TRANSCENDENCE IN PATRICK WHITE: THE IMAGERY OF *THE TREE OF MAN* AND *VOSS*.

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This study represents an exploration of White's concept of transcendence in *The Tree of Man* and *Voss* by means of a detailed account of some of the key patterns of imagery deployed in these novels. White's imagery is a key mode of expression in his work, not simply manifesting in overarching religious symbols and framing structures but figuring in constantly modulated tropes continuous with the narrative, as well as in minor, but no less significant images occasionally susceptible to etymological or onomastic reading.

While no attempt is made to provide an exhaustive exploration of the tropes at work in these novels, a sufficient range of material is covered, and its metaphoric density adequately penetrated, to highlight and explore a fundamental concern in White's work with a paradoxical unity underlying the dualities inherent in temporal existence. A useful way of approaching his fiction is to view the perpetual modulations of his imagery as the dramatisation of an enantiodromia or play of opposites, in which the conflicts of duality are elaborated and paradoxically — though typically only momentarily — resolved. This resolution or coincidence of opposites is a significant feature of his notion of transcendence as well as his depictions of illuminatory experience, and in this respect White's metaphysics share an essential characteristic, not only of Christianity, but a range of religious and mythological systems concerned with expressing a transcendent reality. Despite these analogies, however, the novels at hand are not so tightly bound to Christian, or any other, meaning-making systems so as to constitute sustained allegories, and hence this study does not aim to chart a series of correspondences between White's images and biblical or mythological symbols. Indeed, a criticism often levelled at White — with *The Tree of Man* and *Voss* typically figuring in support of this claim — is that he too rigidly imposes religious frameworks on his work. An extension of this view is formulated in the Jungian critique of

White's corpus offered by David Tacey, who argues that White's conception of transcendence is consistently challenged by the archetypal significance of the images he employs, which point to a contrary process of psycho-spiritual regression in his protagonists.

In a fundamentally text-based approach, this study explores White's use of imagery while taking biblical resonances and archetypal interpretations into account, and suggests that, though White's images are highly allusive, they are not merely agents of imported Christian, or other traditional symbolic values. Nor do they undermine the authenticity of his depiction of the spirituality of his protagonists, or obtrude on the fabric of the narrative. Instead, the range of his images are — though often ambivalent — integral to a network of mercurial tropes which articulate and constantly evaluate a notion of transcendence through inflections and oscillations rather than equations of meaning.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS
in alphabetical order

All references to primary texts are to the following Penguin editions:

AS	*The Aunt's Story* (1948; Harmondsworth: Penguin)
ES	*The Eye of the Storm* (1973; London: Penguin)
FG	*Flaws in the Glass: A Self-Portrait* (1981; London: Penguin)
FL	*A Fringe of Leaves* (1976; London: Penguin)
MMO	*Memoirs of Many in One* (1986; Harmondsworth: Penguin)
PWS	*Patrick White Speaks* (1989; London: Penguin)
RC	*Riders in the Chariot* (1961; London: Penguin)
SM	*The Solid Mandala* (1966; London: Penguin)
TM	*The Tree of Man* (1956; Harmondsworth: Penguin)
V	*Voss* (1957; London, Penguin)
VS	*The Vivisector* (1970; Harmondsworth: Penguin)

INTRODUCTION

> *I started a novel.... It lapsed.... Now there is a crop of 4000 stock plants to be rescued from the weeds. So I don't know what becomes of the novel.*
> (29.iii.50; Marr, 1994: 80)

> *I wish I could say I am writing. Too many things got in the way, and I gave up. I suppose if it had been anything* worth *writing I shouldn't have.*
> (1.vii.50; Marr, 1994: 81)

> *Sometimes I feel: If only I could* wish *to write another book. But I don't. And of course that is why I don't begin.* (3.vi.51; Marr, 1994: 82)

> *My 'acedia' continues. Funnily enough, this was diagnosed by an Anglican priest who stayed with us a couple of years ago. There are moments when I do take interest in a book I have in my head ... then I succumb to the feeling of: What is the use? Since the war I cannot find any point, see any future, love my fellow men; I have gone quite sour — and it is not possible, in that condition, to be a novelist, for he does deal in human beings.* (15.viii.51; Marr, 1994: 83)

A few nights before Christmas 1951, in a heavy downpour of rain, White lost his foothold in the mud "somewhere between the jacaranda and the old piggery" (Marr, 1991: 281) on his smallholding, 'Dogwoods', Castle Hill, and this chance event signalled his emergence from a lengthy period of accidie, during which he had considered "giving up writing altogether" (*FG*: 144):

> During what seemed like months of rain I was carrying a trayload of food to a wormy litter of pups down at the kennels when I slipped and fell on my back, dog dishes shooting in all directions. I lay where I had fallen, half-blinded by rain, under a pale sky, cursing through watery lips a God in whom I did not believe. I began laughing finally, at my own helplessness and hopelessness, in the mud and the stench from my filthy old oilskin.
>
> It was the turning point. My disbelief appeared as farcical as my fall. At that moment I was truly humbled. (*FG*: 144)

"Faith began to come to me" (Marr, 1991: 281), he said when commenting on the ensuing period. He returned to the manuscript of *The Tree of Man*, abandoned for a year and a half, and two years after its publication in 1956 (by which time *Voss* had also been published, in

1957) White wrote *The Prodigal Son*, an essay concerning the reasons behind his decision to remain in Australia as well as his motivations in this "return" to writing. An often-quoted passage reads:

> I wanted to try to suggest in this book every possible aspect of life, through the lives of an ordinary man and woman. But at the same time I wanted to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and the poetry which alone could make bearable the lives of such people, and incidentally, my own life since my return. (*PWS*: 15)

Despite the fact that the excerpt describes *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*, and that White's renewed engagement with fiction followed an experience he characterised as a religious one, there is, however, no overt reference in *The Prodigal Son* to religious preoccupations. (The title of the essay might be interpreted as a hint in this regard, but seems to have been chosen more as an ironic reference to expatriatism.)

There is a split here, between the Christian ideas of "faith" and "God" (initially expressed privately by White) and a kind of visionary apprehension of "the extraordinary behind the ordinary" which does not automatically imply theological notions. This dichotomy enters White's fiction, and will be considered in connection with *The Tree of Man* where it is more evident, and through which White hints at the harmonisation of religious experience and the creative imagination (the two are, of course, yoked in the very concept of the religious novel). It is through this relationship, as manifested in his own creative output, that White articulates a concept of transcendence, rather than through an attempt to separate and depict directly the shape and form of divinity. Hence, my focus is not on what his personal conception of God may be — a subject on which he is not explicit — but on the experiences of his characters who, whether or not they seem to possess a clear understanding of the processes at work in them, and however well- or ill-equipped they may seem to be for

it, are pictured as being engaged in a quest for spiritual[1] liberation. These experiences may be bound up with notions of a divine presence, or, in White's words, "a splendour, a transcendence, which is ... above human realities" (Herring & Wilkes: 136-7), but in White the God-image is always to some extent an acknowledged anthropomorphism and employed typically to suggest, usually satirically, aspects of his characters' spirituality which need to be outgrown in order to clear the way to true spirituality.

Nevertheless, the preoccupation with what is "above human realities" has perplexed many of White's critics concerned with the metaphysical aspects of his fiction. The difficulty evident both in critical studies of White's work and in the fiction itself is that much of his subject matter is, by definition, beyond comprehension. Hence traditional representations of the transcendent through symbols which are the only medium for communicating aspects of reality which remain unknowable and are not expressible by other means (Cooper: 7; Jung, n.d.: 601-2). It is for this reason that the transcendent is represented obliquely in White, and that he "abandon[ed] churches because churches 'destroy the mystery of God'", preferring to "'evolve symbols of my own through which to worship'" (Marr, 1991: 358).

Through his own symbols, in indirect language and with frequent recourse to irony and ambiguity, White does attempt to suggest a transcendent reality. But these moments of revelation in his characters are rare, and of equal interest is the gradual development of tropes which reflect the inner states of his characters throughout their lives as well as those points when imagery clearly signals a character's direct engagement with mystery. It has become a cliché to say that the journey is no less important than the destination, but clichés often point

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[1]By *spiritual* I mean this sense among those outlined by C.S. Lewis in his discussion of the applications of the word: "the opposite of 'bodily' or 'material' ... all that is immaterial in man (emotions, passions, memory, etc.) ... a good word would be 'soul': and the adjective to go with it would be 'psychological'" (Lewis: 205-6).

out the obvious and this holds true in the lives of White's characters. The emphasis of this study, therefore, falls more on White's portrayal of his characters' relationship to the divine than on an isolated concept of God or the transcendent.

The respective ends which White's protagonists come to are also typically death scenes, and the nature of the illumination experiences granted some of these characters is usually elusive, to say the least. Here again White resorts to patterns of imagery already established in the narrative in oblique suggestion of the processes informing his characters' spiritually transforming experiences. This is another reason why the thematic preoccupation with transcendence cannot be discussed in isolation, since White's vision can only be made meaningful through an examination of the development of the terms in which it is articulated.

I have chosen to explore these concerns in two novels, *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*. Given the fact that an explication of imagery necessitates an in-depth approach, attempting a reading of more than two works within the given spatial constraints would require that they be treated with a level of superficiality which would defeat the object of the study. Already my approach to the material contained in the two is of necessity highly selective.

In themselves *The Tree of Man* and *Voss* pair well together. Apart from their chronological proximity, both emerge from the renewal of White's creative output and constitute different approaches to similar questions. Stan Parker's spiritual development is conditioned by a desire for permanence, and he is an inarticulate and passive character, whereas Voss, a complex man and the epitome of action, pursues his vision of his own apotheosis through constant movement. Yet there are similarities and, when viewed together, several elements of each of the novels suggest that aspects of the one contain the seeds of the other. For example Stan is inarticulate, and "no interpreter" (*TM*: 12), yet Voss too is "locked in language" (*V*: 274). The explorer's life reaches its culmination when he is forced to halt

his desert journey, whereas Stan's garden vision initiates movement: "Stan Parker began to go then. To walk" (*TM*: 477). Both, shortly before their deaths, are shown staring in wonder at a leaf. Each of the works echoes biblical material, but broad structural elements of *The Tree of Man* tend to echo Old Testament imagery, whereas *Voss* draws more heavily on the New. With all these considerations in mind, the pair of novels together take on a kind of unity which forms a useful framework for critical interpretation.

Imagery

At all times during the discussion of these two works, the emphasis will be on a close explication of imagery. White himself declared: "I say what I have to say through the juxtaposition of images and situations" (Herring & Wilkes: 138). Moreover, in his review essay on White criticism, Alan Lawson opens by describing the view, expressed by himself on a previous occasion, that

> the most profitable task in White studies would be to examine in considerable detail the constantly fluctuating point of view and the carefully modulated imagery in his work. There seemed to me ... to be two main flaws in the existing body of criticism of White's fiction: an obsession with categorizing characters, their experiences, and White's responses; and an excessive (and misguided) interpretive reliance on the oracular statements with which White so liberally endows each of his novels.... [T]his was a proposition made ten years earlier still, by H. P. Heseltine in his seminal article on White's style. (Lawson: 280)

Since then a similar appeal has been made by the Jungian critic, David Tacey, who argues that an image-based interpretation of White shows strong mythical undercurrents expressed in "natural" patterns of imagery which continually subvert a "superimposed layer" of "artificial" or "algebraic" symbolism (xx). Though this position relies on a specifically archetypal reading of White, it echoes other critical positions which suggest a conflict in White's fiction between an overarching symbolic framework and tropic patterns perceived as more authentic

(see, for example, Colmer; Mitchell). With the body of White's fiction in mind, Tacey continues:

> The crucial task in our reading is to differentiate between the artificial religious design and the authentic mythic structure. Most often, the Christian frame is asserted through rhetoric and statement, whereas the *puer*[2]/Mother myth [which Tacey argues is predominant in White's fiction] is established internally ... through narrative patterns and archetypal imagery. It is through the *image* ... that we reach into the living matriarchal structure of the work. (90)

This study, therefore, attempts to follow as closely as possible the development of some of the key tropes employed in *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*. My intention, on the one hand, is to explore White's concept of transcendence as articulated in imagery, and on the other, to respond to some of the specific interpretations of these novels advanced by Tacey, and in so doing evaluate the distinction between "internal" and "superimposed" layers of imagery. (The relation between my own methodology and the archetypal approach employed by Tacey will be further elaborated below, under the heading Critical Approach.)

While a broad interpretation of White's major tropes is necessary, his images are often highly particularised and their significances deeply embedded in the text. A specific pattern of imagery may also be so ubiquitous that its various functional manifestations may often pass unnoticed. For example, in *The Tree of Man* the principal image is that of the tree. Apart from the numerous images which may appear to be minor but are nevertheless actively employed as part of the arboreal trope (such as twigs and tendrils, bark and roots), the tree is also meaningfully presented in less immediately recognisable form (in imagery of

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[2]Tacey glosses his term *puer aeternus*, a central concept in his reading of White, as follows: "Latin, 'eternal youth'. Refers to an ego held in a childlike, or childish, stage of development. This often results when the Mother archetype is strongly constellated, thus drawing the ego back into infantilism rather than allowing it to move forward into life" (237).

matchsticks, paper, sawdust, and so on). Equally in *Voss*, in which key tropes draw heavily on Christian imagery, the ubiquity of biblical motifs is demonstrated through attention to apparently incidental detail. In this light, when Rose Portion, for example, introduces "this German gentleman" on the novel's first page, her concern that "he could lay his hands on something" (*V*: 7) is not merely demonstrative of the fact that Voss "does not belong to the 'civilized' gentry of Sydney" (Garebian: 559) but is already functioning as an early and fittingly ironic parallel of Christ's healing powers, doubly ironic given Voss's abandonment of his initial calling as physician (*V*: 13) (which in turn comments on his own spiritual development, as is argued in chapter 2 of this study).

Hence, while the overall movement of central patterns of imagery is always to be kept in mind, the fact that White's image motifs are often deeply submerged in the text, and that these motifs function in support of major tropic patterns, often entails the investigation of minutiae. And occasionally the full significance of an image is only arrived at through an etymological reading. The closing pages of *The Solid Mandala* provide a later example of this: Arthur Brown, the apparently imbecilic twin brother of Waldo, asks his friend and neighbour, Mrs Poulter, whether, when she comes to visit him, she will

> "...bring the ju-jubes?"
>
> "Yes," she cried, "the orange ones!"
>
> For Arthur the orange disc had not moved noticeably since he began his upward climb.... (*SM*: 314-15)

In this novel the central image is that of the mandala, the symbol of wholeness, most commonly represented by the four marbles Arthur carries with him (his "solid mandalas"), one of which he tries (unsuccessfully) to offer his brother. Here, however, the mandala is suggested by the ju-jubes, which by virtue of their colour also evoke the sun — which can, in the Jungian scheme, like any circular or spherical object, be characterised as mandalic — an

association which is then taken up in the next paragraph with the question being raised as to whether the "orange disc" has moved. But White intends more by having Arthur prefer this particular kind of sweet than is immediately evident. Ju-jubes are modelled on the edible berries of the jujube, the tree of the genus *Zizyphus*. Beneath the surface development of the mandala image, White employs the connection with "Sisyphus" to deepen his characterisation of Arthur Brown as a bearer of mandalas, fated to have his tokens of wholeness misunderstood and rejected, so that they become symbols of a burden he is to carry alone, like King Sisyphus, on an endless "upward climb".

Be it through the mandala or the tree, White's tropes allude (suggesting parallels which imply varying degrees of correspondence) to established outside structures within which these key images traditionally occur. This, and the consequent implications for interpretation, can be clearly illustrated by outlining briefly his use of the already mentioned arboreal trope.

Tree imagery in White's fiction draws on two kinds of association with outside manifestations of it. The first and most immediately recognisable way is through biblical allusion (a divergence occurs in *The Solid Mandala*, where religious frameworks are replaced by the Jungian paradigm). So the meaning of White's arboreal images are often bound up with the way in which they relate to the tree as it is represented in Christian iconography (for example as the Tree of Life, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, or, to give an instance of a less generalised case, the cedar of Ezekiel 17: 22 which prefigures the advent of Christ; this commonly extends to such images as the cross, an image typologically related to the Tree of Knowledge).

The Christian tree trope is itself closely connected with earlier representations of this image, which introduces the second way in which images in White's work are connected with

"sources" outside of it: those instances in which mythological parallels can be drawn. For example, when Gage hangs himself from a tree in *The Tree of Man*, or Le Mesurier kills himself under one in *Voss*, parallels with recurrent mythological motifs seem to suggest themselves, and will be explored insofar as they illuminate a reading of White's work.

These two kinds of resonances, the *biblical* and the *mythological*, are treated as subordinate to the tropes White establishes, as particularised fictional creations, in his work. The primary function of the arboreal image in *The Tree of Man*, to return to this example, is not determined by the fact that it refers, whether directly or indirectly, to biblical or mythological manifestations of it, but acts as a foundational (if shifting) metaphor existing in and of itself, at turns representing humankind, a sheltering or hostile landscape, death, immortality and so forth. This level of symbolism will be isolated under the term *intra-textual*, indicating tropes the significances of which are derived from their specific use in the text, separate from biblical references or mythological resonances with which the trope may be imbued.

These categories, which I have isolated as the biblical, mythological and intra-textual, do not remain fixed, and in some instances an image may fall into all three, but are introduced for their value as aids to interpretation.

A Note on Allegory

There is a sense in which White's novels could be termed allegorical, especially when considering his use of meaning-making structures like Christianity as frameworks for his narratives, but only in a loose sense of the term. A characterising feature of White's fiction is ambiguity, which deepens with the progress of his writing career, and this is incommensurable with strict allegorical modes. An illustration of this point may be found in

J. R. R. Tolkien's foreword to the *The Lord of the Rings*: tired of the suggestion that the One Ring, which in his fantasy epic symbolises the will to power, represents the atom bomb, he wrote in response:

> I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence.... [M]any confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in purposed domination of the author. (11)

White would probably have concurred with these sentiments. As an exploration of his novels quickly show, he resists rigidity in style and form, and his thematic preoccupations represent an implicit criticism of the desire for fixity. He approaches an explanation of his position on this issue in a passage commenting primarily on his sexuality, but which has broader implications for his work:

> [A]mbivalence has given me insights into human nature, denied, I believe, to those who are unequivocally male or female.... I would not trade my halfway house, frail though it be, for the entrenchments of those who like to think themselves unequivocal. (*FG*: 154)

Critical Approach

My focus is mainly on how White's vision of (the approach to) transcendent experience is articulated through images, and the angle of interpretation will vary according to the form of imagery at hand. Critical attention is grounded in a close examination of the development of tropes within the text itself, before giving consideration to references to material external to it. This is taken as a self-evidently appropriate mode of reading, particularly when faced with the predominantly intra-textual function of White's imagery. When, however, passages include the biblical or mythological elements, one naturally needs to turn one's attention outside the text in order to elucidate these passages. With biblical references one of course has recourse to the Bible and Christian iconography. With mythological material the process is similar. But while an investigation of Christian imagery already introduces a considerable

body of symbolism, the sheer volume of material classified as mythological, and within which we find recurring motifs imaged in White's work, is vast. As an aid in this respect I have turned to the work of C.G. Jung.

This is for two sets of reasons. The first is that Jung's work, when judiciously applied to White's fiction, can yield illuminating interpretations. His attempts to outline an "archaeology of the soul" bring his writings into close and sustained contact with mythological material, which in turn makes his collected works a fund of information on the history of images. Moreover, the ordering concepts he formulated as a result of his explorations of these images offer useful guidelines in approaching myth, and consequently White's work, where parallels seem to exist. Furthermore, White's prose often has the texture of dreams and his fiction frequently displays a marked reliance on oneiric sequences, which itself suggests a demand for openness to psychoanalytical interpretation. It is not surprising, in this regard, that when he read Jung while working on *The Solid Mandala*, he found in himself a natural affinity for Jung's ideas:

> White had gone some distance with *The Solid Mandala* when he turned to Daws[3] for help. In answer to his appeal, Daws arranged for a copy of Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy* to be sent to White along with a little volume by Jung on psychology and religion. White was excited to find "*all* the symbols which came to me spontaneously in connection with [the novel] are meaningful and recognised ones now that I am investigating them in Jung.... He seems to me to have a lot of the answers." (Marr, 1991: 452)

The second set of reasons for the inclusion of the Jungian perspective centre on the fact that a familiarity with Jung's concepts was required in order to come to an informed understanding of the archetypal reading of White's fiction offered by David Tacey. Given that psychoanalytic interpretation could offer useful insights into the imagery of the novels,

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[3]The painter Lawrence Daws whose work White admired. When they were introduced they discussed Daws' series of "mandala paintings", Jung, and the occult (Marr, 1991: 451).

Tacey's position became all the more relevant to a discussion of transcendence in White, since his study represents a sustained critique of White's spirituality through the Jungian paradigm. Tacey argues that, instead of progressing towards self-realisation or transcendence — though he does not clearly define the concept of transcendence he sees as being promulgated in the novels — White's "culture-heroes" embark on "tragic, one-way journeys into the unconscious", "lose their way and become completely cut off from ordinary human consciousness" (xv). He elaborates:

> Stan Parker [imagines] that he is at one with the cosmos; Voss that he has achieved spiritual transcendence. In fact, they have attained nothing grand or remarkable, but have simply been deceived into a sense of their higher status.... In a word, they are psychologically inflated, and are unable to grasp their situation objectively.... White idolizes the unconscious as a maternal well-spring and source.... [and] this 'source' consumes him and his characters.... (Tacey: xv)

One of the fundamental aims of my study is to consider, therefore, by examining some of the key images of *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*, and Tacey's specific archetypal interpretations of them, both Tacey's viewpoint and White's notion of transcendence, while also suggesting archetypal readings where they seem useful.

Jungian reading indeed has a broad field of application, and unless clearly helpful is not allowed to obtrude on interpretation which is based fundamentally on the intra-textual development of White's tropes. Relevant remarks and concepts from Jung's writings, as well as that of other writers in the fields of mythology and archetypal depth theory (such as the mythologists Erich Neumann and Joseph Campbell, and the post-Jungians James Hillman and Edward Edinger) will be occasionally drawn upon, but with the fact borne in mind that they inform an approach to literature, and that the theory should illuminate the text rather than the text the theory. The pursuit of fixed correspondences, as has already been suggested in the brief discussion of allegory, is an attempt to constrain perception and was anathema to White — a position he makes clear in his response to one Jungian essay on his work:

> Like all such obsessed characters, he tries to tie his subject down in the straight jacket of his system and finds I don't fit. Of course I'm no expert on Jung, only picked out a few bits [for *The Solid Mandala*] which suited my purpose, just as I've picked a few bits from Christian theology and the Jewish mystics. (Marr, 1994: 566)

Some writers in the field of depth psychology express concern over the tendency toward what White punningly calls "straight jacketing". The post-Jungian James Hillman writes:

> [P]sychology is its own worst enemy. The cause of these internal oppositions is literalism.... Here I join Owen Barfield and Norman Brown in a mafia of the metaphor to protect plain men from literalism.... [which] demands singleness of meaning ... [and] ... prevents mystery.... It also hardens the heart, preventing deeper penetration of the imagination.... (149)

Reading this passage, one recalls the emphasis in *The Prodigal Son* on "the mystery and the poetry", and White's disappointment with churches because they "destroy the mystery of God". But while it is difficult to approach an interpretation of his fiction without some degree of dissection taking place, my intention is to maintain a balance between the elucidation of key elements within the texts and offering an analysis of them; and, insofar as the Jungian paradigm is concerned, to draw upon it in a way that avoids entrenchments of perception and does not amount to an over-reduction of White's imaginative vision, that is with the knowledge that "the price of the employment of models is eternal vigilance" (Braithwaite, quoted in Hillman: 151).

The Concept of Transcendence

The most significant area in which Jung is useful to this study is as an aid in the provision of a framework within which to view the notion of transcendence. In his discussion of symbols, which in his work reaches into their mythological, religious and historical manifestations, Jung makes frequent reference to the concept of the *enantiodromia*. This idea, signifying a play of opposites, has its roots in Pre-Socratic philosophy, and develops out of the thought of

Thales, with whom "every history of philosophy begins" (Allen: 1). It will be sketched here in brief outline:

Thales, in his search for a first cosmological principle, took water to be the primordial source of all things (an idea already evident in Babylonian and Egyptian mythology, and clearly present in Genesis). He suggested that the material world manifests this one, unbounded element in a variety of forms. Thales' pupil, Anaximander, challenged this idea, arguing that "the hot, the cold, the wet, and the dry, and the items which embody them, stand to each other in a relation of eternal opposition; therefore, if one of them were made primary and unbounded, the others could not continue to exist" (Allen: 2). This posed the question of "how the qualitative diversity of the world [is] to be reconciled with the primordial unity of its source" (Allen: 3).

The intricacies of the ensuing philosophical debate need not be entered into here, its origins being mentioned merely in order to demonstrate the analogous relation between the generally Pre-Socratic (and not exclusively Heraclitean) preoccupation with unity and multiplicity (which informs the concept of the *enantiodromia*) and those systems of thought which will be briefly pointed to below, as well as to contextualise the ideas emerging from the *Fragments* of Heraclitus, upon which Jung draws to gloss his term:

> *Enantiodromia* means 'a running counter to'. In the philosophy of Heraclitus this concept is used to designate the play of opposites in the course of events, namely, the view which maintains that everything that exists goes over into its opposite. "From the living comes death, and from the dead, life; from the young, old age; and from the old, youth; from waking, sleep; and from sleep, waking; the stream of creation and decay never stands still." ... There are abundant sayings from the mouth of Heraclitus himself which express the same view.... "Even Nature herself striveth after the opposite, bringing harmony not from like things, but from contrasts." ... I use the term enantiodromia to describe the emergence of the unconscious opposite.... This characteristic phenomenon occurs almost universally wherever an extreme, onesided tendency dominates the conscious life; for this involves the gradual development of an equally strong, unconscious counterposition.... (Jung, n.d.: 541-2)

In the same work Jung discusses, at some length, the problem of opposites as it is conceived in Hindu philosophy. A brief extract reads:

> The pairs of opposites were ordained by the Creator of the world.... "Beneath the pairs of opposites must this world suffer without ceasing" [a quotation from the 5th century BC epic poem, the *Ramayana*].
>
> Not to allow oneself to be influenced by the pairs of opposites (*nirdvandva* — free, untouched by the opposites), but to raise oneself above them, is then an essentially ethical task, since freedom from the opposites leads to redemption. (Jung, n.d.: 242)

He quotes from several Hindu texts in illustration of this point, and the notion that the opposites are reconciled in Brahman, which is defined as "the Supreme Soul (*paramatman*), or impersonal, all-embracing, divine essence, the original source and ultimate goal of all that exists" (243) or, briefly put, God. Brahman is a "reconciling symbol", pointing to a spiritual and psychological state to which human beings, in the Hindu conception, must aspire in order to attain redemption. Jung demonstrates the kinship between this idea and Chinese philosophy, quoting several passages from the classical Taoist text, the *Tao Te Ching*. In order to give a briefer illustration, I quote from Wilhelm's introduction to this work:

> [T]he eternity of Dao rests on the fact that all of its movements 'return' into itself. All opposites are eliminated by it by being balanced against one another, so that every movement necessarily turns into its opposite.... The One, as thesis, generates the Two, as antithesis (the opposites of light and dark, male and female, positive and negative, for example). From these pairs of opposites the visible world is born as the Three.... [Dao is] multiplicity in unity ... [and] ... reveals itself in a perpetual state of flux. (Wilhelm: 19-21)

The "saint" or "Man of Calling", as a microcosm of the "reconciling symbol" Tao, attempts to live in harmony with this ever-changing principle, in order to transcend the conflict of opposites.

A similar idea is at work in many mythological systems, including the Australian Aboriginal one. James Cowan, in his book on Australian myth and ritual, offers his readers an analysis of an Aboriginal painting depicting the order of the cosmos, and concludes by saying of the painting that it "integrates the paradox of unity-duality, under the aegis of cyclic

time, as it becomes manifest in the world" (30). World mythologies, moreover, abound with reconciling symbols. A familiar one is Hermes' wand, the caduceus, which shows two serpents intertwined on a pole, of which J. C. Cooper writes: "the double serpent is the opposites in dualism, ultimately to be united" (28). In alchemical symbolism this image represents "the male sulphur and the female quicksilver, the power of transformation ... the synthesis of opposites and the transcendent function of mediation between the upper and lower realms" (Cooper: 28).

The meditations of the fifteenth-century Christian mystic, Nicholas of Cusa, articulate a similar idea, of the apprehension of divinity in the irrational union of opposites:

> Thou hast inspired me, Lord, who art the Food of the strong, to do violence to myself, because impossibility coincideth with necessity, and I have learnt that the place wherein thou art found unveiled is girt round with the coincidence of contradictories, and this is the wall of Paradise wherein Thou dost abide. The door whereof is guarded by the most proud spirit of Reason, and, unless he be vanquished, the way in will not lie open. Thus 'tis beyond the coincidence of contradictories that Thou mayest be seen, and nowhere this side thereof. (quoted in Happold: 336)

This brief illustration of the analogous concerns of some key philosophical, mythological and religious systems is not intended as support for the kind of claim often met with in popular contemporary spiritualism, namely the sweeping assertion that "All religions are one". I summarise Jung's demonstration of correspondences between different sets of ideas — adding a few other examples of my own for the sake of brevity and clarity — with the aim of illustrating: firstly, the nature and general applicability of the concept of the enantiodromia in systems of thought which relate to spirituality; and secondly, the way in which these meaning-making systems place a common emphasis on polarities manifest in the world (the tensions between which initiate the play of opposites) and, at the same time, on a paradoxical unity (in which these tensions are reconciled). Within this framework I approach a definition of transcendence, as being that which has to do with the *reconciliation of or liberation from*

seemingly irreconcilable opposites inherent in the experience of the world. Of course it should be again emphasised that the interpretive framework this supplies is not regarded as prescriptive, but does offer a means of elucidating key aspects of the spiritual development of White's characters, where analogies with the pattern I have outlined can be drawn.

Generally, however, any features of the novels which show a concern with the inner life — whether or not articulated in terms implying a preoccupation with duality and unity, and whether susceptible to interpretation from a psychological, mythological or religious angle — come into view as elements of the larger picture.

Within the broader frameworks of *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*, a concern with conflicting opposites and their paradoxical reconciliation is, however, clearly discernible. The earlier novel opens with the thematic tension between the simultaneous desire for stability and change. White shows Stan Parker caught in "a struggle between two desires" (*TM*: 13), the "fiend of motion" at war with the "nostalgia of permanence" as his life is "ending and beginning" (*TM*: 14). While Stan moves "in search ... of permanence" (*TM*: 14), the tension established in *The Tree of Man* between permanence and change continues to be elaborated, but from the opposite perspective, in *Voss* where the "fiend of motion" is given free reign in the male protagonist. Permanence and motion are key concepts in *Voss* just as they are in *The Tree of Man*, except that in *Voss* the tensions between them are manifested not so much in a single character as through the conflict between Laura and Voss, towards the resolution of which the novel moves. The movement toward the synthesis of permanence and change is enacted within a larger framework within which contraries are married (as aspects of Laura and Voss are in a metaphorical sense). These questions will be explored in detail in the chapters devoted to each novel, and, as I have already suggested, such discussion generally requires the consideration of associated imagery, in which most of White's ideas are articulated.

A brief discussion of the chief, arboreal trope of *The Tree of Man*, to be more fully elaborated in relation to specific examples from the text in chapter 1, may shed light on the way in which the notion of conflicting opposites and their transcendence finds its application in the interpretation of these novels. Both works rely on a loosely Christian framework, in so doing drawing extensively on biblical tropes, and significant parallels do exist between White's use of arboreal imagery and the tree as it appears in both the Old and New Testaments. The cross of Christ echoes the trees of Genesis, and White's figurations of trees often allude to their association with the crucifixion as well as with other biblical motifs, while also resonating with mythological manifestations of arboreal imagery (in which both the Edenic trees and the cross have their origins).

The tree is a universal image with several sets of significances. In one of its key roles it symbolises

> the synthesis of heaven, earth and water.... The Cosmic Tree ... indicat[es] universal manifestation proceeding from unity to diversity and back to unity, the union of heaven and earth....
>
> The Tree of Life and Tree of Knowledge grow in Paradise; the Tree of life is at the centre and signifies regeneration, the return to the primordial state of perfection; it is the cosmic axis and is unitary, transcending good and evil, while the Tree of Knowledge is essentially dualistic with the knowledge of good and evil.... [T]he Dying God is always killed on a tree.... (Cooper: 176)

Jung also observes that "the alchemist[s] saw the union of opposites under the symbol of the tree" (*CW*, 9i: 109) and that this recalls

> the symbol of the cosmic tree rooted in this world and growing up to heaven — the tree that is also man. In the history of symbols this tree is described as the way of life itself, a growing into that which eternally is and does not change; which springs from the union of opposites and, by its eternal presence, also makes that union possible. (*CW*, 9i: 110)

The cross, connected with the tree symbol, is "the cosmic symbol par excellence.... It is dualism in nature and the union of opposites and represents spiritual union and the integration of man's soul in the horizontal-vertical aspects necessary to full life; it is the Supreme

Identity" (Cooper: 45). In the Jungian approach to the crucifixion the juxtaposition of opposites is emphasised: Christ, both human and divine, is crucified between two thieves, the one going to heaven and the other to hell. "Other pairs of opposites that gather around the cross include the lance-bearer and the sponge-bearer and [in some representations of the event] even the sun and moon" (Edinger: 99).

"Without the experience of opposites there is no experience of wholeness", writes Jung (*CW*, 12: 20), and it is in accordance with this principle, he argues, that Christianity insists on the doctrine of original sin in counterbalance to the idea of human goodness, while at the same time offering the possibility of redemption (*CW*, 12: 20).[4] Considered from this perspective, Christianity posits a "problem of opposites" in which

> The reality of evil and its incompatibility with good cleave the opposites asunder and lead inexorably to the crucifixion and suspension of everything that lives. Since "the soul is by nature Christian" this result is bound to come as infallibly as it did in the life of Jesus: we all have to be "crucified with Christ," i.e. suspended in a moral suffering equivalent to veritable crucifixion. (Jung, *CW*, 12: 21)

The crucifixion then, taken as a *coniunctio oppositorum*, a culmination of the enantiodromic play of contraries, informs our understanding of Christ's transcendence. If, for White, Christ is the inscape of humanity (as Professor Guy Butler once observed) — and such a position does seem to be implied in the deployment of biblical imagery in *The Tree of Man* and *Voss* — then Jung's interpretation of Christ can be a further aid to understanding these novels.

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[4]It is due to the lack of insight into this problem, Jung remarks, that "Cases are not unknown where the rigorous exercises and proselytizings of the Catholics, and a certain type of Protestant education that is always sniffing out sin, have brought about psychic damage that leads not to the Kingdom of Heaven but to the consulting room of the doctor" (*CW*, 12: 20).

Chapter 1: *THE TREE OF MAN*

> *The light shone on the dust of the carpet, of which the pattern had worn away. Weariness was almost bliss. The flowers of the vases were so taut, so tight, that only a law of nature was preventing them from flying apart by strength of their own stillness.* (*TM*: 415)

An often-quoted passage which appears early on in *The Tree of Man*, and in Stan Parker's life, outlines the novel's chief tension: "Then, more than at any other time, the nostalgia of permanence and the fiend of motion fought inside the boy, right there at the moment when his life was beginning and ending" (*TM*: 14). It is the way in which this tension, with all its psycho-spiritual implications, as well as the possibility of its resolution, is enacted through imagery that frames the novel — and my discussion of it.

The primary image of the novel, which determines its title and with which it begins and ends, is of course that of the tree. Like others, this trope manifests, as has been stated in the introductory remarks relating to White's imagery, in a great variety of forms from obvious references to arboreal anatomy to those which are less clear. The tree, moreover, is often an ambivalent image in *The Tree of Man* with constantly shifting meanings. (This, and associated images and their context-dependent significances will be explored in detail as relevant textual material comes to the fore.) Generally speaking, however, the tree either represents or mediates the notion of permanence, as it does in this early excerpt: "To stay put was, in fact, just what the young man Stanley Parker himself desired.... In the streets of towns the open windows, on the dusty roads and rooted trees, filled him with the melancholy longing for permanence" (*TM*: 13). The equestrian trope, on the other hand, typically exemplifies motion, and is immediately juxtaposed with the "rooted trees" of the above extract:

> ... But not yet. *It was the struggle between two desires*. As the little boy, holding the musical horseshoes for his father, blowing the bellows, or scraping up the grey parings of hoof and the shapely yellow mounds of manure, *he had already experienced the unhappiness of these desires*. (*TM*: 13-14; emphasis added)

This conflict, between being and becoming, as it manifests in the young Stan and develops into the novel's overarching theme, is nevertheless represented as already achieving paradoxical resolution in the image with which the novel opens:

> A cart drove between the two big stringybarks and stopped. These were the dominant trees in that part of the bush, rising above the involved scrub with the simplicity of true grandeur. So the cart stopped, grazing the side of a hairy tree, and the horse, shaggy and stolid as the tree, sighed and took root. (*TM*: 9)

On one level the passage simply indicates that this is the place where Stan, having been spurred into "motion" "in search, if he had known it, of permanence" (*TM*: 14), has now arrived, but this does not diminish the thematic significance of the tree becoming "hairy", like the horse, and the horse itself acquiring the character of the tree, "stolid", and "taking root". Inherent in this play of images is a critique of absolutes, specifically of clear distinctions between beginnings and endings, past and future. An exploration of White's imagery shows that such enactments of a paradoxical reconciliation of opposing principles are characteristic, and articulate his response to the problem of duality intrinsic to temporal existence.

This paradoxical union which typically arises in key images where contraries are closely juxtaposed can be understood in terms of an enantiodromia or play of opposites, in which opposing impulses ultimately affirm their counterparts (see Introduction for a discussion of this concept). The novel closes with a similar paradox when Stan's death and his grandson's awakening to his own daemon coincide in the book's shortest and most densely imagistic chapter: "So that in the end there were the trees. The boy walking through

them with his head *drooping* as he *increased* in stature.... So that, in the end, there was no end" (*TM*: 480; emphasis added).

The novel's imagery shifts between these two poles of death and regeneration, or being and becoming. It is the way in which White employs his images to elaborate this tension or suggest its resolution that I will now explore through reference to some of the key events or images of *The Tree of Man*. My discussion will be divided into four sections. The first will treat of the establishment of "Parkers' place" and some of the key associated thematic statements and images, with particular attention given to the arboreal trope. The second and third parts will deal with the novel's flood and fire imagery respectively, with related imagery from other parts of the novel brought under consideration (this will include an exploration of events which do not follow chronologically but will allow for more concentrated discussion of tropes which are developed throughout the work). The fourth and final section of the chapter, which is not bound to any specific pattern of imagery, will examine a selection of images and events occurring in the latter stages of the novel, and consider the way these suggest illumination and renewal for Stan in a revision of the notions of permanence and transcendence.

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I

Stan's arrival in the uncleared bush out of which he is to shape "Parkers' place" is as though through a gate of two trees between which his cart passes before his horse "takes root". Aside from the enactment in the opening images of a paradoxical union of permanence and motion already commented upon, they also suggest both a birth, the beginning of Stan's life and his immersion in "the meaner warfare of the scrub" (*TM*: 16), and a conclusion, the literal one of the journey which brought him to his land as well as a broader sense of completion and transcendence which is yoked to it in having the older, "dominant" gums "rising above the involved scrub with the simplicity of true grandeur" (*TM*: 9). In the background there are Edenic resonances with the sense of Stan as a kind of "Australian Adam, in his busy Eden with his nervy, cockney Eve" (Walsh, 1977: 30). These echoes do not, of course, imply adherence to a rigid biblical framework (which is here also being satirised) either in *The Tree of Man* as a whole or in my exploration of it, but seem to cast Stan and Amy as representative figures. Added to this, and though the designation is also partly ironic, his constantly being referred to as "the man" also suggests a broader, universal, semi-mythical setting constituting the timeless "dream" with which he must "break" (*TM*: 9), in order to embark on his own personal, time-bound life (to similar effect his grandson is referred to in the last chapter as "the boy").

Within the "dream" which is conveyed in a style "parodying the biblical 'in the beginning' narrative" (Brown: 862), significant overtly Christian images do nevertheless appear:

> Then the man took an axe and struck at the side of a hairy tree, more to hear the sound than for any other reason. And the sound was cold and loud. The man struck at the tree, and struck, till several white chips had fallen. He looked at the scar in the side of the tree. The silence was immense. (*TM*: 9)

The scar in the tree's side is an evocation of the crucifixion, and its wounding, juxtaposed with the two trees "rising above the involved scrub", echoes the typological relationship between the cross and the tree in Christian iconography. Depictions of the crucifixion often show Christ on a tree[1], and according to Christian myth the cross was set up in the place where the Tree of Knowledge stood (Neumann, 1955: 254). Whereas the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in Genesis symbolises duality, and eating its fruit brought about the Fall, it is on the cross, even more emphatically a symbol of the conflict of opposites, in the New Testament that this tension is finally resolved through Christ and redemption achieved for humankind. White's arboreal imagery functions similarly, simultaneously suggesting duality and division on the one hand and unity and reconciliation on the other. The tree image in this novel possesses an ambivalent aspect as it does in Eden, and, when invoked, the crucifixion is typically employed to suggest the apparently irreconcilable tension in White's characters between the earthbound and the transcendent.

Hence, Stan's chopping at a tree and observing the "scar" he has produced in its "side" becomes a conflation of images. Not only does it recall Christ on the cross with the wound in his side, but also, by having the tree itself bearing the wound, creates the effect of personifying the tree as an image of Christ himself, uniting Tree, Cross, and Crucified. Along with these biblical resonances comes an intra-textual level of reference which reverses the metaphor. The tree itself takes on an anthropological character, being compared to the

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[1]The spiritual "Were You There?" gives a recent survival of this traditional association:

Were you there
when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there
when they nailed him to the Tree?

wounded Christ, and therefore begins to function also as an arboranthropomorphic[2] image of humankind. Broadly speaking, and depending on the context in which the image is employed, the tree is "man", and "man" is also the tree, with whichever image is the primary one lending its associations to the other. Here White suggests that Stan is himself presently dealing the metaphorical blows which at another time he will be receiving, by virtue of his cutting at the tree, an aspect of the duality between the opposites of which he is caught. The wound in the side of the tree suggests Christ, suspended between the opposites. Yet, though Stan is the agent of this "wounding", he himself, by virtue of incarnation into the temporal world, is caught between the same opposites. Through the act of beginning to establish permanence through clearing the bush he is only elaborating the tension between being and becoming, spurred to action by the "fiend of motion" but paradoxically in search of permanence. The trees, furthermore, are overarching symbols of this circular process in which permanence and change perpetually coincide. Even when Stan is finally at rest on his first evening in the place where he himself will put down roots, the opposite impulse toward movement is latent but not absent, registering in the image of the horse-collar against which his head is propped up as he rests before his fire (*TM*: 10).

