

Chapter 3

VOSS

The novel *Voss* continues the theme of personal quest for life meaning, first explored by White in *The Tree of Man*. Although its setting in the Australian landscape, is similar to the earlier novel, *Voss* is on a much greater scale and a larger dimension. The description of the continent's interior landscape is one of the triumphs of the novel. The themes of personal quest and of expedition in *Voss* are juxtaposed, with the investigations now displayed of the literal landscape and the metaphysical search of the desert of the mind. In *Voss*, more of the characters are granted epiphanies, as if White is more confident of his universal theme and its impact upon several of his characters. Certainly, in *Voss* it is clear that White feels that personal salvation through the expression of love is possible, and that love itself is the consequence of moments of insight and illumination. Additionally, it is in this novel that White introduces for the first time the idea of great suffering as a necessary prerequisite with love of another/others for one's evolving enlightenment and so understanding of divine purpose.

The novel *Voss*, is a fictional account of the final journey of a simulacrum of the colonial explorer, Ludwig Leichhardt. Like Leichhardt, Johann Ulrich Voss, the leader of the expedition, is a German and he is to disappear from human ken. His exploits will become mythologised and search parties are to be organized to determine the truth about his failure to return. In the novel, Voss's journey takes him on an allegorical journey through the wilderness of the

Australian landscape and, finally, to the desert where he finds his ultimate enlightenment. Paralleling this search is the journey of his lover and later fiancée, Laura Trevelyan, whose own emotional and spiritual quest takes place entirely within her mind. Laura, a rationalist who has lost her faith, comes ultimately to regain her belief through her love for Voss. He in turn, initially an unbeliever, acknowledging only his own abilities, comes to a form of belief through his love for Laura. Both receive personal epiphanies in which further self-knowledge is revealed. Understanding and human and spiritual love are thus able to be established.

The historical Ludwig Leichhardt was, like the fictional Voss, born in Prussia and studied philosophy, languages, natural science and medicine in Germany, England and France before coming to Australia in 1842. Leichhardt's final journey began in March 1848 from the Condamine River (near Roma, Queensland), and he disappeared without trace.⁶⁰

The party departs from Sydney by boat. After enjoying the hospitality of two properties in the area, the group leaves the then boundary of known civilization in the Hunter Valley. Their journey is marked by increasing physical hardship until Voss's apparent intransigence and megalomania divides the party into two, with Voss and two companions persisting with the journey, only to die as a result of Aboriginal entrapment. Of the other party, only one of three members, Judd, survives to tell the story.

Whilst in Sydney, Voss had met Laura Trevelyan, the adopted daughter of

⁶⁰ Details from Renee Erdos, biography of 'Friedrich Wilhelm Ludwig Leichhardt', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 2, pp. 102-104, Gen. Editor, Douglas Pike, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1967.

the expedition's main financial backer, Edward Bonner. The two are able to communicate on an intellectual level, and later this communication is maintained by telepathic means whilst Voss is in the hinterland; ultimately Voss requests and is granted Laura's hand in what proves to be a mystical 'marriage'.

There is a strong underlying historical narrative behind the novel, but this is not its main focus. Rather, White explores quite explicitly the psychological and metaphysical aspects of his characters, the whole set against the colonial constructs of 'the bush' and the interior of Australia. Whilst White deals with the society of early Sydney in colonial New South Wales with both satire and wit, the search for self-realisation and redemption by the expedition members is central to an understanding of the novel and is most important for critical investigation of the text.

Patricia Morley, in *The Mystery of Unity: Theme and Technique in the novels of Patrick White*, writes of the novel as 'a comedy' and of the character Voss himself as a 'comic character'.⁶¹ Presumably the word 'comedy' is used by Morley to encompass the awful sense of disparity between the elevated ideals of the protagonist Voss and his less-than-heroic performance as a leader of the expedition. For his human weakness and shortcomings are largely responsible for the expedition's failure and for his men's deaths. Morley also sees a religious parallel with Dante's *Divine Comedy* in the structure of *Voss*.

⁶¹ Patricia A. Morley, *The Mystery of Unity: Theme and Technique in the novels of Patrick White*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1972, p. 117.

Voss is Patrick White's great novel of search and personal discovery. For some characters in the novel, this exploration includes redemption from sin and improper behaviour. The theme is not new: the concept of seeking one's destiny and understanding life's purpose is Biblical in its antiquity and endorsed by the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers. Nor is the structure of the novel particularly unique, alternating or 'interlacing' as it does between the progress of the expedition and the life of the colony in Sydney, yet many readers consider it to be White's greatest novel and its reputation has increased over time. Despite receiving a lukewarm response in Australia and the USA, *Voss* met with early and widespread enthusiasm in England; and the novel has been considered for a full-length motion picture and an opera, with its lyrics created by David Malouf.

In writing his novel White used the technique of James Joyce in *Ulysses*, grafting of a metaphysical search by humans onto a mythical skeleton, established as an archetype in Homer's *Odyssey*. As Odysseus and his feats are to become mythologies in ancient Greek literature, so Leichhardt and his fictional counterpart, Ulrich Voss, have become myths in a land which at the time of the expedition was largely unexplored and whose non-indigenous inhabitants mainly occupied a very marginal coastal strip. Whilst metaphors of penetration and of the settlers' exploitation of a perceived cornucopia of wealth are mentioned, the other themes in the book are subservient to the quest motif and to its implication for each of the searchers.

For Patrick White's characters, it is not enough to search for redemption or salvation: suffering, either physical or mental, or both is an essential part of the process. The following epithet from the novel *Happy Valley*, taken from the

writings of Mahatma Gandhi, conveys White's underlying theme here also:

It is impossible to do away with the law of suffering, which is the one indispensable condition of our being. Progress is to be measured by the amount of suffering undergone...the purer the suffering the greater is the progress.⁶²

This quotation would be equally appropriate for the novel *Voss*, for the character Le Mesurier is to say towards the end of his life:

The mystery of life is not solved by success, which is an end in itself, but in failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming. (p. 271)

All the characters in the novel, both in the country and the city are measured against this benchmark, and paradoxically, those that appear to have failed are those that have usually achieved the greatest level of personal insight or ventured furthest into their own character.

Thus, in order to fully comprehend White's purpose in writing *Voss*, the reader must understand these underlying concerns; since the metaphysical search in the novel is predominant, and White made it clear how he wants the novel to be read, when he said at the beginning of chapter 4:

Few people of attainments take easily to a plan of self-improvement. Some discover very early their perfection cannot endure the insult. Others find their intellectual pleasure lies in the theory, not in the practice. Only a few stubborn ones will blunder on, painfully, out of the luxuriant world of their pretensions into the desert of mortification and reward. (p. 74)

This may be too much for some to bear and the bleakness overwhelming; yet White allows some of his characters moments of illumination or epiphany, which serve to encourage, and, by their degree of revelation to grant a degree

⁶² Patrick White, *Happy Valley*, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

of understanding. For White, understanding and therefore knowledge, especially of the self, is at the centre of the existence of man, providing him or her with the reason for existence, the explanation of the mystery of life and the salve for the suffering which he or she has had to endure.

The structure of the book is simple with passages of the progress of the exploration party juxtaposed with the mundane life and trivial thoughts of those left behind in the infant colony, mainly the mercantile class who have financed the expedition. As in his other work, Patrick White patronises those of the merchant class with a strong materialistic outlook who lack insight into their commercial motives. Their behaviour is examined by White and often criticised or parodied in his novels. The novel's tone is realistic and descriptions of events, houses and the landscape have been carefully researched and corroborated by White before publication.⁶³

The most controversial aspect of the work for many is the form of communication that Voss and Laura Trevelyan maintain during the expedition, a form of surreal mental telepathy. If the novel is read simply and superficially as a story of pioneer exploration, this form of communication is most extraordinary, and especially so when it becomes apparent that the relationship evolves through this medium so that the couple become in their own eyes 'married' and share intimate secrets. Some critics, for example Vincent Buckley and Noel Macainsh,⁶⁴ have found the device flawed; others,

⁶³ D. Marr, *Patrick White A Life*, *op. cit.*, pp. 311-316.

⁶⁴ Vincent Buckley, 'Patrick White' in Geoffrey Dutton, ed., *The Literature of Australia*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1964, pp. 413-426; and Noel Macainsh, 'Voss and his Communications - A Structural Contrast', *Australian Literary Studies*, 10, 1982, 437-447. Macainsh argues that not only are the telepathic communications between Voss and Laura muddled and confusing, but also many of the verbal exchanges in the novel, between Voss and the native Dugald, for

like James McAuley,⁶⁵ feel its use is justified and apt, given the 'High Romanticism' from which the theme derives and the 'meta-novelistic' form of the work. Importantly, White himself believed in the existence of extra-sensory perception and its use in *Voss* is not just a literary device.⁶⁶

Whilst the novel is entitled *Voss* and its central character appears to be Ulrich Voss, it is noteworthy that the novel begins and ends with Laura Trevelyan, niece of Voss's patron in the colony, Edward Bonner. She is at least Voss's intellectual equal and on their initial meeting senses that his sincerity and commitment to the expedition entitle him to her and our respect and admiration. In an early piece of epiphany in the novel, Laura comes to realize that she and Voss are to become one and that they alone have sufficient imagination to understand the nature of his quest. This is related symbolically in the text at lunchtime after church on Sunday when the 'green' apples (Laura and Voss) are 'released' from the apple pie with the 'golden pastrywork'. Laura at lunch suggests:

Everyone is still afraid, or most of us, of this country, and will not say it. We are not yet possessed of understanding. (p. 28)

When challenged, she defends Voss's right to explore and possess the country by quietly stating: 'It is his by right of vision'. (p. 29)

Laura, as she has grown older and read more widely, finds her childhood faith in God replaced by a more empirical and rational belief (p. 9). As she and Voss learn more of one another in conversation, the reader is aware of how

example.

