

Chapter 4

RIDERS IN THE CHARIOT

Patrick White's next novel in this study, *Riders in the Chariot*,¹⁰⁴ continues his so much explored theme of personal quest, and of the illumination that may come with it - now for at least some of the characters in this representative society of post-war Australia. This notion of a persisted soul in search of something deeper is a theme present in all of his novels, particularly the *Tree of Man* and *Voss*. This Jungian theme takes the form of an individual seeking, albeit not often intellectually, some form of redemption and enlightenment, and is very often associated with considerable suffering. In Patrick White's novels the character or individual who undertakes this quest for self-knowledge and meaningful self-direction is often portrayed as an outcast from society, or at least on its margins.

In *Riders in the Chariot*, White has taken four individuals, both typical and atypical people - Alf Dubbo, an aboriginal painter; Ruth Godbold, a born-again Christian; Mordecai Himmelfarb, a German-Jewish refugee; and Miss Hare: an Australian eccentric, a humanist, who identifies strongly with the earth and nature. All four are despised in Australia's expansionist and materialistic new urban age because of their different background, life belief or actual vocation and they suffer because of it. All four are representative of important if non-central social movements or concerns of the immediate post-war decades:

¹⁰⁴ Patrick White, *Riders in the Chariot*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1964 (1961).

European immigration and refugees; the Aboriginal population, now more urbanised; the decaying squattocracy; and the humble Christian believer. Whilst some of these issues are international, the nature of the actual multicultural Australia and especially the rights of the indigenous population have perhaps only now - four decades later - really come to the forefront of the national consciousness. Additionally, mainstream Australian society is now more accepting of those who do not appear 'normal' in dress or behaviour and greater efforts are made both socially and legislatively to accommodate them. Yet for Australia, as a secular society, the Christian believer - except the dismissed Catholic - has always been on the margin, a paradoxical situation given that Australia has long links between the state and religion and the Christian credo underpins our parliaments and State and Federal laws.

Unlike the two earlier novels, *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*, this novel has a wider social scope involving antecedent aspects of barbaric human behaviour and of violent politico-historical events in Europe, some of which White as a Cambridge undergraduate visiting Germany in the 1930s would have been personally aware of. J. S. Ryan has commented specifically on this aspect of White's life.¹⁰⁵

White himself has stated explicitly that all his novels are about religion¹⁰⁶ and many of his characters seek God or at least a form of deity with whom they can form dialogue and a meaningful union. Of all his novels *Riders in the Chariot* deals with this theme most overtly, the four main characters in it

¹⁰⁵ See J. S. Ryan, 'Patrick White and Germany', *Notes & Furphies*, No. 8, 1982, 9-11.

¹⁰⁶ Patrick White quoted in *In the Making*, C. McGregor, *op. cit.*, pp. 219-220: 'Religion. Yes, that's behind all my books...What I am interested in is the relationship between the blundering human being and God.'

all wishing to ascend to union with God, by means of the chariot mentioned in the book of the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel. In addition to their profound mystical belief, each of these characters demonstrates a capacity for love and guidance of the marginalised, so that the challenge of Christian love, to love thy neighbour as thyself, underlies and determines their actions. Love is described in the Bible as the 'greatest' of the three attributes the person can attain,¹⁰⁷ and through the giving and receiving of love, the individual comes closest to God and to the 'core of reality' as White described it in his writing in 1969.¹⁰⁸

This essence is variously compared by White to the action of stripping off the layers of an onion to reach the centre, as when Miss Hare:

...had to suppose:
Eventually I shall discover what is at the centre, if enough of me is peeled away. (p. 52)

In contrast to the musings of Mary Hare as seeker, her tormentor, Mrs. Jolley, avoids any such investigation. In a comic and ironic paragraph White parodies the antithetic behaviour of the housekeeper:

Mrs. Jolley saw her friend Mrs. Flack, as they had expected, that Sunday after church, but such occasions are never for confidences, nor is it possible, desirable, after a service, to peel right down to the last and most revealing skin of that doubtful onion-truth. So the friends chose to wait. (p. 224)

Those who strive in all the Whitean canon are granted glimpses or moments of profound insight, one often marked in the text by an association with light or fire. Frequently these insights are extended to incorporate other ideas such as

¹⁰⁷ Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians, Chapter 13, verses 1 to 12.

¹⁰⁸ See C. McGregor, *loc. cit.*, 1969.

truth and knowledge,¹⁰⁹ those ideas lying at the core of White's writing, and reflecting the importance of humble self knowledge as the basis of behaviour and love for others.

But evil personal acts towards others and their effect upon character forms the central thematic part of this book and the unique but awesome responsibility that is granted to the illuminates was paraphrased by the English mystic and religious writer, William Blake, in the epigraph to the novel:

The Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with me, and I asked them how they dared so roundly to assert that God spoke to them; and whether they did not think at the time that they would be misunderstood, & so be the cause of imposition. Isaiah answer'd: 'I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception, but my senses discover'd the infinite in everything, and as I was then perswaded, & remain confirmed, that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God, I cared not, for consequences, but wrote....'
I then asked Ezekiel why he eat dung, & lay so long on his right and left side? He answer'd,
'the desire of raising other men into a perception of the infinite: this the North American tribes practise, & is he honest who resists his genius or conscience only for the sake of present ease or gratification?' (p. 6)

Those who have any share of the divine enlightening gifts have an obligation 'to raise other men into a perception of the infinite', and although it is not stated explicitly, presumably one of the methods would be through the practice of love. Evil is the antithesis of love and those who practice evil in the novel are superficial, impervious to any encounters with grace, and incapable of any form of self analysis.

Whilst Patrick White as a novelist acknowledged that all his writing was about religion, *Riders in the Chariot* is the book most overtly so, bringing

¹⁰⁹ As Miss Hare rushes to rescue Mordecai Himmelfarb she considers: 'In the end, if not always,

together these four disparate individuals with very different belief systems, whose focus of searching is the earthly manifestation of an Old Testament Biblical narrative of revelation. In this novel the author is most lucid as to the nature of his characters' seeking. In previous novels, *The Tree of Man* and *Voss* the nature and goal of the characters' search has been nebulous and in the plot sense poorly defined, so that the reader is confused about what exactly the author is attempting to achieve. This has meant exclusion from deeper understanding of it for many readers who regard his work as very difficult or even hopelessly obscure; not only are the themes hard to follow but the syntax and grammar is highly idiosyncratic.

Additionally, there has been disagreement among critics regarding the relative importance of the more obvious satiric and sudden or even startling religious writing in the novel. Many, for example John Colmer and Leonie Kramer,¹¹⁰ were uncomfortable with the obviously esoteric religious aspects, seeing them as confused, with the satire much overemphasised; others saw and still see the novel as traditionally religious.¹¹¹ This to a great extent is because the four illuminates appear privileged above the masses,¹¹² and each has a different view of what the Chariot represents and means to them. Of the two who die, (Dubbo and Himmelfarb), neither enters the 'Chariot' at death, and its relevance to them is, therefore, able to be questioned. The Catholic

truth was a stillness and a light', *Riders in the Chariot*, p. 422.

