

## VARIOUS TYPES OF AMBIGUITY IN PATRICK WHITE'S RIDERS IN THE CHARIOT

It is commonplace, nowadays, to speak of contemporary life in terms of chaos, fragmentariness, absurdity, alienation, lack of spiritual identity, ontological insecurity and hence, it is easy to find in contemporary writers the theme of the quest, by means of which the hero, or non-hero, endeavours to find an answer and a justification to the existential problems inherent in his human condition. White's response to life in his novels is very much in line with this trend: in order to extrapolate a common issue one can plead that his characters look at reality from an individual point of view, and their common point of reference is "a courtship of art and the spirit". This is why I define his style, as a whole, as "ambiguous". White is neither a writer who claims to know black from white, nor one who works on clichés of simplicity: in his portrayal of characters he strives for a complete human dimension, encompassing both the mystery and the helplessness of man's transient condition, affirming his fundamental contradictory nature. In his novels there is a sense of pathos that permeates the life of the characters and leads to the conclusion that man is eventually alone and has to struggle alone with his own destiny: in man's life the point of reference is to be sought within and cannot be projected without in fixed rules or secular systems.

The "ambiguity" in the novels is exhibited on various levels: White's style, that is, his peculiar way of organizing and giving form to his artistic material, that constant attitude of his prose that matches the issues of his time, is "ambiguous" in that its distinctive feature is the use of a mixed point of view, extended by the author's frequent intrusions in introducing ironical remarks on the eventual achievements of the characters' spiritual quest. Thus the reader is finally left at a loss to find a fixed point of reference in the novel that can enable him to judge, to condemn or to sympathize with the characters. In other words, White does not provide the reader with a general solution, a panacea to the human condition, he rather dramatizes it in such a way as to focus the problem. His prose, a combination of symbolic and naturalistic writing, aims at communicating the various levels of experience and the flux of life, the "extraordinary behind the ordinary", as he defined it. As a whole, it is a poetic prose, whose traits are detectable in its complex syntax, a frequent use of the conditional mode to suggest hypothetical possibilities beyond the mere gesture, of broken sentences; the tenseness and concentration of meaning are acquired by the reduction of logical nexus and by a network of interwoven images expanded in all their possible inferences through a symbolic technique that continually shifts from a naturalistic to a symbolic plane, investing the objects with a mysterious life and meaning.

White's themes are based on a continual tension between the individual and the collective on the projection of the individual quest for permanence against the continual flux of events and sensations. The compassionate irony conveys the tragedy and the comedy of man's life, and has its *raison d'être* in the chasm existing between historic reality and the characters' spiritual aspirations, in a transitional era such as ours,

lacking in a fixed system of values. The discrepancy between history and unsatisfied spiritual exigencies is the first motivation for White's ironic attitude, so that some of his "illuminati" end their lives in a psychiatric hospital, rejected by their society. In this sense White's prophetic artistry cannot be separated from his awareness of an era in spiritual crisis.

It is no use, then, claiming a straightforward answer from his novels, superimposing labels or exterior systems of values. Beside accepting the fundamental mystery of his condition, man must strive for that glimpse of his spiritual identity, which he can at times conjure up from the depths of his being. This is the peculiar religion underlying White's novels, already formulated at the time of *The Aunt's Story*, where permanence was a state of "multiplication and division", and endorsing a vision of life that encompasses its opposites. On the whole, then, White's response to a world that continually disintegrates into ions and electrons, and that science itself, after Heisenberg's Principle of Uncertainty, finds impossible to dominate, is a positive one: man's individual quest for a spiritual identity becomes a celebration of man's wholeness, an affirmation of the intrinsic values of mankind. The absolute anthropomorphic God of traditional religions is annihilated, and his place is taken by the relative theomorphic man: "It is not outside, it is inside: wholly within", affirms Meister Eckhart's epigraph to *The Solid Mandala*, and White's novels seem to confirm it. In such a world, faith—a personal experience that cannot be transmitted to others—is something that fluctuates with the flux of life, or, as White himself wrote in a letter to me, "Faith is a personal matter which continually threatens to evaporate. Like the approach to any art, it has to be coaxed back daily". *Riders in the Chariot* is, in my opinion, White's most ambiguous and religious novel. The central symbol of the chariot is given a catalytic function in the life of the four riders, and it represents the extrapolation of their quest for the absolute; but their lives afford four different answers to the quest. The ambiguity is shown pre-eminently in the mixture of Judaeo-Christian symbolism, which permeates the life of the four riders.