⁶⁵ James McAuley, 'The Gothic Splendours: Patrick White's *Voss*', *Southerly*, 25, No. 1, 1965, pp. 34-44, rep. in G. A. Wilkes, ed., *Ten Essays on Patrick White*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1970, pp. 41-42.

she and Voss are like many of White's paired characters, opposites yet of the same basic character. When picnicking one day they discuss the future, Voss maintaining each person has to have determined his or her own destiny by force of will. This approach would fit with Laura's current philosophy and yet she hesitates to be so dogmatic, preferring a more open approach, acknowledging that time may bring changes:

'Oh, I have the will', said Laura quickly. 'But I have not yet grasped in what way I am to use it'. (p. 68)

That Laura has come to understand Voss so quickly and to sense that his fanaticism will ultimately destroy him⁶⁷ suggests to the reader that Laura is his intellectual superior and notably at this time, 'the light was gilding them', (p. 68) - a not so subtle intimation of their individual and ultimate joint transfiguration. The same association of knowledge and light occurs as the expedition leaves Sydney and Voss sees Laura for the last time:

She is a cold, hard girl, he decided, and I could almost love her.
The less discriminate sunlight did. (p. 112)

The meeting in the Bonners' garden on the night of the party is the last private contact between Voss and Laura and she, with her insight into his behaviour and motivation,⁶⁸ agrees to journey with him metaphysically. Using metaphors of the landscape, Laura, through Voss is to be assisted to undertake her own search of self-awareness:

⁶⁶ D. Marr, *Patrick White A Life*, *op. cit.*, p. 317.

⁶⁷ The text reads:

'This expedition Mr. Voss', said Laura Trevelyan suddenly, 'this expedition of yours is pure will', (p. 69).

⁶⁸ Laura states 'I think I can enter into the minds of most men', *Voss*, p. 86.

'You are so vast and ugly', Laura Trevelyan was repeating the words; 'I can imagine some desert, with rocks, rocks of prejudice, and, yes, even hatred. You are so isolated'. (p. 87)

Having established the probable metaphorical conditions of the journey, Laura then commits herself: 'I am fascinated by you', laughed Laura Trevelyan, with such candour that her admission did not seem immodest. '*You are my desert!*' (p. 88). The brief physical contact described at the time of this meeting is sufficient to site the narrative in worldly fiction, since White is vague about the details at this time, although, emblematic of Australia in the future, we are told that 'she held his bones' (p. 89). The importance of the meeting lies not in Voss's declaration of his unbelief for rather pitiful superficial reasons which substitute for his growing egotism, but, rather, in Laura's sudden realization of the immensity of it,⁶⁹ and the possibility of the destruction of the expedition as a consequence of his willfulness. Her then response to this awesome knowledge is to return to her abandoned faith and to assure Voss: 'Then I will learn to pray for you' (p. 90). For someone who only recently had not determined the direction of her will and who has committed herself to Voss mentally and physically knowing of the expedition's almost certain failure, this is an extraordinary admission. That the author wants the reader to understand that a climactic and destiny-fulfilling commitment has been made between the two is made clear when they walk in the camellia grove noting the white flowers, (a symbol of Laura's chastity and of a marriage), in a 'thick night [that] was growing luminous' (p. 87.)

⁶⁹ 'It was clear. She saw him standing in the glare of his own brilliant desert. Of course, He was Himself indestructible', *Voss*, p. 90.

Note however this idyllic description of romance is potentially flawed when Laura tells Voss that occasionally the white camellia throws a 'sport', a defective flower of disturbing 'marbled' colour: this is a reference to Voss. However, both know union will occur, and the author states: 'That it would take place, they both knew now'. (p. 87) Despite the warning inherent in the camellia flower metaphor, Laura does love Voss and they are united, as she says just before entering the Bonners' house after the tumultuous events in the garden: 'It is our *beings* that pleases me', she replied (p. 90). White uses italics to emphasize the total union of mind and body of the couple.

Later, when with others, she has gathered at the harbour edge to farewell the expedition, Laura recalls the evening and its significance for her:

Remembering a contentment she had experienced in the garden either from illumination or exhaustion, after the daemon had withdrawn from her, the dry mouth of any dying man was a thing of horror. (p. 107)

This is an ambiguous passage, but it is followed by the comment that, 'the world of light was taking possession' (p. 107), suggesting an illumination of significance had occurred. I believe the paragraph refers to the revelation of knowledge Laura received in the garden: that she loved Voss, the man, but knew of his ego and powerful will. She also knew he was likely to be destroyed, but none the less she herself wanted to accompany him on his journey.

These decisions alone are tumultuous enough, but in addition she has returned to her old faith: having seen the effect of Voss's will, and his denial of the existence of God, Laura confronts her own will and disbelief in the garden and so comes to understand that to deny God is to deny your own life:

'I am to understand that I have destroyed myself. But you, Mr. Voss', Laura cried, 'it is for you I am concerned. To watch the same fate approaching someone else is far, far worse.' (p. 89)

Her return to Christian faith, with its understanding of necessary suffering and (self-) sacrifice, is publicly demonstrated when, in conversation with an expedition member, Palfreyman, she says:

'Oh, I would welcome dangers', she said. 'One must not expect to avoid suffering. And the chance is equal for everyone. Is that not so?' (p. 107)

The daemon mentioned in the previous quotation refers to the end of her ambivalence about her faith and her newly attained contentment, a form of heavenly grace. As promised, Laura does begin to pray for Voss; this further symbolic commitment is demonstrated when, as the ship bearing the expedition leaves the harbour, Rose Portion the maid brings Laura Trevelyan and Belle Bonner a dish of cumquats, a sacramental sharing. This fruit is to be related to the orange, the blossom of which denotes pure love and chastity, and even marriage.⁷⁰ Voss is not to see Laura again, but they continue to communicate telepathically until he is murdered. They exchanged a few letters only,⁷¹ his first, relatively formal and written early in the course of the expedition stressed confidence in his quest and the importance of his destiny (p. 153). Since these factors are all he requires for success, he has emphasized, in italics, the uselessness of her prayers.

⁷⁰J. C. Cooper, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

⁷¹I have read the letters as those exchanged between an arrogant Victorian gentleman and an earnest gentlewoman. Others, e.g., John B. Beston, have read them as exercises in a power relationship 'as each seeks to subordinate the other'. See John B. Beston, 'Voss's Proposal and Laura's Acceptance Letter: The Struggle for Dominance in *Voss*', *Quadrant*, 16, 4, 1972, 24-30.

At around the same time, in Sydney, Laura and the maid Rose Portion (her sensual self) are cutting roses, a symbol of passion and joy. For Laura, who has only just begun to understand their significance as floral emblems of herself and Voss⁷², the experience is associated with light:

She bent to reach others, till roselight was flooding her face,
and she was forced to lower the lids of her eyes against the
glare of the roses. (p. 159)

Whilst thus engaged, Laura becomes entangled - overpowered as she is 'caught' and 'held' - by 'sinewy black wood' but is easily 'freed' by Rose. (p. 159) Laura's concern is that she may be 'torn', and Rose's reply is one of womanly perspicacity and of an acolyte's assurances as to the efficacy of the sacrament:

'Not that I can notice', Rose replied, 'but I expect'. (p. 159)

This whole episode is a metaphor of the relationship of Laura and Voss, the concern about being torn is related to sexual intercourse.

Thus the subsequent letter from Voss asking for her hand in marriage is only a formality since Laura, in her imagination, has already consummated such an event. With this betrothed or nuptial status established, she now assumes greater responsibility within the Bonner household, a position emphasized only a few paragraphs later, when the pregnancy of the maid, Rose Portion, and the forthcoming birth of a baby out of wedlock, become imminent. Concomitant with Laura's meeting and 'marriage' to Voss and the

⁷²The passage reads:

For Laura herself had not yet grasped the full sense of the season, only that it was fuller than ever before, and that the flesh of roses was becoming personal, ... *Voss*, p. 158.

return of her old faith has come a definitive lessening of her reliance upon rational thought and a subtle expansion of her imaginative powers. The description of her by the author is now of a quietly assured and confident mature woman, who as we learn later, is ready to achieve through the pregnancy of Rose the unique gift of a child. White writes:

Laura Trevelyan had given much consideration to the question of Rose Portion, but the answer to it was withheld. She did not fret like her aunt, although it concerned her personally, she sensed even more personally. For personal reasons, therefore, she would continue to give the matter thought although her faith in reason was already less. She would prepare her mind, shall we say, to receive revelations. (p. 160)

Both Laura and Rose - who now constitute a sort of Holy Family - share a profound insight into their own characters: Rose, uneducated and a servant, appears to understand with an innate sagacity, Laura by her education and some moment of 'revelation'. Both know of this facility in each other and respect it, as is clear from this gentle and caring exchange over the apparently trivial matter of sleep:

'You have not slept, miss.'
 'I would not say that I had not slept,' Laura replied. 'How can you tell, Rose?'
 'Oh, I know. There are things you can tell by knowing.'
 'You are determined to mystify me,' laughed the girl, and immediately frowned to think of how she must run the gauntlet of her servant's intuition.
 'I am a simple woman,' Rose said.
 Laura held her face away. The yellow light was blinding her.
 'I do not know what you are, Rose. You have never shown me.'
 'Ah, now, miss, you are playing on my ignorance.'
 'In what way?'
 'How am I to show you what I am? I am not an educated person. I am just a woman.'
 Laura Trevelyan got up quickly. She would have liked to open a cupboard, and to look inside. (p. 75)

In this passage we learn in an imprecise yet luminous fashion of Laura's understanding of Rose's knowledge and of the association of this spiritual realization with the transfiguring 'yellow light'. Additionally, the metaphor of the cupboard at the end of the passage may imply that Laura is curious to find out the depth of Rose's knowledge, or to view the penetralia as in the synagogue.

