Patrick White and God

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DEDICATED TO

Benedict XVI
logos philosopher

and

Patrick White
mythos poet

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A debt of gratitude is owed to Emeritus Professor Ann McCulloch for issuing necessary challenges and enlarging my intellectual frame. Thanks are also due to my three first readers—Therese Milham, Grahame Reynolds, and Craig Willcox—each of whom made important insights and offered strategies for improvement. There is a reason why I took on board much but not all of their advice. There comes a time, when writing and editing any critical work, when too much reworking threatens to undermine what little coherence the author's original arguments may have had. The flaws in this book are therefore all mine. I trust I am allowed to recognize that fact as forcefully as any future reader.

INTRODUCTION

Continental Australian

In mid-1985, I wrote to Patrick White, on hearing he was ill, offering the pastoral care of what is—indelibly—his Church by Baptism and Confirmation. His answer, dated 12 August 1985, said:

> I'm ashamed not to have answered your message before, but I have had a lot more illness since returning from hospital. Thank you for offering to bring us Communion to the house. If I refuse the offer it is because I cannot see myself as a true Christian. My faith is put together out of bits and pieces. I am a believer, but not the kind most "Christians" would accept (Marr 1994, 603–604).

White's emphasis—which Marr's book underlines differently from the original letter—raises questions about White's withdrawal from the Church and how it is expressed in his novels.

White believed in God. This much is irrefutable. From *Flaws in the Glass* (1981) we know that, in December 1950, as he was approaching his middle age, he fell in the mud at his Castle Hill property, Dogwoods, and realized there is a God (144). The experience humbled him and brought him back to the Church for a lengthy but unknown period (Marr 1991, 281–285). We do not know when White stopped going to Church, regularly, but he was still occasionally attending High Mass at my parish—Christ Church St Laurence—with Kylie Tennant, around the time *The Solid Mandala* was published.

Our parish priest 1964–1996, Father Austin Day AM, wrote to White on 13 August 1985 inviting him to our 140th Dedication Festival. White's reply, dated 18 August 1985, said:

> I don't like to say outright that I can come to your celebrations. Every time I say "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" I realize I am a hypocrite and un-Christian. Manoly Lascaris, my friend of 45 years, an ingrained Christian (Greek Orthodox), is the reason I have managed to stay afloat (CCSL Archives).

The reason White gave for his ultimate lapse, in *Flaws*, was the rector of the Castle Hill parish banning a guessing game, at a fête, of how many

beans were in a jar (145). Clearly his parish did not nurture his adult faith—a measure of its failure rather than his—but at least he gave the Church another go before withdrawing into the "mystical circus" of an "Anglican egotist agnostic pantheist occultist existentialist would-be though failed Christian Australian" (102). In spite of White's final lapse, Manoly remained secure within the Orthodox Church, which White always admired and took an interest in.

The truth of White's relationship with the Church lies somewhere between falling in the mud and shunning the Castle Hill rector. His struggle with his faith will resonate with many who continue to struggle with their faith from within the Church. According to him, one of the problems was that his family's relationship with the Church was tribal rather than spiritual. Apparently this did not nurture his adult faith. This is common. Many lapsed Christians blame others—particularly their parents—for their unwillingness to remain in and struggle with an institution that is as human as it is divine.

The story of the extended White family's relationship with the Anglican Church—as patrons of the Sydney and Newcastle Dioceses—is interesting yet not widely known. On the whole, Marr avoided the subject in *Patrick White: A Life* (1991) which, in spite of its strengths, did not take White's faith seriously. Perhaps this was because of Marr's own hostility towards the Church as a former adherent who once toyed with the idea of ordination before coming out and seeing the light (Marr 1999, xi).

In February 1993, on *The Search for Meaning*, ABC Radio aired a talk Marr gave to the Eremos Institute. The talk was meant to be about White's spirituality but struck me as more of a comic monologue by someone outside the Church, affecting inside knowledge, who wanted to entertain. Marr told his audience that White was not a Christian but until his death he was passionately concerned for the Church's welfare. Evidently he identified as "tarred with the brush" of the Low Church. This fuelled his tribal antipathy towards the Catholic Church and prevented him from joining the Orthodox Church.

A few minutes later, however, Marr said White was devoted to the Virgin Mary. He acknowledged her intercessory power and influence over world affairs: for example in relation to communism. Also, he observed the Orthodox calendar in his home until his death. The talk raises more questions than it answers, since it is hard to imagine someone tarred with a Low Church brush being devoted to the Virgin Mary, or acknowledging her intercessory power, or observing the Orthodox calendar. Either Marr was confused, or White was confused, or both were confused.

It is easy to take White's tribal anti-Catholicism out of context.

Catholicism has been a soft target—and the subject of false witness—for centuries (Stark 2016). But there is always another side to the story. In *Patrick White: A Tribute* (Joyce 1991), Father Edmund Campion tells a charming story about White hosting two dozen young Christian Brothers just out of training and about to start teaching. One January afternoon they went to Dogwoods with their Master of Scholastics, at some point after *Riders in the Chariot* had begun to win acclaim, before *The Solid Mandala* was published, during the period White was writing plays and short stories. They were given a tour of the house. The walls were crowded with Greek icons and the paintings of well-known Australian painters:

> Going through the house, the Brothers noticed how spick and span the two bachelors kept everything. They were led outside, where afternoon tea, with several Greek dishes, was laid on a table under the trees.
>
> Then it was time for talk. Patrick White told the Brothers how he wrote his novels, starting with the characters who grew in his mind until they found a story they were able to inhabit. He said he didn't "enjoy" writing, it was more of a personal compulsion. Here Manoly Lascaris chimed in with the information that the novelist sometimes spent weeks polishing a single phrase. When he flagged he sought refreshment in music. Although later novels had greater commercial success, he thought his best novel to date was *The Aunt's Story* (1948). He claimed not to read much fiction.
>
> Patrick White showed exquisite courtesy to his at times gauche questioners. No, he had had few associations with Catholics, although he had observed them closely. No, he had not made a special study of Aboriginal psychology; indeed, he had never met an Aborigine. What did he think of A.D. Hope's charge that he wrote "illiterate verbal sludge"? He smiled faintly but … tolerantly (9).

