Chapter Six

6. Conclusion

This study shows that Patrick White is a highly skillful satirist who uses the devices, techniques, and strategies that have been traditionally associated with satire along with such other subversive forms as parody and burlesque. It also elaborates the way he not only mixes the subversive forms of writing in his post 1948 works but that he also uses the mode of satire in variable proportions within his narratives so that his writing comes to comprise a rich mélange of literary effects which helps us to arrive to this fact that his increasing use of satire occupies a pre- eminent position in some of his works, especially those studied in this thesis.

The decision to study the use of satire and the quest for identity was made when I noticed that there was a gap in White criticism in this area. The question of identity and its relation with satire has largely eluded the attention of critics and this critical omission is partly attributable to the orthodox and log-held conception of White as a religious writer with which his often offensive or obscene satire does not sit well. This general ignorance of satire and its relation to the question of identity can also be attributed to the traditionally low status of satire, parody, and burlesque more generally, and to the problems that arise from formalist theories of satire. Anne Pender draws our attention to these problems when she ascribes the comparatively low critical interest in satire to definitions of it that are “so rigid” that they ignore the satirical impulse when it is conveyed in “a tonal quality or spirit rather than in a specific set of conventions”. The issue of whether or not satire comprises a genre or a mode of writing and the issue of whether it has corrective intentions and is thus generative propose themselves as additional critical deterrents. In response to these problems, this study argues that satire is best understood as a mode of writing,
produced by instinct, mediated by temperament, driven by spirit, and thus it may be mild or extreme, wayward or controlled, obscene or otherwise offensive, socio-historically referential but highly subjective, not subject to a rigid set of conventions, and not intended as corrective or cure but produced to relieve the pressure in the satirist's own breast or simply for the fun or the hell of it. White's satire is testament to this formulation.

My reading of the four novels selected here from the standpoint of satire enables this study to identify and elaborate a pattern of development that encompasses White's post 1948 oeuvre. This pattern of development begins in The Tree of Man and Voss with White's re-visionary engagement with Australian history, myth, legend, and identity, and with the predominantly comic social satire that he mounts in these two otherwise serious historical novels. My research into White's sources for Voss shows him to be an author who draws extensively upon historical, "real life" figures for his characters, and thus it indicates the extent of his engagement with history and his commitment to historical accuracy, while at the same time my analysis shows him to be an author who substantially transforms some of these figures by making them vehicles for satire. White not only engages with history as soon as he resumes his writing career in The Tree of Man and Voss but he also reaches out to satire as if to mediate the force of history that he confronts within that engagement.

This study elaborates White's expansion of his social satire in Riders in the Chariot through his attacks on the Hare family, Mrs. Jolley, Mrs. Flack, and Mrs. Chalmers Robinson. More specifically, it illustrates his use of the satirical devices, tropes, and strategies identified by Stephen Greenblatt in his study of the satires of Waugh, Huxley and Orwell in conjunction with four of the techniques and strategies of classical Menippean satire, particularly the strategy of sending the wise man out to confront "evil" in the world, in order to sustain a number of hard-hitting and sometimes exaggerated satirical attacks on all manners of social issues and problems.
The development of White's satire continues in the form of the artistically self-referential satire by parody that he presents in The Eye of The Storm and in the host of often comical, typically playful literary allusions that he uses to underscore that satire and its relation to the question of identity. White's willingness to experiment eventually leads him to employ the techniques and strategies of post-modern degenerative grotesque satire in his penultimate novel, The Twybom Affair. This study thus reveals that White's approach within this pattern of development was impulsive and experimental rather than determined and paradigmatic.