Rose, with her hare lip and lumpy and unlovely figure, is one of Patrick White's characters who suffer much because of the physical deformity but whose emotional burden is relieved by their degree of self knowledge. As Rose states to Laura: 'I have been laid right open in my time' (p. 76).⁷³ Only someone totally devoid of any pretension and artifice would dare make such a public statement: not only does Rose carry the stigmata of the hare lip, but she is to become pregnant outside marriage to the Bonner's groomsman, Jack Slipper. A rogue, he is now dismissed by Mr. Bonner, but Rose is allowed to remain in the household to complete the pregnancy after the intervention of Laura, only then to die soon after being delivered of a child, to be named Mercy. It is this type of suffering that has enabled Rose to achieve the profoundly comprehending wisdom she has, so that when Mr. Bonner consults Laura about the adopting out of Mercy without consulting Rose: 'Rose looked, and saw, and understood - there was very little she did not' (p. 160).

⁷³ This phrase with its Biblical association of bodily suffering and sacrifice is repeated throughout the book. When questioned by her aunt and uncle about her future as an unmarried mother with the child, Mercy, Laura says:

I will suffer anything you care to inflict on me, of course. I, too, can endure. (Voss, p. 308)
and then -

Again, on the evening of Belle Bonner's party, Laura sits alone, the object of curiosity to most and ridicule to some; she is aware of her situation and she was most alarmingly, chokingly exposed. Her neck had mottled. (Voss, p. 319).

The mention of her exposed neck signifies the sacrificial Biblical lamb, and the passage describing Judd killing the sheep to celebrate Christmas is important for its like connotations. Not the least is that the activity takes place within a circle, a mandala image, and that Laura is

The integrity and frankness of Rose and her acceptance of her fate as a woman is expressed to Laura: 'But sufferin' creeps up. And in different disguises. You do not recognize it, miss. You will see' (p. 77); this has a remarkable effect on Laura and it is one of the reasons for the gradual restoration of her Christian faith. Rose and Laura draw close together at the time of Rose's pregnancy; neither are married in any true Biblical sense, and yet, with Laura experiencing a pseudo-pregnancy, both know Rose is a surrogate for the infant which Laura had conceived at the time of 'consummation' of her 'marriage' to Voss in the episode with the mystical rose bushes.⁷⁴ The shared child, somehow conceived by both women, is given the name Mercy by Rose, her 'blood' mother, as a recognition of a Christian quality which Rose had seldom experienced, and the paradoxical grace that Rose thus hoped to achieve for having had a bastard pregnancy.

The joy of Laura's having a child and the constantly new experiences associated in Mercy's upbringing are described in terms of brilliant light:

Those ensuing days she was exhausted but content. They were the baby's days. There was golden fuzz of morning in the garden. She could not bring herself to tread upon the tender flesh of rose petals that were showered at her feet. To avoid this, she would walk round by another way, though it meant running the gauntlet of the sun. Then her duty was most delicious. She was the living shield, that deflected the most savage blows. Other pains, of desert suns, of letters unwritten, of the touch of his man's hands, with their queer pronounced finger joints, would fluctuate, as she carried her baby along the golden tunnels of light. (p. 231)

subconsciously with them at the sacrifice. See *Voss*, pp. 198-199.

⁷⁴The text reads: 'There was no doubt that the child was hers; nor did the blood mother protest, lying on her hot pillows in the shuttered, best room.' (*Voss*, p. 231)

Rose dies soon after, her body assuming a state reminiscent of the Biblical description of Christ's at the time of His crucifixion: 'Her hands had reached the position of infinite acceptance' (p. 232). This is the final statement about Rose, who through her suffering has bestowed upon Laura a final great gift of love - her own daughter, Mercy, who will remain her constant companion.

At the funeral Laura begins to understand this and we are told that 'it was Laura Trevelyan who saw clearest' (p. 234). The immensity of this vision and divine gift of love, all loves excelling, is later described by Laura in a letter to Voss:

We buried her [Rose] at the Sand Hills on an indescribable day, of heat, and cloud, and wind. As I stood there (I hesitate to write you all this, except that it is the truth), as I stood, 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 as I had found it on the pillow. (p. 239)

Through this experience Laura is able to tell Voss of her own further revelations and insights, particularly about the Australian landscape and its inhabitants,⁷⁵ and especially as Rose was humble and suffered humility. Her own plea is for (white Australia's) universal service and, by inference, for its willing acceptance of the great Biblical and Christian commandment, to 'love one another'.

⁷⁵ Laura writes:

Finally, I believe I have begun to understand this great country, which we have been presumptuous enough to call *ours*, and with which I shall be content to grow since we buried Rose. For a part of me has now gone into it. Do you know that a country does not develop through the prosperity of a few landowners and merchants, but out of the suffering of the humble? (Voss, p. 239)

But Voss does not receive the letter from his 'bride', and even if he had, would it have changed his attitude? The novel suggests not: he has in his first letter asked Laura not to pray for him. He has rejected advice and an admonition from Brother Müller earlier in the novel and the warning to curb his ambition and modify his arrogance. The urgency for a practice of humility is stressed by a man who personifies the virtue, and who is portrayed in an Eastern or orthodox iconic fashion or as an image of Christ with a golden aura about him, as White writes:

Then he leaned upon his rake. There was behind him a golden aureole of sun.
'Mr. Voss,' he said, with no suggestion of criticism, 'you have a contempt for God, because He is not in your own image.' (pp. 49-50)

Later Voss also ignores the further wisdom of the educated and Christian if dissipated Irish settler, Brendan Boyle, when one night in his cups the latter states how important it is 'to explore the depths of one's own repulsive nature' (p. 167), and likens the process to the peeling of fruit: 'To peel down to the last layer', he yawned. 'There is always another, and yet another, of more exquisite subtlety' (p. 167).⁷⁶ Voss also fails to learn from the example of love and humility clearly demonstrated and so offered to the expedition during its prolonged stay at Rhine Towers, the property of the Sandersons.

The stay at Rhine Towers, with the Sandersons, exposes Voss - and especially the men in the expedition - to the healing benison of the atmosphere of peace and tranquility created by the owner and his wife. Unlike

⁷⁶ This concept of attaining the innermost being of a person and likening the process to the core in a piece of fruit is common in White's writing. The same metaphor is used when Laura writes in

Sydney, it is portrayed as a true community of equals, working together in an atmosphere free of exploitation of each other or of the landscape. There is equal opportunity for all, and it seems a veritable Biblical paradise: when first seen by Voss it 'was for the moment pure gold' (p. 128). The (early) Christian theme is continued with Sanderson's telling Voss that they 'are even building a church' (p. 128). There is no apparent reply from Voss to this information, but shortly after the members of the expedition are introduced to Sanderson's wife, and at this moment Frank Le Mesurier realizes 'the serpent has slid even into this paradise' (p. 129). The text is ambiguous and whether Le Mesurier is referring to Voss alone or the (arrogant) expedition in general is unclear.

This community established by the Sandersons is one of learning and of spiritual knowledge, in which a pragmatic Christianity pervades all activities. The reader learns of Sanderson's 'Christian care' of his 'flocks and herds' (p. 126), and all those of the community introduced into the narrative are humble and innocent. Sanderson himself is 'a man of certain culture, which his passionate search for truth had rid of intellectual ostentation' (p. 126). He and his wife 'devour' books in their quest of traditional knowledge and their acceptance of failure and ability to learn further from them is 'perhaps the source of their perfection' (p. 131). They have no trouble detecting the pride and envy in Voss and are sadly aware that these forms of Biblical fault will cause his downfall. Their concern is Christian in its purpose and illuminating in its expression of their compassionate love:

That others did not share the perfection of their life would fill

her final letter to Voss, '[you] who has possession of the most secret part of me. You have taken the essential core of the apple...'. (Voss, p. 238)

her at times with a sense of guilt, and now especially was she guilty, by such golden light.

'Have you been watching him to that extent?' laughed her husband.

'It is not necessary to watch. One can feel it. I wish it were possible to heal him.' (p. 139)

Further association of the transfiguring saintly light with the Sandersons occurs at the end of the novel, as his former host attends the dedication of the Voss memorial in Sydney, when: 'Old Sanderson was bathed in a golden glow of age' (p. 442).

All the visitors to the Sanderson household, at the time of the expedition's stay there, whether adult or child, are described in terms of their possessed innocence and none more so than the emancipated convict Judd, now a neighbour and important friend to the Sandersons. He is to join the expedition as a sort of guide and grace and is to become Voss's rival, later the alternate leader and finally its only survivor. Judd symbolises a sinner, by pain a born-again Christian, searching to atone for his pre-convict behaviour and for his forgiving understanding of the behaviour of those who had jailed and beaten him. Like Rose Portion, he has experienced suffering and the most debased actions against him, but now a quester he is prepared to forgive and forget all that pain. As he says so joyfully to Voss: 'Oh, Sir, I have nothing to lose, and everything to find' (p. 149).

There are parallels with Rose Portion when Judd uses the words: 'I am a simple man' (p. 136), meaning not only is he complex but knowing of the great verities. As readers, we understand this sense of knowing to be deeply intuitive, but, like Voss, he has limited powers of self-examination; so that when we read 'rock cannot know rock, stone cannot come together with stone,

except in conflict' (p. 136), we are alerted to the likely future for the expedition and of its leadership. Voss's self-delusion is most apparent at around the time of meeting Judd. Whilst he recognizes the other's inner strength,⁷⁷ when riding to visit him at his home the day after their meeting, Voss imagines himself as a divinity, even being worshipped by Laura Trevelyan. Realizing however, how absurd a notion this is, and that she with her humility would pray for him rather than praise him, he 'Then laughed, and spat it out' (p. 144).

His journey at this time is almost that of a knightly wilderness quest, one through countryside hostile and populated with 'dark' and 'songless' birds (pp. 143-144): the contrast with the landscape of Judd's house with its descriptions of peace and tranquility is immediate. Judd's wife is concerned with a Biblical domesticity, ever diligent and understanding of her husband's need to 'explore', even though she does not fully comprehend the nature or purpose of his quest. But, despite this, she is still able to offer Voss sensible advice, as others had before, emphasizing the need for personal humility: 'You will be well advised to let them have their glory, take it from me' (p. 147).