This fire which Stan builds on his first night in the bush also forms part of a larger trope and soon becomes a dominant image in the setting. The fire diminishes Stan's sense of alienation from the landscape and its imposing silence, offering the "first warmth of content" (*TM*: 9). Itself fed by the wood Stan has cut, the fire collapses the sense of duality and causes the dissipation of the dark, threatening associations which the trees take on: "the black limbs

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[2]The term *arboranthropomorphism*, intended to be more inclusive than *personification*, *anthropomorphism*, or *prosopopoeia*, will be used to indicate the use of the figurative device commonly employed in *The Tree of Man* (and *Voss*) where characters are either described in tree imagery or trees themselves take on human character, with shifts occurring between the two, or both angles suggested simultaneously.

of trees, the black and brooding scrub, were being folded into one. Only the fire held out" (*TM*: 10). Stan is enclosed in the "circle of its light" (*TM*: 10) — an image of centrality which recurs at the end of the novel, as well as in the spring at Judd's place in *Voss*. In contrast to the "warfare of scrub" (*TM*: 16) there is now "a unity of eyes and firelight" (*TM*: 10). This oneness is suggestive of divinity, in which contraries are paradoxically resolved. More specifically, the fire, as one of the here comforting but also potentially destructive elements of nature, is presented as a medium through which divinity may be glimpsed, and its mysterious purposes interpreted.

The notion of "look[ing] into the fire" (*TM*: 11) as interpreting divinity is developed in the subsequent characterisation of Stan's father, the blacksmith. As he and Stan's mother are introduced, so are their respective God-images, which are notable for the way they reflect their own personalities.

Stan's mother is pictured as "a humourless and rather frightened woman" (*TM*: 10) with "watery blue eyes" who began reading literature "as a protection from the frightening and unpleasant things" (*TM*: 11). Consequently her God is "a pale-blue gentleness", which Stan is not convinced by: "He had tried to see her God, in actual feature, but he had not" (*TM*: 11). She and her God are contrasted with her husband and his God-image. It is said of Ned Parker, the blacksmith, "an obscene man, with hair on his stomach" (*TM*: 10) who "finally died of the rum bottle and a stroke" (*TM*: 14)[3], that he

> did not deny God. On the contrary. He was the blacksmith, and had looked into the fire. He smote the anvil, and the sparks flew. All fiery in his own strength, deaf with the music of metal, and superior to the stench of burned

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[3]Despite the apparent antithesis of the pair, White shows that their characters do also intersect. That the frightened Mrs Parker who aspires to gentility married Ned Parker "By some mistake or *fascination*" (*TM*: 11; emphasis added) suggests that the blacksmith's rude earthiness is an aspect of her own psyche. Likewise, the brawny, hard-drinking Ned Parker produces evidence of a religious sensibility and the finer emotions: he "once had answered a question in a sermon, and ... could twist a piece of iron into a true lover's knot" (*TM*: 11).

> hoof, there was no question. Once, from the bottom of a ditch, on his way home, after rum, he had even spoken to God, and caught at the wing of a protesting angel, before passing out. (*TM*: 11)

The paragraph, in which bathos characteristically disguises important thematic hints, introduces "The God of Parker the father" as "a fiery God, a gusty God" which Ned Parker also ironically embodies, "appear[ing] between belches, accusing with a horny finger" (*TM*: 11). Juxtaposed with Mrs Parker's God-image, a sentimentalised version of the God of the New Testament, Ned Parker's God is the elemental, "jealous God" (Exodus 20:5) of the Old Testament who "bent the trees until they streamed in the wind like beards" and "cut the throat of old Joe Skinner, who was nothing to deserve it" (*TM*: 11-12).

Behind the ironic depictions of these anthropomorphisms of God, White also highlights the problematic tension within the Christian tradition between the God of love and the God of retribution, in much the same way as the ambivalence of his arboreal imagery manifests the antithetical relation between the trees in Eden and Calvary, so that Stan's personal history also becomes a vehicle for the conveyance of a broader, conflicting religious and symbolic heritage shared by western humankind.[4]

It is the "God of Parker the father" that the young Stan "suspected and feared rather than his mother's gentleness" (*TM*: 11). Ned Parker's having "looked into the fire" suggests the means of perception or interpretation of this elemental divinity, and this is echoed when Stan gazes into the fire on his first night in the bush.[5]

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[4]Coates argues for the influence on White of Jacob Boehme, who "saw Nature as the manifestation of the battle between two aspects of God, love and anger, light and darkness, an antithesis which would eventually result in the complete realisation and manifestation of the Divine Being" (Coates: 119).

[5]The image of sparks, here pictured flying from Ned Parker's anvil, prefigures its more concentrated employment in *Riders in the Chariot*, in which Mordecai Himmelfarb seeks to "gather up the sparks" (*RC*: 140) of divine being in earthly existence. For an illuminating exploration of this trope and its relation to the Kabbalistic myth of the exile and

Within the inner contradiction between the gentle and wrathful aspects of the God-image, however, Ned Parker is not only connected with the latter but is also associated with the creative urge. He could "twist a piece of iron into a true lover's knot" (*TM*: 11) and his character is evocative of Vulcan-Hephaestus, "the divine blacksmith, the artisan-god, the demiurge who has created admirable works and taught men the mechanical arts" (Aldington & Ames: 139). This facet of Ned Parker seems to be related to Stan's own desire for creative expression, which increases as the novel progresses until it becomes centred on the notebook in which he hopes to articulate his inner experience. Allied to this is his recurrent memory of reading his mother's *Hamlet* and the Old Testament. Just as his father's smithy suggests both divine revelation and artistic vision, moreover, his mother's hopes for him associate literary and religious aspirations: "he will teach the words of the poets and God" (*TM*: 12).

Mrs Parker's hopes are unfulfilled, since Stan, notable for his inarticulacy, "was no interpreter" (*TM*: 12), but his desire for expression through words does not diminish. Likewise, the association between art and religion persists, and the simultaneously divine and creative associations linked to pyreal[6] imagery are developed later on in the novel when fire engulfs the district and converges on the Armstrongs' farm, Glastonbury, culminating in an erotically toned encounter between Stan and Madeleine in the burning house. This will be explored in part III of this chapter in a detailed examination of the pyreal trope.

What is significant at this point is the convergence of equestrian and pyreal imagery in the characterisation of Stan's father. White exploits the fact that Ned Parker, by virtue of his being a blacksmith, is largely occupied with shoeing horses, and depicts the young Stan

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"ingathering of the sparks" in a restoration of the original integrity of spirit and matter see Ben-Bassat (1990).

[6]I employ this word to designate White's fire imagery for reasons which are explained in the opening of part III of this chapter, where the focus on the range of significances of White's fire images requires a broad, neutral term.

"holding the musical horseshoes for his father, blowing the bellows, or scraping up the grey parings of hoof" (*TM*: 14). On the one hand this seems to herald Stan's journey of becoming, with the "musical horseshoes" suggesting the glory of motion, but change also implies, and the journey itself also archetypally symbolises, death. Hence, the funereal associations of "grey parings of hoof" extend into "the stench of burned hoof" (*TM*: 11) in Ned Parker's smithy, suggesting the ineluctability of death in spite of the possibility of motion or becoming. White often couples the intoxication of movement or danger with the obliteration in his characters of the conventional conception of the self — or, in loosely Jungian terms, the transcendence of ego-consciousness while in the grip of an archetypal situation — so that the prospect of death becomes a source of exhilaration. At the end of the novel, for example, the Parkers' neighbours are chary of associating with people as close to death as they are, but "It is a different matter if it [death] drops on you out of the sky, on the road, for instance, some stranger, that can be stimulating" (*TM*: 473). Likewise Mrs Gage, the postmistress at Durilgai, entranced by the report she is conveying of a timber cutter struck by lighting while on horseback — note the fusion of the pyreal, equestrian and arboreal tropes — secretly longs to be "str[uck] ... into shapes of fire and radiance" (*TM*: 107), and near the end of the novel Mrs Fisher says to Amy: "You hate the unexpected.... But if there is to be a genuine eruption ... let it erupt unexpectedly. That can be exhilarating" (*TM*: 424). The process of becoming, and the intensification of the experience of life, White seems to suggest, paradoxically also affirms the reality of death. From this relationship between the two opposing impulses, we are at other times led to infer, it should follow that death must be equally affirming of life, through a process of death and renewal, with the one dependent on the other.

At this early stage in the novel, where the young Stan watches his father shaping horseshoes in his smithy and it might be easy to notice only the young man's process of becoming, White emphasises the inseparability of life from death, as he does in the very

opening as well as the conclusion of the novel, where both permanence and motion, and birth and dying, coincide in the present.

With his developing awareness of death, Stan continues for the duration of his life to seek or interpret evidence of God, and by aligning himself with divinity to achieve true permanence. This increasingly takes the form of a "communion of soul and scene" (*TM*: 397) in which "the natural world" becomes "Stan Parker's prophet" (Bliss: 50). Crucial to his spiritual growth is his willingness to reconcile himself to an *impersonal* notion of God[7] which manifests in "the mystery of the natural world" (*TM*: 49) and the elemental powers at work in it, rather than to shape a God-image tailored to his own personal needs which would serve only to obfuscate spiritual experience. His response to the destruction wreaked by flood and fire, and other events which challenge his personal significance, is to adopt an attitude of humility. This places him in direct opposition to Amy, whose deprivation is expressed in materialism and personal relationships which fail due to her possessive conduct of them. Early on in her relationship with Stan she is depicted as a "greedy" woman, "for bread and, once discovered, for his love" (*TM*: 32). Her possessive and objectifying impulses extend to her children, and even before this to her first, miscarried child, who is disturbingly depicted as occupying "the prison of her bones" (*TM*: 62), while Stan sees "a whole tangled ball of mystery in his wife's womb" (*TM*: 54). Similarly, when Amy rescues a boy who is orphaned in the Wullunya floods, she would "imprison the child ... by force of love" (*TM*: 97). Her own children consequently resist her attempts to possess them, and the subsequent failure of her relationships makes her name — *Amy* meaning "beloved" (Room: 20) — one of the more

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[7]John Beston makes a similar point when he comments on Stan's ability to "feel at one with impersonal nature or an abstract God", but the suggestion that this and his "human apartness" prevents him from being able to "convey love for a person" (Beston: 156) does not seem to take full cognisance of the negative impact Amy's possessiveness has on Stan's ability to either convey his undeniable love for her or communicate a vision which becomes increasingly ineffable.

uncomfortably ironic among those of White's characters, ranking together with the brutal choice of *Rhoda* (Greek, "rose" (Room: 455)) for the disfigured half-sister of Hurtle Duffield in *The Vivisector*.

Stan's spiritual growth, the keys to which lie in his increasingly "submerged half" (*TM*: 408), becomes to Amy a source of frustration because it transcends materialism and interpersonal relationships. She constantly views him as concealing from her the secrets of his inner life, failing to acknowledge that his spirituality cannot be reduced to the terms of their relationship. Her inability to rise above her own limitations and her failure ultimately to love those whose spiritual and emotional growth she stifles through her possessiveness thwarts her own spiritual development. Carolyn Bliss, in her study of what she terms "the paradox of fortunate failure" in White's fiction, succinctly describes the problematic tension between Stan and Amy, as well as their role in the novel as a whole, when she asserts that these characters represent "two studies of failure: the one illuminating and the other obscuring" (Bliss: 52).

This distinction, which White maintains throughout, has elicited a defence of Amy in the face White's apparent "condemnation" of her, his "flash of dislike" for her late in the novel, and "his criticism of her as possessive [which] is not vindicated by the evidence within the novel, except in her relationship to Ray" (Beston: 165). While there is abundant evidence of her possessiveness, not only over her family but over all those with whom she becomes or seeks to become in any way intimate, and disturbing as this depiction and the extent of her "failure" turns out to be, one should not conclude from White's stark but clear and unsentimental portrayal of her that his stance is rigid, condemnatory or unsympathetic. Though occasionally the irony of some of White's later characterisations — of, for example, Mrs Jolley and Flack, and Himmelfarb's tormentor, Blue in *Riders in the Chariot* — is at times pursued toward a point of alienating bitterness, Amy's motivations are as faithfully

portrayed as are her husband's. Her personal history, however, is marked by emotional and spiritual deprivation and, unable — as well as, in a sense, unwilling — to overcome this heritage, White also shows her unconsciously, and tragically, reinforcing her own limitations and in so doing attempting to impose them on others.[8]

Stan's inarticulacy leaves him no less able to successfully conduct his relationship with Amy or with his children. Nevertheless, the narrator is clear about her spiritual failings and her unfair dependence on Stan with respect to her own spiritual life, as well as about her distorted love for him which is frequently described in terms such as: "She had not succeeded in eating her husband, though she had often promised herself in moments of indulgence that she would achieve this at some future date" (*TM*: 127).

Amy expects illumination through Stan, and her response to the problem of a loving yet also destructive God — or, otherwise stated, the problem of evil — does not develop beyond the formulation appearing shortly after her marriage:

> She would beg the sad, pale Christ for some sign of recognition.... She turned the pages [of the Bible] respectfully. She said or read the words. And she waited for the warmth, the completeness, the safety of religion. But to achieve this there was something perhaps that she had to do, something that she had not been taught, and in its absence she would get up, in a desperation of activity, as if she might acquire the secret in performing a ritual of household acts, or merely by walking about. Suspecting she might find grace in her hands, suddenly, like a plaster dove. (*TM*: 28)

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[8]White responded to the question of Amy's portrayal in a letter to his cousin and lifelong friend, Peggy Garland:

> Amy Parker had to turn out like that. It is quite possible to be consumed by love for an individual and be led to a fatal wallowing in something else at some point in one's life. A kind of desecration of the noble ideal one can't attain to. Amy Parker is led progressively and fatally to this, I feel, through her fleeting relationships with Madeleine, the Young Digger, Con the Greek, O'Dowd and finally the commercial traveller.
>
> It is strange you should be impressed by Stan Parker as a character "of unfailing strength". To me, he is at many points weak and wavering. Certainly I wanted him to appear admirable as far as his human limitations allow, but perhaps I have tried too hard. (Marr, 1994: 100)

Even in this passage, which is rare among those evidencing actual religious preoccupation in her, she seeks to "acquire the secret" of religion, as she would Stan's, and to hold in her hands the grace of God "like a plaster dove", as when she rescued the orphan from the flood and "held in her hands the body of a caught bird" (*TM*: 89). Her impoverishment, and her frustration of the transcendent impulse (which is often represented by avian imagery) is clear in these images. She seems unable to formulate a conception of the transcendent beyond the domestic or interpersonal sphere. Unable to escape or accept her sense of aloneness or transitoriness, her image of God becomes clothed in terms more descriptive of Stan:

> But she did not receive the grace of God, of which it had been spoken under coloured glass. When she was alone, she was alone. Or else there was lightning in the sky that warned her of her transitoriness. The sad Christ was an old man with a beard, who spat death from full cheeks. But the mercy of God was the sound of wheels at the end of market day. And the love of God was a kiss full in the mouth. She was filled with the love of God, and would take it for granted, until in its absence she would remember again. She was so frail. (*TM*: 32)

Amy's inability to develop her own spiritual potentialities translates into a growing resentment over Stan's deep, yet private relationship to nature. "I do not know God, Stan will not let me" (*TM*: 429), is the most direct among many statements blaming Stan for her own spiritual inadequacy. For this reason the Jungian critic David Tacey has argued that the real marriage is between Stan and "the Earth Mother ... his true lover and bride" in sacrifice to whom Stan hopes to achieve "self-dissolution" which White misrepresents as "spiritual transcendence" (Tacey: 50). This creates "conflict between Amy and the Earth Mother. By marrying Parker she unwittingly puts herself in opposition to Her" (Tacey: 51). Events which manifest the elemental power of nature, Tacey continues, show Amy "cut down to size ... further reduced by the tremendous energy of the Earth Mother", and one of the first of these displays occurs in a passage depicting Amy and Stan on the road to their farm after the marriage:

> She had begun to hate the wind, and the distance, and the road, because her importance tended to dwindle.
>
> Just then, too, the wind took the elbow of a bough and broke it off, and tossed it, dry and black and writhing, so that its bark harrowed the girl's cheek, slapped terror for a moment into the horse, and crumbled, used and negative, in what was already their travelled road.
>
> *Achhh*, cried the girl's hot breath, her hands touching the livid moment of fright that was more than a wound.... (*TM*: 27)

"An effective rebuke from the Mother!", suggests Tacey (51).

The Tree of Man does not fit the frameworks of archetypal criticism neatly, however. Archetypal resonances are certainly evident in White's fiction, and in a general sense the perspectives offered by Jungian criticism can be illuminating insofar as they provide a means of understanding mythical undercurrents which may be seen to be at work. Nevertheless, there are many detailed elaborations of imagery which, on close examination of the text, emerge as part of more sophisticated thematic and tropical patterns than an archetypal reading alone can pinpoint. The elemental power of nature threatens all White's characters throughout the book, and Stan's private exhilaration in the face of fires, floods and dramatic storms could as easily be understood in the terms White seems to intend it — as a fascination with and a probing of the perhaps divine, certainly mysterious, source of the energy which animates the natural world. Stan's understanding of this is constantly mediating his notion of permanence, the object of his quest, and informs his sense of his place in the world in which time and the elemental powers of nature exert an inescapable influence on his life.

Stan's response is to humble himself in the face of events he acknowledges he cannot control. Amy's resistance to the world he embraces, because "her importance tended to dwindle" with full recognition of its extent and power over her, perhaps invites this sharp reminder by way of the tree branch. While White's tropes are so vividly realised, and mercurial, that the tree image does shift into its dark aspect, and seems here the personification of malevolence, this does not justify a sustained argument for an equation

between tree imagery — which in mythological terms *is* often associated with the archetypal Mother — and the Earth Mother which Tacey suggests Amy is constantly, and simply, at odds with.

A different interpretation of the excerpt Tacey quotes is more compatible with the thematic concerns of the novel and consistent with the functioning of its tropes. The active force in the severing of the branch which wounds Amy is significantly the wind, which Amy "had begun to hate". This wind is figuratively related to that which "bent the trees" (*TM*: 11) in the young Stan's conception of a fearful, elemental God, as well as with the "gale" of time which "plies the saplings double" (*TM*: 376) in the Housman poem which informs the novel and suggests its title. In both cases the tree stands for humankind, whose resilience is perpetually challenged by the tribulations of existence. (Hence, for example, in the hours preceding the death of Kathy O'Dowd, the Parkers' neighbour, "the wind was torturing the roof. It took a leaf of iron and tore it off" (*TM*: 451). Once she has died, however, the sense of her eventual release from this final ordeal registers in a poignant image of the "the trees stirring with a dying wind" (*TM*: 460).) The tree that is "man" is "torn" and "used" by the wind, and the fact of human transitoriness conveyed metaphorically through these images is made doubly clear when it is literalised as a wound to Amy's cheek — Amy, moreover, who is less humble in the face of the natural world than Stan, and who is for the first time making the journey to their farm that he is by now familiar with. The result is the momentary paralysis of the terrified horse, suggesting a challenge to the efficacy of human "motion", or the journey of becoming which defies death, "in what was already their travelled road" (*TM*: 27).

Perhaps more fertile an image is the compound, though apparently incidental one which precedes Tacey's excerpt by a few paragraphs: "once they passed a tin nailed on top of a stump, and in the tin were a stone and a dead lizard" (*TM*: 26). On the surface the starkness

of the image is appropriate to the life Amy is entering upon, but beneath this both the stone and the lizard suggest Stan. The name *Stan* is derived from Old English *stān* "stone" (Room: 519), and he is often associated with stone elsewhere in the novel (this connection, particularly in relation to the significance of his unearthing a large boulder while helping his neighbour sink fenceposts, will be more fully explored in part IV of this chapter). The lizard, though a less prominent image in the novel (and once connected with the Parkers' aged neighbour, Ossie Peabody) is linked particularly with Stan, and on the two other occasions when it accompanies him the lizard is itself also associated with stone. The first of these occurs after the war, when Stan takes his son Ray out into the bush in a failed, and late attempt to begin building a relationship with him. He points out a lizard amongst some stones, saying that these are the things he likes to "watch ... to look at" (*TM*: 222). The failure of communication is emphasised when the lizard closes an eye, "shutting it up in its pocket of stone" (*TM*: 222). The second reference appears in the novel's final chapter, in which a "stone lizard" lies in the back garden of what was Stan's house (*TM*: 479), effectively signifying his presence after his death. (As Stan has aged, moreover, "His eyes and his wrists ha[ve] gone a bit scaly" (*TM*: 395).) Both images, of stone and lizard, are appropriate to Stan in their suggestion of permanence, durability and inscrutability.

Once these two images are rendered less opaque, the whole figuration of the stone and the lizard in the tin becomes a startling suggestion of the crucifixion. That White employs the association between the tree and the cross has already been demonstrated, and is here again suggested by the tin being "nailed" to the tree as Christ was to the cross. Just as Christ is an image of humankind suspended between the earthly and the divine, and between death and resurrection, so Stan is suspended between the parallel polarity of permanence and motion. This tension, as well as its resolution, is symbolically articulated in the image of the tree-cross, in the Christian iconography which White exploits as well as in the mythological

imagery in which it is firmly based. The image, given Stan's later metaphorical appearance as the "stone lizard" of the final chapter, is also a prefiguration of his death, in counterbalance to the early stages of his life when it is taking shape.

The conflict of opposites, of which the image of the stone and lizard on the tree stump also acts as a reminder, also impacts on Amy's consciousness when her neighbour, Doll Quigley, speaks of her unrealised ambition to own a shop:

> "And why did nothing come of your shop, Doll?" said Amy Parker....
>
> "It didn't work out that way," said Miss Quigley, without further elaboration, but as if she knew.
>
> What way things were working out for herself, Amy Parker was not sure. She had not thought of it till now, but was it not, now, perhaps, a reason for panic? A slight gust of panic just touched her skin. Here in this house her life was suspended, a bubble ready to burst.
>
> ...
>
> Till now she had never sensed sharply and personally the division between life and death. (*TM*: 52)

The establishment of Doll's life in the district, and her as yet unrealised self, are registered in arboreal terms: "It's funny the way you take root" (*TM*: 54), she says. An orange farmer, "she was not unlike a tree, of which something had roughened the bark in passing" (*TM*: 54). And: "Like her brothers, she could have been carved from wood, but whereas the young men were crude gods, she was an unfinished totem, of which the significance was obscure" (*TM*: 51).

Her brother, Bub, one of White's simple-minded illuminates, is portrayed in images which suggest the transcendence of duality. Engrossed in the natural world, and uniting the heavenly with the terrestrial, "He knew that part of the country from earth level to treetop. He was both bird and ant" (*TM*: 183).[9] The overarching conflict of opposites, in which is included the tension between permanence and motion, does not oppress White's child characters, or those participating in childlike consciousness like Bub, who wears "a child's

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[9]In *Riders in the Chariot* Mary Hare, similarly, enjoys an "equal relationship with air and earth" (*RC*: 420).

face on a young man's body" (*TM*: 51). Hence, when, soon after the Quigleys' visit Amy tells Stan she is pregnant, Stan's "positive vision" (*TM*: 54) of their unborn child is presented in images suggestive of a resolution rather than a conflict arising from the being-becoming dichotomy: "And the boy ... stood in the centre of the floor, of a new house, holding in his hand things to show, a speckled magpie's egg, a piece of glass with a bubble in it, or a stick that was meant to be a horse" (*TM*: 54). The description of the child's hobby-horse as "a stick that was meant to be a horse" yokes the arboreal and equestrian tropes in a conjunction of the themes of permanence and motion which the two tropes typically signify. That this suggestion of the resolution of the novel's chief tension is also accompanied by an image signifying the transcendent impulse in the form of the magpie's egg — which implies not only the aerial associations of avian imagery but also birth — adds to the sense of spiritual liberation. And whereas Amy's experience of the conflict of opposites is accompanied by the negative image of her "suspended, a bubble ready to burst" (*TM*: 52), the tenor of the metaphor seems to be reversed in this image of a piece of glass with a bubble in it, so that the agonising experience of the suspension between opposites is made transparent, something the child, occupying the "centre" of the room, holds up "to show".

The stick-horse of the unborn child is a refiguration of the opening fusion of the "hairy" tree and the "rooted" horse which ushers Stan into the novel. While this juxtaposition looks back at the book's opening, the image of glass becomes the first among a series employed right to the end of the novel. Particularly the "coloured glass" (*TM*: 33) of church windows — or the "transcendent glass" (*TM*: 414), as it is later, partly ironically, referred to — becomes increasingly associated with children, acting as a metaphor for the experience of the world in religious terms (as well as for the vision underlying artistic creation). This motif gains momentum with the appearance of the boy orphaned in the Wullunya flood, and will be

given further consideration in the next section of this chapter which is structured around the novel's diluvial imagery.

II

The Wullunya flood is the first of the biblical "set pieces" (Walsh, 1977: 34) of *The Tree of Man* which, along with those of fire and drought — corresponding to "every cliché in the Australian climatic calendar: drought, fire, gales, floods..." (*FG*: 144) — challenges the myth of permanence which the surface narrative of the early stages of the novel shows Stan Parker seeking to establish. Added to an exploration of White's employment of the diluvial trope will be a discussion of significant manifestations of arboreal imagery, particularly the image of the old man Stan sees caught in a tree, as well as the suicide of Gage (an event which occurs much later in the novel but which will be discussed here due to its tropical association). These and related images highlight the ambivalent aspect of tree symbolism in *The Tree of Man*, through which the notion of transcendence seems here to be undermined. Nevertheless, it is out of this complex of images, among which there feature several confrontations for Stan, Amy and their neighbours with death, that several significant images emerge which counteract this ambivalence, most significantly through the orphan boy who bears a piece of coloured glass which peculiarly reaffirms transcendent, or visionary, possibilities.

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From the outset of the deluge that inundates the district, White exploits the sense of liquidity to which imagery of rain and flood naturally lends itself to suggest a heightened awareness of transitoriness. Water so permeates the landscape that the normal order of stability and change is in fact inverted in the unrelenting downpour so that the rain itself becomes the pervading and constant feature of existence: "When the rain began in earnest ... the lives of men appeared both transitory and insignificant events beneath its terrible continuity" (*TM*: 69-70). Continuing the subversion of the myth of permanence, the Parkers' house is

"reduced to a pointed roof on which rain fell" (*TM*: 70), and even their dreams become flooded: "It fell always. It fell in their sleep. It washed through the dreams of sleepers, lifted their fears and resentments, and set them floating on the grey waters of sleep" (*TM*: 70) .

When Stan sets off in a boat to help rescue those stranded on farms which have been cut off by the "no longer personal" (*TM*: 70) rain, his fellow volunteers anticipate an opportunity to "exercise their strength" (*TM*: 72). Yet, once they comprehend the full extent of the flood the rowers begin to doubt the efficacy of human action, finding that "their muscles were uncertain of this work" (*TM*: 72-3). "[T]he yellow flood ... had taken the lives from out of their hands" (*TM*: 71), so that the fiend of motion becomes impotent with the characters' inability to effect change. Instead, rain and flood are in a sense wreaking change or motion on *them*. Pluvial and diluvial imagery is employed to represent the element, water, paradoxically permanent in its constancy, in possession of the agency which has been "taken out of their hands", so that the rowers were "possessed by motion" (*TM*: 74) rather than acting out of their own volition. (This sense is ubiquitous in surrounding imagery, to the extent that even in a peripheral description of an anonymous woman pouring tea, its "red stream appeared to be fixed" (*TM*: 88).)

White continues to employ imagery of water in a subtle, yet total reversal of its traditional associations of flux as usually set against the stability of the land, so that now "It was the boat that was stationary" (*TM*: 74) while "fragments of the still, safe lives that are lived in houses flowed past" (*TM*: 73).[10] (Even trees, in *The Tree of Man* commonly

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[10]The device and its thematic import is later contemplated by Alf Dubbo in *Riders in the Chariot*, in connection with one of his paintings:

> From certain angles the canvas presented a reversal of the relationship between permanence and motion, as though the banks of a river were to begin to flow alongside its stationary waters. The effect pleased the painter, who had achieved more or less by accident what he had discovered years before while lying in the gutter. So he encouraged an illusion which was also a truth, and from which the

emblematic of permanence, become "drifting", "liquid" (*TM*: 73).) Among the debris, significantly, is "a hat with a drowned feather" (*TM*: 74), challenging the tenor of transcendence of which avian imagery typically acts as a vehicle. With similar irony a bible floats by, open at Ezekiel. Recalling the identification of Stan's God-image with the "God of the Prophets" (*TM*: 11), the ironic detail shows such testimony to divinity overwhelmed by the flood.

To Stan himself the flood is further, undeniable evidence of transitoriness:

> [T]he half-submerged world became familiar as his own thoughts. He remembered things he had never told, and forgotten. He remembered the face of his mother before her burial, when the skull disclosed what the eyes had always hidden, some fear that the solidity of things around her was not assured. But in the dissolved world of flowing water, under the drifting trees, it was obvious that solidity is not. (*TM*: 73)

Able to countenance this fact, he is soon, however, confronted with the sight of one of the flood's victims which so shocks him that he is not able to report on it to his companions, or later to the man's daughter when she asks after him:

> Stan Parker saw, stuck in the fork of a tree, the body of an old, bearded man. But he did not mention this. He rowed. All omissions were accepted by the blunt boat. And soon the old man, whose expression had not expected much, dying upside down in a tree, was obliterated by motion and rain. (*TM*: 74)

The man, it later comes to light, had set off to rescue "a ram stuck in a tree" (*TM*: 74), and it is this image which Stan substitutes for the true one to hide his guilt at not reporting it. Apart from "the obvious Christian allusion to a man's death by hanging in a tree", Carolyn Bliss elaborates:

> It is as though he prefers to believe that the man was not human, not an Isaac, but rather the substitute sacrifice, the ram in the thicket.... The ram, of course, also suggests Christ, the Lamb who *was* sacrificed for man's redemption. (54)

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timid might retreat simply by changing their position. (*RC*: 458)

Apart from these clear biblical resonances, the incident also relates to the intra-textual development of the God-image. The old bearded man recalls the patriarchal, Old Testament God invoked early on in the novel as "the God of Parker the father" (*TM*: 11), yet here it, like Stan and his companions, seems to be rendered impotent in the face of the elemental, impersonal power of nature. The yoking of this image of the Father to that of the crucified Christ, moreover, parallels an earlier, shifting identification between the two as it forms in Amy's consciousness: "The sad Christ was an old man with a beard" (*TM*: 33).

The whole tenor of this image challenges the notion of transcendence, both through presenting an image of God rendered powerless, as well as through inverting the crucifixion symbol and in so doing undermining its transcendent significance. Parallel to this runs the abovementioned reversal of roles of traditional symbols of permanence and change, so that Stan's own powerlessness and the impotence of the previously fearful, patriarchal God of his early youth converge to form a spiritual upheaval more disturbing than any he has yet experienced. The image accompanies Stan's "first significant experience of failure" (Bliss: 52), and it is noteworthy that his much later recollection of the man in the tree occurs when he is finally confronted with the fact of Amy's adultery with the travelling salesman, another of his life's profound failures. Though this act on her part — described unambiguously by White as motivated by a conscious yet irresistible desire to bring about "her own destruction" (*TM*: 303) — arises from her distorted vision of a relationship in which it is counted as a failing that she "had not succeeded in eating her husband" (*TM*: 127), and in which Stan "respected and accepted her mysteries, as she could never respect and accept his" (*TM*: 147), Stan cannot escape complicity in the betrayal. Clearly, through his inability to communicate successfully with her (as with his children) he has been inadequate to the demands of their relationship. This awareness is reflected in a dream he has on the evening of one of her encounters with Leo (though at this point Stan only suspects her infidelity) in

which he tries unsuccessfully to make amends by revealing the inner life she has always coveted but now — since she has acquired her own secret life — disdains. The dream sequence begins in Amy's consciousness, with her being blown about in "a gusty wooden box, in which there seemed room for both good and evil" while she avoids Stan's face, "fearing that a preponderance of good might upset this satisfactory balance" (*TM*: 307) so that, in an ironic reversal of Pandora's box, she now discourages his attempt at self-disclosure:

> [H]e could not lift the lid of the box to show her what he had inside. It does not matter, she said, Stan, I do not want to see.... I shall show, he said, pulling till the sweat came. But still not. No, she said, Stan, Stan, it has gone bad in there, it has been in there all these years. Pulling, he could not explain it was his act that had died, and grown wool, like a ram, and lived again. I am going, she said. (*TM*: 308)

Apart from the failure of Stan's relationship with Amy and his desire to make his inner life available to her, and given contextual details surrounding the dream, the excerpt bears embedded significances which are also associated with his guilt over not reporting the sight of the old man in the tree. Having met the man's grandson on this day, and confessed to Amy his guilt over passing by the "almost certainly dead" (*TM*: 306) — but perhaps, it is implied, at the time still living — man, the ram he substituted for the figure appears in his dream. The "act" in the dream represents both his failed attempt to give more of himself over to Amy through lifting the lid on his inner nature, and his failure to declare that he saw the man in the tree. The "dead act", "gone bad" in Amy's words, seems to express his guilt and failure. Yet this guilt becomes embodied in the ram, the substitute sacrifice, and is also here, as earlier, associated with the crucifixion. Like Christ, sacrificed for the redemption of humankind and yet also being resurrected, Stan's failure takes the form of the ram which "lived again", and what has risen is the guilt of which he is unable to disburden himself, either in the dream or in his direct confession to Amy. She trivialises his dilemma — "'It is all too silly,' said his

wife" — and "his guilt remained", while her infidelity leaves her considering "her own corpse, that she could not share" (*TM*: 307).

The continuity of the development of this motif and its mercurial changes are not accounted for in the interpretation offered by David Tacey. Tacey argues that the inverted corpse is "perhaps the key mythological image in *The Tree of Man*" (55) and that through it White unwittingly subverts a different set of meanings he is at pains to portray through recourse to an imposed Christian framework:

> In ancient mythology dissolution into Mother Nature was often imaged as a return to the maternal tree. The *puer*-god was sometimes called 'he in the tree', since he was born of the tree and buried inside it at his death. In the Attis/Cybele myth the boy-god castrates himself under the sacred pine, and in another version he hangs himself on the tree.... [I]t is interesting that the old man in the flood dies upside down in the tree. In a sense, the *puer* lives life in an inverted way. Instead of growing toward maturity and independence he sinks back into darkness, infantilism, and the unconscious. His head points down toward the earth, held in thrall by the great mother. (Tacey: 55)

The whole depiction of the Wullunya floods certainly invites mythological association, and the apparent immersion of Stan's consciousness in "the dissolved world of flowing water" (*TM*: 73) does suggest that mythological undercurrents are at work, particularly that of the archetypal Mother which is typically identified with the realm of the collective unconscious, itself also often imaged as water. Likewise, the primacy of the diluvial trope and the reversal of masculine Christian symbols suggests a conflict between spirit and matter, in which the material seems here to have gained the upper hand. Yet these images are part of more complex figurations which are constantly modulated within a broader tropical context. It is an over-reduction to argue that the appearance of the inverted corpse in this context is simply indicative of Stan's enthralment to the Mother and that he is therefore trapped in a persistent state of spiritual inversion. As I have attempted to demonstrate in my exploration of the image, White employs it to combine several other meanings which are not accounted for in Tacey's reading. The flood, likewise, forms a background of dissolution and threatens

permanence, but though it dramatises a conflict between the spiritual and the material this is part of its intra-textual function and Stan's encounter with it facilitates the elaboration of a stage of his inner journey rather than exposing regressive tendencies which conflict — as Tacey suggests — with White's intentions in deploying the trope. Archetypal resonances, while they are illuminating, cannot be taken alone in the formulation of a complete interpretation of White's images without the provision of a more comprehensive account of their manifestation in different contexts, as will continue to be demonstrated below. Moreover, there exists also the danger that archetypal interpretation — and this has been noted from within the Jungian perspective, as demonstrated in the introductory chapter — lends itself to circularity of argument unless specific details of the text, rather than mythological comparisons from a single perspective to decontextualised images, remain the primary matter of explication. In this regard, Tacey's preoccupation with parallels between Stan Parker's spiritual life and the fate of the *puer aeternus* in his reading of the image under consideration seems in any case to be a misapplication of the Jungian concept. Among the mythological personages which represent motifs and contents of the collective unconscious in Jung's schema, the *puer aeternus* or "eternal youth" has as its counterpart the *senex* or wise old man (see Jacobi: 47). If White's image is to be interpreted in Jungian terms, surely the latter motif would be more analogous to the old, bearded man inverted in the tree.

Additionally, there are many more examples of the death of the god on the tree than Tacey calls on to support his interpretation. Typically, however, death on the tree is part of a symbolic cycle culminating in the illumination or, more often, *rebirth* of the god who commonly takes on the character of a solar deity. Hence, among those gods whom Tacey alludes to as being born and entombed in the tree is the Egyptian god Osiris, "a vegetation spirit that dies and is ceaselessly reborn" to become "the light of the sun" (Aldington & Ames: 17), with his tree-coffin representing "the *djed* pillar [through which] he is the sun-

generating principle" (Neumann, 1955: 242). In Egyptian mythology generally, "the tree goddess gives birth to the sun" (Neumann, 1955: 241), and "the tree birth of Osiris recurs in [the Phoenician] Adonis; both are 'vegetation gods,' as is the infant Jesus, the Babylonian grain god, the virgin-born ear of wheat, lying in his wooden manger" (Neumann, 1955: 243). Under the bodhi tree the Buddha, or Bodhisattva (from Sanskrit *bodhi* "enlightenment" and *sattva* "essence" (Room: 70)), experiences his awakening. The Norse myth of Odin (to which the Hanged Man of the Tarot also corresponds (Cirlot: 138)) would also suggest a likely mythological parallel. Odin, hanging inverted from Yggdrasil, the World Ash tree, falls from it after nine days to achieve illumination (Cook: 23). On this event and analogous mythological motifs, Neumann (1955) notes that

> sacrifice, death, rebirth, and wisdom are intertwined on a new plane. Thus the tree of life, cross, and gallows tree are ambivalent forms of the maternal tree. What hangs on the tree, the child of the tree mother, suffers death but receives immortality from her.... (252)

Jung offers a loose outline of arboreal symbolism pointing to similar significances:

> Trees ... have played a large part in religion and mythology from the remotest times. Typical of the trees found in myth is the tree of paradise, or tree of life; most people know of the pine-tree of Attis, the tree or trees of Mithras, and the World-Ash Yggdrasill of Nordic mythology.... The hanging of Attis, in effigy, on a pine tree, the hanging of Marsyas, which became a popular theme for art, the hanging of Odin, the Germanic hanging sacrifices and the whole series of hanged gods — all teach us that the hanging of Christ on the cross is nothing unique in mythology but belongs to the same circle of ideas. In this world of images the Cross is the Tree of Life and at the same time a Tree of Death — a coffin. Just as the myths tell us that human beings were descended from trees, so there were burial customs in which people were buried in hollow tree-trunks, whence the German *Totenbaum*, 'tree of death,' for coffin, which is still in use today. If we remember that the tree is predominantly a mother-symbol, then the meaning of this mode of burial becomes clear. *The dead are delivered back to the mother for rebirth.* (*CW*, 5: 233)

The tree is undeniably an ambivalent image, in White's deployment of it as well as in its manifestations in world mythology and specifically in Christian iconography. However, an archetypal reading of White's, or any other literary employment of, arboreal imagery must

surely consider its ultimate significance as an image of renewal as is clear from the above brief outline. That Tacey makes no reference to the positive significance of tree imagery in mythological or biblical sources throughout his critique of White's work is surprising. His exclusive emphasis on its aspect of the Tree of Death, through which it personifies a devouring maternal matrix, pins a highly varied and shifting symbol to only one of its facies, and denies the process of transformation which the tree symbol in its entirety conveys. This significantly jeopardises his interpretation of, among other images, that of the inverted corpse, which is also further illuminated by biblical and intra-textual elements associated with it, as well as of the suicide by hanging of the artist, Gage, whom Tacey's reading also consigns to "darkness, infantilism, and the unconscious" (55).

It perhaps requires emphasis at this point that archetypal interpretation should not be eschewed, but that the present study treats White's specific configurations of images and their continuous development in the text as primary, with either their biblical or mythological associations augmenting interpretation when they appear relevant. Too great a demand for correspondences between White's tropes and specific images amongst a truly vast array of mythological motifs could lead to an endless number of associations. Many such parallels may be superficially plausible but are ultimately less illuminating than close scrutiny of the also considerable detail of White's images as they are developed within the work itself. From this perspective the suicide of Gage will now be examined. (This event takes place much later on in the novel but will be discussed at this point given its tropical relation to the image of the old man in the tree.)

