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Displaying the Monster: Patrick White, Sexuality, Celebrity

Guy Davidson

FOR all his reputation as a singular figure, Patrick White's relation to fame exhibits contradictions or tensions that are, up to a point, entirely characteristic of the Anglophone literary modernism of which he was a belated proponent. White frequently professed to despise fame, pronouncing for instance that 'adulation is the most insidious form of death the world can inflict on artists' (qtd in Marr, *Life* 346). For many years he was inclined to destroy letters that would furnish biographical materials (and to urge his correspondents to do the same), motivated no doubt by the modernist credo famously formulated by one of his heroes, D.H. Lawrence, to 'trust the tale and not the teller'. On the other hand, White craved acclaim and affirmation – indeed, saw these as his due – and late in his career gave his imprimatur to David Marr's biography, thereafter abandoning his policy of urging the destruction of his letters (Marr, 'White and His Letters' 623–24). But while White's oscillation between repudiating literary celebrity and desiring recognition was typical of modernist writers, this complicated relation to fame was, in his case, made still more complicated by his homosexuality. Again, of course, this issue is hardly White's alone: indeed, the anxieties and potentials associated with the cloaking and disclosure of queer sexuality may be observed in particularly charged form in the careers of many of the leading lights of modernism. Where White's career differs from those of other queer modernist writers, such as W.H. Auden, is in his public 'confession' of his sexual orientation – first implicitly in the novel *The Twyborn Affair* (1979), then overtly in the memoir *Flaws in the Glass* (1981).

White's professions of his sexuality can be seen as attesting to the dual urge intertwined, if sometimes conflicting, impulses to confess aspects of one's private life, and to control one's public image, that structure the contemporary mode of literary celebrity. His professions were also associated with a shift in the mode of his writing from modernism to postmodernism. It is the interconnections between aesthetic mode, sexual disclosure, and literary celebrity in White's work and career that I am interested in tracing in this essay. While works associated with his uncloseting – including that under-discussed coda to his literary career

Memoirs of Many in One (1986) as well as *The Twyborn Affair* and *Flaws in the Glass* – are inevitably key works for this enquiry, writings from White's closeted period also provide essential evidence. From early on in his career, White appears to have been convinced of a close link between – indeed, the virtual equation of – sexuality and literary artistry. White's autobiographical writings, his correspondence, and his fiction elaborate upon this idea, moving between notions of identity as performance and identity as essence. In so doing, his work indicates his uneasy relations to his homosexuality and his celebrity status, both of which he simultaneously embraced and disavowed.

The contradictory relation of modernist writers to celebrity is described by Loren Glass as a 'contrast between their stated theories of self-effacement and their actual practice and literary-historical destiny of self-aggrandizement and even shameless self-promotion' – exemplified, for instance, in the discrepancy between T.S. Eliot's declarations on the 'impersonality' of poetry and his transformation into a media icon, culminating in his appearance on the cover of *Time* (Glass 5). The careers of many modernist writers evince the dialectical relation between modernism and mass culture: while modernism characteristically opposed itself to mass culture, in actuality the latter was an essential shaping force upon modernist production (Frow 16–17; Jameson 133–35). In his study of mostly male modernist American celebrity authors, Glass notes that in the first half of the twentieth century

the volatile passage from the restricted elite audience of urban bohemia and 'little magazines' to the mass audience of the U.S. middlebrow became a signature career arc. ... Along this arc, the model of the author whose work goes unrecognized by the mainstream collides with the model of the author as part of a corporate publisher's marketing strategy. (6)

These tensions are given a turn of the psychosexual screw for male authors by the way that the mass cultural arena, and key manifestations of it such as celebrity, are associated with femininity. Fear of mass culture becomes, in Andreas Huyssen's words, a 'fear of woman, a fear of nature out of control, a fear of the unconscious, of sexuality, of the loss of identity and stable ego boundaries' (qtd. in Glass 18). For the male American modernists studied by Glass, celebrity status

threaten[s] ... the 'stable ego boundaries' of the male author ... and the hypermasculine posturing of authors such as [Jack] London, [Ernest] Hemingway, and Norman Mailer can be understood as a symptomatic response to the feminized, and feminizing, literary marketplace. (18)

There are both convergences and differences between White and the writers discussed by Glass. Although White's reputation was in many ways the creation of forces in the international art-novel industry, his Australian nationality, residency, and literary concerns – along with the comparative difficulty of his prose style – meant that his impact on global cultural consciousness never matched that of

Hemingway or Mailer.¹ On the other hand, in Australia, White's celebrity – which began with the acclaim accorded *Voss* (1957) and was magnified by the 1973 Nobel Prize and his interventions on the public stage in the 1970s and 1980s over such issues as the dismissal of the Whitlam government, the nuclear arms race, and the Bicentennial – made him the approximate local equivalent of Mailer over roughly the same period in the U.S. Indeed, it is hard to conceive of an Australian author having the same kind of presence in public life today – something that indicates the applicability beyond the American context of Glass's argument that the 'cultural authority' of masculinist literary celebrity, which arose with mass culture and modernism, is greatly 'diminished in scale and scope' in the era after second-wave feminism and postmodernism (197).

