

# *Riders in the Chariot:* A Tale for Our Times

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Patrick White's message of the need for loving-kindness in the face of difference, and fear of that difference, is as pertinent today in "multicultural" Australia as it was when *Riders in the Chariot* was published in 1961. White's characters live in the emerging suburbs of a postwar, Menzies-led Australia still in the grip of the White Australia Policy. Mordecai Himmelfarb, the most obvious signifier of real difference in their midst, is known as the "dirty Jew" and is, ultimately, destroyed for his failure to become an ordinary Aussie bloke. Critics have consistently found Himmelfarb's mock crucifixion less than convincing: it lacked adequate motivation; it was improbable, unreal; it bordered "on the melodramatic" (Roderick 75, see also Kramer, Phillips, Wilding and Kiernan). At a time when a Brisbane Mosque is firebombed in retaliation for the September 11 attacks in America, when Muslim girls have their headscarves ripped off, when Anglo-Celtic gangs, dressed in T-shirts proclaiming "wog free zone", wrap themselves in Australian flags and chant "Lebs go home" and "ethnic cleansing unit", a little stringing up, all in good fun of course, does not seem to be beyond the realm of possibility.

In December 2006 the Australian public learned that six out of nine Tamworth councillors had voted to block the proposed resettlement of five Sudanese refugee families in their district. The councillors were not acting in isolation. They had polled 500 Tamworth residents to gauge their response to the arrival of these families; 492 respondents feared that the refugees would bring increased violence, crime and disease to their community. They felt their health service infrastructure could not withstand such an onslaught. While the public outcry brought about a conditional acceptance of the resettlement program, Tamworth residents, like many Australians, remain uncertain about, and afraid of, the arrival of refugees seeking asylum in Australia.

Of course this Australian fear and uncertainty of otherness is not new. Himmelfarb's persecution reflects the "raging against the Jewish 'reffos' of Central Europe" that White witnessed on his return to "stiff-necked

Australia” in 1948 (*Patrick White Speaks* 156). What is new, however, is that the “us” and “them” mentality, initiated in this novel by the ignorant and inadequate suburban witches, is now being fuelled by highly educated and influential conservative politicians, journalists and public intellectuals. The politics of fear currently operating in this country fosters an environment in which people of minority ethnic and religious backgrounds are being metaphorically crucified for being “un-Australian”. So too are those who speak out against such vilification; they are not only “un-Australian”, they are “elites”.

Over the last decade Australian public and political discourse has been informed increasingly by simplistic versions of elite theory. Back in 1998 Boris Frankel noted: “These flawed and misleading notions of power and culture saturate political discussions in the media, universities and public forums—from writers’ festivals to One Nation meetings” (29). Unfortunately, we are now all too familiar with the largely unchallenged rhetoric which sets up a supposed division between two seemingly homogeneous groups: “ordinary Australians” and “elites”. “Ordinary” has become the complimentary adjective of choice to describe decent Australian people. “Elite”, unless it is applied to athletes, is pejorative, contemptuous and dismissive. Dissenting voices, disturbing words can be effectively silenced or sidelined simply by applying the “elitist” label. Elites, we are told, are “arrogant”, “patronising”, opposed to “ordinary battlers”, “out of touch” with the “mainstream”. As Sean Scalmer and Murray Groot have established, the discourse of “elites” in the Australian print media has three peak moments: 1997, the year in which One Nation was founded; 1999 when the referendum for the Republic was held; and 2001 with the re-election of the Howard government for a third time. Significantly, they point out “this discourse is organized around three principles: a binary structure of elites and non-elites; elites and non-elites as enemies, not just adversaries; and elites as powerful, non-elites as weak” (1).

