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The Chariot of Fire: Terrorism, Liberalism, and the Mystic Attitude

Zusammenfassung

Patrick White's novel, *Riders in the Chariot*, develops a critique of Weimar German liberalism from a mystical standpoint, explaining the intellectual weakness of liberalism and depicting the response of the mysticism of fire, in part historically based, to the systemic terror of Nazism. The scenes from the novel that are discussed end with an image of mystical holocaust turned against the Nazi holocaust.

It was begun during the last of our eighteen years at Castle Hill. The painter Lawrence Daws had given me Jung's Psychology and Alchemy, which had a great influence on me. It projected me into my Solid Mandala. Jung's teaching also bolstered me up during a wavering of faith on realising I could not accept the sterility, the vulgarity, in many cases the bigotry of the Christian churches in Australia. Manoly [Lascaris] seemed secure inside the structure of Eastern Orthodoxy. I had nothing from my upbringing in a kind of social C. of E. (a visiting card on the pew, clothes outgrown or no longer fashionable sent off to the jumble sale, a grateful rector and his wife calling to express gratitude for patronage.) So I evolved what I think Manoly has always seen as my non-religious or mystic circus.

Patrick White, *Flaws in the Glass*¹

Mordecai Himmelfarb is walking home through the streets of Holunderthal, the North German town he grew up in.² He spent time at Oxford University and in the provincial German university city of Bienenstadt but eventually returned, as a celebrated professor of literature, to the place of his childhood. In the waning grey-green light of day's end, he is heading where he has gone a thousand times before. Turning into the city's Friedrichstrasse, he stops abruptly. Trams are shunting through the dusk. Pedestrians are negotiating the semi-darkness on their way home. Pubs are filling up for the evening. Despite the air of ordinary routine around him, Himmelfarb is gripped by an ungovernable fear. He bolts for his life, down the Friedrichstrasse, across the Königin

¹ White's autobiography (1981), 146.

² This and subsequent scenes are from Part Two of Patrick White, *Riders in the Chariot* (1964 [1961]), 91-195.

Luise Platz, into Bismarkstrasse, along the Krötengasse. He heads in the direction of the Süd Park area, making for the apartment of Konrad Stauffer, the brother of his old childhood friend, Jürgen Stauffer. Why has he shot off in this urgent fashion? It looks like he is having a panic attack.

The reader has already learnt that Himmelfarb has been under great pressure. He is a Jew and the Nazis are in power in Germany. He has been dismissed from his post at the university. His Jewish compatriots have started to disappear. Friends have advised him to leave for Palestine or the United States. But he has refused. It is understandable, then, if his nerve has snapped. Each of us is calibrated for a certain amount of pressure, and no more. Some of us can withstand greater pressure than others. Professors are a notably frail species. So we understand if Himmelfarb bolts, looking for a friendly face and some respite from an increasingly hostile society. As he runs through the streets, he has Konrad Stauffer in mind. Only a little while ago Stauffer extended an invitation for Himmelfarb to visit—a rare gesture in a world that is steadily closing its doors to Jews. So Himmelfarb makes for the Stauffer apartment.

Konrad and his wife Ingeborg are liberal Germans. Konrad is a mediocre but successful novelist. The Stauffers are wealthy, conscience-stricken intellectuals in the Thomas Mann mould. They are sympathetic to the plight of the Jews and welcome Himmelfarb into their apartment though they know him only slightly. He steps into a benign world of central heating, old cardigans, good cognac, and liqueur chocolates.

The professor and his hosts spend the evening talking about Schönberg, Paul Klee and Brecht. Finally Himmelfarb gets up to leave.

'I must go,' he announced...

'I must go to my wife...'

'Your wife?' Frau Stauffer's breath was drawn in sharp, she could have been recoiling from a blow.

A dreadful truth has announced itself.

'Finally, fatefully, all knew.'

Everyone in the room realizes something horrible.

In that moment, everyone understands that God himself has contracted into the first chaos.

'I did not realize that your wife,' Stauffer kept repeating.

Himmelfarb then admits he may have been guilty of something he can never atone for. His hosts reply that no, no, *they* are the guilty ones. Apologies gush forth from their mouths—as if the high crimes of their countrymen could be apologized for.

From the moment Himmelfarb mentions his wife, the Stauffers understand their fatal misunderstanding.

'But this is most, most horrible,' Stauffer was almost shouting.

'We understood in the beginning, you had come here to take refuge.'

That was true, but it was not *the truth*.

Himmelfarb had sought refuge that evening. The Stauffers, without saying anything, gave him sanctuary.

His hosts are good Germans. They are embarrassed by what is happening around them. They are aware that a demonic tide has swept across Germany that night. Their friends warned them.