¹¹⁰ John Colmer, *Patrick White's Riders in the Chariot*, Edward Arnold, Melbourne, 1978, Leonie Kramer, 'Patrick White's *Gotterdammerung*' *Quadrant*, 17, 1973, 8-19.

¹¹¹ See Susan Moore 'The Quest for Wholeness in *Riders in the Chariot*', *Southerly*, 35, 1975, 50-67, whose reading of the novel includes both traditional Jewish and Jewish mystical aspects. Also see Dorothy Green, 'The Edge of Error', *Quadrant*, 27, 1973, 36-47.

¹¹² Brian McFarlane objects particularly to the portrayal of the characters by an 'elitist' writer engaged in 'a self-indulgent verbal exercise', p. 27. Brian McFarlane, 'Inhumanity in the

critic Brian Kiernan also comments that none of the four experience a revelation in their life.¹¹³ This, I believe, is wrong and would suggest they receive many, if quite subtle epiphanies.

In White's narratives he often conveys a spiritual and mystical yearning for truth. His characters invariably experience some understanding of the mystery of life. They gain this through knowledge about their existence. Some characters gain more insight than others and a few gain none at all. The novel *Riders* is his most 'realistic' exploration of his characters' social and questing behaviour in a surrounding world of disbelief and of practised evil. The only antidote and saviour of this venal world is love in as many forms and manifestations as possible. Thus in this novel there are presented several figures whose developing love for others causes them constant physical and spiritual pain and, in the case of the European Jew, Mordecai Himmelfarb, brings about his death.

To sustain the four selected and elected main characters during their search and when their love and belief are threatened, each are granted by grace moments of illumination and epiphany, allowing them - and us - glimpses of a deeper understanding. The final result of this process, they hope, is their carriage to heaven in the chariot to achieve final union with God. Thus these four illuminates are uniquely privileged and therefore, as the epigraph to the novel, from the English mystic, William Blake, explains, they have an obligation to disseminate widely the meaning of this knowledge and

Australian Novel: *Riders in the Chariot*, in *The Critical Review*, 19, 1977, 24-41.

¹¹³ Brian Kiernan, *Patrick White*, Macmillan Commonwealth Writers Series, Macmillan, London, 1980, p. 77.

experience, not least by practise. Each of the four are viewed by society and their contemporaries as an outcast and each suffers to varying extents for his/her beliefs when living in regions such as a Europe suffused with the evil of Nazism or having to endure the secular hedonism of Israel and of Australia. None of the four discuss their visions and aspirations with others, yet, when they meet one of the other three, there is, by grace, immediate recognition and empathy.

The novel's structure revolves around the issues of good and evil and it uses the Biblical story of the crucifixion to emphasise the notion of atonement and even the denial of Christ by Peter, in the novel by the Aboriginal artist Alf Dubbo. The late Professor Dillistone - an Englishman once also resident in the U.S.A. - argued that the pattern of the book is a simple one, with recurring importance of the number four, there are four main characters with four creeds. He saw a strong parallel with the progressive settler development of Australia and adjudged the four characters as representing four different human groups who have inhabited the Australian landscape and who will determine the nature of its future:

The four characters involved represent the established families of early settlers (Miss Hare); the varieties of Anglo-Saxon immigrants who came in haphazard ways to the new continent (Mrs. Godbold); the primitive races of the interior (Dubbo); and the new immigrants, often refugees, who, coming from many nations, have sought a new life in Australia since World War II (Mordecai Himmelfarb).¹¹⁴

While agreeing with Englishman Dillistone's categorisation of Dubbo and

¹¹⁴ Frederick W. Dillistone, Introduction and Commentary, *Patrick White's Riders in the Chariot*, in the series *Religious Dimensions in Literature*, gen. ed., Lee A. Belford, Seabury Press, New York, 1967, p. 7.

Himmelfarb, I would suggest Mary Hare represents the long-failing squattocracy in Australia, and Ruth Godbold, low church Protestant Christianity (Methodism), often strongly evangelical in outlook.¹¹⁵

The first of the exclusive group of four we are to meet is Miss Hare. White portrays Miss Hare as a strong character and a woman without beauty. In her family her worth and reason for existence were seen only in her planned role as a future wife to a man of property. Her face was to be a shiny attraction for money, with her real personhood having no value. Her father does not see her strength and kindness, or her honesty that might ennoble the family name. In her father's eyes her plain appearance subverts the superficial commercial value that had been placed on her life since birth. Therefore he sees her as a commercial loss and regards her failure to meet his desire for increased wealth with deep disappointment. None the less White creates her as a character with qualities akin to St Francis of Assisi with her life fulfilled through her relationship with birds and animals. Perhaps some of this Christian mystic-like ability she has inherited from her father,¹¹⁶ since at a ball held when she is an early teenager Mary realised the moral danger inherent in some people's character, for example in the girl Helen Antill who wears a dress covered with small mirrors, these reflecting the harsh and mocking light of her treacherous nature. At the same ball was Mary's ineffectual cousin

¹¹⁵ Witness her fear of the Cathedral - either Lincoln or, possibly, Ely. J. F. Burrows expands the idea of archetypes in the novel in his article, 'Archetypes and Stereotypes: *Riders in the Chariot*', *Southerly*, 25, No. 1, 1965, 46-68, with a particular emphasis on Jungian interpretation.

¹¹⁶ The description of her father reads:

Norbet Hare had experienced his moments of insight...Whatever the source of his experience, he was, however, aware of a splendour that he himself would never achieve except by instants, and rightly or wrongly, came to interpret this as a failure. (*Riders in the Chariot*, p. 55)

Eustace whose nature Mary recognised and whom she protected in a demonstration of love by 'guiding him.'¹¹⁷ What Mary has learnt by the experience of attending the glittering ball is that there is some aspect of truth in Eustace's ill-concealed character:

The ugliness and weakness which his nature revealed at such moments were, she sensed, far closer to the truth. So she could understand and pity her cousin, even understand and pity her father, even when the latter looked at her with hate for what she saw and understood. (p. 33)

Norbet Hare's felt and manifested hate for his daughter's insightful spiritual knowledge is derived from two incidents in the text when he questions her, first about the existence of the Chariot (pp. 23-24), and, later, to ascertain if she is 'unborn', or innocent and, therefore, 'pure' (p. 36). In the first case her father is drunk and Mary does not understand the question, but instinctively intuits the significance of it, and, as she does so briefly, she glimpses the Chariot itself. At the same time Mary is changed, much as an early Christian mystic:

She had been translated: she was herself a fearful beam of the ruddy, champing light, reflected back at her own silly, uncertain father. (p. 24)

On the second occasion his question is again distasteful and one beyond her comprehension, but she understands its relevance and so her response is awkwardly and indignantly emphatic:

'Oh yes, you can twist my arm if you like!' she blundered, through thickening lips, for his accusation was causing her actual physical pain. 'But the truth is what I understand. Not in words. I have not the gift for words. But I know.' (p. 36)

¹¹⁷ White emphasises the importance of the act by italicising the word 'guide'. See *Riders in the Chariot*, pp. 30-31.