Like the Sandersons' place, the property of Judd and his family is a veritable oasis in a landscape of indifference and brutality,⁷⁸ and, as with the description of the Sandersons' property, there are textual associations with birds, sunlight and especially water. This Mandala image of harmony: and accord is emphasized in the description of the spring where Judd washes, recalling the Biblical ritual -

⁷⁷ Voss's response to Judd's declaration of simplicity is 'Which can read: *most complex*.' (author's italics), *Voss*, p. 136.

⁷⁸ A reminder of this is the gallows used to string up and dress carcasses, and which Voss incorrectly identifies as a gibbet. Whether he does this deliberately to remind Judd that he is

Circles expanding on the precious water made it seem possible this was the centre of the earth. (p. 149)⁷⁹

Voss mentally notes all of this and recognizes the importance of the place but cannot conceive that Judd is to risk all of it for, seemingly, nothing. He thus misjudges Judd to whom the loss by theft of his only significant material possession, a gold chain (p. 149), is nothing in comparison to the miraculous natural resources of the homesite and the spring.

At the final place of call before the expedition proceeds into the unknown Voss receives his last warnings as to his own dangerously ambitious nature. This place is one called Jildra and is perhaps a play on Jerilderie, the town raided by the Kelly gang and famous for Ned Kelly's 'Jerilderie Letter' vindicating his conduct; Voss, too, writes his letter to Laura Trevelyan, warning her that 'Jildra is my last chance' to 'receive your answer' (p. 154). White uses the letter in the text to introduce the reader to the last property in civilisation, the last point before entering the darkness and with echoes of Kelly's fate and death it sets an ominous tone. Jildra is owned by the Irish free settler, Brendan Boyle. In contrast to 'the lamps of friendship' (p. 154), that were present at their departure from the Sandersons, the entry to the Boyle property is seen in a 'red light' - the colour of blood - and Boyle himself is 'of a reddish, chestnut colour, intensified by the setting sun' (p. 165). He is disreputable and

aware of his past is unclear, but Voss is well educated and should know the difference.

⁷⁹ It is incongruous, but in keeping with the description of this place at the centre of the earth, that apart from navigational instruments carried by the expedition, Judd probably the least educated person in the novel, has the only scientific instrument, a telescope, mentioned in the novel. Why, like the episode with the mistaken identification of the gallows, Voss, chooses to pretend ignorance is not clear.

dissolute, but like other Irish characters in White's novels⁸⁰ is rather likeable and also (socially) sagacious. Boyle's wisdom is of the form that is most eloquent with drink, and in this state he urges Voss to undertake a journey of self-discovery, in a clever blending of the literal and metaphysical landscape:

...yet it is the apparent poverty of one's surroundings that proves in the end to be the attraction. This is something that many refuse to understand. Nor will they accept that, to explore the depths of one's own repulsive nature is more than irresistible - it is necessary. (p. 167)

White creates the character of Boyle as a man who requires only the basic essentials for his existence. He is not concerned with animal husbandry and he uses the local Aboriginal women to work in the house and for sex as the need arises. By adopting his manual labouring style he has abandoned any semblance of intellectual or cultural existence and, to some extent, becomes part of the landscape. Voss, too, with his desire to dominate the country has changed visibly,⁸¹ his external appearance apparently identifying more closely with the harsh landscape, but, as White remarks, both are really 'in disguise' (p.168). This bush patina, as it were, is evident when the two Aboriginal trackers first appear. Even before they are sighted Voss is aware:

Their bare feet made upon the earth only a slight, but very particular sound, which to the German's ears at once established their ownership. (p. 169)

Although he is aware that he is in the presence of the original landholders, it is a terrible irony that Voss and Boyle remain confined by their cultural past and

⁸⁰ Brendan Boyle is very much intellectually like the shrewd emancipist Irish merchant, Delaney in *A Fringe of Leaves*, and in his behaviour resembles that of Mick O'Dowd in *The Tree of Man*.

⁸¹ The description of Voss reads: 'Blackened and yellowed by the sun, dried in the wind, he now

so offer to Dugald and Jacky only the stock and contemptuous tokens of the European invader - the brass military button and a death-symbolic clasp knife.

Within White's writing notable symbolism is often used for portentous signification. Thus a careful reading of the passages between the stay of the expedition at the Sandersons and then at Jildra reveal the symbolic change in heavenly bodies watching them. At Rhine Towers descriptions of the sun and therefore bright light occur: at Jildra the moon becomes a notable feature:

Heavy moons hung over Jildra at that season. There was a golden moon of placid swollen belly. There were the ugly, bronze, male moons, threateningly lopsided. One night of wind and dust, there was a pale moonstone, or, as rags of cloud polished its face, delicate glass instrument, on which the needle barely fluttered, indicating the direction that some starry destiny must take. (p. 176)

Moon symbolism is complex but this description at Jildra seems to relate, in part, to the behaviour of Brendan Boyle and the Aboriginal women, and pagan ritual is to be identified with lunar phases. The later passage relates to the deeply sensual in both Boyle and Voss:

The dreams of men were influenced by the various moons, with the result that they were burying their faces in the pregnant moon-women, or shaking their bronze fists at any threat to their virility. (p. 176)

It is, apparently, under such influence that Voss one night sleep-walks (p. 177); later we learn that the prismatic compass has been taken from its previous location and placed in Judd's saddle bag (p. 200). Judd is humiliated in the eyes of the other expedition members, since he had been regarded as completely trustworthy. The seeming flaw is created by Voss (p. 183), under

resembled some root, of dark and esoteric purpose'. (Voss, p. 169)

the guise of sleepwalking, in order to achieve a moral advantage over Judd and, thereby, to achieve control over him. The later description of the discovery of the compass is associated with a bird-like image (p. 183), suggesting Judd is albatross-like, and will bring doom to the expedition if he should be harmed or die.

Voss and the expedition leave Jildra, as they had arrived 'in a tunnel of red light' (p. 188), and not long after Voss clashes with Judd over the celebration of Christmas. Judd celebrates the event by killing a sheep in Old Testament fashion and he is noted to be at 'the circumference of that grassy circle' (p. 198); Voss himself recalling a pre-wedding picnic with Laura in which 'they had a circle of their own' (p. 198). The importance of centrality within the embracing mandala image is understood by Voss as he watches Judd slaughter the beast:

As he saw it now, perfection is always circular, enclosed. So that Judd's circle was enviable. (p. 198)

But this continual (symbolic) rivalry is too much, so that Voss refuses to eat or share part of the sacrificial lamb, and on being 'Left alone, Voss groaned. He would not, could not learn, nor accept humility' (p. 199). His leadership is again compromised when he falls ill after being kicked by a mule.

Judd assumes the command, ministering to Voss, who interprets these actions as adding to Judd's moral dimension and so usurping his own authority:

Voss, who had felt more exposed on some less physical occasions, despised all sickness; he despised physical strength; he despised, though secretly, even the compassion he had sensed in the ministrations of Judd. His own strength, he felt, could not decrease with physical disability. But, was

Judd's power increased by compassion? (p. 212)

Voss copes with these doubts by 'exonerating' Judd (p. 213), a word with a spiritual association - as Voss implicitly relieves Judd of blame or guilt - and a part-compassionate connotation. Of course as an unbeliever Voss believes that he is entitled to assume such a role which adds new irony to the situation, for it is really Judd who, by his behaviour, has demonstrated true Christian love. Voss, however, reassures himself that compassion, 'a feminine virtue' (p. 213), is easily dismissed and did not pertain to him because of his superior will.

At the same time that Voss has contemptuously dismissed this feminine 'grace', it is the distant Laura Trevelyan, by now his 'wife', who achieves the greatest insight into the nature of the country, its inhabitants and even more importantly, into the nature of humility and acceptance. Of her offer to share this knowledge with Voss, the text reads: 'let us understand this and serve *together*' (p. 329). Again White emphasises their serving together, and with the word in italics, demonstrates not just the love that caused her to 'marry' Voss but the love embodied within the meaning of the first Commandment. The profundity of her knowledge and understanding of the nature of the love of serving is to be revealed to Laura as she incorporates the word into her knitting. By using in the wool the landscape colours, and red,⁸² a symbol of blood, for Voss, the reader is drawn into the understanding Laura appreciates and reports to Voss by letter:

However as I worked, the letters were soon blazing at me with

⁸² See entry for the colour 'red' in J. C. Cooper, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

such intensity that the most witless person alive must have understood their significance. (p. 239)

It is noteworthy that other parts of the definition of the word 'serve' involve subordination and humility, the very qualities which Laura exhorts Voss to assume. However, by including the colour crimson in the sampler, Laura signals that he will not accept her offers, but will meet his death and his blood be spilt in the landscape.

True service in any form cannot be performed effectively unless the quality of love expressed is inherently important, and underlying honesty now becomes important as Voss cares for the ill Le Mesurier. The initial reader-impression of concern and love involved in performing the most menial and repugnant of tasks gives way to the realisation that it is yet another method by which Voss demonstrates his lust for all power: 'Never before had he held a man's soul in his hand' (p. 271).

The reasons for the need for Voss to be in this position stem partly from his feeling of innate superiority⁸³ to society in general and especially that of colonial⁸⁴ Sydney, but also because he views Le Mesurier as an intellectual equal. Additionally, Voss, aware Le Mesurier has been keeping a diary during the course of the expedition, is desperate to read its contents. This desire has heightened following the stay with the Sandersons, and the time when Le Mesurier experienced his own epiphany and Voss had sensed that 'Frank is

⁸³ Earlier in the novel, whilst resting at the Sandersons both Harry Robarts and Turner speak to Voss about intimate family matters. Voss responded as he:

...received these confidences, and locked them up quickly, both because they were valuable and because it repelled him to share the sins of human vermin on their infected wall. (p. 141)

⁸⁴ It should not be forgotten Voss has a university education, something very uncommon in

hiding something' (p. 143). Further, Voss knows that when he first met Le Mesurier that the latter was suffering from a form of melancholia, being fearful he might undergo spiritual dissolution, and even eventual destruction, if he remained in the colony, since it was 'potentially fatal' (p. 35). Thus Le Mesurier, in this condition, is deeply vulnerable to the subtle approaches of Voss, and when they talk together in the Botanic Gardens is much impressed by the wisdom of Voss's observation: 'To make yourself, it is also necessary to destroy yourself' (p. 34).