According to White's autobiography, which in some ways is more informative than Marr's biography, his formative religious experiences came from St James King Street, Sydney, which has never been a Low Church parish.[1] The autobiography gives an engaging account of the Reverend Dr Philip Micklem, rector of St James between 1917 and 1937, the period that includes White's childhood and adolescence:

> Mr, or Dr, Micklem was an ascetic, celibate Englishman who conducted a service considered "very high". Mr Micklem could have been the reason why so many ladies fainted on steamy Sunday mornings, and were supported, and in some cases even carried out by vergers, and sat on

[1] The terms High Church and Low Church tend to be confused with the terms Anglo-Catholic and Evangelical but they are quite different. The High Church liturgies of St James King Street are English Cathedral style. The Anglo-Catholic liturgies of Christ Church St Laurence are Use of Salisbury (Sarum Rite).

> upright chairs in the porch. I was overawed by Mr Micklem's raven notes. He had the head, I realized later in life, of a saint in an Orthodox icon, or one of those Greek or Coptic heads painted on wood in the National Gallery London. I was fascinated by the whole production at St James's: the Greek head, the voice, the ascetic cheekbones and blue chin, the fainting ladies (you waited for the next) and Ruth tiptoeing back, hands folded over her stomach, after drinking the communion wine. I never fainted, but was terrified if ever a lady called Una de Burgh in charge of the choristers approached after the service (she had a club foot) to ask Ruth, "When are we going to have him for the choir?" I used to pray my voice would crack there and then. But my mother knew enough to protect me from Una (145).

At this time, the Whites lived at Lulworth, their home in Rushcutters Bay. They also had Withycombe, their summer home in the Blue Mountains. The autobiography tells another story about the rector of St James visiting Withycombe:

> Actually Dr Micklem was a human being. My mother invited him to Mount Wilson, and told me to take him for a walk, for the good of my soul and to get him off her hands before lunch. He was tall, not so gaunt as when performing at St James's, and his gravity had a twinkle in it. I was soon in love. I decided to take Dr Micklem to the cave I had never shown anybody, and where I kept a cardboard box full of secrets. The cave was on a track to one of those tedious Australian, would-be tourist attractions called Chinaman's Hat. Hidden in the scrub below the cave was the rudimentary ladder I had made by nailing lengths of sapling together. I led the way up the rickety ladder, the doctor wobbled perilously behind me. When I produced the cardboard box and shared my secrets he was graver than ever. He treated me, not as a child, but a conspirator. As he sat in the shallow cave, his knee-caps almost under his chin, I stood a little to one side and behind. I looked down at his bald patch surrounded by cropped pepper-and-salt, almost a tonsure. I would have loved to touch it. Instead we went back to lunch, stowing the ladder in the scrub above the track to Chinaman's Hat. I felt hot, and finally disenchanted (72).

The autobiography also gives an account of White's revelatory experience at Dogwoods in December 1950:

> The seasons we experienced ran through every cliché in the Australian climatic calendar: drought, fire, gales, floods along the roads at Windsor and Richmond. During what seemed like months of rain I was carrying a trayload of food to a wormy litter of pups down at the kennels when I slipped and fell on my back, dog dishes shooting in all directions. I lay where I had fallen, half blinded by rain, under a pale sky, cursing through watery lips a God in whom I did not believe. I began laughing finally, at my own helplessness and hopelessness, in the mud and the stench from my

> filthy old oilskin.
>
> It was the turning point. My disbelief appeared as farcical as my fall. At that moment I was truly humbled.
>
> We both began an exercise in organized humility. There is nothing remoter from Greek Orthodoxy than Sydney Evangelical C. of E., but in its hatred of Rome the Eastern Church had accepted Protestant overtures. A Greek living at a distance from a church of his own faith might attend the local C. of E., as Manoly did during our years of trial and error.
>
> Every Sunday we set out for early communion [BCP Holy Communion] as it did not interfere with our activities about the "farm". Built in the early days, the church at Castle Hill had accumulated the kind of Victorian and Edwardian bric-à-brac with which prosperous Australians express their gratitude for God's recognition. Kneeling in this church, under a succession of worthy and not so worthy rectors, in winter frost or the cool before a summer blaze, perhaps I was awaiting unconsciously one of the miracles which had not occurred after confirmation. Secure in a more elaborate tradition Manoly was less expectant or more sceptical. Like any expatriate he was not responsible for the farce he had dropped into. I could not protect myself as he did from the bigotry we found. We withdrew after the rector of the day declared it sinful to guess the number of beans in a jar at the annual church fête.
>
> For a brief space we tried driving to Sydney to the service at Christchurch St Lawrence, unintelligible to both of us, though there were some nice moments of theatre as the acolytes, including a young Chinese, strolled among the faithful weaving veils of incense. Surprisingly, it was the esoteric element which caused our withdrawal—and the presence of the Bad Fairy [Una de Burgh] from my childhood at St James's, now in charge of vestments at Christchurch. So each of us retreated into his private faith, and there we have remained. Each respects what the other believes, though Manoly, I think, disapproves of my erratic spirit, chafing free, rejecting tradition. Is it ever possible to believe entirely in someone one knows by heart, who is, at the same time, the one it is impossible to know? (144–145)

That last sentence, about knowing and unknowing, is worth reflecting upon.