The most significant point of difference between White and the authors studied by Glass, at least in terms of the concerns of this essay, is the authorial persona that White adopted and its sexual implications. While convincing cases have been made for White's own 'fear of woman', particularly his anxiety about the maternal body (e.g., *During* 46–50), this fear was not played out in his relations to the literary marketplace. As the recipient of firstly a private income from his father's estate and then, after his mother's death in 1963, his share of the family fortune, White was never obliged to live primarily on the income from his writings. He was therefore never forced to engage with the pressures and vagaries of mass literary taste in the way that, say, Hemingway and Mailer were, and the need to adopt a stridently masculine self-image as dozens of prominent twentieth-century male literary figures did as protection against the perceived femininity of the mass literary sphere never arose for White.² On the contrary, according to *Flaws in the Glass*, White assumed from early on that his sexuality entailed multiplicity of identity, a self-conception quite at odds with the attempts of many other twentieth-century male authors to forge a phallically contained masculinity. This was White's version of T.S. Eliot's 'depersonalization' – not the 'continual extinction of the personality' (Eliot 26), but its continual proliferation into a host of male and female novelistic characters.

White's understanding of his sexuality relied upon and modified a conception of homosexuality as gender inversion ('a woman's soul in a man's body') – a conception that, by the time in which White actually outed himself, was outmoded, but which he saw as artistically enabling.³ He writes in *Flaws*:

1 The role of American and British publishers and reviewers in the creation of White's reputation during the 1940s and 50s is discussed in detail in *During* 5–9. White's canonisation was affirmed by academic attention, firstly in Australia, in subsequent decades (*During* 10–12).

2 On this tendency within male literary modernism, see Glass; Huyssen 44–62; and Frank Lentricchia's argument, specifically referring to poetry, but applicable to modernist literature in general, that the 'sexual identity' of the male writer is 'the canonical modernist issue of poetic authority' due to 'the cultural powerlessness of poetry in a society that masculinized the economic while feminizing the literary' in his *Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens* (Brighton: Harvester, 1988) 168.

3 White's account of his authorial persona resonates with another famous dictum from the archives of literary modernism: Virginia Woolf's declaration in *A Room of One's Own* that the writer 'must be woman-manly or man-womanly' (1928. London: Granada, 1977) 99, though Woolf

I was chosen as it were, and soon accepted the fact of my homosexuality. In spite of looking convincingly male, I may have been too passive to resist, or else I recognised the freedom being conferred on me to range through every variation of the human mind, to play so many roles in so many contradictory envelopes of flesh. (35)

In being 'chosen' as homosexual, White was concomitantly chosen, in his view, as an artist. An unreconstructed subscriber to the romantic-modernist conception of the artist-as-genius, who is granted insights into the human condition and spiritual realities unavailable to others, White to some extent exemplifies the self-importance typical of many male twentieth-century writers. But in his case this position was always qualified by the positive emphasis placed upon a 'feminised' dispersal of identity. However, White's account of his authorial persona, apparently less phallocentric than that of many of his contemporaries, is qualified by his tendency to align female characters – especially mothers – with abjection.

White's refusal to acknowledge his sexuality publicly during the 1960s and 70s seems to have been connected to the sense he always retained that it was monstrous, pathological, or diseased – his statement regarding his early 'acceptance' of his homosexuality in *Flaws* notwithstanding. Indeed, even that statement of acceptance is compromised by his curious conjecture that he 'may have been too passive to resist' his sexuality – a phrase that implies that homosexual desire is something it might be a good idea to resist, while simultaneously casting submission to it in terms that invoke the stereotypical etiological narratives of ravishment or seduction. By the late 1970s, however, although White maintained his official stance of disdainful opposition to the gay rights movement, his views on coming out had changed, as had his views on the fictional representation of homosexuality. Previously, White had insisted that homosexuality was a clichéd theme 'which easily bec[ame] sentimental and/or hysterical' (*Letters* 413). With *The Twyborn Affair*, White executed an about-face, effectively coming out by making the experience of gay male sexuality central to one of his novels.

One of the more obvious explanations for White's change of heart is that it was a response to the climate of openness brought about to a large extent by gay and lesbian activism. White's new inclination to write about homosexuality was motivated by the desire for social acceptance, although this desire was always compromised by his ambivalence about his own orientation. His profession of his orientation, and the act of coming out more generally, can also be understood in the context of Michel Foucault's analysis of 'the unrelenting system of confession' that governs the modern regime of sexuality, in which sex – constituted as the most fundamental truth of our individual beings – is revealed through mandatory confessional acts. Famously arguing against 'the repressive hypothesis' – the hypothesis that sex is hidden and denied in modernity – Foucault proposes that the post-Enlightenment era is in fact characterised by an 'incitement to discourse' about sex and that 'the obligation to conceal [sex]

does not of course conceive of artistic androgyny in relation to dissident sexual identity. My thanks to an anonymous *ALS* reader for pointing out this parallel.

[is] but another aspect of the duty to admit to it' (61). Certainly, White seems to have felt himself to be impelled by a desire to reveal the 'truth' that dovetails with Foucault's account: in a letter to his publisher in 1981, White wrote, 'I hope you are not going to say that *Flaws in the Glass* will destroy my literary reputation. Any literary reputation that can't stand up to the truth isn't worth having' (*Letters* 542).

Of course the truth of White's sexuality had been an open secret for many years. White frequently acknowledged his longstanding, live-in relationship with his 'friend' Manoly Lascaris. And as far as his novels went, there were often intense, quasi-erotic relations between male characters (particularly in *Voss*) – though these were usually ignored or unperceived in the academic criticism of the 1960s and 1970s that helped consolidate White's reputation. The representation of these relations also operates according to the logic of the open secret, attesting to homosexual desire at the same time that it conceals it. As During argues with regard to White's novelistic practice more generally, White's pre-*Twyborn* novels operate according to a closeted aesthetic, in which transcendental meaning is supposedly located in the veiled figuration of the symbol (73–74). White's closetedness as well as his coming out (and closetedness and coming out in general), then, can both be seen as attesting to Foucault's account of the modern regime of sexuality. If 'the obligation to conceal [sex] [is] but another aspect of the duty to admit to it,' then closetedness and coming out are continuous with one another, rather than mutually exclusive states – which is not at all to argue that they are the same in their political effects.