Mrs Godbold's words focus on the ambiguous religious quest of the riders, formulated in the novel in terms of loss and recovery of one's identity:

" . . . Men are the same before they are born. They are the same at birth perhaps you will agree. It is only the coat they are told to put on that makes them all that different. There are some, of course who feel they are not suited. They think they will change their coat. But remain the same, in themselves. Only at the end, when everything is taken from them, it seems there was never any need. There are the poor souls, at rest, and naked again, as they were in the beginning. That is how it strikes me, sir. Perhaps you will remember, on thinking  
2 it over, that is how Our Lord himself wished us to see it." p.445

In this passage, White gives a definition of the particular quest undertaken by the riders, which is a process towards self-identification that implies both the concepts of transformation and recovery of one's

identity. The "coat" in the passage is White's metaphor for traditional religion, which she has dismissed, and which, in the case of Himmelfarb's esoteric doctrines—also dismissed—becomes the "cloaks of spiritual deceit" (137). In my opinion, the religious experience of both Mary Hare and Himmelfarb are to be interpreted in the light of that particular mystical movement called Hasidism, Himmelfarb's life being a process from the orthodoxy of Rabbinical Judaism to Hasidism.

The choice of Hasidism is not only relevant to the understanding of the novel, but also to White's *Weltanschauung*, as a whole, as I will show further on. Hasidism is the mystic movement founded by Israel ben Elezzer, the Baal Shem Tov, in the XVIIIth cent., and is fundamentally a rejection of Rabbinical intellectualism and Kabbalistic esoterism, in favour of an anti-ascetic and anti-intellectual form of mystical experience. The movement took over the ritual formation of Judaism and the Kabbalistic lore, particularly the one expounded by Isaac Luria, a Safed Kabbalist of the XVIth cent., based on the *Sefer Ha-Zohar* (Book of Splendour), the so-called "Bible of the Kabbalist", an anonymous work of the XIIIth cent., discovered by Moses de Leon. The main modification introduced by Hasidism into the Kabbalah, is the translation of its revelation from a transcendental plane into the individual and personal everyday life. So the lore for initiate is bequeathed to the common man, and the religious act is transformed from a void ascetic and intellectual act, into a religious life that encompasses every possible aspect of daily activities. A particular emphasis is given to the relation of an illuminate, a man called *zaddik* (righteous, perfected one), who becomes a popular leader and centre of the community, to the believers, *hasidim* (pious, gracious ones).

Hasidism is based on the two fundamental principles of the Kabbalah: the mystery of divine revelation in the vision of Ezekiel, where the *Yorde Merkabah* are "those who descend to the chariot", but also who ascend in their mystical journey. The paradox is present also in the two main images employed in the Kabbalah, that of the endless chain and of the concentric layers of the nut, which refer both to the central idea of man's "inward" ascent. In White's novel, strikingly enough, Mary Hare descends, as it were, to the Chariot and Himmelfarb ascends. Hasidism's second principle concerns the mystery of creation, and is based on the concept of the *Tzim-tzum*, God's contraction and emanation in creation, and it fosters a return, through redemption, of God's indwelling in creation, the *Shekhinah*, into unity with the Godhead from where it had been exiliated by "The Splintering of the Vessels", the *Shevirath hakelim*, and the consequent dispersion of the divine sparks into matter. The *Tikkun*, original harmony, is to be restored by the sanctified action of every man in everyday life. White himself gives a brief account of the Hasidic doctrine:

. . . he should have been gathering up the infinitesimal kernels of sparks, which he already knew to exist, and planting them again in the bosom of divine fire, from which they had been let fall in the beginning . . . (141)

Himmelfarb's family contains the seed of his eventual turning to

Hasidism. Moshe, the father, is a good and sensitive Jew who believes more in the goodness of heart than in strict orthodoxy: he will eventually reject Judaism for Christianity. But Himmelfarb is closer to his mother, Malke, who is possibly of Hasidic origins. She is the one who tells him stories and tales in Yiddish, of "relatives and saints" (100); she has a "secret life" as opposed to the life of the ladies in the Jewish community "intoxicated by the honey of their God" (100). Malke is depicted as a pious woman, assisting the poor Jewish families with Galician spirit and almost dancing: Galicia is the region in Poland from where Hasidism stemmed, and the dance is a Hasidic form of prayer that leads the hasid to spiritual ecstasy.

Nonetheless Himmelfarb is brought up as an Orthodox Jew, and White stresses his increasing intellectualism, so that on the one hand he becomes attached to his community life, where he is highly regarded and feels himself at home, but on the other hand he becomes progressively detached from orthodoxy, and embarks on his quest. White's authorial comments are very suggestive in this context: "Religion, like a winter overcoat, grew oppressive and superfluous" (101), and elsewhere, "the ceremonies of his parents' house soon became intolerable" (108). The key to the understanding of his transformation is also set out: Himmelfarb is not only highly intellectual, but is unable to love and be humble, since to him the trial by charity is the severest torture (109). In this way, in order to reach his final illumination, Himmelfarb is expected to go through suffering and humiliation.

