

Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

This thesis has been an attempt to demonstrate the importance of the concept of epiphany and its meaning in some four novels of Patrick White. By epiphany in the novel, as generally, there is meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, or illumination, one derived from an apparently trivial or mundane event, place or scene. Initially 'epiphany' was a religious term, used to denote a specific Christian festival: the viewing of the Christ-child by the three wise men as detailed in the Bible. But in liturgy, especially the Roman Catholic versions, the definition has become expanded to incorporate other manifestations of Divine Power, influence or illumination.

Although it is a revelation and visual experience, it is not a term of recognition, or *anagnorisis*, since 'epiphany' is always divinely inspired. With the general Western decline of religious influence and the widening cultural effect of James Joyce's fictional writings, epiphany has often passed from a religious to a secular idea and became equated with the sudden or numinous illumination of the mind of a so receptive individual. Joyce stressed in his writings on epiphany how the idea underpinned his theory of artistic aesthetics.¹⁷⁵ This theory is itself much indebted to Thomas Aquinas, who in his work¹⁷⁶ speaks of three qualities in the perception of an object. The first act is *integritas*, that is, the object has 'wholeness', an unblemished original

¹⁷⁵ See footnote 12, Chapter 1, for references to T. Spencer, ed., *Stephen Hero*, p. 210.

integrity. The viewer then analyses its parts to derive a total picture of the object and its harmonies - a process termed, *consonantia*. Finally, through *claritas* - or sharp and clear perception - we recognise the thing in itself, 'its soul, its soulness', to use James Joyce's words, 'this is the moment which I call epiphany'.¹⁷⁷

Joyce emphasised several aspects of the epiphany experience: the often apparently trivial nature of the object, place or situation, the suddenness of the process; and the fact that an inherent truth is then and thereby revealed. That is, this special knowledge is imparted in an 'ordinary' situation or moment. The reception of such truth and knowledge must then lead to an altered state of mind in the recipient, so that the individual is both emotionally elated and spiritually aware.

With time, the theme of epiphany has become increasingly important in discussion of the modern novel, both in Europe and North America. It is to be found readily and often identified in the writings of Woolf, Proust and Faulkner.¹⁷⁸ For James Joyce the concept becomes a significant structural device in his work, with its use to emphasise climaxes in the writing, to introduce flash-backs to provide illuminating background, and, as an integrating device, bringing together disparate threads of the narrative.

Like Joyce, White in his fiction, was much concerned with the sad and crippling triviality of much daily, materialistic (urban) existence and with showing the apparent insignificance generally accorded to seemingly ordinary

¹⁷⁶ Quoted in M. Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel, op. cit.*, p.80.

¹⁷⁷ See footnote 12, in Chapter 1, and J. Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist, op. cit.*, pp. 212-213.

¹⁷⁸ See M. Beja, *op. cit.*, who in his book devotes chapters to individual authors, detailing their use of epiphany in their work. (Faulkner has been fruitfully compared with White in many

phenomena able to trigger 'epiphany' in some of his observant or more intuitive characters. Such physical characteristics as the enlightenment as to their owner's suffering from noticing the now drudgery-swollen hands of an individual or watching the patient and orderly, selfless behaviour of ants are frequent examples in White's writing of such ever present messages to both other characters and to his readers.

'Epiphany', therefore, for these modern writers, including White, has become an important literary device, stressing the seemingly disconnected moment and interrupting the mental or 'logical' flow of the formal narrative, and thereby alerting the reader and allowing the author to insert her/his moment of understanding. As Joyce said to a friend, he had wanted the reader:

to understand always through suggestion, rather than direct statement.¹⁷⁹

That is, the obvious is somewhat obscured momentarily, thereby causing the reader to ponder and to consider more closely the author's writing and subliminal meaning now glimpsed, the reader becoming alerted to the deeper spiritual significance of the moment by the literary technique of epiphany. Not only does Patrick White use this manner in his writing but he also continues to use the spiritual meaning of the term when his more suffering and, so, enlightened characters are affected - for example, Stan Parker, who gradually gets increasingly meaningful insights into human interactions or situations, so

thematic and stylistic matters.)