Indeed, the actual saying out loud, as it were, of the 'h' word was experienced by White with apprehensiveness and excitement. In a letter, he wrote that he awaited the appearance of *Twyborn* with 'trepidation,' fearing that 'the long knives' would be out, but that 'it had to be written' (*Letters* 522). Although the critical reception of *Twyborn* and his other uncloseted books was in fact generally positive, White's breaking of the compact of the open secret was also met with the shock of betrayal in some quarters. Christina Stead, who had refused to believe that White was homosexual despite evidence to the contrary, dismissed *Flaws* with the comment that 'Writers should never write autobiographies' (Marr, *Life* 608). And David Tacey, an admirer of White's metaphysical novels, attacked the later works, and *Memoirs of Many in One* in particular, for their perceived connection to the 'ideology' of 'homosexuality and gayness' (13). As far as academic commentary goes, more typical than these dramatic and idiosyncratic responses has been what Andrew McCann calls 'the consensual refusal to engage with White as a gay writer' ('Decomposing' 10) – the maintenance, in other words, of the open secret. The closet, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has demonstrated, is a mobile and elastic space, and White's uncloseting has generally been met in the scholarly context with assiduous recloseting, or, as Sedgwick puts it, 'the frigid response given many acts of coming out: "That's fine, but why did you think I'd want to know about it?"' (*Epistemology* 72).

White's compulsion to tell the 'truth' by coming out was also related to his attempts to control his public image. Celebrity has been defined as 'the point at which the public figure engages interest at the level of private life.'⁴ White's self-identification as homosexual in published work can therefore be seen as a response to his status as a literary celebrity, despite his professed detestation of that status.⁵ If literary celebrity is characteristically experienced by the modernist writer as a loss of control over one's identity (Glass 1), White attempted to resist this phenomenon by manipulating the form his fame took. As he wrote to his French translator Jean Lambert, publishing *Flaws* would enable him 'to display my own monster and save others the trouble of doing it for me' (*Letters* 536). White frequently referred to himself as a monster, a self-representation that draws upon the term's connotations of freakishness, singularity, pathology, and evil, as well as – at a greater etymological distance – prodigiousness and marvellousness. But White's 'display' of his sexuality (among other aspects of his 'monstrous' being) in his memoir is most productively read not as the revelation of a pre-existing stable identity – as the popular discourse of coming out would have it, whereby a hidden identity is salvifically brought to light – but a kind of performance, in keeping with White's longstanding devotion to theatricality. The grammatical distance between White and '[his] own monster' in his comment to Lambert underlines the sense of the dividedness within the self that theatricality necessarily involves.

After coming out, White harnessed his sexual identity to his claimed ability to engage empathically with various kinds of otherness, including ethnic alterity. In a speech from 1984, for instance, he declared that '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 we have already seen, White also believed his homosexuality 'feminised' him, enabling him to create convincing female characters. While a connection between gayness and 'artistic tendencies' has long been part of popular wisdom, and while ideas about the particular insight that sexuality affords their work can be found in the utterances of other twentieth-century gay writers and artists, White is perhaps unique in the extent to which he merges the categories of homosexuality and artistry; doing this enabled White at once to claim a positive resonance for gay identity, and to disavow that identity. Along with his insistence in *Flaws* that he accepted his sexuality early on, we also find the following statement: 'I see myself not so much as a homosexual as a mind possessed by the spirit of man or woman according to the actual situations or the characters I become in my writing' (80–81). For White, the

4 This formulation is Clara Tuite's paraphrase of a point made by Graeme Turner in a public lecture, 'Why Bother with Celebrity? Understanding the Production and Consumption of the Public Figure', delivered in Melbourne in 2003: see her 'Tainted Love and Romantic Literary Celebrity', *ELH* 74.1 (2007) 60.

5 Indeed, when we talk of celebrities coming out, we mean of course their coming out into a mediatised public sphere, rather than the revelation of sexual orientation to the more circumscribed 'public' of friends, family, and workmates that defines coming out for the 'private individual'.

notion of homosexuality qua *sexuality* is displaced by the creative potential that supposedly accompanies it. If White's confession of his sexuality were in part triggered by the political ambience of the 1970s, his perception of the political value of homosexual identity remained limited (though at the same time that he changed his view on coming out he moderated his stance on the importance of rights-based activism somewhat, at least in his correspondence).⁶

White's claims that his sexuality enabled entry into the consciousness and experience of those who were of different ethnicity and gender from him must of course be treated cautiously; on the other hand, his conception of the self as a kind of theatre in which various identities are tried on and performed is, in some ways, arrestingly insightful. Referring to White's conception of his sexuality as inversion, During argues that he 'had internalised an older manner of homosexuality, though he ... never acted out the queenly role (or realised, either in life or in fiction, the deconstructive potential of "camp" parodic mimicry)' (71). It is true that White pretty much eschewed camp during his 'closeted' period. The high moral seriousness and the grand – if not grandiose – designs of the works before *The Twyborn Affair* that work to uncover a numinous reality underlying the phenomenal world could (it would appear) hardly be less camp. But with his coming out, White's approach changed, as During elsewhere acknowledges: 'His later works, notably *The Twyborn Affair*, begin to move away from the transcendentalism of modernist cultural criticism towards what is sometimes called a "postmodernism," no longer confident of its ability to appeal either to art or the spirit as grounds for secure values or sanctioned insights' (37).⁷

This shift to a postmodern aesthetic, which saw White concomitantly engage with the imaginative and critical possibilities of camp, was an outgrowth of the less spiritual disposition of White's work that followed the death in 1964 of the man who had probably done most to nurture his career, Ben Huebsch, an American partner at Viking and onetime publisher of White's early idols Joyce and Lawrence. Marr notes that White's high modernist novels – *The Living and the Dead* (1941), *The Aunt's Story* (1948), *The Tree of Man* (1955), *Voss* (1957), and *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) – 'were written, in some ways, for Huebsch', and that after the publisher's death 'a quality of formal grandeur ... faded from White's writing' (*Life* 438). But Huebsch's death also had the effect of freeing White to pursue the longstanding preoccupation with theatricality that is inherent in his conception of the artist as possessed of inchoately multifarious personality, a conception that had been suppressed in the interests of the spiritual concerns of his earlier novels.