As Mary leaves her father, she is distressed and crying, and is described in almost hagiographic mode as 'gulping down the effusions of light' (p. 37). And later Norbert is unable, still, to accept the paradox of an awkward daughter who understands so much and yet is so physically repulsive to him. His angry retort to her as he comes across her unexpectedly, immediately before his death reveals much: 'Ugly as a foetus. Ripped out too soon' (p. 56), clearly betraying his deep bitterness, at not having a son. The text then describes their reactions as both share or react to a common knowledge:

Then their emotions were whirling, the spokes of whitest light smashing, the hooks grappling together, hatefully. (p. 56)

But lest the reader think the author is describing an obvious Christian in Mary Hare, White gives her a more mystical and seemingly Pantheistic philosophy, as she explains her credo when challenged by her worldly and shallow housekeeper, Mrs. Jolley:

I believe. I cannot tell you what I believe in, any more than what I am. It is too much. I have no proper gift. Of words I mean. Oh yes, I believe! I believe in what I see, and what I cannot see. I believe in a thunderstorm, and wet grass, and patches of light, and stillness. There is such a variety of good. On earth. And everywhere. (p. 58)¹¹⁸

Such 'goodness' is incomprehensible to Mrs. Jolley, whose undefined religious doctrines are nominally Christian, but in reality superficial and maintained only for the sake of public respectability. That she has such an

¹¹⁸This belief is the consequence of her early education the exact nature of which White does not explain. He does however tell the reader:

So the child learned, as far as her natural clumsiness would allow, to move softly, as a leaf, and certain words she avoided, because they were breakable. The word LOVE, for instance, brittle as glass, and far more precious. Oh, she could go carefully enough in the end, in little, starched movements. And had learnt to love, even, but after her secret fashion, the labyrinths of corridors, the big, cool, greenish room, the golden walls of stone, the tunnels through the shrubberies. (p. 16)

attitude is suspected by Miss Hare quite soon after Mrs. Jolley comes to Xanadu as housekeeper, and these suspicions deepen after Mrs. Jolley befriends a Mrs. Flack, (ironically after meeting at a Sydney Anglican church), and so their malevolence deepens. In contrast to the episodes of love, described in the novel in association with light, the moment of realisation for Miss Hare of Mrs. Jolley's true nature is in ominous terms, with the sky overhead described as a bruise, such as one occurring after bleeding:

The marbled sky was heartrending, if also adamant, its layers of mauve and rose, veined by now with black and indigo. (p. 71)

And Mrs. Flack remains as an oppressive and malign presence at Xanadu,¹¹⁹ a reminder of the evil that develops in the unoccupied and wasted life, whose sole purpose is to traffic in gossip and to criticise hypocritically all those around them. That this occurs within the ambit of personal and religious ignorance, the opposite of knowledge, is also important.

Miss Hare's insight is finally revealed to Mrs. Jolley one morning at breakfast. Immediately beforehand we read:

It was a brisk morning. It seemed to Miss Hare that the light illuminated. She herself was exuberant with knowledge. She radiated discoveries. (p. 80)

Miss Hare perceives Mrs. Jolley to be evil and declares that she knows Mrs. Jolley hates her, and then comments, 'Take water, for instance. If you are alone with it enough you become like water. You enter into it' (p. 81). Of course White is here referring to the intimacy that develops after any

¹¹⁹The text describing her presence reads:

Although there was no more mention of Mrs. Flack she was always there at Xanadu. Miss Hare could feel her presence. In certain rather *metallic* [my italics] light...So far had Mrs. Flack, through the medium of Mr. Jolley, insinuated herself into the cracks in the actual

prolonged association, in Mrs. Jolley's case with the evil Mrs. Flack. For White to use this metaphor in this situation is very significant, as in his writing, water is normally associated with the experience of the searcher after purity and goodness.

At this futile argument between the two women Mrs Jolley is described as speaking in a manner suggestive of a snake¹²⁰ and she later kills a harmless grass snake that Miss Hare has been attempting to befriend. The Biblical story of Creation, with the snake in the garden of Eden, is the obvious Christian parallel with (Australian) innocence in the grass snake and in Miss Hare. At the same time in the same context Miss Hare, presumably pondering the Christian exhortation, - 'Judge not lest ye be judged' - speculates on the nature of good and evil by observing: 'Who is to decide what is bad?' (p. 83)

As these terrible thoughts and revelations about the true character of her minder, Mrs. Jolley, are considered by Miss Hare, her burden is relieved by her seeming accidental meeting of the Jew, Himmelfarb, in the garden at Xanadu, beneath the flowering plum tree. The formation by the tree of a 'canopy' (p. 89), suggests the chupah of the Jewish wedding ceremony,¹²¹ with Mary Hare and Mordecai Himmelfarb, both seekers of the Chariot, then joined in a form of symbolic mystical and spiritual union. Noticeably, and uniquely, Mary Hare is described as 'filled with such a contentment of warmth and light' (p. 89), as she meets Himmelfarb, the Jewish man, for the first time.

stone. (p. 78)

¹²⁰ The unpleasant description of Mrs Jolley reads:

The mouth had aged without its teeth, and should have proclaimed innocence, but words flickered almost lividly from between the gums. (p. 80)

¹²¹ This suggests another of White's mystical marriages, akin to that of Laura Trevelyan and Voss in the earlier novel.

As they talk and reveal how they are each separated from the rest of humanity by their race and appearance, they are bonded by this fact and, being equals, they now exchange the intimacies of their lives. Mary very importantly at this time reveals her faith in the fact that essentially religious knowledge will always be revealed to her rather than learned:

‘Oh, yes,’ she agreed. ‘There is always so much one does not understand. But it does not matter. Because some little thing, something quite unimportant, will show. So clearly. One is almost blinded by it,’ she gasped. (p. 95)

Here White gives the appropriately named Mary the opportunity to explain her own stunning experience of enlightenment and of epiphany. Himmelfarb also has this insight, and, as he explains his life history to Mary Hare, recalls the early visit to the family by a Galician rabbi, invited by his mother, who was renowned for her good works and care of the less fortunate Jews.