When Voss then appeals to Le Mesurier's 'genius', he forgets his own cynicism momentarily and agrees to join the expedition. When Le Mesurier is ill he speaks with sagacity and 'lucidity' (p. 271), advising Voss that:

The mystery of life is not solved by success, which is an end in itself, but in failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming. (p. 271)

Both men, therefore, share a common understanding of the progressive nature of suffering and adversity. When Voss finally reads the diary he is unable to accept its terrifyingly lucid and revelatory content, secretly reading prose and poetry that equates childhood innocence with Blakean vision. But not only is the writing visionary, but the imagery of childhood, death and dreams function as a redemptive process, with the exhortation, 'prayer is, indeed stronger' (p. 295), something the proud and self-centred Voss would never accept and had already rejected.

Whilst attributing the contents to 'mania', he is none the less inexplicably drawn to read the final poems which deal first with the arrogance of man, his

fall and humanity, death, and lastly treat of eternal life. But Voss feels nothing of personal relevance to be in them, dismissing the work as '*Irrsinn*' ('rubbish' p. 297), and reassuring himself that his will and determination are all that is required for success. However, Le Mesurier recovers and, after a prolonged wait in a Plato-like cave for rain to cease, the expedition re-commences. But the journey becomes increasingly hazardous; Palfreyman, speared by the blacks, then dies, and Le Mesurier now becoming completely disillusioned with Voss's leadership after questioning him about his plans for their survival, will later suicide. When Voss admits he has nothing to offer but only 'trust to God' (p. 379), Le Mesurier realises that this man whom he had believed in as a 'disciple', was empty, a void in whom the hopes and expectations expressed in his poetry had disappeared. Shattered, he suicides by cutting open his own throat.

Finally only Harry Robarts and Voss are left; Judd, Turner and Angus have turned back, and Le Mesurier and Palfreyman are dead. Still Voss perseveres, communicating with Laura who continues to plead with him and offer support and prayers, 'I shall not fail you' (p. 363). Immediately before her severe illness Laura speaks to Voss, as the expedition enters a native encirclement, challenging his vanity with a portentous and probing rhetorical question, 'Do you see now?' she asked. 'Man is God decapitated' (p. 364). This revelatory interchange takes place at a site, either numinous or sacred, or is it both: 'where the swords of the sun penetrated the skin of the stone [and] a blinding light would pour forth' (p. 364). As Voss is led away by the natives in a position that must suggest Christ's last confinement, the explorer's vision of Laura is also ominously sacrificial - exposed, naked and without her hair but 'beautiful'

(p. 367).

The subsequent death of Voss is associated in the text with three important images of light. The first is the appearance of a comet (p. 378), a natural phenomenon expected and understood by the whites but known to the blacks as a magic spirit. The natives equate the presence of Voss and their sight of the comet, attributing magic to both, but once the comet has disappeared and the light faded and therefore by inference Voss's magic has also gone, the natives are no longer intimidated; this is the Aborigines' moment of epiphany or realisation that Voss is not a god and so he is murdered. The second is the final appearance of Laura to Voss, a bridal dream in which, 'her full, white, immaculate body became the shining source of all light' (p. 383).⁸⁵ Voss is 'flooded with light and memory' (p. 383), during the revelation and they are united mentally in a final act of mutual contrition and of sacramental forgiveness.

The third is the epiphany which Laura experiences at the end of her illness and, with it, a deep understanding of suffering and of despair. The nature of the illness has eluded her attending physicians and despite physical therapies - including the indignity of having all her hair cut off - it remains a medical mystery. Despite a fear for her life the fever finally breaks and Laura is granted a profound insight: 'Dear Christ, now at last I understand your suffering' (p. 386). With the benefit of revelation, Laura is now able to explain:

How important it is to understand the three stages. Of God into man. Man. And man returning into God. (p. 386)

⁸⁵ This final vision is of profound importance as Laura is now described in religious terms of transfiguration, ('immaculate'), and as the source of 'all' light. Note the use of the definite article.

With this insight she cries out in adoration:

‘Here, suddenly, in this room, of which I imagined I knew all the corners, I understand.’ (p. 386)

Her illumination and knowledge are associated with the appearance of a more than physical light:

Beyond the curtains the day was now blazing, and the woman in the bed was burning with a similar light. (p. 386)

Given this sudden yet ultimate moment of epiphany, Laura is now able to comment about man in general, but especially about Voss:

When man is truly humbled, when he has learnt that he is not God then he is nearest to becoming so. In the end he may ascend. (p. 387)

A form of self discovery has also finally come to Voss, as, alone, he faces certain death, ‘only he could endure it, and that because at last he was truly humbled’ (p. 389). He had received or experienced a form of shared communion from the Aboriginals and, as feared by Laura, is beheaded. The act is significantly performed by the guide Jackie, ironically using the very knife Voss had gifted to him at Jildra at the time of their first meeting. Laura has an intuitive knowledge of the event, then lamenting in a paraphrase of the crucified Saviour’s words:

‘O God,’ cried the girl, at last, tearing it out. ‘It is over. It is over.’ (p. 395)

She is simultaneously being described in a mode recalling mediaeval German accounts of the Crucifixion as ‘streaming with moisture and a peculiar

grey light' (p. 395).

Other members of the expedition also achieve a measure of release and understanding after their own, often painful searching. In the case of Le Mesurier - and in a fashion musing on the like behaviour of Judas - his realisation that Voss is a flawed saviour and hero, like 'gold, tarnishing into baser metals' (p. 380), precipitates his own suicide. This act fulfils the New Testament-like prophecies about Voss:

He [Voss] did not altogether trust those he had chosen for his patron's comfort, but at least they were weak men, he considered... (p. 22)

and of Le Mesurier himself, made earlier in the novel. Le Mesurier is unhappy and unsure of his future when he first meets Voss, but his initial reaction to the invitation to join the expedition is strangely prophetic: 'I am not sure that I want to cut my throat just yet' (p 34).

Le Mesurier, as with all members of the expedition, is used by White to exemplify a character type and its likely related pattern of religious encounter. In contrast to the innocent Harry Robarts, discovering salvation in paradise, Le Mesurier has the experience of the cynical, world-weary intellectual snob, who engages too readily in metaphysics. His undoubted, if pretentious, intellect is recognised by Voss and it is to him that Voss reveals his own thoughts, for Le Mesurier has free will-and an immortal soul, to save or lose. It is also to Le Mesurier that Voss gives insightful counsel, regarding the importance of humiliation and suffering, as necessary pre-requisites to becoming a whole

and complete man.⁸⁶

Le Mesurier, who is both like and unlike the traditional Judas type, knows his own weaknesses, constantly commencing projects without bringing anything worthwhile to fruition, ever seeking something more stable than dreams to galvanise him into action for, much like the irritant to a pearl's formation, he calls this urge his 'oyster delusion' (p. 99). What he seeks is finally revealed at that escapist, and for him unearned, earthly paradise, Rhine Towers. In this oasis of goodness and Christian virtue established by the Sandersons, he experiences so very poignantly guileless child-like innocence, celebrated later in his almost Blakean poetry (p. 296).

The two Christian believers in the book, Palfreyman and Judd, are both associated with bird imagery, long symbolic of the human soul,⁸⁷ and according to Carl Jung⁸⁸ every winged bird is symbolic of spiritualisation. The bird, according to Jung, is a beneficent animal representing spirits or angels or thoughts and flights of fancy - wings particularly equating with spiritual transcendency.

Palfreyman is by occupation an ornithologist and collecting specimens on behalf of a patron in England is the Banks-like reason for his travelling to Australia. His occupation reinforces the symbolism and his motives suggesting also a higher and metaphorical proselytizing for Christian 'souls'. As with Le Mesurier, Palfreyman meets Voss in the Botanic Gardens in Sydney. Here Voss is challenged by Palfreyman's rejection of his accusation of being

⁸⁶ He says: 'To make yourself, it is also necessary to destroy yourself', *Voss*, p. 34.

⁸⁷ J. E. Cirlot, ed., *A Dictionary of Symbols*, translated by Jack Sage, English Trans. copyright Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1962, Philosophical Library, New York, 2nd edn., 1971.

⁸⁸ Carl Jung, *Man and his Symbols*, (1964), Pan Books, London, 1978, pp. 152-156.

'strong-willed', Palfreyman replying that his work 'is the will of God' (pp. 46-47). Palfreyman is also described as a kind 'nice' man (p. 121), the recipient of Laura's thoughts about suffering (p. 107), confided to him before the expedition leaves Sydney. Through his Christian virtue he and Judd establish a rapport and understanding (p. 138), something Voss resents for its purity and goodness.

Significantly, however, it is to Voss and not to Judd that Palfreyman reveals the moral burden troubling him. One quiet evening, beside a river (p. 260), Palfreyman discloses the inadequacy he feels in being unable to relieve his sister's distress at her physical deformity and apparent deficiency before God (pp. 261-264).⁸⁹ Palfreyman feels strongly that he should find a way to intervene and to share her burden, although no opportunity has yet occurred. However, when the expedition is challenged by a party of Aborigines, Palfreyman unhesitatingly volunteers to confront them, unarmed, 'trusting in faith' (p. 341). He is speared and dies, but not before it is revealed that the incestuous love his sister had for him had been responsible for his sense of despair and guilt,⁹⁰ and the need for atonement the probable reason for his seeking Australia and his readiness to die for perceived sensuality in order to achieve atonement: 'Ah, Lord,' he said, upon his knees, 'if I had been stronger' (p. 343).