Gage's wife, the Durilgai postmistress, relates her discovery of his body:

> "Took his life, dear," she announced, now piteously for her situation, "on a tree down the yard. By two belts. One was an old thing I had not seen before, that he must have picked up. He was hanging there. Oh dear, it was terrible to see. He was swinging. Very slow. But his face was quiet." (*TM*: 279)

The calm expression on his face recalls the contented smile of the old man caught in the tree (*TM*: 84), and arboreal imagery impinges on Gage's life in many of the details his wife provides: he "would sit ... on the old iron bedstead under the pepper tree ... just sitting"; together they lived "in cottages that smelled of dry rot, in tents, or even under bark"; and "he had a talent for carpentry, but the sawdust affected his breathing" (*TM*: 287), with the latter description echoing Christ as the carpenter while also undercutting the association. The ambivalent aspect of the tree is strongly constellated in association with Gage, and reaches from the stifling effect of the sawdust — also invoking the arboreal trope, apart from the aforementioned biblical allusion — through to his final suffocation by hanging from the tree. A partial explanation for his suicide can be found in the significant parallels between Gage, about whom very little is in fact known given the rarity of his appearances in the forefront of the narrative, and Stan Parker. Gage conveys through his paintings a perception of the mysteries Stan is preoccupied with (though they never escape the latter's lips because of his inarticulacy). Both characters are deeply absorbed in the natural world. Both experience deep marital conflict over an inability to share their vision, or through their spouses' misjudgement of their introversion. "I was never hit about, or split open, but I was led to understand I did not understand myself ... or anything," complains Mrs Gage; and: "Sometimes he [Gage] would sit for days without saying a word, to insult a woman" (*TM*: 280). Both, too, are haunted by a sense of impotence, with Gage having been a fettler "till his hands gave out" (*TM*: 280). (The connection with the railway also suggests arrested motion, and is repeated in the painting depicting a brutalised "fettler-Christ" (*TM*: 282) left for dead beside some railway tracks.) When Stan later recalls Gage it is significantly at the time of Amy's adultery. Having attempted, in the dream considered above, to forestall her abandonment of him by opening the box to reveal the inner life he has protected from her, he recalls the artist:

> He woke then, stretched stiff in the bed, his feet nailing the sheet to the rail, and his neck bare, on which the sweat was cold. But [Amy] was breathing. She had not gone. Then he understood. He understood the husband of the postmistress hanging from the tree in the yard, the reason for whose action had always appeared obscure to him. I could take my life, he said behind stiff lips. But she had not gone.... [G]radually he fell asleep, and was sleeping, and sleeping because she was there. (*TM*: 308)

The connection between Stan's fear that the failure to reveal his depths to Amy could mean the loss of her, and Gage's suicide, suggests that the latter's death is motivated by, alongside the spiritual torment his work depicts, a failure to communicate to others the vision he secretly channels into his paintings. These are clearly dismissed by Mrs Gage who sees their unorthodoxy as merely adding to the burdens she has had to bear. Remaining blind to the profound suffering which they convey, and while her husband's body still lies within the house, she hopes to gain sympathy for herself by exposing them to derision before her acquaintances, and Amy Parker. "[M]orbidly excited by the prospect of complete revelation", she proclaims them "the story of our life" (*TM*: 281):

> And she kicked a picture.
>
> Mrs Mulvaney and Mrs Hobson gasped and recoiled for the audacity of her act. Because she had struck the blasphemous Christ that her late husband had painted, apparently on the side of a tea chest, which by this time had warped somewhat. And it had been in the beginning a poor sort of a scrawny fettler-Christ, a plucked fowl of a man that had not suffered to the last dregs of indignity, but would endure more, down to gashing with a broken bottle, the meanest of all weapons, till left to suppurate under the brown flies, beside the railway lines. (*TM*: 282)

The Christian imagery of the semi-autobiographical portrait draws predominantly on the suffering and humiliation of Christ, emphasised by the image of a plucked fowl[11] — also an

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[11]The image may also relate to O'Dowd, who describes to Amy his invention of a device for plucking chickens, and believes that his having been robbed of the idea accounts for his lack of material success in life (*TM*: 289). By peculiar coincidence he mentions Gage in the same sequence, and attempts to humiliate her with a description of the nude he would paint her as (while concealing knowledge of the artist's portrait of Amy).

ironic deployment of the avian trope which withdraws the possibility of transcendence — and among the spectators it evokes only Amy's humanity:

> Amy Parker, who had been quiet all this time, because she was opening to an experience of great tenderness and beauty, had not suspected such jewels of blood as the husband of the postmistress had put on the Christ's hands. Then the flesh began to move her, its wincing verdigris and sweating tallow. She knew this, as if her sleep had told her of it. (*TM*: 282)

Amy also notices that he had "painted a great many trees, in various positions, their limbs folded in sleep or contemplation, or moving in torture" (*TM*: 282). Associated with "the picture of Christ" (*TM*: 282), the trees evoke the cross, and on the intra-textual level they also act as metaphors for humanity conveying a range of experience from rest to agony. As such, the paintings in a sense constitute a concentrated portrayal of *The Tree of Man* as a whole.

The other painting described in detail, and the one most vigorously execrated by Mrs Gage — "'Yes,' said the postmistress, eagerly enduring it, 'that one is the vilest'" (*TM*: 283) — is of a "laborious woman, almost carved out of paint" (*TM*: 283) which, though the others show no sign of recognising the figure, turns out to be probably the most compassionate and perceptive portrayal of Amy Parker to appear in the novel:

> This figure was just waking. There was a small kernel of knowledge in the almond of the eye, that was growing, and would soon put on leaves. Otherwise the figure of the waking woman was naked, except for the tendrils of hair that preserved those parts of the body in an innocent poetry. Her simplicity was that of silence and of stone. Her breasts were as final as two stones, and she was reaching up with her ponderous but touching hands towards that sun which would itself have been a stone, if it had not glowed with such a savage incandescence.
> ...
> Then Amy Parker ... noticed in the corner, at the feet of the woman, what appeared to be the skeleton of an ant that the husband of the postmistress had scratched in the paint with some sharp instrument, and out of the cage of the ant's body a flame flickered, of luminous paint, rivalling in intensity that sun which the woman was struggling after. (*TM*: 283)

The painting has its genesis in an encounter between Amy and Gage in which she discovers him kneeling on the ground — "upon the stones" (*TM*: 284), as she later recalls — gazing at

an ant, and then at her, with "the intensity of his eyes penetrat[ing] the woman's unconscious face almost to the darker corners, as if here too was some mystery he must solve, like the soul of the ant" (*TM*: 105). This conflation is evident in the painting, which is a kind of dual portrait of Amy and the ant as Gage simultaneously perceives them, and each becomes an unlikely medium for a representation of the transcendent. The tellurian connotations of the ant which are at work at this point — elsewhere the image is often employed to suggest the relative insignificance or "ant-activity" (*TM*: 50) of human endeavour — correlate with the weighty, fundamentally earthbound Amy as a figure composed of stone. The ant, moreover, in its skeletal character is associated with the mortal, suffering image of Christ, etched into the paint with "some sharp instrument" in a suggestion of wounding, operating alongside the pathos of Amy's reaching for the unattainable sun. This sun goes beyond the traditional association between solar imagery and the transcendent in that it is here emblematic of Stan. As Amy mounts the hill on parting from Gage, "She looked up into the face of the sun her husband" (*TM*: 106), and it is this identification by Amy of transcendent possibility with Stan that is reiterated in the portrait. In this light, the predominance in the painting of imagery of stone, while on the one hand conveying her earthboundness, may also again be punning on Stan's name as being Old English for "stone", completing the association between Stan and the sun, and the sun of the painting "which would itself have been a stone". The image highlights two points, the first being the limitation placed on Amy's spiritual life by her reduction of the transcendental to the interpersonal and anthropocentric, as in the opening of the novel when Stan almost becomes her God-image, so that "the love of God was a kiss full in the mouth" (*TM*: 33) at the end of market day. The second is that both Stan and that transcendent possibility which she metaphorically identifies — or, in another sense, burdens — him with hence becomes even less unattainable to her. Demanding his cooperation in a doomed attempt to live her own spiritual life vicariously through him, she further inhibits

what little ability he may have to share aspects of his own spiritual activity with her. She and Stan become, on this level, even further alienated from one another, and in the process the transcendent vision on which he is focused, which also crucially demands a neutral acknowledgement of the transitoriness which she evades, is also placed out of her reach. Only near the end of her life is she shown as having "realized that it was finally between herself and God, and that it was quite possible she would never succeed in opening her husband and looking inside" (*TM*: 415).

This characterisation of Amy, which arises from the novel as a whole and is concentrated in the images White gives Gage's painting, should not, however, be interpreted as amounting to a simple, black and white denigration of her, or reduce the poignance of her depiction by Gage (or the narrator). The "kernel of knowledge in the almond[12] of her eye" — both significantly images of seed — linked with the fact of her waking highlights her possession of a growing intuitive knowledge which is often portrayed in the novel. "I do not *understand.* But I *know*" (*TM*: 345) she says at one point, though again this knowledge tends to be limited to human relationships (as when she penetrates something of the personality of Gage on coming upon him kneeling before the ant, and which is acknowledged by him in his painting). Beyond the domestic and interpersonal, however, that sun under which she walks as she leaves him casts a harsh, "hard light" (*TM*: 106), just as in the painting it is unapproachable, glowing with "a savage incandescence". On the other hand the burgeoning "knowledge" suggested in the painting, given its clear Edenic resonances, also reverts to biblical themes and suggests postlapsarian knowledge of duality as embodied in the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Though tenuously, White seems to be alluding to this

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[12]The almond image may also relate to the mandorla, the almond-shaped halo enclosing Mary or Christ in Christian art. The almond recurs in *Voss* as an image for the soul, and is considered in this connection in chapter 2, part III.

aspect of the tree, as well as to the consciousness in Adam and Eve of their nakedness — or, otherwise stated, of their alienation from God — as tendrils cover Amy's nakedness in a yet "innocent poetry".

Gage's painting and the surrounding imagery of Amy's encounter with him reaches into her experience of the problem of opposites as it is constellated in her life. Another, striking image of this conflict, specifically of precarious suspension between opposites, is expressed through the mouth of Mrs O'Dowd. The imagery associated with this statement occurs within the context of the Wullunya flood, and allows for the return to the core sequence around which this subsection of my exploration of *The Tree of Man* is structured.

When Amy accompanies Mrs O'Dowd on a "jaunt" (*TM*: 76) to Wullunya for diversion from the still unrelenting rain, her friend shares with her an anecdote which is at once comic and replete with images relating significantly to the novel's chief tropes. With their journey registering as a playful defiance of the flood's obliteration of human effort, or motion, they proceed in their cart "lashing the water with their wheels", the horse "str[iking] at the surface as if he meant it" (*TM*: 77), and Mrs O'Dowd describes a previous visit to Wullunya when she and her husband went to see the circus:

> "In that circus I was tellun you of," [she] said, "there was a lady dancin on the rumps of two white horses, from one to tother, and through a hoop, with the band playun beautiful. Oh, I like a circus, for a change, and so does he, if he is sensible, like, at the time. Well ... we was settun eatun our little pies, when *he* becomes as bold as brass. Mind you, it was no more than a pint, or two perhaps — you know what he is — that he'd took at the Oak, or was it the Bunch of Grapes? No matter. There he was, hitchun up his pants and all for ridun a buckjump nag, with me hangun on 'is arm. 'Hold hard,' I said, 'you obstropulous man, haven't you circus enough? An clowns?' I said. 'An ackrybats? If they happen to break their limbs, that is what they are there for. But I have not paid thruppence, O'Dowd, to see me own husband in splinters.' Oh, but I am tellun you, it was terrible, Mrs Parker, an me by rights a sensitive woman for scenes in public. Anyways, they played the band. To distract attention. An they run up a dago girl on a rope. There she was, hangun by one toe from the ceilun, and out of her teeth a cage of birds. 'There,' I said to His Nibs, 'observe,' I said, 'what we have paid to see.' But he was too far gone, Mrs Parker, to expect much from the ceilun, when he was not adjusted to the

> ground. He fell down after that, and I was fannin the flies from off of his face...." (*TM*: 77-8)

The farcical character of the sequence, in one sense in keeping with White's view of life as tragi-comic, also itself "distracts attention" from the key image of the performer hanging precariously inverted, which shares the unsettling undertones of the old man Stan sees caught in the tree. Both suggest an inversion of the crucifixion, an association which is here encouraged by the names of the taverns one of which O'Dowd has visited. Significantly, the names of two possibilities are advanced, emphasising the correlation. The Oak (mentioned elsewhere in connection with O'Dowd (*TM*: 76) invokes the arboreal trope, with the already existing biblical resonances — the oak is "a symbol of Christ as strength in adversity" and sometimes "said to be the tree of the cross" (Cooper: 121) — being added to by virtue of its coupling with the Bunch of Grapes, which draws on the symbolic identity between Christ and the vine (John 15). O'Dowd's crapulence, mediated by the arboreal trope, goes beyond mere comic interlude in that it represents a parody of the spiritual nourishment conferred symbolically by the tree or the vine. While the frustration of his spiritual development is obvious enough in most portrayals of him, the arrest of the impulse toward becoming is highlighted by the earlier image of the sick mare which, on the O'Dowds' arrival in the district, collapses near the gate of their dwelling and becomes "the old dead horse that he left layun for a sign" (*TM*: 45). The glory of motion as it is represented in the white circus horses with the performer dancing between them hence in a sense tempts him to surge back into the process of becoming, but his attempt is of course a failed one. In his wife's demurs over seeing "me own husband in splinters", moreover, the malapropism of *splints* again calls up the arboreal trope through its reference to wood, but he is left unconscious under the sight she presses him to look at. This image, of the other performer suspended from her toe, surrounded by the arboreal details of the sequence, speaks directly to O'Dowd's situation.

Ironically, he is oblivious to it as it points to the conflict of opposites as imaged in suspension on the tree and the tension between being and becoming manifest in his life, with the cessation of motion being accompanied by a proportionate substitution of fixity and decay for permanence.

Apart from its relation to O'Dowd, the image of the hanging performer broadly conveys a sense of the tenuousness of the connection between the earthly and the transcendent, appropriately within the context of the rain and flood which obliterates evidence of human striving. Later Amy sees "The skies reel[ing] above, opening for a moment on an act of blue, but groggily, from which the cage of birds must fall" (*TM*: 78) and imagines the circus dancer and the body of O'Dowd bobbing on the water (*TM*: 83). The bird-cage, moreover, emphasises the doubtfulness of transcendent possibility. As the symbol of the crucifixion has been inverted, so the sense of spiritual freedom traditionally associated with avian imagery (which itself typically accompanies the tree) has been reversed in an image showing spirit captive in matter. (An example of an opposing, positive synthesis of the arboreal and avian tropes appears in the tamarisk of the shopkeeper, Mr Denyer: "As the trunk thickened, the feathers of this straight tamarisk became something to look for" (*TM*: 103).)

All of the resonances of the circus imagery so far explored draw on the negative aspect of the tree, or the tree of duality in its mythical, biblical and intra-textual representations, in which the symbol expresses the notion of irreconcilable division. Mrs O'Dowd, however, posits an opposing notion of balance with her description of O'Dowd's drunkenness as having left him "too far gone ... to expect much from the ceilun, when he was not adjusted to the ground" (*TM*: 78). Among several profound statements she makes in the novel this one is significant in its suggestion of the possibility of the resolution of the tension between the transcendent and the material through a re-evaluation of earthly experience (a

theme which becomes almost ubiquitous in *Voss*). In this light her statement also correlates with the positive aspect of the tree as a symbol of the reconciliation of opposites, again in its mythical and biblical manifestations as well as in White's intra-textual employment of it. References to the flood made through her mouth likewise contradict the conception of it as having a purely annihilating character which cuts off the hope of the transcendence. "It is all floods ... And all ways is one" (*TM*: 78) she says, on the surface describing the full extent of the deluge, but with her words, unusually within the portrayal of the event, also hinting at an underlying unity which circumscribes all events. And when she refers to the volunteers in the rescue operation and predicts "Beer on the house, I'll bet, for fishun the poor souls out of the water" (*TM*: 77), the destructive power of the flood which has so far predominated is vitiated by the fish symbol. The fish, the sign of Christ, also figures in Christian iconography as a symbol of immortality and the resurrection, and the Apostles were fishers of men (Cooper: 68). The image is employed elsewhere in the novel, in one case in association with Gage who is fishing when Mrs Gage first encounters him. In the latter sequence, White ensures that its spiritual connotations are not violated when Gage declines the invitation to partake of the fish he has caught, telling his future wife "he was not interested in fish after they had been cooked" (*TM*: 280). And of another fish about to be cooked the narrator comments: "The fish was. He glittered. His being could not end in death" (*TM*: 372). Connotative of the spirit, the image suggests the transcendence of materiality and its invocation by Mrs O'Dowd acts as a prelude to its manifestation in connection with the boy orphaned during the flood, whose appearance in the narrative will now be considered.

The arrival of the flood boy, who remains anonymous for most of *The Tree of Man*, facilitates the introduction of another tropical antithesis to the negative associations of the flood. The child is discovered outside the Wullunya butchery, crying "As if it was the last Christian left on earth" (*TM*: 89), in a description reminiscent of White's original title for the

novel, *A Life Sentence on Earth* (Marr, 1991: 282). Seeming to have been "washed down from somewhere" (*TM*: 89), he consistently refuses to be named even after Amy rescues him and takes him home with her. "It was as if he had determined to originate on that night" (*TM*: 93). Similarly, the butcher's wife's persistent attempts to establish whom he "belong[s]" (*TM*: 89) to, and Amy's to "possess" (*TM*: 91) him, are unsuccessful and he disappears the following morning as mysteriously as he appeared.

The enigmatic nature of the boy is, as soon emerges, in character with his most significant activity in the novel, which is to gaze through the piece of crimson glass he has taken from the window of a church. The glass itself bears visionary associations which, like him, will not be reduced to a specific origin or name, and several of the novel's tropes, and key biblical symbols, subtly converge in the sequence describing Amy's one private encounter with him in her house, on the night she has found him:

> The kitchen still glowed. The boy lay on his side, looking through his piece of glass at the dying coals....
>
> "You've still got that old thing," she said, shivering in her nightdress on the edge of the bed.
>
> "That is from the church," he said.
>
> "You lived near a church then?"
>
> "No, that was afterwards. After I had left the others. It was near the willows. I thought I was dead," he said.
>
> "Was it your family you were with?" she asked.
>
> "I can't remember that," he said glibly, looking through the piece of glass, that she saw was colouring his cheek; as he moved the glass his skin was a drifting crimson.
>
> ...
>
> "Would you like to look through this?" he asked. "I broke it from one of the windows."
>
> ...
>
> "At first it [the glass] fell into the water. But I fished it up. You see, there was water inside the church."
>
> She took the piece of glass and held it to her face, so that the whole room was drenched with crimson, and the coals of the fire were a disintegrating gold. (*TM*: 94-5)

Close scrutiny of this passage and the relation of its images to previous ones shows White proceeding by a series of hints and suggestions toward a metaphorical identification of the boy with the resurrected Christ.

As Amy finds him, he is looking through the glass at the kitchen fire, an activity which parallels that of Stan's, and Stan's father's, "look[ing] into the fire" (*TM*: 11), portrayed early on as being synonymous with the interpretation of divinity. That the piece of stained glass, moreover, is taken from a church window adds to these religious associations, which are developed elsewhere in the novel: "the grace of God" is "spoken [of] under coloured glass" (*TM*: 33), and "a purple light of transcendent glass" (*TM*: 414) passes through a satirised priest.

Here, significantly, the stained glass is used to look at the "dying embers" of the fire, or its "disintegrating gold", implying both death and renewal and striking a parallel with the death and resurrection of Christ. The boy himself seems to have died and been resurrected: after having "thought he was dead", and passing by some willows (in what is perhaps intended as an invocation of the tree-cross), he significantly comes to his senses in a church[13]. When Amy finds him gazing through the glass at the dying fire he is, moreover, lying "on his side", where Christ was wounded.

In the church, after the boy breaks off the piece of glass the religious significance of which has already been established, it drops into the water out of which he must "fish it up". This act has two sets of connotations, the one generally baptismal, the other relating to the resurrection of Christ, Icthus, and the Apostles as fishers of men, both together signifying resurrection or renewal. The boy himself, moreover, "originat[ing] on that night" (*TM*: 93) — echoing the mysterious and parthenogenic origin of Christ — seems to have been

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[13]It is perhaps his association with the church that explains the choice of his unusual and otherwise opaque name, Organ.

generated by the flood which has caused the death of so many others, giving a second figuration of his "resurrection", this time more closely bound up with the diluvial trope.

From these images one may discern another two tendencies in the characterisation of the boy. The first involves, as has been outlined, his figurative embodiment of Christ or, crudely put, that he represents something of a "Christ-figure", himself a manifestation of the religious vision mediated by the glass. The second tendency is to portray him as himself, but employing the glass, the spiritual significance of which is external to him and by the agency of which he gains a transformed vision of the world, and the reader of him. Hence, while looking outward through the glass, it "was colouring *his cheek*; as he moved the glass *his skin* was a drifting crimson" (*TM*: 94; emphasis added). In this description White suggests the human participation in both the earthly and the transcendent, both existing in a shifting balance. The boy possesses, in one sense, transcendent vision, and in another is a (mortal) object of this vision. The illuminating perception conferred on him is also associated by White typically with children, who, being less bound to the temporal in his work more easily experience timelessness. Significantly, he will not be owned or named, standing for what White conceives of as the ultimate mystery which underlies all being.

Amy's desire to possess him is, fundamentally, an attempt to grasp this mystery by binding it to the temporal, and to her own frustrated capacity for love. "She would imprison the child in her house by force of love" (*TM*: 97). This repeats the pattern of her relationship with Stan whom she would also possess, hoping thereby to own his spiritual experience, but in the process both alienating him and denying herself the possible illumination of the sun which she identifies him with. Her error is in failing to acknowledge her own capacity to experience this illumination herself, and identifying it with those in whom it seems to manifest. In the same way, her possessiveness arises from her identification of her capacity for love with the objects of her love. When the boy escapes her and she is left mourning the

loss of "the transcendent moments she had lived" (*TM*: 98) she begins to turn her attention to her own potentialities and responsibilities when she considers that "a moment comes when you yourself must produce some tangible evidence of the mystery of life" (*TM*: 97). Near the end of her life she gives the same piece of glass to her grandson, who is depicted in rhythmic prose in a state suggestive of inner harmony and eternal becoming: "So he ran on, holding the leaf by its twig, or a feather by its quill, and whereas his mother thought mostly of arriving, discovery kept him in a state of endless being" (*TM*: 384). Moreover, "Amy Parker had not attempted to possess this remote child, with the consequence that he had come closer than her own" (*TM*: 384).

Through the grandson, Ray Jr, the image of the crimson glass is employed, not as a purely religious symbol, but also one which signifies visionary perception through the figure of the artist. In *The Tree of Man* Ray Jr is balanced against the figure of Gage (as in *Voss* the young artist, Willie Pringle, follows on from Le Mesurier) and through such scenes as Gage's gazing at an ant and Stan's dying vision White puts forward a view of the world as a sacred object, susceptible to engagement through creative vision. Religious experience and the creative imagination are often coupled in this novel, and the connection continues to be suggested in imagery which will be referred to in parts III and IV of this chapter. Typically these elements are paired in the inner experience Stan wishes to convey in words but never in his lifetime succeeds to, and the novel suggests that Ray Jr will realise this unfulfilled ambition, partly speaking on his grandfather's behalf, partly on his own, and generally on behalf of humanity as a whole whose universal condition is manifest in both of them. Hence Ray Jr, in the novel's concluding chapter, "look[s] through the glass at the crimson mystery of the world" (*TM*: 479) as through the stained glass which has come down to him from the flood boy. He decides "He would write a poem", a "poem of death" (*TM*: 479) but also "a poem of life, all life" (*TM*: 478), which could easily stand (as Kramer has noted (282)) for

The Tree of Man. Amy too is included in this picture, and moments after Stan's death it is Ray Jr whom Amy anticipates comfort from, "the grandson ... in whose eyes her own obscure, mysterious life would grow transparent at last" (*TM*: 478), as is in fact the case in the extended poem White has written.

The imagery of the divine and the creative also represents a significant element in Stan's confrontation with the fire in the burning Glastonbury house, or "houseful of poetry" (*TM*: 177), which is at the centre of the next section of this chapter on *The Tree of Man* where the novel's pyreal imagery is explored.

III

In several respects the fire which converges on Glastonbury performs an analogous thematic function to the Wullunya floods, chiefly through its threat to permanence and its apparent preclusion of transcendence. Viewed from a different angle, however, the pyreal[14] trope is paradoxically also both metaphorical of divinity and linked to visionary experience, and in this connection the character of the great bushfire is a logical development on the novel's first set of pyreal images (already partially explored in part I of this chapter). In addition to a discussion of these points, this section will consider a few minor related images figuring either within the context of the fire or elsewhere in the novel. For the most part, however, an exploration of some of the key significances and relevant associations attached to a highly varied and mercurial trope — both in its traditional and biblical symbolism and in White's intra-textual deployment of it — will be kept within the confines of chapter 12 of *The Tree of Man*, in which it is fully realised and manifests in concentrated form. Even within this relatively narrow framework, however, the metaphoric density of the pyreal trope is such that exhaustive explication is impossible within the space allotted here, and a delineation of some of its key facets must be limited to a selection of textual descriptions which most clearly illustrate its role within the broader context of the novel.

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[14]At the risk of seeming to indulge in semantic hairsplitting, this term has been coined to meet the need in this study for an adjective conveying the broad sense "of or relating to fire". Surprisingly, this term is undocumented in the *Oxford English Dictionary (Second, online edition)*, and the nearest available synonyms it admits, namely *pyrological* and *empyreal*, bear scientific and celestial associations respectively which are for the most part intrusive and unrelated when applied to White's use of fire imagery.

The presentation of the fire which engulfs parts the district and, finally, the Armstrongs' country house has much in common with that of the previous flood, though standing in elemental opposition to it. Broadly speaking, the fire brings a direct threat to permanence, yet paradoxically the possibility of renewal in a landscape which has "dried up" (*TM*: 157). In a tongue-in-cheek preamble to the fire which opens chapter 12, the narrator describes the stagnation reflected in the natural environment:

> There were many dead things in the landscape — the grey skeletons of old trees, an old weak cow that had stuck in the mud and did not rise again, lizards that life had left belly upwards. It seemed at times during that summer that everything would die. (*TM*: 157)

The ironic reference to "rising again", and the inversion of the lizard in death, seems to call for positive transformation. Similarly, the human inhabitants of the district appear to have succumbed to apathy: despite the surrounding evidence of death

> people did not care, as they shaded their feeble eyes or mopped their greasy skins. They just did not care, that is, in the early, passive stages. Later on, when the fires broke out, and got out of control, and scorched along the gullies, and arrived in the fowl yards, and entered windows, so that the limp curtains were a pair of demoniac flames, then the people woke up at last and realised that they did not want to die. (*TM*: 157)

The tone of mock reproval in which the narrator continues nevertheless points out the role of the coming fire in challenging the spiritual lassitude of the district's inhabitants through a direct reminder of mortality. Some comic, moving, and some gruesome opening descriptions of the fire develop these ideas, in the process employing images relating to other established tropes:

> Passionate volumes of smoke towered above the bush, and in that smoke dark, indistinguishable bodies, as if something were being translated forcibly into space. The men of Durilgai straggled along the bush tracks, in groups, discussing other fires, or singly, looking at the ground. The latter were surprised at the details of sand, stones and sticks they saw. They had discovered in the earth an austere beauty that they now loved with a sad love, that comes when it is already too late. The fire causes this inevitably to happen to solitary men. They are reconciled to the lives they are leaving

> behind, as they ride between the black trees, and the yellow light lowers, and the animals begin to run towards them, instead of away. (*TM*: 164)

The sequence inverts the novel's opening image, where Stan passes between the two stringybarks as though into life. Here, in the midst of other references to mortality, and as "light lowers", the "black trees" suggest a passage into death. Sensing "the approach of the intolerable", some of the men "try to cover it up with obscenity, and when this fails, ride, and spit, and jerk the mouths of their horses" (*TM*: 164) in the attempt, here again signalled in equestrian imagery, to "substitute movement for [their] fears" (*TM*: 246). The inefficacy of motion in this context is, however, indicated in the depiction of Ted Doyle who, bringing news of the destruction caused by the fire "in which he had lost his hat and his courage", sits a horse which "revolved nakedly on thin legs" (*TM*: 164). Similarly, children bringing the volunteer firefighters news of another outbreak "headed for the men, without relenting ... running and running ... running to a standstill" (*TM*: 170). The undercutting, hence, not only of permanence but also of human motion, echoes the flood where "It was the boat that was stationary" (*TM*: 74) while the landscape flows past. And, analogously with the flood which usurps all agency, the volunteers, under the "spell" of the fire, "were swayed by it, instead of it by them" (*TM*: 174).

Avian imagery is also subordinated to the destructive aspect of the pyreal trope, suggesting, as in the flood, an ineluctable bondage of the spirit within the material. Whereas in the diluvial pattern this is suggested by such images as that of "a hat with a drowned feather" (*TM*: 74), here feathers or birds are burned: "There was some hadn't a mattress that wasn't a stench of feathers. And they opened the yards for the fowls to fly out. They flew flaming, or opened their beaks for air, and died decent like, turning up their eyes, their wattles gone black" (*TM*: 165). Or: "A bird fell, flaming from the beak upward", vividly portraying its descent, and hence emphasising the inversion of the image which traditionally symbolises

spiritual ascent, while simultaneously contrasting this with the "upward ... and higher upward" (*TM*: 169) movement of the triumphant fire.

Added to these analogies between the diluvial and pyreal tropes is a persistent tendency to describe the fire, or the effects it produces, in terms suggesting liquidity. The depiction, in the excerpt already quoted, of the fire's anticipated approach "along the gullies" (*TM*: 157) is as of a river broken loose. Its heat causes the air to "thicken into molten glass" (*TM*: 168), the firefighters "sweat[ing] in the molten morning" as "the bush began to dissolve" (*TM*: 169). Later, in "the dissolving evening", "Bits of burned stuff *floated* and settled on the dead grass" (*TM*: 172; emphasis added). And, in the community's initial response to the news of the fire

> Some said they would jump inside the *watertanks* with what cash they had from the vegetables or the pigs.
>
> "I would pray," Doll Quigley said.
>
> And probably be saved. But not everybody was in the same *boat* as Doll Quigley, who had learnt something from the nuns. (*TM*: 166; emphasis added)

The fire, moreover, also originates "in the direction of Wullunya, where the floods had been" (*TM*: 163).

White seems at pains to suggest a hidden identity between flood and fire. Both tropes, on the intra-textual level, suggest the denial of permanence and the human capacity to effect change, instead wreaking change on the landscape and its inhabitants. This state of (enforced) submission is, however, a necessary condition for transformation, which both fire and water traditionally symbolise, and so the diluvial and pyreal tropes draw broadly on overlapping connotations of simultaneous destruction and renewal (though this does not of course imply strict synonymy between fire and water symbolism, each of which is multifaceted). White's deployment of these images, in both their negative and positive senses, suggests a vision of the paradoxical coherence of their antithetical aspects, positing a

mysterious unity beneath the surface conflicts enacted through his tropes. In this connection it is significant that one of the reports of the fire contains, amidst a series of apocalyptic images, a description a snake biting itself: "And the animals were burning, [Ted Doyle] said, the wild ones, and the snakes, they were lashing on the hot earth.... He had seen a snake bite on itself before it died, to hold someone responsible" (*TM*: 165). The image approximates the primordial symbol, universally represented in mythology, of the uroboros or tail-biting snake (which will be further discussed in relation to its recurrence in *Voss*, in chapter 2, part III). J. C. Cooper outlines its significance:

> Depicted as a serpent or dragon biting its own tail [it signifies:] "My end is my beginning." It symbolizes ... the Totality; primordial unity.... It is the cycle of disintegration and reintegration, power that eternally consumes and renews itself; the eternal cycle; cyclic time.... It can both support and maintain the world and injects death into life and life into death. Apparently immobile, it is yet perpetual motion, forever recoiling upon itself. (123-4)

Evident are clear parallels to the preoccupation in *The Tree of Man* with the synthesis of permanence and change, not to mention the echoes from its opening with Stan's life "ending and beginning" (*TM*: 14) and its conclusion with an "end [that] was no end" (*TM*: 480). Such a synthesis, moreover, figures in the passage containing the uroboros image, in which a reference to Ted Doyle's Adam's apple (*TM*: 165) balances the surrounding apocalyptic imagery with hints of Genesis.

Of related significance is the fact that the fire not only seems to embody its precursor, the flood, while also subjugating such minor tropes as the avian pattern, but that the novel's chief, arboreal, trope is also subsumed in the pyreal pattern. For example: "The smoke grew skywards, small still, a sapling of smoke, but growing" (*TM*: 164), and: "the bush began to dissolve into stray tendrils of grey smoke, wreathing and twining between the leaves and twigs, like leaves and twigs released" (*TM*: 169). The tropical pressure with which White invests his images reaches a peak when Stan is described standing in the burning Glastonbury

house where "His veins almost ran resin" (*TM*: 176). Here the fire trope modifies an already dual, arboranthropomorphic figuration in which on the one hand Stan is metaphorically identified with a tree, and tree resin, on the other, by implication bears the personifying attribute of blood. To this, moreover, is added the general character of liquidity — his veins *ran* resin. That such conflations go beyond mere ornamentation is suggested by one of the key descriptions of the fire appearing shortly before it crosses the gully below the Armstrongs' house:

> [The firefighters] were drawn on mercilessly to the fire, that was running up the trees and falling from the elbows, to roll amongst the dead bracken in balls of the same protean fire, to shatter into sparks, to divide and join, but whatever activity engaged in, whatever form disguised in, always burning. In the midst of such unity of purpose the fighters did not stand a chance. (*TM*: 173)

On the surface the sequence further emphasises the elusiveness of an ever-changing elemental opponent in an ironically conceived war between the men — "the fighters" (*TM*: 173), "the defenders" (*TM*: 172) — and the fire, but the excerpt also conveys the sense of unity in multiplicity, of a deeper reality obscured by conflicting appearances. This applies not only to the fire but also to the flood, and ultimately to all of White's constantly shifting tropes. The fire trope easily lends itself to immediate representation as a mercurial but coherent embodiment of all forms, and in this sense is metaphorical of the immaterial, of "something being translated forcibly into space" (*TM*: 164), reminiscent of the "God" who, Stan later sees, wears "many faces" (*TM*: 247).

This leads on to the deployment of pyreal imagery in its renewing aspect. At many points throughout the depiction of the bushfire, and culminating in Stan's emergence with Madeleine from the burning house, White builds on the long history of fire as a symbolic agent of transformation or rebirth:

> The alchemists retained ... the Heraclitean notion of fire as 'the agent of transmutation', since all things derive from, and return to, fire.... [A]s a mediator between forms which vanish and forms in creation, fire is, like water,

> a symbol of transformation and regeneration.... [T]he fire festival (as it persists today in the Valencian bonfires and the illuminated Christmas tree) ... has as its aim the purification or destruction of the forces of evil.... [F]ire is ultra-life. It embraces both good (vital heat) and bad (destruction and conflagration). It implies the desire to annihilate time and to bring all things to their end.... To pass through fire is symbolic of transcending the human condition.... (Cirlot: 106)

White is of course constantly examining the notion of the transforming power the fire has on his characters, and frequently undercuts a simple suggestion of a spiritual rebirth the encounter with it may effect. A more sustained depiction employing these associations does, however, manifest in the depiction of Ossie Peabody's response to the fire. In advanced old age (though he survives for considerably longer on the fringes of the narrative), he is presented, while giving orders to the younger firefighters, as though the "change" he prophesies is for him also imminent:

> Old Mr Peabody, however, had been sitting all this time on a rock, wrapped up, in spite of the temperature, in a coat that looked like it had been the inside of a horse rug. He appeared undisturbed by anything that might happen. It was his age perhaps. He was really very old. His skin stood up on the remains of his flesh in transparent scales. His hands were spread out like matches on the knobs of his knees....
>
> Now he began to move his dry lips in little lizardy motions, and to compose a prophecy.
>
> ...
>
> "Change is on its way," he said, probing the dry air with his tongue.
>
> "Change!" said somebody, "We shall be changed all right, with the fire lickin at our arses...."
>
> "Ah, no, the wind'll turn it. Change is comin," said Mr Peabody in his weak voice, and winced, as if someone had walked across his grave, or the cold wind he had promised had actually got amongst his wrinkles.
> (*TM*: 168-9)

His hands resembling matches (that is invoking the tree, yoked to the pyreal trope), he himself appears almost ready to ignite, and his prediction seems also metaphorical of his death which he senses as though someone is crossing his grave. (Interestingly, the novel does not contain a significant portrayal of his actual death, a fact which adds further weight to the present sequence.) The lizard imagery here prefigures its later association with the ageing

Stan (see discussion in part I), with the sense of its transparency connoting a gradual, transfiguratory movement beyond temporal existence, the vicissitudes of which Ossie Peabody is, unlike his companions, able to face with equanimity. (A similar process of psycho-spiritual transformation that comes with certainty of impending death — though in this case prematurely — is suggested in the description of Tom Archer, one of Stan's companions in the war: "Tom knew he had it coming for some time, and was changed" (*TM*: 201).)

The images accompanying Peabody suggest a passage beyond duality: sitting in the midst of the tumult on a rock — suggesting permanence — yet wearing what looks like a horse blanket — hinting at motion through the equestrian trope — the image is an intra-textual conjunction of opposites, intimating a paradoxical synthesis of the novel's chief contraries of permanence and change.

Peabody's prophesied "change" also develops on the chapter's opening depiction of a dead landscape calling for renewal. This preoccupation is elaborated in images of related significance which — though making more frequent use of biblical allusions than intra-textual tropes — are woven into the narrative in the first significant portrayal of Glastonbury. This follows immediately on the narrator's opening admonitory prelude as Amy goes to the Armstrongs' house to deliver a pair of ducks, and some of the key images from this scene will now be considered.

Going up to Glastonbury "after having made things tidy", the honesty of Amy's existence is emphasised as she moves "through the dry world": smelling of "innocent, best soap", "She was neat enough in her clean blouse, with her arms still red from scrubbing off the blood of ducks" (*TM*: 157). (The last detail is clearly intended to elevate her above the newly rich Armstrong, the ex-butcher now able to distance himself from the source of his wealth.) Contrasted with the Parker's world, Glastonbury is portrayed as a kind of corrupt

Eden — with "a smell of something rotting" (*TM*: 160) — in images of wealth, indolence and concealment: "[P]rosperity was obvious. It shone in the mirror leaves of laurels, and lurked in the glimpses of shrubberies and lawns, and in a little summerhouse, in which a hand of cards had been abandoned beneath the cloying roses" (*TM*: 158). To this is added a sculpture which embarrasses Amy, of "a naked woman" which "Most people ... after enjoying in a furtive flash the suggestiveness of the dimpled hands, accepted ... as a respectable symbol of the wealth that had put it there" (*TM*: 158). The destruction by fire of the Glastonbury house is, however, already anticipated when Amy passes through the gateway on which its name is printed "in white flints" (*TM*: 158).

The scene facilitates a further elaboration of Madeleine, observed here through Amy's eyes but soon to be, with Stan, at the centre of the conflagration in which the pyreal trope reaches its apogee. Amy — whose own sense of impoverishment is poignantly depicted throughout the ensuing sequences — watching from outside a window like a "moth" drawn to flame, sees Madeleine sitting in a room accompanied by a group of adoring men, a lamp (which "She robbed ... even of its light"), and a tantalisingly proleptic "silver branch of candles, of which the flames batted in the breeze" (*TM*: 158). Madeleine becomes not only the object of Amy's infatuation but also a human embodiment of the "passionate" (*TM*: 164, 175) aspect of the fire — a point which will be discussed below — and, surrounded by her male "audience", she reverses the role of the nude statue with whom she is loosely associated: "It was Madeleine by whom they had been sculptured" (*TM*: 159).

The precariousness of the Armstrongs' existence — in a house whose mannered choice of a name associates it with Arthurian romance generally and Avalon in particular, and at the centre of which is the equally romanticised "narrative of Madeleine" (*TM*: 159) — is hinted at when wind upsets the idealised medieval scene depicted in a tapestry which forms one of the sequence's dominant images: "The breeze had got behind the tapestry, an

expensive thing that the butcher had brought from Europe, of lords and ladies on silver horses, and the forest rippled, and the horses shivered in the breeze" (*TM*: 160). The vulgarity of "the butcher" and his Anglophile circle is made clear in this as in other descriptions, and in so doing their inability to rise to the ideal the tapestry — the "expensive thing" — depicts. Equally functional, however, are the images of silver horses and the forest. These present romanticised depictions of "motion" — parallelled by Madeleine's earlier appearances to the captivated Amy on horseback, "ridun on the road", as the less enchanted Mrs O'Dowd remarks, "as if you was the dust upon it" (*TM*: 185) — and "permanence" as embodied in the tree. The permanence of the Armstrongs' world is, however, more relentlessly satirised than, for example, Stan's longing for a humbler version of it, and Tom Armstrong is depicted ironically holding down the ornate chair in which Madeleine sits, "in an effort to give it stability" (*TM*: 160).

This desire for fixity — which is related to Mr Armstrong's imposition on the landscape of a vision of "the old country" which he shares with guests who "strolled on his lawns and spoke about Europe" (*TM*: 158) — is at odds with the coming tide of change represented on a literal and metaphorical level through the fire. One of the scene's more conspicuous proleptic contrasts occurs in the clipped assertion that "Madeleine was ice" (*TM*: 159), and this places her firmly against the grain of the pyreal trope as it begins to be elaborated from this point. Maintaining the posture of aloofness — "controlling her boredom behind the sticks of her fan" (*TM*: 160) — behind which she is able to manipulate her sexual power, and having taken refuge in superficiality — "It's all in the eye with Madeleine" (*TM*: 162) — she cannot relinquish the world of materialism in which she is a key player. Ironically, however, this makes her a prime candidate for a purgatorial encounter with the fire, and the chapter shows it converging specifically on her. The impact of the fire on Madeleine in particular, robbing her of her seductive appearance and hence temporarily of

her ability to participate in the social and sexual game, is to, if only briefly, extract her from a power-based set of relationships and marriage.

The controlled distance which marks her interactions persists in descriptions illustrating her tropical antithesis to the fire. She is "ice". She and her audience, in opposition to the dissolving power of the fire noted above, "would never melt together, for their natures were insoluble" (*TM*: 160). Significantly, she rejects the glass of wine Mr Armstrong pours her — "She would obviously have preferred to break it" (*TM*: 159). While this may also refer, by allusion to the Jewish wedding rite, to her impending marriage to Tom Armstrong, the image is also the first of a series of communion images — with Madeleine once again in opposition to its symbolism — which is further developed when, shortly after this point, Amy enters the Armstrongs' kitchen.

As Amy departs from the window with her basket a sense of spiritual depletion is signalled, again through avian imagery, as she "feel[s] the weight of dead ducks on her arm" (*TM*: 160). This is carried through into the sequence in the kitchen, the "steaming cave" (*TM*: 163) of Mrs Frisby, who perpetuates the reduction of the aerial associations of the avian trope when she relates a macabre story of a friend whose autopsy revealed evidence of an overindulgence in duck (*TM*: 162). Here, amidst images of corruption, White develops a series of allusions to the crucifixion, more particularly to the resurrection and its symbolic association with the communion wine. An assistant cook, Winnie, begins to "attack her nails" (*TM*: 161) with a file, suggesting the stigmata. Mrs Frisby, remembering her lost sailor, belches and excuses herself for being "troubled with a bit of resurrection. That is the price of wine" (*TM*: 161).[15] And she warns the girl, Cassie, who is overbeating her eggs, to

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[15]The joke is recycled, though also ironically functional, in *Riders in the Chariot* where Mrs Flack excuses her eructation by making reference to the tinned herring in tomato sauce she regrets having eaten. "'No, dear,' Mrs Jolley agreed, 'and you with a sour stomach; it is asking for resurrections'" (*RC*: 472), with the fish motif added to the ironic allusion to

"take care ... or you'll rise the floussay too high" (*TM*: 161). Analogously to the cow that "did not rise" (*TM*: 157), the (pilfered, and hence in a sense corrupted) wine which is shared with Amy is "out of fizz.... But it should lift you up to where you want to be" (*TM*: 161). As with Madeleine and the Armstrongs' circle, Mrs Frisby and her assistants' sophistication is set against Amy's naivety, and these allusions are made with a persistent sense of irony. Nevertheless, despite Amy's sudden distaste for the house on leaving, and her abandonment of a gift of corned beef from Mrs Frisby, she is left with a sense of "the poetry she had seen and lived" (*TM*: 163) that evening (echoing "the transcendent moments she had lived" (*TM*: 98) in the flood).

