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PATRICK WHITE'S AESTHETIC

Although percipient generalisations have been made on White's novels, no extended attention has been given specifically to their aesthetic. A consideration of this aesthetic raises fundamental questions about the aesthetic illusion created in the novels, about their relation to reality and truth; it is important for the vexed question of meaning in the novels.

Criticism repeatedly points to the constructed character of White's novels. *The Oxford History of Australian Literature* (1981)[1] is representative: "manipulations of design" (p. 151), "scenes are juxtaposed for ironic possibilities" (p. 152), "the fusion of two levels, the real and the surreal, is incomplete. The connection remains metaphorical", "contrived in structure," "mechanically schematic," "heavily symbolic and allusive," "a structural device" (p. 154). It appears that authorial comment on Sir Basil Hunter in *The Eye of the Storm* might well be applied to the author himself:

> ". . . *there is nobody like Hunter for doing his homework.* Given a part which interested him, he would ferret out the last refinement of lust in a Bosola, say, or just to show them, wrap up a homosexual breadcarter in all the oblique motivation required by the Royal Court."[2]

This, as it were, up-market version of giving-them-what-they-want, associates with the thespian mask behind which Sir Basil appears before the public, gaining thereby an aura of theatrical fame, while privately remaining an impotent mummy's boy, who literally limps his way through all other departments of life.

Criticism then suggests that White's work is a designed abstracting of real elements and an ordering of them to produce an effect. This effect is referred to by critics variously in terms of the spiritual, of vision, of social castigation, of metaphysics, even of religion. Here, let us call this effect simply an aesthetic phenomenon, or, in keeping with the usual terminology of aesthetics, an aesthetic illusion.

The term 'aesthetic illusion' of course has an aura of ambivalence. In general, we know that doubt about the aesthetic illusion, its relation to truth and reality, is of great vintage; it has a famous exponent in Plato, who sees the artist as a falsifier: not only are natural phenomena illusory, as illustrated by Plato's

Cave, but the artist compounds this illusion through his own fabrication of images. White too has expressed radical doubt about the aesthetic illusion, in his depiction of an artist's life in *The Vivisector* (1970). Here, the author suggests the great value of Hurtle Duffield's paintings while also suggesting equally great, if not greater doubts about them: "This is the biggest con man Australia has produced";[3] the aesthetic effect of Duffield's works is ambiguous; one is left wondering about a possible aesthetics of the 'con'. With Duffield's paintings, this difficulty appears to be augmented by their lack of beauty, an attribute which was once a high criterion for aesthetic assessment, since, along with truth and goodness, beauty has been regarded as one of the paths to divinity. In any case, it would be hard to argue for the beauty of White's novels; the effect created, though strong, is of something else.

In 1790, Immanuel Kant, in his *Critique of Judgement,* distinguished the 'illusion' of literature from the deceptively beautiful illusion of rhetoric by arguing that literature is "simply a game" beyond the demands of truth. It seems that as long as the ambivalence of the aesthetic illusion was not resolved one way or the other, as either a real way to something higher, or simply as a game, it remained of minor interest. However, with Friedrich Nietzsche, the question of the aesthetic illusion is brought aggressively into the moral sphere; the problem of Aestheticism emerges and the history of the aesthetic illusion takes a turn, bringing it into intimate connection with the aesthetics of Patrick White. It is suggested here that, rather than pursue White's aesthetic in terms of, say, Flaubert and later developments in the novel, or of psychologists such as Jung and R.D. Laing, all of which is interesting and valuable, it would be more efficient, in getting to the core of White's aesthetic, to pursue it in terms of Nietzsche, whose work contains the aesthetic credo of those stylists and authors of Aestheticism, among whom Patrick White must be placed.

For perspective, let us glance back. In Australia, Christopher Brennan thought that although the aesthetic illusion, or, as he called it, "poetry" or "beauty", was quite separate from morality and expediency of any kind, it was not in ultimate conflict with morality but sought in its own way the good of mankind. Art had an important public function; it was not merely private. However, it was important that the work conform solely to its own laws, be autonomous. Brennan saw the aesthetic illusion as an exemplary harmony quite distinct from actual life but radiating into the lives of citizens, reminding them of what life might be, of the harmonious goal of history. There is something here of the dignity of a national religion: Brennan pointed to

Stephan Mallarmé's idea of a national worship of the aesthetic illusion, of pure poetry.[4] Brennan thought of his aesthetic essentially in terms of the German Romantics, Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis; he was familiar with the writings of Nietzsche, as shown by copious markings in his own volumes, but he saw Nietzsche as a belated romantic, whose best ideas had already been anticipated by Schlegel and Novalis. Unlike Nietzsche, Brennan saw the aesthetic illusion as referring to something else, as an "earnest" of potentials in man and history, a perfection to be arrived at in the course of time.