'[W]e were told... by telephone just as you arrived... they were destroying the property of the Jews.'

It is *Kristallnacht*, the Night of Broken Glass, the night in 1938 when the Nazis ransack Jewish homes and synagogues, and deport 30,000 Jews to concentration camps.

God has contracted into the first chaos.

The Stauffers already know this when Himmelfarb knocks at their door. So in his peculiar way does Himmelfarb. The Stauffers were told it. Himmelfarb intuited it. The distinction is important.

Himmelfarb is a mystic, a Kabbalah mystic—a mystic of the intellect. When he is a young professor working in the provinces, he realizes who, or what, he is. He realizes that he has a mystical frame of mind. He comes across some Kabbalah texts in a bookshop, and buys them. In an ecstatic moment of self-recognition, he sees who or what he has always been, and what it is that others already have seen in him.

Throughout his life, he has encountered various individuals—simple folk, mystics of everyday life—who have intuited what Himmelfarb only belatedly begins to realize. His wife, Reha, is among the unlettered mystics who see something exceptional in

Himmelfarb—something beneath the skin of the uninteresting distinguished professor that he inhabits. Their insight may be untutored, but it is no less powerful for that.

It is his wife who sends Himmelfarb to the bookshop where he finds some strange books from Prague. When he returns home with the mystic books, he won't admit to them. Reha just smiles. She knows tacitly. She knows, but not in words. She has always known.

She also knows her fate, we assume.

She disappears on *Kristallnacht*, carted off to her death. She cannot be surprised by this. Mystical types are not fools. Their intuition, even when it is inarticulate, serves them well. More than most, they know what is coming. In spite of this, Himmelfarb and Reha choose not to depart Germany for Palestine or the United States.

During this whole period of unreason, Mordecai Himmelfarb's mind no more than fumbled after a rational means of escape.

Quietly, slyly, Mordecai and Reha resist the political plague that is descending on Central Europe. They resist just by standing still. They resist by doing nothing in particular and saying nothing special. They resist simply by being themselves—letting their academic colleagues, the guild-class without backbone, sack them; letting the acquaintances of a life time turn their backs on them.

'The Herr Oberst is not at home,' he said at last.

Face, door, words—all flickering slightly.

'And is not allowed to receive Jews. On any account.'

Mordecai and Reha defy this rough treatment with patient, force-absorbing equanimity.

Equanimity is the ability to stand still while the world is sinking into chaos, and all those around are losing their heads.

This is what Himmelfarb has to learn about himself. He has to teach himself who or what he is—a mystic type. He will find out about himself that he has a remarkable capacity for discipline, endurance, and focus. This is not a physical capacity, but a mental one. Steadiness of mind supports steadiness in action.

'When the time comes,' her dark lips began to blurt, 'you will be able to bear it. Because your eyes can see further.'

Rhea is prescient. She knows what will happen. She knows that only her husband will survive, because she knows that he knows how an unbearable burden can be borne.

'But what can we others hold in our minds to make the end bearable?'

Mordecai answers his wife as only a mystic can answer.

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

With that gesture, he indicates that the moral virtue of equanimity and the intellectual discipline of concentration are marks of something deeper. What that is, is difficult to describe, because it lies beyond language. Mordecai experiences it as the union of self and thing. A philosopher would call this the union of subject and object. No matter how elusive it is, the pull toward such oneness or wholeness is compelling. Human beings ordinarily experience the world as a series of splinters. Such fragmentation is nonetheless unsatisfying. Human beings have metaphysical needs. They need the splinters of existence to fit together—to 'make sense'. When they don't or can't, human beings come to grief. They fall into feelings of despair and angst. The function of the absolute spirit of culture is to forestall this deep dark plunge. Culture works on the vivisected things of life. It integrates them, just like Mordecai Himmelfarb's ineffable union of subject and object.

The identity of things that results is simultaneously a plurality of things. It is a non-identical identity of things. The mystic attitude is at ease with this. It readily grasps the identity of things that exist in opposition to each other. This attitude, through-and-through, is paradoxical. For the mystic, everything that is separated is fused. Everything double is one, everything dual is singular—at least potentially. Ordinarily human beings distinguish time and eternity, young and old, subject and object, and so on. In extraordinary moments, though, these distinctions crumble. The motion of time then suddenly evokes the stillness of eternity, the old is made new again, and the subject is transformed into a being that fashions things and creates objects. Often in life, we have many choices in front of us and yet no option. Likewise, the best of us repeatedly make the worst kinds of decisions. In each case, *being* is both identical to and yet different from what *is*.