Bearing in mind the association, developed through the boy orphaned in the flood, between the aesthetic and the religious, the loose use of the term "transcendent" within that context associates it with Amy's experience of "the poetry" at this point. This also reaches into Stan's rescuing of Madeleine from the burning house, which becomes for him the "houseful of poetry" (*TM*: 177).

The function generally of the pyreal trope in its relation to Stan can be separated into these two strands, of religious and artistic significance. In part I of this chapter consideration is given to the way in which divinity seems to manifest in fire imagery, with the act of "looking into the fire" having a revelatory character. Associated with this is a wrathful God-image — "The Lord thy God is a consuming fire" (Deut. 4:24) — indirectly encouraged by the character of Stan's father. Parallelled by this is an early association between fire and creativity, also promoted by Ned Parker in his evocation of the blacksmith god Vulcan-Hephaestus (who is at the same time the "personification of terrestrial fire" (Aldington & Ames: 139)). Both sets of associations endure in the pyreal imagery presently under

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Christ.

consideration. Its almost apocalyptic character has already been commented upon, continuing in "a visible savagery of destruction" (*TM*: 167), and in keeping with which the men are "hollow-eyed" from having "looked into the depths of the fire that day" (*TM*: 172), associating the trope with divine wrath. The fire also continues to activate inner imaginative perception: "every face was illuminated in its most secret visions" (*TM*: 175).

When Stan is called on to rescue Madeleine from the house, however, there becomes evident a marked rift between the fire's associations of "destruction" and of "poetry", which is further widened into a polarity between a personified (and satirised) terrestrial, almost belligerently destructive fire, and an inner world of illumination and timelessness which it circumscribes. Outside the house it is "the barbaric blaze" (*TM*: 176), later "the bungling fire" (*TM*: 181), while Stan, "rooted in a wonderment", is roused from his "passive" state in a kind of inner awakening:

> All that he had never done, all that he had never seen, appeared to be contained in this house, and it was opening to him. Till his head began to reel with fiery splendours of its own, and he was prepared to accept the invitation, and follow the passages of the house, or fire, to any possible conclusion.
> ...
> He smiled in the gloom of this musical cave in which he had found himself, and remembered a play of Hamlet that he had read in a book of his mother's, the teacher, and forgotten, till walking through a houseful of poetry, of which he only had to touch the doors and they would open. (*TM*: 176-7)

Later he treads against "a harp that nobody had ever played" (*TM*: 177). These references to music and literature deepen the association in *The Tree of Man* between a refined conception of spirituality, and art. Stan's heights of experience, significantly given his marked inarticulacy, relate to his unexpressed potentiality for creative vision. The way the forgotten "poetry" becomes accessible to him is elaborated in the peculiar image of "a horse that rocked at a touch, with something rattling in its belly" (*TM*: 177). The rocking horse is at once mobile and unmoving, and can be "touched" into motion suggesting an easy union of

permanence and change, while the rattle in its belly hints at birth or becoming within the "eternal" (*TM*: 177) context of the scene.

At the same time, biblical allusions enter the descriptions of these events and confer on them a more specifically religious character. Conifers around the house are "willing" (*TM*: 176) sacrifices, that "had been waiting, dedicated to fire" (*TM*: 175), and the "stench" (*TM*: 175) or fluidity of their resin is constantly impinging on the narrative. Earlier, trees are transmuted into smoke "wreathing and twining between the leaves and twigs, like leaves and twigs released" (*TM*: 169). These suggestions of sacrifice and transcendence through the arboreal trope hint at the tree-cross. The association with the crucifixion is emphasised through terms describing Stan's role: he is "the worshipping man" (*TM*: 176), responding to the "call for a sacrifice" (*TM*: 175), who becomes "the saviour or sacrifice, it was not clear which" (*TM*: 178), like Christ who fulfils both roles. In fact, the cedar to which attention is constantly being drawn as he moves through the house in search of Madeleine seems to underscore the association through specific biblical allusion:

> [H]e was in a room of quivering mirrors.... Outside the window of the room a cedar stood, of which the bark was visible to its last knot and crack, as the fire rolled the darkness up, and red clouds of smoke drifted in the branches, hanging and drifting, and entered the room. So the man, like the tree, was set adrift, and his botched reflections tried to remember their mission. (*TM*: 177)

Cooper (31) notes that the cedar is a symbol of Christ as prefigured in Ezekiel (17: 22-4), coincidentally the Old Testament book at which the Bible is open when it floats by during the flood (*TM*: 74) (as well as the source of White's main structural metaphor for *Riders in the Chariot*). Stan is here compared to the tree, and his own "mission" is invested ironically with religious significance.

Madeleine, whom Stan is to "save" (*TM*: 179), adds to these biblical resonances. Her name associates her with Mary Magdalene, the "sinful woman" who anoints Christ's feet (Luke 7: 37-8) and the first to whom he appears after his resurrection (John 20: 11-18). That

she mistakes the risen Christ for a gardener has added relevance to Stan who occasionally works for the Amstrongs in this capacity and of course experiences his dying vision in a garden he has created.

The significance of all these biblical connections does not lie solely in the fact of such correspondences, pursued for their own sake to demonstrate what has in any case become something of a literary cliché, the Christ-figure. Certainly many other strains of imagery are simultaneously at work and, though some of these also draw on biblical resonances, White seems to shape them to his own purposes. Allusions to Christ in his fiction proceed from the fact that Christ is employed as a metaphor for humanity, and that in one view his characters' "search for fulfilment engenders a Christ*like* agony or martyrdom of the self" (Scheick: 132; emphasis added).

In this sequence the echoes of Christ's death and resurrection on the tree-cross operate in antithesis to the destructive character of the fire in a suggestion of two personifications of divinity. The destructive or "barbaric" (*TM*: 176) aspect of the fire is aligned with the Old Testament, wrathful God-image. In contrast Christ, the god-man, is sacrificed on the tree at the behest of the Father. Stan, White suggests, also possesses a theanthropic rather than purely material nature, and hence his actions are surrounded with imagery of the crucifixion.

Another notable aspect of the fire which will now be considered is its markedly erotic character. This is not only evoked by Madeleine but is evident in the novel's first pyreal images:

> That particular part of the bush had been made his by the entwining fire. It licked at and swallowed the loneliness. (*TM*: 9)
> ...
> And the cavern of fire was enormous, labyrinthine, that received the man. He branched and flamed, glowed and increased, and was suddenly extinguished in the little puffs of smoke and tired thoughts. (*TM*: 10)

Leonie Kramer[16] argues that Stan's spirituality, portrayed early on through episodes of ecstatic communion with a natural world animated by divine power, and at which he is at the centre, moves progressively away from an early certainty of God. This is borne out in the pyreal trope which shows an initial, unquestioned union with the fire (which in turn bears associations of divinity) and anticipates Stan's erotically toned experience in the fire which converges on Glastonbury, reaching a peak when Stan finds himself "in the bosom of the house ... in which he found the staircase, stumbled, mounted.... Approaching some climax, the breath of the saviour or sacrifice, it was not clear which, came quicker" (*TM*: 177-8). Before this can be pursued further, however, it is necessary to establish Madeleine's relation to this aspect of the pyreal trope.

David Tacey's interpretation is that "Madeleine becomes a personification of the ecstatic realm of the mother-world" (59), usurping the role of the Mother Goddess "who causes [her] to be savagely reduced at the end" (60). "The Great Mother is a jealous deity; she will have no other gods — or humans — before her" (Tacey: 61). This reading is misleadingly reductive of Stan's experience to "a temporary incestuous fulfilment" (Tacey: 61), and early manifestations of the pyreal trope in which it is marked by patriarchal overtones contradict a simple identification with the archetypal Mother. Tacey does, however, point out the connection between the eroticism of the fire imagery and Madeleine.

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[16]Kramer's antipathy toward White is well known and demonstrated in her paper wryly questioning Stan's spirituality, and which concludes that what "Stan discovers" is merely "God's irrelevance" (277) . However, I concur with the observation that despite "deploring ... various features of the novel" her essay on *The Tree of Man* offers a penetrating interpretation and "cannot be overlooked by anyone seriously concerned with that novel" (Lawson: 288).

(White, however, took umbrage: "[A]mbivalence has given me insights into human nature denied, I believe, to those who are unequivocally male or female — and Professor Leonie Kramer" (*FG*: 154).)

The fire, among its several aspects, is commonly associated with divinity, as well as with poetic vision. Madeleine — whose red hair is one point described as "toss[ed] back from her shoulders ... as fire is flung out" (*TM*: 180) — does in some sense become a personification of the fire, though she starts off as "ice" and resists its metaphorical transforming power, just as she is in conflict with the chapter's communion imagery. This personification is, however, on a par with the glamour for Amy — and on a different level for Stan — of the sophisticated and superficially attractive world of the Armstrongs, which is focused on Madeleine's unapproachable beauty. The desire she evokes is hence analogous to the "passionate" (*TM*: 164, 175) character of the fire. Yet she, like the surrounding characters, is drawn to the fire which she also fears and, on different level in her own life, has manipulated through her sexual power play. This hierarchy is implicit in Stan's first sight of her "standing there, her back towards him, because the fire was of first importance" (*TM*: 178).

In the sense that the fire is a symbolic agent of purgation and consequent renewal, that is ultimately a positive image, Madeleine is unprepared for it. On the one hand she is held spellbound by the fire, but the literal and imminent danger it places her in only evokes her lack of conviction, and she lingers on images of its destruction. She remembers a childhood incident in which a "birdcage" (*TM*: 180) is consumed by fire, suggesting the destruction of the spirit in a figuration reminiscent of the circus image appearing in the flood. Added to this is the mock-apocalyptic depiction of "an old papier-mâché globe ... that seemed to go up in a puff. It was horrible" (*TM*: 178). The irony of the last image, as well as the hyperbolic description of "the holocaust at Glastonbury" (*TM*: 180) on one level implies the withdrawal sympathy for Madeleine.

She is among those of White's characters who believe themselves beyond redemption. This makes sensé of her rejection of the communion wine, and her tropical antithesis to the

concomitant renewing aspect of the pyreal trope, over which she initially affects superiority. "Somebody will put them out, I expect", is her initial response to the gathering fires, to which the narrator adds, emphasising her fatalism: "Or else she would be immolated" (*TM*: 166-7). When Stan finds her she believes it "doubtful that he could save her. All the practical and faithful acts he might perform she could regard only with irony" (*TM*: 179). And "She would have fallen down and burned, because it would have been easier" (*TM*: 180). White contrasts her fatalistic scepticism with Stan's honesty and simple conviction, at one point through her own mouth: " It looks as though I am condemned. But you —' She paused" (*TM*: 180). Her doubt seems less anguished than self-regarding and, within the context of Stan's attempt to rescue her at the risk of his own life, a liability. This registers with Stan when, on first discovering her, evidence of tears on her face makes him "all the more mistrustful, to be handed an unhappiness" (*TM*: 179).

Apart from the eventual physical impact of the fire on her, these elements of her own character and Stan's response to them begin to question her romanticised image. When they are about to break through the fire out of the house Stan sees her in a new, unflattering light, and after a moment of sudden attraction to her he loses all desire:

> She had turned sallow, almost ugly, he was close enough to see, and it made him comfortable. On one side of her nose, that was very beautiful and fragile, there was a little mark, like a pockmark. And suddenly he wished he could sink his face in her flesh, to smell it, that he could part her breasts and put his face between.
>
> She saw this. They were burning together at the head of the smoking staircase. She now had to admit, without repugnance, that the sweat of his body was drugging her....
>
> [T]hey had begun the last stage of the journey, groping down the soft stairs....
>
> Then they came out onto the half-landing and felt the first tongue of fire. The breath left them. Now Madeleine's beauty had shrunk right away, and any desire that Stan Parker might have had was shrivelled up. He was small and alone in his body, dragging the sallow woman.
>
> "Don't," she said. "I can't."
>
> She would have fallen down and burned, because it would have been easier.

> Till he picked her up. It was not their flesh that touched but their final bones. They were writhing through the fire. They were not living. They had entered a phase of pain and contained consciousness. His limbs continued to make progress, outside himself. Carrying her. When her teeth fastened in his cheek it expressed the same agony. (*TM*: 180)

The last paragraph aside for the moment, one of the most significant features of the excerpt is the death, from Stan's viewpoint, of the illusion of Madeleine. Her beauty, previously exploited to inflame in others the fires of passion, so to speak, has now been "shrunk", Stan's desire "shrivelled". Instead of embodying the fire, she is now (before actually passing through it) diminished by it. This is one aspect of the pyreal trope as it functions in relation to Stan, in that his own "fiery splendours" (*TM*: 176) are no longer evoked by Madeleine as its personal, eroticised embodiment. "[T]he illusion that Glastonbury contains all that he had never done, all that he had never seen' (*TM*: 176) is shattered" (Kramer: 273).

On the archetypal level, on which the fire metaphorically facilitates an also eroticised union with the divine, to return to this question, a similar development takes place. Kramer objects that "there is no evident aftermath of the fire in Stan's development. He has moments of true knowledge ... telling him of the presence of God' (*TM*: 186).... But there is nothing to connect these moments with the fire" (274). The fact that the divine associations of the fire are not carried through into Stan's later experience points, however, precisely to the spiritual significance of the event. As the image of Madeleine, and Madeleine as a personal embodiment of the fire, is set aside, so is the fire in its archetypal aspect discarded. Stan's moments of illumination, previously represented in erotic encounters with nature — as in the early pyreal sequences and in the "ecstasy of fulfilment" (*TM*: 151) beneath lightning storms — become from this point markedly less sensual. By Kramer's own argument, Stan moves from being at the centre of the experience of God to increasing alienation from God. This illustrates the same point, namely that the fire is another of the "protean" (*TM*: 173) forms which mask "God". The pyreal imagery, on the level on which it suggests the divine,

remains connotative rather than denotative of "God". "God", in turn, is a religious metaphor employed to give a name to the sense of ultimate mystery which White's work is always on some level engaged with while trying to resist terms which constrain it. It is in this sense that it constitutes a stage of Stan's spiritual progression that suggestions of divinity are henceforth portrayed in more remote imagery of sky alongside his increasing spiritual doubt, and that previously ecstatic experiences of the divine are replaced by increasingly dispassionate and uncertain moments of illumination.

Apart from the association between fire and divinity, however, the fire also of course figures as a threat to permanence, as has been commented on in the opening of this discussion. In this sense Stan is portrayed as surviving the destructive power of the fire as though having passed through death and been reborn. Though this experience is not, of course, unquestioned, it should nevertheless be noted that White draws in this and other respects connected with the pyreal trope on the common significance of fire as an agent of rebirth. A few remarks extracted from Gaster's fascinating series of illustrations of this point are particularly relevant at this juncture:

> [According to] the widespread [heathen] custom [noted in the Old Testament] children (and adults) [are passed] through fire in order to sain' them — that is, purge them of human imperfections and (in myth and story) render them immortal.
>
> In ancient Greece, newborn males were carried around the hearth for this purpose.... Plutarch tells us that a certain Malkandros, King of Byblus (in Syria), was passed through fire to make him immortal; and the Roman custom of leaping through fire at the festival of Palilia — a rite parallelled in many European harvest celebrations — is similarly interpreted by several modern scholars. In reference to such usages, the neo-Platonic philosophers speak figuratively of the ascent through fire' as a means by which devotees of theurgy sought to escape fate and ensure the immortality of the soul.
>
> ...
>
> In early Christian thought, regeneration was ... believed to be accomplished by baptism in fire [see Matt. 3: 11; Luke 3: 16]. (Gaster: 586-7)

With these associations occupying the background of the passage from *The Tree of Man* isolated above, Stan carries Madeleine through the fire, and they are reduced to "their final

bones". Momentarily, "they were not living", and in his agony Stan's limbs move "outside himself" as though transcending, in a loose sense, the material and surviving the fire which is finally "impotent" (*TM*: 182). He emerges from the fire "weak as a little child", in a suggestion of rebirth, but suffering only "the superficial wounds of the flesh", and when Amy "laid hands on her husband again" (*TM*: 182) it is as though to reduce him to concrete, earthly existence. His ironic designation as saviour is subordinated to the seemingly divine intervention of rain which puts out the fire which by this point "could have consumed even the spectators" (*TM*: 181): "They were saved. They smelled the ashes and knew" (*TM*: 182).

In stark contrast, Madeleine remains, also alive but, unlike Stan, having to reckon with the death of a persona in which she is heavily invested. The object of Amy's infatuation is destroyed: "Is this Madeleine? Amy Parker said without regret. Her novelette was finished" (*TM*: 181). Madeleine also in a sense "dies" to the novel in that she is not directly portrayed again until very late in it when she ironically "ris[es] from the ashes" (*TM*: 430), phoenix-like, as Mrs Fisher (White probably also intends her name as another pun on the resurrection through the Christian fish motif). A synopsis of her life shows her "knowing men" (*TM*: 427) in a series of affairs which never amount to relationships, and her spiritual impoverishment in a world of surface luxury is conveyed through a conjunction of avian and arboreal imagery in a piece of jewellery which encapsulates her character and her spiritual plight:

> She was withholding her blemish even from Mrs Forsdyke's mother, by offering her good side, so that she was seen in brittle profile, like the parrot that she wore, an old, exquisite brooch, with flashes of enamel in the parrot tail, and a ruby for an eye, and a little chain of gold fettering an ankle to a golden perch. (*TM*: 424-5)

In the midst of a highly satirical portrayal of the interaction between Amy, Thelma, and Mrs Fisher who finally leaves discountenanced by the memory of the fire, her most self-condemning remark is that "There is no such thing as simplicity" (*TM*: 425). It is precisely

the virtue of the Parkers' simplicity which White sets out to affirm in *The Tree of Man*, particularly through Stan, against whom Madeleine and Thelma, despite their worldliness, stand as "people ... who had not realized themselves fully" (*TM*: 432).

The question of Stan's self-realisation as it is pursued in the rest of the novel portrays him in terms of an increasing sense of spiritual uncertainty. As his tumultuous, divinely charged experiences of nature become progressively rarer and he feels increasingly the absence of God, so does his alienation from Amy find concrete expression in her affair with the commercial traveller. These and associated questions, as well as some aspects of the depiction of Ray and Thelma, will be explored in the final part of this chapter in relation to a few significant images and events chosen from the latter half of the novel.

IV

Part I of this chapter was devoted generally to the establishment of the myth of permanence as well as exploring the nature and origins of some of the novel's chief tensions, and attempted to relate these concerns to White's manipulation of imagery through some key tropes as well as minor, but significant figurations. Parts II and III, each confined to the diluvial and pyreal tropes respectively, attempted a closer exploration of single patterns of imagery. Part III, in particular, is fairly tightly restricted to the exploration of a single trope which, apart from occasional but fleeting manifestations elsewhere in *The Tree of Man*, is prominent essentially only in some of its opening pages and a single chapter among the novel's twenty-six. Given this fairly intensive exploration of the way in which White articulates a range of thematic preoccupations through a single trope, this final part of my discussion will isolate a few key happenings and images from the broad range of material presented by the latter half of the novel. Among these is the other "biblical set piece" of drought, but this will not be considered in any significant depth, and is mentioned in passing in favour of an exploration of more illuminating images in what is already a highly selective discussion.

As such, this section explores some of the ways in which key tropes are deployed in the characterisation of Amy, Ray and Thelma. On the whole, however, it focuses on Stan's spiritual development, his shifting preoccupation with permanence, and his movement through increasing scepticism and doubt to the illumination suggested, though not unambiguously, in his dying vision.

***

Shortly after the fire at Glastonbury news of war reaches the district, and in Stan this registers as a renewed questioning of human permanence. On the one hand secretly excited by it —

"he was a bit of a hero within the limits of the flesh ... and felt he would enjoy praise with the pudding, though it would not be decent to show it" (*TM*: 188) — he looks at evidence of his own life reflected in the landscape as he approaches his home:

> As he came down the last hill, and he saw the sticks of the willows by the dam, and the paths that his feet had worn round the house, the man supposed that he would go to war.... Sweating at the neck, he drove on, but now his own impermanence was in conflict with the permanence of all that scene, of bees and grass, murmuring and bending, murmuring and bending. (*TM*: 187)

Stan's actual experience of the war opens the next, third part of the novel where the motif of hands predominates to suggest the sense of powerlessness already implicit here. A haunting description elaborates on how, in contrast to his own pastoral life in which "Things were made to work" (*TM*: 199),

> the contrary process of destruction was far more convincing, once perfected. So his skull saw, as the green lights drifted in the night. The lovely fireworks showed him the hand that had just fallen at his feet, thrown there. The fingers of the lost hand were curled in its last act. It lay there like a tendril that had been torn off some vine, dropped when the motive, if ever there was one, had been forgotten. (*TM*: 199)

The arbitrary yet awesome quality of the devastation is emphasised in the dreamlike atmosphere created by the flares, lingering in his memory as "the green Very Light" (*TM*: 401) he speaks to at one point as though addressing a sublime manifestation of God (while White puns on *Very*, "true", in an echo of the "Very God of very God" of the Creed). This, however, only accentuates his estrangement from God and his own capacities. "I could always do things with my two hands", he writes to Amy, "That is the terrible part of all this. It is taken out my hands. I am weak, Amy...." (*TM*: 200), and his scepticism of human agency endures past the war to when he "no longer believed anything can be effected by human intervention" (*TM*: 210).

The horror of the severed, "lost hand" is soon expressed in terms of specifically spiritual alienation: "Once in a village he had seen the arthritic hand of an old priest make the

sign of blessing on the air. He looked at it with longing, for this hand too seemed irrevocably lost" (*TM*: 199). His doubt as well as his yearning is conveyed as he "thought with increased longing [of] a God that reached down, supposedly, and lifted up" (*TM*: 199).

The sense of God as supernal and remote leads to an increased association of divinity with the inaccessible sky and the intangible element of air. White draws attention to the priest's signing his blessing "on the air", and when Stan describes to Amy a ruined (though not abandoned) church he writes: "It was all sky. There were the frames of the windows, but the glass had fallen. But people came there. There was a priest poking about as if the roof was on" (*TM*: 201). The image echoes, and in one sense reverses, that of the church in which the orphan boy awakes, finding it under water. In the present description, rather than reflecting simply the lack of a roof, the sky takes on an almost tangible and all-pervading quality suggestive of divine presence. Yet simultaneously undermining this sense is the detail of the blown-out windows. Recalling the stained glass windows from which the flood boy breaks a piece, and the general association between divinity and the "transcendent glass" (*TM*: 414) of churches, these windows have not merely broken but "fallen". At the same time, White's use of imagery of glass, apart from its association with art, relates to its function as a metaphorical lens through which to view divinity rather than as a symbol of divinity itself, and in this sense the complete absence of the image parallels the earlier falling away of, for example, fire as another "mask" of God. Hence White seems to be suggesting less the absence of God than a withdrawal or a thinning out, so to speak, of the metaphorical representation of the divine which Stan begins to experience as absence, or in terms of increased remoteness through yet another metaphor, that of the sky.

The same sense of the tenuous hope of participation in the transcendent nature of a God increasingly irreducible to human terms is conveyed by a curiously lingering image from the remains of Glastonbury, manifesting soon after this point. After Tom Armstrong's death

in the war — which precipitates a stroke in his father, leaving the ex-butcher with a "dead hand" — the half rebuilt house is abandoned "so that the staircase continued to open into the sky" (*TM*: 215). Juxtaposed with this image of transcendence is Stan's own frustration and doubt over such possibilities, emphasised as he stands on this same staircase and further articulated through the avian trope during a farcical portrayal of his pursuit of an escaped Muscovy duck. "The duck made straight for Glastonbury, to stalk and hide in its wilderness, and to endure all kinds of frights and elements in order to preserve its illusion of freedom" (*TM*: 216). The mention of "elements" seems out of place until read as an ironic reference to Stan's, rather than the duck's, having survived "frights and elements" in such events as the flood and the fire. The novel, which finally affirms a refined conception of his spiritual freedom, here undercuts his past experiences of it in accordance with his own scepticism. In so doing the duck, of course, parodies Stan's own situation and the scene becomes all the more ironic given the fact he himself is finally the object of satire.

While on the one hand the incident depicts Stan's first recollection, many years after the fire, of Madeleine, its significance cannot be reduced to his "Frustrat[ion] at the impossibility of a Madeleine in his life" (Beston: 157), being of transpersonal import and broadly indicative of his scepticism over the transcendent moments he had experienced in the burning house. He stands, ironically, on the incomplete staircase and searches for the lost memory of details which "seemed to have gone, like those rooms of the top and most significant storey, through which he had run, matching himself against the bravura of the fire" (*TM*: 217). In this position, and feeling his own past moments of "freedom" invalidated, he suddenly recalls the duck and descends the stairs to force it, with uncharacteristic violence, into recognition of its (really his own) bondage:

> So he swore at the bird. "I'll get that bastard," he said.
>
> While the duck continued to stalk, the man ran down and out at the back, his large body grown ridiculous as it hurtled far outside his recollections.

> Then he recovered himself and his breath, picked up a long branch of a tree that the wind had torn off, and that he noticed lying, rushed at the now desperately regretful duck, and pressed it into the ground with the fork of the branch, pressed as if he would crush the bird through the earth, out of existence, rather than take it alive. (*TM*: 217)

With grim satisfaction he clips one of its wings, completing the metaphorical negation of transcendence. However, a shift toward the readmission of divine benevolence and the recognition of the plurality of its manifestation later occurs, when Stan considers how "acts of terror did begin to illuminate the opposite goodness and serenity of the many faces of God" (*TM*: 247). This moment occurs during an encounter between Stan and Ray, to whose portrayal consideration will now be given.

Ray's characterisation is notable for its recourse to the novel's key tropes. Equally, the failings of Stan and Amy which give rise to the conflicts in their marriage are, according to a similar pattern, expressed in each of their relationships to Ray. The latter point is illustrated in the first depiction of the child in their house when Stan, intimidated by his newborn son,

> perform[s] quite a ceremony, humming to himself and stamping on the brick path to the kitchen.... Then he went in arrogantly, or so it seemed, straight to where the baby lay, in a cot, or in his mother's arms, and looked him straight in the face. To get it over.... [Ray] looked at his father with a grave arrogance of his own that was more convincing.
>
> "Seems to be doing all right," the father would say.
>
> Then he would turn his back, glad of this release. Later on he would speak to him, he said, and teach him to make things. They would go off into the bush with axe or gun, and there would be many things to say.
>
> ...
>
> "You never touch him," said the mother. "I believe you don't love him at all."
>
> Taking her baby that she alone could love enough.
>
> "What am I to do?" he asked, offering his empty hands. "What can you do with a baby?"
>
> A baby is an abstraction, still an idea, to which you have not yet had time to adjust your opinions and your habits.
>
> "What can you *do?*" she said. "Why, you can eat him!"
>
> She could have. She could not love him enough, not even by slow, devouring kisses. Sometimes her moist eyes longed almost to have him safe inside her again.

> "I'd put it down," said the father. "It can't be healthy to maul it like that." (*TM*: 114-15)

The figures, almost proverbial in psychoanalytic discourse, of the absent father and the possessive mother are clearly constellated. The perpetuation of this pattern could bear lengthy analysis, but can only be briefly commented on here, and what is significant for the purposes of this study is the basic structure of interactions. Stan's greater receptiveness to the presence and mystery of his son causes him to withdraw from, or delay relationship with him and the gap this creates between them is never closed. Amy's observation that Stan is physically remote from Ray is true, and significant, but becomes a half-truth when she distorts it into the self-serving accusation that Stan "doesn't love him at all". And when she herself meets the valid demand for physical intimacy with Ray it goes beyond the bounds of the healthy, depicted in disturbing imagery of devourment or, as it is expressed by Stan, also with a finger on the truth, "mauling". (White may intend a revealing echo of Amy's desire to "eat" Ray when, at the scene of his interrogation over some puppies he has killed, he lies to conceal his deed by saying of the mother of the pups (with whom Amy identifies (*TM*: 128)): "perhaps she ate some" (*TM*: 129).)

As Ray's portrayal is developed he is cast in antithesis to the positive significance of almost every one of the novel's significant tropes. Against the grain of the glass motif introduced by the flood boy, Ray "smashes a pane of glass with an iron bar nearly as big as himself" (*TM*: 130). Conflicting metaphorically with the liberative associations of the avian trope, he persecutes chickens with a catapult (*TM*: 126), shoots at a seagull and conceals it from Amy by burying it (*TM*: 203), "looked contemptuously into an old nest, that he would have robbed if it had been full, but as it was not he tore it from its fork and flung it to the ground" (*TM*: 135). He "put his hand into the secret depths of nests and stole the jewels of eggs" (*TM*: 203). Thelma remembers placing "little girls' flowers on sparrows' graves"

(*TM*: 344) and, in a doubled avian image, depicting a double violation, Ray cheats Bub Quigley out of a lyre-bird tail-feather with an unfulfilled promise of robbed magpies' eggs in exchange (*TM*: 258). These images continue into adulthood when, visiting his parents, a bird's nest drops as he makes an unconventional entry through a window (*TM*: 242).

Similarly with the arboreal trope: in a struggle to gain possession of Bub's "favourite thing", a "skeleton leaf", he destroys it and the beauty it manifests (*TM*: 117). At Thelma's christening he considers how "The name was already losing its mystery, and would in time become something short and common, to be carved on a tree" (*TM*: 124), an image which is repeated when, warned against shooting at the hens, Ray "began scratching at a tree, to scratch his name, to impress his will with his hands on some thing" (*TM*: 126), as he again does on some "green trees" (*TM*: 203) later on. He tells Stan he "would like to see a tree torn out by the roots. Or struck by lightning. They say you can smell a struck tree, and it smells of gunpowder" (*TM*: 247), with the arboranthropomorphic character of this figuration eerily suggesting a murder.

These descriptions are not intended to suggest an extended anathemitisation on White's part of Ray, and within their respective contexts several of the images they contain take on specific significances as elements of juxtapositions which, though they cannot be pursued here, develop a penetrating portrayal of one of the novel's most complex, though frustrated, characters. On the whole these illustrations of Ray's cruelty reveal an awareness of the beauty and enigma of the natural world, but a confusion as to how to respond to it which manifests in the distortion of an instinctual (but undirected) youthful impulse to "do something memorable and heroic" (*TM*: 203), that is, to produce evidence of "permanence" and develop his potentialities through "motion". Unlike Stan, or Bub Quigley, he "failed to become absorbed into his surroundings. He could not do enough" (*TM*: 127), and in the process violates the mystery his father reveres. This emphasis on action is elaborated in a

misconceived struggle with his own impotence, a struggle which White suggests — for example through Stan at the novel's opening, and the young artist at its closure — is a universal one, ultimately arising from the conflict of duality. Stan's uncommunicativeness, however, coupled with the growth of his disbelief in the efficacy of human action leaves Ray without a comprehensible role model, and hence only passive, indirect and in this case inadequate guidance. Parallelling Amy's relationship to Stan, his father's external appearance of certainty is both inaccessible and alienating to him and therefore becomes an object of resentment, so that Amy's conception of him as "the sun her husband" (*TM*: 106) is echoed in Ray's apprehension of Stan: "there his father, the daylight, would be standing" (*TM*: 246).

That Ray is apprenticed to a saddler also initiates a sustained association between him and the equestrian trope. This, coupled with the depictions of his character in arboreal imagery, sets Ray against the yoking of the tree and the horse in the novel's opening image, where the juxtaposition hints at the resolution of the tension between permanence and motion. Equestrian imagery typically suggests the frustration in Ray of the process of becoming. His "desire to exchange his identity with something tangible" (*TM*: 240) and his pursuit of "the experience that he desired but also feared" (*TM*: 238) does not lead him beyond the anxiety he feels in the face of life, so that, in association with him, "motion" is never an enactment of becoming but instead manifests as a "long[ing] to substitute movement for his fears" (*TM*: 246). Even his first sexual encounter — which White sets behind a stable — leaves him, not in possession of the sense of manhood he had hoped to attain, but "shr[unk] ... into a boy" and dogged by the odour of the manure he treads in: "a smell of fresh horse dung that persisted and persisted, the horses pawing and whinnying and raising their long, shining necks, to strike" (*TM*: 240).

Abandoning his apprenticeship to saddlery, he reappears in a visit to his sister, Thelma, who is lodging with the Bourke family. He establishes a relationship with Horrie Bourke, significantly a horse-trainer, and finds in the old man a substitute father who "wanted to expose the tenderest, the most vulnerable part of him, and tell Ray Parker about horses" (*TM*: 259). Ray disappears soon after this, at the centre of a racing scandal in which Bourke's horse — his "cert ... his big chance" (*TM*: 265) — is doped and Ray has backed the winning outsider. When viewed against the chief tensions of the novel, apart from the emotional complexities of his motivations in this particular situation, this suggests a desperate attempt to usurp the "motion" he cannot achieve through his own volition. At the same time — again I am concerned with the broader tropical significance of this particular series of events — Ray in a sense unconsciously sabotages his own becoming through sacrificing his integrity to a fraudulently acquired version of "motion", while of course being compelled to rob Horrie Bourke of his victory and in so doing condemn a relationship he desired but never felt entitled to in the first place. Rather than a natural development of inner potentialities through motion or becoming, it is just this process that is perverted in Ray: "He was involved in *progressive guilt*" (*TM*: 241; emphasis added).

This guilt is at one point expressed in a minor but recurrent motif which connects Ray's behaviour with Amy, namely that of apples. Ray's gifts have the character of "debt[s] laid up against the future" (*TM*: 264), and it fits the same pattern when, before the racing scandal from which he benefits, Ray brings the Bourkes "paper bags filled with big pale apples, or the purple foaming ones" (*TM*: 265). Frequently, the image (though it does not form part of a rigidly allegorical portrayal) is connected with Amy and casts her as an Eve figure offering the apple in Eden. In connection with Amy, apples bear these associations of guilt as well as being offered as an erotic temptation to those with whom she desires

intimacy. The image enters the depiction of her relationship with Con, the young Greek who works for the Parkers as a farmhand for a period (and has not yet learned English):

> Once she had given him a red apple and watched him bite it. His teeth clove the apple with a hard, animal sound. His lips were shining with the white juice.
>
> "That is an apple," she said in a flat voice, watching him in the peaceful yard. "Apple," she repeated, nodding her head, but diffidently.
>
> "Epple?" he asked, or laughed, from his wet mouth.
>
> Almost as if he were returning it to hers, this word, or fragment of apple flesh, that he had tried in his. So that she blushed for the intimacy of the whole incident.
>
> "Oh," she said, laughing roughly, "you'll learn in time."
>
> She did not know what to say next, so turned away with a moisture in her mouth, of apple juice. (*TM*: 226)

The sensuality here associated with the image takes on more disturbing and incestuous undertones in her relationship with Ray. Manifesting in an early description — " Give me a kiss,' she said laughingly, as if it had been a red apple" (*TM*: 204) — it reappears in the secret encounter between Amy and Ray, then a fugitive, in the ruins of Glastonbury. Having asked her for money, they meet in an encounter which bears the markings of a tryst:

> "That is a bit of tucker, dear," said the mother, who had forgotten what pleasure she would have in watching him eat.
>
> He did so, very quickly, tearing the legs off the chicken and wrenching open the bread....
>
> ...
>
> He threw the bones into a corner, and the carcass with its little shrivelled heart.
>
> Then he sighed, and was easier in his clothes.
>
> "I should have brought some apples," she said, seeing his teeth tear the flesh of apples.
>
> ...
>
> She liked to watch him.
>
> "Now you can tell me about yourself, won't you?" she asked. "What have you done and seen?"
>
> ...
>
> "You haven't lost that habit, Mum," he said, giving a kind of twitch that came to him apparently at moments of defence, "that habit of cross-questioning a man. You would kill a man dead to see what was inside."
>
> ...
>
> When she had got him defenceless she began to cry for him. She had been waiting a long time for this.
>
> "Oh, Ray," she cried, putting her hands on his shoulders, to be comforted.

> ...
> [She was] bringing the money out of her dress.
> ...
> "But stay here for a bit, Ray," she said. "Stay and talk to us. You can help your father with the cows. I'll make an apple pie...."
> But Ray Parker was as good as gone. (*TM*: 351-3)

While Amy is presented with some pathos as an ageing, lonely figure trying to regain a lost relationship with her son, the sequence also lays bare her manipulation of this persona, and her attempts to have Ray give some "explanation" (*TM*: 351) of himself are turned to a questioning of her own "belief that she was innocent. It could not be otherwise" (*TM*: 352). This question of personal guilt is broadened and interwoven with biblical themes as White, within the context of Glastonbury's already established associations of a corrupt Eden, exploits the significance of the apple as the fruit of the Fall. It represents knowledge, complicity and guilt, all elements of the intimacy she would engage Ray in, and her intention to tempt him to stay with apples, or later apple pie, ironically undercuts her belief in her own innocence.

Within the broader conceptual framework of the novel the apple also operates as a suggestion of duality, and is another illustration of the way in which Amy is set against Stan, so that she in a sense moves backwards toward the Fall while he progresses towards an experience of redemption and unity.

The image makes another fleeting appearance in connection with Thelma, who writes to Amy of a pot plant she has, called a "love apple" (*TM*: 268). The plant is, however, really an "ornamental chilli" (*TM*: 268), and the incongruity makes for a fittingly ironic analogy with the controlled, loveless, and ultimately cruel personality which expresses itself in her displays — or, increasingly, her simulations — of emotion. "Thelma Forsdyke did recoil. From the terms of love" (*TM*: 409). One of the most relentlessly satirised characters in the novel, she abhors both her parents' simplicity — the virtue of which White extols as elevating

their existence above hers — and her childhood home which she considers "the abyss of her origin" (*TM*: 373). Nevertheless, her portrayal exhibits a psychological continuity which, though it does not amount to an endorsement of the person she becomes, makes her development comprehensible.

Though this development cannot be explored in any great detail here, a brief illustration can be made of the ways in which White articulates her spiritual situation through recourse to key images. Her desire for becoming is signalled, not in the typical equestrian imagery (clearly unsuitable given her fastidiousness) but through a modernised surrogate, when she is depicted "Offering the cold pennies to the tram conductor, she might have been buying freedom. She craved for this, like most men, before anything, while remaining uncertain of its nature" (*TM*: 264). Similarly, her spirituality is portrayed in arboreal imagery with some depth and irony, near the very end of the novel, through her experience of music in a concert hall:

> Mrs Forsdyke rolled her programme into the thinnest cylinder, and would have made herself thinner, if possible, clasping her elbows still tighter, reducing her attentive thighs. Thus compressed, she might have soared upward on the note of release. But she could do nothing about her soul. The soul remains anchored. It is a balloon tied to a branch of bones. Still, it will tug nobly. (*TM*: 469)

The arboranthropomorphised arboreal image is a familiar one of the entrapment of the spirit in mortal existence. Thelma, however, romanticises this conflict which she does not believe it possible to transcend, and she clings to an ostensibly "noble" spirituality of unbridled ascent as part of the martyrdom she cultivates in social intercourse. Like the balloon, White suggests, her soul is really empty but rises due to its compression. Ultimately, she denies herself spiritual experience out of the pride she cannot recognise as an aspect of her patronising view of her parents' existence: "To be forgiven, it is necessary to be very simple, very good, like my parents, said Thelma Forsdyke as she received and ate the sacrament"

(*TM*: 414). During the concert, the sequence of images accompanying the music become, despite her desire for unrestrained heights of experience, a depiction of a descent, through arboreal imagery down to the paddocks of her childhood home in a return to the natural world in which, White implies, true spirituality is rooted. What starts out as the imagery of fantasy takes on the substance of a vision when she is finally led to the side of the Parkers' house and an actual premonition of Stan's death, and ironically to her first real recognition of relationship with him: "oh, Daddy, she began with horror, for she had never said this before, never" (*TM*: 470).

It is also Thelma who stumbles on the Housman poem which suggests the novel's title. Much of the novel's imagery, particularly the tree as metaphorical of humankind, is continually referring to this poem and its suggestion of cyclic continuity, and the notion that all human experience is identical in the sense that it both channels the life force and comes into conflict with external manifestations of it. On the whole the texture of *The Tree of Man* (as well as elements of *Voss*) frequently echoes many of the thematic and tropical elements of *A Shropshire Lad*, which in its pastoral setting employs images of trees, hanging (on gallows-trees), flesh against bone, sky against earth, burial as part of a process of organic continuity, and so forth. One poem, in which the speaker imagines a conversation with a Greek statue, may have suggested the character of Stan. The sculpture stands as a figure of immortality "still in marble stone" (LI, l. 5), and advises the speaker to adopt a similar attitude of steadfast endurance — "And then I stept out in flesh and bone / Manful like the man of stone" (LI, ll. 25-6).

Though an interpretation of *The Tree of Man* is not dependent on a connection with this poem, the possible relationship suggests itself when one considers the origin of Stan's name. *Stan*, as noted earlier in this chapter, is derived from Old English *stān* "stone" (its full form, *Stanley*, meaning "stone clearing") (Room: 519). White emphasises the stone image in

a passage (*TM*: 10) stating that, if his father hadn't derided the suggestion, his mother would have called him Ebenezer, which means, from Hebrew, "stone of help" (Room: 162).

Separately from the possible parallel with Housman's "man of stone", the connection between Stan and stone imagery is useful in the interpretation of an incident in which Stan, well past middle age and with diminishing physical strength, helps his neighbour dig holes for fenceposts. Stan, who "had moved the trees and the boulders back in the dream time", watches with some irony as Joe Peabody, now working the land previously owned by Ossie Peabody, digs in "a fury of confidence" (*TM*: 362) until he encounters a boulder:

> "That's sunk us for this one," [Joe] said, temporarily dubious. "Might blast it, I suppose."
>
> It was an apparently endless boulder that the two men had been picking around.
>
> "That?" said Stan Parker, smiling at the hole in a rather tight way. "There has been worse than that. I wouldn't let that beat us, a little bit of stone."
>
> ...
>
> So he took the crowbar.
>
> Stan Parker worked. The iron trembled as it struck the ground, whether with contempt or hope. The man worked.... Once or twice sparks flew out of the rock, and grey wounds appeared. The dry, fragile body of the man was fighting with the dull stone.... Suddenly he bent over the crowbar, pressing his belly into it, weighing it down with his body, the whole of his strength.
>
> The stone did move in the hole.
>
> He withdrew the bar and stabbed again and again into the corners of the earth, having observed a weakness. The rock heaved, its shape was evident now. (*TM*: 362)

The stone, as has already been suggested, metaphorically represents Stan himself and the almost epic struggle to unearth it becomes an attempt to arrive at final self-definition, to "put his hand on his own soul and judge its shape, age, toughness and durability" (*TM*: 363). Echoing the "grey wounds" in the rock, "He was rather grey" (*TM*: 363). And that he stabs with the crowbar "into the corners of the earth", moreover, creates a hyperbolic suggestion of an exploration not merely of the hole but of the world — parallelling the novel's preoccupation with motion or becoming — and of a lifetime's inner searching. (This view is

encouraged by a comparison between Stan and the crowbar, when he throws it down and wonders whether he himself, "though still upright, had been similarly rejected" (*TM*: 363).)