With Nietzsche, however, the aesthetic illusion is separate from truth; truth and beauty are no longer one, nor is there any goal in history; there is only "the eternal return of the same." The aesthetic illusion here becomes simply a phenomenon arising from an artistic operation. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche considers the effect of the aesthetic illusion on the spectator. This effect is concentrated in a "moment" compounded of horror and pleasure, in which a glimpse into the horrifying abyss underlying all life is met by the pleasure of release from individual limits.[5] In *The Vivisector*, for instance, Katya Volkov's playing of "the Andantino" is such that "dark tragedies hinted at resolved themselves in limpid strength." This effect is emphasized by immediately stating that "An ambulance clanging down George Street entered through closed doors. . . Along the rows the intellectual public servants and unassimilated Europeans were sitting tensed by the Andantino . . . For the time being at least, the waves on which they were rising and falling wouldn't suck them down into some horrid abyss, or so they believed; they were riding safe. . ."[6]

For Nietzsche, the basic fact of life is a power that destroys individuals with not the slightest hint of concern for dignity or unfulfilled aspirations. A similar basic fact is to be found in White's novels: Voss, hopelessly lost, is indifferently hacked to death with a knife; Waldo Brown, a lost soul, lies dead with dogs eating his throat and penis; Mrs Hunter dies unfulfilled while waiting to excrete on her commode; the dying Hurtle Duffield crashes against his unfinished picture; Eddie Twyborn dies on the pavement, in dishevilled 'drag'. One is reminded of Oscar Wilde:

> "It often happens that the real tragedies of life occur in such an inartistic manner that they hurt us by their crude violence, their absolute incoherence, their absurd want of meaning, their entire lack of style. They affect us just as vulgarity affects us. They give us the impression of sheer brute force and we revolt against that."[7]

This "impression of sheer brute force" that arises in the world of White's novels, of a cruel cosmic "Vivisector," is emphasized by the author's technique of focussing on situations, as against continuity. In these situations, not only is the extraordinary sought, but it is intensified in moments of experience seemingly lifted out of the normal continuum of time and space. These heightened and intimate moments include aesthetic moments of salvation, the momentary utopia. Sir Basil Hunter, the actor, can recall "agonizing doubts before the final flash of intuition"[8] and "occasions when words and emotions fermented inside you, seethed upwards through the throat in a delirium to which you might have succumbed if you had been without the skill to direct it through the darkness at the many-faced monster."[9]

Before considering these moments further, let us return to Nietzsche. The moment of escape from individuation provided by the aesthetic illusion does not, in Nietzsche's view, afford a glimpse into a higher world; the phenomenal world is not the "moving image of eternity," in a Platonist sense, as with the poetry of Judith Wright. Rather, this moment affords, like the Gorgon's mirror, a manageable glimpse of horror, in which one feels momentarily freed of normal restraints. At the end of *A Fringe of Leaves,* Miss Scrimshaw expresses the desire for such a moment, when she wishes to become an eagle. "To breathe . . . Elevated, and at last free!"[10] She is described ironically: ". . . the eagle flumped across the deck, reached the companionway, and disappeared."[11] Then, at the end of the book, authorial comment indicates the true source of this aspiration: ". . . however much crypto-eagles aspire to soar, and do in fact, through thoughtscape and dream, their human nature cannot but grasp at any circumstantial straw which may indicate an ordered universe."[12] Here, a *horror vacui* is implied as a compelling source of behaviour. Also, the thought arises, that "crypto-eagles" may be a basic assumption in the writing of novels, which, by metaphorical means, raise hopes of such an order, while, at a more prosaic level, they cancel these hopes. It seems that the crypto-eagles may try their wings against the winds of fate, while the reader, who presumably is wiser on this question of order, who perhaps is a real eagle, can look down with a perverse, if unadmitted pleasure in the disappointment of illusionists such as Miss Scrimshaw. Given this reflective stance, is it not possible that, along with these birds, there also may be owls, who reflect on the work of art itself and, as Hegel anticipated, thus contribute to a further development, in which a comprehended art is no longer the final word on the human condition but an interesting component of social communication?