6 See, for instance, his comment that the knighthood of Angus Wilson 'may help advance the homosexual cause' and his complaint about the 'pussyfooting' of the New South Wales Labor government on homosexual law reform (Marr, *Life* 599).

7 The self-parodic tendency of *Flaws* also entails a cautious embrace of 'the queenly role'. For instance, White's account of his disappointing meeting with Joan Sutherland concludes with the moral that 'divas should never meet' (239).

White was stagestruck from a young age, and as an adolescent had even briefly entertained thoughts of becoming an actor, an ambition that was succeeded by a desultory attempt to forge a career as a playwright while living in London in the 1930s. When White 'returned' to the theatre in the 1960s in a fresh burst of playwriting, many admirers of his novels viewed the development with alarm (Marr, *Life* 406). Huebsch's associate Marshall Best wrote to White that he hoped the experience of failing to get *The Ham Funeral* staged at the Adelaide Festival in 1962 would turn White against the theatre so that he would 'go on using [his] best talents for [his] novels' (qtd in *Life* 406). With *The Twyborn Affair*, *Flaws in the Glass*, and *Memoirs of the Many in One*, however, masking, performance, and parody (including self-parody) are vigorously and playfully explored. Theatricality is the mainstay of these texts rather than sitting in uneasy apposition with his spiritual concerns, as would seem to be the case in his earlier work (see During 1–3).

If theatricality was an abiding, and indeed in his late career an increasing, fascination for White, celebrity status was associated by him with a kind of public performance that he professed to abhor. In a letter to Kate Grenville from 1988, he enjoined her to 'get on with your writing now, instead of giving way to the performing virus which seems to have infected so many writers' (*Letters* 617). White usually insisted that celebrity had been thrust upon him rather than sought; and there is no doubting the genuineness of his frequent resistance to the overtures of reporters and so on. However, White seems to have enjoyed the public performances of the 1970s and 80s at least as much as he dreaded them, even speculating that his late-blooming desire to speak in public was the 'frustrated actor in me finding an outlet at the end' (*Flaws* 225). In her discussion of White as a public figure, Brigid Rooney deftly traces his contradictory impulses towards reclusiveness and exhibitionism, arguing that these worked in 'productive tension' to provide the 'organising logic of both his art and his activism' (54):

[White's] case offers an example of the literary as both an aristocratic cultural logic, and as a political practice that refuses (even as it depends on) the demands of the market, with its effort to pierce, circumvent and transcend the world. This highly literary logic is at once conservative and potentially politicising. If White's alienation from the ordinary – his tourist-like observation of 'residents' – was a function of his social privilege and his distance from economic necessity, it was also generative of texts that represented everyday Australian culture with the lucidity of the insider-outsider. (55)

Integral to her examination of White's literary-political career is Rooney's disputation of the view, promulgated by Tim Bonyhady among others, that White's activism was mere posing – that his 'apparent relish for public performance' detracted from the seriousness of his commitment (Rooney 53). As Rooney suggests, 'moral binaries' that oppose 'exhibitionism and serious political passion' (53) miss the conjunction of the theatrical and the heartfelt that

was present in White's work and self-conception from the start and that came increasingly to the fore with White's coming out, both as activist and homosexual. This conjunction is exemplified at a literary level, Rooney argues, by the way in which White's attention to surfaces in his novels enables the rendition of the depths of interiority: 'Often noted for its painterly texture, White's prose yields irritable energies directed towards the carving out of depths, so that surfaces become, paradoxically, sites of intensity of feeling, and this does the work of affective and social excavation' (51).

Another way of conceiving of 'the production of depths out of surfaces' (Rooney 51) in White might be in terms of this operation's affinities with camp, which famously prioritises surface over depth. A couple of examples from the archives of camp expression and commentary on camp should suffice to establish the point. Firstly (and in reverse chronological order), from Susan Sontag's 'Notes on Camp' (1964): 'Camp art is often decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content' (278). Secondly, an epigram from Oscar Wilde's 'The Importance of Being Earnest' (1895): 'In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing' (406). Wilde's epigram calls up the conjunction of depth and surface that Rooney finds at work in White's fiction and public performances. The idea of gravity (to take Wilde gravely for a moment) is not refused but is *produced* by style. As a now substantial body of scholarship on camp in Wilde and on camp more generally has shown, this aesthetic, far from being simply ludic, may be understood as embodying perceptions about the rhetorical production of all manner of categories of authenticity: identity, emotion, affect, truth.⁸

The attention to verbal surface in White's prose which often seems to work at the expense of content has, interestingly, recently been proffered as Exhibit A by critics who wish to exonerate White from the charge of a conservative, transcendentalist outlook. Thus Andrew McCann delineates a 'perverse' White, whose perversity is underpinned by 'the perverse pleasure of linguistic excess' ('Ethics' 153). McCann argues that 'the absence of the idea of perversity in White criticism (along with the consensual refusal to engage with White as a gay writer) is the condition on which critiques of White's conservatism remain plausible' ('Decomposing' 10). And Ivor Indyk maintains that White deploys a 'baroque aesthetic' of 'inclusiveness', 'a camp excess which delights in its escape from rigidity, its access to authority.'⁹ But I think we need to tread carefully here. I

8 See, for instance, the essays collected in Fabio Cleto, ed. *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1999) and Moe Meyer, ed., *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (London: Routledge, 1994).