The stone is also, of course, suggestive of permanence. On this level the sequence shows Stan struggling against the age, that is the increasingly evident impermanence, of his body, and when he later tells Amy how the work left him overcome by dizziness, the metaphor of stone is continued. "I cracked up" (*TM*: 365), he tells her, the figure of speech at once indicating his physical failure and hinting at the loss of permanence suggested by cracking stone.

Once the boulder is unearthed, however, Joe Peabody significantly "ordered Stan Parker to sit upon it, which he did" (*TM*: 363). This ushers in a series of images, echoing an earlier portrayal of the aged Ossie Peabody sitting on a rock (*TM*: 168), of Stan in the same position which, despite his doubt, does increasingly suggest permanence as well as an extended process of contemplation. Similarly, the image, coupled with Stan's steadfastness while he grapples after certainty, also invites comparison with St Peter and the rock as the foundation of faith.

At a point previous to this, however, in the midst of the spiritual crisis initiated by Amy's adultery, Stan becomes disdainful of the notion of permanence and deeply sceptical of the presence of God. It is to this earlier stage in the narrative that I will now turn, in the process remarking briefly on the novel's imagery of drought.

In the sequences immediately preceding the drought both Stan's religious convictions and his relationship with Amy already begin to be more urgently, though subtly, questioned. He is now "inseparable from the district, he had become a place name", and in church he sings

> in praise of that God which obviously did exist. Stan Parker had been told for so long that he believed, of course he did believe....

> What then was wrong? There was nothing, of course, that you could explain by methods of logic; only a leaf falling at dusk will disturb the reason without reason. (*TM*: 295)

This uncertainty begins the "years of drought" (*TM*: 297) which takes on spiritual overtones (as does the winter setting which predominates toward the end of the novel). At the same time Amy rediscovers the notebook she had once offered to Ray as a diary, though he dismissed the suggestion suspecting an obvious snare ("[Y]ou could send it to me ... and I could read what you have done" (*TM*: 243), she says to him before regretting the whole idea). When it resurfaces, Stan takes the notebook from her in the secret hope of recording in it "some poem or prayer" — notice again the juxtaposition of the poetic and religious dimensions — in "simple words, within his reach, with which to throw further light" (*TM*: 297). Looking at the empty notebook, however, he finds "The blank pages were in themselves simple and complete" (*TM*: 296), a description which in one sense also parallels the questioning of metaphors in the later stages of the novel. "So the book remained empty", and he goes about meeting the daily needs of his life in "acts [which] were good in themselves", though "none of them explained his dream life, as some word might, like lightning" (*TM*: 297).

The closest Stan gets to articulating himself is when he writes home during the war, and finds he is "a bit excited at himself, writing these letters, of which the words became transformed — they were grass, and slow cows, and the bits of paraphernalia, axes and hammers and wire and things ... that he liked to remember" (*TM*: 201). These reflections of his, especially given the images at hand, become a kind of metafictional comment — also developed through the grandson, Ray Jr — on the process of White's fulfilling Stan's ambition through writing *The Tree of Man*, which in a sense constitutes the filling of the notebook, both with Stan's life and those aspects of his experience which he is unable to interpret beyond living them.

Stan's lack of inspiration is highlighted within an atmosphere of general anticipation in which even cows watch their masters, "as if these expected a revelation from men similar to that which men expected from the sky" (*TM*: 297). During this period, Stan shows Amy a dragonfly he finds "trembling on a yellow mulberry leaf":

> "Why, that is beautiful, Stan," she said.
>
> She was pleased but detached, humouring him as if he were a little boy....
>
> "Put it on the sill," she said, "and perhaps it will fly."
>
> After delivering it from his hands, from which the skin had been knocked in one or two places, there were scabs on them, he went out, and afterwards remembered the incident as one that had been insufficient. (*TM*: 297)

The detail of the mulberry leaf encourages comparison with a scene from the early stages of their marriage where they experience a moment of intimacy "inside the envelope of the shining tree, talking, and laughing at nothing, and gathering fruit" (*TM*: 149) and Stan is embarrassed by her suddenly kissing him. Here, however, the mulberry leaf is withered, signalling the present deficiency of their relationship and the mutual depletion of their spiritual resources. Amy's desire for access to his experience has dissipated and she trivialises the vision of the dragonfly which he had hoped to share with her, so that "If they had been dependent on those frail wings to rise together, the woman would not have been able at that moment to infuse them with strength" (*TM*: 297).

Around this time, and into the now "arid garden", in which Amy stands with "dry and drying skin" and a milk can falls "with a clatter of emptiness" (*TM*: 298), Leo, the travelling salesman, enters accompanied by ironic allusions to the serpent in Eden, selling "soft snakes" (*TM*: 300) of cloth and women's clothes, and asking for water, being "dry as a snake" (*TM*: 301). The sexual encounter which ensues is depicted not merely as a violation of her personal relationship with Stan but also of the spiritual experience he is never able to share with her. It has been argued that, later on, Amy can "begin to accept her own sensuality and

the adultery which was for her the expression of it" (Maack: 128) but, while it is debatable whether White intends the affair (which is nevertheless inevitable) to be viewed as a healthy act of exploration in any sense, it clearly goes beyond the terms of sensuality. Embracing Leo, who is in any case already "repulsive" (*TM*: 300) and "repellent" (*TM*: 301) to her, she finds

> It was her husband's head. Then she put her tongue, crying, against the mouth. It was as if she had spat into the face of her husband, or still further, into the mystery of her husband's God, that she saw by glimpses, but could not reach deeper to. So that she was fighting her disgust, and crying for her own destruction before she had destroyed, as she must destroy. (*TM*: 303)

Bliss refers to this passage when she observes that "White describes her adultery in terms that will be echoed when Stan spits out his God, thus linking the acts and equating their import" (55). The passage further indicates that Amy's set of motivations again have to do with her failure to separate between Stan and God. She "would have embraced a religion of her own needs" (*TM*: 413). Amy believes that Stan withholds God from her, and at the same time finds that Stan's experience of God makes inaccessible to her that part of him which she seeks to possess. His failure to successfully share any of this, and her own inability to possess either Stan or that mystery which she perceives him to experience, finally impels her to assert the independence of her own experience through the affair with Leo, whom she "reduc[es] to meet those needs of her own for destruction or renewal" (*TM*: 309). This does not, however, result in an enlarged definition of herself. It is worth remembering at this point White's own description of Amy's adultery in terms of a "desecration of the noble ideal one can't attain to. Amy Parker is led progressively and fatally to this, I feel" (Marr, 1994: 100).

Amy's affair is concerned, not with Leo, "the shadow of her desire" (*TM*: 320), but with her unfulfilled desire for Stan, though White questions the supportability of these needs. When Stan, on becoming aware of her infidelity, is driven towards a final rejection of God in a moment of drunken crisis, he repeats her desecration, perpetrated on the marital and

domestic level, in religious terms, spitting at God as she has spat at him. Though he does not, as Bliss suggests, specifically spit God *out*, the passage nevertheless characterises the whole event as one of traumatic emotional, psychological and spiritual disgorgement:

> He got round the corner to some side street, of which he could not read the name, while trying; it seemed so necessary to locate a degradation. And old banana skins. There was a paper sky, quite flat, and white, and Godless. He spat at the absent God then, mumbling till it ran down his chin. He spat and farted, because he was full to bursting; he pissed in the street until he was empty, quite empty. Then the paper sky was tearing, he saw. He was tearing the last sacredness, before he fell down amongst some empty crates, mercifully reduced to his body for a time. (*TM*: 324)

In the midst of the crisis his act of sacrilege is deflated, an "old banana skin" on which he must slip in a necessary fall along a path of spiritual progression. Apart from the irony of having Stan curse a God which does not exist — echoing White's own, similar experience (see the passage describing his "farcical fall" quoted in the Introduction) — the image of the sky as paper is significant. It hints broadly at the manifestation of "the mystery and the poetry" (*PWS*: 15) in the Bible and in literature, the "poem or prayer" (*TM*: 297) which Stan hoped to write in the notebook. The "flat", "white", "paper" sky, like the notebook, remains empty. This image, moreover, gives rise to a further suggestion. White implies in his satirical anthropomorphisms of the God-image, and emphasises through the related point made in the discussion of the pyreal trope, that fire, flood, and ultimately all apparent manifestations of God remain masks, metaphorical of a mystery which remains ineffable. Stan, tearing the paper sky here is in a sense unwittingly rending the veil of metaphor, "the last sacredness" which is also the final obstruction to true religious experience, just as in the Sanskrit epic, the *Mahabharata*, heaven is the last illusion.

Later Stan questions the value of permanence when reflects that he "had by this time achieved permanence of a kind.... But this permanence was not worth having, he knew. All

things of importance ... are withheld or past" (*TM*: 328); "He could have taken a hammer and smashed the marble world" (*TM*: 329).

When he almost shoots himself in a hunting accident, the event facilitates a countermovement from the state of emptiness and agnosticism following his spitting at God toward fullness: "Then his agreeable life, which had been empty for many years, began to fill. It is not natural that emptiness shall prevail, it will fill eventually, whether with water, or children, or dust, or spirit. So the old man sat gulping in" (*TM*: 407). Significantly, this moment is preceded by one in which "He was suspended" (*TM*: 407), hinting at the conflicts of duality and the passage beyond it. This is augmented by a description which follows closely on this event, of the oldest among the celebrants at communion in the local church: "Some people, who in private life would have been referred to as elderly, had passed beyond old and come to death. Their masks were beyond joy and suffering. They were quite pure as they waited in suspense" (*TM*: 414). The sense of a reconciliation of opposites is likewise a significant feature of Stan's garden vision, some images from which I will now consider.

The sequence depicting Stan's last moments resolves some of the novel's chief tensions initially through images of circularity. The garden itself is circular, and White emphasises the harmoniousness with nature of its design which has "formed out of the wilderness", while "It was perfectly obvious that the man was at the centre of it, and from this the trees radiated" (*TM*: 474). Bliss observes that Stan "has not imposed the design; rather, it has incorporated him" and whereas the energy of circle imagery in the beginning of the novel is centripetal and focused on Stan, here he "finds himself at the centre of a great concentric wheel of apposition whose force is emphatically centrifugal" and looks outwards (57). Of these concentric circles, moreover, the second outermost signifies death, "the cold and golden bowl of winter, enclosing all that was visible and material" (*TM*: 474). The figuration parallels the positive symbolism of the cross in some Christian interpretations, according to

which the horizontal axis signifies death, and the crossing over this of the vertical axis depicts the promise of eternal life. Here, similarly, the final, implied circle is beyond description, constituting the ineffable and immaterial.

The arrival of the evangelist who would offer Stan salvation makes for a scene in which White goes to some lengths to dissociate Stan's spirituality from orthodox Christianity and "the steam roller of faith" (*TM*: 475), employing the juxtaposition to define Stan's experience more sharply. Stan spits on the ground and points at what becomes a "jewel" (*TM*: 476) manifesting divine immanence so that God, previously depicted as increasingly supernal and in remote imagery of sky, can be produced in the form of his own bodily fluids and be pointed at with a stick. This marriage of the sacred and the profane, and the hint of what White must be aware would constitute blasphemy to an orthodoxly religious eye, is functional in the sense that it points beyond metaphors of God and the formulae contained in the pages of the religious tracts delivered by the evangelist. These are left "flapping and plapping in the undergrowth" (*TM*: 476), in a position which associates them with the "involved scrub" over which the gums of the opening chapter "ris[e] with the simplicity of true grandeur" (*TM*: 9). Stan's spittle is also an image of revelation, alluding to Christ's healing of the blind with saliva (Mark 8: 23; John 9: 6). The depiction of this event in Mark's Gospel is peculiarly appropriate to *The Tree of Man* given the healed man's apprehension of human figures in arboreal form: "And [Christ] took the blind man by the hand ... and when he had spit on his eyes, and put his hands upon him, he asked him if he saw aught. And he looked up, and said, I see men as trees walking" (8: 23-4).

His vision also initiates movement: "Stan Parker began to go then. To walk" (*TM*: 477), suggesting a release of spiritual energy after a series of depictions of him as sedentary or in association with stone. As he slowly moves, "The winter dog's dusty plume of a tail dragged after the old man" (*TM*: 477), the "plume" calling up the aerial associations

of the avian trope as the pair struggle along. Similarly ants, previously suggesting the insignificance of human activity, are "massing, struggling up over an escarpment", parallelling Stan's own effort to gain clarity, "But struggling.... But joyful" (*TM*: 477). The stick he carries ironically associates him with the arboreal trope so that when he singles out a leaf, it really becomes another echo of himself as the tree: "I believe in this leaf, he laughed, stabbing at it with his stick" (*TM*: 477), and previous manifestations of the tree as an image of duality begin to be replaced by imagery of unity, in this particular figuration, and in the abovementioned imagery of circles.

That the conflict arising from Stan's own impermanence seems to be dissolved is also suggested in a return to the image of stone, when he — himself once disturbed by his having "cracked up" (*TM*: 365) — now reflects: "I believe ... in the cracks in the path" (*TM*: 477). That he dies on this path, moreover, suggests the continuation of a journey. Similarly, his hand, until this point depicted as being increasingly alienated from God's, and illustrating only Stan's impotence, now emphasises the immediacy of his illumination: "he prayed for greater clarity, and it became obvious as a hand" (*TM*: 477). The final, encapsulatingly unificatory statement "It was clear that One, and no other figure, is the answer to all sums" (*TM*: 477), elaborates not simply the concept of unity, but specifically the notion of unity in multiplicity with the reference to "sums". Nevertheless Stan's illumination, as is typical in White's fiction, is fleeting and there are hints of its synonymousness with blinding: "It [the sunlight] was in his eyes now" (*TM*: 477).

Amy is left behind to endure her "further sentence" of life, and her attempt to keep hold of him "with all the strength of her body and her will" (*TM*: 477), capacities which Stan has long since abandoned as inefficacious, only underscores her predicament. It makes for one of the novel's most tragic moments when he, sitting in "peace and understanding" (*TM*: 476) is interrupted by Amy, excited over her rediscovery of the silver nutmeg grater

given her as a wedding gift. The object stands for an inaccessible world of elegance and romanticism which once constituted the attraction of Madeleine, and suggests the limits of her life's aspirations. The triviality of the image reintroduced at this particular point deepens the sense of her own impoverishment and blindness, and she can only conceive of herself as being "left behind" in "solitary confinement" (*TM*: 477). Stan's recognition of this and his last words, spoken to reassure her, make for a deeply moving moment: "'It is all right,' he said" (*TM*: 478).

The final, densely metaphorical chapter is at once a moving coda to the novel and a return to its opening pages, which are written in the same timeless mode. Trees stand as though in an anonymous assembly of eternal figures representing humanity, and among these "There is silence, and a stone lizard" which, given the already considered association of these images with Stan, metaphorically identifies him. Into this timeless scene there enters the figure of the artist, Stan's grandson, Ray Jr, who will write the "poem of death" or "poem of life" which, as noted earlier, in a sense constitutes *The Tree of Man* and figures as a "scribbl[ing] on the already scribbled trees" (*TM*: 480). He is himself depicted in arboreal terms, "Putting out shoots of green thought" (*TM*: 480), and these associations of organicity are applied to Stan's death, as well as that of his now also dead dog, which "the maggots have not yet had time to invade" where it lies among "decomposing leaves" (*TM*: 479). Ray Jr himself "could not believe in death. Or only in passing through a dark hall, in which it is an old overcoat that puts its empty arms around him" (*TM*: 480), and the description is linked to a sense of inevitable renewal through the boy, "who has grown too long for his pants and the arms of his coat" (*TM*: 479).

Equally, the universal tension between being and becoming begins another cycle in him. He is "tortured by impotence, and at the same time the possibility of his unborn poem" which, in a manifestation of the by now familiar equestrian trope, is "a little wisp of white

cloud that will swell into a horse and trample the whole sky once it gets the wind inside it" (*TM*: 480). The horse as motion, and the fact that "in the end there were the trees"(*TM*: 480), suggesting permanence, together again recall the opening of the novel where the horse and tree are fused and yet begin to embody the tension between being and becoming in Stan, as it does here in his grandson. (The same parallel, though to different effect, is evident in the depiction of the boy's father, Ray, as noted earlier.) Accordingly, the chapter, and the novel, ends in the expression of a paradox. The boy walks with "head drooping as he increased in stature" (*TM*: 480). Suggesting incipience, its final words complete the biblical "in the beginning" narrative while inverting it, "So that in the end, there was no end", as well as echoing one of Thomas Aquinas's equally enigmatic observations:

> The name of being wise is reserved to him alone whose consideration is about the end of the universe, which end is also the beginning of the universe. (quoted in Campbell, 1993: 269)

Chapter 2: *VOSS*

> *I will cross the continent from one end to the other. I have every intention to know it with my heart.* (*V*: 33)

"'Like some foolish nun,' were Mrs Bonner's last words" (*V*: 404). This is Emily Bonner's parting pronouncement on her niece, Laura Trevelyan, and may be an expression of Mrs Bonner's embarrassment, defensive as she is of the class identity which Laura eschews, but does not — though the characterisation is ironic — carry the same associations for White, for whom nuns held an enduring fascination.[1] *Voss* is an exploration of the nature and development of faith, and it is not surprising that it aroused interest among Roman Catholics and that nuns featured among early readers producing theses on this work (Marr, 1991: 357). Yet, though Laura's metaphysical formulations — exemplified by her "three stages. Of God into man. Man. And man returning into God" (*V*: 297) — point to the mystical core of the novel, they do not by themselves represent a series of statements from which the meaning of the novel may be extracted. A balanced reading requires sensitivity to the complex whole of White's imaginative landscape, to which Laura's key statements provide illuminating, but not total access. A closer reading of *Voss*, which considers a broad field of imagery, allows greater insight into a diverse range of significances borne by images functioning together in an integrated whole. In the introductory chapter I loosely grouped these patterns of imagery as operating on intra-textual, biblical or mythological lines, and in *Voss* the last category

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[1]The influence on his work of White's somewhat eccentric interest in nuns is felt through to his last novel, *Memoirs of Many in One*. For its cover he, himself a "born Mother Superior", posed as his nun character Alex Xenophon Demirjian Gray (the photographs, of White in bed with religious icons arranged at the head and stage-blood trickling from his mouth, were abandoned following the demurs of his friends, who were concerned that "He'd be leaving himself wide open") (Marr, 1991: 626-7).

achieves greater prominence than in *The Tree of Man* through the explicit deployment of Aboriginal images.

Discussion will centre on key images manifesting in three general phases in the novel: firstly, its opening, and the encounters between Voss and other characters; secondly, the sequences describing events at Rhine Towers and Jildra; and thirdly, events occurring in the latter stages of the expedition, specifically the death scenes of key characters, most importantly Voss's. While the other members of the expedition party, and particularly Laura, warrant more extensive treatment in their own right, it is the way in which they condition Voss's character and in which the imagery surrounding them reflect *his* spiritual progression that determines my focus. That Laura's development is integral to the novel as a whole is undeniable and I do not intend to suggest that she serves merely as a foil to Voss. She and the German have a mutual impact on each other and the narrative is balanced between each of their worlds. Nevertheless, spatial constraints dictate that a more comprehensive consideration of the tropes depicting her development must be set aside in favour of a deeper exploration of those accompanying Voss.

Similarly, it is mainly the development of patterns of imagery relevant to the key scenes I have isolated that will be discussed at any length. There are several significant tropes, such as the solar, lunar, chromatic and mineralogical (or specifically alchemical) figurations which are of necessity either omitted or given cursory treatment. Those patterns of imagery which will be examined in greater detail include specifically the arboreal pattern (with frequent reference to its association with the cross), the paradise-hell dichotomy, the Aboriginal Great Snake, and the sequence of lily images, while the opposition between light and dark, desert and garden, earth and sky, as well as other minor images reflecting on other tropes under discussion, will be commented upon as they become relevant.

Particularly in *Voss*, White's tropes, which are somewhat more elaborately figured than in *The Tree of Man*, function in service of two contrary tendencies making themselves felt in all aspects of the text — on the one hand a particularising, differentiating form of perception, and on the other a reconciling consciousness intent on demonstrating an underlying unity to the novel. In its opening stages, for example, the contrasting elements of characters' spiritual and psychological makeup are emphasised, while particularly the portrayals of the literal or (as in Laura's case) metaphorical deaths of characters in the climactic episodes tend to suggest analogies between their experiences. Through characters as divergent as Le Mesurier, Palfreyman, Laura and Voss, White charts intertwined quests for redemption, showing the relevance to all their lives of the not exclusively Christian "paradox of man in Christ, and Christ in man" (*V*: 342). The concept of sacrifice, of "dying to live" is essential to White's vision, and in many respects *Voss* constitutes a reassertion of this principle, approached from the broadest perspectives, and in terms searching enough to dissociate it from a limited and clichéd notion of Christian self-sacrifice. (The novel's Christian principles are, moreover, subjected to constant irony, as well as to Laura's initial atheism, and the views of a main male protagonist whose contempt for Christian humility often echoes Nietzsche's penetrating critique of Christian morality, quite apart from the question of whether Voss is to be considered an *Übermensch* figure.[2]) The analogous nature

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[2]The importance of this question can be overstated but does raise some interesting points. (For a list of critical discussions of the issue see Bliss (215, n. 5).) Dorothy Green rightly points out that

> It is an anachronism to talk, as critics have done, about Voss's anticipating Nietzsche. Voss is a character in a book, not a real life philosopher.... His metaphysical conclusions would have been abhorrent to Nietzsche. (Green: 304)

While excessive emphasis on the pursuit of Nietzschean correspondences tends to detract from the novel, a historical correlation need not, however, exist between the character and the philosopher in order for the latter's ideas to make themselves felt in a twentieth century novel. I mention the point because many of Voss's thoughts or formulations are at times

of the spiritual experience of White's characters arises from the problem common to all life — that of the irreconcilable, yet unavoidable basic conflict between death and life. The conflict of opposites is conspicuous in *Voss*, manifesting itself on personal, social and religious levels. Characters are introduced through the contrariety of their spiritual preoccupations. The Christian myth is juxtaposed with an Aboriginal one. Yet as this complex of opposites is presented the tension begins to be resolved, a resolution enacted not only in the blending of imagery and the suggestion of an underlying unity to characters' experiences but reflected also in the novel's structure (so that, for example, while Laura's and Voss's worlds are divided by chapters after his departure from Sydney Harbour, the narrative alternates five times from the one setting to the other within the climactic thirteenth chapter). These simultaneously opposed and unified elements of character, imagery and overall structure are not merely stylistic effects but can be understood as the dramatisation of an enantiodromia, a juxtaposition of divergent impulses moving paradoxically toward each other. It is fitting therefore that one of this novel's key motifs is the Christ-image, the god-man, and the tree-cross on which he dies, and through which he is resurrected. The crucifixion is at once emblematic of redemption through Christ's sacrifice and an image of the "coincidentia oppositorum" which, Jung remarks, "is one of the commonest and most

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surprisingly close echoes of Nietzsche, the title of whose work, *Human, All Too Human*, could figure as one of Voss's mottos in the earlier stages of the narrative. Compare also, for example: "I detest humility.... Is man so ignoble that he must lie in the dust, like worms?" (*V*: 151) with an aphorism from Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*: "When it is trodden on a worm will curl up. That is prudent. It thereby reduces the chance of being trodden on again. In the language of morals: *humility*" (36). Or, "To kiss and to kill are similar words to eyes that focus with difficulty" (*V*: 268) with the maxim from *Beyond Good and Evil*: "One has been a bad spectator of life if one has not also seen the hand that in a considerate fashion — kills" (91).

Whether or not these echoes are intentional — White claimed to have read only "very little Nietzsche — some of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* when I was at Cambridge. He doesn't appeal to me" (Marr, 1994: 413) — the salient point is that Voss's spiritual progression is measured against his abandonment of these views.

archaic formulas for expressing the reality of God" (McGuire & Hull: 223). This balance is for White not a fixed end in itself but a creative equilibrium which incorporates a vision of constant change and at once involves transcendent experience and a return, within life, specifically for Voss who has attempted to abandoned it, to humanity.

It is to the specific bases in the text of the ideas so far outlined that I will now turn, but before doing so a brief comment on the novel's Christian framework should be made. William Walsh "cannot agree that White's method implies the existence of a long series of detailed correspondences between episodes in *Voss* and the life of Christ. The parallelism is subtler and less quantitative than this" (Walsh, 1976: 42). While the pursuit of biblical allusions as an activity in itself ultimately serves little purpose, there are nevertheless close textual correspondences between *Voss* and parts of the New Testament. These often illuminate the text and therefore require elucidation, but it should be emphasised that whatever biblical parallels do exist, they do not make for an overall pattern of algebraic connections between novel and scripture. The fact that Voss is often characterised in imagery evocative of Christ, for example, does not mean he is being simply cast as a "Christ-figure". Often this functions merely as an ironic device suggesting Voss's preoccupation with his own apotheosis, and the association with Christ is immediately undermined, not simply to retract the Christian characterisation, which has never been seriously posited, but in order to highlight the absurdity of his desire for godhead. Hence, as Dorothy Green observes, though the novel "affirms the Christlikeness of each man who strives to be fully human ... it is emphatically not an allegory of the gospel story" (305) — White's deployment of biblical imagery creates inflections rather than equivalences of meaning.

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I

The most significant encounter in *Voss* — "the story of a *grand passion*" White once called it (Marr, 1996: 107) — is clearly that between Voss and Laura. White termed her Voss's "anima" (*FG*: 103), and the explorer comes to see her as "the woman who was locked inside him permanently" (*V*: 275). In a novel concerned with "coplacing opposite aspirations [and] wedding contrarieties" (Edgecombe, 1989: 2) their apparent irreconcilability is dwelt upon at more length than with any other pair of characters. At the same time, however, they are "doubles ... mirror images of each other" (Bliss: 61), and it is through the ensuing combination of psychological and spiritual echoes and contrasts that White shows "Each ... achiev[ing] the transformation of the other" (Green: 303).

Within the permanence-motion tension introduced in *The Tree of Man*, Voss epitomises the "fiend of motion" in his obsession "to overcome distance" (*V*: 167), while Laura "huddle[s]" at Potts Point, "afraid of the country which, for lack of any other, she supposed was hers" (*V*: 11). He embraces "the glare of his own brilliant desert" (*V*: 90) through a journey into the Dead Heart of Australia, driven by his will toward his own apotheosis, while she remains "in the garden" (*V*: 90), discovering in herself the necessity for love and humility which she later presses on Voss.

The full extent of the antithesis in their spiritual perspectives is developed largely in the portrayal of their encounters in the novel's opening section, and perhaps the best demonstration of this is in the parallel presentation of the memory sequences outlining the shape of their lives before reaching Australia (*V*: 12-14).

Laura's recollection begins:

> Already she herself was threatening to disintegrate into voices of the past. The rather thin, grey voice of the mother, to which she had never succeeded in attaching a body. She is going, they said, the kind voices that close the lid and arrange the future. Going, but where? (*V*: 12)

Laura's mother "goes", leaving her behind and in need of the protection the Bonners offer her. The desire for permanence hence seems a natural reaction, orphaned and homeless as she is. For Voss, however, who feels with some discomfort the memories impinging on his consciousness (unlike Laura who is less resistant to them),

> the past now swelled in distorting bubbles, like the windows of the warehouse in which his father, an old man, gave orders to apprentices and clerks, and the sweet smell of blond timber suggested all safety and virtue.... Finally, he knew he must tread with his boot on the trusting face of the old man, his father.[3] (*V*: 13-14)

His home suffocates him with its excess of safety, and his resulting claustrophobia forces him to "wr[i]ng freedom from his protesting parents" (*V*: 14). It is the son who is "going" in this instance, "forced to many measures of brutality in defence of himself" (*V*: 14), a phrase which, Susan Wood observes, "points to the underlying vulnerability which Voss feels in himself" (145). His defence of this freedom, moreover, makes for a situation which inverts Laura's, she being the daughter who has lost her parents.

Laura's mother's death, described as her "going", slips into a description of Laura's own departure to Australia: "Going, but where? It was cold upon the stairs, going down, down, and glittering with beeswax, until the door opened on the morning, and steps that Kate scoured with holystone" (*V*: 12). By placing the image of holystone at the end of the sentence White effects a subtle but rapid transition, taking the young Laura out of her house (implied by the familiarity of "Kate", presumably a servant) and onto the ship, where she would first see holystone being used to scrub the decks. And while "holy" hints at the

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[3]That Voss is the son of a timber merchant of course parodies Christ as son of a carpenter. The "safety and virtue" of his father's world, coupled with the "sweet smell" of the trees (hinting at the cross), both associate themselves with the meek and humble aspect of Christ. Voss meets these qualities in Palfreyman, to whom his instinctual reaction is is essentially the same. "[H]e would have liked to dispose of Palfreyman" (*V*: 47), just as, in the biographical excerpt, he feels he must "tread on the face" of his father (which, considered in relation to Christian mythology, is evocative of a Luciferian rebellion against God).

spiritual journey she is destined for, the beeswax polish is also not without significance. Bees (featuring again in Voss's final vision) were believed to be parthenogenic and therefore symbolised the virginity of Mary (Cooper: 19) — associations peculiarly appropriate to Laura.[4] In what functions as a counter-image, we read that Voss "was fascinated in particular by a species of lily which swallows flies. With such instinctive neatness and cleanliness to dispose of those detestable pests" (*V*: 13-14). The lily is of course another emblem of the Virgin Mary, and becomes a key image often invoking Laura's presence in the desert. The fly is equally significant, however, like the image of the bee which is here juxtaposed with it.[5] In the context of Christian symbolism it symbolises evil, pestilence and disease, placed in opposition to Christ (Cooper: 70), in whose role Voss is ironically cast.[6] On the intra-textual level of reference, the lily features more strongly as an image of purity — the "neatness and cleanliness" Voss admires — which displaces its charitable associations and instead evokes

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[4]Laura "never succeeded in attaching a body" (*V*: 12) to her own mother, and her adoptive daughter, Mercy, comes to be presented as Laura's own child, but "of unexplained origin" (*V*: 445), the product of the mystical union between herself and Voss, in an echo of the immaculate conception.

[5]White's pairing of the bee and the fly recalls an Old Testament prophecy of the coming of Christ, perhaps functioning in the opening chapter as a prefiguration of Voss's ironic Christ-status, while also setting the stage for the psycho-spiritual drama both Laura and Voss soon find themselves involved in. The biblical passage reads:

> Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.... [T]he Lord shall hiss for the fly that is in the uppermost part of the rivers of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria. (Isa. 8: 14-18)

[6]The associations of evil extend through a connection with Beelzebub, "Lord of the Flies". The name was originally intended to convey the fact that the Philistine god offered protection against fly-borne diseases (Room: 56). "In German folklore", moreover, "the Devil is often depicted as a fly" (Gaster: 515). In juxtaposition with Voss, who is often singled out as being at the mercy of flies in some literal or figurative sense, the image (which will be returned to in later discussion) functions as goadingly ironic reminder to him of his and his megalomaniac ideas' vulnerability to death and corruption, as well as advancing the characterisation of him as "the Devil" (*V*: 414).

the inhuman perfection of the grand "Idea" (*V*: 44) which Voss would preserve, untouched. The flower's swift devourment of pests also expresses Voss's attitude to those around him. Looking at Bonner's incomplete map in preparation for the journey, Voss anticipates being "under restraint by several human beings"(*V*: 69), and the more remote inhabited areas are designated "fly-spots of human settlement" (*V*: 23). The image reflects his aggressive resistance to human relationships, a trend which is shown through the lily to be gradually inverted, giving way to a process of emotional and spiritual transformation mainly through Laura. With this later development, the sharp distinction between his fly-catching lily and the lily associated with Laura begins to blur.

To return to the biographical sequences, Laura steps onto the ship and remembers voices saying of her:

> Poor, poor little girl. She warmed at pity, and on other voices, other kisses, some of the latter of the moist kind. Often the Captain would lock her in his greatcoat, so that she was almost part of him.... falling in love with an immensity of stars, or the warmth of his rough coat.... (*V*: 12)

While Laura (at least here, as a young girl) is comforted by pity, the sympathetic gestures of her elders and physical closeness with the paternal sea-captain, this is in marked contrast to Voss's reaction to both his parents, as well as to the fact that he abandons his intended medical profession (and with it the idea of healing) having become "revolted by the palpitating bodies of men" (*V*: 13). Reacting to ridicule from his peers over his peculiar interest in the insectivorous lily he concludes that "to be misunderstood can be desirable" (*V*: 14). This last detail is revealing. Voss reacts to the teasing as an attack on his self-image, and subsequently hides the insecurity this speaks of and calls it superiority, taking pleasure in his isolation because it supports the illusion of his self-sufficiency. Yet despite his outward show of arrogance his defensive narcissism is made clear to us: "Anonymous individuals

were watching him.... He suspected their blank faces. All that was external to himself he mistrusted" (*V*: 21).

The older Laura has taken on a similar attitude to physical intimacy. "Persistent touch was terrifying to her" (*V*: 122), and she holds herself aloof. This is one of the ways in which she and Voss are mirrored, but the fact that she is portrayed in her reminiscence as a young girl, still unashamed of her need for touch, in a sense explains why she is able to guide Voss back to the necessity for love. She can remember it, whereas Voss remembers only the emotional violence to which he had to resort in self-defence.

Added to this, the excerpt prefigures, ironically given the mutual diffidence with which the pair are regarding each other, Laura and Voss's future relationship, and his prompting of her own spiritual journey. Here "the Captain would lock her in his greatcoat, so that she was almost part of him", in a proleptic figuration of the adult Laura who becomes to Voss "the woman who was locked inside of him".

Laura's sequence continues, showing her fascinated and comforted by the way "the rigging rocked, and the furry stars. Sleeping and waking, opening and closing, suns and moons, so it goes" (*V*: 13). The sea is a common image of change and Laura, like many of White's child or childlike characters, is shown to be in trusting submission to it. The brief invocation of contraries and the movement from one state to its opposite is characteristic in White, when nature is not portrayed as hostile, as it is to Voss:

> Nothing could be safer than that gabled town, from which he would escape in all weathers, at night also, to tramp across the heath, running almost, bursting his lungs, while deformed trees in places snatched at his clothes, the low, wind-combed trees, almost invariably under a thin moon, and other traps, in the shape of stretches of unsuspected bog, drew black, sucking sounds from his boots. (*V*: 13)

His own psychological discomfort registers in his natural surroundings, projected into the world outside of him and then regarded from a distance as possessing its own malevolent

character. The tree, far from being an image of transcendence, takes on the shadowy, entrapping side which makes it an ambivalent image in mythology and often in White's use of it. Laura's childhood sea-journey shows a conjunction of sun and moon, while only a menacingly "thin moon" attends Voss's tramping through his own sea of mud. Lunar imagery typically represents the feminine principle, as well as being "universally symbolic of the rhythm of cyclic time; universal becoming" (Cooper: 106), a rhythm which is conspicuously absent from Voss's life. For him "Human behaviour is a series of lunges" and he "wonder[s] at the purpose and nature of ... freedom" (*V*: 14), while for Laura, coming under the care of the Bonners, "It did appear momentarily that permanence can be achieved" (*V*: 13). These contrasting tendencies toward motion and stasis begin to be resolved when Voss's "lunge" into the desert results in the relaxation of his obsessive desire for the conquest of distance, and Laura emerges from her "huddling" existence at Potts Point to join him by "blunder[ing] on, painfully, out of the luxuriant world of [her] pretensions into the desert of mortification and reward" (*V*: 74). These countermovements — of Voss coming eventually to rest, Laura setting off on the desert journey — figuratively suggest the attainment of a balance between being and becoming, an equilibrium, even if necessarily a constantly changing one, which is to be seen at work in nature and in the integrated individual. Pride, rooted in the fear of change (because implying death) is an attempt to evade this process, and this is the characteristic Laura and Voss, who move from fragmentation to a greater experience of wholeness, initially share.

In a passage which attracts the attention of many of White's commentators, Laura describes her "defection" from Christianity to "become what, she suspected, might be called a rationalist" (*V*: 9). But the fact that "If she had been less proud, she might have been more afraid" (*V*: 9) is a description that could as well be applied to Voss, who, it emerges, "had always been most abominably frightened" (*V*: 390). As Peter Shrubb has observed, "Self-

sufficiency is something they both feel the necessity for" (11) and, like Voss, Laura retreats behind the illusion of emotional and spiritual independence. Her "self-sufficiency" (*V*: 9) echoes Voss's conviction that "He was sufficient in himself" (*V*: 15), but their own individualism prevents them from recognising their own attitudes ironically reflected in the other. Laura, "happiest shut with her own thoughts" (*V*: 7), grows "tired of this enclosed man" (*V*: 15), and Voss sits alone with her considering that "Here, much was unnecessary. Such beautiful women were in no way necessary to him" (*V*: 15).

Echoing Voss's belief about himself, Laura's reading leaves "her mind seem[ing] to be complete", and "There was in consequence no necessity to duplicate her own image, unless in glass, as now, in the blurry mirror of the big, darkish room" (*V*: 9). This implicit criticism, in Laura's view, of the anthropomorphism inherent in Christianity is immediately undercut, however, by the reference to the mirror, pointing ironically to her own narcissism.[7] Additionally, the "blurriness" of the flawed nineteenth-century mirror suggests not only her lack of clear self knowledge, but also alludes to the arrival of Voss, in a sense her double and also bearing with him the image of God, so that Laura is brought full circle and turned, despite her intention to adopt atheism, back to the contemplation of divinity.

Just as Voss challenges her atheism — "*Atheismus* is self-murder" (*V*: 89) — and the notion that her "mind seemed to be complete", she breaks into his own circumscribed self-image, from within which "he did not expect much of love, for all that is soft and yielding is easily hurt.... He was complete" (*V*: 41). Yet Laura's mind, crucially, only *seemed* to be complete, and she remains to some extent open to genuine relationship: "in spite of her

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[7]The connection between religious scepticism and narcissism is clear in the portrayal of Miss Palfreyman, which makes significant use of mirror imagery (cf. *V*: 261-4), as does much of White's work, including his autobiography which figures as an act of gazing into the "flaws in the glass".

admirable self-sufficiency, she might have elected to share her experience with some similar mind, if such a mind had offered" (*V*: 9). Hence she is able to recognise the extent of Voss's pride, her own being not yet so entrenched as to escape her detection. As she later writes to him, "Arrogance is surely the quality that caused us to recognize each other. Nobody within memory ... dared so much as to *disturb* my pride.... [C]an two such faulty beings endure to face each other, almost as in a looking glass?" (*V*: 185). Along with this recognition comes her consideration that "It was necessary, she knew, to humiliate herself in some way for the German's arrogance. She could feel her nails biting her own pride" (*V*: 74). The crucifixion, invoked here, is the ultimate image of humiliation, and significantly inverts its appearance in connection with Voss, whom Le Mesurier sees "biting his nails ... perhaps one especial nail" (*V*: 37). Laura's sense of guilt and her consequent determination to submit to humility registers in the crucifixionary nail "biting" her pride, while Voss, self-deifying and contemptuous of humility, ironically bites the nail itself.

So far I have discussed two general aspects of the initial encounter between Laura and Voss: their antipathy toward one another and the figurations of imagery standing behind the characters elaborating the extent of the antithesis in broad thematic terms, as well as the factors showing their similarity and bringing about their recognition of each other. White shows two characters whose pride is undermined by their human frailty and it is through a third stage of their relationship, their "spiritual marriage", that he suggests the necessity of a painful return to humanity as a prerequisite for their return to God. This union is also prefigured in the description of their first meeting, most notably in the communion imagery that begins to manifest when Rose, at Laura's behest, presents them both with wine and biscuits. That it is "Not the best port, but the second best" (*V*: 9) alludes to the first of Christ's miracles in St John's Gospel, where he changes the water into wine at the marriage

— the image again anticipating the development of their relationship — at Cana[8] (while the image perhaps also serves as a kind of annunciation of Voss[9]). Laura offers the wine in the interval between each of their reminiscences (discussed above), so that their union is suggested structurally as well as by virtue of the symbolic qualities of the image. Voss, initially disinclined to accept it — "*Danke*. No. A little, perhaps. Yes, a half" (*V*: 13) — is left, being himself here in a sense a "half", to negotiate the "full, shining glass" (*V*: 13), suggesting the wholeness each achieves through transformative relationship with the other. Related is one of the chapter's key images: "[Voss] had followed suit when she sat down. They were in almost identical positions, on similar chairs, on either side of the generous window" (*V*: 12). This is a kind of tableau of the ways they are mirrored in their first meeting and in the rest of the novel. The window, "through which the light began to flow" (*V*: 12), is however particularly significant at this point. The word "generous" appears very infrequently

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[8]The second-best port wine is also part of the motif of "seconds" which persists throughout the novel, and which is related to images of halving and mirroring, doubling and duplication already touched on. Other examples are:

At the party's arrival at Rhine Towers Palfreyman falls for a second time from his horse, and shortly afterwards Ralph Sanderson introduces Ralph Angus saying

> 'This is a *second* Ralph. I am the first.'
>
> The thought of being duplicated, even in name, seemed to give great pleasure to the host. (*V*: 132)

Beside Judd, Voss "was in the nature of a second monolith" (*V*: 136), while Judd himself is "a second copper sun" (*V*: 420). Palfreyman is attacked by one Aborigine and then "A second black ... rushed forward.... the second murderer ... straddled a rock...." (*V*: 343).

Returning to the image at hand, the later development of Laura's esoteric insight into the parallel world of Voss's journey, her "second sight" (*V*: 326), is suggested here by the associations with the communion of the second-best wine, hinting at the union between the two characters brought about through mirroring or doubling.