This book attempts to locate Patrick White's fiction within a 200-year phase in western philosophy and aesthetics beginning with romanticism in the late 18th century. The attempt is ambitious because his fiction is a critique of western consciousness, in particular its understanding of reason;[2] however, his critique looks like a metaphysics—and perhaps a

[2] As Alasdair MacIntyre reminds us, in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988), the terms reason and rationality have never been defined objectively. There are only

metapsychology—now challenged by an unstable marriage of promethean science and intersectional politics. Because of this, his religious frame—which remained remarkably consistent during his career—is harder to recognize in the 21st century.

According to the Nobel Prize website, White became a Nobel Laureate in 1973 for an "epic and psychological narrative art which has introduced a new continent to literature". He first appeared on the Nobel short-list in 1969. He would have become a Laureate in 1972 had one judge not strongly objected to *The Vivisector* (1970) (Marr 1991, 532–534). Before he did become a Laureate, another judge said 1973 would be his last chance. So, there was obviously a symbiosis between what he wrote and what the judges thought important at the time. Had he lived in another period, and been shaped by other influences, his fiction might have been different, and the symbiosis might not have existed.

Time moves on. Time influenced the religious festivals that shaped the theatrical culture of ancient Greece. Even in the secularizing festivals of our apparently post-Christian age, time still influences the way writers write, readers read, and critics critique. It separates the ephemeral from the enduring. Is White ephemeral or enduring? We do not know. It is too early to tell. If curriculum developers and the reading public still take their cues from literary critics, a lot will depend on the state of literary criticism.

In the 20th century, many Australians liked White's work having read all of it. Many disliked it, preferring to judge it without having read it. Most were in between. To some he was a great novelist who held up the mirror. Others were more sceptical about his greatness and turned the mirror back on him. Before the Nobel, his work was better understood overseas. After the Nobel, Australian critics wrote perceptive studies interpreting him in his own terms. Yet there were some who suggested—implicitly when not explicitly—that his literary vision was the incoherent rambling of a disordered mind.

I was introduced to White in the 1980s not as an Australian novelist but as part of a broader literary tradition, the British and Commonwealth novel from romanticism to the present, an extended period of overlapping genres between the late-18th and late-20th centuries. As a result, I have

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subjective theories—all contested—about what they mean to particular movements or individuals. One of the fundamental problems westerners face is our tendency to presume their meaning, as universal or self-evident givens, when there is no consensus over what they mean. One person's rationality is another person's irrationality and vice versa. Yet the west still needs a consensus over what these terms mean, because they are often said to define the west. Westerners must do more than wave these terms around like a fetish—or point them like a witchdoctor's bone—at anyone they disagree with.

always compared and contrasted him with his postwar contemporaries from England, Scotland, and Canada: Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, William Golding, and Robertson Davies. After the war, because of the war, these authors worked with a shared pattern of archetypes, or tropes, which allowed each of them to explore the metaphysical dimension of western consciousness, individual and collective, and the civilization that consciousness has produced. This book hopes to shed light on how and why that pattern evolved.

In the 20th century, White's metaphysics was too close to be noticed in its entirety. As his novels are studiously encoded with "bits and pieces" of western philosophy and aesthetics, explaining the sum of its parts was hard. Even in the 21st century it is easier to avoid his metaphysics entirely or refer to it vaguely. Also, since David Marr's *Patrick White: A Life* (1991), with its wealth of biographical detail, the majority of White's critics are unable to discuss his texts without making an issue of his class, sexuality, whiteness, personality, or private life. He is dead when we need him dead, in the Barthean sense. He is alive when we need him alive, as a god who fills our critical gaps.

Historicized Rhetorician

Every author mentioned in this book is a rhetorician whose rhetoric mirrors their period; as a mixture of the timeless and the timebound. Their novels are performative topoi where backgrounds, characterizations and dialogues are aspects of each performance. White's performances, and those of his contemporaries, are therefore historicized. Each of these authors looks to the past, speaks to the present, and points to the future. Margaret Atwood offers two observations about this manoeuvre. First, authors adopt their terms of discourse early in their reading and writing lives. Second, authors have a double consciousness within the shadow of romanticism or its fragments (Atwood 2002, xxvi).

These observations, which Atwood applies to herself, also apply to White, his predecessors, and his contemporaries. They operate across two spheres. First, the sphere of the changing role of the artist since romanticism began. Second, the sphere of the changing message that evolved with the changing role. Her point is that, in both spheres, romanticism has influenced both the author's consciousness and her or his terms of discourse. Understanding this phenomenon requires a general sense of the Greek origins of the dream of reason (Gottlieb 2016), a general sense of the philological origins of the modern humanities (Turner 2014), a general sense of how different authors thought and wrote at

different points over a 200-year period, and a general sense of how trends in literature parallel trends in philosophy.

Atwood is wary of the perception of the artist as inspired and set apart, in the way Kermode describes in *Romantic Image* (1957). She therefore avoids the drastic mythologies of the author as self-dedicated "priestess of the imagination" dedicated to creating the "perfect work". But if authors do not acknowledge some loyalty to this romantic ideal, she believes they are unlikely to achieve "more than mediocrity" or perhaps "glaring insignificance" (Atwood 2002, 96). If she avoids the role of priest, she is happy to accept the role of shaman, who descends to the forbidden places, struggles with the dark forces, wrests a story from them, and returns to the world, while trying to avoid being killed in the process (175–176).