Paradoxes, metaphors, and parables illuminate something of this strange ontological condition. All the same language is an uneasy medium in which to express

the union of opposites. It tends to resist the ironic self-contradictory identity of the world. So the mystic responds by turning words into things.

Himmelfarb, the professor of English literature, simply gestures to the table.

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

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

'God will,' he answered. 'God is in this table.'

The subject is the object. The self fuses with the thing.

...sometimes he would become possessed by a rigid coldness of mind, his soul absorbed into the entity of his own upright leather chair, his knuckles carved out of oak.

This—Himmelfarb's mystic-ecstatic vision, the first that he experiences on his long, winding route to self-understanding—suggests no trace of commandment or commanding authority in the slightest.

The only voice in the universe of the mystic is the sound of silence. The only book is the table.

This, Himmelfarb realizes, applies even to the Letters and Names that he discovered in the esoteric books.

But he did, at last, unknown, it was to be hoped, to his rational self, begin fitfully to combine and permute the Letters, even contemplate the Names.

It was, however, the most cerebral approach—when spiritually he longed for an ascent into an ecstasy so cool and green that his own desert would drink the heavenly moisture.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein worked out much the same. The mystic has to throw away the ladder of language having climbed up it.³

...by now, Himmelfarb had taken the path of inwardness. He could not resist silence, and became morose on evenings when he was prevented from retreating early to his room. Reha would continue to sew, or mend. Her expression did not protest. She would smile a gentle approval—but of what, it was never made clear.

Because of the reverence of silence, the mystic intellectual happily accepts the kaleidoscope of human discourse. The assumption is that no discourse ever touches the

³ Wittgenstein (1974), Proposition 7.

Absolute. Consequently no discourse has an imperative claim on human beings. Thus there is no plausible reason for one reason to subjugate another. This is not because all reasons are equally worthwhile but because each is equally liable to murder and mayhem. Reason often turns irrational. It does this when it loses sight of its own limits. The mystic observes that each thing contains within itself its contrary. Its contrary is its limit. Everything in human experience in some measure is contradictory, yet reason demands consistency. The consistency of reason readily turns into obsession. Obsessive reason overturns the limit of reason and wages war on the contradictory nature of experience. Thus reason becomes un-reasonable causing the mystic to shrug off reason in order to reclaim reason from reason's own unreasonableness.

In all his dealings with his colleagues of the faculty, in the lectures to his students, in the articles he published and the books he wrote, Professor Himmelfarb was of straightforward character, of thorough, sometimes niggling intellect, and often epigrammatic wit. Nobody watching him tramp slowly, monotonously over the fallen leaves of the Stadtwald, or along the well-kept pavements of the town, would have suspected him of morbid tendencies and reprehensible ambitions. For he was wracked by his persistent longing to exceed the bounds of reason: to gather up the sparks, visible intermittently inside the thick shells of human faces; to break through to the sparks of light imprisoned in the forms of wood and stone.

Himmelfarb is still the distinguished professor, still at work on yet another plodding futile treatise, this one titled inanely *The Compatibility of the Spirit: a Study in the Affinities of Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century English and German Literatures*. Yet it is noticeable how, bit-by-bit, in his secret life, he grows distant from discourses of all kinds, whether it is his own or the esoteric writings of the Hebrew mystics who had set him on his quest in the first place.

'Mordecai,' she asked, 'what became of the old books?'

'Books?'

He could have been contemptuous, as he stared back at his wife through the thick glasses of his spectacles.

'The Judaica.'

She sounded unnaturally jovial. Like some woman who, for secret reasons, was trying to insinuate herself into her husband's mind by matching his masculinity.

'You don't always express yourself, Rehalein.'

Because, by now, he was annoyed. He did not wish to answer questions.

'You know what I mean,' Reha Himmelfarb replied. 'The old Kabbalistic volumes and manuscripts in Hebrew, which you found at Rutkowitz's.'

Professor Himmelfarb put aside the book he had been reading. He was cruelly interrupted.

'I left them at Bienenstadt,' he answered. 'I had no further use for them.'

'Such valuable books!'

'They had no particular value. They were, at most, intellectual curiosities.'

Books, books of all kinds, books that are the mark of his profession, recede into the distance. The book, the sign of reason, its marker and token, has no particular value any more. The fetish of the professor is being cast aside.

Himmelfarb is gradually coming to understand that human wholeness is a function not of reason but of rhyme.

Some books possess rhymes. Some books are possessed by rhymes. Some writings rhyme, and some rhymes lend writings their luminous skeletal structure.

Rhyme is the like the rhythm of walking. It gives order and structure and elemental beauty to creation.

It is the silent music of writing.

The philosopher William James once observed that music—not conceptual speech—is the element through which we are spoken to by mystical truth.⁴

'Oh words, words!' she cried, brushing them off with her freckled hands. 'I do not understand what they mean.'