Judd, an emancipist convict not introduced into the novel until approximately one-third the way through (p. 133), represents the type of born-

⁸⁹ Also compare this with Hurtle and Rhoda in *The Vivisector*.

⁹⁰ Compare this with Arthur's sexual exploitation by his brother Waldo in *The Solid Mandala*.

again Christian⁹¹. He becomes increasingly important in the middle section of the novel as an alternate leader of the expedition, initially in fact when Voss is incapacitated, and later in reality. His presence in the novel is a source of plot tension in the middle sections, providing a counterweight as the more truly seeking Christian figure on the one hand, with Voss as the egotistical self-reliant fanatic on the other.

Confined and literally shackled when a convict, Judd is a forgiven and forgiving sinner, now an 'open book', who repudiates material wealth, searching only for an inner peace. In the novel he is associated with water and mandala imagery, with the latter emphasised in the description of his house being harmoniously 'at the centre of the earth' (p. 149). This description suggests that he is already 'aware' and does not need to experience any form of illumination or epiphany; indeed he is associated more with meditative silences (p. 148).⁹²

Judd is presented in the novel as a paradox: old in appearance but young in years, professing an hermetic simplicity: 'I am nothing to understand' (p. 148), but suspected by Voss because of this to 'read: *most complete*' (p. 136). What Voss has not detected at the time of their first meeting, but which will become increasingly evident during the course of the expedition, is how, like himself, Judd is so self-willed. To emphasise this the author reveals their cores

⁹¹ He resembles, in his Christian search, the character Stan Parker in the novel *The Tree of Man*. As if to emphasise this the description of his meeting with Voss includes an association of his physical appearance with trees:

He was, in fact, a union of strength and delicacy, like some gnarled trees that have been tortured and twisted into exaggerated shapes, but of which the leaves still quiver at each change, and constantly shed shy, subtle scents... (p. 133).

⁹² This feature is appreciated by Voss at the time of their first meeting:

He is strong, mused Voss, considering not so much the thick body as some strength of

somewhat portentously to the reader: 'rock cannot know rock, stone cannot come together with stone, except in conflict' (p. 136).

The reasons for him leaving an apparent paradise, his home, and for joining the expedition are multiple, complex and deeply ambiguous. Judd himself has apparently volunteered because of previous experience in the country through which they are to travel. He also mentions in conversation with Voss that he has 'a duty to offer my services to the colony on the strength of that experience' (p. 136.) That this is enigmatic and somewhat disingenuous, Voss immediately detects and so he questions him in view of the Government's inhumane treatment of the convict. However, Judd's use of the word 'duty' is important here: there is an ecclesiastical association of dues to God for the sins of forgiveness; and secondly, in the context of the discussion that takes place later in the novel with the post-mortem conducting Colonel Hebden, Judd is repaying a personal debt of love and friendship to the Sandersons.⁹³ When pressed by Voss to explain why he would leave a house located in such an idyllic position, Judd, like an early Church father or desert hermit, replies: 'Oh, sir, I have nothing to lose, and everything to find' (p. 149).

Judd's wife is, however, more pragmatic and insightful of human nature when she explains her husband's more vain motivation to Voss:

Because all men will lead, some of the time, anyways, even the meanest of 'em. It is in their nature. (p. 147)

silence of which the man was possessed. (Voss, p. 148)

⁹³ Mr. Sanderson advises: 'He joined the expedition when it passed through. In fact, I was responsible for that.' (Voss, p. 442)

As if to reinforce her perception of the respective motives of her husband and Voss, she finishes her conversation, prophesying: 'there would be no more suitable than him to lead this great expedition' (p. 147).

Early in the course of the expedition Judd is represented as a Christ-like figure: administering the slaughter of the sacrificial lamb to celebrate a form of ritualistic Christmas (p. 148), and, later, when part of their flour supply is lost in a river crossing, divides the remaining reserves (p. 279), effectively rehearsing and repeating the Biblical parable. When Voss is kicked by a mule and is incapacitated, Judd assumes leadership and effectively organises the men and animals, as well as ministering to the physical needs of Voss. This form of regularly practised and consistent selflessness Voss finds threatening both to his own power and pragmatic morality, and so he recalls his earlier suspicions about Judd's strength and compassion (see p. 212).

Additionally through this virtue of compassion ('a feminine virtue' according to Voss, p. 213), the selfless Judd is linked to Laura Trevelyan, who continuously presses Voss in letter and dream to surrender his position of destructive power:

He lay thinking of the wife from whose hands he would accept salvation, if he were intended to renounce the crown of fire for the ring of gentle gold. (p. 213)

As the expedition falters Judd rebels against the authority of Voss⁹⁴ and turns back with Angus and Turner. Judd disagrees with the thoughtless manner in which Voss 'drives' the men, - rather like 'mules' - and finally

⁹⁴ At the final appearance of Judd in the novel and following the unveiling of the memorial to Voss, Mr. Sanderson says Judd had told him he had 'mutinied' against the authority of Voss

understands the loss in Voss of true vision and, therefore, of hope. Immediately before announcing his decision and within the hearing of Voss, Judd murmurs out loud:

‘In those days, I knew how much and how little I was capable of. I knew where *I* was headed. Now I do not know about *us*.’
(p. 339)

Turner and Angus die on the return journey, and so Judd is the only survivor and reappears in the narrative at the end of the story to meet Laura Trevelyan in the company of Mr. Sanderson and Colonel Hebden. At this meeting Judd gives a fictitious account of the death of Voss, indicating he had witnessed the event and was present at the moment of death. Not only is this version unexpected, but, to the surprise of all, he acknowledges and stresses Voss’s compassion and identifies him as a Christian.

Further, because of the other’s suffering, Judd appropriates for Voss spiritual identification with the land upon his death, a spiritual identification previously a marker of the Aboriginal culture. This is not entirely inappropriate, as Voss had experienced a form of epiphany when the expedition’s members are sheltering in the caves during the prolonged rain. That experience involved exposure to what can only be called an Aboriginal-Judeo-Christian symbol/phenomenon as ‘an animal’, a Rainbow Serpent-like creature, termed ‘the creator’ awakes and slithers out of the cave. The German’s unexpected epiphany is in the form of light:

Now, liquid light was allowed to pour from great receptacles. The infinitely pure white light might have remained the masterpiece of creation. if fire had not suddenly broken out.

(Voss, p. 444).

For the sun was rising, in spite of immersion. (p. 282)

The reader must, somehow, reconcile the alternate stories of the death of Voss. This is not a form of post-modern literary device by White, but rather an attempt by the author to partially redeem the hitherto fatally flawed character. It also ends the meaningless speculation and investigation by such people as Colonel Hebden, even as it also enhances the mythic quality of Voss and of the whole expedition. And although Laura Trevelyan knows that Judd is not telling the whole truth, now that the Voss experience is mythologised into the history books and he is venerated in a commemorative bronze statue, it is irrelevant exactly how he died. Society is now satisfied; both they and Voss have paid a price; he failed but this would be an unacceptable truth and thus a fiction is created to ensure a general palatability. But for Laura, her knowledge allows her the understanding, that she shares with Colonel Hebden, after Judd leaves the gathering 'that Voss had in him a little of Christ' and was, like all of us, a mixture of good and evil (p. 445). Not only is character perceived to be a composite but truth is also composed of multiple versions, as Laura explains: 'All truths are particoloured. Except the greatest truth of all' (p. 444).

The other expedition members Angus and Turner have a minor role in the narrative, but they provide an important contrast as unbelievers beside the spiritual seekers, Palfreyman and Le Mesurier. They do not have any vision or power of imagination, relying instead for the certainties of life upon material goods and possessions. To heighten the contrast with other expedition members they come from very disparate backgrounds: Angus is a wealthy landowner, Turner probably a murderer. They are drawn together because of

their basic blunt personalities, 'We understand each other, Ralph, you and me.' So says Turner one day as they surreptitiously discuss and question Voss's leadership (p. 254). Angus is described as being too 'decent' to reveal anything of significance (p. 258), and Turner is too 'cunning' and a man whose 'mind has gone sour' (pp. 41-42). Their 'bush' quart pot used for their cooking becomes the symbol of their total reliance on the physical world, and it acts as a metaphor, anchoring them firmly to the mundane and protecting them against the dangerous mystery of such people such as Le Mesurier, who have created poetry and beauty (pp. 254-255). Paradoxically it is such a pot that Palfreyman uses to focus upon for a moment of afflatus after the expedition crosses the swollen river (pp. 278-279) - paradoxical because it is while discussing the importance of the quart pot that Turner chooses to reveal to Ralph Angus, 'I do not believe in God,' and, in fact, he goes on, 'not in nothing that I cannot touch' (p. 256); at the same time he gives the quart pot an 'angry poke' and so it became a divinely-charged Platonic object by association and an objective correlative of his suppressed yearnings.