Atwood cannot control how her message is received but controls what she writes. She has studied and taught literary fiction as well as written it. Her favourite teaching method is blackboard analysis (Ingersoll 2006, 219). She could no doubt do a blackboard analysis of most novelists discussed in this book. She understands how literature operates and is aware of the distinctive roles of author and critic:

> Literary critics start with an already-written text. They then address questions to this text, "What does it mean?" being both the most basic and the most difficult. Novelists, on the other hand, start with the blank page, to which they similarly address questions. But the questions are different. Instead of asking, first of all, "What does it mean?" they work at the widget level; they ask, "Is this the right word?" "What does it mean?" can only come when there is an "it" to mean something. Novelists have to get some actual words down before they can fiddle with the theology. Or, to put it another way: God started with chaos—dark, without form and void—and so does the novelist. God made one detail at a time. So does the novelist. On the seventh day, God took a breath to consider what he'd done. So does the novelist. But the critic starts on Day 7 (Ingersoll 2006, 187).

Notice Atwood's admission that, after struggling to create an "it" to mean something, she "fiddles with the theology". The text can never be completely unconscious to her. Like White, she is a sub-creator, a created being who creates, and there is a mysterious yet unknown level of intentionality about creating. Like White, her creations are the result of a human need to transform chaos into some order shaping narrative. The "consonance" of this kind of story, its "coherent pattern", is often an attempt to mirror the west's past, present, and future (Kermode 1966; Kermode 1979).

Given the trajectory of Atwood's career, particularly her journey into speculative fiction (Atwood 2011), she seems to be suggesting that, for the

post-romantic artist, including the modernist and postmodernist artist, the unchartered future will owe increasingly less to the romantic past, once the fragments of the romantic shadow have been reabsorbed by the aether. Her novels have always questioned the canonical roles of classicism and romanticism. Her questioning intensified during her middle age—the period of her literary maturity—in her desire to focus on the current challenges facing the socially-conscious and globally-aware author: the dangers of promethean hubris, the consequences of science and technology, the existential threats to civilization, and the environmental threats to nature. One cannot help feel, when reading her later work, that humanity is heading for a reckoning.

Critics have noticed a tension in Atwood's work—also found in White's work—which mirrors a struggle between two concepts of western narrative:

> One of these is the concept of apocalypse that permeates the Hebrew-Christian *Heilsgeschichte*, the story of the salvation of God's people. The other is the concept of mimesis from Aristotle's discussion of tragedy in his *Poetics* (Detweiler 1990, 2).

The American Academy of Religion has published an intriguing collection of essays, *The Daemonic Imagination* (Detweiler and Doty 1990), focused on this tension as it appears in Atwood's short story "The Sin Eater" and Mark's pericope of the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1–17). This collection of essays demonstrates how Atwood and Mark are excellent examples of apocalypse struggling with mimesis. In White, perhaps the first example of mimesis struggling with apocalypse is his short story "The Twitching Colonel" (1937). The mimesis is the story of the Colonel's poor physical and mental health, the result of his colonial service in India. The apocalypse is what happens after his immolation and the Indian rope trick, an Oriental version of Jacob's Ladder (Shepherd, 1978, 28–33).

While apocalypse is focused on an ever receding end, and is often associated with eschatology, there are non-religious ends to write about and even the formation of race and gender can be apocalypse rather than mimesis (Ledbetter 1993, 79–90). In *MaddAddam* (2013) the apocalypse has already happened and Atwood describes why it happened. The trace of a classical trope, Glenn–Crake, destroys the world. The trace of a romantic trope, Jimmy–Snowman, is powerless to save it. All that is left are a few humans, and genetically-modified humanoids, flora, and fauna, all existing within a permanently altered ecosystem absorbing the ruins of what was once western civilization.

The novel is about the beginning of a post-apocalyptic, post-western, post-human world. The future belongs to the genetically-modified humanoids,

who have no creation story and, being blank slates, are unable to make one up. This is why Atwood assigns Toby, one of the novel's remnant female protagonists, the role of new Hesiod. Toby narrates a new Theogony or creation story for the humanoids. This is necessary, since even a post-human culture needs a creation story and existing creation stories are no longer relevant. They have vanished, along with all the real and imagined tensions within western philosophy and aesthetics, including the influential tension between classicism and romanticism.

Atwood's career began when the careers of Patrick White and Roberston Davies were at their height. Her first novel *The Edible Woman* (1969) appeared between White's *The Solid Mandala* (1966) and *The Vivisector* (1970), just before Davies's *Fifth Business* (1970), the first novel in the Deptford Trilogy. Atwood was clearly the newcomer signalling the next generation. As her career progressed, she gradually became more focused on our next apocalypse. Hence the stark contrast between *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Davies's masterpiece *What's Bred in the Bone* (1985), both short-listed for the 1986 Booker Prize (see Appendix).