Meaning comes not from the words, but from their rhythmical rhyming structures. Beat, rhythm, meter, accent, harmony, and melody—all of these, rather than conceptual distinctions and discursive vivisections, are the primary media of mystical communication. It is they that summon up the non-discursive wholeness that draws the splintered ragged parts of human experience. Individuals and institutions analyze,

⁴ James (1982), 420-421.

differentiate, and separate. The grace note of non-discursive truth, the work of the table, enables the fragmented things of the world to hang together and make sense. This oneness though is not simple singularity. The mystic resists not only analytic vivisection but also totalitarian autocracy. The banality of the former and the viciousness of the second are all-consuming. Both are given short shrift by the paradoxical wit of the mystic type who is usually the first to see through their respective illusions. Mystic wit and ironic intuition are protections against the cruel conceits of reason and the nasty infallibility of unreason unchained.

When the time comes...

Intuition's unspoken sense of wholeness is indispensable. Without it, the world remains an incomprehensible heap of splinters. Without it also there is no standpoint from which to deny the despotic desiccation of analytic reason and the merciless malignancy of tyranny. Tyrant and vivisectionist both claim to know the whole. They are all-seeing, one on a large scale, the other on a micro scale. Both claim to institute perfection. Rigor, discipline, exactitude, and correction—all perfect us, apparently. Mystic wholeness, in contrast, is an ironic compendium of partiality, blindness, inadequacy, failure, and imperfection.

Imperfection in himself had enabled him to recognize the fragmentary nature of things, but at the same time restrained him from undertaking the immense labor of reconstruction. So this imperfect man had remained necessarily tentative. He was forever peering into the bushes, or windows, or the holes of eyes, or, with his stick, testing the thickness of a stone, as if in search of further evidence, when he should have been gathering up the infinitesimal kernel of sparks, which he already knew to exist, and planting them again in the bosom of divine fire, from which they had been let fall in the beginning.

This is what Himmelfarb must slowly learn about himself. He must learn that he has this ability to intuit a whole that is not perfect—a whole whose perfection contains imperfection.

Because he is an intellectual, he must learn this thing about himself explicitly—even when others know it about themselves tacitly. His learning begins on his wedding

day, when he meets again one of the untutored mystics who keep crossing his path—the crippled dyer from Holunderthal.

Himmelfarb does not like the dyer. The old man is a very annoying character. He talks gibberish. ‘...*you are all riddles—secrets!*’ Himmelfarb complains, and the pair sink into an argument.

‘There is no secret,’ the dyer appeared to be saying or shouting back. ‘Equanimity is no secret. Solitariness is no secret. True solitariness is only possible where equanimity exists. An unquiet spirit can introduce distraction into the best-prepared mind.

‘But this is immoral!’ Mordecai protested, shouting. ‘And on such an occasion! It is a denial of community. And man is not a hermit.’

‘Depending on the man, he is a light that will reflect out over the community—all the brighter from a bare room.’

Konrad and Ingeborg Stauffer would have agreed with the young betrothed Himmelfarb. Society and community trump the individual. But what then happens when society turns rancid and community becomes totalitarian? What happens when a society devours its own in radically evil ways?

Konrad and Ingeborg are liberals—intellectual activist types. As their society turns wolverine, they are impelled to do something. They must act. So they insist on hiding Himmelfarb. They take him to their country house at Herrenwaldau. In the meantime Konrad joins a secret armed resistance group. Immediately we hear that, we know Konrad is doomed—and his wife also. At first, when Himmelfarb arrives at the country mansion with his hosts, he has free reign of the grand house. But as the Nazi stranglehold on Germany increases, he becomes a prisoner in his own room. We know that his refuge is a charade, and that he cannot escape a worse fate. Finally the day of reckoning comes. Ingeborg Stauffer is arrested by the Nazis, and Himmelfarb must leave his room.

White’s story is a political parable. It portrays, in a savage comic mode, the inability of the conventional liberal to fight the deadly political sickness that engulfs Germany.

Konrad Stauffer is a model of liberal failure. He is a popular novelist but a bad one. White's mockery of this is merciless.

Konrad Stauffer had succeeded in pleasing a cautious public—it was said, even the Regierung—because he dared and shocked.

Konrad admits his inadequacy to Himmelfarb.

'Sometimes I have to tell myself that success, even of the acceptable, the almost honest kind, was never unaccompanied. Inevitably, it trailed a certain shadow of shame.'

His wife is blunter still.

'Oh, I know that Konrad, in spite of his success, was an insubstantial man. We both accepted it. He had very few illusions. "My books will survive," he used to say, "just about as long as I."'