The ambiguity of Himmelfarb's role inside the novel lies particularly in the way in which White deals with the messianic theme. The concept of redemption is central to the novel and deserves to be examined carefully. The first hint is given to us in the last talk Himmelfarb has with his parents, when he shouts almost unaware that he is "beyond redemption" (112). Besides, White tells us that Himmelfarb is searching for a solution to the problem of atonement, and that he assumes the part of the scapegoat who offers himself continually, as he says to Ari, his brother-in-law (193); but we are not told that he regards himself as a Messiah, which is rather what he is, considered from the point of view of the other characters. The following quotations will support my thesis:

"You, I seem to remember, Reha had decided, were to play the part of a Messiah."

If each of the two men had not experienced all that he had, this accusatory remark might have sounded more brutal. As it was, Mordecai made it refer to one of those other pastboard selves silhouetted on the past. (192)

and further on, in his life at Bicycle Lamps:

... others seemed to regard him as God-sent, with the result that he was forced to retreat, to save them from their presumption, and himself from shame. (308)

The only admission he makes about his possible messianic role, is a Hasidic one:

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. (129)

At the core of the Hasidic idea of redemption there is the actualization of Messianism, i.e. the transposition at all times of messianic activity into the individual. This is also what emerges in Ya'akov's words to his son Haim Rosenbaum, on the advent of a Saviour. Ya'akov, who possibly comes from Poland (202), is always referred to in Yiddish, and his identity, only briefly sketched out by White, is that of a hasid. The clue to interpret him as such, is given by White's seemingly irrelevant remark on his curls (443), a distinctive hasidic feature. Moreover he is illiterate, and to be a good hasid one needs no books. In his words on the advent of a Saviour, he criticizes Sabbatai Zvi, the Pseudo-Messiah, who ended his life as heretic, and the Judaic Messiahs:

I have just come, the father confided, from a conversation with two *Rabbanim*, in which we discussed the One who is Expected . . . The One, who, in our time, we are convinced, must come, to lead and save, as it was not, it seems, David, or Hezekiah, and not, most certainly, Sabbatai Zvi, though *all* that is something you will not have heard about. (444)

In my opinion then, White's ambiguity lies in his criticism of the idea of a Messiah, shared both by Christianity and Judaism in different ways of someone to be used as a scapegoat,

“ . . . a goat that shall bear upon him all the iniquities into a land not inhabited: and he (Aaron) shall let go the goat into the wilderness.” (Leviticus 16:21–22)

And Ari, White's Aaron, “will continue to need (his) scapegoat” (193). Whereas Himmelfarb chooses a willing exile, into his desert, his elective Australia, to carry out there his individual redemption of the *Shek hinah*, and possibly illuminate, as a *zaddik*, other people as Hasidism states:

“The chassidic message of redemption should be understood in connection with the attitude which Baalshem took to redemption. It rises against the messianic self-differentiation between one man and the other man . . . to the whole mankind is given the power to redeem, all actions for God's sake may be called messianic action. But only simple-hearted actions can be actions for God's sake . . . ”

Here lies Himmelfarb's main task: to be simple-hearted, and White traces his development from the darkness of orthodox intellectualism to the light of the hasid's humble acceptance in a most powerful way. To overcome his intellectual pride, of which he has been accused already in his boyhood by the Cantor Katzmann (101), and to attain humility and acceptance, this is the conflict in Himmelfarb's mind that will haunt him all his life:

“I agree that intellect can be a serious handicap. There are moments when I like to imagine I have overcome it.” (303)

In order to trace in the novel the nodal points of his development to-

wards Hasidism, I shall start by quoting his conversation with the mysterious and enigmatic dyer, where his "prophetic" tone reveals his disguised identity of Hasidic Rabbi, and the whole passage is rendered with the flavour of one of Baalshem's tales:

"I did not doubt you would see what was indicated," slobbered the awful man into the bridegroom's ear. "And know you will justify our expectations. Because your heart has been touched and changed."

"Touched and changed?" He laughed back and heard it sound faintly stupid. "I am, as always, myself, I regret to tell you!" "That is so and that is why!" the dyer replied.

Pressed together as they were, Mordecai realized that the man's hitherto sickly body had a warmth and strength he would never have suspected. Nor was he himself half disgusted as he had been on previous occasions, though now, of course, he had taken several glasses of wine.

"But you are all riddles—secrets!" In spite of their proximity it was necessary to shout to be heard above the noise.

"There is no secret," the dyer appeared to be saying or shouting back. "Equanimity is no secret. Solitariness is no secret. True solitariness is only possible where equanimity exists . . ." (128)

I have quoted at length because here White provides us with an exemplary piece of ironic prose, in which his style is particularly exemplified. The prophetic tone of the dyer in the first sentence is contrasted with the sceptical answer of Himmelfarb, but White intrudes with a remark on Himmelfarb's uneasy laughter, undermining his self-reliance. The following insight into Himmelfarb's mind reveals his gradual awareness of a mysterious strength in the dyer, but again White intrudes to blunt this impression with another authorial remark on the glasses of wine Himmelfarb had taken. It follows a quasi-humorous shift on the necessity to shout in order to be heard, so that the whole scene is affected by White's ironical intrusion. But in the last sentence White manages to restore the quasi-legendary tone particularly by the use of the verb "appeared to". Clearly enough, if one fails to perceive White's irony, which bears upon the whole novel, he will irremediably lose one of the planes of the narrative.