On the question of an ordered universe, Nietzsche, like White, returns a negative: there is no inherent ordering, no true nature of things, no thing-in-itself. The dionysian moment is a mediation through the Apollonian principle of form, whether in dreams, art or natural phenomena, of the horror of existence, which, like Elizabeth Hunter, is seen as "evil, brutal, destructive."[13] Nietzsche realised that the phenomenal appearance of horror, as in the Greek plays, could be enjoyed; the particular conditions of this effect, which is an aesthetic one, not one of knowledge, are that it take place suddenly under loss of the principle of individuation; it is an experience attended by dread mixed with pleasure. The conditions for the perception of dread are three: ". . . chance, uncertainty, suddenness."[14] The death of Oswald Dignam, in *A Fringe of Leaves,* may serve in principle as representative of this effect. His death is presented both indirectly through Mrs Roxburgh and directly through authorial comment. Dignam, the "diminutive lover" of Mrs Roxburgh, goes to the water's edge, to please her by gathering food; he begins "bashing at the coral with a stone." Mrs Roxburgh watches, her lips "parted between pleasure and anxiety. When the sea rose, and with a logic which had only been suspended, it seemed to her, swept him off the ledge. . ." He is described as "at best a human sacrifice, at worst an object for which there was no further use."[15] The dignity of Oswald Dignam is pointed up as of no account. The tired sailors do not want to hear of him: "Oswald Dignam the individual had slipped from the common consciousness. . ."[16] He dies twice, as it were; in the sea and in the minds of men. Mrs Roxburgh is "warned off" by a wave, and stands "mewing," unable to respond rationally. The essence of this moment, like that of the dionysian moment, is the collapse of reason in an act of pathos. At another level, when Lal Wyburd puts it to Sir Basil that "You actors of – of intellectual integrity, must find it immensely rewarding – to *immerse* yourselves in the great classic roles," the author comments, "poor old bugger, if he only knew!"[17] The implication here is that intellectual integrity is really beside the point.

Whereas Kant had thought of art as keeping imagination within the bounds of a concept, Nietzsche deliberately abandoned the concept and stated that in the "cry of terror," the "new," the "unheard of," the "never experienced," the "incommensurable" was experienced.[18] From the viewpoint of knowledge, the tragic moment is 'empty.' As the narrator comments in *The Eye of the Storm,* ". . . emptiness is not emptiness when it serves a purpose. Many of the greatest have been empty. How else could they have filled with those necessary

flashes of inspiration, the surge of words, emotion, if they had been a bunch of intellectuals stuffed with theories and 'taste'?"[19] This is also the emptiness of Hurtle Duffield's last canvas: ". . . this fresh emptiness promised to be the vastest desert he had ever set out to cross . . ."[20] It might be mentioned that motifs here, of agonies, limping, Macbeth, suggest thematic relationship to Sir Basil, the actor in *The Eye of the Storm,* if not to Voss, attempting to cross an actual desert.

The suddenly occurring moment, in Nietzsche and in White, is outside of reflected history: "In a moment it seemed to Eddie Twyborn as though his own share in time were snatched away. . ."[21] Eddie is faced at this moment with the incommensurable power that destroys him, as he sees his own detached hand lying in blood on the pavement. The moment, in the sense of a sudden, intense perception of self-identification with actuality, is not a logical or metaphysical concept but is aesthetic. Nietzsche not only described the aesthetic structure of tragedy as illusion but also replaced the necessity of "plot" with that of "pathos" alone; in place of 'collisions' that introduce a new turn to the plot each time, he emphasized the pathetic "situation." The entire course of the tragedy was a phenomenon in which time was eliminated, an effect which is also present in White's novels, where, by a network of variously modulated symbols, metaphors, motifs, by ironic comments and distancings, a literary texture is created in which anticipations and recollections work to subordinate chronology to a sense of timeless pattern actualised at certain moments.