9 For an earlier argument that sees White's style as working *against* the expression of 'any spiritual structure of the universe,' but that does not connect this feature to homosexual identity, see Noel Macainsh, 'Patrick White's Aesthetic' in *LiNQ* 12.1-3 (1984) 68. See also Adrian Mitchell's argument that the alleged metaphysical import of White's work is an effect of the extravagant verbal surface: 'the real mysticism of Patrick White is a mysticism of words' 'Eventually, White's Language: Words, and More than Words' in *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*, ed. Ron Shepherd and Kirpal Singh (Adelaide: Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978) 13.

have stated that it is hard in some ways to imagine a novelistic mode *less* camp than that of the closeted White, and I want to hold on to my point that it is only with the uncloseting of *The Twyborn Affair* that camp style is truly attained – that White successfully and productively explores theatricality and surface. Rather than claiming a thoroughgoing camp aesthetic at work throughout White's career, what I want to suggest is that the potential for such an aesthetic was always there, and that this potential has implications for how we view White and his relation to fame. Let me return to Sontag's definition of camp art as 'decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content'. While still resisting the idea that White's closeted texts might be seen as camp, we can say that this description may be aligned with White's novelistic practice throughout his career. White himself often acknowledged that his art was a decorative one. In a discussion of his work from 1969, he stated: 'I am interested in detail. I enjoy decoration. By accumulating this mass of detail you throw light on things in a long sense: in the long run it all adds up' (*Patrick White Speaks* 23); and in another from 1965: 'All my novels are accumulations of detail. I am a bit of a bower-bird' (qtd in Marr, *Life* 364). In *Flaws*, this devotion to decorativeness is related to heterodox gender and sexual identities. An invocation of childhood fascination with 'the rites' of his mother's dressing table segues into an account of his own vanity:

'Growing up in a period when drabness was expected of the male sex, my vanity could not express itself through dress. ... Instead I suppose I've indulged my vanity by tricking myself out in words. Not all ornamentation. Part of me is austere enough to have conveyed the truth, I like to think, but again that could be vanity'. (42)

White's emphasis on decorative detail in his novels recalls Roland Barthes's famous discussion of 'the reality effect', whereby in realist narrative the accumulation of apparently 'insignificant' details effects the 'referential illusion' (148) that the sociohistorical world has been bodied forth. No realist, however, White proffers his particular brand of novelistic detail not as a means to verisimilitude but as a way of accessing an epiphanic 'truth' beyond the phenomenal world: 'you throw light on things in a long sense.' But, in *Flaws* at least, the possibility is raised that his belief in that deeper truth might also be vanity – that what Barthes calls the 'narrative luxury' of "'futile" details' (141) might constitute the whole of a text's effect.

In acknowledging his own ornamental style, then, White registers the centrality of the superficial that is evident also in his concerns with painterly textures and with theatricality. This interest in ornamentation is realised not only through an ornamental style – 'tricking myself out in words' – but also at the level of 'content'. White's novels bristle with ornaments or ornamentally embellished implements: for example, the glass box in *The Living and the Dead*, the silver nutmeg grater in *The Tree of Man*, the flamingo-feather fan in *Riders in the Chariot*, Olivia's crystal bird in *The Vivisector*. Unlike the 'insignificant' details in Barthes's account of realism, however, these objects are frequently

accorded special significance, though that significance often has less to do with their symbolic role (albeit some, to be sure, are intended as symbols), their role in the plot, or even what they indicate about the characters associated with them, than it does with the fascination that their textures, surfaces, and shapes evoke in the characters and upon the narration. White's preoccupation with decorative detail often displaces the mandates of structure, symbolic meaning, and narrative. However, because White so intensely identified himself with his ornamental art, his ornamental passages or passages about ornaments can also be read as speaking to his conception of interiority and identity – the interiority and identity of the artist above all – and as therefore reflecting obliquely on his self-conception as artist, celebrity, and homosexual. I want now to turn to some relevant passages from three of the novels in order to elaborate this claim.

In *The Vivisector* (1970), White's most extensive exploration of the artist figure, ornamental imagery enables meditation on the self in relation to competing models of depth and surface. I have mentioned the significance accorded to Olivia's crystal bird – the centrepiece of her table at a dinner-party, which seems to the protagonist Hurtle Duffield 'one of the happiest surprises Olivia had sprung' and which is described as 'Perched on a crag of rose-quartz, its wings outspread among the crackled basin of shallow water, in which glimmered slivers of amethyst and a cluster of moss agates' (317). While the lavish description of the bird obviously attests to Hurtle's constant alertness to the aesthetic, more importantly, I would suggest, it furnishes an example of White's addiction to decorative detail, his tendency to dwell over sensuously rendered materiality. A more obviously symbolic use of a decorative object is supplied by the Courtney family's chandelier, described in terms of 'glass fruit and flickering of broken rainbow', which bewitches the young Hurtle when he visits the Courtney house with his laundress mother (25). Again, this object works to convey Hurtle's aesthetic sense, his burgeoning and then his mature identity as an artist. After the first visit, the chandelier 'blaze[s] up in him' (28) as incipient aesthetic-affective intensity and later, when Hurtle has become an accomplished painter, he 'want[s] to shoot at an enormous naked canvas a whole radiant chandelier waiting in his mind and balls' (207). White deploys the chandelier to render Hurtle's interiority at the same time that he emphasises the materiality of its multiple glittering surfaces and shapes. In stressing the erotic component of Hurtle's inner self and in connecting his artistic talent to sexual desire, White also affirms Foucault's argument about the sexualisation of interiority in modernity and conveys his own conviction about the essentially sexual nature of art-making.¹⁰