The conflict in Himmelfarb's mind is decidedly emphasized where we are told that he "had taken the path of inwardness", but his struggles to permute the Letters and contemplate the Names are described as "a cerebral approach" (136). To discover the secret of the true *devekuth*, the prayer of the hasid who decides to follow God, Himmelfarb will have to overcome his self, and then to integrate the dark side which lies in his unconscious. The first step the hasid has to undertake in order to reach a communion with God through prayer is to descend in the depths of his being, where lies the Godhead. But to Himmelfarb the path towards the unconscious is made more difficult by the resistance of his self, an appalling one:

But once he was roused from sleep, during the leaden hours to

identify a face. And got to his feet, to receive the messenger of light, or resist the dark dissembler. When he was transfixed by his own horror. Of his own image, but fluctuating, as though in fire or water. So that the long-awaited moment was reduced to a reflection of the self. In a distorting mirror. Who, then, could hope to be saved? (136/7)

From now on, his struggle to overcome his self and penetrate the deepest regions of his being becomes his predominant activity: like every hasid, Himmelfarb will take long walks into the *Wald*, meditating in contact with nature, carrying a stick, wearing a coarse tweed, and taking notice of the most insignificant and simple objects. Thus he becomes aware of his task" . . . to gather up the sparks . . . inside the thick shells of human faces" (140), and in his conversation with Reha, Himmelfarb utters the first declaration of hasidic faith:

" . . . what can we others hold in our minds to make the end bearable?"

"This table," he replied, touching it gently.

Then his wife put down her knitting.

"Oh, Mordecai," she whispered, "I am afraid. Tables and chairs will not stand up and save us."

"God will," he answered. "God is in this table." (142)

This revelation, which from one point of view is White's personal symbol, his controlling image, recurring in all his novels and conveying the idea of the need to be humble as a *conditio sine qua non* to reach the eventual illumination, acquires, in this context, peculiar hasidic undertones:

"All things desire to become sacrament. 'Ye shall pray with the plank and with the bench' . . . Our task is to make the hidden life of God shine in this lower world, the world of matter."

Himmelfarb's first step towards Hasidism has been taken, but " . . . he had not yet arrived at that state of equanimity, of solitariness, of disinterest" (163), which, as the dyer had said, would enable him to see and help others to see. At Herrenwaldau, in Stauffer's house, Himmelfarb's awareness of his spiritual identity is growing:

. . . his room became particularly fragile, even, he felt, superfluous. Was he preparing to break his shell? (166)

The acceptance of his shortcomings and the consciousness of the need to undertake a personal *Galuth* (exile) for the final redemption is particularly stressed when, arriving in his Land, he bitterly replies to a woman, the embodiment of the Jewish self-reliance:

"I am afraid it may soon be forgotten that our being a people does not relieve us of individual obligations." (189)

White himself ironically stresses the same point with his omniscient comment on the Jews who choose to go back to Palestine:

. . . Some returned to Palestine — o yes, returned, because how else is exile ended? — but were not vouchsafed that personal glimpse of

the *Shekhinah* which their sense of atavism demanded. (143)

10 Significantly enough, Himmelfarb instinctively decides to go to Australia, "to suffer exile with the *Shekhinah*", as it were.

In Australia his life will be devoted particularly to prayer. The *devekuth* is made object of White's peculiar attention in the choice of metaphors: "He flung his rope into the dusk", (taken probably from the  
11 *Tanya*, Rabbi Schneur Zalman's text of Habad Hasidism); "So he twined and plaited the words until his ladder held firm", and "So he added breath by breath to the rungs of faith" (198), (probably from  
12 the *Zohar*). The first decision he takes as he arrives in Australia is to refrain from intellectual activities in favour of a simple manual work. Strikingly enough, Hasidism praises the simple man, and the simple acts of daily life, and, as I said before, it fights against the intellectualism of Rabbinical Judaism. To be poor means to reflect the condition of the  
13 *Shekhinah*. Consequently, the expression "The intellect has failed us" (198) implies Himmelfarb choice of a hasidic life.