This pattern casts White and his novels in a new and altogether different light by demonstrating the shifts and changes that occur in his writing as a result of his increasing and experimental use of satire and its related modes of writing. This pattern indicates that although his use of these subversive modes decreases in three of the novels from this period, the trend within his oeuvre overall is to the greater use of them. These developments ensure that White's satire, and consequently his writing generally, is not static but ever-changing and indeed evolutionary. It becomes clear that White only initially uses symbolism and allegory, that he inconsistently draws on religion and then comes to mock his recourse to it, that his novels are only psyche-driven to a degree, and that they come to express post-modernist as well modernist concerns. His writing is subversive and ever-changing, enquiring in new ways and in new areas, and not static as the still dominant orthodox readings of his work suggest.

The successful mixture of history and satire vis-à-vis the question of identity that White produces in The Tree of Man and Voss seems to have given him the courage and the confidence to write as he pleases in Riders in the Chariot. This novel encompasses the historical expanse of the epic and the contemporary history but his writing is remarkably unrestrained so that he writes satire that is unstable and uncontrolled but also strong and delightful. White, in deploying the tropes and features of modern satire in
the manner identified by Greenblatt and in drawing on four of the techniques and strategies of classical Menippean satire, also enacts what is his increasingly despairing view of humanity that is in search of his true identity in this novel. He engages his four main characters as wise or good men or women in a hopeless battle with evil in the world and he draws upon another subversive mode, high burlesque, in order to highlight the failure of Alf Dubbo's "Final Deposition". White's mixing of the techniques and strategies of modern and Menippean satire initiates a shift in the tonal quality of his satire - it is at times darkly comical but it is often continuously bleak because virtually all the characters are victims, they suffer a loss of identity, they choose to play empty social roles, they retreat into private worlds, they are locked into circles of futility, and they neither understand nor overcome their suffering. Riders in the Chariot produces a dramatic shift in the nature of White's satire by expanding and radicalizing it in terms of its targets, tenor, and tone. This radicalization, and the creative freedom from which it issues, is quite evident when White boldly takes his satire inside the gates of the extermination camp at Friedensdorf and in the grotesque parody of the crucifixion of Christ that he enacts at Sarsaparilla.

White's courage as a satirist is proven by way of the decidedly adverse responses to his depiction of these events produced by Brian McFarlane and Michael Wilding respectively. These responses, moreover, indicate that White's satire is truly a form of oppositional - if not adversarial - art. White's recourse to and his mixing of these techniques and strategies not only produces the sharp, hard-edged satire of this novel but in doing so it also ensures that his satire takes on new meaning in that it is made to bear his philosophy, his increasingly despairing view of the society of humankind. My study thus reveals Riders in the Chariot to be a milestone in the development of White's oeuvre.

White employs a primarily literal psychological realist mode of writing in The Tree of Man and Riders in the Chariot in order to explore
subjects and themes that were of personal and professional interest to him. These novels do not directly contribute to the development of his satire but this study shows that White reconsiders these same subjects and themes in The Eye of the Storm so that the dramatic turn inwards upon his own artistic activity that he executes through satire by parody. The self-referential satire by parody that White mounts and the host of often comical, typically playful literary allusions and that he disposes in this novel ensures that the pattern of development that is this study's primary focus continues in the form of another major shift in his mode of subversive writing. White's use of King Lear and his witty, intelligent, and amusing references to many other literary works indicate that this turn is reflective and conscious rather than reflexive and unconscious. The novel consequently reflects a high level of artistic self-consciousness while at the same time it exhibits and enacts a recursive proliferation of signs and images that demonstrate what is White's break with modernism, a break in favor of post-modernism. What Riders in the Chariot indeed initiates and reflects is the change from the modernist epistemological concerns that support and drive forward The Tree of Man, Voss, and Riders in the Chariot, and indeed The Solid Mandala and The Vivisector, to the postmodernist ontological concerns that find their ultimate expression in the grotesque degenerative satire of The Twyborn Affair and The Memoirs of Many in One. White embodies and enacts his own epistemological concerns in The Eye of the Storm principally through Sir Basil Hunter, his main character, whose foibles, fumblings, and failures, cast him as a parody actor-artist figure, one who serves to mock White's own activity, that of the creative artist. White's use of parody for satiric purposes in this novel not only demonstrates his willingness to mix and thus to experiment with the modes of subversive writing but it also provides an indication of the free-ranging nature of the critical disposition that underwrites and produces his satire.