[9]Together with the fact that the novel opens with Rose alerting Laura and the reader to the fact that "There is a man here...." who she is concerned might "lay his hands on something", Laura also pointedly says to Rose, "do not forget to announce Mr Voss on showing him into the room" (*V*: 7-8).

in *Voss*, and this is a rarely unambiguous image of clarity and of a benevolent purpose which, usually hidden, is at work throughout the novel. Voss's name, moreover, and the novel's title, in "the German pronunciation ... produces a translinguistic pun on the Greek word *phos* or light" (Edgecombe, 1984: 141). Added to this is his other name, Ulrich, an anagram of *Urlicht* ("Primeval Light"), the title of the song, expressing all-trusting faith in God, from Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony.[10] His first name (of course the German form of John) also has biblical resonances. The Gospel of St John emphasises the experience of God as light: "In him [the Logos] was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in the darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not" (John 1: 4-5). Max Pulver, in his exploration of the light symbolism of St John's Gospel, comments on the way

> the motif of light is further developed and it is said of John the Baptist (1: 8-9): "He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world...." [T]his light must be apprehended or comprehended — i.e., received — if man is to be redeemed, if he is to become the Son of God; God wants to be known by his own.... (240)

It is just this paradigm that Voss has inverted. Instead of bearing witness to the light, as John the Baptist does (whose beheading is echoed by Voss's), he identifies himself with it (as one initially suspects Laura might do). White sets about re-establishing the original order, so that Voss's journey is to allow himself to be known by God, beginning with opening himself to Laura. At this point they sit on either side of the window through which the light enters, in a sense uncomprehended by them, and which White projects as an image of unity, obscured as this unity may often be by the many "shape[s] of the ever-protean light" (*V*: 172).[11]

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[10]The 1950s were White's "Mahler years" (Marr, 1991: 293). In *Voss*, published in 1957, he aimed "to convey ... what Mahler and Liszt might have heard" (*PWS*: 16).

[11]A similar sense is conveyed by the "protean fire" (*TM*: 173), or "the many faces of God" (*TM*: 247) of *The Tree of Man*.

Having highlighted some of the key images introduced in the meeting between Voss and Laura, and the way these reflect spiritual tensions within and between them as well as hinting at the possibility of inner transformation, I will now turn to some of the significant early encounters between Voss and other characters.

Harry Robarts, Le Mesurier and Palfreyman each comment on Voss's nature and offer a range of alternatives along a spectrum of human experience. Beside Harry, "strong with innocence", "Voss felt weak with knowledge" (*V*: 32), but the German is nevertheless flattered by his devotion and regards him patronisingly as "an easy shadow to wear" (*V*: 31-2). Set against Harry's simplicity are "the sophistications of Le Mesurier" (*V*: 361), and Voss reflects early on that he "knew this young man" — another "shadow" of his — "as he knew his own blacker thoughts" (*V*: 35). He conceives of each of them as being "one of his selves" (*V*: 361), a statement which of course conveys Voss's solipsistic arrogance but which also points to an important function of the two characters as representing contrary states, psychological positions that are to be reconciled in him. (In much the same way, Laura's and Voss's consciousnesses are enlarged through the integration of, rather than the maintenance of antagonism toward, the perspective of the other.) Robarts and Le Mesurier are significantly the first two "converts" (*V*: 42) to gather at Voss's rooms in the house of the music master, Topp[12]. Both will remain with him until the end, yet from the moment they are

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[12]Though White is not often given to the use of anagrams, *Topp* inverts *Potts* Point, and is possibly intended to create a parallel between Voss's residence in "the two upper rooms" (*V*: 30-1) on Sussex street and the house Laura occupies, where he drinks the wine with her in "the high room" (*V*: 12). Both descriptions echo the "upper room" of the last supper (Mat. 14: 15; Luke 22: 12), with Voss here significantly eating alone, there being "no question of his offering anything to his two dependants" (*V*: 39).

The motif of doubling is also advanced through there being *two* rooms as well as in the name of the widow, Mrs Thompson. "[S]uspected of being the the original Thompson" (*V*: 30), her name of course stems from *Thomas* (meaning "twin"), Christ's disciple who in John 11: 16 is referred to as "Thomas, which is called Didymus ['double']" (Room: 543).

introduced White emphasises the disparity between them. Whereas "Harry stuck to Voss" (*V*: 32), "Frank would stick at nothing long" (*V*: 33). They are depicted as Voss's "two dissimilar disciples.... indeed, an ill-assorted pair, alike only in their desperate need of him" (*V*: 39). Bound together by their leader, they are, though characters existing in their own right, elaborations of the spiritual tensions existing in Voss, together constituting the coincidence of opposites characteristic of transcendent situations (this point will be more fully developed in discussion of Voss's death). An analogous juxtaposition of contraries attends the crucifixion, an image which is soon evoked in the description of Topp's (for the moment Voss's) house of stone "honestly revealing how painfully it had been hewn. There in its weathered sides were the scars, where the iron had entered in, like livid ribs, and in certain lights the dumpy house suggested all suffering" (*V*: 30). Scars in the sides of things are commonly employed by White to suggest the crucifixion, and its evocation here is soon supported by the ironic description of the public reaction to Topp's flute-playing, the music of which drifts down from the windows "causing bullock teams to flick their tails, or some drunkard to invoke the name of Jesus Christ" (*V*: 30).

The character most frequently compared with Christ is of course the ornithologist, Palfreyman, whom Voss first meets on the day following the gathering at his lodgings. Palfreyman stands apart from the others Voss has chosen to accompany him — "at least they were weak men" (*V*: 22) — and arouses his contempt and fear because of the power paradoxically conferred on him by his having "surrendered his strength to selflessness" (*V*: 22). Voss does not raise this objection against Harry and Frank, since they have apparently surrendered themselves to him. He is always threatened by the moral strength of others and, from within his self-deifying scheme, he conveniently attributes Palfreyman's self-surrender to the weakness of "feminine men" (*V*: 48).

The issue of strength does not leave Voss's mind, and when they meet in the botanic gardens their encounter opens with the first of his attempts to manipulate Palfreyman into abandoning the expedition by questioning his health, thereby hoping to offer the ornithologist an escape route. He asks patronisingly: "You will be strong enough already to undertake this journey, Mr Palfreyman?" (*V*: 45). Palfreyman's reply, and his first words in the novel, are "I am perfectly strong" (*V*: 45). Voss soon grows exasperated by "his apparent inability to overcome his companion's strength" (*V*: 47), and the strain placed on the polite manner through which he hopes to dominate Palfreyman makes for some comic moments in the episode. Voss finally sees he must submit, telling Palfreyman he is "strong-willed" (*V*: 46), but he is quickly corrected: "It is not a question of *my* will, Mr Voss. It is rather the will of God that I should carry out certain chosen undertakings" (*V*: 47). In response to this direct contradiction of his belief in the power of the "royal instrument" (*V*: 297) of his will — and the effective demonstration of its powerlessness against the ornithologist, for which reason "he would have liked to do away with Palfreyman" (*V*: 47) — Voss attempts to disguise his growing distaste through "some ... witticism", but "it did not come naturally to him. Even his laughter sounded convulsive, against an agitation of banana palms, two or three of which were standing behind them" (*V*: 47). Here White parodies the triumphal entry of Christ (John 12: 13), with the banana palms echoing the palm leaves strewn along the path into Jerusalem, and hence appropriately "agitating" to Voss. (Palfreyman's name also seems chosen to suggest an ironic identification with Christ, who enters the city on the back of an ass, as well as to draw on the associations of effeminacy connected with the palfrey, heightening the contrast with Voss.)

Along with this is the setting of their meeting, in which the botanic gardens evokes Gethsemane and in this context Palfreyman's injury, resulting from a fall from a horse, echoes the Fall of Man. (The garden setting, in which Voss wrestles with Palfreyman as he

later will with Laura, also figures strongly as the intra-textual antithesis to the novel's forthcoming desert imagery.)

The most interesting set of images in the meeting between Palfreyman and Voss comes into play when the two men pause on a bridge. The bridge itself is an appropriately reconciliatory image for Palfreyman, who often experiences a "conflict between the scientific study of behaviour, and his instinctive craving to believe that man is right" (*V*: 127), and must in order to "justify [him]self" somehow "condemn the morality and love the man" (*V*: 98). White applies the image to him:

> Dedication to science might have been his consolation, if it had not been for his religious faith. As it was, his trusting nature built a bridge in the form of a cult of usefulness, so that the two banks of his life were reconciled despite many an incongruous geographical feature, and it was seldom noticed that a strong current flowed between. (*V*: 46)

Palfreyman attempts reconciliation — of himself with others, his flawed humanity with God — through all-embracing love, and this stands in stark contrast to Voss's power-driven relationships with others and whose response to the God-image is to identify himself with it.

On the particular bridge on which the pair stand, however, "Circumstance ... joining them, whether comfortably or not" (*V*: 46), White introduces a startling reformulation of earlier images:

> They were looking down, but without observing what it was that lay beneath them. (It was, in fact, a mess of dead water-lily leaves.)
> ...
> "Look," said Palfreyman, pointing at a species of diaphanous fly that had alighted on the rail of the bridge.
>
> It appeared that he was fascinated by the insect, glittering in its life with all the colours of decomposition.... (*V*: 46-7)

The conjunction of the dead water-lilies and the fly which is so absorbing to Palfreyman produces a configuration of images which inverts precisely the object of Voss's fascination, the fly-catching lily. The lilies under the botanic garden bridge lie dead, and "messy", and on the rail the fly sits "glittering in its life" — contradicting the "neatness and cleanliness" of

Voss's lily which he admires for its ability to deal death to flies[13]. This is a key imagistic articulation of the opposition between Voss and Palfreyman and the impact of their perceptions of life on their attitudes toward death. As an agent of decay the fly's associations of disease and death — as explored in the first appearance of the image — make of it a kind of *memento mori* to Voss. His monolithic "Idea" (*V*: 44) is the grand abstraction designed to overcome death, like the lily which defends its purity by consuming other such "detestable pest[s]" (*V*: 14). This underlies Voss's contempt of humility, since it involves the open acknowledgement of mortality and dependence on others, and his arrogance on both these levels is really a measure of his anxiety. He convinces himself "He could dispense with flesh" (*V*: 34) and dismisses "the material world which his egoism had made him reject" (*V*: 36). The material world shows the co-existence of life with death, as represented encapsulatingly by Palfreyman's fly "glittering in its life with all the colours of decomposition" (*V*: 47). In this sense the ostensibly humble image of the fly shares the significance of the crucifixion, which shows the individual suspended between these opposites (while the imagery of decomposition and wings also attends Voss's distorted vision of Christ with "racked flesh [which] had begun to suppurate, the soul ... flapping down the ages" (*V*: 197-8)). Likewise, the creature has a "diaphanous" quality which, like other images of translucence in White's fiction, suggests the emergence of the spirit and hints at the possibility of transcendence.

As White — along with a host of mythological, religious and mystical systems — suggests, experience may only transcend the dualities inherent in temporal existence when

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[13]Harry performs ironically for Voss the same function as the lily, though less cleanly, killing flies on the window-sill of his room (*V*: 36). And when, on the day before the party's departure from Jildra, Thorndike brings a bundle of mail for Voss, it is doubly ironic that along with the letters and newspapers "a lady had contributed a fly-veil, made by her own hands" (*V*: 184).

one is balanced between them, rather than attempting to escape the one through the other as Voss attempts to do. Palfreyman acknowledges not only his divine nature but also his mortality, and in consequence has a more balanced and open perspective toward life, and can therefore only threaten "the Idea, its granite monolith untouched. Except by Palfreyman — was it?" (*V*: 44).

II

I have so far explored some of the novel's early images with the intention of showing how they articulate characters' spiritual states and preoccupations as well as their relationships to one another; and how these images begin to develop into key tropes. In the initial stages of the novel these figurative patterns go towards establishing the set of tensions already outlined, and the outward journey into the desert functions increasingly as a metaphor for the inward, redemptive journey through which these dualities are to be reconciled. With the expedition's departure, moreover, the novel is split into chapters alternately depicting Laura's world and the new landscapes Voss enters. As the tension of the garden-desert dichotomy increases, however, so the distinction between the two settings is simultaneously undermined. It is some of the ways in which Voss's development is shown against the background of these and other shifting contraries that will now be explored, focusing on the Rhine Towers and Jildra scenes as well as surrounding events.

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Taken together, the two stops at Rhine Towers and Jildra are the most striking example in *Voss* of a juxtaposition of opposites, often mirroring each other image for image. (Within the Rhine Towers sequence itself, of course, White contrasts the purgatorial resonances of Judd's place with the paradisiacal Sanderson farm. It is specifically the latter setting which figures in direct opposition to Jildra.) The two settings stand "at opposite ends of the spectrum along which human life is possible" (Bliss: 67). Rhine Towers is pervaded by a sense of clarity and wholeness which is inaccessible to Voss, and Jildra, in contrast, is evidence of spiritual and social alienation to which even he has not fallen victim. Before exploring these scenes in detail, however, I would like to consider the terms describing the expedition's departure from

Sydney, since they shed light on Voss and Laura's relationship and comment significantly on the nature of the journey being embarked upon.

Two patterns of imagery which feature prominently in the description of events leading to the departure of the *Osprey* from Sydney Harbour are those of death and dreaming. Through the persistent presence of the dream as a mode of experience in these scenes White suggests a larger, strangely logical pattern of events in which the assembled characters participate without fully comprehending their part in it. What is most pertinent, however, is the imagery of death, which is often symbolised by the journey, and this association emerges strongly in chapter 5, at times functioning alongside evocations of Christ, in whose role Voss occasionally ironically figures.[14] Mrs Thompson is moved to tears as Voss leaves Topp's house for the last time: "as on all such occasions, she was remembering the dead" (*V*: 93). And while the chapter opens with a sense of nostalgia and the observation that "Life was grown humane. No one would be crucified on such amiable trees as those pressed along the northern shore" (*V*: 93), we are soon arrested by the thought turning in Harry's mind: "Somewhere he had learnt that man's first duty is to suffer" (*V*: 95).

The depiction of Laura at the Circular Wharf invokes further images of death which expand on Mrs Thompson's attitude of mourning almost to the point of overkill: Laura sits a black mare (*V*: 101, 106), with the "stiff panels" of her "black habit ... boarding her up" (*V*: 101) as though in a coffin. A few pages on, she extends a black gloved hand (*V*: 109). And when Le Mesurier later recalls the event it is "the dark shadows under her eyes" (*V*: 285) that he remembers. Voss, however, his expedition finally beginning, is in high spirits and uncharacteristically affable, his face "a lesson in open hilarity" (*V*: 109).

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[14]Compare: "Some of those present were patting him on the back, just to touch him" (*V*: 110). And a second reference (*V*: 112) is made to the fact that Voss's father is a timber merchant.

Two points emerge from this incongruity. The first is that Voss of course misconceives the nature of the expedition at its outset. His lightheartedness at this point arises from his hubristic anticipation of apotheosis achieved by force of will. "Future is will" he tells Laura (*V*: 68), who fears that it is precisely his will which could destroy him, not merely by leading him to his death but by dehumanising him. Hence, as though to highlight Voss's folly the text is laden with background images foreboding death. These seem to centre overtly on Laura — and will be further elaborated on below — but other, separate and less explicit details are also significant. One is the name of the ship, which on closer examination emerges as another peculiarly apt sort of *memento mori* to Voss. *Osprey* is derived from *ossifrage*, meaning "bone-breaking", due to the bird's habit of dropping the bones of its prey from great heights in order to crack them open and feed on the marrow. White often uses imagery of bones to suggest in his characters a sense of inescapable mortality and impotence, and here this particular detail becomes an overarching comment on Voss's fate, namely that the expedition which he, at its beginning, conceives of as a steady spiritual ascent will only return him to the fact which he is trying to deny, namely his own mortality.

On the face of it, Voss is embarking on an expedition which will literally lead him to his own death, taking many of his companions to the same end, and Laura's and Mrs Thompson's reactions of course foreshadow this actual event. Despite this, however, the metaphorical significance of death — the submission to which is a prerequisite for change, transformation and renewal — suggests a spiritual impulse at work in the imagery, and redeems what might otherwise be merely a glorified suicide mission. However wrongheaded in his initial motivations for the expedition, it is Voss's recognition of the necessity for and possibility of authentic self-exploration which makes him a compelling character. Moreover, it is a sense of this possibility which he communicates to Laura who stands "env[ying] the

people who have the freedom to make journeys" (*V*: 106) and here embarks, metaphorically if not literally, on her own parallel journey into "the desert of *mortification* and reward" (*V*: 74; emphasis added).

It is out of this that the second point of significance of the juxtaposition of the contradictory attitudes and images emerges, namely that the journey is itself ambiguous, and is a kind of death. Death is one aspect of the journey which has a dual nature, on the one hand enacting the desire for becoming, and on the other implying loss and relinquishment in psychological and spiritual rather than simply material terms. Hence, in keeping with the enantiodromia, Voss's vision of apotheosis or limitless transcendence immediately invokes counter-images of mortality and human limitation (as emphasised by Laura). The process of becoming, the novel suggests, is inseparable from death. Voss will not escape the conflict of these opposites, however much he may identify solely with the transcendent, and beneath the ironic, mythologising characterisation through Mrs Thompson's and other eyes of Voss as a Christ-figure lies the truth that he too must endure the "mortification", "suffer" as Harry fears (*V*: 95), and "be crucified on such amiable trees" (*V*: 93). In a metaphorical sense Voss, as does Laura, goes to his own personal crucifixion where he will endure the agonising suspension between opposites, though he will not at this point admit the full humanity which, as White suggests, is theanthropic in nature, only one aspect transcendent, the other mortal.

This point and the concomitant inseparability of dying from becoming may not appear explicit in the surface depiction of the ship's departure, but is soon articulated through a strange but significant series of dreamlike images arising as Laura leaves the scene.

As the *Osprey* begins to move, Turner has a nightmare out of which he screams: "Mr Voss, you are killing us! Give me the knife, please. Ahhhhh! The butter! The butter! It is not my turn to die" (*V*: 119). The dream so disturbs Turner that when he later wakes from it he begins rummaging for a bone-handled knife which he flings overboard (*V*: 123).

Immediately after we read of Turner's nightmare, however, the chapter breaks[15] and shifts into a sequence describing Laura's journey back to Potts Point — through "a stink of stale fish" (*V*: 119) as though she were on board a ship herself — to her afternoon meal:

> [T]he dream persisted disturbingly. Laura Trevelyan, drawing back her lips to bite the slice of bread and honey, saw whole rows of sailors' blackened teeth gaping from a gunnel. The knife with which she slashed the butter, had a mottled, slippery handle, and could have been made from horse's hoof. (*V*: 119)

Parts of this paragraph and the description of Turner's nightmare are almost interchangeable. His request "Give me the knife, please" sounds very much like table talk and could as well be uttered by Laura at the Bonners' meal. The image of Laura "slashing" the butter would, on the other hand, be more in the character of Voss as Turner sees him in the dream, while the fact that *she* is "slashing" at butter echoes Turner's cry, "The butter! The butter!". On the face of it this suggests a convergence of the two worlds of Laura and Voss and creates the sense of Laura's undertaking a parallel journey almost involuntarily (it is "the dream" that "persisted"). Yet there are more specific points of significance.

The horse hoof invokes the equestrian trope and acts as a metonym of the journey, so that Laura's slashing at the butter with a horse-hoof-handled knife, and the knife being an image of death — Turner's knife is also *bone*-handled — again draws together the motifs of death and the journey. Hence Turner, at the moment when the ship begins to move, is dreaming of Voss and appealing to him to be spared the knife, since he senses unconsciously (as Laura too fears) that Voss is being driven by his monomania toward his own (and by implication his companions') death — with Turner's knife importantly prefiguring Voss's own which he gives to Jackie, and by which he himself will die. (Turner suspects later on

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[15]This is the first time a chapter is split in the novel, appropriately at this point since it follows Laura and Voss's physical separation. No sooner does the narrative split into a dual one, however, than this dichotomy begins to be challenged by images which cross the boundaries of their setting to surface in the other.

that he too, along with the other human members of the expedition party, is implicated in Voss's decision that "All sheep must be sacrificed" (*V*: 247), and after Voss destroys his dog, Gyp, in order to kill his too-human affection for the animal, Turner chillingly remarks: "in these here circumstances, we are all, every one of us, dogs" (*V*: 266).)

More concentrated metaphors emerge from these images, however. White exploits the homonymy of *butter* (a contraction of *butteris*), which also denotes "a farrier's tool for paring a horse's hoofs" (*Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. butteris*[1]). The tool, commonly used in the nineteenth century, was designed for trimming hoofs before shoeing, and is therefore particularly aptly invoked at the point where the expedition departs and the impulse toward becoming, or the "fiend of motion" embodied in equestrian imagery, has suddenly become dominant. Aside from Turner's fear that he has taken up with a madman, his cry "The butter!" also re-emphasises the symbolic association between death and the journey, so that, in the conflated language of the images, the hoof is the knife is death.

Added to this is the image Laura sees, of sailors' teeth "gaping from a gunnel". This is a kind of inverted mirror image of herself as she bares her own teeth in "drawing back her lips" to eat her sandwich, another signal that she too is embarking on her journey just as the crew of the *Osprey* have, while she gazes at a dreamlike figuration of herself disguised in imagery of the ship's departing crew.

Laura fears the consequences of Voss's hubris, and early on in their relationship, once she begins to perceive its magnitude, she expresses her concern in a peculiar blend of question and prediction when she says to him: "You are not going to allow your will to destroy you" (*V*: 69). Her deepening conviction that redemption is achieved through humility, that spiritual ascent paradoxically involves a descent (though her own formulation of this idea only appears later on), is also articulated in the up-down pattern of the osprey's taking bones to great heights in order to drop them to earth. The osprey image is therefore

not merely a punitive deflation of Voss's arrogance, but also emphasises the notion of a spiritual descent which is implied by the purely upward journey Voss anticipates. He himself ironically enacts this cycle at the Pringles' picnic, where his metaphysical speculations are punctuated with the image of him "thr[owing] up a little pebble, which had been changing colour in his hand, turning from pale lavender to purple [symbolically suggesting a transition to the state of sovereignty he desires], and *caught it before it reached the sun*" (*V*: 62; emphasis added). Moreover, an anticipation of the paradoxically identical ascent-descent figures also in peripheral depictions, as in the vignette of the crowd before the ship's departure: "Some were swearing at the dust, some had got drunk, and were in danger of being *taken up*. One individual in particular was *falling*-drunk" (*V*: 118; emphasis added). Clearly the stress on the descending, mortal element of a theanthropic concept of human nature is not only articulated through Laura's statements, and this point will continue to be explored in connection with imagery discussed below.

A final point to be made about the departure of the expedition relates to the brief, mostly paraverbal interchange between Laura and Palfreyman. She addresses him in the midst of the crowd at the Wharf in "a dream" which momentarily unites their consciousnesses: "Ah, Laura was crying out ... you are my only friend, and I cannot reach you" (*V*: 109). This moment has been interpreted, given the surrounding images of death, in David Tacey's archetypal reading as "the first indication that Laura is a destructive Siren figure", a "beckoning enchantress" bent on the annihilation of Palfreyman's, and by implication Voss's, spirit (76). If, however, the death imagery which seems to centre on her but also attends the ship's departure generally is seen, as I have argued it should be, as being a comment on the nature of the journey (upon which she embarks with a sense of trepidation that Voss shows no sign of), then her apparent desolation and her appeal to Palfreyman become comprehensible. Far from seeking Palfreyman's or Voss's destruction, she foresees

not only the physical dangers but particularly the spiritual trials of the expedition, and the greater part of her concern is instead *for* Voss who is determinedly unconscious of his own danger. She appeals, appropriately, to Palfreyman since, unlike the other members of the expedition at this point, he shares her recognition of the necessity for humility and the subjugation of the will which Voss, dangerously, sees as his greatest asset (though Palfreyman only fully recognises the extent of Voss's arrogance much later, when confronted with his "greatest error" (*V*: 177)). This renunciatory, and fundamentally affirmative rather than destructive, course is the one which she from this point attempts to follow herself and, even in her separation from him, continues to suggest to Voss on his journey into the desert.

Before Voss enters the desert, however, his two stops at Rhine Towers and Jildra together form a significant prelude to the journey proper, and I will now explore some of the key elements of these two settings both in terms of their separate functions and in the way they relate to one another.

Rhine Towers

The depiction of the party's arrival at Rhine Towers and characters' responses to the place and those who inhabit it — especially, at first, to Mrs Sanderson — is revealing of particularly Voss's psychological and spiritual stance, the more so because from his reaction to this particular setting one could gauge his response to Eden, imagery suggestive of which often occupies the background. Within the Rhine Towers sequence, Judd's place is contrasted with the Sanderson farm through its persistent images of guilt and purgatorial torment, and the ways in which Voss's visit to the emancipist's dwelling reflects his spirituality will also be explored.

David Tacey's interpretation of this stage of Voss's journey, in particular of the events occurring at the Sanderson farm, suggests, in a similar vein to his reading of Laura at the

expedition's departure, that the Sandersons' farm is a place of profound spiritual danger for Voss. This view requires some response and, while this necessitates the exploration of some points of detail, my aim is not to be confined to a point for point critique of Tacey's argument but to illustrate a different assessment based on key images and events occurring at this stage in the novel.

Tacey suggests that Mrs Sanderson represents another variation on the archetypal Mother Goddess in her dark aspect, by whom White's protagonists are typically drawn into a state of psychic dissolution disguised by the author as revelatory or transcendent experience. Hence, she is "a powerful, materialistic mother figure" who presides over the maternal realm of Rhine Towers, and it is because Voss "feel[s] trapped and ensnared by her materialism" that he

> rejects their offer to sleep inside her house ... much to the amazement of Mr Sanderson, their kindly host. Le Mesurier sees the woman as an evil force: 'the serpent has slid even into this paradise, Frank Le Mesurier realized, and sighed'. As soon as Mrs Sanderson insists that the men must sleep inside her house ... Palfreyman collapses in his saddle, and falls to the ground. The *puer* has been overcome by the Mother's power. Palfreyman is carried unconscious into the house, and Voss and his party sleep in the imprisoning matrix after all. Their external protest is pointless, because they are bound, psychologically and mythically, to the destructive power of the maternal realm. (Tacey: 77)

A close reading of the text and its images does not support these conclusions. Voss's private motivation for rejecting the Sandersons' offer is self-flagellatory, an act of "mortification" (*V*: 129) intended as a punishment for his delight at the sight of "the ultimate stronghold of beauty" (*V*: 128): "He had been wrong to surrender to sensuous delights, and must now suffer accordingly" (*V*: 129). The temptation to "sensuous delights" — which should be viewed against Voss's discomfort in the material world in general — testifies to the power of the Edenic landscape, but this in itself does not suggest, simply, an engulfing maternal power against which Voss must defend himself. Coupled with this is the irony of the statement, suggesting that Voss's martyrdom is not to be taken seriously. That he is wary of the

Sandersons' desire to make the party "comfortable" (*V*: 129) is, moreover, typical of his insistence on his own independence, pushed to the point of insularity, underlying a system of belief in keeping with which he habitually chooses to "refuse what he would have liked to accept" (*V*: 13).

Mrs Sanderson acts as a kind of touchstone at this point. She is not a foiled enchantress, but in her innocence is "bewildered" (*V*: 129) by Voss's refusal, and his consciousness is not centred on her, he being instead absorbed in the masochistic pleasure brought on by his act of self-denial: "Voss's jaws were straining under the hurt he had done to the others, and, more exquisitely, to himself" (*V*: 129).

Le Mesurier, too, grasps the true meaning of these events. He is grouped among the "more enlightened" onlookers, not one of those "to whom such mortification remained a mystery" (*V*: 129). Consequently he sees Voss — not Mrs Sanderson, as Tacey assumes — as "The serpent ... slid even into this paradise" (*V*: 129). Mrs Sanderson is one of White's many female intuitives[16] and her estimation of the German, expressed the same evening to her husband, reflects an immediate and encapsulating understanding of him. "I fear he may be ill", she says in one of the novel's most compassionate statements about Voss, "One can feel it. I wish it were possible to heal him" (*V*: 139). Her husband's reply, reiterating Voss's reasons for refusing their accommodation, points directly to the nature of his "illness", which, while manifesting here on the social level, is really a spiritual one: "Rocks will not gash him deeper, nor sun cauterize more searingly than human kindness" (*V*: 139). The desert imagery is appropriate, showing that those elements against which Voss would test himself are less threatening to him than the prospect of shared humanity, with which Laura will increasingly

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[16]Like Amy Parker, Mary Hare, Elizabeth Hunter and Alex Gray, for example, who "know" without being able to articulate rational arguments to support their perceptions.

present him. The desert brings Voss, in words he later uses against Palfreyman, "hazards, certainly, but of a most impersonal kind" (*V*: 264).

Le Mesurier, whose acute sensitivity to the undercurrents in human intercourse is evidenced at least in his poetry, responds to Rhine Towers as a place of healing. He takes to the Sanderson children "with no trace of that cynicism with which he would protect himself from the omniscience of children" (*V*: 132), diverted from his habitual sense of purposelessness when "by some radiant discovery of a vocation [he] was helping their hostess carry sleeping children to their beds" (*V*: 137).[17] The care and trust implicit in this simple event points the way to healing, and Voss's resistance to the bed he himself is offered highlights his own moral affliction, in part demonstrating why he is somewhat out of place in a setting so evocative of paradise.

Palfreyman's fall from his horse — the other key event marking the party's arrival at the Sanderson estate — is also part of a meaningful figuration of images, in the context of which the idea that he is overcome with the fear of an archetypal maternal matrix embodied by Mrs Sanderson is misplaced. Three distinguishable elements come into play in the depiction of this event. Firstly, the scene creates an intriguing, diametrical opposition between Palfreyman and Voss. It employs, secondly, intra-textual back-references to Palfreyman's earlier "fall", and thirdly exploits the clear biblical resonances of the image.

While Palfreyman slips unconscious from his horse, Voss will not get down from his, being, as Sanderson notes, "in love with the saddle" (*V*: 129). Considered in relation to the equestrian trope, this suggests the opposition between Voss's obsession with overcoming distance and the absence of such an obsession in Palfreyman (attributed by Voss to a lack of

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[17]Compare an earlier description of his anxiety in the company of children: "[I]n addressing ... any young person ... Le Mesurier would compose his dark mouth with conscious irony. For protection. Young things read the thoughts more clearly...." (*V*: 36).

spiritual ambition and strength — or will). The antagonism this evokes in Voss is highlighted when his "explanations" of Palfreyman's infirmity "assumed the tone of threats" (*V*: 130). Yet while Voss will not dismount, and Palfreyman does so involuntarily, their reaction to Rhine Towers is similar. As the beauty of the landscape inspires an act of self-mortification in Voss so it does in the ornithologist who, as they approach the house, also feels he deserves punishment: "Palfreyman realized he had failed that day to pray to God, and must forfeit what progress he had made on the road where progress is perhaps illusory" (*V*: 128). While they respond alike, the difference in motivation of course arises from contrasting views of spiritual progress, the one demanding the maintenance of humility, the other of pride.

Palfreyman's fall at this point also echoes his earlier fall from a horse, the fact of which Voss soon reminds us (*V*: 130). Especially in the present context of "paradise" (*V*: 129), Palfreyman's fall significantly echoes the concept of the original Fall from grace, a concept which is frequently connected with him. (Of similar thematic import, for example, is his defenestration by his sister from an "upper window" (*V*: 262), recalling "the high room", the "upper rooms" (*V*: 30-1) and the "generous window" (*V*: 12) associated early on in the novel with divine presence and benevolence). Voss shares this fallen status in the sense of being metaphorically cast out of Eden but, for him, to countenance the fact would be to adopt the humility he abhors. In Palfreyman, however, there is a persistent, almost pathetic acknowledgement of the duality brought on by the Fall, the alienation of postlapsarian Adam and Eve who "knew that they were naked" and "hid themselves from the Lord God" (Gen. 3: 7-8). Palfreyman is threatened neither by the "fallen" status of which the event is metaphorical, nor his literal dependence on the Sandersons for the care and shelter they offer. For Voss, on the other hand, who claims superiority to both social and spiritual alienation, it is difficult to relinquish his only place of safety, the saddle.

In the light of the biblical associations of Palfreyman's fall, it is appropriate that the arboreal trope also resurfaces at this point. When Voss declines the offer of accommodation he does so by saying he had not intended "intruding under your roof-tree" (*V*: 129). He refers of course to the beam supporting the roof of the house, but given the related biblical and mythological tropes at work in the novel, the image takes on a deeper significance. Houses are often symbolically associated with the tree, both representing by turns the sheltering and entombing aspects of the maternal, and, as often occurs in mythology and White's fiction, here the two images coincide and the negative aspect of the symbol is constellated. The Sanderson household becomes connected with the sense of permanence which Voss found constricting as a boy and sought desperately to escape from. "It is not for me to build a solid house" (*V*: 131) he says to Sanderson, and aside from the ironic juxtaposition of the allusion to the parable of the man who built his house on sand and the desert sand Voss is making for, his fear of stasis and his obsession with motion figure strongly. Within this context, however, the specific image of the roof-tree evokes the trope of the tree-cross, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil which facilitates the Fall into duality, and the cross through which humankind is redeemed and opposites reconciled. On the allegorical level which White hints at, therefore, Voss's refusal to accept the shelter under the Sandersons' roof-tree figures as a rejection of atonement. Instead of expressing actual independence, his negation of a desire for reconciliation with God masks his fear of the possibility, later registering also in biblical arboreal imagery when it becomes evident that he had always been "mortally frightened, of the arms, or sticks, reaching down from the eternal tree, and tears of blood, and candlewax. Of the great legend [of Christ] becoming truth" (*V*: 390).

In contrast to the associations of duality and mortality of the biblical arboreal trope, the reconciling and redemptive aspects of the tree are also constellated on the evening of the party's arrival at Rhine Towers. Mrs Sanderson enters the house with "her own contribution

of light, and a *branch* of home-made candles" (*V*: 131; emphasis added). The obvious light symbolism in the context of "paradise" here evokes the Tree of Life rather than the Tree of Knowledge. Her husband pours wine "from our own grapes" (*V*: 131), with the detail figuring as an evocation of Christ as the vine. These two images point not only, through their biblical associations, to the possibility of redemption, but also embody the humility of the Sandersons' existence, and in so doing the psychological stability which is out of Voss's reach.

Set against the Sandersons' household and its pervasive compassion and benevolence is Judd's dwelling, which is depicted in imagery suggestive of life wrested from forces of punishment and torture, and Voss's visit to the place creates some significant juxtapositions. The initial meeting with Judd himself is what Voss had "dreaded most of all" (*V*: 133) and for this reason he "already suspected him as a man" (*V*: 135) before having sat down with him at the dinner table. In an often cited passage introducing Judd, he is "presented in imagery which evokes Christ crucified and resurrected" (Bliss: 70):

> He was, in fact, a union of strength and delicacy, like some gnarled trees that have been tortured and twisted by time and weather into exaggerated shapes, but of which the leaves still quiver at each change.... It was difficult to estimate his age, though he was not old. He was quietly, even well spoken. What he knew could have been considerable, though would not escape from him, one suspected, even if pincers were brought to bear. Not that he mistrusted men. Rather had the injustice and contempt he had experienced during a certain period sealed him up. Risen from the tomb of that dead life, he could not yet bring himself to recognize it as a miracle, and perhaps he would not, and perhaps it was not. (*V*: 133)

The characterisation is a remarkably favourable one, and the passage contains several significant elements. As a "union of strength and delicacy" he embodies the resolution of conflicts which Palfreyman, for example, finds difficult to enact in his own life, and is therefore an unusual figure in a novel in which so many figures are introduced in terms of emotional and spiritual conflict. Judd's strength and delicacy also contrasts him with Voss

who, typically when assuming postures of authority, is awkward and brutal. The emancipist survives like a tree "tortured and twisted", evoking the cross, itself an instrument of torture and humiliation, and a cosmic symbol of the union of opposites. He has undergone a metaphorical process of rebirth after the imprisonment which figures here as entombment and death. These associations are undercut, however, not only by the narrator but more persistently by Judd himself. "The convict had been tempered in hell and ... survived" (*V*: 137), and "his soul" does not easily inhabit "his body, from which it had been driven out by whips" (*V*: 203). He is, as the excerpt states, "sealed up". He "knows himself to be imprisoned within the mind and body that have enabled him to survive" yet discovers "no grounds from which to understand his own unique rightness" (Wood: 155, 157), so that he conceives of himself as a "common man" (*V*: 345) and is dubious of the relevance to his life of "the transfiguration of Christ" (*V*: 345).

When Voss visits Judd's dwelling, two complex and allusive sequences portray the trip there and the visit itself, in each case often drawing significantly on either arboreal or biblical images. Rich in associations with the mortification and resurrection Judd is presented (though not unambiguously) as having undergone, the landscape often reflects the purgatorial experiences which have formed his character, so that the images begin to bear analogies with the journey of mortification Laura anticipates. In a sense Voss's visit to Judd's place, viewed as a whole (and including his setting out) enacts, in microcosmic form, the redemptive journey itself, concluding with the arrival at the spring that seemed "the centre of the earth" (*V*: 149), typifying a state of original, Edenic unity which has the desirability of a final goal yet attains paradoxically the character of a starting point. Moreover, this setting is reached after a sequence of images depicting the conflicts of duality: guilt, punishment and humiliation. The Sandersons' homestead, with its Edenic associations and the clarity and lack of spiritual alienation of its inhabitants, posits a state of wholeness.

That this state of spiritual integrity is inaccessible to Voss is illustrated by his visit to Judd's place, showing him passing through a setting marked by images of duality towards the unity symbolised by the spring. Crudely stated, it is as though the minor journey through Judd's place to his spring maps the route back to Eden, as figured in the Sandersons' home, ironically the place Voss has just left, but could not inhabit fully, being instead the serpent in paradise. Here, Voss, having a different spiritual journey in mind, holds himself aloof to the redemptive cycle depicted in the setting he passes through, just as he is openly contemptuous (and secretly fearful) of Christ and the tree. These and related points are highlighted by the specific images at work in the depiction of his visit to Judd's place, to which I will now turn.

Voss sets out along a track so narrow Judd "must have trusted to providence and the instincts of his horse" on the evening he rode home from the Sandersons (*V*: 143), and, uncharacteristically, Voss also submits to motion without intellectual control or domination: "He no longer rode consciously, but was carried onward by sensation. He was touching the bark of those trees that were closest to him (they were, in fact, very close; he could see the gummy scabs on healed wounds, and ants faring through the fibre forests)" (*V*: 143). The wounded trees are here arboranthropomorphic in function, at once evocative of Christ's passion and hinting at the analogous suffering Judd has experienced. Significantly, however, the wounds are healed, and again the image is applicable both to Judd's having survived, and suggestive of the redemption attained on the cross.

As Voss proceeds, lulled by his song, the words of which are on a "mystical errand" in the silence of the bush, there is an abrupt change of tone, and the sense of intimacy in a landscape of healing trees is suddenly broken as the path "reached a razorback, bristling with burnt stumps, [and] wound suddenly, violently, through a crop of shiny, black rocks, and plunged down" (*V*: 143). The charred trees and the sharp descent — images of the "dead life" (*V*: 133) Judd has survived, which also hark back to the crucifixion and the tree as

overlapping symbols of the mortification preceding renewal — almost throw Voss from his horse. He continues, in a metaphorical descent into dark, hellish regions whose mythological precursors are wryly hinted at: "the country itself was legendary" (*V*: 143). The association between the journey and death is reiterated as diabolical goats "slit the scrub open" with their hoofs, "dashing down, down, down, deeper than all else" — "All was, indeed, headed downward" (*V*: 143). Even "Birds plunged songless through the leaves in heavy flight. Dark birds, mostly" (*V*: 143-4).[18]

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[18]A comparison between the description of Voss's descent to Judd's place and elements of *The Divine Comedy* yields interesting results. "When Satan fell from Heaven", writes Sayers in a textual note explaining the formation of Hell and Mount Purgatory,

> two things happened. (1) The dry land, which until then had occupied the Southern Hemisphere, fled in horror before him, and fetched up in the Northern Hemisphere; while the ocean poured in from all sides to fill the gap. (2) The inner bowels of the Earth, to avoid contact with him, rushed upwards towards the south, and there formed the island and mountain at the top of which was the Earthly Paradise, ready for the reception of Man, and which, after Hell's Harrowing became Mount Purgatory. This, according to Dante, is the only land in the Southern Hemisphere. The hollow thus left in the middle of the earth is the core of Hell, together with the space in which Dante and Virgil are now standing — the "tomb" of Satan. From this a winding passage leads up to the surface of the Antipodes. By this passage the river Lethe descends, and up it the poets now make their way. (Sayers, 1949: 291)

Voss, in the Southern Hemisphere where Dante situates Mount Purgatory, and who is characterised on the party's arrival at the paradisal Rhine Towers as the serpent in Eden, goes to visit the ex-convict Judd, who has metaphorically "risen from the tomb". The path Voss takes is initially flanked by trees on which wounds are healing, but soon he is at the top of a steep-sided narrow ridge, around which the trees are blackened by fire and from where the path descends sharply, with the added accompaniment of diabolical images of birds and goats. Down Mount Purgatory flows Lethe, from which those ascending the mountain must drink in order to "destroy all memory of evil and the sin with it" (Sayers, 1955: 68). Conversely, Voss's path, "which could have been a shallow watercourse" (*V*: 143), is a sharp descent, and reaching the bottom, he inadvertently sings the name of God — "Yes. GOTT. He had *remembered*" (*V*: 144; emphasis added).

White's set of images is an uncannily close reversal of Dante's, as though to depict Voss's descent rather than ascent of Mount Purgatory. This would be entirely in keeping with Voss's ironic characterisation as Devil — assuming godhead through pride, thus attempting to reverse the order of creation — and only deepens the irony of his smug conclusion, on reaching the foot of the slope, that "Even the depths lead upward to that throne" (*V*: 144).

Voss is intoxicated by this atmosphere and after this series of ominous images his response seems ironically to cast him in the role of Lucifer. He is "jubilant as brass", and "sang his jubilation" which we discover is, out of perversity, "dedicated to God" (*V*: 144).

On the other hand Voss is also laughingly awakening to a paradox: "Even the depths lead upward to that throne, meandered his inspired thoughts" (*V*: 144), corresponding to the Heraclitean aphorism which the novel on several levels endorses: "The path up and down is one and the same" (quoted in Allen: 41). Both statements illustrate the unity of opposites, with White's figuration of images here being an illustration of the enantiodromia, in which — in keeping with the archetypal death-rebirth motif — spiritual descent evokes the opposite countermovement of ascension. Voss parodies this notion, however, and simply considers it as proof of godhead already attained: "It had become quite clear from the man's face that he accepted his own divinity" (*V*: 144). Perversely amused by his having recalled, even celebrated, the name of God — "Yes. GOTT. He had remembered. He had sung it" (*V*: 144) — he is able to commit himself to a notion of divinity only insofar as he envisages himself, blasphemously, occupying "that throne" (*V*: 144).