¹⁷⁹James Joyce, quoted in Frank Bugden, *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1960, p. 21.

that his final illumination appears to be a total revelation. Importantly White has stated that religion is behind all his writing¹⁸⁰ and that 'every man has genius',¹⁸¹ thereby suggesting that the experience of momentary grace or epiphany is available to all. Indeed, in all of his writing, those who seek, and especially those who have suffered and continue to seek, are rewarded. Suffering, in White's writing is an apparent prerequisite, and many of White's characters expect to have to do just this, as does Laura Trevelyan in *Voss* (p. 107). Further, those who are prepared to be totally exposed, in White's words, 'laid open', such as Rose Portion in *Voss* (p. 76), or Alf Dubbo in *Riders in the Chariot* (p. 361), often experience a socially compounding defect, frequently physical; such for example, are Rose's hare lip and Alf's coloured skin. And many are sexually exploited or cruelly rebuffed by the shallow people who have used them. These apparent defects and acts of abuse serve to further marginalise such pitiful characters, so that their suffering is greater and their seeking even more attenuated. These characters, who later become 'burnt ones' as in White's short story collection of the same name, are also often psychologically damaged and sexually and physically abused.

Only those who are intuitively 'good' - and often called 'simple' - do not appear to need to receive epiphanies or such sudden spiritual understanding and illumination. These include characters such as Doll Quigley in *Tree of Man*, or Waldo in *The Solid Mandala*. These characters are incorporated into White's cluster of the saved, 'old women, and nuns, and idiots.' This is a select

¹⁸⁰ Also see the 'Introduction' to this thesis for White's words: 'Religion. Yes, that's behind all my books', from *In the Making*, C. McGregor, *op cit.*

¹⁸¹ Patrick White, *Voss*, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

group, to whom 'the purposes of God are made clear'.¹⁸²

In White's fiction, the character receiving the revelation is not always (so very obviously) spiritually altered or transformed by the experience. Granted they must be receptive and able to comprehend it to some extent, but several characters, Amy Parker, for example, do not seek, yet receive flashes of understanding, especially in relation to her comprehending the nature of the paintings of Mr. Gage, the post-mistress's husband. Yet she remains discordant to her husband's lifelong quest. Similarly, Ellen Gluyas, (Roxburgh), gains insights in her autotelic search, but at the end of the novel she opts for societal and financial safety in the arms of the comfortable merchant, Mr. Jevons. Ulrich Voss is different again: he neither seeks nor desires revelation, but through love the ultimate truth is revealed, which he then accepts even before his transfiguration.

Most often, the reader is not advised with total clarity by the author as to the nature of the epiphany; perhaps it is an elation of the mind, some sort of deeper knowledge imparted or understanding gained, but exactly what lasting impact it may have made is not revealed to us. Stan Parker, in his final moments, gains a 'release', presumably from earthly pain and constraints, and his belief is rewarded by knowing 'the answer to all sums', (*Tree of Man*, p. 497). This sense of new or final freedom is only available to those who have explored long and received insights, and it is most clearly elaborated by White through his character Miss Scrimshaw at the end of *A Fringe of Leaves*. It is paradoxical that this figure, a palimpsest, and general factotum should be the

¹⁸² Patrick White, *The Tree of Man*, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

one to recognise the bestowal or operation of such freedom and to compare it with that of transformation into the majestic eagle. This she secretly reveals to Ellen Roxburgh, who is now to return to civilisation and financial comfort, her secret longing is to have undergone self-exploration and to come out of it above everything and untouchable: 'To soar free...' (p. 363). It is also ironic that Ellen, who has, in fact, undergone such a search, and presumably some moments of enlightenment, appears now to turn her back on the understandings she has achieved, whilst her impoverished friend, Miss Scrimshaw, will never be in a position to seek what she knows is attainable to the spirit liberated through suffering.