As readers and scholars we need to actively resist these three destructive principles. The following discussion of *Riders in the Chariot* suggests some of the ways White’s fiction demonstrates how that resistance might be possible. Firstly, we must refuse to accept the way “elite” has been colonised by the political right and deprived of its fuller, richer meanings. We need to embrace the label in the way it signifies excellence, expertise, experience. We need to stop apologising for it. Secondly, we need to offer an alternative to the rigid binary structure in which the narrowed term has been positioned. Such a binary disenfranchises not only language but literature, art and the role of criticism in informing public consciousness and stimulating debate. It

is futile to suggest that the binary does not actually exist and can, therefore, be dismissed, because one of the most significant divisions in contemporary Australian society is that between those who have access to education and those who do not. Those with access to education are perceived, and the perception has been perpetuated by sections of the media and some politicians, as being elite. It is a reality that most readers of White fall into that category. What we need to do is investigate the term and its application more fully. We need to challenge the simplistic portrayal of “us” and “them”. Thirdly, we need to reinstate difference into the supposedly stereotypical groups.

*Riders in the Chariot* has been read through the frameworks of Jewish mysticism, Christian symbolism, modernist aesthetics, mythic vision and psychoanalysis; criticism which contributes productively to the rich and ongoing discussions about the novel’s power and purpose. In seeking to offer a reading of this novel in terms of what it might have to say to us about the politics of fear, I do not wish to discount the luminous, indeed numinous, qualities of White’s prose. To paraphrase Alan Lawson, my consciously political reading of “a secular, immanent White-of-his-time” is not intended to detract from readings of the “otherworldly, metaphysical, transcendent White-of-all-time” (355). It is, however, intended to make us reconsider the notion that White was a snobbish intellectual who valorised the isolated outcast, the reclusive artist, above all others. In *Riders in the Chariot* White celebrates the worth and beauty of those outcasts yet he insists, ultimately, that for their art or lives to bear fruit they must engage with the world.

It has been possible to dismiss White’s ongoing relevance to Australian literature and to an Australian imaginary by labeling him and his writing “elitist” (During 100). His privileged upbringing, his extensive English education and his sense of his own intelligence did set him apart from most of his compatriots. He was appalled by “the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions, in which the rich man is the important man, in which the schoolmaster and the journalist rule what intellectual roost there is” (*Patrick White Speaks* 15). He was panicked by what he saw as “the exultation of the ‘average’” and sought always to promote artistic excellence. White unashamedly strove to inspire those around him—friends and readers—to reach the height of their imaginative powers. His fiction is elitist, in the most positive sense of the word; it is highly crafted, dense with classical and literary allusions and religious symbolism, often allegorical, at times a little overwritten. On one level his writing demands an

educated, intellectual readership but on another his intuitive, sensual prose is readily comprehensible as felt experience. Increasingly it seems, perhaps because of his reputation as a difficult writer, White's work is of interest only to educated readers—an "us"—no matter how different we might be from each other in a variety of ways and circumstance, united under the given title of "elite" precisely because we read this kind of literature.

White's purpose in writing was to enhance communication and understanding amongst his readers: "There is always the possibility that the book lent [. . .] may lead to communication between human beings. There is the possibility that one may be helping to people a barely inhabited country with a race possessed of understanding". An essential element of his literary project was always "to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and the poetry which alone could make bearable the lives of [ordinary] people" (*Patrick White Speaks* 15). In *Riders in the Chariot* the extraordinary behind the ordinary takes the form of being able to perceive "the infinite in everything" (6); it is the ability to sense some possibility, or some presence, that is larger than the self. It involves being-in-the-world.