Voss himself comes under irony at just this point, however, remaining merely "the man" "accept[ing] his own divinity" though "equally convinced that all others must accept" (*V*: 144). "After he had submitted himself to further trial, and, if necessary, immolation" (*V*: 144), follows the qualification. This sentence — with the rare appearance in *Voss* of the word *immolation* (occurring, also rarely and significantly, in *The Tree of Man* in connection with Madeleine (*TM*: 167)) — again reintroduces the notion of sacrifice as a necessary prerequisite for spiritual transformation. What Voss anticipates is, however, a trial at the expense of his own humanity — "hazards ... of a most impersonal kind" (*V*: 264) — not the acceptance of human limitation Laura suggests. It is not surprising, therefore, that her image is invoked at this point to challenge his parody of divinity, "she who had wrestled with him in

the garden, trying to throw him by some Christian guile, or prayers offered" (*V*: 144). He responds with further mockery: "'*Jesus*,' murmured the man, making it sweet, soft, pitiful. Because ineffectual" (*V*: 144). However, Voss at this point merely caricatures the attitudes which he must finally accept, due to his mistrust and fear of those aspects of himself which he labels mere femininity, weakness, or the "dog-eyed love" (*V*: 267) of Laura. Yet one of the images accompanying his descent ironically affirms the power of what Voss would characterise as "ineffectual": "Birds plunged songless through the leaves in heavy flight.... It was strange that *such soft things* could explode the silence, but they did, most vehemently, by their mere passage through it" (*V*: 143-4; emphasis added).

Soon after his arrival at Judd's place biblical imagery intensifies, highlighting the paradoxical nature of transcendence through Christian images of sin and redemption. After meeting Judd's wife — at a house "that melted into the live trunks of the surrounding trees" (*V*: 145) — who unwittingly confirms the threat Judd poses to his authority on the expedition, Voss, walking with the emancipist, notices in the corner of a sheep-pen a contrivance which disturbs him:

> [T]here was something resembling a gallows, furnished with ropes and pulleys. It was one of those erections that will rise up against the sky on immense evenings, though the present occasion, with its lambs'-wool clouds and pink sun, was not of that scale.
>
> "What is that gibbet?" asked Voss to revive the conversation.
>
> "Gibbet?" flashed the man, very bloodshot.
>
> Then, when he had seen, he explained with his usual decent calm.
>
> "That is where we kill. You can string a sheep up there. Or a beast." (*V*: 148)

The "gibbet", while associated with the execution of criminals by hanging and therefore disquieting to the emancipist, is also suggestive of the cross, again pointing to the image of sacrificial death on the tree. Coupled with this is the image of the "lambs'-wool clouds" evoking Christ, "the crucifixion ... the Lamb of God, the 'sacrifice without blemish'" (Cooper: 94), while also referring back to Judd's arrival "spotted with [the] dry blood ... of

lambs" (*V*: 147). The cluster of images is at once suggestive of guilt and redemption, drawing on the one hand on the parallel with Judd's status as former convict, and through showing him stained with lambs'-blood (here also "bloodshot"), and on the other suggestive of redemption, attained by the "emancipated" Judd in a literal sense but also hinting at an analogous process of spiritual liberation. This process is of course the main connotation of the Christian symbol of the crucifixion looming in the background, in terms of which redemption, or transcendence, is achieved through suspension between the opposites of duality. Appropriately, therefore, imagery suggestive of Eden soon comes to the fore, since it is the Fall from the state of original unity which first brought on the experience of the opposites which the crucifixion is intended symbolically to reconcile.

Hence, when the passage shifts to the spring where Judd washes himself free of the blood in a symbolic act of renewal, the transition, broadly considered, from the time Voss sets off for Judd's place is striking. Voss, half grasping the paradoxical interrelationship between pride and humility, or as he puts it, between descent and ascent, passes through a metaphorical landscape of agony and death in order to arrive at the original fountain of life, the spring where "Circles expanding on the precious water made it seem possible that this was the centre of the earth" (*V*: 149). The place has, along with the redemptive quality of a return to Edenic innocence, all the associations of timelessness and unity appropriate to the concept of the *omphalos*, the world centre or navel of the earth. Judd washes off the lambs'-blood "with dreamy soap" (*V*: 148) and the act has overtones of absolution and baptism. The "dream" (*V*: 149) becomes the dominant mode of reality, emphasised by a sense of timelessness reinforced by Mrs Judd's earlier description of a broken clock: "[T]he clock is broke now for good. It was no fault of his. Something essential, he says, is missing" (*V*: 146). In characteristic Whitean fashion, however, the sense of primal unity and eternity — essentially an absence of conflict, or opposites — is barely realised when the dream is

broken by Voss's quietly goading question which returns them to the world of polarity: "Then you wish to leave all this ... for the possibility of nothing?" (*V*: 149). In so doing the German, despite his malicious intentions towards Judd, highlights the central tension of this novel (and of *The Tree of Man*) between rest and motion, garden and desert, concepts and images which ultimately enact the overarching tension between unity and duality and are never entirely divorced from one another, appearing only less or more prominent as their balance shifts or the perspectives of characters changes. Unlike Voss who seeks to possess the country as he explores it, Judd knows that ultimately he does not own the spring, or the body which has survived thus far: "It is not mine.... And when they would take the cat to me, I would know that these bones were not mine, neither. Oh, sir, I have nothing to lose, and everything to find" (*V*: 149). In Judd, too, a re-evaluation of the concept of permanence gives rise to the need for exploration, and Voss fails to acknowledge that Judd's motivation for embarking on the expedition arises from the same impulse towards becoming that is at work in his own life. That the whole metaphor of the journey is part of this shifting polarity is suggested by a passing remark made by Judd's wife, who sees him on a quest "to find an inland sea, or is it gold?" (*V*: 146). The notion of the journey into a desert leading to its opposite, a large body of water (probably referring to Lake Eyre), is another demonstration of the enantiodromic pattern in which the experience or pursuit of one extreme strengthens its contrary counterpart in much the same way as what Voss conceives of as his apotheosis ultimately leads to his being humbled and returned to human stature.

While the enantiodromic pattern is suggested in contrasting images within Rhine Towers through contrasts between the Sandersons' homestead and Judd's place, Rhine Towers and Jildra together form an overarching pair of opposites. Yet at times the depiction of the one place so closely echoes, or inverts, that of the other that the mirroring effect also begins to suggest their paradoxical unity.

Jildra

In Rhine Towers (excluding Judd's place of course) imagery of paradise is dominant, whereas Boyle's station figures more strongly as a metaphorical hell — "a kind of demonic parody of Rhine Towers" (Bliss: 66). Boyle, bearing a name which itself draws on associations with corruption and disease[19], is the embodiment of experience, at odds with the Edenic innocence associated with the Sandersons. As if to balance the previous entry into paradise, the party arrives at Jildra under a sky "blood red" (*V*: 166), a colour which soon becomes dominant, alternating with imagery of darkness to give the landscape its texture of infernality. The party's first sight of Boyle is of "this figure, who came through the red light" (*V*: 165). He, like his horse, "was of a reddish, chestnut colour, intensified by the evening sun" (*V*: 165), with the solar image subtly turned from its traditional associations of light and clarity and instead introducing nightfall. Additionally, we soon discover that Boyle is red-headed, a frequent warning in White's fiction[20] and a characteristic he passes on to the "red-haired boys" (*V*: 172) he has fathered negligently (providing another contrast with Rhine Towers where the care of children is emphasised). This colouring, which avoids being overstated only by being couched in so much other detail, continues to be developed in descriptions which follow, such as of the "accretion of red dust" which covers Boyle's skin, much like "the big, rude, red potatoes" which are harvested at Jildra, "with the fine red dust coating them" (*V*: 168).

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[19]Imagery of *boils* recurs later in the novel when Voss sneers at Palfreyman who "in his capacity of Jesus Christ, lances the boils" of Turner (*V*: 242) in a redemptive act which figures again in *A Fringe of Leaves* (186-9), where Austin Roxburgh cleans the boil of Spurgeon, another "human derelict" (*FL*: 186).

[20]This feature is given, for example, to the sinister Blue, Himmelfarb's torturer of *Riders in the Chariot*, and Don Prowse, the rapist farm manager of *The Twyborn Affair*.

This is coupled with evocations of chaos and darkness so that on the party's arrival "All was confused" before an "approaching unity of darkness" (*V*: 166). Unlike the benign, light-bearing Mrs Sanderson, Boyle, on his first night as host to the expedition party, "grumbled, and shouted, and went outside, causing the whole neighbourhood of grass and trees to rock in that same disturbed lanternlight" (*V*: 167).

Boyle's landscape soon gathers associations of secrecy and concealment: "Jildra, with its squalid pleasures of black flesh and acres of concealed wealth, was reduced to a panful of dust and stinking mud, in which Brendan Boyle himself had chosen to stick" (*V*: 175). In contrast, Sanderson's "mind could not conceive darkness" and as he leads the party to his house "They forded streams in which nothing was hidden. A truth of sunlight was dappling the innocent grass. In this light, he felt, all that is secret must be exposed" (*V*: 127). More is revealed of Voss's nature from the open, trusting perspective of particularly Mrs Sanderson than the suspicious and self-involved Boyle struggling to "read the faces of the German's men for some clue to their leader's nature and intentions" (*V*: 174). Consequently he projects his own inner situation onto what he sees, eager to discover "the German's crime" (*V*: 175) and speaking also partly for himself when he concludes that the men have "little existence of their own, unless it was a deeply buried one" (*V*: 174). This "crime" soon becomes literalised in Voss's somnambulant act of hiding a compass in Judd's pack, an act which fulfils other important functions which I will soon explore, but it is Boyle's fascination with guilt which has in him frustrated the development of a positive sense of self. For Boyle — "incapable of disliking for long anyone but himself" (*V*: 171) — self-exploration is a morbid pursuit, and he sees his inner life (and that of others) as at once "irresistible" and "repulsive" (*V*: 167).

Boyle clearly lacks the sense of trust and self-love which underlies the simple existence of the Sandersons (and puts even Le Mesurier at ease). His morbidity does,

however, give him some insights into Voss's motivations, as when he welcomes Voss mockingly "through the gate of human weaknesses" (*V*: 177).

The Sandersons and Boyle, and their respective landscapes, suggest two contrary states between which Voss passes, each reflecting the polarities at work in him. Rhine Towers, with its promise of paradise and its predominance of light, is inaccessible to him partly due to its resemblance to the other "solid house", that of his parents which so stifled him as a young man that he escaped to another hemisphere, but also because it demands the honesty and humility which he resists, because such a "lack of intellectual ostentation" (*V*: 126) would "destroy most effectually such foundations as some of us have" (*V*: 131). Jildra, on the other hand, evocative of Hell, represents through Boyle, living (in another clear contrast to the Sandersons) in his "skeleton shack" (*V*: 167), the life of the social and spiritual outcast whose growth is frustrated by a self-alienation which goes hand in hand with his preoccupation with guilt. Voss, whose obsession with godhead is a kind of compensation for a profound sense of inadequacy, could easily find himself in a similar position since, though he refuses to acknowledge his insecurity, he, too, is threatened by the morbidity and narcissism which is dominant in Boyle. It is partly because Voss finds this hidden aspect of himself echoed in the doubt-ridden Le Mesurier that he is attracted to him: "He knew this young man as he knew his own blacker thoughts" (*V*: 35). Laura, too, near the end of the novel points out the danger inherent in the path of self-exploration Voss's journey becomes a metaphor of, when she curbs the desire for "introspection, however great her longing for those delights of hell. The gaunt man, her husband, would not tempt her in" (*V*: 404). It is one of Voss's compelling traits that he, however excessive and wrongheaded in his approach, embarks on a spiritual quest of becoming and does not, finally, retreat into narcissism and the "slow rotting" (*V*: 175) of static being Boyle has opted for.

Apart from the general patterns of imagery so far commented on, there are particular sequences in the Jildra setting which illuminate other aspects of the novel and Voss's character. The first relates to the demoniacal side of Voss which appears as the dark obverse of his desire for apotheosis.

Palfreyman, unable to sleep on "one particularly white night", remembers a past sight of "a white eagle fluttering for a moment on the branch of a dead tree" (*V*: 176). His delight is appropriate to his vision of a bird symbolising Christ. The dead tree, functioning arboranthropomorphically, suggests mortality and is also again associated with the crucifixion, so that Palfreyman's vision is symbolic of the hope of transcendence. The image gathers darker undertones, however, as the hovering eagle begins to be described in terms reminiscent of Milton's Satan, "almost blotting out the sky with the span of its wings", with the at once bathetic and tragic detail of "the squeak of mice" undercutting the hyperbole of the image but also emphasising its sinister overtones (*V*: 177). Palfreyman is "almost freed" by "the sound of the strong feathers" with their suggestion of salvation through the symbolism of the transcendent flight of the soul, but this mood is destroyed when, ominously, "Voss rose" (*V*: 177). Continuing the contrasting pattern of light and dark, opening in Palfreyman's consciousness with the "white night" and the "white eagle" set against the "dead tree" and the sky that has been "blotted out", Voss is "striped by moonlight and darkness" (*V*: 177), and the ornithologist watches his exit from the room:

> Voss himself did not move. Rather he was moved by a dream, Palfreyman sensed. Through some trick of moonlight or uncertainty of behaviour, the head became detached for a second and appeared to have been fixed upon a beam of the wooden wall. The mouth and the eyes were visible. Palfreyman shivered. Ah, Christ is an evil dream, he feared, and all my life I have been deceived. After the bones of the naked Christ had been drawn through the foetid room, by sheets of moonlight, and out the doorway, the fully conscious witness continued to lie on his blanket, face to face with his own shortcomings and his greatest error. (*V*: 177)

The processes at work in the passage can be separated into two main strands of imagery, one commenting on Palfreyman's apprehension of the meaning of Christ, and the other concerning Voss's spirituality. White is intent on showing that while Voss is the object of the "evil dream" and is himself "moved by a dream", Palfreyman himself is "wakeful", "fully conscious" (*V*: 177) during his nightmarish vision. From this perspective, and initially oblivious to the dark undercurrents of an image which is to him a source of "tremendous joy" (*V*: 176), Palfreyman perceives at once the ambivalence of both Voss and Christ, images of whom are here overlaid. His error is that he will not be taken up, or "freed" from earthly existence as the eagle portends for him, neither through the leadership of Voss, whose character he has profoundly mistaken out of his "instinctive craving to believe that man is right" (*V*: 127), nor through an idealised concept of transcendence — all of which is brought home to him through the deathly, skeletal figure of the rising Voss and ambivalent Christ imagery. The image of Christ on the cross here turns into the evocation of a decapitated head on a beam, a picture of primitivity and death (associating itself with Boyle's parodic Black Mass[21]), and prominent here are "the bones of the naked Christ" (*V*: 177). The figuration crushes the hope of transcendence and negates the symbolism of the liberating eagle — which is, additionally, a solar symbol in conflict with the "Heavy moons [that] hung above Jildra" (*V*: 176), and the "sheets of moonlight" (*V*: 177) drawing Voss from Boyle's shack.

The significance of the sequence in relation particularly to Voss himself can be viewed separately. In the grip of the "dream" — the unconscious shaping force in his life and the source of his connection with Laura — Voss, putative rival of the sun, is directed by "a

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[21]Boyle's prediction of a "high old Mass ... with the skull of a blackfeller and his own blood, in Central Australia" (*V*: 168), together with the image of Voss's decapitated head here seeming to be fixed on a pole, is, along with other connections between *Voss* and *Heart of Darkness*, startlingly evocative of the "unspeakable rites" of Kurtz and the skulls decorating the fence-posts around his house.

golden moon, of placid, swollen belly" against which he stands as one of "the ugly, bronze, male moons, threateningly lopsided" (*V*: 176). On the one hand Voss is satirised along with the other sleepers, who are either "burying their faces in the pregnant moon-women, or shaking their bronze fists at any threat to their virility" (*V*: 176). Voss, with his contempt for femininity — leading to the "lopsidedness" of exaggerated masculinity — and his aspiration to divinity — "the terrible Sun that he is imitating" (*V*: 371) — is depicted ironically as headless. The moon is "golden" (*V*: 176), while he (presumably one of the men who shake their bronze fists impotently) is returned to his room with his skin covered in "a greenish verdigris" (*V*: 177), the patina forming on corroded bronze.

Despite the challenge to Voss's virility and his apprehension of femininity as threatening, however, these images again do not point simply to a victory of a dark archetypal mother over consciousness. The imagery is too subtly nuanced for this, and here it is particularly his exaggeratedly masculine contempt for femininity that is mocked through the irony of his subservience to it in his sleep. These symbols have a positive significance, since alongside the imagery of "swollen" moons and "pregnant moon-women" (*V*: 176), Voss's exit from the room is portrayed as a kind of birth, an unconscious process significantly preceding his honest acknowledgement of his attachment to Laura the following day, when he secretly decides to delay the expedition's departure until the arrival of a letter from her and "realized he was staking all. Thus, he could blame no one for his own human weakness" (*V*: 178-9).

When Voss sleepwalks from the room it is of course to commit a specific "crime" (*V*: 175) which Boyle is able to connect with the German, namely the planting of the compass in Judd's pack. The act conceals a fact of deeper significance, however, and one which marks the evening as the point from which Voss begins to accept Laura's role as tutelary spirit.

The connection is made clear by the description of the compass as "a pale moonstone" which, after being polished by "rags of cloud" becomes the "delicate glass instrument, on which the needle barely fluttered, indicating the direction that some starry destiny must take" (*V*: 176). A "starry destiny" — recalling Judd's telescope which is too weak to enable him to see the stars, and ironically placed since it is into Judd's pack that Voss will put the compass — is also, of course, the hope of Voss, who "lay looking at the stars on the other side of that cage of bones" (*V*: 168). Laura becomes the guiding "fluttering needle" of the moonstone-compass, stating in a letter to Voss: "moonstone, I think, would be my stone" (*V*: 238). Encapsulating the significance of this configuration of images is the biblical notion, to which White may be alluding, that "A woman shall compass a man" (Jer. 31: 22). Jung (*CW*, 11: 92), relates this verse to the "fundamental image of the male-female opposites united in the centre" (itself connected with the concept of hermaphroditism, which features in the imagery surrounding Voss's death, and will be discussed at a relevant point).

This recalls White's characterisation of Laura as Voss's "anima" (*FG*: 103), or as Voss himself considers her, "the woman who was locked inside him permanently" (*V*: 275). Indeed, if Laura is to be considered as an anima figure, that is, a guiding personification of a sensibility which is an aspect of Voss's unconscious (insofar as it must compensate for his conscious desire for power and his exaltation of the will) then the psychological and spiritual significance of their relationship becomes clear. Laura, through her ability to understand the intellectualised self-image in which Voss has cast himself, and therefore to fully recognise him, makes an equal relationship with a woman possible for Voss, and in so doing facilitates the integration of the femininity he so abhors.

To be sceptical, as some commentators have been, of the relationship between Laura and Voss because it seems to demand a belief in something akin to ESP is to approach the novel with a literalism which would in effect make nonsense of the body of White's work, let

alone any other fiction which relies as heavily on figurative language. The question of whether one should accept a long-distance relationship with a slender basis in reality becomes irrelevant when one acknowledges that Laura is at once the young woman whom Voss encounters in the world of daylight reality, whom he in any case initially misjudges, and the tutelary spirit she comes, metaphorically, to represent — an anima-figure activated by the actual character of Laura Trevelyan. Voss, it should be noted, typically has access to her when his consciousness shifts into a state of dreaming, whether waking or in sleep, and White preempts the demand for fact and reason in the matter of their relationship in a brief episode preceding the departure of the *Osprey* from Sydney Harbour. There the sailor, Dick, making a confession to Palfreyman about a possible indiscretion with his friend's wife, and unable to remember whether the event actually took place or whether he had "dreamed a dream", since the woman concerned "made no sign" after the evening in question, wonders: "What was he to believe?" (*V*: 97). Palfreyman replies that "If it happened in a dream that was not distinguishable from the life, it is still a matter for your conscience.... You wished to live what you dreamed" (*V*: 97). The salient point is that what is "dreamed" in *Voss* is nevertheless experienced, and it is often through this mode of consciousness and the concomitant language of images and symbols that White conveys meanings which are neither "distinguishable from life" nor susceptible to direct representation. This must necessarily be taken into account when considering the relationship between Laura and Voss, which it is difficult to imagine being as productive were they to travel their respective spiritual journeys side by side, in the flesh. Their physical separation paradoxically allows them greater intimacy — as Voss writes to her: "You see that separation has brought us far, far closer" (*V*: 216) — and facilitates the resolution of the conflicting aspects of their personalities so painstakingly portrayed in the sequences of images describing their first encounter.

Likewise the two settings of Rhine Towers and Jildra, through which Voss and his party must pass, represent two opposite spiritual states which are nevertheless so closely mirrored that the one is constantly reflecting the other. Both of these disparate worlds function paradoxically together as elements of a unity White attempts to convey a sense of. This point emerges in a crucial image coinciding with the party's arrival at Jildra, which is both a poetic description of the enantiodromian play of opposites and a reaffirmation of the light entering the "generous window" (*V*: 12) between Laura and Voss on their first meeting: "Trees, too, were but illusory substance, for they would quickly turn to shadow, which is another shape of the ever-protean light" (*V*: 172).

III

Having explored some of the key sequences and images of the novel's opening, and thereafter a few of the most pertinent ones associated with Rhine Towers and Jildra, the two contradictory but interrelated settings in which the key tropes could be regarded as being regrouped and further developed in preparation for the beginning of the expedition proper, I will now explore some features of the journey from this point onwards to its culmination. It should be noted, however, that much of the substance of the arduous journey which is finally undertaken by the members of the party must be omitted from my discussion, the focus of which will be necessarily confined to a few key images and episodes along the way. Likewise, Laura's parallel psychological journey in Potts Point could bear extensive analysis but will be given only brief consideration, and is elsewhere referred to mainly insofar as it complements Voss's. Among the crucial events on the journey are the deaths of many of the characters, and some of these will be examined in terms of how they reflect images and spiritual experiences which ultimately form components of the imagery and spiritual questions surrounding the death of Voss. This climactic event in the narrative represents a core (if an intangible, elusive one) around which many of the novel's key tropes turn. Apart from the various subsidiary motifs which will be touched on where possible, key images such as the tree, the crucifixion and the Rainbow Serpent will be isolated for discussion. These, along with the cosmic images which begin to be figured more intensely as Voss nears his death, will be examined in terms of how they posit, and suggest a reconciliation of, overarching contraries, as well as seeming to enact the resolution of spiritual conflicts within Voss and other characters (as is often discernible in developments on the minor patterns of imagery which will continue to be dealt with).

***

Voss's megalomania, which manifests in his vision of total social, emotional and spiritual independence, and his conception of transcendence which rests on a denial of earthboundness and mortality, are challenged from early on in the novel. This is typically achieved through White's manipulation of images, as has been demonstrated in the first and second parts of this chapter, as well as through the direct or implied contradiction of Voss's attitudes by other characters, most notably Laura and (most recently) Judd. With the arrival of the novel's Aboriginal characters, previously established patterns of imagery begin, as they change with the introduction of the guides Jackie and Dugald, to take on significances which increasingly challenge Voss's distorted spiritual outlook. One of the first instances of this is discernible in the fire imagery which is so ubiquitous in Jildra. While the constant references to the redness of the place (and of Boyle and the children he carelessly fathers) have so far suggested degeneration and debasement in an infernal setting, the old man Dugald, in contrast, seems to have been refined by fire. Synechdochically invoking the arboreal trope, White describes him as though he "could have been a thinking stick on which the ash had cooled after purification by fire, so wooden was his old, scarified, cauterized body, with its cap of grey, brittle ash. Inside the eyes moved with some memory of myth or smoke" (*V*: 170). He wears a swallowtail coat, with the avian trope hinting at the possibility of transcendence, but this is immediately undercut by it being ironically qualified as "deficient in one tail" (*V*: 170). The coat becomes progressively more tattered along the journey, and when, after abandoning the party ostensibly to return to Jildra, Dugald meets up with another tribe of Aborigines it is so frayed that it falls from him after having one of the strips torn off it by a huntsman. The coat, like the impulse toward ascension, is "no longer essential" (*V*: 219), and Dugald remains "standing in his wrinkles and his bark-cloth" (*V*: 219) which is "the colour of nature" (*V*: 170).

These images represent a state of spiritual development which Voss has yet to achieve, and should not be mistaken for a clichéd or patronising representation of a "return to nature". It is precisely Voss's intention, grandly declared very early on in the novel, to "discard the inessential and attempt the infinite" (*V*: 35), that is fulfilled by Dugald in the simple act of discarding the "no longer essential" (*V*: 219) coat. The coat is artificial, much like Voss's cerebral notion of transcendence which rests on the "intellectual ostentation" (*V*: 126) Sanderson too has abandoned. It is the fact of mortality, and the implied acknowledgement of the body, which Voss seeks to evade through intellectualisation, while in Dugald this conflict is absent. He stands "in wrinkles", almost wearing his age, a manifestation of "nature" rather than at odds with it, while the remaining bark-cloth which clothes him functions as an arboranthropomorphic suggestion of the tree with its paradoxically simultaneous archetypal associations of death and life, duality and the transcendence of these dualities. Meanwhile "the German was the victim" of his "European, or even ... human inheritance" (*V*: 170).

Likewise, Voss labours under a concept of time (bound up with his notion of distance, of which he likewise seeks conquest) which Dugald is not enslaved by. When Dugald turns back from the expedition with letters in his charge and Voss issues his "generous command" to "not loiter, and waste time", "the old man could only laugh, because time did not exist" (*V*: 218). The German's sense of self-importance is deflated and we are left with an image of his impatient feet "exasperated in the stirrup-irons" (*V*: 218), while Dugald departs and encounters a group of Aboriginals moving northward, not in pursuit of a grandiose spiritual vision but because they hope to find, in accordance with seasonal changes and the requirements of the body, "wild life and a plentiful supply of yams" (*V*: 220). Moreover, "the present absorbed them utterly" (*V*: 220). This experience of timelessness is entered into

without seeking conquest of time, and without cultivating the "royal instrument" (*V*: 297) of the will.

Though White is not suggesting by these contrasts that Voss's salvation would lie in conversion to Australian Aboriginal views and ways of life, the details of the portrayal of Dugald — who never stops being an *old* man approaching his own death, and remains a character in his own right — point out Voss's limitations in the specific ways discussed. In this light the recent charge that "White's descriptions of rural Aborigines" in *Voss* and in his later novels "never wholly move past primitivism" (During: 30) requires reconsideration.

Despite his exploiting cultural divergences between Voss and Dugald to illustrate the German's predicament, White does not suggest their predicaments are incommensurable. Essentially the demands placed on them are identical, namely that they live in acknowledgement of mortality. The portrayal of the aged Dugald, moreover, is not without pathos. The acceptance of death as an attempt at the resolution of the problem of life in time is not a culture-specific concept, and this accounts for a fluidity in the juxtaposition of often contrasting images associated on the one hand with Voss and on the other with Dugald. In a similar vein, one of the significant aspects of this novel is the way in which Aboriginal mythological images and Christian ones are merged so that they provide, together with other intra-textual tropes, a unified cartography of symbols reflecting the inner states of the characters moving through the landscape.

One of the novel's key tropes which begins to gain renewed prominence at this point is the arboreal one, and Aboriginal and Christian tree symbolism begins to emerge in tandem. Once again, these arboreal images may have either biblical or mythological resonances, or function intra-textually. These three strands of imagery do not exclude one another, and particularly interesting is White's exploitation of the archetypal resonances shared by both the Aboriginal and Christian mythological images of the tree to suggest a symbolic unity between

the European and the Australian, and between the Western spiritual heritage of Voss and his companions and the spiritual possibilities hinted at in images arising from the Australian, ostensibly foreign landscape and its inhabitants.

The expedition party's celebration of Christmas is an early instance of the foregrounding of Christian tree symbolism and its pagan origins — archetypal imagery which is soon complemented by arboreal imagery associated with the Aborigines they encounter — as well as a useful illustration of Voss's attitudes towards some of the meanings carried by these images.

Voss hopes to avoid the celebration of Christmas because of its, to him simply abhorrent, Christian associations and he remains silent on the matter, until Judd raises the issue and he submits against his will. Sitting in "the shadow of a tree" as though in the shadow of the spiritual significance of the image, he complains tactlessly to the Christian Palfreyman:

> "Yet, to drag in the miserable fetish that this man [Judd] has insisted on! Of Jesus Christ!"
>
> The vision that rose before the German's eyes was, indeed, most horrible. The racked flesh had begun to suppurate, the soul had emerged, and gone flapping down the ages with slow, suffocating beat of wings. [With the image quickly undercut:]
>
> As the great hawk flew down the valley, Turner did take a shot at it, but missed. It was the glare he blamed. (*V*: 197-8)

It may need emphasising that Voss's vision is in fact of Christ's *transcendence.* The terms — also echoing the eagle of Palfreyman's vision in Jildra — in which Voss's horror of this event is registered are telling. Voss does not dismiss God or the idea of divinity — he is no atheist, as he makes clear in his admonishment of Laura for her scepticism (*V*: 88-9). His imagery instead betrays (as does his initial response to the fly-catching lily) his fear of death, and the vulnerability and corruptibility of the body. He seeks apotheosis, but recoils from the actual significance of the crucifixion. The prospect of a return to the body and in so doing to human

status as a prerequisite for spiritual renewal remains a source of terror, and he seeks refuge in characterising Christ as a "miserable fetish", and Christmas as a contemptible "pagan survival" (*V*: 198). Yet essentially the same anxiety has plagued him from early on in his life, motivating his abandonment of a medical career out of revulsion for "the palpitating bodies of men" (*V*: 13). There, as here, his apparent reaction was disgust, whereas the true conflict was hidden: a marked inability to reconcile himself spiritually and emotionally to his own human vulnerability as he could not avoid seeing it reflected in those he was called on to minister to.

Judd, preparing the Christmas feast, enacts the ritual sacrifice of "the lamb, or stained wether" (*V*: 198), and hangs its carcass on a tree. Apart from the clear resonances with the crucifixion, yoked here to the celebration of the nativity, this is also an elaboration of these images as they appeared in connection with Judd at the time of Voss's visit to his dwelling, where the German remarks on the gibbet on which Judd, stained with lambs'-blood, explains he hangs his slaughtered sheep (*V*: 148). In that sequence, the sense of alienation and duality symbolised by the crucifixion shifts into a suggestion of the possibility of unity in the image of Judd's spring, where "Circles expanding on the precious water made it seem possible that this was the centre of the earth" (*V*: 149). In the present scene the suggestion of a transition from duality to wholeness is equally evident, with the celebrants forming a circle of which "Judd was the centre" (*V*: 198), while Voss sits stubbornly outside of it and envisions Laura joining the men in a feast she "understood perfectly", a "simple, humble ... act of praise" (*V*: 199). To Voss, too, "perfection is always circular", but because "enclosed" (*V*: 198), and he remains painfully aware of his own exclusion despite his posture of aloofness. Moreover, that he sits under a tree, on this particular day wearing the crimson shirt he received as a "present" from Mr Bonner and almost cutting a kind of Santa Claus-figure against the "liquid

green" landscape in which Laura is "clothed" (*V*: 198), perhaps deepens the irony of his situation.

There occurs a remarkable shift in his attitude, however. Softening to the idea of the Christmas meal and "descend[ing] from his eminence" (*V*: 206), he begins to describe his own childhood Christmases, which always included a fir tree "smelling as such trees will when they bleed from fresh wounds" (*V*: 207). His description of the tree, in keeping with his abhorrence of the Christ-image, is another invocation of the crucifixion in its dark aspect, signifying death when the Christmas tree is a symbol of renewal, of "rebirth and immortality" (Cooper: 35). The association with him of the ambivalent aspect of the mythological tree symbol is emphasised when he is shortly afterwards himself wounded by the branch of a "dead tree" (*V*: 208). This, taken together with the typically negative character of arboreal imagery when juxtaposed with him, once again suggests his inability or unwillingness to accept the positive, reconciliatory spiritual possibilities which the tree symbol also suggests. Instead these images of redemption are, due to their equally implicit demand for the acknowledgement of mortality, for him an object of fear (as he himself later admits, and will be discussed in more detail below).

However, the Voss "who feared union" (*V*: 196) shows signs of relinquishing his guarded sense of independence when he allows Judd to bandage his head after its gashing by the tree-branch. He does remain defensive: "To surrender itself into the hands of another is one of the temptations of mortal flesh, the German knew, and shivered for an instant" (*V*: 208), but this concern becomes his chief preoccupation. "[T]he perpetual question ... grappled him as coldly as iron": whether he is "to renounce the crown of fire for the ring of gentle gold" (*V*: 213), that is whether he should exchange the desire for dominance for the possibility of union. Beginning to tend toward the latter, in a state less "self-possessed" (*V*: 215) than usual, he writes a letter to Laura proposing marriage, though still concerned to

"ascend" and unable to "kill myself quite off", but offering "my love, since distance has united us thus closely" (*V*: 217).

Shortly after Christmas, Aboriginal arboreal imagery is foregrounded when the expedition party crosses paths with the members of a tribe in search of the fruits of the bunya bunya tree. The Aborigines' quest for the bunya pine is presented as a purely practical matter, since they go to it for its edible nuts, but to the members of Voss's party the image takes on spiritual associations. For Le Mesurier "those dark trees promised paradise", and the other men feel "the fruit of the mystic bunya bunya contract[ing] in their mouths" (*V*: 210). (The association between the bunya bunya and divinity also arises from White's childhood, during which he believed God lived in the bunya pine that stood in the driveway of his childhood home (*FG*: 70).) Australian trees, with these mystical associations initially projected onto the bunya bunya by the Europeans with their Christian heritage, nevertheless begin to function as archetypal symbols of transcendence as they do in Christian iconography when the party comes upon trees with platforms built into them. From the young guide, Jackie's, explanations

> it was gathered that his people laid their dead on such platforms, and would leave them there for their spirits to depart.
>
> "All go," said the blackfellow. "All."
>
> As he placed his hands together, in the shape of a pointed seed, against his own breast, and opened them skyward with a great whooshing of explanation, so that the silky, white soul did actually escape, and lose itself in the whirling circles of the blue sky, his smile was radiant. (*V*: 243)

Harry Robarts sees the soul as a "white bird" (*V*: 244) released from Jackie's hands, yet the imagery of ascension is quickly qualified by the perspective of "the thick Judd, whose own soul had achieved fulfilment not by escaping from his body, but by returning to it, [and who] preferred to interpret the aboriginal illusion in terms of life" (*V*: 243) (and later Jackie explains that the spirits of the departed do not leave the earth but penetrate the landscape to inhabit "rock ... tree.... They everywhere" (*V*: 275)). Characteristically preferring to deal

with concrete values, Judd is "himself an element" (*V*: 243), "the veins in the back of his broad hand like the branches of a tree" (*V*: 420) as Jackie later recalls. He cannot, however, escape the fact that his actions take on symbolic overtones, as when the gum he pulls from a tree trunk as a simple "present" (*V*: 245) for Harry becomes, when he too chews a piece, "an act of communion, reminiscent of the sacrament" (Taylor: 38). When Harry finally rejects the "knot of gum" (*V*: 245), fearing betrayal of his allegiance to Voss, he reaffirms his faith in his leader in a return to the image of the tree: "I will stick closer than anyone, in the end.... I will sit under the platform. I will learn languages" (*V*: 246).

Arboreal imagery in some form is ubiquitous along the rest of the journey, performing a variety of functions dependent on context. This consideration of some of the key appearances of the tree in the earlier stages of the journey, where it mediates between characters and the hope — or, on another level, Voss's dread — of transcendent experience, while also merging the meanings conferred on it by Aboriginal and Christian mythology, must suffice until a later point when the trope recurs significantly and will be further explored.

The other image which becomes a major one on the journey is that of the Aboriginal Rainbow Serpent, which will now be considered together with its relation to Le Mesurier, who is most closely associated with it.

Jackie identifies a cave painting of the Snake as "Father my father, all blackfeller" (*V*: 274). Colleen Taylor provides a useful discussion of the relation of the mythological figure to *Voss*. While she focuses particularly on alchemical parallels and demonstrates interesting connections in this regard to the character and writings of Le Mesurier — a significant topic of enquiry which is beyond the scope of this investigation — her initial remarks on the subject provide background which is useful here:

> [T]he Rainbow Serpent [is] possibly the most significant figure in the Aboriginal pantheon. Known variously as "the great Mother" and "the Father of us all", or simply the "Great Snake", the Rainbow Serpent has existed since the beginning of the world and is associated with creation and procreation.... [T]here are suggestions [Taylor later quotes Kenneth Maddock on this point] that this mythological figure is bisexual and thus represents an impulse towards a philosophic resolution of opposites. [I]t is the giver of life ... [and] also the Destroyer. (Taylor: 49)

In Aboriginal myth "the Great Snake always arrives 'from the sea'" (Cowan: 31) to create the landscape, and it is in this form that its image is first suggested in *Voss*, when Laura on the beach at the Pringles' picnic "trac[es] with her toe the long, ribbony track of some sea-worm, as if it had been important" (*V*: 62), almost suggesting the incipient "creation" of Australia. More significant and susceptible to interpretation than this suggestive detail, however, is the response the snake provokes in the psyche of Le Mesurier after he sees it in the cave painting. In a state of heightened spiritual activity brought on by his physical debility, it becomes an overriding image in his engagement with "the principle of creation and destruction" (Green: 301), registering initially in a dream:

> [He] was wrestling with the great snake, his King, the divine powers of which were not disguised by the earth-colours of its scales. Friction of days had worn its fangs to a yellow-grey, but it would arch itself like a rainbow out of the mud of tribulation. At one point during his struggles, the sick man, or visionary, kissed the slime of the beast's mouth, and at once spat out a shower of diamonds. (*V*: 281)

Both the character of the snake and Le Mesurier's encounter with it are highly paradoxical. It is portrayed in images which shift enantiodromically into their antitheses: slime produces diamonds; its body, immersed in mud, is deftly transformed into the intangibility of an over-arching rainbow; and (here again demonstrating a recurrent point in the novel) it is divine but inseparable from the earth. There exist also correspondences to the uroboros, the universal mythological image which is also one of the oldest.[22] (It appears too in the Revelation of St

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[22]This image is also discussed in chapter 1, part III.

John (see Neumann, 1954: 10), to which Palfreyman's uncle is working on a key (*V*: 263)).

Neumann provides a useful description:

> [It is] the circular snake, the primal dragon of the beginning that bites its own tail, the self-begetting.... It slays, weds and impregnates itself. It is man and woman, begetting and conceiving, devouring and giving birth, active and passive, above and below, at once. (Neumann, 1954: 10)

The qualification "at once" is crucial, and helps emphasise the simultaneity of the antitheses inherent in the mercurial figure of Le Mesurier's snake, which is a personification of the idea he subsequently expresses when he asserts that "Dying is creation" (*V*: 361). Jung's elaboration on the significance of the archetypal serpent — to which there are correspondences in the Christian symbolism of communion (Edinger: 72) — is of further relevance:

> In the age-old image of the uroboros lies the thought of devouring oneself and turning oneself into a circulatory process.... The uroboros is a dramatic symbol for the integration and assimilation of the opposite, i.e., of the shadow. This 'feed-back' process is at the same time a symbol of immortality.... He symbolises the One, who proceeds from the clash of opposites. (Jung, quoted in Edinger: 72-3)

The serpent and the tree-cross have an analogous function in *Voss* in that they both express the problem of opposites and suggest its resolution. Indeed, the notion of the concurrence of divinity and earthboundness is evident both in Le Mesurier's Snake and in his invocation (anticipating Laura's "three stages") of the Christ-image to express the theanthropic nature of humanity: "Then I am not God, but Man. I am God with a spear in his side" (*V*: 297).

Nevertheless, Le Mesurier is a perplexing character, mainly because of what Carolyn Bliss aptly calls "the conundrum of his suicide" (Bliss: 69). Bliss provides a useful overview of the difficulty and possible resolutions:

> The novel suggests that Le Mesurier slits his throat because Voss has resigned his claim to omniscience and omnipotence, but Le Mesurier had long foreseen this abdication and should not have despaired when it came. Three solutions to this riddle might be offered. [*1*] On the thematic level, Le Mesurier may represent a man who has reached the core of self, who has discarded every

> protection, dream and delusion, without being able to initiate the complementary movement of accretion and expansion. The mystic moment he experienced in the storm would thus be irrecoverable, and he would be bereft of the resources to do what Voss finally demands of him: to wring out hope for himself. Alternatively [*2*], the moment in the storm may represent a culmination beyond which Le Mesurier would neither hope nor wish to go. Subsequently, he might seek death as a release from a life so inadequate to his vision. Either of these explanations has psychological validity and thematic resonances. But [*3*] a structural imperative may also dictate that Le Mesurier disappear at this point in the novel. For, as Voss approaches his own death, he must incorporate the several selves which previously have been encountered in the expedition members. Thus Le Mesurier as a separate self must vanish. To this end Voss is also deprived of Harry Robarts. (Bliss: 69)

The third explanation, given elements of the first and second, seems fitting, and is corroborated by aspects of the narrative structure which will be discussed below in connection with Voss's death. An interpretation which falls outside of this framework is offered by David Tacey, who argues that Le Mesurier's suicide under a tree is "a classic image of the self-mutilating *puer aeternus*", comparable with the Phrygian god Attis's self-castration under a pine, "carr[ying] out to the letter the archaic celebration of the Earth Goddess" (Tacey: 85). This is suggested as being in keeping with the poet's "madness" (Tacey: 82) and the "death romanticism" (Tacey: 71) Tacey proposes is the driving force for the expedition. There is, however, room for disagreement here, and a response is necessary at this point.

Firstly, to diagnose Le Mesurier as being simply "mad" is to employ an objectification Voss resorts to in response to those of Le Mesurier's utterances he finds threatening (as during his clandestine reading of the latter's poems: "These are the poems of a maniac, [Voss] protested rather primly, to protect himself" (*V*: 294)). Though a challenging character and decidedly straying from the norm, Le Mesurier is an ultimately coherent figure and his preoccupations comprehensible, as is the meaning of his highly intuitive poetry when its images are considered in relation to larger tropes at work in the novel. As far as romanticising death is concerned, the most that can be said of him is that he sets out on the

expedition with a declared lack of purpose which, he suspects, "I shall not discover till I am at my last gasp" (*V*: 34). Foremost among Voss's purposes, moreover, as should be evident from foregoing discussion, is the evasion of mortality rather than the glorification of it.