In contrast to these moments of human experience, in White, the sense of continuity is presented as more befitting animals than humans: swallows and hornets provide "evidence of the continuity which convinces animals better than it does human beings, unless they are human vegetables."[22] Fictional characters of course need some limitation of perspective in order to act; if their perspective were broader, they would have to act differently. But limitation of time-perspective leads to an animal state outside of history. This constellation of factors, of ahistorical continuity, of animal and vegetable being, of sharply restricted perspective in time and space, is repeatedly invoked in White's novels. They abound with animal and vegetable life, in metaphor and simile. In this respect, the novels are a mannerist gallery. Here are some samples, at random: "Garth, the dark thin young hawk, had raised his beak . . .,"[23] "The draftmare, whose name was Janie Carson . . .,"[24] ". . . in a patch of light by a couple of milky globes a human object had been planted: a third globe or turnip, or face of a woman . . .,"[25] ". . . a pair

of naked calves, or immense blond bulbs grown to bursting, before they uprooted themselves . . .,"[26] "She was making a mouth like a pullet's arse the moment before it drops the egg,"[27] "He could see her corpse so clearly: the bones of her transparent feet, the skin of a pale fish-saint – possibly skate,"[28] "He thought he recognised the . . . physiologist inside the tom-cat cheeks which come with regular steak and bed,"[29] "the vegetable conductor,"[30] ". . . to stretch alongside her, no longer a lover, but some lean and ingratiating breed of hairless dog, licking her wrists . . .," "Monsieur Vatatzes," his hand, "the claw of an elderly black cock, the kind which can be served as several courses after careful stewing."[32]

When Eddie Twyborn's life is restricted to a moment during bombing, he hears "the thump and crump of history becoming unstable, crumbling"[33] and sees the dying soldier's hands near him as "a dog's obedient paws."[34] In this reduced state, he has a sense of continuity, albeit pathetic, and croaks "over his shoulder" for a band-aid from someone who is not there. Eddie perceives an historical event as the end of history; with this perspective gone, he can perceive the human as animal.

To save art from history, without sacrificing history to art, Nietzsche came to develop the idea of art as a "mask." Of the Greeks, he wrote: "O those Greeks! They knew how to *live*: for which they stayed bravely at the surface, the wrinkle, the skin, to worship appearances, to believe in forms, in sounds, in words, in the entire Olympus of illusion! The Greeks were superficial – *out of depth!*" And then he asked, "Are we not, precisely in this – Greeks? Worshippers of form, of sounds, of words? Even because of this – artists?"[35] He argues that, whereas "beauty" was formerly expressive of a myth, of the Greeks, or of Christianity, it now has something of a mask, whether applied to a building or to "the face of an uncultured woman."[36] The metaphor of the mask becomes an ironic substitute for the "beautiful illusion" of art. Whereas the illusion of art had reflected the world of individuation, which in turn reflected the dionysian abyss, the mask is simply deceptive, without reference to a final ground of being. For instance: Eddie Twyborn "glanced sideways in the gathering dusk and saw himself reflected in plate-glass. . . He was disgusted to see he had forgotten to take off Eadith's make-up. The great magenta mouth was still flowering in a chalk face."[37] Behind Eddie's reflected mask is a crisis of identity, of sexual ambiguity, illusion on illusion, and finally an abyss of senseless, violent death. Eddie's gesture towards beauty lies ruined on the pavement as he dies. Likewise, the corpse of Elizabeth Hunter affords an instance of the

ambiguity of this concept. "The mask did seem to be taking on the expression of original purity, and in assuming, to assure. Elizabeth Hunter's beauty, anyway as idea, hovered on the face of a skull to which a reality had been restored."[38] Then there are the countless mirror scenes in the novels, where typically the image is witnessed as the mask of an ambivalent existence. The beautiful appearance is presented in both Nietzsche and White as deception, as masking; the separation between this appearance and the idea of truth is emphatic and aggressive. Another instance, at a different level of appearance, is provided when Eddie Twyborn sees "natural phenomena" as "becoming his greatest source of solace" and healing; for they are promptly reduced virtually to a hollow mask by the crass announcement of Eddie's prospective buggary.[39] This situation has been prepared for by the authorial comment, that "On such an enamelled morning . . . Happiness was perhaps the reward of those who cultivate illusion, or, who . . . have it thrust upon them by some tutelary being, and then are granted sufficient innocence to sustain it."[40] These are, of course, specific instances out of many, without reference to the mask-like character of the novels as a whole.