In *Riders* the elites are the outcasts: the Jew, the Aboriginal, the madwoman, the abused wife and mother. They are all poor and lead fairly ordinary lives; Himmelfarb is a factory worker, Dubbo an itinerant cleaner, Miss Hare an old reclusive spinster, Mrs Godbold a housewife and mother who takes in laundry. With the exception of Himmelfarb, none are well educated. Intellectually, financially, socially, these people could be termed "battlers". Significantly, they are all very different. Each has a unique concept and experience of the Chariot: for Himmelfarb it is an intellectual mystery found in Kabbalistic and Hasidic texts; for Dubbo it is a vision of artistic possibility inspired by Odilon Redon's Apollonian chariot; for Miss Hare it is a hopeful expectation of some ultimate revelation; for Mrs Godbold it is a blend of promise (from her childhood hymns) and pain (wrought by the farm cart which crushed her brother). These different notions of the chariot have caused critics concern; it is nothing but a crude, one-dimensional image that fails to lift off the page, it is unconvincing, "it is a projection of their delusions", it is not sufficiently coherent to be effective in any symbolic way (Kramer 11, see also Phillips and Kiernan). Yet its difference for each rider is essential not only because it demonstrates their individuality but also because it demonstrates how experience and understanding can be so varied, even within a select group. The four riders are united because they are "*different*" (*Riders* 7). They are the elite because they are open to intuitive perception and an understanding of human suffering.

Miss Hare and Mrs Godbold understand the painful human condition from an early age. Alf Dubbo and Himmelfarb need to learn about it through lived experience. Their changing appreciation of the chariot mirrors their respective journeys toward engagement with the world and recognition of their responsibilities in it. At the height of his intellectual arrogance Himmelfarb takes “the path of inwardness [and] looks into the books” (136) as a means of understanding the world. “It was, however, the driest, the most cerebral approach [. . .] Mostly he remained at a level where, it seemed, he was unacceptable as a vessel of experience” (136). Reha pleads for enlightenment as her world plunges towards horror but Himmelfarb, in his ivory tower of knowledge, has only empty words to offer her. It is only once he has truly suffered, once he accepts that he must “make amends” and has “individual obligations” (189), that he recognises that the chariot and the possibility of redemption are linked, and that they are somehow related to human interaction: “It is even told [. . .] how the creative light of God poured into the *zaddikim*. That *they* are the Chariot of God” (155). Similarly, when the mature Alf Dubbo comes across Redon’s chariot the second time he realises “how differently he saw this painting since his first acquaintance with it, and how he would now transcribe the Frenchman’s limited composition into his own terms of motion, and forms partly transcendental, partly evolved from his struggle with daily becoming, and experience of suffering” (342). Michael Wilding is only partly correct when he writes that White works firmly within the assumptions of modernism, choosing “to privilege the alienated, the outsider, the decadent, the deviant, celebrating human isolation and non-cooperation, expressing despair rather than hope” (27). White does privilege the alienated, the outsider, but, in this novel at least, he does not advocate elitist segregation from the world. The intellect and artistic creativity, to be truly worthwhile, must be involved with being-in-the-world.

White empathised with outcasts: “As a homosexual I have always known what it is to be an outsider. It has given me added insight into the plight of the immigrant—the hate and contempt with which he is often received” (*Patrick White Speaks* 157). As readers we are encouraged to empathise with the alienated riders—but only to a certain extent. We feel for them but we do not identify with them. Part of that resistance may be because they hold symbolic significance, because they are constructed as archetypes, but perhaps also in part because White blends their human failings and vulnerability with a healthy dose of either arrogance or simplicity. These four elite figures are not wholly likeable. During would argue that our lack of identification is because “the humble are always other to, and finally lesser than, the author and his readers (even if they are morally and spiritually superior)” (46). But

I wonder if it is not also that we are led to understand, to an extent, the “ordinary” suburbanites who cannot warm to these four and are made uneasy by them. Our sympathies might be engaged by Himmelfarb’s plight but it is equally possible that his extreme piety and passive subservience to the will of the mob may irritate and alienate readers.