I will turn now to examining Mary Hare's personality, the other rider who is meant to play an important role in Himmelfarb's life. Mary Hare is one of White's God's Fools or Divine Fools, as she has been defined by most critics, a close kin to Theodora Goodman and Arthur Brown. None of her parents is able to teach their daughter the importance of love for human beings; so she grows up with the same idiosyncrasy as Himmelfarb, who had not been able to love his wife. The word "Love" is for Mary Hare "brittle as glass, and far more precious" (16): she learns to love after her secret fashion, "sticks, pebbled, skeleton leaves, birds, insects, the hollows of trees", but not to love human beings (18). Besides, in one of her conversations with Himmelfarb she appears to him as one of the 36 hidden *zaddikim*, who go about the world, unaware of their identity, "healing, interpreting, doing their good deeds" (155). Himmelfarb's discovery is not without foundation, because White, very shrewdly, depicts her as a *zaddik* as well. Mary Hare's idiosyncrasies as God's Fool are extended in her inability to distinguish between good and evil. Instead of considering evil as an objective reality, she rather sees sin as something inherent in human beings, or as a projection of the evil they carry in themselves. Like Theodora Goodman who could not "subtract the grub from the total sum of the garden" (23, T.A.S.), Mary Hare cannot understand why Mrs Jolley kills the snake and calls it evil. In my opinion, the clue to Mary Hare's attitude towards the problem of evil is traceable in Buber's definition of the hasidic attitude on the same problem: "There is no evil in itself; the imperfect is  
14 only clasp and cover of a more perfect", or elsewhere, pointing out the fact that the hasid has to endure the contradiction of existence to rise above it and to redeem the contradiction itself:

"We have been sent down into a world of contradiction . . . It is contrary to the faith and humour of our existence . . . to suppose that there is a level of being to which we need only to lift ourselves in order to fathom the contraction. Contradiction is given me to endure along with my life and also to fulfil: this endurance and fulfilment

15 of the contradiction is the only meaning accessible to me.”

It is clear then, that the hasid has not to extirpate the evil from himself, or to objectify it in the outer world, but rather to discover its root and sensation in daily life, and to contain, integrate and transform it, because wholeness is the goal of the hasid and not perfection, as Christianity has taught Mrs Jolley and Peg. It is not by killing the snake, or by living according to the Bible that one finds a solution to the problem of evil, but by leading a life directed to the discovery of one's spiritual identity, looking inwardly and not outwardly: “Eventually I shall discover what is at the centre, if enough of me is peeled away” (52) is Mary Hare's conclusion, which seems to fit perfectly into her identity of *zaddik*. The metaphor of the onion is White's rendering of the concept of the numinous within man's self, that Hasidism has inherited partly from the Kabbalah: there is not an upper and a lower world, and only if you deeply fathom the world of corporeality you will reach the godhead. The image of the onion accounts for the various strata that one has to penetrate in order to reach the core, the essence of one's being.

Other elements that account for her double nature are the black hat, a peculiar accessory of the hasid, and her death by water. The symbolic meaning attached to her death, which works as a means of rebirth, is particularly alive in Hasidism: we are told that the *zaddikim* practised the act of immersion in the primeval symbol of rebirth “with a profound and joyful eagerness”. Her relationship with Himmelfarb is depicted by White as that intervening between the *zaddik* and the *hasid*: “I am responsible for you” (303) she says to Himmelfarb. But rather than a one-way relationship, it proves to be reciprocally fruitful. On the one side Mary Hare's instinctive knowledge helps Himmelfarb to drop his intellectualism, on the other his rationality helps her to overcome and master her animal side. Hence she enables Himmelfarb to understand and visualize, as it were, the paradoxical nature of the riders—who “are the Chariot of God”, — with her hasidic attitude towards the sacrality of objects:

“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 when it is time for them to be.” (155)

Elsewhere it is Himmelfarb that helps Mary Hare to relieve her doubts:

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

Mary Hare's same nature of Divine Fool, her piety in accepting man's helplessness in attaining and possessing the truth (421), can also be traced to Hasidism, since:

“ . . . it is precisely through a profound awareness of the frailty of all possible knowledge, of the incongruity of all possessed truth, through ‘holy certainty’ that hasidic piety truly lives. This is the reason for the hasidic love of the ‘fool’ . . . ”

This awareness is also expressed by their doubts on the possibility of salvation — Himmelfarb's “who will save us?” (154), and Mary Hare's

“what will save us?” (306), – which testify to their religious feeling. And salvation will be bestowed upon them, by Himmelfarb’s mock-crucifixion.

In order to understand the reason why White introduces the crucifixion in the novel, and the way in which he deals with its effects, I will compare it with Voss’s death. In both novels White employs the passion and death of Christ as an archetype, i.e. stripping it of its strictly  
18 orthodoxically religious undertones and translating it from a historical plane to a mythical and psychological one. In this way the analogy with Christ becomes functional to the novel’s final issues. In Voss’s crucifixion  
19 it is the god-side of man that is sacrificed: “Man is God decapitated” (364), says Laura in Voss’s vision. But this god-side is not sacrificed in order to get rid of it, but so that it may rise again:

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

In this statement is extrapolated the spiritual process of the novel: at last Voss is not god in human shapes, but man in divine forms. Both Voss and Himmelfarb had committed the sin of *hybris*, and for both White has reserved the trial of the crucifixion:

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

But Voss’s eternal tree (V. 390) becomes Himmelfarb’s jacaranda tree, and the tone from the epic has been reduced to the mock-heroic. Differently from *Voss* in *Riders* the climax is not centered upon the crucifixion, which is dealt with only as an indispensable stage towards the final illumination. Himmelfarb’s crucifixion is enriched by a wealth of Jewish undertones: his morning prayer is not a Christian but a Jewish  
20 one, and represents the hasidic profoundest declaration of faith and the attestation that Himmelfarb has reached a state of complete humility. In particular it is the 12th Article of Faith with the ritualistic closure:

“I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah, and though he tarry, I will wait daily for his coming. For thy salvation I hope, O Lord! I hope, for thy salvation! O Lord, for thy salvation I hope! (400)

and in that very moment he was” . . . indeed, a man, made to suffer the torments and indignities”. In order to become a *zaddik*, the hasid has to endure all sorts of injustices and sufferings. The mocking tone permeating the whole crucifixion scene, and Himmelfarb’s comparison to the clown prelude the final authorial comment telling us that “it had not been accorded to him to expiate the sins of the world” (418). The irony is extended by Ernie Theobald’s remark addressed to Himmelfarb: “No man is better than another . . . we are proud of what we have invented” (417). Here White seems to infer that Australia has played an important role on the salvation of a man who believed to be

considered “the most different of all human beings”. Then, on the one hand we have the “demythicization” of the crucifixion, that is the divestment of its historical and messianic implications, but on the other hand “the mystery of failure” – White’s ambiguous cliché for Christ’s death – is again invested of its charismatic power, re-entering history through myth, and helping to save the four riders. Particularly Himmelfarb’s experience of Christ’s message and his understanding of the necessity to annihilate pride and proclaim man’s inadequacy to pierce through the mystery of redemption, becomes a means of illumination:

It seemed to him as though the mystery of failure might be pierced only by those of extreme simplicity of soul or else by one who was about to doff the outgrown garment of the body. (427)

where failure is given a positive connotation, by its connection with simplicity and the stripping of the temptations and inadequacies of the flesh. The implications of the “mystery of failure” are enlarged by White when, in a dream, he links Himmelfarb to his father Moshe: “Always separate during the illusory life of men, now they touched, it seemed, at the point of failure.” (426). The father’s apostasy has the same function also for the son, in that it helps to free himself from “the thicket of Jewish self-righteousness” (115), but in his case, it leads to a hasidic glorification.

The interplay of motives foreshadowed by the “mystery of failure”, are solved in Himmelfarb’s final vision, where he has finally become a *zaddik*, bringing about his father’s rather casual remark in his childhood (97). The vision is scattered in various fragments, all of them inspired by Hasidism, and which I will examine separately.

During the afternoon Himmelfarb drifted into a doze. He was swallowed up by the whiteness. He was received as seldom. Of course there had been other occasions when he might have allowed himself . . . But the rope-end of dedication had always driven him on. Even now it was torturing his side although the goat-mask and hair shawl had slipped, leaving him hanging abandoned on a tree. Again he was the Man Kadmon, descending from the Tree of Light to take the Bride. Trembling with white, holding the cup in her chapped hands, she advanced to stand beneath the *Chuppah*. So they were brought together in the smell of all primordial velvets. This, explained the cousins and aunts, is at last the Shecchinah, whom you have carried all these years under your left breast . . . Then they were truly one. They did not break the cup, as the wedding guests expected, but took and drank, again and again. (430)

As in several hasidic tales, Himmelfarb’s vision is pervaded by whiteness, the colour of the revelation. The transfiguration is heralded at first by the metaphorical stripping of his previous roles—the goatmask, for the man who undergoes sufferings and humiliations; the shawl, for the praying hasid. Then, the Jacaranda tree becomes the Tree of Light, White’s version of the Tree of Life, the kabbalistic allegory for the Adam Kadmon, the *Anthropos*. The conjunction with the Bridegroom corresponds to the reunification of the lowest of the 10 *Sefiroth* (the

attributes of the *En-Sof*, his manifestation of divine power), the *Shekhinah*, with the *En-Sof*. After her exile in creation—she has “chapped hands”—, she is now redeemed. Hasidic is White’s placing of the *Shekhinah* in the left breast, as it is said in the *Tanya*. The attribution in Yiddish of this expression to the cousins and aunts reveals another interesting parallel inside the novel: these relatives are present in Himmelfarb’s prayers (381), together with the Lady of Czernowitz, Cantor Katzmann and the dyer, and by no means, are a casual presence. White apparently is referring here to Himmelfarb’s relatives on the side of his mother Malke, who is reported to seal envelopes for Poland and Rumania (100), two countries from which Hasidism originated. The *hieros gamos*, the marriage of the celestial Bride and the Bridegroom, taken from the Kabbalah, provides another comparison with Himmelfarb’s marriage with Reha. The reference to the breaking of the cups, as it actually happens in Jewish marriages, gains here a peculiar symbolic meaning. This act, which usually has the function of reminding the wedding guests of the Destruction of the Temple and the beginning of the *Galuth*, is related in Himmelfarb’s vision to the “Splintering of the Vessels” and the exile of the *Shekhinah*: in their failure to shatter the cup, White conveys the idea of the advent of the *Tikkun*, and the end of the *Galuth*. In the next fragment Himmelfarb is invested with his identity of *zaddik*:

He was content by now as he would never have allowed himself to be in life. Children and chairs conversed with him intimately. Thanks to the textures of their skin, the language of animals was no longer a mystery, as of course, the Baal Shem had always insisted. (432)

and further on,

He had only to open the flesh of their leaves to identify himself with the souls of plants. (437)

I would like to compare these passages with an extract taken from a Hasidic tale by the Baal Shem:

“And know this, friend, he who is able to extend his soul so high that it penetrates into that sphere of the upper world in which the carriage stands and who then sees with such clarity and depth that he apprehends the mystery of the four creatures of the carriage, to him the meaning of all sounds on the earth is revealed . . . He hears . . . the voices of the animals on the earth and the birds in the air convey to him those secrets which the senses of man ordinarily cannot perceive.”

Himmelfarb’s journey, or his ascension to his place among the Four Living Creatures, continues “along the banks of the interminable river” to the spring where, from the “mountain of darkness”, he will finally reach the light of spiritual illumination. Himmelfarb’s final understanding in light and ascension is opposed to Mary Hare’s, who, after succeeding in overcoming and mastering her animal body, enters “that state of complete union which her nature had never yet achieved” (438); her

redemption will not be in individuation but in dispersion, embracing the spirit of the dust "which she was able to understand at last" (438).

The hasidic way to mystical illumination in *Riders* has various points in common with Jung's analytical psychology, which seems to loom large in the background of White's thought. Hasidism, and particularly Habad Hasidism, gives a new emphasis to psychology, or, as Gershom Scholem puts it: "in Hasidism . . . the secrets of the divine realm are presented in the guise of mystical psychology". The distinctive feature of the hasidic quest is the stress on the irreducibility of individual values, as in Jung's theory, and its process contain such stages which can also be detected in Jung's process of individuation. Characteristic is the descent into the depths of the unconscious which imply a *sacrificium intellectus*, and a collapse of the conscious personality, for a surrender to the dark unconscious side, or the *Shadow* in Jungian terms. The hasid has to detect and integrate the contents of his dark side, in order to make them a vital part of his life, as also Jung maintains. In Himmelfarb's life the necessity to integrate his dark side is fathomed by the dream in which his wife Reha is offering "the dish of most delicious cinnamon apple, then the dish of bitter herbs" (217) to a third person, obviously the new self that will be engendered by his sacrifice with the mock-crucifixion. Himmelfarb's sacrifice is envisaged as a self-surrender to prove his complete control over the Ego, the *hybris* of consciousness, and testifies to his acceptance of the mysterious powers which lie in the depths of the unconscious, from where the new mystical being is meant to spring. As Jung says, it is only reaching inwardly and outwardly in a continual dialectical interrelation between the conscious and unconscious contents of his psyche, that man goes through all the various stages of transformation mysticism to attain finally his integrated unity. The pivotal symbol of the chariot, beside its hasidic connotations, is introduced in the novel also as a symbol of the Self, Jung's archetype for man's individuation. Its appearance in the life of the four riders is an intimation of their task and privilege to attain the integration of the personality, man's discovery of the godhead in his self. The Self, the last stage of the process of individuation, requires the union with the *anima*, which is clearly evoked in Himmelfarb's *hieros gamos*, the marriage of the *Anthropos* with the *Shekhinah*, that leads to the restoring of the original pleromatic unity.

At the beginning of this article I introduced the concept of "ambiguity" in White's novels. In the conclusion I would like to draw now, this concept will be given a different connotation, that of totality. White's novels are, in my opinion, an attempt at rendering the totality of experience apprehensible by human beings. This attempt is epitomized particularly by his use of myth and his drawing upon Jung's psychology, whose main issue, in relation to religion, is that it has helped to rehabilitate myths as authentic means of religious knowledge.

*Riders in the Chariot* is fundamentally a mythic novel, the more so if we regard it as a celebration of Hasidism. Hasidism is an affirmation of myth as opposed to Rabbinical Judaism, which has continually striven to build a creed purified from myth. The history of the Jewish

religion is in great part the history of its fight against myth. The hasidic legend is the latest form of the Jewish myth: thanks to it man can make his life a living myth; he is called to determine with his own life the destiny of God, abolishing the chasm between the sacred and the profane, by making every act performed in everyday life a sacred act. The reconciliation of history and myth in the one irreducible pattern of man's life has also been Jung's task in his process of individuation, where structure and process are tightly interwoven and solved finally in the Self. Man's calling is to respond creatively to the symbolic dimension lying in his psyche, that "religious" area that persists to inhabit our unconscious and emerges from its depths in dreams and visions. To endorse this calling means to individuate oneself, to reject it means to alienate and annihilate oneself.