This study recognizes Voss, the novel that follows The Tree of Man, as...
a historical work but one that constitutes an interlude rather than a disruption in the development of White's subversive writing, even though it contains some satire, because it is a novel that he began and then set aside much earlier in his career. White's completion of it exemplifies his commitment to his work, to the art of writing, to historical fiction, to history per se, and the creative virtuosity that he again demonstrates when he resumes and further develops his subversive writing in his next novel. I elaborate the progress as regress plot and the grotesque style that White disposes within an insistent topos of carnival in *The Twybom Affair*, arguing that this not only troubles the representational foundations of his narrative but also that it defies the process of reading that seek to integrate the text with social and aesthetic norms. I show that this, White's penultimate novel, consequently exhibits the chief features of post-modern degenerative satire and I argue that these features are the proof and product of White's shift away from his earlier modernist epistemological concerns to his later post-modernist ontological concerns, the shift that he initiates by way of the turn inwards upon his own activity that is exemplified in *The Eye of the Storm*.

This study also shows that White's experimental rather than determined and paradigmatic approach to satire is beneficial to his writing. This experimentation begins with the incidental social satire and comedy of *The Tree of Man*, it continues in the expansion and intensification of White's social satire in *Voss*, in the radicalization of his satire in *Riders in the Chariot*, in the parodic satire that initiates the meta-fictional turn in *The Tree of Man*, and in *The Twybom Affair* where White's fiction undergoes its most radical shift by entering the field of the post-modern, degenerative, grotesque satire. This study thus shows that White's writing up to and including *The Twybom Affair* is never static, that he is not a religious novelist “pure and simple”, that he is not a writer of any particular genre, even though he realizes his mature, predominately satiric style in *The Twybom Affair*. 
White's mature style is ironic but also playful, comic, and intimate and at the same time it is less obviously self-referential in artistic terms but grotesque and degenerative and thus subversive in that the characters are grotesquely figured and the narrative regressively plotted. The extent to which White's last novel, The Memoirs of Many in One, is stylistically similar to The Twyborn Affair confirms that he realized his mature style in the earlier novel but, if he had lived longer, there is no reason to assume that his novels may not have reflected further experimentation and change. This shift implicates his satire in making manifest the changing philosophy that is the ultimate meaning of his work and, in so doing, it establishes his attitude to Australia, to the world in which he is located and upon which he draws. White's satire is typically an expression of discontent and despair but its radicalization is a further, more angered expression of it so that the significance of his satire now resides in what it suggests of his worldview and man's quest for identity.

White's attitude towards Australia and Australian history, society, and culture, is initially positive in both The Tree of Man and Voss when he affirms the idea of human progress and so proposes a better future, the kind of future that he suggests in The Prodigal Son. The social satire that White mounts in these novels seems to serve this affirmative purpose too, in that it mocks and so draws out attention to the foibles and failures of humankind. By focusing on White's satire, I have sought to provide a reading of four of his novels that accounts for the major shifts and changes that occur in his oeuvre after his return to Australia in 1948. Most criticism on White saw him as a symbolist-allegorist; these critics went on to insist that he is a modernist, an elitist, or a mother-hating misogynist, but ultimately a metaphysical or religious writer. There are grounds for these readings in particular novels but the proponents of these readings are seemingly unaware of White's increasing use of satire and the pattern of development that it produces. These readings persist even though they
cannot offer a consistent, satisfactory explanation for the development of White's body of work as a whole or for the last novels that establish his mature style and set the seal on his career, *The Twyborn Affair* and *The Memoirs of Many in One*.