Perspectivist Disclosures

Other changes were happening to narrative modes, apart from shifting tensions between apocalypse and mimesis. During the neoclassical and romantic periods, philosophical and aesthetic perceptions of knowledge and truth were given form and content through theories of analogy (or analogical theories); through correspondence theories associated with Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas; through coherence theories associated with Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel (DiCenso 1990). After neoclassicism and romanticism, analogical theories of knowledge and truth became less congruent, less idealistic, and more relativistic and fragmented. For this reason, many post-romantic novelists moved away from correspondence and coherence theories. Following the fashion of their period, they adapted to the new non-analogical or anti-analogical perspectivist theories associated with Nietzsche (Young 1992; Tanner 2000) or disclosure theories associated with Heidegger (Young 2001; Inwood 2000). White was a creature of his period. To understand his texts in their context, it is necessary to understand this transition from correspondence–coherence theories to perspectivist–disclosure theories.

As a romantic, White de-trancendentalized religion by critiquing classical aesthetics and aristocratic–bourgeois norms, by replacing rational theological doctrine with feeling and metaphor, and by locating the divine

within nature and the soul (Ferber 2010). As a modernist, he was an innovator who deviated from 19th century realism and naturalism, with their stable intellectual frameworks narrated by "authoritative" reporters (Butler 2010) such as George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. As a postmodernist, he maintained an interrogatory, sceptical attitude towards the metanarratives of historical progress and human emancipation contained in or implied by in the philosophies of Kant, Hegel, and Marx (Butler 2002).[3]

We know he was hostile towards realism and naturalism (White 1989, 13–17 and 19–23). We also know many influential 20th century critics regarded romanticism as a turning point or definitive break with the past (Auerbach 1953; Abrams 1953; Berlin 1999) which would evolve into modernism and postmodernism. Such critics presumably took this view because they regarded classicism—in its neoclassical form—as closer to the Enlightement and its obsession with reason. This (neo)classicism represented the past being broken from, as romanticism had claimed the future on behalf of feeling rather than reason. Theoretically, there could be no going back.

There are problems with this break-from-the-past logic, however, as classicism and romanticism are siblings. They are obverse sides of the same metaphysical coin. They are interdependent aspects of a single dialectic. They are inseparable siblings, like the Dashwood sisters in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and Brown brothers in *The Solid Mandala* (1966). Although the line between classicism and romanticism "has been constantly drawn and redrawn", it represents binary thinking that has "hovered for two centuries over discussions of the cultural history of Europe and North America". While these two modes are cultural "imaginaries", many believe that, because there is "so much smoke" surrounding them, "there must have been a real fire somewhere: a real difference between two cultural styles" (Ferber 2010, 14).

So, if romanticism, modernism, and postmodernism critique classical metaphysics, the critique was simply a variation on an ancient theme. Also, paradoxically, the logic of the reaction against classicism depended upon the continuation of classicism (Honour 1968, Honour 1979). When situating White within this 19th and 20th century milieu, as a variation on an ancient theme, it is useful to notice how his fiction operates across two interdependent spheres.

The first sphere revolves around a hypothetical tension within the pagan imagination of ancient Greece, between its philosophy and its

[3] This book accepts the axiom that "one person's postmodernism is another person's modernism" and vice versa.

poetry–drama–rhetoric, which presents itself in a variety of archetypal or dialectical ways. The second sphere revolves around a hypothetical tension between the mind of ancient Greece (Athens) and the mind of ancient Israel (Jerusalem). During White's "religious" phase he moved between both spheres simultaneously. Like most westerners, he treated them as interchangeable, which they are not.

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the tension between reason and feeling (within the Greek mind) was often confused with the tension between reason and revelation (between the Greek and Jewish minds). After Kant, there was a tendency to consign revealed religion to the realm of feeling and alienate it from the realm of reason. This tendency is no longer fashionable, as recent developments in classical studies, talmudic studies, diaspora studies, and church history are challenging many of our inherited assumptions about the role of reason in ancient Greece, ancient Israel, and early Christianity.

In *Process and Reality* (1929), A.N. Whitehead suggests the European philosophical tradition is a series of footnotes to Plato. This also applies to the west's literary tradition. The model of mind underpinning White's vision, and the vision of every novelist mentioned in this book, is part of the west's inheritance from ancient Greece. In Book IV of *The Republic* (c.380 BC), Plato tells us the mind has a tripartite structure (rational, spirited, and appetitive), analogous with different parts of the body (head, heart, and lower abdomen), analogous with different classes of society (guardians, auxiliaries, and producers). The difference between these parts becomes obvious as he describes what his ideal society looks like while referring to the "old quarrel" between philosophy and poetry. As the quarrel was already old, when Plato refers to it, it must have existed in some form within Presocratic philosophy, Sophist rhetoric, or their equivalent in ancient Greek poetry and drama.

Plato believed philosophy has the highest truth-claims, because it comes from the rational mind (analogous with the head). He believed poetry has lesser truth-claims, because it comes from the spirited mind (analogous with the heart) and therefore poetry can easily be corrupted by the appetitive mind (analogous with the lower abdomen).[4] He banned the poets from his ideal republic because their poetry comes from the mind's spirited part, not its rational part, and therefore it does not represent the highest form of truth. As he applied the same logic to rhetoricians, whether he would ban the authors mentioned in this book depends on

[4] Polynesians believe "the abdomen is the realm of thought as well as of emotion" (Brown 1924, 131). This is more optimistic than Plato's view of the mind–body dualism.

whether he agreed or disagreed with the form and content of their stories, as rhetoric and as poetry.

Plato's student Aristotle moved from Platonic rationalism towards his own form of empiricism. The resulting dialectic of rationalism and empiricism profoundly influenced the trajectory of Jewish and Christian theology, and formed the basis of what, until relatively recently, was regarded as science (McCrone 1993). For a Renaissance example, consider Raphael's famous fresco *The School of Athens* (1509–1511) in the Vatican's papal apartments. In the fresco, Plato points to the heavens, to his realm of Forms and Ideas, while Aristotle extends his hand horizontally, suggesting that while the knowledge of philosophy and science is the knowledge of universal essences (rationalism) we should look towards the earth (empiricism).