One of the issues which Ellen has faced and experienced is that of recognising the often confused manifestation and operation of good and evil: good and evil both in society and in the individual. All of the novels discussed explore this theme in relation to particular fictional lives as presented. In the *Tree of Man* and also in *A Fringe of Leaves*, Amy Parker and Ellen Gluyas speculate about the importance and influence of original sin and/or predestination, the author thereby suggesting that it has been responsible for their individual and momentary moral lapses. In *Riders in the Chariot*, the theme is realistically explored on a national scale through the behaviour of the Nazis and their treatment of the Jews, but individual indifference towards others, neglect and insensitivity are all features of the main characters' behaviour in that novel, although they are not overtly evil. White is predictable in his writing of Australia's widespread racism in the book, both towards immigrants, Jews, and the indigenous population of Australia, as represented by Alf Dubbo. The malicious gossiping of the Mesdames Jolly and Flack is

comic, but this only underscores its greater seriousness and its destructive effect upon its victims.

Throughout all the novels it is love and the biblical exhortation to the love of one another that can redeem these various surrounding manifestations of evil.¹⁸³ This form of practised and received love incorporates Christian concepts of service as its earthly manifestation and also as its practical demonstration. The love is a matter of attitude, of the character's essence, not of momentary feeling and is, therefore, not mere or momentary sentimentality. It is in acts of real benevolence or 'well wishing' such as those of the Stauffers towards Mordecai Himmelfarb, and the goodwill demonstrated by Ruth and Else Godbold in all their dealings with their fellow men, that underpin this idea of true human love. It is selfless, not necessarily mutual, or reciprocal, as Ruth discovers in her marriage. But White suggests it is the only way forward in the moral world constructed and described in his fiction, one which is frequently inhabited by venal or more shallow characters.

Importantly, this love is frequently found outside the established religions and the ministers and administerers of these are often deeply flawed or at best ineffectual. The Rev. Timothy Calderon, an Anglican, is one of a number of pathetic examples; in his case he also molests children in his care, but the chaplain who speaks to Ellen Roxburgh after her ordeal is a bully, rather than a comforter of souls. Not only are his flock as individuals devoid of love, but the buildings they inhabit are cheerless: in contrast Pilcher's crude structure

¹⁸³ See Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*, SCM Press, London, 1966, pp. 103-105.

with its lettering 'God Is Love'¹⁸⁴ is readily appreciated by Ellen, yet also recalling the severe formal Protestant church she had visited on her arrival on the island.

The strongly personal approach accorded by White to so many of his characters if offered life-giving love is one of the hallmarks of style in the four novels discussed. Those who seek, who gain knowledge and insight from pain and their own selflessness, have, White suggests, an obligation to pass this enlightening knowledge on and to always serve others less blessed as a manifestation of their love and understanding. Those in his novels who are poor or marginalised frequently practise such behaviour without any hope of earthly or financial reward or recognition by others.

Such individual and highly moral service, performed in humility, is characteristic of that mysticism which seeks salvation from within. In relation to the novel, *The Tree of Man*, and Stan Parker's progress towards his personal understanding, comment has already been made of the apparent influence of the 13th century Dominican mystic theologian, Meister Eckhart. Self-understanding is also a feature of such Gnosticism; there is also a dualistic philosophy of understanding, with evil associated with darkness, and knowledge with light - a feature of all inner or private illumination and epiphany.

Whilst mystical experiences are not the same as religious ones,¹⁸⁵ qualities shared by both in effect mean that much mystical insight is taken by

¹⁸⁴ Patrick White, *A Fringe of Leaves*, *op. cit.*, p. 353.

¹⁸⁵ See explanation of 'mysticism' in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed., Ted Honderich, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, pp. 599-600.

those experiences as sent to be religious. Such qualities as ineffability, noetic quality, transiency and passivity¹⁸⁶ are all features shared by both types of consciousness. It has been suggested that a fifth be added,¹⁸⁷ that is, the 'altered state of consciousness' that may occur with a mystical experience. This would include trances and moments of social or societal pause, when one slips out of present awareness.

In the novels of Patrick White, it is typical of his characters that any spiritualisation they experience is internalised, and that their quest is generally outside any catalytic influence from the established church. This is true even for the Jewish character, Mordecai Himmelfarb, who practices his religion but does not consider synagogue attendance or orthodoxy required for his transfigured perceptions. For Mary Hare, whose personal philosophy is an elemental form of Pantheism, a spiritual significance can be found in all forms of nature and any man-made church would be inadequate to incorporate all of nature's bounteous goodness to her. Interestingly, both she and Ellen Gluyas have experienced their finest moments of epiphany in natural 'temples' in the overgrown garden, the English countryside or the Australian bush. Thus White's characters do their personal seeking in a world free from authoritarianism and dogma and other formal constraints, their openness and the operation of grace allowing them to experience union or fellowship with a divine presence or immanence.