Himmelfarb, significantly, then stood in ‘the centre of the geometric carpet’ (p. 97),¹²² and ‘without looking at him [the rabbi], the little boy saw’ (p. 97). In the same meeting Himmelfarb’s ‘mother had grown quite luminous’ (p. 97), suggesting she is, like the Virgin Mary to Christ, the font of her son’s (Himmelfarb’s) great gift and destiny. As he grows, Himmelfarb himself is impressed by the appearance of his German friend Jurgen,¹²³ and his love affair with Catherine is spectacular,¹²⁴ but brief. His later meeting with Jurgen Stauffer, who had wanted to be a cavalry officer, is during war and again the

¹²² The first instance in this novel of the symbolic Mandala image used so frequently by White, in his novels.

¹²³ Jurgen who is described as being ‘of that distinctive tint of German gold...’ (p.104).

¹²⁴ White conveys this by his brilliant imagery: ‘Each was perhaps a little dazzled by the incandescence they achieved together’. (p. 114)

highly moral young German is described in terms of light,¹²⁵ but these transient associations are of a relatively trivial nature with the young Himmelfarb aware of the still largely unevolved nature of the participants.

Himmelfarb's own spiritual destiny is to really begin when he moves to the town of Bienenstadt, following an introduction from an old family acquaintance, the dyer, Israel. The latter is persistent in his conviction of Himmelfarb's destiny, for, despite his being 'disgusting' in appearance (p. 120), he is described as having indigo coloured skin and purple stained hands, suggesting his royal lineage (p. 109), as well as an affinity with John the Baptist. As the dyer has anticipated, Himmelfarb is accepted with 'lovingkindness' by the Liebmann family who expect, because of Himmelfarb's advanced education he can indeed 'illuminate' many of their Jewish social and spiritual problems (p. 124). However, as Himmelfarb comes to realise, when he marries Reha Liebmann, his true vocation is one of a far greater magnitude and he is expected by the dyer and the Liebmanns to enlighten the whole local Jewish community, indeed the whole race:

Now, in the moment of perception, all the inklings were married together: the dyer's image was with him for always, like his new wife, or his own fate. Now he was committed. So he continued to answer distractedly the questions of the wedding guests, while trying to reconcile in his mind what his wife had taught him of love, with what had hitherto been the disgust he felt for the dyer. In the light of the one, he must discover and gather up the sparks of love hidden in the other. Or deny his own purpose, as well as the existence of the race. (pp. 128-129)

¹²⁵The light surrounding their war-time meeting changes with the late afternoon and the suggestion of coming darkness:

The shining lieutenant embraced the rather scruffy Jewish private - the sun was setting, there was nobody about... (p.119)

Reha and Himmelfarb live very simply, he an academic, she a capable housewife; but they are unfulfilled, a state detected by Reha's friends as occurring because they are childless. But they are both aware that the dissatisfaction is deeper and unknown: as Reha explains to Himmelfarb, 'we must expect our lives to be different' (p. 132). Reha is content to discharge her duty as a wife and remain for Himmelfarb a source of inspiration¹²⁶ and orthodoxy, but for Himmelfarb a chance finding of some ancient Jewish mystical texts¹²⁷, (Kabbalistic and Hasidic works), in an old bookshop lead him to read deeply and speculate about the true meaning of his own religion. This is also the first time that Himmelfarb, as one of the gifted, appears to encounter the Chariot, the vision central to the four illuminates. And he explains to Reha the ideas behind scribbings she had noted on his desk:

'What is that, Mordecai? I did not know you could draw.'
 'I was scribbling,' he said. 'This, it appears, is the Chariot.'
 'Ah,' she exclaimed softly, withdrawing her glance; she could have lost interest. 'Which chariot?' she did certainly ask, but now it might have been to humour him.
 'That, I am not sure,' he replied. 'It is difficult to distinguish. Just when I think I have understood, I discover some fresh form - so many-streaming with implications. There is the Throne of God for instance. That is obvious enough - all gold, and chrysoprase, and jasper. Then there is the Chariot of Redemption, much more shadowy, poignant, personal.' (pp. 135-136)

It is interesting to compare the idea of the Chariot as held by Mary Hare and Himmelfarb; for him, the academic and intellectual, reading religious texts it is vague in its conception but clear in purpose (redemption), whereas for

¹²⁶ Her constancy and goodness are expressed in luminous terms in the paragraph:

She had released her hair, and brushed it out, with the result that she appeared to be standing against a dark and brittle thicket, but one in which a light shone. (p.135)

¹²⁷ For a detailed discussion of the nature of these writings see Hedda Ben-Bassat 'To Gather the Sparks: Kabbalistic and Hasidic Elements in Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot*', in

Mary, in her simplicity, it is during fever that her imagination permits a vision, in which trust absolves the reason for a purpose and in which the detail of the Chariot is clear:

The massive rumps of her horses waited, swishing their tails through eternity. The wheels of her chariot were solid gold, well-axled, as might have been expected. Or so it seemed to the sick woman whose own vision never formed, remaining a confusion of light... (p. 67)

Again when Mary and Himmelfarb are in conversation, the difference in their appreciation of the Chariot and its importance becomes evident: Mary Hare is content in her holistic belief whilst the learned Himmelfarb searches for a deeper meaning, perhaps anticipating his own later crucifixion :

'And the Chariot,' he asked, 'that you wished to discuss at one stage? Will you not admit the possibility of redemption?'
 'Oh, words, words!' she cried, brushing them off with her freckled hands. 'I do not understand what they mean.'
 'But the Chariot,' she conceded, 'does exist. I have seen it. Even if a certain person likes to hint it was only because I happened to be sick. I have seen it. And Mrs. Godbold has, whom I believe and trust. Even my poor father, whom I did not, and who was bad, *bad*, suspected some such secret was being kept hidden from him. And you a very learned man, have found the Chariot in books, and understand more than you will tell.'
 'But the riders! I cannot visualize, I do not understand the riders!' (p. 155)

At this point White, the author, through his character Mary Hare, outlines the most important theme of the book and, indeed, of all White's writing:

Do you see everything at once? My own house is full of things waiting to be seen. Even quite common objects are shown to us only when it is time for them to be. (p. 155)

This is close to the definition of epiphany as elaborated by Joyce¹²⁸ and the response of Himmelfarb to this wisdom is profound and perceptive: he salutes Mary Hare as a *Tsaddik* (*zaddik*): in the Hasidic tradition, a title bestowed on a man of exemplary righteousness. Further and continuing the theme of illumination and righteousness, he suggests Mary has been touched by divinity:

‘It is even told,’ continued the Jew, stroking grass, ‘how the creative light of God poured into the *zaddikim*. That they are the Chariot of God.’ (p. 155)

In a later conversation Himmelfarb is to comment to Mary that she has an instinctive rather than an intellectually trained mind such as his. Mary, understanding, responds:

‘Is that what it is?’ she considered. ‘I do know a lot. About some things.’ They had mounted the terrace. ‘That light, for instance. Those two shiny leaves lying together on the twig. That sort of thing I know and understand.’ (p. 300)

As they prepare to leave and separate, the narrative continues,

indeed, looking out from under the tree, it seemed as though light was at work on matter as never before. The molten blue had been poured thickly round the chafing-dish of the world. (p. 155)

This leaves the reader in no doubt that a very significant event had taken place.