In his early work, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, Nietzsche stated that there is no "correct perception," no "adequate expression of an object in a subject," because "between two such absolutely different spheres, as subject and object . . . there is no causality, no correctness, no expression, but at most an *aesthetic* behaviour. . ."[41] Aesthetic behaviour can be assessed only in itself, not in respect to something other; it is an "absolutely different sphere." It might be mentioned that, among other sources, these ideas can be found also in Oscar Wilde's essays, "The Decay of Lying" (1889), and "The Truth of Masks" (1891). The general point, however, is that with Nietzsche the aesthetic illusion of Greek tragedy becomes adapted to modern times in terms of the mask. The illusion of art is now presented as an ideal mask which does not represent reality but "allegorical generality"; in which the naturalistic character of time is "attenuated almost to invisibility and made mythical."[43] Thus the ideal mask, the "allegorical," again has mythical quality.

Adrian Mitchell has seen in White's work "a tendency for the symbolism to verge on spiritual allegory."[44] If we take the term 'allegory' to signify a strictly stylised model of the world, with a dense internal system of reference, which remains meaningless as a whole until its 'code' is cracked, then, could we not see Mitchell's statement as having caught, in the case of

White, just that quality of the ideal mask, which exists on the "verge", where it does not represent any idea, any metaphysical content, any reality but "allegorical generality"? For Nietzsche, this concept of the mask is a self-referential concept of form, advanced against a contemporary art sliding down into the naturalistically subjective. Here Nietzsche holds fast to an objectivity which has distinguished the dionysian artist of *The Birth of Tragedy.* Mitchell percipiently remarks that White's fiction is to some extent "quasi-allegorical dramatization, and the spiritual truths are peculiarly external realities."[45] This perception too squares with the Nietzschean myth of the mask, which distinguishes itself from the archaically mythic, in that the horror of glimpsing the gods is replaced by that of glimpsing, behind all fabric of civilisation, the abyss of time, cruelty and death. Hence, the negation of historical continuity in White's novels and the 'dionysian' moments of identification with nature when the protagonist, as it were, drops out of official time and enters a permanence more permanent than history. But this nature is itself the illusory individuation or mask of an abyss, of a Dionysus or Vivisector: when Oswald Dignam in *A Fringe of Leaves* protests " against the mystery of the divine prerogative" in carrying him out to sea, the sea puts "a glassy stopper in his mouth."[46]

In contrast to these moments of horror, the moments of release, or "epiphanies", as James Joyce and even White himself has called them,[47] which are sudden intensifications of experience, aesthetic illusions of salvation, appear in the presence of that from which salvation is needed. Mrs Roxburgh, for instance, has her vision of escape, in a chapel with birds, when she feels abandoned and facing a prospect of permanent imprisonment.[48] But these phenomena, in White, as in Nietzsche, are ironically radicalised to masks, deceptions. The birds in the chapel come to function as symbols of Mrs Roxburgh's physical release, but the novel ends with the denial of transcendent order: there is no release for the soul.[49] No metaphysical reference can rationally be brought to these moments, a circumstance which nevertheless works to heighten their aesthetic effect; they are abysmally deep in Nietzsche's macabre sense that "Everything that is deep loves a mask."[50] At best, one can only speak, with Nietzsche, of an "aesthetic metaphysics,"[51] in the sense of reversing, say, the Platonic order of priorities implied in Judith Wright's *The Moving Image.* Nietzsche himself spoke of a reversed Platonism, in which he gave the flickering shadows cast by the fire in Plato's Cave a higher priority than the unchanging source of their being. For Nietzsche, this source is suffering, from which salva-

tion can only be found in illusion, that of the empirical world, or, if we are capable of it, that of the world of art. The aesthetic act is a response to pain; its attendant pleasure arises out of this. In order to experience aesthetic pleasure, we need suffering or, to put it more obliquely, though graphically: "... it was perhaps doubtful whether anyone would notice Mrs Poulter or Mrs Dun unless life took its cleaver to them".[52]