In White's fiction various characters who are given no societal identity or

¹⁸⁶William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Longmans, Green, London, 8th impression, (1904), pp. 380-382.

¹⁸⁷Reference to George I. Mavrodes, *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, *op. cit.*, pp. 599-600.

even a surname are of profound importance, both to the understanding of the novels by the reader and to other characters in the book. They function as timeless seers or prophets who happen to appear, especially 'The Man who was Given his Dinner' in *The Aunt's Story*. Described in appearance, 'like a prophet' (p. 40), this seeming sundowner is wealthy in non-materialistic terms and has great powers of insight, accurately predicting Theodora Goodman's own developing powers of insightful perception.¹⁸⁸ Something similar is associated with the Indian or Afghan pedlar.

More subtle is the description and role of the young boy found by Stan Parker after he had assisted others so selflessly during the flood. At this time of her life, his wife Amy Parker is desperate to have a child, and so is determined to 'imprison the child in her house by force of love'. However, after a single night, the unnamed child disappears without thanks or acknowledgement. Two things are to be associated with the child's temporary presence: the Parker's furniture and a piece of stained glass from a broken church window, damaged in the floods, (*The Tree of Man*, pp. 94-95). The glass is a numinous talismanic object, iconically identifying the boy as an almost Christ-like holy child, to be set against the comfortable, but spiritually-barren Parker household, one in which the couple 'eyed their furniture with contented eyes' (p. 92). The inference is that the house is devoid of any receptive love and so Amy especially loses an opportunity to be in contact with and so gain some knowledge of a divine innocence which the boy symbolises:

¹⁸⁸ The text reads:

You'll see a lot of funny things, Theodora Goodman. You'll see them because you've got eyes to see. And they'll break you. But perhaps you'll survive.

Patrick White, *The Aunt's Story*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

She could not explain that a moment comes when you yourself must produce some tangible evidence of the mystery of life. (p. 97)

By contrast, Theodora Goodman has almost immediately and intuitively reasoned through to the many aspects of hospitality and importance to 'The Man who was Given his Dinner'. For when asked by her sister Fanny if he will return, she senses the only momentary or momentarily proffered gift of grace and insight, now gone.

... she knew already that he would not come. In all that she did not know there was this certainty. She began to feel that knowing this might be the answer to many of the mysteries. (p. 46)

This 'knowing' the numinous nature of the momentary proffered benison of a manifestation of grace and insight is the answer many of Patrick White's characters seek. The exact nature of the knowledge gained or practised White does not reveal, but many, especially those who suffer mentally or physically, are uplifted and inspired to follow the biblical call to love one another. In *The Tree of Man*, the first of White's novels written upon his return to Australia, Stan Parker finally understands:

It was clear that One, and no other figure, is the answer to all sums. (p. 497)

Although Stan may understand, White leaves the reader with an ambiguous statement, suggesting the author leaves the journey for the reader to undertake alone; with the novels that deal with the idea merely serving as a springboard to impress upon people the need to search for greater love and understanding. For epiphany is an intensely personal experience that affirms

the inner self and leads to the ever more meek yet confident practice of service, love, selflessness - in short the behaviour of the most Christ-like behaviour in the daily round. Such inner enlightenment is followed by the ever more calm yet joyous manifestation of love, service, humility and understanding.

In Australian literature, I believe that White's use of epiphany is unique: as a potent and arresting method of engaging the reader with his fiction, but also as a literary device to reveal and dramatise his preoccupations. Not only has White used epiphany in the strict religious sense and also followed Joyce as modern theorist, but he has also incorporated ideas as to the revelation of knowledge to the humble seeker. His epigraphs serve as particular reminders of the theologians, writers and philosophers who deal with the universal themes of love, knowledge and understanding, and they demonstrate many of White's sources in the pursuit of his own personal journey or quest.