It is surprising that critics apparently avoid comment on such passages, considering their importance to this novel and to White’s oeuvre. For, at the same meeting, Himmelfarb and Mary Hare have discussed the eternal question of sin and evil. Despite their brief acquaintance, they each reveal

¹²⁸ See the ‘Introduction’ to this thesis.

their innermost fears and doubts; that Himmelfarb abandoned his wife and betrayed the trust of his family and race, and Mary the lingering doubt over her possibly active role in her father's death, one cleverly alluded to by the author in his coupling of the fate of Mary and her father.¹²⁹ Mary acknowledges the presence of sin in all people, but what is important for her is its effect upon the individual. Unlike Himmelfarb, and sustained by the earth and its abundant goodness in the animals and plants, she appears not to seek redemption for sin and acts of evil. Presumably this attitude reflects her lack of education and simplicity, but it is not clear what Mary expects for herself after her visualisation of the Chariot.

For people such as the evolving Christian Stauffers their redemptive acts are to offer to help Himmelfarb, thereby saving him for a time from the evil of the approaching Nazis. Then he loses his wife and becomes increasingly persecuted. As Ingeborg Stauffer, an evolving good person, explains:

We do it also on account of ourselves. It is most, most necessary. For more than ourselves. For all of us. (p. 164)

For Himmelfarb, manifest evil is most effectively countered by simplicity of living and a total honesty in dealings with others. As he later explains to Mary Hare in discussion:

I would like to persuade you that the simple acts we have to perform daily are the best protection against evil. (p. 304)

Almost certainly, Himmelfarb was thinking of his wife Reha, whom he recalls as he lies dying but now in Mrs. Godbold's care:

¹²⁹ The text reads:

'I shall sink into it, [the earth] she said, 'and the grass will grow out of me.' (p. 154)
Long after her father was dead, and disposed of under the paspalum of Sarsaparilla... (p. 37)

He could see now the rightness and inevitability of all that his wife Reha had been allowed in her simplicity to understand, and which she had attempted to convey, not so much by words, for which she had no gift, but by the light of her conviction. It seemed to him as though the mystery of failure might be pierced only by those of extreme simplicity of soul, ... (p. 427)

Such acts of lovingkindnesses¹³⁰ as demonstrated by the Stauffers allow the younger Himmelfarb to survive, whereas the Stauffers are destroyed,¹³¹ and so he leaves the secure house, passing through a dangerous village much like the account of the parting of the waters in the Biblical story (p. 170) and, at the same time with the protection of the Chariot.

Following Himmelfarb's escape from the German concentration camp, and his subsequent rejection of possible settlement on a *kibbutz* in Israel, he comes to live in Australia, commencing work in Sydney at the Brighta Bicycle Lamps factory. This name is most ironic given the importance of light and seeking in Himmelfarb's life, and from the very remote possibility of him finding the redemption he seeks in such a place. Yet he soon meets nearby not only Mary Hare but also Mrs. Godbold, another of the illuminates and one who shares his vision of the Chariot. He does not share with Mrs Godbold the intimacies of his life as he does with Mary Hare, but the two have an

¹³⁰ The idea of love as the antidote to evil underlies the book and much of the behaviour of the characters. There are multiple examples, some obvious, some subtle, of love and variations of love throughout the novel. Obvious ones such as the behaviour of the Stauffers need no explanation but that of Mary Hare 'leading' her cousin Eustace Clough away from social embarrassment at her dance, (p. 31), or Alf Dubbo 'guiding' (p. 330), the pathetic Rev. Calderon, in his search of sexual gratification, are other examples (also compare Arthur and Waldo in *The Solid Mandala*). Thus the suggestion by John Colmer that 'there is altogether too much Christian symbolism and too little Christian spirit', in the novel is hard to reconcile. Quoted by Adrian Mitchell in his 'Review of *Patrick White's Riders in the Chariot*, by John Colmer', *Australian Literary Studies*, 9, 1979, 248-251.

¹³¹ But as the author explains 'her face was of that perfect emptiness which precedes fulfilment', *Riders in the Chariot*, p. 169.

understanding that far transcends the evil thoughts of Mrs. Flack and Jolley. So as the latter two spy on Himmelfarb and Mrs. Godbold, their own simple goodness and shared sincerity are described in radiant terms:

Then, as people will toss up the ball of friendship, into the last light, at the moment of departure, and it will hang there briefly, lovely and luminous to see, so did the Jew and Mrs. Godbold. There hung the golden sphere. The laughter climbed up quickly, out of their exposed throats, and clashed together by consent; the light splintered against their teeth. How private, and mysterious, and beautiful it was, even the intruders suspected, and were deterred momentarily from hating. (pp. 215-216)

On each occasion the two meet, and, particularly in the kindly acts Mrs. Godbold performs, the passages are luminous and the Chariot is mentioned, thus reinforcing their association, one of selfless love and redemption.¹³²

It is through her ever unstinting, compassionate and continuous acts of love and devotion that we come to appreciate the character of Ruth Godbold. As a child she strays into a Cathedral, to experience a moment of illumination, a combination of music and light,¹³³ so profound that she is so visibly affected and a stranger witnessing her comments:

‘I can see you will remember this day’, he said, ‘when you have forgotten a lot of other things. You have probably been taken closer than you are ever likely to come’. (p. 237)

For Ruth, in spite of her own deepening faith, still ‘has to suffer’ (p. 231), and

¹³² For example:

So the golden chains continued to unwind, the golden circles to revolve, the dust of secrecy to settle. Himmelfarb was glad even for his wilting bunch of lush, yellow-green weeds, *Riders in the Chariot*, p. 222.

¹³³ White conveys the uplifting experience as:

The organ lashed together the bars of music until there was a whole shining scaffolding of sound. And always the golden ladders rose, extended and extended, as if to reach the window of a fire. But there was no fire, only bliss, surging and rising, as she herself climbed upon the heavenly scaffolding and placed still other ladders, to reach higher, *Riders in the Chariot*, p. 236.

does so at the hands of her husband through his infidelities and her employer with her dishonesty. But Ruth's faith is 'a living thing' (p. 231), allowing her to propose marriage to the weak Tom Godbold, knowing that he will fail her and will sin. Even so, Ruth's proposal comes with the Christ-like pledge: 'I will bear all your sins, Tom', and the realisation 'that her love was on two planes, one of which he might never reach' (p. 263).