The subordination of being to the pleasure of the aesthetic illusion contains in principle a sadistic motive. The expression of this motive may be comparatively mild, as with Waldo Brown's metaphorical moment of realisation: "At that moment Waldo Brown realized Mrs Feinstein's nose reminded him of the uncircumcised penis of an Anglican bishop he had noticed in a public lavatory,"[53] or, another moment, a little stronger: "There was actual lightning over the sea . . . in which he again saw the girl's eyeballs populated with the ant-forms of anxiety,"[54] or, stronger still, "the electric moment" when "a young girl, white as lard, of turnip forms," throws an epileptic fit, "rolling her china eyeballs. For an instant the possessed one glanced at the only other of her kind, and they were swept up, and united by sheet lightning, as they never could have been on the accepted plane. . . If his had been the right knife, she might have planted it there and then in her turnip flesh. . ."[55] But, apart from the many moments of these kinds, there is also a sense of sadism possible from the reader's identification with the novelist's control over the life and destruction of a doomed individual. One notices, for instance, the skill with which the moments mentioned above are set up for maximum effect. The electric moment of epilepsy is made to occur on "one of the flatter evenings, after supper: collars were wilting on male necks; ladies were gazing out across the water with a nostalgia born of night and perspiration. . .,"[56] and so on. Of *The Tree of Man,* Adrian Mitchell remarks "the moment of illumination reduces to an unnecessarily dramatic reaffirmation of Stan's affinity with the natural world."[57] The moment is set up for maximum contrast; likewise for the larger effects of death in main characters, say Voss, Elizabeth Hunter, Hurtle Duffield, Eddie Twyborn. Just as these characters in their significant moments are associated with ahistorical Nature, so the author skilfully points up this same Nature, or rather a vast power indifferent to humanity, as a source of destruction, and this, to such a degree that the reader may suspect this mighty power, after all, as being that of the author himself; in other words, the aesthetic illusion may be broken both from a sense of incongruity with life and from a glimpse of the ropes and pulleys behind the scenes.

The famous statement in *The Birth of Tragedy* that "only as an aesthetic phenomenon is existence and the world eternally justified,"[58] means that the world is bearable only as an aesthetic reflection, since there is no deeper knowledge of the world than that experienced in the dionysian moment, which is horrifying. At the same time, the aesthetic phenomenon has its own significance, irreducible to any other, since only as *aesthetic* does it contradict being. This is distinct from the traditional representation of the truth of being by means of artistic illusion. Insofar as Nietzsche has released the aesthetic illusion from being and truth, he has provided a theoretical model of aesthetic autonomy, in which aesthetic effect, not truth, is the essence.

From this perspective, we gain a further view of "the contradiction at the heart" of White's work. Adrian Mitchell states that this contradiction is revealed in White's remark that what he is interested in is "the relationship between the blundering human being and God," to which Mitchell comments that "Although he [White] means to explore that connection, his terms disclose an essential and inevitable disjunction."[59] The novels show not a merciful God of Christian tradition, but a "cleaver" god akin to the cruel, elemental power of Nietzsche's Dionysus. The only god that Nietzsche acknowledged, although named after a Greek god, is simply the world of recurring life: "Let us remove the highest good from the idea of God – that is unworthy of a god. Likewise let us remove the highest wisdom – that is the vanity of philosophers . . . God the highest power – that is enough! From this, everything follows; from it follows – 'the world'!"[60] God is the same as the world. The world of Nature is the highest power and, as such, is divine. From the viewpoint of Christian theism, the world has become godless, ungodly. For Nietzsche, the world in which we live is indeed ungodly, unmoral, inhuman; to apply human standards to it is in bad taste.[61] Also, the "human being" in White's statement of relationship is of the "blundering" kind. Whatever we may think of the representativeness of this kind in the real world, the world of the novels shows this being as socially marginal, as a creature of crisis, with problems of identity, subject to illusion and suffering. The terms of the relationship between man and God become, in the novels, those between protagonists of illusion and an unmoral, inhuman and, in a Christian sense, ungodly power.

In the world of White's novels, the touchstone of reality is not reason and grace in history but Nature, not its harnessed regularity but its elemental arbitrary, cruel power, or, in