The connection of the secret, sexualised self to the ornamental is given a different spin in the attention accorded to diaries early on in the novel, after

10 Passages from his oeuvre in which White equates the artistic impulse with (male) sexuality are legion. *Flaws* furnishes some particularly bald examples. White's first remembered erection is aligned with his first meeting with a literary figure (Banjo Paterson): 'My first erection and my first poet: first ripples on the tide of passion' (6); and his early attempts at writing are likened to masturbation: 'I continued ... seated before a sheet of blank paper waiting for something to pour out. It never did, except in the bath' (6).

Hurtle is sold by his poor parents to the wealthy Courtneys. The Courtneys' daughter Rhoda announces her intention to keep a diary as her governess does – a diary that both Rhoda and Hurtle read – in which she will write 'secret things'. Responding to her father's admonition that people might read her diary if she leaves it lying about, Rhoda says, 'Secrets are more interesting if they're not all that secret' (113). The diary – ostensibly the repository of the private self – is, in Rhoda's precocious response, identified as a manifestation of the modern dispensation of the open secret. Later, while he is away at World War I, Rhoda writes to Hurtle that on her eighteenth birthday she burned all her diaries, only to be later given a diary by her mother as a present. This diary, 'bound in ivory, with a gold clasp and key', is 'only an ornament', Rhoda tells Hurtle (175). But the distinction Rhoda makes between the secret and the ornament, between inner and outer, is undermined by the book's rendition of Hurtle's interiority precisely in terms of ornamentation, as well as by the gesture towards the open secret made earlier by Rhoda herself.

D.A. Miller, taking his analytical cues from Foucault, contends in an influential argument that in the post-Enlightenment era in which the subject is thoroughly imbricated within a carceral 'social totality', secrecy constitutes 'the spiritual exercise by which the subject is allowed to conceive of himself as a resistance: a friction in the smooth functioning of the social order'. The open secret 'does not, as one might think, bring about the collapse of [the] binarisms' of private/public, inside/outside, subject/object, 'but rather attests to their fantasmatic recovery. ... The paradox of the open secret registers the subject's accommodation to a totalizing system that has obliterated the difference he would make' (207). The precious store of interiority with which the modern subject seeks to compensate him- or herself for the depredations of modern society is, on this argument, evidence of his or her thorough social enmeshment. The interior is actually an aspect of the external, endlessly policing social world. As Sedgwick notes in a valuable critique, Miller's argument is 'entirely circular: everything can be understood as an effect of the carceral, therefore the carceral is everywhere' (*Touching* 135). Rather than collapsing the division between the interiority and sociality entirely (and rather than wholly discounting the salvific potential of interiority), a more theoretically productive view might be to think of these two categories as braided: necessarily always bound up with one another but not identical.

The Vivisector's representation of Hurtle's celebrity status indicates this implication of internal and the external in one another, in ways that resonate with White's own experience. The novel satirises the cult of artistic celebrity, most concertedly in the alternately vicious and toadying chatter at the opening night of Hurtle's retrospective, from which the artist flees home in a taxi 'into that silence where he had spent half a lifetime begetting, and giving birth' (598). But again the distinction between the private and meaningful space of artistic creation and the spiritually vacuous arena of public acclaim is complicated by Hurtle's own artistic practice. Unlike Rhoda, Hurtle keeps no diary, but he is nevertheless compelled to construct his subjectivity through his deeply personal but publicly acclaimed

art. I say he constructs rather than expresses his subjectivity because one of the most effective aspects of White's attempt to delineate the artistic process in this novel is the sheer amount of *work* that goes into Hurtle's painting – the planning and reworking of canvases, the preoccupying problems of form. Like White's laboriously 'oxywelded' novels and like his theatrical public performances, Hurtle's art cannot be said to be simply the emission of a prior self (despite the novel's association of his painting with the ostensibly primal force of sexuality); rather, all three forms – White's novels, his public interventions, and Hurtle's paintings – evince a self in process.

The coming-out text *The Twyborn Affair* continues with the idea of self as a performative process, paradoxically deploying the static category of the ornament to convey that idea. The ornamentation of the transvestite protagonist E. Twyborn is described as being inextricable from her/his body. Or at least this is the case in Part I of the novel, in which E. is presented to us in the guise of Eudoxia Vatatzes; E. changes personae and genders over the course of the narrative, first appearing as Eudoxia, then Eddie, then Eadith Trist. The thematic and dramatic effect of the novel depends on this first impression, as E. only appears in his 'original' (and unornamented) masculine form, Eddie Twyborn, in Part II. Priority is not, therefore, given to what common sense would designate E.'s authentic identity; rather, in a deployment of *hysteron proteron* – the rhetorical or textual strategy whereby the 'natural' order of things is reversed – the narrative converts the ostensible primacy of E.'s masculinity into secondariness. In Part I Eudoxia is mainly shown to us from the sexually entranced perspective of Joanie Golson, erstwhile lover of Eddie's mother, Eadie. Joanie observes not only that Eudoxia possesses 'jewelled' eyes (104), but also, with regard to her hands, that 'The finger-joints could have been arthritic, and must have prevented her ever dragging off those antique rings, had she wanted to, but probably she didn't want. The rings of women such as Madame Vatatzes (like Eadie Twyborn) were ingrained and ingrown' (102). Identifying E. with his/her mother because of the similar way they wear their rings, Joanie, who does not recognise E., unconsciously deduces a familial relation, and also the perversity of that relation. An ostensibly epiphenomenal category – accoutrements – trumps the supposed primacy of the body.¹¹