Here White refers to the disappointment which Ruth feels when she realises she will never share her knowledge and understanding of the love of God with her all too fallible husband. And White emphasises the new universality of the deeper experience of empathetic suffering by women, when, later in the book, Ruth's daughter Else watches her fiancé Bob Tanner assist the terminally ill Jew, Himmelfarb:

But Else withdrew quickly from what she sensed she, too, must eventually suffer. (p. 430)

However, for the young man the vicarious suffering is a positive experience, since out of it comes a realisation that there is always something finer to follow on pain. Bob Tanner too has seen the effect upon Else, and:

He realised that his girl was the uglier for pity, and would alter many times yet. Each was choking with discovery. (p. 430)

Ruth's other manifestation of loving goodness occurs in the discharge of her obligations as maid in the household of Mr. and Mrs. Chalmers-Robinson. Not only is she diligent and attentive but acts as confidant to the superficial, foolish and snobbish rich woman. Recognising anew the goodness in Ruth and her own aridity of faith, Mrs. Chalmers-Robinson attempts to appropriate Ruth's after admitting her current fad (Christian Science), had proven disappointing.

As Ruth begins to explain in her own simple terms the nature of her faith, her worthiness is manifest in terms of a halo of light:

Then, it was realized by the woman on the bed, who would have given anything for a peep - she was all goggly for it - this white tower, too, was locked against her. So she began to bare her teeth, and cry. Although rooted firmly in the carpet, the white maid appeared to be swaying. The light was streaming from her shiny cuffs. But it no longer soothed; it slashed and blinded. (p. 267)

And slightly later in the same conversation:

Indeed, she [Ruth] streamed with a steady fire, which illuminated more clearly the contents of her face. (p. 267)

Shortly after this confronting moment of employer embarrassment, Ruth Joyner leaves the employ of Mrs. Chalmers-Robinson to marry Tom Godbold and live at Sarsaparilla. Her old employers subsequently divorce, and following imprudent behaviour, become bankrupt, and Mrs. Chalmers-Robinson re-enters the novel at the end with her reminiscences of Ruth. By now, having survived such vicissitudes Mrs. Chalmers-Robinson appreciates and is able to recognise awkwardly but publicly the goodness of Ruth, calling her 'a kind of saint' (p. 485). When asked to explain this she states:

'It is difficult to explain exactly,' she began. 'By *being*, I suppose. She was so stupid, so trusting. But her trustfulness could have been her strength,' the visionary pursued drunkenly. (p. 486)

Thus Mrs. Chalmers-Robinson is still without any deep insight into Ruth's nature, seeing her rather in terms of an employee/employer relationship, but now enlightened to the fact that the simple woman was one who is constant: 'She was a rock to which we clung'. And then an inkling of the foundation of Ruth's righteousness follows, perhaps through the effect of the alcohol: 'She was the rock of love' (p. 486).

Finally, we as readers, come to understand and perceive through its radiance the importance of love as the core value in Ruth's character, and her ready acceptance of her husband's and others' sins. Within this passage is the Biblical reference to St. Peter as the rock and the Commandment to love God and your neighbour. Ruth comes to possess this herself when she visits the brothel of Mrs. Khalil in search of her husband. As she waits for him to appear, she observes Mrs. Khalil and her cat:

Suddenly she bent down, for something to do, it could have been, and got possession of the smoky cat. She laid it along her cheek, and asked:

'What are you after, eh?'

So softly. But it was heard.

Mrs. Khalil nearly bust herself. She answered:

'Love, I expect. Like anybody else.'

And Mrs. Godbold had to see this was true. That was perhaps the dreadful part. Now she really did understand, she thought, almost every thing, and only prayed she would not be corrupted by her own knowledge. (p. 277)

In the same place of the appeasing of carnal appetite Ruth is to meet the last of the novel's four unique characters, the Aboriginal, Alf Dubbo. Appropriately the introduction occurs through Ruth's offering, as an act of love, to assist Alf as he lies drunken and sick on the floor of the brothel. His elaboration of his pitiful life history (pp. 283-284) immediately causes Ruth to recall the momentous epiphanic event she had experienced in the cathedral as a child, and she instantly recognises a fellow seeker and less evolved illuminate. As with the other three there is a clarity to their greatest vision so that Dubbo can unselfconsciously say, 'I could see through anything on those days...' (p. 284), an insight which the others share, and which functions as a

marker of their uniqueness.

Tom Godbold dies shortly after in a hospice, unmourned except by his wife Ruth who, in her grief for the spiritual limitations and sins of lust in all men, undergoes a brief 'out of body experience' and wavers between the forces of evil, (the 'acid' and 'greenish light'), as 'fingers of green and crimson neon grappled for possession of her ordinarily suetty face' (p. 288). Finally, however, the contest is over as 'the strife between light and darkness wrung out a royal purple' (p. 288), and Ruth Godbold experiences in her Calvary position, a moment of spiritual release to thereby console her great grief.

The Australian-set plot climax of the book was the mock crucifixion of the Jew Himmelfarb, an event he had long anticipated: at least some form of profound suffering sought by him to atone for his own perceived sins and those of his race. In the opening chapter of Part Five in the novel, an earthquake occurs damaging Xanadu further, at least structurally. This destruction is assessed by Mary Hare who realises as she moves from room to room how transient and puny are the efforts of men in the creation of edifices, especially those dedicated to their own personal glory as Xanadu had been by her father. Just how ephemeral and unimportant such possessions are comes suddenly to her as Miss Hare 'picked up a fragment of her house, just about the size of a fist, and threw it at a malachite urn which had been her parent's pride. The moment of impact, however, was somewhat disappointing' (p. 290). This dismissive moment is followed immediately by the symbolic appearance of birds in the narrative, a device frequently used by White to indicate peace and harmony:

All problems had always given way to birds, and here were

several, aimed practically at her. Released from the tapestry of light and leaves, the birds whirred and wheeled into life inside the burst drawing-room. (p. 290)

The earthquake itself is also metaphorical since two events of great change and significance are then to occur in the life of Mary Hare: she is to lose her housekeeper, Mrs. Jolley who is to join the evil Mrs. Flack, and Himmelfarb her friend and confidant is to die. Mary does not have to meet Mrs. Flack to 'know' she is the embodiment of evil, and, rather comically, insists to Mrs. Jolley: 'goats are perhaps the animals which see the truth most clearly' (p. 292). In an act of love Mary Hare summons Himmelfarb to Xanadu to warn him of the danger and the evil that is abroad in Sarsaparilla. This is the last and most profound conversation the two will have as they explore one another's will and motivations. Mary's concern and altruistic love is overwhelming:

'Oh,' she cried, her mouth full of tears and pebbles, 'I am not interested in *you*! Not what you are, think, feel. I am only concerned for your safety. I am responsible for you!' she gasped. (p. 303)