Wilding and During have argued that White’s characterisation demonstrates his inability to understand the lives of ordinary people. For Wilding, White’s “patrician treatment of the lower orders” demonstrates his “snobberies of taste and class”. White’s sympathies, he insists, are “reserved for the outsider figure who cannot accept the middle-class world view, the figure generally derided by the middle-class norm” (30). Andrew McCann, citing Wilding, writes of White’s “paranoid fear of suburbia” and notes that *Riders in the Chariot* “is the novel that clinches this reading of White as the patrician modernist unable to represent middle Australia except through a series of extravagantly misanthropic caricatures” (145). To label Mrs Flack and Mrs Jolley as simply caricatures is to dismiss their potent power. Certainly they, like all White’s characters, are exaggeratedly drawn for dramatic effect but are they really so unbelievable? In 1965 J. F. Burrows wrote, “Mrs Flack is too stereotypical, too empty and vacuous to be truly xenophobic” (56). While we can read her and her crony as stereotypes, or as Macbeth’s scheming witches, or as “vaudeville figures [. . .] two of the comic monsters of modern fiction”, and while we appreciate the extent of White’s satiric gaze, who amongst us has not heard echoes of her bile (Malouf 13)?:

I would not have thought it would come to this [. . .] a stream of foreign migrants pouring into the country, and our boys many of them not yet returned, to say nothing of those with permanent headstones still to be erected overseas. So much for promises and Prime Ministers. Who will feed us, I would like to know, when we are so many mouths over, and foreign mouths, how many of them I did read, but forget the figure. (211)

In her insular “plastic” world Mrs Flack poisons the minds of those around her. She demonstrates how easy it is for a small few, left unchallenged, to cause grievous damage to people and community. Leonie Kramer was unconvinced that Mrs Flack’s suggestion to Blue that Christians “*suffer every Easter to know the Jews have crucified Our Lord [. . .] It was Them, Blue*” was sufficiently powerful to spur him to action. Arguably, the heated controversy surrounding Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2006), coupled with Gibson’s drunken outburst on being arrested by a Jewish policeman, might suggest otherwise.

Blue and the rest of the crowd do not fully comprehend what spurs them to action. There is an unfocussed, mounting tension in the novel's Easter Thursday morning that needs an outlet. The arrival and departure of the circus and its collision with a funeral procession unleashes some deep primal need in the community of workers and spectators. The sensuality of the circus girls and the animalistic arousal triggered by the monkeys' smell coupled with the clown's enactment of a public hanging and the widow's display of grief ensures the crowd is both excited and uneasy. Some of the "more thoughtful" spectators understand the momentous nature of the clown's act, others hunger for a cathartic resolution to their elevated, agitated sensibilities (405): "those who had longed for a show wondered whether they were appeased, for the clown was surely more or less a puppet, when they had been hoping for a man" (404-5). In the absence of any effectual leadership from Harry Rosetree and with the acquiescence of Himmelfarb, the combination of alcohol, sexual arousal and intimations of death opens a space for Blue and his mates to satisfy the crowd's need for blood. And Mrs Flack has laid the groundwork effectively.

As readers we despise Mrs Flack and, to a lesser extent, Mrs Jolley. They are nasty, bitter women and yet White engages our sympathies for both of them. Their behaviour is not excused but it is somewhat mitigated when we discover that Mrs Flack, for the sake of conformity and social propriety, has sacrificed her relationship with her son. How much energy has this character invested, how much passion has she repressed, in her quest to appear as a moral Christian woman? Mrs Jolley, for all her bluster, is unloved and unwanted by her children. She is financially destitute and is, in many ways, powerless to control her life. The women are (rightly) imprisoned for their wrongs, consigned to a living hell together in their lidded "brick box" (469). Their fear of stepping outside proscribed boundaries, of appearing to be anything other than the norm, anything other than "ordinary" Australians will eventually suffocate them. It is not so much suburbia as the suburban mindset that unquestionably accepts labels or codes of appropriate conduct—in contemporary parlance, what is Australian, what is un-Australian—that White is railing against. Do we not feel for Shirl Rosetree when she discovers she and Harry should have become "Methoes" rather than Catholics because "That is what people are, it seems" (208)? Have things changed so much when young Muslim girls are told to buy a bikini if they want to fit in to Australian society? The resonance between these attitudes, held forty years apart and spanning decades that have seen so much social change, is significant.