While understanding the rationalism–empiricism dialectic is essential to understanding White's contribution to the western literary tradition, it is also essential to notice how the debate changed after the Renaissance, particularly after the Enlightenment. Humanists of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment both looked back to ancient Greece, but they did so in different ways and for different reasons. The debate White participated in was a deviation from the one on the walls of the papal apartments. Particularly on the Continent, the debate gradually evolved, away from a dialectic of Plato and Aristotle, towards a wide-ranging "immanent" or "emancipatory" critique of classical philosophy and aesthetics,[5] and a nostalgia for their supposedly "holistic" Presocratic forebears. Also, White was not an expert on the past. Like his contemporaries, and like us, he absorbed the critique of classical philosophy and aesthetics secondhand. Occasionally that may make him an unreliable witness.

Romantic Performances

Winckelmann's *History of Ancient Art* (1764) was the beginning of an influential period of looking back at ancient Greece and seeing parallels with modern Europe which were regarded as theoretically true, or psychologically true, when not historically true (Butler 1935; Williamson 2004). In *Flaws in the Glass* (1981) White admitted to being influenced by the assumptions behind Germany's romantic reconstruction of the past (39). Within this context, Nietzsche announced God's death, which Heidegger saw as the end of metaphysics, in its classical form. and the

[5] The terms immanent or emancipatory critique are associated with the Frankfurt School. They are always rooted in, and always convey, Hegelianism or Marxism.

beginning of post-Kantian alternatives—existential, phenomenological, hermeneutical—all focused on the idea of "being".

White's fiction is a consistent and persistent commentary on God's death; however, to appreciate the complexity of his commentary, it is necessary to distinguish the postmetaphysical from the anti-metaphysical, and to understand existentialism, phenomenology and hermeneutics as different ways of "doing" metaphysics. White was part of a tradition that critiqued the purpose of things (teleology) while championing the nature of being (ontology). As an extension of the rationalism–empiricism debate within philosophy and aesthetics, there was also a shift from the idea of transcendence to the idea of immanence. As a result, questions about God's existence, and his relationship with creation, became philosophically complex and politically contentious.

White knew the announcement of God's death did not prove atheism with language. Rather than "killing" God, the announcement was about replacing classical assumptions about God with a range of assumptions that all involved impasses and aporias beyond language. The announcement therefore presented him with the impossible task of reimagining the God who "died"—through language—using language as his only means of communication.

Each critic approaches the announcement of God's death with their own assumptions about what it meant to him, what it means to them, and how they see it performed in his novels. The announcement has been interpreted in antithetical ways: as atheistic or theistic, as secular or religious, as humanistic or fatalistic, or as different combinations of these. After Nietzsche the nostalgia became—and in many quarters still is—a desire to replace the Torah and the Christ with some reification or embodiment of dionysian man.

White issues difficult challenges. He forces us into uncomfortable territory. Like Nietzsche and Heidegger, he has always been and continues to be a screen on which strong, ambivalent thoughts and emotions are projected. Occasionally he has been used as a kind of scapegoat. His novels and short stories still fascinate me, as I struggle to interpret them, yet they remain just beyond my reach. Is this the function of great art?

As Marr 1991 points out:

> Had White been able to act, he might not have written a word. He still dreamed of *his* Lear, *his* Hedda and the vaudeville routines he would perform—if he had the knack. His imagination was essentially theatrical, and the best of White's characters are not only astonishing inventions but great performances. At his desk he acted all the roles. When he spoke of the creative process he used the language of the theatre. Characters wandered across the stage of his imagination for years—the spinster, the

> artist, the dame, the boy, the laundress—but not until a couple of them came face to face and began to speak did a novel begin. They put on costume; the air smelt of hot lights and greasepaint. "There are moments when you have *no* control over it. One's characters are part of one's consciousness but they do take control and you haven't much say in the matter." His writing life was dotted with complaints of his characters keeping him awake at night. When he could not stop their dialogues, it was time to put them down on paper. The performance continued until the last words were written, with White as cast, director and audience in the theatre of his mind (495).

Interconnected Relationships

White said many things about the religious nature of his novels. About being a novelist who "lifted bits and pieces from various religions in trying to come to a better understanding". About using religious themes and symbols to lead his readers towards religion "a different way" (White 1989, 19–23). About conveying "a religious faith through symbols and situations which can be accepted by people today" (Marr 1991, 284). Through Alex Gray, the protagonist of *Memoirs of Many in One* (1986), he confessed the religious aspects of these performances "won't be known until after I'm dead" (157).

Readers who approach White as a religious author, or those who want to advance convincing secular arguments, may find it useful to associate him with several interwoven relationships that, individually and collectively, tell us something significant, and occasionally contradictory, about his agon. If he is a creature of his period, we are obliged to understand that agon as best we can.

Logos and Mythos

While the logos–mythos dialectic has existed as an influential "imaginary", throughout the history of western philosophy and aesthetics, a powerful view emerged—after the proto-romantic Sturm und Drang movement—which revolved around the notion that at some point "mythos was replaced by logos, the desouled Word" (Waterfield 2000, xi). The desoulment was thought to have occurred during the classical Greek Enlightenment of the 4th and 5th century BC. Romanticism's goal was finding a way of reclaiming the hypothetical *Weltanschauung* of the Presocratic philosophers, Sophist rhetoricians, and pre-classical poets–playwrights. If that reclamation was not possible, the options were to continue lamenting the desoulment or continue theorizing it in a range of

postromantic ways which all involve the Frankfurt School somewhere.