Stauffer hopes to turn his artistic failure into moral success. But he can't manage that either. He joins a secret anti-Nazi organization. Yet that gesture, sincere as it is, is as useless as his novels. The internal resistance to Hitler is too little and too late.

Konrad's personal failure is mirrored in the failure of liberal Germany.

'Between Bach and Hitler,' Konrad said, 'something went very wrong with Germany. We must go back to Bach, side-stepping the twin bogs of Wagner and Nietzsche, with an eye for Weimar, and the Hansa towns, listening to the poets.'

Still, in a reflective moment, he wonders about success—is success really a kind of failure? White gently mocks him, having him talk like a mystic.

'I wonder whether the pure aren't those who have tried but not succeeded? Do you think, Himmelfarb, atonement is possible only where there has been failure?'

Himmelfarb replies with wry skepticism.

'In that case many of us are saved who never suspected it!'

Paradox in Konrad's mouth sounds lame.

Himmelfarb's skepticism is warranted. Konrad is hopelessly right and wrong. Flaws do entail perfection—for in reality only a flawed character is capable of a perfect act.⁵ Yet such a paradox condemns—through-and-through—the enlightenment of liberal Germany, which supposed the perfectibility of humankind. Liberal utopias of the

⁵ Oskar Schindler is a good example of this paradox in play.

nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries opened the door to madness. The ideal of perfectibility only encouraged the basest of humanity to do its worst.

What then of Hansa? The Pre-Socratics conceived the archaic Greek polis as a union of opposites. At a pinch Hansa may have echoed something of that same spirit, but the German free cities proved abject political failures. They could withstand neither the rise of the nation state nor the absolute state. Hellenic philosophies, channeled by Romanticism, proved no better. The Nazis violated with impunity all of the symbolic niceties of Himmelfarb's villa ...*the façade, in the Greco-German style, with stucco pediment and caryatids*... just as Martin Heidegger appropriated the Pre-Socratics for the cause of nihilism, the 'Terror before the Nothing'.⁶

As for J.S. Bach—polyphony *is* a kind of absolute self-contradiction in music. It congeals multiple truths into one and divides an indivisible form into manifold lines. It comes very close to a kind of musical paradox. Thus we can hear in it something of what the mystic sees in the world. It is like a *moment become eternity* or *the grass that grows again after fire* or *a plain-song of bees that fell in solid drops of gold* or *an ecstasy so cool and green that his own desert would drink the heavenly moisture*.

Still, Bach's music proved no defense against barbarism, either.

Himmelfarb could easily have turned out like Konrad. White is scathing of the young Himmelfarb, who is a classic comic figure—the fatuous professor in full flight. White's scorn is unrelenting. Himmelfarb gets his PhD at Oxford and is well on the way to becoming a professorial bore. With surgical accuracy, White parodies the kind of academic cant that manages to inflate minor ability into major achievement.

It was not generally known in Bienenstadt that Doctor Himmelfarb himself had written and published an admirable and scholarly little monograph on the novels of John Oliver Hobbes. Although the Frau Doktor had made a point of mentioning the fact casually to the ladies of her circle, the information was not absorbed. Why should it have been? The book would remain a scholar's major achievement or, at most, an object of interest to some research student exploring the by-ways of literature. However, his large-scale work English Novelists of the Nineteenth-Century in Relation to German Literature and Life, also written during the quiet years at Bienenstadt, was a rather different matter.

⁶ See Heidegger's winter 1941 lectures in *Basic Concepts* (1993) and Murphy (2008).

Himmelfarb's English Novelists attracted a wider academic, not to say public, attention, and it was taken for granted that he would soon be accepted as a general authority.

This is almost perfect academic-speak. What makes it grotesquely comic is the mismatch between its pretension to authority and its impotency and irrelevance when faced with political monstrosity and social evil. It simply has nothing, not one single thing, to offer to explain—let alone defy—what is happening in the world. A title like *English Novelists of the Nineteenth-Century in Relation to German Literature and Life* announces its own pointlessness. It is an authority that lacks authority.

In Nazi Germany, all of the words of liberal intellectuals, and all of the protestations of famous novelists and professors, were without consequence. Only one thing would make a difference.

In his last conversation with Himmelfarb, before Konrad disappears never to return, *'Stauffer announced that the British had declared war on Germany.'* Soon after, the bombs begin dropping. So starts a holocaust that will end the holocaust of the Jews. Many civilians, including many innocents, will die in this conflagration.

Does this make beasts of us, wondered Churchill, the author of the fire-storm? Perhaps it does. But if it is does it is because only a bestial fire in the end will rid the world of the diabolical fire. Himmelfarb, the fire mystic, intuits this. He has an intuition of a burning chariot, the sign of the divine fire. He grasps that—somehow—his life is interwoven with this image. During their spell in the provinces, when Himmelfarb is discovering his mystical character, Reha spots a drawing on her husband's desk.