For both E. and Eadie, identification with the nominally superficial category of adornment is apposite. The identity of E. is indistinguishable from her/his multiple 'roles'. Eadie, too, is possessed of perverse sexual and gender identities (if less spectacularly than E.). Despite her marriage, Eadie has a strongly lesbian orientation, emphasised in the repeatedly invoked scene of her night on the town with Joanie during E.'s childhood, in which Eadie cross-dressed in jacket,

11 White's association of ornamentation with the 'interior' experience of identity resonates with historical and etymological dimensions of the term ornament. As Eric Cheyfitz notes, in *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from The Tempest to Tarzan*, 'within the classical and Renaissance tradition of rhetoric, "ornament" does not suggest the superfluous or the exterior; rather, derived from the Latin verb *orno*, which means both "to provide with necessities" and "to embellish", it articulates that place where the interior and the exterior, the necessary and the contingent are inseparable' (New York: Oxford UP, 1991) 93.

trousers, and corked-on moustache. Another cross-dressing homosexual, Eddie Twyborn is therefore primarily his mother's rather than his father's son, as is stressed in the phonic and orthographic proximity of the first names *Eddie* and *Eadie*. The novel delineates a heterodox genealogy that, rather than ensuring the patriarchal continuation of a family 'line', is realised in a perverse repetition of homosexual and transvestite identities across the generations.

The identification of mother and son via adornment in *Twyborn* anticipates the passage from *Flaws* in which White's love of verbal ornamentation is traced to his childhood fascination with his mother's dressing table, and the process of self-construction through dress, make-up, and adornment, for which the dressing table is a metonymy. If White's relationship with his mother was legendarily difficult, this difficulty was based on similarity as much as it was on difference – as is acknowledged by White in his speculation that he inherited his vanity from Ruth. White's novels are of course thickly populated by vain, monstrous mothers, figures who have been parsed by critics for their autobiographical resonances. In *Twyborn*, however, the hostile mother/son relations that characterised his life and his art are finally revoked in a scenario in which Eadie accepts the scandalous difference of her offspring: coincidentally encountering the expatriated Eadith in London, she tells her, 'I've always wanted a daughter' (422). If this moment can be read, in autobiographical terms, as the fantasised resolution of an intractable relationship, at a wider level it signals the acceptance and recognition of gender and sexual heterodoxy that White sought through this covert and literary act of coming out.

If White explores the possibilities of role-playing and performativity in *Twyborn*, he does not simply discard the idea of a secret self beneath the performance. However, that secret self, as in *The Vivisector*, is always also a kind of performance – it is bound up with the external, social world from which it is nominally distinguished. As in *The Vivisector*, but more extensively, the notion of interiority is associated with the literary genre of the diary. In Part I, passages in which E. writes in his/her diary contrast with the third-person narration, usually focused through Joanie, and work to supply an alternative account of events, and, notably, of E. him/herself, the object of Joanie's fascination. As Elizabeth McMahon has argued, however, the excerpts from the diary do not displace or supersede the third-person narration as a consequence of their supposed access to the authenticity of interiority; indeed, rather than supplying us with the 'truth' of either E.'s subjectivity or gender, the diary operates as 'a process of objectifying the self through discourse,' while the first-person narration of the diary form also maintains the uncertain status of E.'s gender 'by removing the need for third person pronouns' (58). The diary's performative aspect is made particularly clear in its 'transcription of [the] duologue of [Eudoxia and her lover Angelos] in the form of dramatic script' (61).

White always insisted on the autobiographical dimension of his characters, but the resonances with his own life are perhaps nowhere more pronounced in

his oeuvre than in the representation of E. Significant elements of E.'s narrative correspond to White's own experiences, and, even more notably perhaps, E. presents a realisation of White's claimed artistically productive multiplicity of identity, although E.'s aesthetic capacities are realised in a Paterian or Wildean practice of life-as-art rather than in conventional artistic efforts. White had earlier represented a version of this multiplicity in the 'Jardin Exotique' section of *The Aunt's Story*, in which Theodora takes on the personalities of her fellow hotel inmates. But the representation of multiplicity in *Twyborn* differs greatly in the extent of its elaboration, its dramatic effect, and its affective resonance. E.'s several identities are not evidence of psychic instability but canny responses to a regime of sexual and gender orthodoxy from which he/she feels alienated. As in White's account of his own personality, E.'s multiple identities are linked to male homosexual subjectivity.

If *Twyborn* works thus to affirm – albeit obliquely – White's conception of the relays between artistry and sexuality, the novel also presents a kind of valediction to another key aspect of White's authorial 'signature' – the transcendental ambitions, which had steadily been dropping away since the death of Huebsch. The renunciation of these ambitions is immanent in the design of the novel, with its emphasis on the importance of surface. It is also allegorically suggested in another passage from Part I that deploys ornamental imagery. Again presented from Joanie's point of view, the passage describes Eudoxia's farewell to Joanie and her husband at the end of their visit to her villa:

Madame Vatatzes seemed on the verge of making some declaration or appeal as she stood with hand on the gate, the line of her cheek touched by a last transcendental glow, lips fumbling with elusive words, eyes revealing the same extraordinary mosaic of colour as they had on the occasion of that first meeting, then as self-contained as jewels, now diffused if not melting. No doubt only an effect produced by evening light. Nor did she find the words she needed to convey that deeper message – which she may never have intended to convey. (111)

In lieu of the 'declaration,' 'appeal' or 'deeper message' that E. fails to make, Joanie, and the passage, fixate on her splendid surface – in particular, her 'jewelled' eyes 'now diffused if not melting', a magical play of light. As in *Twyborn* generally and as in White's other uncloseted texts, the 'deeper message' of transcendental or spiritual meaning is foregone in favour of an attention to the surface, or, rather, to the way in which surface produces depth. The transcendental here is also the superficial, another effect of the play of light: 'the line' of E.'s cheek is 'touched by a last transcendental glow'.