The desoulment idea was slippery in practice. Logos and mythos continued to be constructed or deconstructed by different individuals, in different ways, for different purposes, across the humanities and the social sciences. Whatever form this took, in whatever discipline it occurred, the unifying idea was a perceived shift in Greek intellectual history with Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. As most of what is known about Socrates is refracted though Plato—and as Aristotle was Plato's student—this is what Whitehead means by "footnotes to Plato". In the neoclassical period, the authoritative "footnotes" promoted the self-evident truth of logos. In the romantic period, which overlaps the neoclassical period, the footnotes began to question Plato's logos and ask whether other forms of logos, or some forms of mythos, might be better means to arrive at knowledge and truth. In this way, the footnotes reimagined ancient territory as part of an ongoing agon within the western mind.[6]

What is logos? The Presocratic philosopher Heraclitus believed it was the "systematic structure that underlies every aspect of our experience" through which we can understand "the true significance of the world" (Osborne 2004, 91–95). As this definition is broad, narrower ones have been offered. Logos can mean language, theory, reason, ratio, proportion, and definition; from logos "we derive our word logic, and the endings of science and knowledge words such as biology, geology, theology, and anthropology" (92); also, there is the ultimate Logos of John 1:1 (92). Logos can also mean word, speech, argument, formula, principle, reason as rationality, or as explanation, and an account as story or value–amount (Waterfield 2000). Its full range of meanings are rarely considered because logos is usually associated, in unfortunately narrow terms, with Nietzschean assumptions about Socrates disunifying philosophy and Euripides disunifying tragedy.

What is mythos? The glib answer is everything one happens to believe post-Presocratic logos has desouled, which is what makes the task of resouling the desouled world, or word, such a difficult thankless task. Among White's influences, mythos has been described as the world from which the gods have departed or God has died (Nietzsche) or from which God has chosen to conceal himself (Heidegger). Since the Sturm und Drang period, logos and mythos are thought to be dialogical when not anithetical; however, this view is too simplistic, because there are many different myths, and many different cultures in which they function, and

[6] So the story goes, the older footnotes embody ideological, hegemonic, logocentric, and patriarchal–phallocentric biases which the newer footnotes are struggling to revise.

because God is also logos. We have been conditioned to see science as logos but science is as much mythos as any other mythos. It has not banished the old gods, or God, it has merely created new scientific gods. One person's mythos is another person's logos. In *Gorgias* 523a, Plato has Socrates saying exactly that: "I want to tell you a story. You may think it's a mythos but to me it's a logos" (Waterfield 2000).

In his immensely useful study *The Longing for Myth in Germany* (2004), Williamson notes that:

> "Myth" was originally a Greek word (μύθος). While scholars dispute its exact meaning for Homer and Hesiod, by the fourth century BC it had come to signify a kind of authoritative speech that philosophers like Plato criticize as immoral and at the same time exploit for their own purposes. "Mythology", as a coherent system or narratives that legitimate the religious and political traditions of the polis, was a retrospective invention, born of an era in which pious and impious skepticism had already begun to undermine belief in the old tribal stories. The Greek origins of "myth" are crucial to its career in Germany, because it is largely through the study of Greek literature and philosophy that scholars developed an image of what myth was and how it functioned in ancient societies. Indeed the rise of a discourse on myth coincided more or less directly with the establishment of the institutions of neohumanist *Bildung* in the second half the eighteenth century. For intellectuals like Goethe, Schiller, and Wilhelm von Humboldt, Greek art represented an absolute standard of beauty, as well as the foundation of individual self-cultivation. In subsequent years, these neohumanist ideals of beauty as well as *Bildung* would be preserved through the institutions of the gymnasium and the philological seminar, which encouraged a regimen of study and scholarship that Suzanne Marchand has aptly characterized as "aesthetic asceticism" (7).

In ancient Greece, logos and mythos were thought to be different; however, in spite of much romantic and post-romantic theorizing, we still do not know how, precisely, or in what way. In *The Republic* Plato distinguishes between philosophy, rhetoric, and poetry. He seems to treat philosophy as logos and poetry–rhetoric as mythos but we can only guess what these terms meant to him. More important, in spite of much desoulment theory, we can only guess what philosophy and poetry–rhetoric meant in the centuries preceding Plato. The methodological problem here is how 19th and 20th theories about the logos–mythos dialectic are used, as they relate to the Presocratics, and whether those theories are still worth taking seriously in the 21st century. Irrespective of whether we take a hegemonic or counter-hegemonic view of the logos–mythos dialectic, each side is methodologically constrained.

As far as the Sophists are concerned, contemporary scholars of rhetoric

such as Jarratt (1991) use feminist theory to challenge traditional views of logos and mythos, particularly the orality–literacy thesis popularised Dodds (1951), Havelock (1963), and Ong (1982). However, Jarratt faces the same or similar methodological constraints as the Presocratic scholars. As long as these methodological constraints exist, theories about the Sophists are guesswork.

A lot depends on what the original sources allow us to conclude. There are complete texts to provide an evidence base for interpreting Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. For the Presocratics there are only fragments of original papyri and a range of second-hand testimonia from later centuries, much of which is hostile. In the 21st century, Presocratic scholarship has "expanded out of all recognition". Old paradigms and models "have come under heavy attack". In some cases new material has rendered most previous interpretations obsolete. Sophisticated computer modelling is now being used to test the internal validity of the second-hand testimonia, to see if convergences exist, which might allow an academic consensus to emerge (McKirahan, 2010). In other words, there might not be much of an evidence base to support the influential 19th and 20th century theorizing about the Presocratics that has dominated so much literary-cultural theory.