Nietzschean terms, the divine necessity of divine chance. As Mitchell suggests, the novels can be seen as unsatisfactory because the disjunction remains: harmony is suggested by design but is contradicted by human fragmentation: "White's novels yearn for and attempt to impose by the authority of his narrative design a final image of harmony, totality, spiritual fulfilment; in fact they depict the movement of the human experience towards fragmentation, and particularly to a recognition of the irresolvable tension between the flesh and the spirit."[62] But, is this not the very condition for the aesthetic effect, in which the collapse of the human being, his descent into animal and vegetable existence, into ultimate identity with an abyssal, ahistorical nature, is prepared for by careful, 'harmonious' designs on the reader? Is not this "irresolvable tension" the condition for what Nietzsche has called the "metaphysical pleasure of the tragical in the destruction of the individual"?[63] Nietzsche recommended this pleasure to the spectator as a "higher pleasure," to be gained from "the suffering in the fate of the hero," a pleasure for which even the "ugly and disharmonious is an artistic game, which the will, in the eternal wealth of its pleasure, plays with itself."[64]

Furthermore, we might ask if the "disjunction" is not seen as unsatisfying because the aesthetic effect, as already implied above, is created at the cost of giving up all historical categories? As Mitchell writes: "White is careful to define historical circumstances in his novels, yet the transcendental aspirations of his fiction lead him away from a pre-occupation with the period sense, to cross the boundaries of art and understanding."[65] These "transcendental aspirations," the *unio mystica* suggested in White's art is expressive of individuation yielded up to an eternally destructive world will; this is what the novels suggest as "the core of permanence beyond the illusion of permanence."[66] The category of dionysian unification with the world-mystery, and the aesthetic pleasure in destruction, suggest parallels with aspects of European literature earlier in this century. It is suggested here that White's "careful attention to historical circumstances" is by no means arbitrary but bears intimately on his aesthetic. Apart from the consideration that this type of aesthetic largely had its rise and influence in the period of White's earlier years and in the period preferred for his fictional settings, is it not the case that the function of the "careful" depiction of this particular social reality is that of justifying the response, the illusory strategies of his fictional protagonists? If this is so, if historical actuality makes these characters understandable, even sympathetic, then is it not also

disjunctive to reject history in their moments of illumination? What category of understanding remains? Here, it can only be said that the rejection of history leads to the idea of the unchanging nature of things. Conversely, if it were possible to change things, to really make history, then White's aesthetic would be outmoded. It is not surprising, in such a context that all technological, social and political projects of amelioration, all social optimism, should be essentially absent from the world of the novels. Again, one is reminded of Nietzsche, of his scorn for the Socratic, Alexandrine caste of mind that allegedly now dominates the world and "decadently" believes in rational, scientific answers to the inescapable tragedy of life.[67] The "historical-critical scholar," the critic ("an odd quidproquo"), a public ruined by education and journals, "yes, even the most harmless female creature," have all been spoiled by this caste of mind, and are not capable of being "*aesthetic spectators.*"[68] In parentheses, it might be said that this view surely brings to mind the art-world of *The Vivisector.* Alongside this, it might also be remarked that White's characters, for the most part, appear to be fairly ignorant of key areas of knowledge specific to their time; they are strong on 'surfaces,' weak on 'connections.' Also, we might ask if White's social satire, through its lack of any ameliorative perspective, is not implicitly nihilistic.

Another, and essential aspect of the 'disjunctive' technique in the novels is the metaphorical. That White's novels, as a whole, might be seen as a metaphor, is already suggested by Mitchell's statement about the author attempting to impose a final image of harmony on human fragmentation. Here, metaphor and aesthetic effect stand in the same 'verging' relationship mentioned already with reference to the concept of the mask. If the attempted metaphor of fragmented life as "final image of harmony" were not disjunctive, then the aesthetic effect would be weak compared to that actually produced; on the other hand, absence of approach to this metaphor would also weaken the effect; it is a question of carefully regulating metaphorical suggestiveness for optimum aesthetic effect. What might be called an artificial transcendence is suggested in White's novels by cyphers or symbols, by use of colour, particularly blue, by various hints of the occult, by pyramids, signet rings, birds, muslin, and so on, employed in a network of picture language tending to suggest a mysterious harmony. This is the dilemma of metaphor, a device which has a basic tendency to both harmonise and mystify, even when transcendental ideas of a religious kind no longer play a central role in society. The metaphorical method inevitably suggests something of a ground of

unity lying behind the disparate; it suggests the creation of meaning or harmony, it creates expectations. While the aesthetic effect of metaphor and simile can be considerable and desirable, it need not preclude awareness of the trap it sets for the unthinking, of suggesting meaning but not specifying it. Of course, there is also the rebellious, satirical aspect of these devices, as with Waldo Brown's nose-penis comparison, already mentioned. Presumably, no mysterious harmony need be pondered here.