'What is that Mordecai? I did not know you could draw.'

'I was scribbling,' he said. 'This, it appears, is the Chariot.'

'Ah,' she exclaimed softly...

We begin to understand more clearly the significance of this as Himmelfarb's time at Herrenwaldau is coming to a close. The British bomb the district. Near-by Holunderthal, where Himmelfarb was born, has factories. It is a natural target for aerial attack. Stray munitions hit the Herrenwaldau property and German soldiers arrive to clear away unexploded ordinance. They take up residence in the grand house. Ingeborg lies to Himmelfarb. The soldiers will go soon. But we know that they won't. They are there to stay. The refuge is over. Soon Ingeborg will be arrested, and Himmelfarb cannot avoid

being discovered. In a beautiful comic scene, he quietly packs his bag and walks out of the house, nodding to the soldier on guard who graciously nods back to him.

Himmelfarb wants to see where he grew up one more time. So he trudges the arduous miles back to Holunderthal. As he does, a burning chariot appears, as in a mystical vision. The chariot of fire, the bombing overhead, shields him. He will get to complete his perilous journey. He will see his childhood town one more time.

The winter evening was already drawing in as he approached the darker masses of the town, which had begun already to receive its nightly visitation. The knots and loops, the little exquisite puffs of white hung on the deepening distances of the sky, all the way to its orange rim. The riot of the fireworks was on. Ordinarily solid, black buildings were shown to have other, more transcendental qualities, in that they would open up disclosing fountains of hidden fire. Much was inverted, that hitherto had been accepted as sound and immutable. Two silver fish were flaming downward, out of their cobalt sea, into the land.

As Himmelfarb entered the town, he concluded the industrial suburb of Scheidnig was the target for the night. There the panache was gayest, the involvement deepest, although occasionally a bomb would fall wide and casual into the deathly streets through which he walked. There was a sighing of old bricks subsiding, the sound of stone coughing up its guts, and once he himself was flung onto the ground, in what could have been a splitting open of the earth, if the pavement had not remained, and the hollow clatter of his suitcase spoilt the effects of doom.

As he walked deeper into the town, a wind got up, tossing the flaps of his coat, twitching at the brim of his hat. In the streets, the vagaries of human behavior had almost been entirely replaced by an apparent organization of mechanical means, engines roared, bells rang, flak reacted, the hard confetti of shrapnel never ceased to fall, innocent and invisible.

Through which the Jew walked.

It did not occur to him to feel afraid. His mechanism could not have been responding to control. Once, certainly, compassion flooded his metal limbs, and he stooped to close the eyes of a man who had been rejected by his grave of rubble.

The wheels were arriving. Of ambulance? Or fire-engine? The Jew walked on, by supernatural contrivance. For now the wheels were grazing the black shell of the town. The horses were neighing and screaming. As they dared the acid of the green sky. The horses extended their webbing necks, and their nostrils glinted brass in the fiery light. While the amazed Jew walked unharmed beneath the chariot wheels.

I suppose you might call this an epiphany. It certainly is a very beautiful passage of writing. But its beauty only begs the question of how a mystical epiphany can be described in an act of writing. The Sufi mystic poet Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273) put it well: the exposition or explanation of the world is limited, so whatever the tongue may elucidate, speechless action is always clearer. In a similar vein, Wittgenstein advised us to throw away the ladder of language when we reach what is most important in life.

The pre-eminent mystic state is silence. And yet mystics write and say and sing—and can do so exquisitely. So is the mystic act of communication, then, simply the inadequate communication of what cannot be communicated? Is it—always and already—one decisive step removed from the wordless silent Absolute? Is it then an inherently futile, even a ridiculous effort—an attempt of the communicant to say the unsayable and write the unwritable?

Perhaps it is—yet we cannot ignore the immense beauty of White's description of Himmelfarb's epiphany. White recounts the most terrible of human experiences in the most striking of terms. This is the reply of the great writer to the bad novelist. **This is how it is done!** A third-rate writer like Konrad will lay second-rate learning on thick. He will tell us how the Greek God Helios rode a chariot, and how the Roman Sun God, Sol Invictus, did exactly the same thing. He will be unable to resist a learned reference to the Old Testament prophet Elijah ascending to heaven in a chariot of fire—or to the early Christian writers who used the sun as a symbol of righteousness, or to the Masonic light of the modern Enlightenment. How great is the temptation to walk in the shoes of the prophets: *And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.* But White resists this. So when he invokes the chariot symbol, he does so with delicacy.