But the author does not abandon his characters without some opportunity for the reader to ponder their possible ultimate enlightenment. During a storm, when Turner and Angus are sheltering together beneath an overhanging rock, they are confronted by Le Mesurier, sent as a messenger by Voss. That he is different from them they both know, but the passage suggests they are 'illuminated' with the full knowledge of the difference (p. 253). However, because of their limitations neither Turner nor Angus venture to explore the nature of the personal experience which, as the reader senses, was in reality, most profound and revelatory for them:

What they had always suspected, the lightning at once made evident: that the rider was not of their own kind. Even before he was gone, each of the cave-dwellers was raging, and longing to communicate his rage. They were brought together closer than before. Each wondered what the other had seen, although neither would have dared to speculate on the nature of his vision. Thought is very disturbing when it lights up the mind by green flashes. (pp. 253-254)

By contrast, the imaginative and perceptive Le Mesurier is aware of the nature of the two he has been sent to advise:

Nor did he [Le Mesurier] know how to address the two individuals into whose souls he saw most clearly... (p. 250)

The youngest member of the expedition is the uneducated and apparent simpleton, Harry Robarts, a good-hearted, simple, English lad. He too, in his own way, searches fruitlessly but has to acknowledge: 'I dunno what I am' (p. 37). Yet he is unquestionably loyal, with an acolyte's devotion to Voss: 'The boy did not ask for more than to be led' (p. 96), and 'his simple soul [was] open to receive the superior will of whatever master' (p. 94). His innocence, wholesome and unfettered, allows him to almost frolic in the fresh experiences of the expedition, especially in the early stages. Once away from the capital of the colony's confining oppressiveness, he grows in stature and feels a boyish and trusting equality with the other expedition members. He is able to interact with them and jokes freely, for example when they run out of milk for the tea:

The boy could not stop, but continued to laugh beneath the stars. The apparent simplicity of space had deceived his rather simple mind. He was free, of past, and future. His hilarious body had forgotten its constricting clothes. (p. 193)

He is associated in a strange if simplistic empathy with the constellations which continue to 'dazzle' him, particularly after he learns their ancient and so

wondrously potent names from Voss. This illuminating association is therefore, emphasised with the escape from previous confinement and restriction, being for him both physical and mental.

However, despite his ignorance and perhaps because of his essential innocence, Robarts is able to understand immediately the meaning and significance of the Aboriginal drawings in the rock cave. Apparently early physical and mental confinement had served to enhance his developing intuitiveness:

Privation, which had reduced the strength of his body, had increased his vision and simplicity of mind, so that he was treading through the withered grass with the horde of ochrous hunters. (p. 280)

Paradoxically the native-like intuition of Robarts is confirmed by the native guide, Jackie, but ridiculed by Voss for his naivety: 'It is as simple as that,' Voss said (p. 280). Because of his moral goodness, Robarts is able to achieve an enlightening fulfilment as he participates in the funeral service for the murdered Palfreyman. This illumination is helpfully associated with light and the image of a bird, a symbol of the soaring of the soul to its higher destiny. As the text continues, in the description of this unexpected transfiguration:

[i]n the case of Harry Robarts, however, truth descended upon ignorance in a blinding light. He saw into the meaning of words, and watched the white bird depart out of the hole in Mr. Palfreyman's side as they lowered the body into the ground. (p. 344)

Later in the narrative when the expedition is divided, Robarts is again associated with the stars and light as he is interrogated by Voss about his 'learning': although Robarts has achieved profound insight, he is, through lack

of sophistication and education, unable to express this (mystical) knowledge:

'I do not know,' he said at last, shyly. 'I cannot say it. But know. Why, Sir, to live, I suppose.'

He blushed in the darkness for the blundering inadequacy of his own words, but in his weak, feverish condition, was vibrating and fluctuating, like any star-living, in fact.

'Living?' laughed the German.

He was shouting with laughter to hide his joy.

'Then I have taught you something shameful. How they would accuse me!'

'I am happy,' said Harry Robarts. (p. 360)

Voss is obviously delighted to hear of Robart's recently acquired knowledge and the intercourse between the two emphasises yet again the importance in the novel of the revelatory collision/dichotomy between the binary opposites of ignorance/ darkness and the new, cleansing knowledge/light; the progress of another, when it does not threaten, can be a shared delight.

Apart from Judd, the only other members of the expedition who do not (need to) experience any form of revelation are the Aboriginal guides, Jackie and Dugald. The reader's introduction to the Aboriginal inhabitants of the colony had occurred at the wharf on the occasion of the departure of the expedition. Amongst the milling crowd are:

Two aboriginal women, dressed in the poorest shifts of clothing, but the most distinguished silence, were seated on the dirt beside the wharf, broiling on a fire of coals the fish that they had caught. And a little boy, introduced especially into this regretful picture, was selling hot mutton pies that he carried in a wooden box. He was walking, and calling, and dawdling, and looking, and picking his snub nose. The little boy would not have asked to live in any other surroundings. He belonged to that place. (p. 99)

There are important aspects of this paragraph, especially that the women are not clearly clad physically but seen in a 'distinguished silence', one

emphasising their dignity and integrity, despite their poverty. They eat fish they have caught themselves, reinforcing their original self-sufficiency, whilst the boy sells mutton, the introduced product of the colonists. The pies are carried in a wooden box, metaphoric indication of the restricted and confined existence of the whites. Finally, and most importantly, the boy 'belonged to that place', a statement of inalienable right, and possession. Ownership of the land by the Aborigine is again emphasised when Jackie and Dugald are first introduced to Voss, as he notes:

Their bare feet made upon the earth only a slight, but very particular sound, which, to the German's ears, at once established their ownership. (p. 169)

But the nature of Aboriginality as equated with the land is not wholly expressed through possession; as Jackie explains to Voss, even the dead are 'everywhere' as spirits (p. 275), a metaphysical concept alien to the colonists whose importance in the colony is measured by the extent of their landholdings.⁹⁵ In the Aboriginal state, time and space are an artificial construct of no importance, so that the recondite phrase 'the present absorbed them utterly' (p. 250), referring to Dugald as he rejoins his tribe is not as abstruse as it appears. This is the understanding which Judd seeks to convey to the gathering of the interested persons at the end of the novel, when he first meets Laura Trevelyan. At this encounter Judd's claims for the death of Voss and of his presence at his death are spurious, but his reassurance to Laura that Voss still exists in spirit can be made in truth because of their mutual

⁹⁵ Most noteworthy is the description of the aspirations of Una Pringle as she carefully assesses the assets of potential suitors. See page 66, where it is evident Una has already thoroughly

experiences of suffering and hardship. Judd also knows that Voss understood the country and was prepared to explore it on its own terms and not as a coloniser or exploiter. This is akin to the grace shown to Dugald as he comes across a tribe of Aboriginals: 'they realised this was a man full of the wisdom and dignity that is derived from long and important journeys' (p. 219).

Mr. Bonner, the man who mainly financed the expedition, is, with his family, a merchant, an exemplar of a type in that Colonial society, that is both confined and defined by its possessions. Living, as they do, in a sandstone mansion with 'half open shutters' (p. 14), an interior gloomy with ignorance and heavy 'dark' (p. 8) furniture, which contrasts with the outside, the Bonners lack that greater knowledge, one metaphorically to be found when 'leaves played, and birds, and light' (p. 15). Bonner, himself in fact, fears knowledge, avoids his expensive and tastefully furnished study in his mansion, and senses in Laura Trevelyan, as in others, a considerable intellectual capacity which he does not comprehend and so carefully avoids. He and his merchant friends have financed the expedition Voss leads, in order to achieve both reflected glory, if it is successful, and some great - if not yet obvious - future mercantile advantage. Not only is his mansion suffocating to the mind, but his form of elite transport, the coffin-like brougham has the same effect: 'he sat in the gloom of the enclosed brougham' (p. 353), and later we read: 'he was rather lonely in the brougham'. (p. 353).⁹⁶ The Bonners are the 'boxed' character types so frequently parodied by White in the canon for their

researched the potential benefits of Woburn McAllister, and whom she marries, obviously for this wealth rather than for love.

⁹⁶The same enclosure of the occupants and their minds occurs with the description of Mr. and Mrs. Fitzpatrick in *A Fringe of Leaves*. It is no coincidence that the characters White wants to

unimaginative, self-imprisoned, unquestioning life-style, sustained only by a proud snobbery and financial or social status.

Whilst Mr. Bonner has his work and fellow merchants to occupy him, his wife's role is a modest one - producing children and then ceaselessly worrying about their marriage prospects. The competitive games arranged and played with the social rivals, in the name of friendship in order to marry off their own children, is a further source of humour in the novel. The description of Una Pringle's husband, in animalistic and perhaps phallic terms, is a wryly comic one:

Una's orange giant stood with his fists on his hips, and grinned. His teeth were broad, and wide-set, which fascinated Laura. (p. 411)

The dark humour comes both from the description of her husband and the sense that Una, who so assiduously arranged her marriage, should have ended up with such an unattractive golliwog figure. That all women were seen as a man's property is made specifically in the comment of her fiancé, Tom Radclyffe, at the time of Belle Bonner's approaching marriage: '[he] was looking not at this thorny cousin, but at his own precious property' (p. 305).

As the wealth-related natural daughter of a wealthy colonial merchant, the description of Belle as 'property' means her future husband has first attached some form of monetary value to her: this is reinforced by the association of Belle in the text with gold.⁹⁷

parody in the two books are very similar.

⁹⁷ For example p. 156: 'Miss Belle remained dripping gold.' The echoes of the tale of the golden heiress, Miss Killimanseg, in Thomas Hook's poem of the same name, are very close and obvious.

But despite wealth and possessions, the father's spiritual decline both physical and mental has already begun, and the expensive pears that he brings home one day, in a box, are a metaphor for his fleshy life:

After composing his legs for the journey, he unfolded them and asked to stop at Todmans', where they robbed him over three pears, beautifully nesting in their own leaves, in a little box. So he sat in the gloom of the enclosed brougham, holding the box of expensive pears, surrounded by their generous scent, gradually even by their golden light, and hoped that the material offering he intended making to his niece would express that affection which might be absent from his voice and looks. (p. 353)

Within the confinement of the box, the scent and particularly the golden light suggest the potential that exists, but Mr. Bonner knows only one way to resolve all matters, and that is through money. Yet the pears are forgotten, only to be discovered at the end of Laura's illness and detected by their decaying smell and so are immediately discarded. Further Belle Bonner, that most feminine of characters, has previously been associated with over-lush fruit⁹⁸ and the feminine association is made with Mr. Bonner himself, now perhaps epicene:

Now he went about this business, after abandoning on a console table in the shadows of the room the unfortunate pears. These soft, innocent fruit seemed to proclaim a weakness that he would have liked to keep secret. (p. 355)

His declining years of like shallowness are spent as a 'cheerful dotard' (p. 431), pestering people and being tedious to his now aggressively matriarchal daughter, Belle.