And what of Ernie Theobalds, Blue and the Lucky Sevens? During dismisses them as “resentful, cruel and stupid” (46). Certainly the potential for human cruelty, and the evidence of it on an individual and global scale, informs this narrative, but it is not these characters who are cruel. Ernie Theobalds is portrayed as a mate, a good Aussie bloke. He’s “not a bad sort of a cove” but like the rest of the crowd he does not intervene to save Himmelfarb until instructed to by his boss (416). Ernie understands it is all just a bit of harmless fun. When he eventually gets Himmelfarb down from the tree and is thanked by the Jew, he responds with a brief lecture on the egalitarian ethic of mateship before reminding Himmelfarb that he needs to lighten up:

Remember we have a sense of humour, and when the boys start to horse around, it is that that is gettin’ the better of ’em. They can’t resist a joke. Even when a man is full of beer, you will find the old sense of humour hard at work underneath. It has to play a joke. See? No offence can be taken when a joke is intended. (417)

The Lucky Sevens do not set out to be cruel or vindictive. They are just a bunch of “ordinary” blokes who struck it lucky in the lotto and had one too many early in the day. It is precisely because we understand these characters, despite being told so little about them, that their actions and the consequences of those actions are so disturbing. They demonstrate the latent aggression that so commonly brews beneath the surface of groups of adolescent males—think of the Cronulla riots and continuing violence at sporting matches. David Malouf writes, “History in Australia repeats itself as larrikin horseplay, but is no less brutal because Himmelfarb’s persecutor—Blue of the splendid torso and toothless head, that ‘Antinous of the suburbs’—lacks a designer uniform, and no searchlights turn the sky overhead to a cathedral” (13). Blue’s crime is less cruelty than it is ignorance and lack of independent thought. Do we judge Blue or do we recognize his motivation?: “All the injustices to which he had ever been subjected grew appreciably sadder. But for all the injustices he had committed, somebody had committed worse. Not to say the worst, so he had been told, the very worst. And must not go unpunished” (407). He is not sure why he harasses Himmelfarb, he just needs to release some unformed feeling of hurt and inadequacy. And besides, he is just playing to the crowd: “Because Blue the vindicator was also Blue the mate. It was possible to practice all manner of cruelties provided the majority might laugh them off as practical jokes”. The majority seemed to agree with him as they “giggled and chanted”: “Go home! Go home! [. . .] Go home to Germany! [. . .] Go home to hell!” (409).

In February 2007 Andrew Rule reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* how a minibus full of drunken football fans had harassed orthodox Jews walking home from Synagogue on a Friday night in suburban Melbourne. The louts yelled “Go the Nazis” and “F [. . .] the Jews” before grabbing Menachem Vorchheimer’s skull cap and yarmulke (Rule 45). When he demanded their return he was punched in the face. Was Patrick White really so wide of the mark back in 1961? Can we honestly say that Himmelfarb’s treatment at the hands of a bunch of drunken louts “is grotesquely untypical of Australian social reality” (Wilding 30)?

My argument here refutes During’s claim that White is “doomed to be increasingly neglected” because “his critique of Australian ordinariness is no longer especially vital or useful” (100). On the contrary this prescient novel has much to say about the current climate of fear being fuelled by false assertions about the threat difference poses to “ordinary Australians” and their way of life. White’s writing will be increasingly neglected, however, if those of us who read, write about and teach his work, accept the view that White was an “elitist” with nothing to say about everyday Australian life, interested only in art for art’s sake. The charge that White was an “Australia-hating writer” (During 100) because he criticised aspects of Australian society is redolent of the dismissal of contemporary dissent as “un-Australian”.

In *Riders in the Chariot* the accepted binary of elite riders/ordinary suburbanites does not hold; the supposed elites are a diverse group who lead pretty ordinary lives, the supposed ordinary Australians are not alike but are forced, by a pervading sense of conformity, to appear so. How does Mrs Godbold fit into this supposed binary? Like all White’s characters she is both a representative type and a believable character; she can be read as Isaiah’s suffering servant, the magna mater, a secular saint and a very real woman who lies awake “wondering if she had conceived again in lust” (231). Mrs Godbold is both ordinary and elite. Similarly she is both saint and woman, visionary saviour and simple fool. Critics cannot seem to agree on how to read Mrs Godbold, she slips through their frameworks. So too does the novel as a whole. The accepted binaries through which it has been consistently analysed cannot be sustained: immanence bleeds into transcendence, profane into sacred, Judaism into Christianity, physical into metaphysical, intellect into intuition, and vice versa<sup>1</sup>. Each supposedly conflicting term operates in a relational mode, as a dialectic. And here we begin to understand why White chose a fragment of William Blake’s satirical work, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, as the epigraph to this novel.

Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* makes problematic what is taken for granted; it seeks to unsettle readers in order to disturb their expected perception of fundamental categories (or binaries) such as right and wrong, good and evil. Blake argues passionately against order, conformity and repression. His art and poetry celebrate the redemptive power of imaginative perception: "One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression" (264). In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* he attacks Swedenborg's belief that without "equilibrium there is no action and reaction" (443), stating, "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence" (250). Blake's contraries are opposed, but not as enemies that block or cancel each other, for such an opposition would produce only destruction and stasis. Rather, they act positively in opposed but complementary directions, and their opposition is like that between expansion and contraction, between the creative imagination and the ordering reason. They operate in a dialectic mode to create new ways of perceiving the world.

Blake reinterpreted literature from the past and brought it into contact with contemporary politics. He agitated through his art for social change, working always to destroy class prejudice and political repression. In the memorable fancy of the "Printing house in Hell" he suggests that powerful literature originates from "flaming fire, raging around & melting the metals into living fluids". In the fifth chamber these metals are "cast [. . .] into the expanse". Words and art are free and active in the world. Significantly, they are then "reciev'd[sic] by Men who occupied the sixth chamber, and took the forms of books & were arranged in libraries" (258). If literature is to remain vibrant and energising it must be active in the world, not sealed away in shuttered books. Those of us who continue to read it must also continue to elucidate its ongoing relevance.

Like Blake, White believed that art had power to enhance imagination and change attitudes. At the end of the war he considered the prospect of "ceasing to be an artist and turning instead into that most sterile of beings, a London intellectual" (*Patrick White Speaks* 14), but the prospect of a purely intellectual life seemed to him to be "distressingly parasitic and pointless" (*Patrick White Speaks* 13). For some reason critics have consistently discounted White's interest in using his art to effect change in Australian society. Wilding writes, "White's vision of alienation, of human isolation and futility, facilitates this art of exclusions: nothing other than art itself is seen as worthy of representation. This is the nature of modernism, that it is not the ideas but the patterns, the forms, the 'art' that are the work's concern"

(32). This kind of reading cannot be sustained, particularly in relation to *Riders in the Chariot*, where again and again the heroic characters act for the betterment of their world. How does such a reading explain that Konrad Stauffer becomes a “man of action” (149), becomes “personally involved” (151), or that Mrs Godbold, for all her simplemindedness, is the only rider to survive and is celebrated in the closing sentences of the text for the positive effect she has “not only [on] those she had healed of some anxiety, but those who suspected her of possessing an enviable secret” (490)? Meanwhile the ineffectual Mrs Pask who cannot bear to contemplate a bodily world of sensation, and therefore paints in a vacuum, is satirised. She lectures Alf on the purpose of art, “Never forget that art is first and foremost a moral force” (315). Is not White suggesting that art, devoid of interaction with the world, has no force at all?

White’s valorisation of isolated elites is supposedly manifest in his depiction of Alf Dubbo (and later Hurtle Duffield). Certainly both Dubbo and Duffield are without family and isolate themselves willingly from personal interaction; such detachment is necessary for their art and in Duffield’s case sanctioned by his genius. But Dubbo cannot stay wholly divorced from community: “the unhappiness of almost complete isolation from other human beings would flicker up in him at times, and he would hurry away from his job [. . .] to roam the streets” (344). Dubbo’s intuitive understanding of colour, texture and form set him apart from the other characters in *Riders* but is he really elevated above all of them?: “While standing on the mat floor, Alf Dubbo was stationed as if upon an eminence, watching what he alone was gifted or fated to see. Neither the actor, nor the spectator, he was the most miserable of human beings, the artist” (407). Dubbo knows he will never speak, never act. All he can do is paint his vision and while that painting is magnificent, it kills him. His paintings are only good for a laugh: “the paintings disappeared, and, if not destroyed when they ceased to give the buyers a laugh, have still to be discovered” (461).