Mary is frustrated by what she perceives as the elderly Jew's inability to act in the face of danger, at his apparent indifference, and at his seemingly vague intellectual responses to what she sees as imminent threat. She knows that he is 'worn down further by the accumulation of knowledge' (p. 298), and so seeks to shield him. In what may well be a recollection of his much earlier interrogation by the Nazis, he proclaims, 'I have nothing to hide' (p. 304). Yet he is so impractical and Mary is furious at this response, her retort leaving him in no doubt as to his all too likely Australian future:

Men usually decide to destroy for very feeble reasons. Oh, I know from experience! It can be for the weather, or boredom after lunch. They will torture almost to death someone who has seen into them. (p. 304)

And her further behaviour as he leaves, she offering to kill for him,¹³⁴ reinforces our understanding of her practical nature, but it is an offer Himmelfarb must, Christ-like, decline, aware as he is that he is to be sacrificed and this knife, ('a sliver of light'), takes on a symbolic quality as befitting the instrument that, metaphorically, will be used to destroy him. Not only does this passage suggest a religious allegory, but also burgeons forth the theme of crucifixion, not only of Jesus Christ but also of Himmelfarb. At the same time the image of knife and light, with distinct echoes of the slaughter of the German pastor Bonhoffer, reinforce the knowledge of his fate.

And so they divide and part, but not before the author seals their parting with a regal significance and the setting undergoes in sympathy a veritable transformation, as he describes the house and the sunset with emphasis:

She was leading him slowly through the house, which the crimson and gold of evening had dyed with a Renaissance splendour. (p. 305)

The lights in this passage are also the colours of a bishop's clerical garb, a continuation of the multi-layered religious allegory.

At the end of the chapter we are reminded of the central focus of their friendship, indeed of all four illuminates, that gift of the shared Chariot and yet of the solitary nature of the quest:

She was at her ugliest, wet and matted, but any disgust which Himmelfarb might have felt was swallowed up in the conviction that, despite the differences of geography and race, they were, and always had been, engaged on a similar mission. Approaching from opposite directions, it was the same

¹³⁴ Her words are: 'I would kill for you, you know,' Miss Hare suddenly said. 'If it would preserve for us what is right', *Riders in the Chariot*, p. 305.

darkness and the same marsh which threatened to engulf their movements, but however lumbering and impeded those movements might be, the precious parcel of secrets carried by each must only be given at the end into certain hands. (p. 304)

And White seems to suggest, in the final ambiguous paragraphs, that this quest, difficult and isolated though it may be, is the only way to counteract the chaotic violence conceived and executed by secular societal man; and that the notion of solace available from institutions is misplaced, for:

Only the Chariot itself rode straight and silent, both now, and on the clouds of recollection. (p. 307)

Whilst the Chariot may be an imaginative construct for Mary Hare and Himmelfarb, Alf Dubbo is only able to comprehend it by visual inspection, for we are told, 'it did seem as though he could grasp only what he was able to see' (p. 321), the earlier spiritual exhortations of the Rev. Calderon being ineffective. Alf's first enlightened sighting of the Chariot is in a French painting, and the importance of the light and fire within the painting cause him to 'throb over his discovery' (p. 320). He begins to paint in a manner that offends his patron, Mrs. Pask, sister of the Rev. Calderon, who regards his work as 'dirty' (p. 326). This is a reflection of her own inadequacy to cope with the realism of the painting, and her fear of the potential sensuality that may come to riotous expression from the use of oil paints.

Once he leaves this artistically inhibited atmosphere, he spends some time with Mrs Spice, the curator of the local rubbish tip. Even she, the local prostitute, suspects - like Mrs. Godbold - that there is an inner life in everybody, but Alf is unable to verbalise what he knows: 'Everything is inside of me, waiting for me to understand it' (p. 337).

He is inspired to commence painting again after reading one afternoon in the 'true light' (p. 353), certain passages from the book of Ezekiel. His ensuing work is then titled *The Fiery Furnace*, a title which he had conceived much earlier to encapsulate the light and movement that had so affected him when he first saw the painting of the Chariot with Mr. Calderon. *The Fiery Furnace* and his surviving other paintings are immediately recognised as outstanding by a collector, and he conspires with Alf's landlady to steal them. This behaviour is in direct contrast to the fine and esoteric qualities which the collector, Humphrey Mortimer, has seen in the paintings, and in the spirit of the moment:

.... the two actual men, watching the figures in the fiery furnace, were themselves touched with a heavenly dew which protected them momentarily from other voices and mortal dangers. It seemed that honesty must prevail. (p. 360)

Alf, like the other illuminates, has hereby 'laid himself open' (p. 361),¹³⁵ in this first public display of his work and panics when he feels he has been deceived, withdrawing the paintings from sale. Later he destroys all his remaining work, for, like Mary Hare, he understands the esoteric and worshipping nature of his quest even though he is unable to articulate it:

For, had he not revealed to Humphrey Mortimer secret truths which had been given to him to keep? (p. 364)

Dubbo is in effect to 'betray' his 'secret gift' (p. 435) again, like the disciple, Peter, by denying that he knew the Jew, Himmelfarb, when questioned by a tram conductor and is yet again a Peter-like figure when he observes the

¹³⁵As does Rose Portion in *Voss*, or Ruth in her love for Tom Godbold.

'crucifixion' of Himmelfarb but does not intervene, the chiming of clocks at the end of the paragraph then paralleling the crowing of cocks in the Biblical story. Dubbo innocently assumes the first episode of moral cowardice is racially based, blaming 'his darker skin' (p. 410), and knowing that he 'would never act' (p. 410) but remain an observer. Suffering in his imagination and powerless to act because of his marginal status, he later realises this resiling is false and that the fault is in his own frail character, 'it was his nature to betray' (p. 435).

But if Dubbo suffers because of his cowardly inaction, the sight of the crucified Himmelfarb allows him to integrate all his bible reading and the confused teaching of the Rev. Calderon, and in that illuminated moment he understands the nature of knowledge and love and the Christian message:

He was blinded now. Choking now. Physically feebler for the revelation that knowledge would never cut the cords which bound the Saviour to the tree. Not that it was asked. Nothing was asked. So he began to understand acceptance. How he could at last have conveyed it, in its cloak of purple, on the blue tree, the green lips of detached, contemplative suffering. And love in its many kinds began to trouble him as he looked. (p. 413)

The old Jew finally dies as a result of the injuries he has received in the mock-crucifixion, the event itself and its consequences very closely paralleling the Biblical narrative. He dies on Good Friday and is taken to the house of Ruth Godbold where he is cared for by her family and Mary Hare, and later in a blending of the Judeo-Christian story receives a Christian burial.