More importantly, White does not confuse a linguistic symbol with the act of mystic communication. So it is not a course of semi-learned symbols that lift up White's readers 'into the mystic'. Rather it is his capacity to use language to escape language. He takes us into the wordless mystic realm of rhythm and rhyme—into a mythic time out of mind. We ascend to an enigmatic melodious space. This is a time and space beyond the keen of morals and messages, rules and rituals. This is the mystic Absolute.

During his fated excursion back to Holunderthal, this is what Himmelfarb experiences. He moves through a cinematic dreamscape of bomber chariots and fiery explosions. It is terrible and thunderous. At the same time, it is silent and beautiful. The beautiful mystic silence—the silence that resists the excruciating thunderous terror of a world torn apart by radical evil—is conveyed in a riveting manner by the writer's mastery of a gorgeous rhythmic-musical poetics.

(a) *The **riot** of the **fireworks** was on...*

(b) *...disclosing **fountains** of **hidden fire***

(c) *Two **silver fish** were **flaming** downward...*

(d) *... a **sig**hing of **old bricks** **subsiding**, the **sound** of **stone** **coughing** up its **guts**,*

Forget the clichés about Elijah. Forget the earnest allusions to the Old Testament. Forget the ponderous cleverness of 'we, scholars' and bad novelists.

Himmelfarb had slowly figured it out what a lot of old clap trap the learned clichés were. He prepared himself to survive hell. He read obscure books. But not in order to write a treatise on them. How lame that would have been. He read in order to learn a lesson from those books about the incantatory-poetic nature of creation and its alliterative-rhyming-rhythmical capacity to resist destruction.

*It did not occur to him to **feel** **afraid**.*

What gets Himmelfarb through the trance-like dreamscape of the sacred fire is not just the vehicle of burning embers, with its wheels on fire. It is also the sonorous bell-jar of resonant rhyming chiming qualities, the collected echoes of the explosion of the original divine fire, the big bang, from which the sparks of creation first fell.

*The **wheels** were **arriving**...*

*The **horses** were **neighing** and **screaming**...*

The poetic sounds of silence of mystical fiery creation are not a Hallelujah chorus. There is no triumphal entry into the city, all horns blazing. Himmelfarb makes it back to Holunderthal, under the shelter of the sacred fire. But only to find that his childhood places are all in ruins. His journey ends in comic futility. So he turns himself into the local police. The further comedy of when he then appears at the police station is brilliant. He declares that he is a Jew—ready to be rounded up the Nazi state. The reader expects Nazi zealotry. Instead all we get is an irritable cop:⁷

'Well?' he asked though. 'What do you want?'

'I am a Jew,' Himmelfarb announced.

Offering the paper.

'A Jew, eh?'

But the policeman was too distracted by his inability to lay his hand on some other document.

'Well,' he grumbled, 'you will have to wait. A Jew!' he complained. 'At this time of night. And on my own!'

In the bored fullness of paperwork time, the state eventually makes Himmelfarb its prisoner. He is corralled with other Jews, and put on a train to be sent to a concentration camp. This is a train of illusions. Many of the prisoners try and convince themselves that they are not being sent to a death camp. The main evidence for this is that they have not been put into cattle carts but rather are riding in regular compartments, even if the toilets have no running water. They are being sent to Palestine, they assure themselves.

It was the change in policy, insisted the Lady from Czernowitz, who had returned from the waterless w.c.

She had spoken to a rabbi, of Magdeburg, and been convinced. The train-load of Jews was the first to be carried into Eastern Europe. In future, all Central European Jews would be assisted to reach Bucharest, to make their connexions for Istanbul, where they would embark for Palestine. Neutral powers had interceded.

⁷ Simone Weil (*Notebook IV*, 2004) observed: 'Imaginary evil is romantic, fanciful, varied; real evil is dreary, monotonous, barren, and boring. Imaginary good is boring; real good is always new, fresh, marvelous intoxicating...' Patrick White was an attentive reader of Weil's work.

Here is the singular absurd delusion of European liberalism. *Neutral powers had interceded.* As if radically-evil regimes give the slightest toss as to what neutral powers or international opinion or any of the other talismans of liberal hope might think.

A handful of the Jews in transit, though, are more realistic. They know exactly why they are on a train and not in a cattle pen. The intuitive ones grasp the significance of the waterless water closet—the slight oddity that betrays a universe of horrors.

‘The train—don’t you see?—was all they had. The trucks were bombed. And so many Jews on their hands. There was no alternative.’

A grotesque comic ceremony welcomes the prisoners on the train to the camp at Friedensdorf. Music pumped through loud speakers announces their arrival. The popular culture of Eastern Europe—the waltzes and folk dances—mock the fate of the Jews by perpetuating for a little while longer the cruel illusion of their expatriation.