What is striking about White's aesthetic is its repudiation of the old idea of a general, as it were, humanitarian background for literature and its following the demand for total harmony and transcendence to the point where the literary world is so completely structured that it negates everything concrete and is only to be intuited in the literary act. Since, in this aesthetic, it is not possible to express any spiritual structure of the universe, the process of writing must repeatedly express radical doubt of the possibility of any creation of meaning. White's questioning of any absolute is so presented that the meaning and composition of the world can only be read from the process of creating meaning, that is from the simultaneous witnessing of meaninglessness. The narrative of the novels, as both a process of creating and questioning meaning, referring only to its own process, has become in fact concrete, since it no longer refers to any transcendence of unity.

Notes:

1. *The Oxford History of Australian Literature*, ed. Leonie Kramer, with contributions by Adrian Mitchell, Terry Sturm, Vivian Smith, Joy Hooton. Oxford University Press, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne 1981.
2. Patrick White: *The Eye of the Storm*, Penguin Books, 1975, p. 126, White's emphasis.
3. Patrick White: *The Vivisector*, Penguin Books, 1973, p. 579.
4. *The Prose of Christopher Brennan*, ed. A.R. Chisholm and J.J. Quinn, Angus & Robertson, Sydney 1962, pp. 145-6, 224. cf. Noel Macainsh: The Transposed World — Aestheticism and Christopher Brennan, *Southerly* No. 1, 1982.
5. Friedrich Nietzsche: *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, first publ. 1872, Section 1.

6. *The Vivisector*, pp. 530-1.
7. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, London, Glasgow, 1972.
8. *The Eye of the Storm*, p. 123.
9. p. 126.
10. Patrick White: *A Fringe of Leaves*, Avon Books, New York, 1978, p. 370.
11. p. 371.
12. p. 373.
13. *The Eye of the Storm*, p. 146.
14. Friedrich Nietzsche: *Werke in drei Bänden*, ed. Karl Schlechta, Munich 1973, Vol. III, p. 625.
15. *A Fringe of Leaves*, p. 194.
16. p. 195.
17. *The Eye of the Storm*, pp. 123-4.
18. *Werke*, I, pp. 28, 69.
19. *The Eye of the Storm*, p. 126.
20. *The Vivisector*, p. 613.
21. Patrick White: *The Twyborn Affair*, Penguin Books, 1981, p. 376.
22. p. 255.
23. *The Eye of the Storm*, p. 134.
24. p. 132.
25. p. 550.
26. p. 548.
27. *The Vivisector*, p. 80.
28. p. 610.
29. p. 532.
30. p. 503.
31. *The Twyborn Affair*, p. 254.
32. p. 107.
33. p. 376.
34. p. 377.
35. *Werke*, Vol. II, p. 15.
36. Vol. I, p. 449 (*Human, All-too-Human*).
37. *The Twyborn Affair*, p. 376.
38. *The Eye of the Storm*, p. 547.
39. *The Twyborn Affair*, pp. 218-9.
40. p. 217.
41. *Werke*, Vol. III, p. 317.
42. Vol. I, p. 581.

43. p. 581.
44. *The Oxford History of Australian Literature,* p. 148.
45. p. 148.
46. *A Fringe of Leaves,* p. 194.
47. cf. *The Twyborn Affair,* pp. 194, 366.
48. *A Fringe of Leaves,* pp. 359-360.
49. p. 373.
50. *Werke,* Vol. II, p. 603 *(Beyond Good and Evil).*
51. Vol. I, p. 37 (*The Birth of Tragedy*).
52. Patrick White: *The Solid Mandala,* Avon Books, New York, 1975, p. 4.
53. p. 129.
54. *The Vivisector,* p. 301.
55. p. 299.
56. p. 298.
57. *Oxford History of Australian Literature,* p. 151.
58. *The Birth of Tragedy,* Section 6.
59. *Oxford History of Australian Literature,* p. 148.
60. *The Will to Power,* Section 1037.
61. *The Joyful Science,* Section 346.
62. *Oxford History of Australian Literature,* p. 148.
63. *The Birth of Tragedy,* Section 16.
64. Section 24.
65. *Oxford History of Australian Literature,* pp. 146-7.
66. p. 146.
67. *The Birth of Tragedy,* Section 18.
68. Section 22.