In this deeply silent text, where all four riders are skeptical of the ability of language to adequately express felt experience, there is one voice that rings out clearly and it belongs to the Lady from Czernowitz: “Stripped. Calling to him from out of the dark of history, ageless, ageless, and interminable” (184). Faced with the horror of the camps Himmelfarb turns away from intellectual pursuits believing firmly that “[t]he intellect has failed us” (198). Today it is the fear of intellectual reasoning, and the reticence of those with the ability to publicly articulate perceived injustices to speak out, for fear of being branded “elite” and dismissed as irrelevant, that has the potential to make us

all less than we can be. Indeed if we remain silent and accept that we, and the literature we read, are powerless to change public opinion and governmental policy, then, as a nation it becomes easier to become like White's suburban witches: inward-looking, destructive, fearful people who guard our turf with suspicion and innuendo.

There is something further suggested by White's chosen epigraph: "is he honest who/resists his genius or conscience only for the/sake of present ease or gratification?" Should we, as scholars and readers, accept that we are powerless to change the political climate? What, seriously, can we do—a handful of intellectuals who continue to engage with White's work? In her disturbing essay "Ties That Bind" (2005) Margaret Simons tells of visiting one of the newer, gated, middle-class suburbs (and the Fountain Gate shopping mall of *Kath and Kim* fame) on the outskirts of Melbourne where only 6.7% of the population over the age of fifteen have a university degree. Simons compares this figure to the inner-city suburb of Carlton where 65% of residents "either have a degree or are studying at a university or TAFE full-time" (276). Education, she rightly argues, is now "the proxy for class", and education, specifically tertiary education, seems to determine a number of significant attitudes: "Generalisations are dangerous. Nevertheless it seems that the issues that divide us could be summed up as those of patriotism, national identity, immigration, including asylum seekers, and attitudes to our history, including the past treatment of Aborigines [. . .] These issues are to do with notions of nationhood and fairness. They are to do with notions of us and them—who we are, who belongs, who does not and who is deserving of our help and compassion" (278). She concludes with a very important message: "After a while, I caught a glimpse of how I and my kind appear, viewed from Fountain Gate. Mostly, I don't think the people of Fountain Gate think about us much at all. This is perhaps the most important lesson. That most of Australian life is not *about us*" (279). So how do we go about becoming more relevant to Australian society?

Himmelfarb explains to Miss Hare: "It is not yet obvious [. . .] but will be made clear, how we are to use our knowledge, what link we provide in the chain of events" (300). Perhaps we can start by using our experience and expertise in areas to do with language and narrative to offer alternative stories to the Australian people than those currently being propagated by the spin doctors of fear. Perhaps we can demonstrate that Australian literature has always been concerned with questions of identity, fear and belonging, and we can elucidate some of the ways in which our writers have sought to offer us a broader picture of who we might be and how we might live. White's

writing helps us understand the absolutely ordinary fears and insecurities of the suburban Australian consciousness; now we have to find ways to combat those fears, to replace the politics of fear with a politics of recognition. As White noted in 1986: "A lot of you have qualities I don't possess—you are intellectuals, academics. At my worst, I am a doodler; at my best, I like to think a kind of bricklayer or stonemason. Put together, our joint qualities can assault those I increasingly suspect—the politicians and the megalomaniacs" (*Patrick White Speaks* 178-9). There is much work to be done.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> David Tacey has lamented that: "Time and again we sense in White an acute absence of the intellect, a lack of reflection in relation to symbolic material, and a blind faith entrusted to imagination" (82).

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