⁹⁸ At dinner Belle is described with: 'Her hands, that she held above the finger-bowl, dripped inelegantly with the juice of early peaches', (p. 162). A little later at the same dinner, we are told:

Following the death of Voss, Laura and her adopted child, Mercy, live together as mother and daughter, Laura now working as a teacher, the vocation she is pre-eminently suited for, considering her life's experiences of learning. She, secure in her own self-knowledge, stands aside from Sydney colonial society, now confident in her place within it, and imparting knowledge, a task she loves. She is an excellent teacher, envied by her colleagues⁹⁹ for her ability and reasonableness. She is perceptively aware of her charges' youthful experiences, and successfully deflects the odium of the superiors when their urges are seemingly, inappropriately expressed.¹⁰⁰

Laura encourages her pupils and others to enquire and to acquire imaginative knowledge which in the text is related to the light of the moon, as is made clear during one evening discussion:

So they talked, while through the doorway, in the garden, the fine seed of moonlight continued to fall and the moist soil to suck it up. (p. 447)

The linked analogy of wisdom, as a fertile seed germinating in receptive soil, is particularly appropriate for the closing paragraphs of the book, for here at a party Laura meets friends old and new, acolytes and detractors. She urges those who gathered to hear her speak, that they enquire in order to gain knowledge, insisting that the form of true enquiry - and by implication, epiphany - will be through multiple routes and channels:

⁹⁹ 'The young women moved her plate slightly, on which were the downy skins of peaches', (p. 163).

⁹⁹ Following a discussion with a fellow teacher, Miss Linsley, about the suitability of some love poems for the pupils to read, Laura's sensible views prevail and we read: 'Miss Trevelyan was really rather queer but, secretly, Miss Linsley was longing to admire', (Voss, p. 405).

¹⁰⁰ See pages 404-405 where Laura staunchly defends the right of her female pupils to read poetry, including love poetry, since it provided a unique form of knowledge achieved through

'Some of you,' she continued, 'will express what we others have experienced by living. Some will learn to interpret the ideas embodied in the less communicative forms of matter, such as rock, wood, metal, and water. I must include water, because, of all matter it is the most musical.' (p. 446)

But she warns of the process that it may be 'torture', and mental rather than physical, a reference to the bitter solitary anguish that may be experienced in the course of self exploration and self realisation. This theme had already been elaborated by Voss in one of his early discussions with future expedition members in the Sydney Botanic gardens. With Le Mesurier, he had then been most explicit and discursive, when he emphasised not only the potential pain involved but leavened by the potential gain of the recognition of the unique individual genius:

Every man has a genius, though it is not always discoverable. Least of all when choked by the trivialities of daily existence. But in this disturbing country, so far as I have become acquainted with it already, it is possible more easily to discard the inessential and to attempt the infinite. You will be burnt up most likely, you will have the flesh torn from your bones, you will be tortured probably in many horrible and primitive ways, but you will realise that genius of which you sometimes suspect you are possessed, and of which you will not tell me you are afraid. (p. 35)

For those prepared to undertake such a journey of discovery, both Voss and Laura Trevelyan warn of the personal suffering and the importance of discarding the external trappings, such as the manifestations of materialism so important in the colony. In *A Fringe of Leaves*, also set in colonial times, White also draws on the idea of prelapsarian innocence, in that case, the discarding of clothes to signify innocence and a return to nature and freedom from sin.

the use of their imagination.

But not all will wish to venture outside their safe confines, a fact recognised by Laura,¹⁰¹ 'Some of you, at least, are the discoverers' (p. 446), but one, Willie Pringle, immediately understands. In early chapters, Willie is young and unsure of his ability¹⁰² and future, now having spent a period of time in Europe he returns as a painter and is described as 'a genius' (p. 445). Both Topp, the misplaced music teacher, and Pringle, grown-up, identify with Laura's ideas, but recognise all too clearly that the barrier to their acceptance lies in the prosaic nature of colonial society and its inherent mediocrity, blinkered as to the recognition of the beauty everywhere around them.

There is a strong sense of authorial presence within the composite characters of Topp and Pringle, for White the homosexual, music-loving frustrated visual artist was constantly railing against mediocrity within his own society. Indeed, the paragraph in which Pringle describes his delight in the ordinary might well stand as a credo for the novel's author, even as its ending might symbolise Voss:

'The grey of mediocrity, the blue of frustration,' he suggested, less to inform an audience than to commit it to his memory. He added at once, louder and brisker than before: 'Topp has dared to raise a subject that has often occupied my mind: our inherent mediocrity as a people. I am confident that the mediocrity of which he speaks is not a final and irrevocable state; rather is it (sic) a creative source of endless variety and subtlety. The blowfly on its bed of offal is but a variation of the rainbow. Common forms are continually breaking into brilliant shapes. If we will explore them.' (p. 447)

¹⁰¹ One who certainly does not is the rather buffoon-like Englishman Laura meets at the ball. Wishing to deal only in facts he is completely bewildered by Laura's responses to his questions and her reassurance that the immediacy of life is paramount and that the imagination is the source of creative energy.

¹⁰² Although Willie is unsure, Laura suspects an innate ability, and Willie associates with older girls 'sensing that mysticism which their presence bred...' p.322. Such a passage suggests obliquely that Willie is homosexual or at least has a dominant effeminate nature.

Here White is urging his reader to recognise through the artist figures, Topp and Pringle, the beauty in everything, an ability limited only by the individual imagination and the desire to explore, a journey perhaps perceived by Voss at his end, but one long understood by Laura.

Whilst Voss is the most celebrated character in the novel, ultimately achieving status as a now mythologised hero and so being safely cast in bronze, it is Laura Trevelyan who is the real protagonist. For she has the most to lose and to ultimately gain, and so undergoes the greater physical and mental suffering. At the end of the novel, she has achieved the sort of serenity reserved for those who have suffered much but finally understood the reasons for this and benefited by it. Her mental journey with Voss and the constant support she offers to him form an acknowledgement of the nature of his task and of its importance. The loss of her faith is unique in the novel and her self-understanding is unparalleled, only Le Mesurier being granted illumination of similar magnitude. The pseudo-pregnancy which she shares with Rose Portion is disturbing to her and after adopting the child, she almost loses Mercy because of her serious psychosomatic if 'unknown' illness. This experience parallels the pre-death agonies of Voss, the nature of which she has already perceptively anticipated, and in which she shares telepathically. The state of understanding that Laura comes to after her mystical marriage and the related epiphanies are so profound they are equated in the novel with the agony of the crucified Christ: 'Dear Christ, now at last I understand your suffering' (p. 386).

Socially, she exposes herself to ridicule, dressing in a mundane fashion, eschewing social pretension and convention: personally she denies herself the attentions of the congenial Dr. Badgery, her intellectual equal and so more anxious to marry her. This is unlike her counterpart, Ellen Roxburgh, in *A Fringe of Leaves*, who accepts the safe and prosaic merchant George Jevons, with her future an emphasis on worldly goods. Laura is unable to escape the interrogation of Colonel Debden,¹⁰³ enduring it with stoicism and finally earning the Colonel's approbation with her strong verisimilitude. Nonetheless, even with this respect the Colonel anticipates with a vicarious pleasure the meeting of Judd and Laura, particularly after she declines to do so.

And it is this acceptance of her situation, of the personality and the ambition of others that marks Laura Trevelyan. When questioned by the Colonel at the end of the novel about the developing mythology about Voss, she answers on two occasions, 'I am content' (p. 444), as if to reinforce her now evolved acquiescent attitude to life. Of course, she cannot wonder about the altered testimony of Judd about the death of Voss, but realizes that, regardless of the man-made situation, he will have to live with the lie. This acceptance is the mark of Laura's love: it is not judgmental, does not argue or question others' motives but seeks rather to understand, and for this reason is granted the deeper insights she has now experienced. For Laura's acceptance incorporates the knowledge that truth contains many elements and is not the quantifiable or even polemic issue, such as Colonel Hebden would have it. As Laura advises him: 'All truths are particoloured. Except the

¹⁰³ An event similar to that by the Commandant of Mrs. Roxburgh in *A Fringe of Leaves*, pp. 325-

greatest truth of all' (p. 444). Additionally, the nature of all men, like truth, is a composite of good and evil and, therefore, the enlightened Laura can inform the persistent Colonel:

I am convinced that Voss had in him a little of Christ, like other men. If he was composed of evil along with the good, he struggled with that evil. And failed. (p. 445)

In today's secular society we can readily sympathize with those who seemingly suffer and their exploits like those of Voss are readily mythologised and public recognition of their endeavours is expressed in bronze statues, halls of fame, naming rights, etc. For Laura, her greatest love and gift to Voss, has been to recognize the nature of his struggle and to offer to support him and share his burden, as she does constantly during the expedition. In his final epiphany of Laura's love they are presented to one another, totally naked with all their faults and defects exposed in one final (Paradise Regained) display of overwhelming love (p. 383). With this complete revelation described as occurring with 'its radiance', the author suggests of their Australia that: 'Given time, the man and woman might have healed each other' (p. 383). But this is not to be in this life, and Voss, as Laura explains to Mr Ludlow, is 'still there, it is said, in the country, and always will be' (p. 448). The notion of Purgatory still is strong.

The backdrop landscape of the Australian hinterland is the framework upon which the structure of *Voss* is depicted. The usual metaphors of male penetration of the female, the cornucopia and possession are here evident but more subtly expressed, as is the duality of the physical and the metaphysical

journey as the expedition arrives at the Gethsemane place of wordly finality. And here in a vision of clarity and 'light of such physical intensity' Laura understands the futility of Voss's vision and his final demise. In the end, it is Laura Trevelyan, the adopted orphaned niece, who achieves the greatest triumph through her monumental self-abnegation and is the true hero of the novel, for she has endured the greater mental and physical suffering and, by her honest searching, has attained the most profound spiritual enlightenment.