Science and Religion

Critical attitudes towards neoclassicism as reason–logos and romanticism as feeling–mythos reinforce the assumption that the former is linked with science and the latter is linked with religion. While White agreed with this science–religion binary, it becomes unstable if science is actually a form of mythos and religion is actually a form of logos, since it challenges our arbitrary distinction between rational fact and irrational fiction. More important, Jewish and Christian revelation come from quite different conceptual domains, neither of which can be assigned to one or another half of the logos–mythos or science–religion binary. The acceptance of revelation on the part of the believer—whether on Sinai or in Christ—involves an assent from the rational and spirited minds not one or the other (1 Corinthians 1:22–23). If White understood this in principle, his romanticism and modernism made it difficult for him to accept in practice.

Protestantism and Roman Catholicism

White accepted the Blakean idea of solitary poetic genius and shared Blake's hostility towards institutional–clericalized religion. Directly or indirectly, Blake and White participated in the anti-Catholic Protestant

agenda of their period, which had been bearing false witness about Roman Catholicism for centuries (Stark 2016). Blake's ideas and antipathies are paradoxical, however. He clearly identified as a solitary poetic genius—a romantic view of the artist no longer encouraged—and he clearly believed this solitary poetic genius did not require the mediation of any church or synagogue. However, he was inspired by the Old and New Testaments, and he was under the impression that canonical scripture, both Jewish and Christian, was the product of solitary poetic genius.

This is not true. Divine inspiration may have been given, originally, to solitary individuals, some of whom may have been poetic geniuses, but the final canonical result—the Bible as we know it—was the product of centuries of collaborative editorial formation by religious functionaries within similar hierarchies to the ones Blake and White were both hostile towards.[7]

Athens and Jerusalem

As mentioned earlier, White moved between two spheres: the philosophical tension between reason and feeling (in the Greek mind), and the theological tension between reason and revelation (between the Greek and Jewish minds), and the latter tension includes the original Jesus movement. Athens and Jerusalem are cosmologically different. They have different senses of what it means to be a person and different understandings of the relationships between mind–body and matter–spirit. As far as Judaism is concerned, White tended to confuse philosophy and theology. He took the typically romantic and post-romantic view that ancient Greek reason was logos, Jewish revelation was mythos, and therefore Athens and Jerusalem have little or nothing in common.

The way White portrays his Jewish characters reinforces this view. For him, the worst thing a Jew could do was align himself with Athens, as doing so would compromise his covenental relationship with the God of Israel. While this view is understandable—in its historical specificity—it has dated. Also, it is unclear whether White's view of Judaism was part of his critique of the Enlightenment, or whether he was aware of the Jewish Enlightenment, the Haskalah, as a phenomenon in its own right (Feiner 2004; Litvak 2012).

White's characterization of his Jewish characters does not account for

[7] There is another paradox here too. Being Anglican is different from being Protestant. While it is no longer fashionable to use the term *via media* to describe Anglicanism's balance between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, Anglican polity is still different from Protestant polity. And that polity has never been Blakean.

the ways in which the Jewish mind was influenced by the Greek mind during the Hellenistic Period before Christ (Boyarin 2009; Boyarin 2011; Satran 2011). Or the role of logos in Rabbinic Judaism (Boyarin 2003; Boyarin 2011). Or the insights of diaspora studies, which now tell us that in the ancient world there were many more Jews outside Israel, throughout the Graeco-Roman world, than there were within it, and each diaspora community inculturated itself differently (Barclay 1996; Williams 1998; Collins 2000; Barclay 2004; Goodman 2007). Judaism, including the Jesus movement, has never been a fossil in amber. From the beginning, it has remained a living faith engaging with the different cultures in which it exists.

Judaism and Christianity

If Nietzsche's passionate aphorisms have been influential—in philosophy and aesthetics—they are not a sound basis for understanding Judaism and Christianity. He believed the west could not achieve its full potential until it was freed from the bondage of revealed religion. According to him, biblical values had universalized a negative "slave morality" that opposed the positive "master morality" of Graeco-Roman civilization (Nietzsche 1887). He also believed that, in its classical form, Christianity had become an oppressive "Platonism for the people" (Nietzsche 1886). If White did not agree with Nietzsche's negative view of Judaism, Nietzsche's negative view of Christianity must have resonated with him as part of the influential anti-Platonic spirit of his milieu. Once White finally withdrew from the Church, during his middle age, it would have been impossible for him to write about Christianity without a Nietzschean as well as a Blakean underpinning.

White's critics do not need to be Jewish or Christian to understand how he portrays Judaism and Christianity in his novels; however, in addition to being honest about their secular biases, they should place Nietzsche's influence on White in a broader context. If we want to approach White as a religious author, and consider whether his religious critique is accurate, in its historical specificity, or inaccurate given what we currently know, we must consider academic developments that neither Nietzsche nor White knew about. This includes a general understanding of the Jesus movement as one of the many varieties of Judaism in the Late Second Temple Period (Saldarini 1988; Neusner and Chiltern 2007; Schwartz 2011; Levenson 2011; Vermes 2011), of Jesus as a rabbi or pharisee who understood and used midrashic techniques (Levine 2006; Levine 2014), of Paul's rabbinic or pharisaic role in the politics of