That Le Mesurier chooses to commit suicide under the "skeleton of a tree" (*V*: 381) is not, of course, insignificant, but there is little evidence to suggest that he castrates or mutilates himself in obeisance to the dark archetypal Mother Goddess. Loose analogies to mythical situations do not automatically imply applicability, and textual detail which would support such a specific archetypal reading is markedly absent. Moreover, it is contradicted by the fact that Le Mesurier consistently addresses his "King", whether this be Voss or later the Great Snake, and not a maternal principle, which does not feature significantly in his consciousness. In any case, Jung emphasises the fact that "Like any other archetype, the mother archetype appears under an almost infinite variety of aspects" (*CW*, 9i: 81) and underscores the point that archetypal tree symbolism typically shows "*The dead ... delivered back to the mother for rebirth*" (*CW*, 5: 233). As has been noted in the discussion of *The Tree of Man*, Tacey's arguments exclude this possibility and concentrate on the dark aspect of the mother archetype as a purely destructive force, to the detriment of his archetypal reading.

Those archetypal resonances which are manifest in the context of Le Mesurier's suicide do provide some, though limited, insight into his action. That he kills himself under a tree suggests an association with the tree-cross, the transcendent connotations of which are evident in his poem *Childhood* ("It is not known that we shall rise above the trees on any afternoon" (*V*: 295)). This, however, is as much a biblical image as it is a universal, archetypal one. In his poem *Conclusion*, more significantly, he declares — again suggesting analogies with the crucifixion — "Humility is my brigalow, that I must remember: here I shall find a thin shade in which to sit" (*V*: 296). In contrast to Voss, however, Le Mesurier expects neither transcendence nor apotheosis, but damnation. "[I]f suffering is measured on

the soul", he writes, "then I am damned for ever" (*V*: 297), and when Voss later asks him shortly before his suicide what he has learned from him, his startling reply is: "To expect damnation" (*V*: 360). Though he gains visionary perception of the paradoxical unity of being and becoming, death and regeneration, and the divinity inherent in earthly forms, he remains essentially an outsider to his vision, and it is difficult to conceive of a mode of living which would be compatible for him with his perception. Anticipating his suicide, Le Mesurier's *Conclusion* ends with a prayer to "God" to "take my spirit out of this my body's remains, and after you have scattered it, grant that it shall be everywhere, and in the rocks, and in the empty waterholes, and in the true love of all men, and in you, O God, at last" (*V*: 297). It is a moving prayer for his own redemption, and expresses his hope, not of heavenly transcendence, but something akin to the transmigration of Aboriginal souls and inhabitation of the landscape which Jackie describes.

Perhaps White finally intends Le Mesurier to be viewed as an agent of "the illuminating function of creative activity" (Petersson: 254), whose thoughts are echoed at the very end of the novel by Willie Pringle, another artist figure: "The blowfly on its bed of offal is but a variation of the rainbow. Common forms are continually breaking into brilliant shapes. If we will explore them" (*V*: 297). This exploration is Le Mesurier's *raison d'être*, who, shortly before his death, dismisses Harry's invitation to describe the "last dinner" of his choice, saying "I would not eat for fear that I might miss something of what was happening to me. I would want to feel the last fly crawling on my skin, and listen to my conscience in case it should give up a secret. Out of that experience I might even create something" (*V*: 361). Le Mesurier's suicide, his "last attempt at poetry" (*V*: 381), demonstrates his faith in his conviction that "Dying is creation. The body creates fresh forms, the soul inspires by its manner of leaving the body, and passes into other souls" (*V*: 361). His death does not provide closure, however, and perhaps the distinctive feature of this character is that, instead of being

able to direct his vision in accordance with some purpose, he is absorbed by it. White leaves him at the point when his spirit is "climb[ing] out into the immense fields of silence", his body "glugg[ing] and blubber[ing] a little longer before lying still" (*V*: 381).

Le Mesurier's death will be given further consideration in terms of how it forms part of the structure of the narrative around Voss's death, but another significant death scene, namely that of Palfreyman, precedes this event and is best examined at this point.

Palfreyman's death during his attempt, at Voss's behest, to interrogate a group of Aborigines over the question of some items which have "disappeared" (*V*: 340) from the party's tents, is portrayed with significant recourse to imagery of Christ and the crucifixion, but also draws on Aboriginal images. He is first speared in the side in the manner of Christ (Bliss: 72), but then also between the ribs, recalling the Aboriginal representation in the cave of a man with "a spear in his heart" (*V*: 280). Harry sees "the white bird depart out of the hole in Mr Palfreyman's side" (*V*: 344), a Christian symbol of the soul but also one which is associated with the tree-platforms encountered earlier in the journey, again merging the Aboriginal and Christian tropes. His death takes on overtly Christian overtones, with the "transfigured" Palfreyman showing "the palms of his hands" (*V*: 342), suggesting the stigmata, and his "toes turned in" (*V*: 343) after he is speared echoing Christ's nailed together on the cross. The association is emphasised when, shortly before his death, he reflects on his own spirituality in terms of a conflict of opposites reminiscent of the crucifixion: "There comes a moment when an individual who is too honest to take refuge in the old illusion of self-importance is suspended agonizingly between the flat sky and the flat earth" (*V*: 332). The divisive aspect of the cross, embodying the tension of opposites, is however replaced by his dying vision of "circles ... whirling already, the white circles in the blue" (*V*: 343) suggestive of resolution, as well as cyclic continuity. Nevertheless, any promise of imminent transcendence is quickly withdrawn: "his voice was bubbling. His blood was aching through

a hole which the flies had scented already" (*V*: 343). Imagery of flies, associated with mortality and also attending Palfreyman in his introduction to the novel where it embodies a "glittering" "decomposition" (*V*: 47), is soon complemented by imagery of wax also signifying mutability: "Death had turned him into wax" (*V*: 343). This remains anathema to Voss, who continues to distance himself from the flesh. At Palfreyman's burial he is "furious with the flies", and with "the Christ-picture. He could have shouted" (*V*: 344).

> Pious peasants wore their knees out worshipping similar effigies, Voss remembered with disgust. The face of Laura Trevelyan, herself amongst the candles, did reproach him for a moment during the orgy of mortality at which they were assisting, but he drove her off, together with the flies, and spoke very irritably, for flesh, like candles, is designed to melt. (*V*: 343-4)

Though Voss would deny this conflict in himself, the contraries symbolised by the cross are registered in broader terms in the chapter depicting Palfreyman's death. It opens "between flood and dry", "sky and water" (*V*: 333), and concludes with the party split in two, riding in "opposite directions" from "a small cairn of stones that marked the grave of Mr Palfreyman" (*V*: 348). At the point, before his death, when the party begins to be polarised into two groups, moreover, Palfreyman is pictured between the "two separate fires", sitting "at equal distance from the two.... He would most willingly have maintained a balance" (*V*: 281).

The deaths of Harry Robarts and Frank Le Mesurier also form key components in the structure of the developing enantiodromia. The two figures are contrasted down to the finest detail in the scenes introducing them, and though the initial antipathy between them has dissipated, the symmetrical opposition between these two characters endures. Frank's preoccupation with "the damnation of man" (*V*: 272), this being the "common doom" (*V*: 295) he and Voss are to share, offsets Harry's visions of the soul ascending like a white dove and whose own body is shown, after his death, "rising where it lay" (*V*: 389). Together Harry, with his "plump body" and Le Mesurier with his "dried one" form two contrasting figures between which Voss stands, just as Christ was crucified between two thieves, one

going to heaven and the other to hell. Voss is to reconcile these two contradictory selves in order to return to full humanity.

The portrayal of Harry's death, the last Voss sees before his own, also enacts a significant reversal of imagery. In the initial stages of his relationship with Voss he perpetuated the image of the fly-catching lily, killing flies on the German's windowsill. At his death, however, he has become a "stinking lily, or suspect saint" (*V*: 389), in a sense showing the cleanly, pest-disposing flower itself now decomposing. Voss, addressing the boy (without immediately realising that he is already dead) to ask how long they have been in the twig shelter the Aborigines put them in, finally begins to acknowledge the corruptibility of his own body and the futility of attempting to escape the fact through apotheosis or the conquest of distance:

> "Harry? *Wie lang sind wir schon hier?* How many days? We must catch the horses, or we will rot as we lie in this one place."
>
> As if to rot were avoidable. By moving. But it was not.
>
> "We rot by living," he sighed.
>
> Grace lay only in the varying speeds at which the process of decomposition took place, and the lovely colours of putrescence that some souls were allowed to wear. For, in the end, everything was of flesh, the soul elliptical in shape. (*V*: 388)

That "we rot by living" expresses essentially the same paradox as that which inheres in Le Mesurier's notion that "Dying is creation" (*V*: 361), in that through both these statements White questions the conventional and artificial division between life and death. It is the paradoxical unity of these conflicting forces which White suggests in the death scenes of key characters, all of which in some way anticipate or inform the death of Voss.

In the events preceding Voss's death, contraries continue to manifest in the surrounding imagery. When Voss, and Harry and Le Mesurier, the other members of his "trinity" (*V*: 359), meet up with the final group of Aborigines, the white men find themselves escorted between two columns formed by the "corporeal shadows" of "black forms" (*V*: 363).

Suggesting a resolution of this tension, Le Mesurier remarks in terms characteristically alchemical: "When we run together ... that will be the centre of the fire" (*V*: 363), almost as a prelude to the inner conflict that awaits the characters and is also registered in cosmic imagery. Additionally, Voss's arrival among the Aborigines coincides with the appearance of their deity, the Great Snake, in the form of a comet. This represents a kind of temptation to Voss, his identification with a supreme deity affording him the opportunity for his much anticipated apotheosis. However, he gradually withdraws this claim, and the marked change in him is signalled by the failure of his first attempt to remount his horse (*V*: 367). The equestrian image signals his relinquishment of the desire for dominance through the conquest of distance, and at this time he also abdicates his position as Harry's "Lord" (*V*: 366), with Laura increasingly present as his guide, whose "teaching has forced me to renounce my strength" (*V*: 367).

Though Laura leads Voss toward an acceptance of this "teaching", her relationship with him is also essential to her own attainment and affirmation of this conviction. Together they are "the two visionaries" (*V*: 163) riding through the desert, and her character is given as much weight as his, insofar as she, as Voss's counterpart, is one of the novel's two chief personifications of the contraries White seeks to reconcile through their metaphorical union. As Voss reflects of their relationship: "Through the marriage of light and shadow ... all, finally, would be resolved" (*V*: 190). From Laura's perspective, therefore, as from Palfreyman's, Voss figures as "the ugly rock upon which the truth must batter itself to survive" (*V*: 98), and while she is guiding Voss, she herself is undergoing an analogous journey in which her own faith is put to the test. Hence, though my discussion must necessarily be centred on Voss's development at the expense of a detailed consideration of Laura's, a few key images elaborating her own spiritual journey in its own right, and its

culmination in her metaphorical death, will be isolated and commented on in the next few pages.

Laura's acceptance — on condition that they "*pray together* for salvation" (*V*: 186) — of Voss's marriage proposal, and in so doing of the spiritual test her relationship with him puts her to, prompts a conscious descent to humility. This is signalled in terms echoing this movement as Voss could still only parody it in his visit to Judd's dwelling, when she, immediately after her letter of acceptance, comes "descending the hall stairs. Down, down, down" (*V*: 164). Her resolve, and the strength this paradoxically confers on her is immediately evident, and emphasised by Una Pringle's grudging apprehension of Laura's increased self-possession as the metaphor of Laura's descent is continued, "Through that, and every subsequent afternoon, of which, it was obvious, she would be the mistress. Una Pringle stopped breathing. She had always hated Laura Trevelyan, and she would now hate her more than ever" (*V*: 164-5).

Laura's anticipation, previous to his actual proposal, of a deeper relationship with Voss as part of the desert journey she is then already metaphorically accompanying him on, registers in a constant association with her of imagery of roses. This is one of the ways in which White casts Laura as Mary, particularly — through echoes of the Magnificat — to herald the redemptive birth of Mercy. The flower of course identifies Mary, the "rose without thorns", indicating her freedom from original sin. The association, arising from the legend that the rose grew thorns after the Fall "as a reminder of man's sins and fall from grace" (Sill: 52), is, however, undercut by White who ironically emphasises the thorns of Laura's roses in keeping with her own insistence on her own failures. Hence, she is depicted early on picking roses and caught in "one of the older, more involved, staggier bushes" (*V*: 159), which also prefigures the agony of her self-confrontation as mediated through relationship with Voss. When she accepts his proposal, her letter is delivered at Jildra by

*Thorn*dike (*V*: 184). And when Dr Badgery, a parody of Voss — the German is a surgeon turned botanist turned explorer; Badgery, the ship's surgeon, is interested in topiary (*V*: 307), and "anxious to study the geography of New South Wales" (*V*: 302) — enters the Bonners' world and is thrust on Laura, "this thorny cousin" (*V*: 305), as a potential husband, she observes how "His ... voice seemed unable to tear itself out of the thorny arms of the rosebushes" (*V*: 304).

Her association with the thorns of the rose also challenges the lily — which Badgery's appreciation of "the creamy ... rose" (*V*: 304) is perhaps intended to echo — registering in Voss's consciousness on their first meeting, as an image of the inhuman and sterile perfection he is initially obsessed with. As their relationship deepens, however, the lily begins to figure in terms of eroticism and communion (a point which will be elaborated upon in connection with the recurrence of the image in Voss's final moments) and so too, for Laura, "the flesh of roses was becoming personal" (*V*: 158).

When Laura takes on what Mrs Bonner calls "the burden of Rose" (*V*: 221) — whose name of course also continues the roseal pattern — the emancipist servant's pregnancy facilitates an ironic play on the notion of her as a fallen woman, a qualification which also describes the status of Laura and Voss. As Mercy's birth becomes the "vindicat[ion]" (*V*: 228) of Rose, the event takes on redemptive significance for Laura who seems to bear the baby herself — she "felt the child kick inside her" (*V*: 227) and, after enduring the "agony" she herself has "willed" (*V*: 229), is, in the midwife's words, "that drawn, dear, about the face, anyone would think it was you had just been delivered of the bonny thing" (*V*: 230). (Mercy's birth later takes on associations of parthenogenesis, she being "of unexplained origin" (*V*: 445), further elaborating the association between Laura and Mary.) As Rose struggles to give birth, the midwife remarks, "It is the head that is giving the trouble" (*V*: 229), associating the literal event with a metaphorical redemption in which pride is the

obstruction to deliverance, until Laura sees: "It is moving, we are moving, we are saved.... The supreme agony of joy was twisting, twisting, twisting" (*V*: 230).

Rose's subsequent death facilitates a confrontation in Laura, at the servant's funeral (*V*: 235), with her own impermanence, and in a letter to Voss in which she lucidly describes the experience, she asserts its paradoxically affirming nature:

> As I stood there ... the material part of myself became quite superfluous, while my understanding seemed to enter into wind, earth, the ocean beyond, even the soul of our poor, dead maid. I was nowhere and everywhere at once. I was destroyed, yet living more intensely than actual sunlight, so that I no longer feared the face of Death.... (*V*: 239)

This penetration of the landscape of course prefigures Voss's fate (as well as echoing the depiction of Le Mesurier's death), but also highlights the paradoxical movement through death into life, which, though she has experienced it in metaphorical identification with Rose — who, when she is buried, is to Laura "a part of me" (*V*: 239) that now lies under the earth — is personally enacted through her when she falls victim to a "brain fever" (*V*: 353). This diagnosis again suggests that pride, located in the head, is a key element in the spiritual conflict her fever stands for, and in the midst of it she is prompted to sacrifice Mercy, her "token of love" (*V*: 239), by (attempting to) give her up to the Asbold family for adoption, reflecting that "It is only a human sacrifice that will convince man that he is not God" (*V*: 370). The assertion, though made with Voss in mind, also, of course, ironically describes the redemptive "human sacrifice" of Christ on the cross. Her own agony begins to figure increasingly in terms of the crucifixion when her head is shaved and, scarred by the leeches applied by Dr Kilwinning — the name punning on the theme of victory through death[23] — her own head seems to bear the marks left by the crown of thorns. This points to the significance

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[23]White may intend the name of the previous physician, dismissed by Mrs Bonner, Dr Bass, as a hint at the resurrection as symbolised in the fish.

of her name, derived from *laurel* (Room: 300) and hence alluding to the laurel wreath of victory, which was parodied when Christ was crowned in mockery with thorns.[24]

The crown of thorns, rather than simply predicting a spiritual victory analogous to Christ's, points to the thorns of her own failures with which she must grapple in her own mortification. At the climax of her fever, and "in spite of reason", she comprehends the paradoxical significance of Christ and the theanthropic nature of humanity in the "three stages. Of God returning into Man. Man. And Man returning into God" (*V*: 386) and, on Voss's death, she herself wakes as though manifesting his resurrection, the fever having broken in a metaphorical rebirth.

To return more specifically to Voss, though Laura bears the crown she has not sought it, instead pressing him to "resist the Christ-thorn" (*V*: 187) of kingship. The perpetual danger of Voss's succumbing to pride is reiterated through the equestrian trope: waking in a state of delirium in her room at Potts Point after being "struck" in the face when Voss's horse throws up its head, Laura cries for "The martingale! ... We have left the martingale at the place we rested" (*V*: 358). She refers to the device used to prevent the horses from rearing, which here becomes a metaphor, developed through the equestrian trope, for Voss's hubris, and the need for it to be curbed.

In conjunction with this, combined Christian and Aboriginal mythological imagery begins to figure in cosmic terms. The Southern Cross Voss points out to Harry (*V*: 389) invokes the tree-cross of the crucifixion. Toward it flies the comet, identified by the Aborigines with the Great Snake, approaching the constellation "to the south of the

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[24]This seems a more likely explanation than Petersson's suggestion that the name involves a pun on "a Greek word for alley, lane, path, which could bear a connotation of 'way to light' or enlightenment" (256, n. 10). Petersson also notes White's assurances that Laura's choice of name has "nothing to do with Petrarch" (256, n. 10). The text, however, seems to contradict his denial, not least through persistent references to her "elegant", "fine", or to "a certain poignance of" her "Italian hand" (*V*: 74, 78, 192).

mainmast. That is where, doubtless, their snake will burrow in" (*V*: 389-90). On the one hand these images (together with the "mainmast") recall Voss's sea-journey — from where the Great Snake also comes — and the first appearance of the uroboros image at the Pringles' picnic, where it is suggested the explorer will find in the heart of the desert "something resembling the bottom of the sea", while Laura "trac[es] ... the ... track of some sea-worm" (*V*: 62)). More overtly, however, the path of the comet shows the Snake descending towards the cross — the "nails" of which are "eating" (*V*: 391) into the sky — in a sense "burrowing in" at the foot of the tree, signifying the descent of God (here conflated with the Aboriginal deity). Moreover, the comet itself also echoes the star heralding Christ's Nativity, suggesting, alongside the image of descent, rebirth or the counter-ascent.

Meanwhile Voss is himself "encased in twigs" (*V*: 376), in the shelter built by the Aborigines, and the chain of arboreal images culminating in the celestial crucifix finally sparks off Voss's own agonising confrontation with the paradox of Christ and the tree. The explorer faces the absurdity of his claim to apotheosis when coupled with his own human vulnerability, and the relevance to him of the "Christ-picture" (*V*: 344) against which he had previously raged, becomes less questionable:

> He himself, he realized, had always been most abominably frightened, even at the height of his power, a frail god upon a rickety throne, afraid of opening letters, of making decisions, afraid of the instinctive knowledge in the eyes of mules, of the innocent eyes of good men, of the elastic nature of the passions, even the devotion he had received from some men, and women, and dogs.
>
> Now, at least, reduced to the bones of manhood, he could admit to all this and listen to his teeth rattling in the darkness.
>
> "*O Jesus*,' he cried, "*rette mich nur! Du lieber!*"
>
> Of this, too, mortally frightened, of the arms, or sticks, reaching down from the eternal tree, and tears of blood, and candlewax. Of the great legend becoming truth. (*V*: 390)

Reading this passage, one may recall the "cauterising" effect Sanderson sees human kindness would have on Voss, the fear of which still seems to live in him though he appeals to Christ to save him. It is appropriate that the question of fear should figure so strongly in this

sequence. Jung once observed that fear, rather than hatred, is the opposite of love, and that "where love is lacking, power fills the vacuum" (*CW*, 9i: 88). This has certainly been true of Voss. His desire to assume godhead masks his shame over the vulnerability which would have to be acknowledged in receiving human, or in this case divine, aid. The threat to his freedom in his parental home which led him early on to "acts of brutality in defence of himself" (*V*: 14) is a microcosm of the larger pattern his life has taken, since it is this early reaction which contains the seed of his later rejection of "the material world" (*V*: 36) and of God, conceived of as threatening his spiritual freedom. His contempt for the Christ-image, the humility of which recalls the sense of anxious vulnerability from which he has been trying to escape, is turned to the rejection of the possibility of redemption — another "act of brutality" intended in his own defence but ultimately perpetrated against himself. This set of choices, impacting not only on his social existence but also inverting his spiritual life, amounts to the substitution of fear and power-based hierarchies for the unifying force of love (the word which also features in the last line of Le Mesurier's *Conclusion* (*V*: 297)). Appearing foremost among Voss's fears is the image of Christ, the "loved one". The "legend becoming truth" later becomes that of Voss, which much of the rest of the novel shows Sydney society trying to digest, but at this stage it is centrally the legend of Christ which Voss, standing beneath the tree, finds is being enacted in his own life, encapsulating his own descent from pride to humanity, his own re-entry into the "bones of manhood" as a prerequisite for love of others as well as, crucially, self-love.

Alongside Voss's atonement with the Christ-image, White also brings the notion of the marriage between Laura and Voss to the foreground. Their union is preceded by imagery of hermaphroditism, broadening their mystic marriage into the suggestion of the union of the dual masculine and feminine principles. The old man guarding Voss in the shelter becomes Laura, "the woman" whose "full, white, immaculate body became the source of all light"

(*V*: 383), suggesting both benevolence and a kind of rebirth. Harry's dead body, moreover, "had become a green woman" (*V*: 389), an image of fertility also suggesting transformation. Added to this is the description of the girl Jackie is given for a wife: "celestial visions" and the revelation of "a mystery" transform the girl into "an old man" (*V*: 390).

The equestrian trope also reaches a point of resolution, with the dissipation of Voss's will and the concomitant obsession with motion — the gradual erosion of which is suggested by the growing difficulty with which he mounts his horse — completed in the gruesome portrayal of the massacre of the horses during which "the spear seemed to enter into his own hide" (*V*: 392). He does make one final journey on horseback, accompanied by Laura, and this takes place in an oneiric sequence which becomes a measure of his spiritual progression, and which requires consideration in some detail.

The dream journey becomes, not his originally intended "outward journey to his coronation", but a return to "human status" (*V*: 393). The journey is also symbolic of death, and on the way they pause

> upon the banks of a transparent river, the waters of which were not needed to quench thirst, so persuasive was the air which flowed into and over their bodies, they dismounted to pick the lilies that were growing there. They were prayers, she said, which she had let fall during the outward journey to his coronation, and which, on the cancellation of that ceremony, had sprung up as food to tide them over the long journey back in search of human status. She advised him to sample these nourishing blooms. So they stood there munching awhile. The lilies tasted floury, but wholesome. Moreover, he suspected that the juices in the stalks would enable them to be rendered down easily into a gelatinous, sustaining soup. But of greater importance were his own words of love that he was able at last to put into her mouth. So great was her faith, she received these white wafers without surprise. (*V*: 393)

Here the lily figures primarily as an image of communion. It is a reversal of the first lily image of the novel, the insectivorous species which so fascinates Voss because of its "instinctive neatness and cleanliness" (*V*: 14), an image of the defence against change and the decomposition process which must be warded off to protect his megalomaniac "Idea" (*V*: 44).

Following the development of Voss's intimacy with Laura, however, the image undergoes several metamorphoses, both in the context of his relation to her and to other characters, the most marked shift occurring when Voss examines the lily Palfreyman finds at Jildra, the seeds of which are shaped "like testes, attached to the rather virginal flower" (*V*: 187). That lily prompts an erotic dream of Laura, in which he is overcome by the "painful[ness]" of "human obligations" and fears drowning in a "love-stream", but here the lily becomes the medium of "his own words of love".

The lilies here, themselves "prayers", at once suggest communion and the union between Voss and Laura. That they are both "floury" and can be rendered into liquid form is perhaps half-punningly intended to suggest a connection with the sacramental bread and wine respectively. This shifts into the image of the communion wafer which Laura, because possessed of "great faith", is able to accept from Voss without question.

The dream sequence proceeds to describe his unfolding vision with a sense of unusual clarity and serenity which does not come under the narrator's irony. Faith and humility leaves them unaffected by "the interminable nature of their journey, and by their own smallness in the immense landscape" (*V*: 393) while they examine "objects of wonder", three of which are described:

"[S]tones that sweated a wild honey" (*V*: 393) unites this last meeting between Voss and Laura with their first, combining as it does the early image of beeswax and holystone, found in Laura's childhood reminiscence in the opening chapter. Her memories at that point balance Voss's own, with the apian imagery countering Voss's fly-catching lily. A second sight is the brigalow palm with "wounds in the side" (*V*: 393). An arboranthropomorphic evocation of Christ, the species also recalls Le Mesurier's line: "Humility is my brigalow, that I must remember" (*V*: 296). The image is appropriate to the adoption of humility by Voss, who has recently felt the spear "enter his own hide" (*V*: 392). The third sight is a

"memorable" (*V*: 393) one. This is of "a species of soul, elliptical in shape, of a substance similar to human flesh" (*V*: 393), and it comes after a series of similar descriptions of the soul in the latter half of the novel, as variously elliptical, seed- or egg-shaped. It appears most recently in the form of the witchetty grub eaten by the Aborigines, and fed to Voss prior to his death, which resembles an "almond, which is also elliptical" (*V*: 388), and becomes transformed into a communion wafer, ironically fulfilling Boyle's macabre prediction for Voss of "a high old Mass ... with the skull of a blackfeller and his own blood" (*V*: 168). Moreover, the almond evokes the Christian iconographical mandorla (Italian "almond"), "the oval halo that encloses the body of Mary or Christ" and "a sign of divine approval" (Sill: 53). While White may also be exploiting the ambiguity of *elliptical* — drawing on the stem *ellipsis* and the sense it conveys in this context of incompleteness in the face of the ineffable — the emphasis falls on the shape the word denotes. Egg- or seed-shaped, the image suggests birth, imaging the possibility of renewal. This rebirth does not issue in purely transcendent form but includes paradoxically the experience of mortality, so that the soul Voss sees is "fleshy", reaffirming a theanthropic vision of humanity.

The objects Voss and Laura see on their journey are nevertheless regarded with detachment. The problems of existence they point to are past ones — "remembered", "memorable" phenomena "of scientific interest" which "the husband" explains to "his wife" who politely professes interest "even when most bored" (*V*: 393). Voss, confronted with his imminent death, regards these images, together with Laura with whom he is united, with equanimity. Metaphors of the soul's desire for unimpeded ascent are absent, and replaced by more subtle suggestions of transformation. Voss returns from his "luminous state ... ready to meet the supreme emergency with strength and resignation" (*V*: 393). This "emergency" refers on the one hand to his impending death but also carries the sense of *emergence*, and represents the culmination of Voss's spiritual development.

From this point White withdraws from the psyche of his protagonist. Jackie, his reluctant executioner, sees "the pale eyes of the white man were looking, whether at him or through him, he did not attempt to discover" (*V*: 394). The narrative shifts dramatically into a grim portrayal of his decapitation. His severed head "knocked against a few stones, and lay like any melon", giving no clue as to "how much was left of the man it no longer represented" (*V*: 394).

Jackie stands momentarily under the morning star, a collective symbol of immortality and an image evocative of Christ. The morning star also, however, designates the light-bearer, Lucifer, with whom Voss is identified elsewhere in the novel, and here the image ironically emphasises his own descent.

As Voss dies, Laura regains consciousness, the veins standing out in her throat where Jackie cut at Voss. In stark contrast to the portrayal of Miss Palfreyman who fears glass and mirrors because they reflect what she sees as her own irredeemable image — "a double that she has grown to hate" (*V*: 263) — Laura is "streaming with moisture and a peculiar grey light. This latter effect was caused, doubtless, by the morning, as it came in at the window, and was reflected by the panes, the mirrors, and various objects in ornamental glass" (*V*: 395). Previously Laura had seen "her own image" reflected in a "blurry mirror" (*V*: 9) at Potts Point. Standing in opposition to Voss who laid equal claim to spiritual as well as emotional and social "self-sufficiency", she sat across from him, each unconsciously mirroring the other's narcissism. The morning light of Laura's sickbed, however, hinting at the morning star attending Voss's death, is also akin to that which entered through the "generous window" (*V*: 12) at their first meeting, showing this initial antithesis transformed into a set of synchronous echoes. Both undergo a transition from a narcissistic, ego-centred definition of self to a fuller experience of humanity and acceptance of its spiritual and mortal aspects. As White shows Voss integrating those facets of himself evoked by Laura, so he in a

sense lives on in her and she becomes an interpreter — if largely privately — of the legend of Voss as she has been of the significance of the Christian myth.

This is not to suggest a convenient notion of transcendence on Voss's part. The novel itself is in many respects a satire of this idea. What Voss does, however, achieve in his final moments is acceptance of death, and serenity in the face of apparently irreconcilable duality. Prior to this most of his life is lived in defence against the experience of this duality, but in his final moments he is able to begin making good his promise to "cross the continent" and "know it with my heart" (*V*: 33) by recovering it.

CONCLUSION

The main concerns of this study, which are elaborated at greater length in the introductory chapter, may be briefly restated here. Firstly, there was the broad requirement for a close exploration of White's imagery. This, more than an initial reading of his work suggests, is the overwhelmingly predominant mode of expression in his fiction. Contrasted with this, in the general critical view, are direct statements of meaning made either by the narrator or through the mouths of protagonists, on which many critical interpretations, whether favourable or unfavourable, have tended to rely. This disparity, some have argued, reflects a conflict in White's work between the imagery and authorially interposed assertions or, in the words of one critic, the "design" of White's novels "is often at odds with the authentically complex rendering of reality in the main body of the work ... [which] ... forbids any final resolution of the duality that exists everywhere in the smallest detail of the fiction" (Colmer: 71). David Tacey, analogously, proposes a tension between "algebraic" and "organic" elements of White's fiction suggesting the suppression of a deeper layer of meaning, expressed in imagery, by artificial frameworks imposed from outside, and, in his exclusively archetypal, image-based critique of the novels, argues that what White attempts to portray as illumination or transcendence is really a disguised depiction of psychological regression.

This study has attempted a response to these questions in an exploration, in as much detail as possible within given spatial constraints, of White's use of imagery in *The Tree of Man* and *Voss* with a view to elucidating the spiritual development of mainly Stan Parker and Voss and offering an interpretation of White's vision of transcendent experience as presented in these novels.

The explication I have offered is by no means exhaustive, and many of the tropes at work in these novels have had to remain untouched in favour of a selective consideration of the development of some of the major, and some minor but significant, patterns of imagery in these works. Sufficient material has been examined, however, to demonstrate that the notion that "White rather wastefully if splendidly heaps up enormous sets of details that ultimately don't signify" (Mitchell: 8) fails to take into account the functionality of his images, whether developed as constantly foregrounded tropes or lesser patterns. Neither do these images represent statically recurring motifs alerting the reader to the same meaning, but either alter in significance, or are yoked to other images in juxtapositions which express the changing inner states of characters within different contexts. White's tropes, though they often draw on archetypal or (often ironically) on biblical resonances, are, moreover, primarily intra-textual in function and conception. By this, I mean that external associations are assimilated in his patterns of imagery to form coherent tropes of a unique dynamism, and the extent of the synthesis they enact contradicts the suggestion that biblical images are superadded as elements of an artificially imposed structure. A perceived contradictoriness in his images can be attributed to the fact that White's vision rests on paradox, so that, for example, the tree can represent both the tension and reconciliation of duality. Similarly, a detail which would ordinarily be passed over turns out, on closer consideration, to be working in harmony with the broader intentions of the novel. In this way the name of Voss's ship, the *Osprey*, as noted in earlier discussion of this point, at the outset of the expedition depicts in microcosm the spiritual trajectory of Voss's journey, which will return him to a transforming acknowledgement of the mortality he has always, on some level, been trying to evade.

While attempting an elucidation of some of White's tropes I have considered Tacey's interpretations of a few key images and situations. These also tend, on the one hand, to take insufficient account of the subtlety and constant irony with which White's imagery is

elaborated, and, on the other, ignore much of the detail which creates and qualifies meaning. Though White's tropes are possessed of figurative integrity, this is nevertheless manifested in constantly shifting images, with what has been aptly termed "White's technique of chiaroscuro portraiture" (Garebian: 559) setting persistent ambiguity alongside the simultaneous attempt to reconcile the dualities being highlighted. As such, the assumption of or demand for a static singularity of meaning in White's images, as well as the inflexible application of Jungian schemas are more contributive to a perceived disjunction between "algebraic" and "organic" aspects of White's fiction than is suggested by the fabric of the texts themselves.

Tacey's "pathological reading", moreover, controverts the view, attributed to "authorial commentary and imposed interpretation", that "every novel [constitutes] an heroic quest novel, a tale of triumphant individuation" (xix). Yet White was surprised when he found his work was viewed as such. To Peggy Garland he wrote, in a passage already referred to: "It is strange that you should be impressed by Stan Parker as a character 'of unfailing strength'. To me, he is at many points weak and wavering" (Marr, 1994: 100). Neither do his novels attempt to suggest that their protagonists find the moral autonomy within life that is implied by the concept of individuation. Failure, as Carolyn Bliss's illuminating study has demonstrated, is a persistent theme in White's fiction, and his characters typically experience themselves as foreign and outcast, insufficient to the demands of their environment and struggling with the demands of the spiritual life which sets them apart. What is constantly being depicted in *Voss*, for example, though the novel also operates on other levels, is the lack of spiritual maturity of its male protagonist, and only in the moments before his death is Voss presented as having relinquished the division he has actively maintained between spirit and body, and which created the inner disharmony prompting his psycho-spiritual quest in the first place (though the form it takes is different to

what he intended). His return to wholeness, meaning an undivided experience of himself and the world, is immediately followed by his death.

Typically, such inner harmony, which can be depicted in cosmic terms if only in fleeting moments, is not portrayed as forming part of a daily, or specifically social mode of existence. Depending on one's concept of society, this more than any other aspect of White's fiction constitutes the significant limitation of his work (though some novels, *A Fringe of Leaves* for example, require a more complex response to this question).

On the whole, White is interested in what he can illustrate through dramatising the individual's response to her mortality. Of *The Tree of Man* he said while writing it that it had "no plot, except the only one of living and dying" (Marr, 1994: 87). Though all his fiction depicts the conflict between spirit and matter he does not, however, endorse a view of spirituality which is divorced from the body. *Voss*, in particular, constitutes a sustained satire of a notion of transcendence which implies a kind of disembodiment, so to speak, of the spirit, a view which really masks a profound pessimism. White's chief concerns are of course metaphysical, but a more suitable description for the transcendental experience he attempts to portray through his characters might be conveyed by the sense of *eternity*. The concept is considered in *The Aunt's Story*:

> Theodora did not reject the word [eternity]. It flowed, violet, and black, and momentarily oyster-bellied through the evening landscape, fingering the faces of houses. Soon the sea would merge with the houses, and the almost empty asphalt promenade, and the dissolving lavender hills behind the town. So that there was no break in the continuity of being. The landscape was a state of interminable being, hope and despair devouring and disgorging endlessly, and the faces, whether Katina Pavlou, or Sokolnikov, or Mrs Rapallo, or Wetherby, only slightly different aspects of the same state. (*AS*: 179-80)

The concept of endlessly repeated cycles of creation and destruction becomes familiar in White's fiction, and posits not only a notion of eternity through continuity but the suggestion of a single identity or underlying unity in moments when the opposites of duality clash or are

resolved. The idea of eternity ultimately points, therefore, not as in the common conception to a very long time, or endless time, but a state which exists *beyond* time and the concept of time, transcending duality. Time itself gives rise to duality, and it is in terms of a resolution of the contraries manifesting in characters' lives, in an experience of the eternal, that White hints at transcendence.

The association between transcendence and a reconciliation of opposites accounts for White's reliance on death scenes. In the moments before death his protagonists, whose experience is still susceptible to description, stand on the threshold between temporal existence and infinity, the mystery out of which life arises at birth and into which it returns in death. While the example is not intended to demonstrate strict correspondences between White's work and specific religious concepts, Joseph Campbell's outline of the significance of the Sanskrit meditation chant Om or Aum is illustrative:

> [In] the holy syllable AUM.... the sound *A* represents waking consciousness, *U* dream consciousness, *M* deep sleep. The silence surrounding the syllable is the unknown: it is called simply "The Fourth." The syllable itself is God as creator-preserver-destroyer, but the silence is God Eternal, absolutely uninvolved in the openings-and-closings of the [cosmogonic] round.
>
> > *It is unseen, unrelated, inconceivable,*
> > *uninferable, unimaginable, indescribable.*
> > *It is the essence of the one self-cognition*
> > *common to all states of consciousness.*
> > *All phenomena cease in it.*
> > *It is peace, it is bliss, it is nonduality.* [Manduka Upanishad, 8-12]
>
> Myth remains, necessarily, within the cycle, but represents this cycle as surrounded and permeated by the silence.... Myth is a directing of the mind and heart, by means of profoundly informed figurations, to that ultimate mystery which fills and surrounds all existences. Even in the most comical and apparently frivolous of its moments, mythology is directing the mind to this unmanifest which is just beyond the eye. (Campbell, 1993: 266-7)

White, professing "A belief contained less in what is said than the silences" (*FG*: 70), makes felt the presence of a similar concept of silence at the fringes of his narratives. In *The Tree of*

Man, Stan Parker, before he is named as such, is introduced in a setting in which "The silence was immense" and enters the narrative, cutting at trees "more to hear the sound than for any other reason", as if "deliberately breaking with a dream" (*TM*: 9). After his death, in the novel's final chapter, his presence is again hinted at in a similarly arboreal setting in which "There is silence, and a stone lizard[1]" (*TM*: 479). In *Voss*, Le Mesurier's death figures as a "climb[ing] out into the immense fields of silence" (*V*: 381), and in *Riders in the Chariot* Alf Dubbo reflects: "silence is everything.... Once ... he had attempted ... to convey the skin of silence nailed to a tree" (*RC*: 434) (here associating the image with the crucifixion, in itself symbolising the suspension between the temporal and the eternal). Insofar as silence represents the infinite, the transcendent vision Hurtle Duffield, in *The Vivisector*, dies while trying to paint employs a chromatic metaphor for this mystery, in "the never-yet-attainable blue" (*VS*: 616), "the otherwise unnameable I-N-D-I-G-O" (*VS*: 617). As Paul St. Pierre observes, indigo is the end of the colour spectrum, and through his final painting White shows Duffield struggling to reach beyond the manifest. The colour also suggests the union of opposites since "blue is the intermediary between white and black.... reconcil[ing] the darkness ... with the light" (St. Pierre: 105-6).

Campbell's comments on myth, to return to the excerpt, also suggest analogies with White's fiction, which must, likewise from within the temporal sphere, rely on symbols and metaphors which can only be connotative of what lies beyond human experience.

Yet, as I have already suggested here, and attempted to demonstrate through a consideration of the imagery of *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*, White's novels can be read usefully as an elaboration of an enantiodromia or play of opposites, and in portraying metaphorically the reconciliation of these contraries his work echoes a common symbolic

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[1]For the interpretation of the image of the stone lizard as a metaphorical suggestion of Stan, see chapter 1, part I.

formula of mythical and religious systems for the depiction of the transcendent. This union of opposites is of course by its very nature paradoxical and irrational, but accommodated in White's often expressed distrust for the purely rational: "Practically anything I have done of any worth I feel I have done through my intuition, not my mind" (*PWS*: 21).

One of White's key images, the cross, and the aspects of his arboreal imagery which relate to this symbol, depict both the conflict and the irrational union of opposites, with the vertical axis typically regarded as representing the spirit and the horizontal axis the material. These associations are integral to the deployment of the image, which continues to figure significantly through *Voss* and into *Riders in the Chariot*. A less central image in *The Solid Mandala*, the cross is displaced by the mandala as dominant symbol. Yet the mandala too, in the form of Arthur's marble, performs an analogous reconciling function. It is "a double spiral whose intertwining threads represent the relation between opposites" (St. Pierre: 102) with Arthur "in the centre of the mandala ... danc[ing] the passion of all their lives" (*SM*: 266).

White becomes progressively less reliant on framing symbols to represent the play of opposites, but in those novels in which he does employ them, these symbols do not contribute significantly to a rigidity in thematic resolution. The Christian imagery of *The Tree of Man*, for instance, does not force transcendence on Stan Parker, or close with the suggestion of any fixed ontological state. Instead, it shows Ray Jr, whose "discovery kept him in a state of endless being" (*TM*: 384), poised to repeat the cycle that has ended, yet not ended, with Stan's death. This vision is essentially no different to that expressed in *The Eye of the Storm* where Mary de Santis relinquishes a desire for a "state of perfection" in favour of "a belief — no, it was stronger: a religion — of perpetual becoming" (*ES*: 11). Commenting on these words, Manly Johnson writes:

> What she denies specifically in this resolution of opposites is the static quality of the resolution. White also denies that resolution to his readers, and sometimes receives for it the charge that he doesn't know what he is doing, that his themes are at cross-purposes, that his novels do not end satisfactorily. Like Mary de Santis, White offers instead of neat formulations, participation in a process. A balance of opposites ... is only a phase in the generation of other oppositions up to the final two balanced scenes of the novel, which predicate a continuation of process. (343)

Though White is able to suggest the experience of eternity through richly elaborating a concept of perpetual becoming, he must, however, contend with the fact that his images, whether part of purely intra-textual figurations or drawing on religious (or Jungian) symbols, remain metaphors for what is ultimately ineffable. Despite the attempt, sustained throughout his fiction, to penetrate into the sphere of the indescribable, his equally constant ambiguity reflects a persistent concern to avoid reducing to his own terms what is infinite, and in so doing have his images duplicate the effect of churches which "destroy the mystery of God" (Marr, 1991: 358). Though to dismiss his fiction on such grounds would be to require a concomitant rejection of the symbolic plane on which all religious and mythological systems function, the gap between the temporal and the infinite can by definition never be closed. Of this, White remains aware to the last and most idiosyncratic of his novels, *Memoirs of Many in One*. As a "friend" of his protagonist, Alex Gray, whose autobiography he is later the reluctant "editor" of, she records one of his visits as she sits writing upstairs, and in so doing reiterates his perpetual dilemma:

> Patrick — the ersatz Reverend Mother patrolling the living room at the moment.... is in search of the unanswerable, the unattainable. (*MMO*: 88)

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