RODOLFO DELMONTE

#### REFERENCES

1. *The Aunt's Story*, London, Routledge, 1948; Penguin, 1969, p. 295.
2. *Riders in the Chariot*, London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1961; Penguin, 1964. All page-references in the article are to the Penguin edition.
3. Prof. Colin Roderick hinted at this aspect in "Riders in the Chariot, An Exposition", *Southerly*, 22/2/62, pp. 62/77; see also Manfred McKenzie, "Abyssinia Lost and Regained", *Essays in Criticism*, July 1963, pp. 292/300.
4. References to sparks in connection with Himmelfarb are scattered throughout the novel.
5. Elsewhere Himmelfarb himself, talking to Rosetree's daughter, mentions the saints of Safed and Galicia (388).
6. *Bible of the World*, ed. by Robert O. Ballou, New York, Viking Press, 1938.
7. Martin Buber, *Mamre, Essays in Religion*, Melbourne/London, Uni. Press, 1946, p. 121; Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, New York, Schocken Books, 1965, p. 117: "... in Kabbalistic myth the Messiah becomes a mere symbol, a pledge of the Messianic redemption of all things from their exile. For it is not the act of the Messiah as executor of the *tikkun*, as a person entrusted with the specific function of redemption, that brings redemption, but your action and mine. Thus for all its setbacks the history of mankind in its exile is looked upon as a steady progress toward the Messianic era."
8. For all references to "shell", the Kabbalistic *kelipoth*, see A. Altmann, *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969, pp. 172/9.
9. Martin Buber, "Sacramental Existence in the World of Hasidism", in *Spiritual Disciplines, Papers from Eranos Yearbook*, Bollingen

- Series, Pantheon Books, Princeton Uni. Press, 1968, p. 185.
10. Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal Shem*, London, East & West Library, 1955/6, p. 22.
  11. Rabbi Schneur Zalman di Liadi, *LIQQUTE' AMARIM, TANYA*, Milano/Brooklin New York, 1927, pp. 37/8; (1st ed. Slavita 1796/Zolkiev 1798).
  12. See "The Ladder of Ascension" in A. Altmann, *op.cit.*, pp. 41/72.
  13. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1955, p. 234.
  14. Martin Buber, *Mamre... cit.*, p. 72.
  15. Martin Buber, "Sacramental Existence...", *op.cit.*, p. 183.
  16. Martin Buber, *Mamre... cit.*, p. 84.
  17. Martin Buber, "Sacramental Existence...", *op.cit.*, p. 183.
  18. In the archetypes we discover the pattern of our own experience *sub specie aeternitatis*.
  19. Voss, London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1957; Penguin, 1970, p. 364. All page-references to the Penguin edition.
  20. Harry M. Rabinowicz, *The World of Hasidism*, London, Vallentine, Mitchell, 1970, p. 201.
  21. The Tree can also be interpreted as an allegory of the Cross, and Christ as the second Adam, redeeming with his blood the first Adam, buried on top of the Golgotha; the reunification of the Bridegroom with the Bride, as that of Christ and the Church. See René Guenon, *Symbolism of the Cross*, London, Luzac & Company Ltd, 1958, pp. 48/53.
  22. Marriage was considered one of the most saintly mysteries among the Kabbalists and not only a concession to the flesh. Every wedding became a symbolic enactment of the union of the *En-sof* and the *Shekhinah*. G. Scholem, *Major Trends cit.*, p. 235.
  23. Martin Buber, "The Language of the Birds", *The Legend... cit.*, p. 192.
  24. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends cit.*, pp. 340/1.
  25. The integration of the dark side is also introduced with the other riders: Mrs Godbold experiences it at Mrs Khalil's, whose name hides Kali, the Hindu Goddess, the sinister archetype of the Terrible Mother, her dark side since she is depicted as the archetypal Mother; Alf Dubbo accepts his dark side, his sickness, after Himmelfarb's crucifixion which enables him to understand the "concept of the blood" (412); Mary Hare experiences her dark animal side when she enters the shack on fire in order to rescue Himmelfarb, that extinguishes her materially (423).
  26. C.G. Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963, (German Ed. 1955/6), pp. 202/10: Jung makes specific relations between the Chariot, as a symbol of the self,

and the four individual creatures as embodiment of the four different functions of the psyche, and White has built his four characters according to Jung's fourfold pattern; Himmelfarb the extraverted thinking type, Mary Hare the introverted sensation type, Ruth Godbold extraverted feeling and Alf Dubbo introverted intuition. Their relationship and the interplay of their opposite functions hints at Jung's theories of the necessity to integrate the superior function of the psyche, a conscious one, with the inferior, an unconscious one which is opposite to the first and carries on a compensatory part.