The production of depth out of surface is explored once more in White's final novel, the *jeu d'esprit*-cum-bitchy roman à clef *Memoirs of Many in One*, and again this idea is conveyed through ornamental imagery. White's own metaphor for himself as a novelist addicted to the accumulation of decorative detail – a bower-bird – describes his female alter ego, Madame Alex Xenophon Demirjian Gray. The incipiently senile Alex 'acquire[s] names as other women encrust

themselves with jewels and bower-birds collect fragments of coloured glass' (9). In the picaresque, if brief, span of the narrative she takes on the identities of the nun Cassiani, the actress Dolly Formosa, and the shoplifting housewife Eleanor Shadbolt, among several others. Alex's mercurial switching of personae recalls again, but in a more humorous register, the multiple identities of Theodora and E. Twyborn, and (according to White) White himself (Alex, like White, is 'Xenophon' – stranger or outsider – and her first name is appropriately androgynous). Alex's protean personality is counterpointed with the stolid sanity of her daughter, Hilda, keeper of the Gray family archives. The archives are in turn contrasted with Alex's freewheeling memoirs, which, it is the novel's organising conceit, 'Patrick White' has been retained by Hilda to edit after Alex's death.

Memoirs mocks not only the idea of authentic identity but also the biographical imperative to body forth such an identity: 'Whether archives or memoirs [contain] the truth it might be difficult to decide,' declares Patrick in one of his frequent editorial interpolations (16). *Memoirs* might be read as a proleptic riposte to Marr's monumental project, in which White's performative capacities are displaced onto a dragged-up double, enabling a contrasting, self-deprecating depiction of 'Patrick' in old age. Alex and her memoirs constitute an oblique, and camp, manifestation of White's desire to control his public image: the desire that motivated the writing of *Flaws*. The novel presents a self-portrait (divided between Alex and 'Patrick White') that conveys a kind of truth about White as he saw himself at the same time that it distorts and omits key facts of White's actual life (Manoly goes unmentioned, for instance).

Like the diaries in *The Vivisector* and *Twyborn*, the memoirs are a secret document. Alex keeps them 'locked in a morocco writing case' (1); but their secret status can only be specious, as memoirs are meant to be read by others, even meant to be published. The memoirs are, once again, a manifestation of the open secret, whereby subjectivity is enmeshed in the external, social world. *Memoirs* is premised on the knotted desires that cluster around the phenomenon of celebrity in the regime of the open secret: the desire of the audience to know about the life of the artist-celebrity (though in Alex's case her celebrity is largely, or even wholly, delusional), the desire of the artist-celebrity to be known, and the desire of the artist-celebrity to control what *can* be known. The novel's relation to homosexuality further complicates these entangled elements. While homosexuality (that of White or anyone else) is barely mentioned, the book is incontrovertibly 'gay' in its camp playfulness. *Memoirs* conveys gayness yet resists the reduction of that gayness to the biographical facts of a life.

White's literary coming out was informed and complicated by contrary tendencies towards self-assertion and self-effacement, which were in part the manifestation of a temperament at once exhibitionist and retiring and which in part derived from adherence to a literary modernism split between attraction to fame and valorisation of 'impersonality'. These discrepant impulses towards assertion and effacement are evident in various permutations across White's

work and self-conception. They are there, for instance, in the disjunction between White's conviction that his writing was basically autobiographical and the fact that for most of his career he was unable to write in the first person. They are also evident in his idiosyncratic view of his identity as homosexual artist – at once an isolated genius and a self that was dispersed in multiplicity. In coming out, White drew upon his notion of himself as 'many in one', simultaneously affirming his homosexuality, and – demonstrating his abiding unease with his orientation – explaining it away.

Yet if White's relation to homosexuality remained ambivalent, the act of coming out seems to have enabled a relaxation, or maybe a reorientation, of White's novelistic ambitions. White moved from a transcendentalism centred on the epiphany to a postmodern camp aesthetic that emphasises theatricality and surface – an aesthetic that always lurked as a potential within his work but that was only fully manifested with White's breaking of the compact of the open secret that had formed around his sexuality. But in coming out, White did not simply offer himself up in naked vulnerability to the public gaze – his fears about the hostile reaction to his candour notwithstanding. The camp aesthetic that he adopted as he came out, with its emphasis on masking, parody, and play, enabled control as well as revelation. In his 'out' texts White began to write in the first person for sustained periods for the first time – in the diary entries in *Twyborn*, in the official memoir *Flaws*, and in the parodic autobiography *Memoirs of the Many in One*, in which there are two first-person voices representing dispersed aspects of the author. These versions of first-person writing complicate or even obscure the reading public's desire for revelation at the same time that they cater to it. In his out texts, White embraces his celebrity status, in that authorial subjectivity – and, in particular, homosexual authorial subjectivity – is for the first time in his career an integral and explicit component of textual effect; but he also attempts to control it. At once frank and carefully managed, White's literary disclosures of his sexuality indicate the interpenetration of public and private that characterise the phenomenon of modern literary celebrity specifically and the modern category of sexual identity in general.

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