A reading from the perspective of satire explains the development of White's oeuvre in terms of style and meaning, in other words, in terms of art and philosophy. The discussion of White's philosophy that this study pursues shows that he was not nor did he become - a religious writer in any conventional sense. The only religion White appears to have ever embraced was the "religion" of art, essentially a faith in its redemptive powers, as Marjorie Barnard first suggested when she alone pointed out that art for White provided the solution to his bleak philosophy of humankind. Although White continued to write and indeed enacted the creation of visual, theatrical, as well as literary art in his work, this study reveals that he began to lose faith in the redemptive power of art in *Riders in the Chariot* and that he goes on to turn in upon art, initially in the satire by parody of dramatic art that he enacts in *The Eye of the Storm* and then more generally and aggressively in the post-modern degenerative satire of *The Twyborn Affair* and *The Memoirs of Many in One*.

The development of White's satire, particularly the switch from the epistemological concerns of the earlier novels to ontological concerns of the later novels that it reflects, not only indicates that White lost faith in his own 'religion' of art but also that his philosophy was never religious but secular humanist. This is the ultimate meaning of White's satire. The satire produced by White can be best understood within the context of some of the non-Australian satirical fiction of his period for although Anne Pender has recently and usefully reintroduced Christina Stead, the Australian novelist who was roughly contemporary to White, as a satirist, there was and is no substantive canon of Australian subversive writing, no body of work that can be said to constitute an Australian tradition of satire. While
White (and Stead) employed satire and appear to have at least alerted such subsequent satirists as Frank Moorhouse and David Foster to the possibilities offered by it as a mode of writing. White needs be compared to George Orwell, Evelyn Waugh, and Aldous Huxley, and to the American satirists as Nathanael West and Flannery O'Connor.

This situation not only arises because there is no Australian tradition of satire but also because White's use of satire was ever-changing, and because he never used a fixed or paradigmatic form of it, not even initially in his emergent satire in *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*. This ensures that White is continually moving towards the realization of his own satirical style. My reading of White's fiction through the prism of satire allows us to understand the interrelationship between its formal and the contextual qualities. This study shows that White's satire in all its manifestations was the product of his experience, particularly of his intense, ongoing engagement with Australian society and culture after 1950, with the history, myth, and legend that espouses that culture, and with the patterns of behavior that characterized its contemporary forms and which he found objectionable. The thrust of White's satire is directed towards historical and contemporary beliefs and practices, the very cornerstones of Australian identity and sensibility, and we may see this in the topicality of his satire and in the currency of his satirical criticism in novel after novel.

In addition, this approach allows us to circumvent the limitations of the extant criticism and the danger of continuing to see White in the same, fixed, time-honored ways. This study has deliberately limited its use of the biographical material on Patrick White's life in order to minimize its dependence on biographical arguments, but what must be pointed out as part of his achievement is that only a writer of his particular disposition, commitment, ability, and life experience could have produced the four novels that form the basis of this study. Only a writer such as White could have written exaggerated but entertaining, offensive but intelligent, unfair
but amusing novels that are substantially informed by his knowledge of
Australian myth and legend, by his historical research, by his study of
English, French, and German Literature at Cambridge University, by his
knowledge of the traditions and practices of Australian literature, by his
wide, ongoing reading of other literatures, and by his concerns as well as
his perceptions. Only a repatriate, intelligent, well-read novelist like White
engaged in a struggle to reconnect to his native land could draw upon and
meld together these sources and influences in variable proportions but in
ways that draw upon his experience and his powers of observation, that
exercise his wit, that deliver a strong social critique, that question the
reception of art and his own role in its production, that produce laughter or
anger, that reflect his changing philosophy.

Although White's rambunctious satirical novels become increasingly
degenerative in that they do not finally offer even a pretence to corrective
or cure, they are, despite all the controversy they produced and the criticism
they generated, the proof as well as the product of what was a deep
commitment to Australia and Australian Literature.