See, some of the passengers were prepared to believe, and amongst them the Lady from Czernowitz, this was a kind of transit camp, for those who were taking part in the organized migration to the Land.

It is not so. But even the most skeptical reader might wish it were so.

The Jews on the train will be separated into two groups, men and women, undressed, gassed, and buried in pits. This is a holocaust without fire.

One of the few to survive will be Himmelfarb.

He survives because he is picked out by the guards to be a trustee. He is chosen to help administer the thanatocracy. He will become one of the slaves whose job it is to drag the dead bodies into the burial pits. He is picked out because he is exceptional. He becomes one of the morbidly slavish because he is one of the elect of the spirit. He holds himself differently.

It seemed quite capricious that the guard should have picked on this elderly man, although there might have been an official reason for doing so. Certainly, Himmelfarb was still impressive. In height and breadth he was the guard’s equal, but his eyes entered deeper than those of his superior, whose shallow blue did not flicker for an instant. It could have been, then, that the physically luxuriant youth was deliberately wooing into his secret depths what he sensed to be a superior spirit. Or he could, simply, have been directed without knowing.

Strange isn't it? The slaves chosen by the guards are the ones who are not the most craven but the least craven of souls. It is not that the chosen ones are fearless. Rather they are not fearful in the way that the poor, doomed Lady from Czernowitz is afraid. Himmelfarb does not shriek and lunge in fear when all illusion has finally been stripped away. When the Lady's head is shaved and her body is naked, and she is being ushered to her death, she recoils frantically against her terrible fate. Himmelfarb is no super-man. He faints when he sees what happens to the Lady of Czernowitz. But his oblivion is the sleep of the elect. The superior spirit has learnt to control fear and hope. This is the old lesson of the Stoics. The mystics understand it well. They won't protest against what will happen. What is the point? Desperate fearful cringing protest robs human beings of their last shred of dignity.

At Herrenwaldau, hiding quietly in the house of Ingeborg Stauffer, Himmelfarb *had not yet arrived at that state of equanimity, of solitariness, of disinterest, from which it had been suggested by the dyer, he might illuminate the vaster darkness.* But that moment has now arrived. Himmelfarb can now fulfill his own peculiar destiny. The superior spirits, the disinterested slaves, who act not out of hope or fear and who are obedient in their duties, turn on their masters, the guards, and create a great conflagration. The camp will burn, and in the middle of this holocaust, Himmelfarb will escape.

Fire, this time.

The well-planned establishment which he had known as Friedensdorf was enclosed in a blood-red blur, or aura, at the centre of which he lay, like a chrysalis, swathed in some mysterious, supernatural cocoon. Other forms, though not distinguishably human, moved on transcendental errands within the same shape, no longer that intense crimson, but expanding to a loose orange. Of blue edges.

The colors of fire are vivid and memorable, like the night-time airplane bombing that Himmelfarb experienced in Holunderthal—but also like a Renaissance painting, or the fiery embers of an exquisite cigar, or the kernel of sparks that Himmelfarb long ago had wanted to collect up and return to the divine fire.

[Himmelfarb] was reminded suddenly and vividly of the long, blue-grey, tranquil ash of an expensive cigar he had smoked somewhere. Of stubbing out a cigar by an

orange light from a little lantern of oriental design. Then, of course, he remembered his friend Konrad Stauffer.

As Himmelfarb scrabbles through the smoke, he realizes that he has lost his eye-glasses. Yet in his blindness, he sees much better with his hands. He gropes and touches the ground. He is desperate to find his glasses, but instead finds a way out through a tear in the barbed wire. After three days of wanderings, he is rescued by local peasants who tell him what has transpired.

Those of the prisoners kept alive by the Germans, to empty the gas chambers of corpses, and provide labour for the camp, had decided to mutiny, the Pole related. Weeks had been spent collecting and hiding arms and ammunition, and it was only after the arrival of the last train-load of Jews that the conspirators felt themselves strong enough to act. Then the slaves rose, killed the commandant and a number of the guards, exploded a fuel dump, set fire to part of the establishment, cut the wire, and were at that moment on their way to join the Resistance.

The political parable is drawn with a razor. Only the slaves who are superior spirits survive—or at least some of them, including Himmelfarb.

‘And all those other Jews?’ Himmelfarb ventured to ask.

The Pole believed most of them had died, some already of gas fumes, the remainder by the fire which had destroyed Freidensdorf.

He laughed.

‘You are the lucky one!’ he said.

And Himmelfarb, who had re-examined so often the sequence of his escape, could not bring himself to explain how it had been a miracle.

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