His death is the climax of the novel: from there it follows the experience for revelation of most of the characters, not least for Himmelfarb himself, who not

only fulfils his wife's prophecy¹³⁶ but atones for the guilt he feels by his absence at the time of her arrest and later death. As he enters the final stage of his journey along the River of Life, appropriately purple in colour in recognition of his suffering, he is granted the divine insight he seeks, so that we read: 'he knew, he knew' (p. 437), and he dies, now brilliantly illuminated:

For it was at this point that he glanced back at the last blaze of earthly fire. It rose up, through the cracks in the now colourless earth, not to consume, but to illuminate the departing spirit. (p. 438)

It is significant that this elderly, strictly Orthodox Jewish man, dies in the harshest land, Australia, and thus fulfils his long anticipated destiny. Himmelfarb is the personification of the great European tradition of culture and learning, who comes to Australia as he says, 'possibly because it was farthest, perhaps also bitterest' (p. 193). This sentiment is very similar to that expressed in George Eliot's novel, *Daniel Deronda*, where the Jew Mordecai Cohen explains the endurance of the Jew under stress, describing himself as an 'exile' who 'was forced afar among brutish people'.¹³⁷ Both characters, Mordecai Himmelfarb and Mordecai Cohen demonstrate the same endurance. In Himmelfarb's case he has miraculously escaped from the enormity of the Holocaust, and, although welcome in Israel, he had rejected settlement there

¹³⁶ Shortly before she is to be taken away by the Nazis, Reha says: 'Much will be made clear to you! But to us, the ordinary ones?' (p. 142)

¹³⁷ As the Jew Mordecai Cohen explains in *Daniel Deronda*:

The exile was forced afar among brutish people, where the consciousness of his race was no clearer to him than the light of the sun to our fathers in the Roman persecution, who had their hiding place in a cave and knew not that it was day save by the dimmer burning of their candles. What wonder that multitudes of our people are ignorant, narrow, superstitious?

George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, (1876), rep. Zodiac Press, London, 1971, p. 463. There is a mystical quality about this explanation that suggests Western culture would be impoverished without the contribution of the Jew who has contributed an 'enlightening' quality, and the tradition of their suffering, their sense of national destiny. Himmelfarb is therefore in this tradition and by choosing, seemingly spontaneously, to move to Australia is continuing the sense of

which he viewed as materialistic and dominated by the humanist ethic rather than the spiritual. Thus he has an obvious association with the other great European 'explorer' created by Patrick White, Voss. Both Europeans find within Australia a literal aridity and a like state of mind and culture, and both die as a consequence of it. But both also find an intimate or intimates who, whilst surviving with their ideals and principles, still can offer hope to an apparently barren metaphysical landscape. White sees much hope in such Australian characters as Else Godbold and her lover Bob Tanner, both of whom have experienced and shared the suffering of Himmelfarb and are irreversibly changed by it. Else by instinct feels:

As if she had not always known that all certainty was here, and goodness must return, like grass. (p. 467)

For Miss Hare, Himmelfarb's ordeal is to be the unifying event she has waited all her life to experience. Driven by the knowledge that, 'in the end, if not always, truth was a stillness and a light' (p. 422), she willingly risks her life to save the Jew's burning house, and subsequently, although burnt herself, becomes with Ruth Godbold the other 'Mary at the Tomb', seen by Alf Dubbo to tend the deposed and dying Himmelfarb:

But Miss Hare would only moan, not from pain, it seemed but because she again succeeded in closing the circle of her happiness. (p. 432)

As he dies:

Miss Hare had, in fact, entered that state of complete union which her nature had never yet achieved.

and:

...she wrapped and cherished the heavenly spirit which had

exile and martyr-like suffering both literally and metaphorically.

entered her, as Peg had suggested it might.

So in the end:

She herself would embrace the dust, the spirit of which she was able to understand at last. (p. 438)

Others present or aware in various ways of Himmelfarb's passing and who achieve some small measure of insight and knowledge include the slowly evolving Else Godbold, the wretched apostate, Harry Rosetree, and the 'good pagan', Mrs. Chalmers-Robinson. But it is Alf Dubbo who 'saw, and knew that he had reached the point of compulsion' (p. 453). He is now compelled to paint his masterpiece, finally achieving complete understanding after witnessing what had befallen Himmelfarb:

Now his fingers were reaching out, steely and surprising. Not to himself, of course. He was no longer in any way surprised. But knew. He had always known. (p. 453)

Himmelfarb during his illness and at the time of his death does not see the Chariot, and it is left to Alf Dubbo in his painting to create the great visual revelation/interpretation of the four illuminates together. Over a number of pages (452-459), the process undertaken by Alf is described, with constant references to light and illumination.¹³⁸ When it is finally finished and he has signed the painting Alf is to die, but not before he is himself described in luminous terms of a true transfiguration:

It was again evening when he had finished. The light was pouring into his room, and might have blinded, if the will to see had continued in him. He sat down stiffly on the bed. The sharp pain poured in crimson tones into the limited space of the room, and overflowed. It poured and overflowed his hands. These were gilded, he was forced to observe, with his own

¹³⁸ For example, 'his mind was shooting with little, illuminating sparks.' (*Riders in the Chariot*, p. 455)

gold. (p. 459)

Miss Hare has now disappeared, and is presumably dead, leaving only Ruth Godbold at the end of the novel. Her simplicity and her readiness to offer love and charity to all¹³⁹ have been passed onto her children, who because of their experiences are 'tougher' and have greater perception than other girls.¹⁴⁰ And although Ruth has not directly been illuminated as yet, the final description of her, bathed in golden light, means that it will occur ultimately as it did for the other three friends:

That evening, as she walked along the road it was the hour at which the other gold sank its furrows in the softer sky. The lids of her eyes, flickering beneath its glow, were gilded with an identical splendour. (pp. 491-492)

Riders in the Chariot is the most ambitious novel by Patrick White in which he deals with the theme of epiphany: ambitious in the sense that more characters are involved and interact in the canvas of the novel, one dealing as it does with events both in Europe and Australia, and with the dubious future for simplistic nationalistic societies. It is also ambitious in the breadth of social and cultural issues that are discussed. Additionally, it is the novel in which the theme of epiphany is dealt with so overtly and with so solid an underpinning of its religious and spiritual nature. In the next novel in which the transfiguring theme is central, *A Fringe of Leaves*, White returns to a more restricted canvas,

¹³⁹ Carrying on with the metaphor of the onion the text reads:

She had her own version of the Charict. Even now, at the thought of it, her very centre was touched by the wings of love and charity. (*Riders in the Chariot*, p. 489)

¹⁴⁰ Their experiences are described with intensity through a metaphor of iron or steel in a forge:

Even the youngest children, who had been sleeping at the time, remembered that night, for sleep did not seem to have prevented them participating in the event. So their eyes saw farther than those of other girls. Tempered on that night, their metal was tougher. (*Riders in*

in which only a single character, a very ordinary young woman, seeks knowledge, which she only gains at a great price after crossing the known world, to experience two harrowing bereavements there.