

Contested selves and postmodern hybridity: Authorial renunciation and gender revisionism in Patrick White's *Memoirs of Many in One*

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Dates:

Received: 30 Dec. 2020

Accepted: 09 July 2021

Published: 28 Feb. 2022

How to cite this article:

Graham-Smith, G.H., 2022, 'Contested selves and postmodern hybridity: Authorial renunciation and gender revisionism in Patrick White's *Memoirs of Many in One*', *Literator* 43(1), a1779. <https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v43i1.1779>

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This article attempted to reclaim Patrick White's final novel, *Memoirs of Many in One*, from the margins of White scholarship. The novel was a significant omission from the first major study of White's oeuvre to appear in over 25 years, entitled *Remembering Patrick White: Contemporary Critical Essays*, edited by Elizabeth McMahon and Brigitta Olubas. Reviled by critics such as David Tacey as demonstrating White's systematic repudiation and trivialisation of his literary legacy, most palpably commemorated in the form of the 1973 Nobel Prize for Literature, the novel has been largely ignored by White scholars. Bridget Grogan's ground-breaking new monograph on White's work, *Reading corporeality in Patrick White's fiction* also did not include a study of *Memoirs*. But, this was most probably because the novel does not fit the theoretical focus of her study. As I hope to demonstrate, using postmodernist, Lacanian and film theory, the book may be reinterpreted as a conscious renunciation by its author of the realist tenets, which saw the author as a God-like, omniscient figure. By placing himself as just another character in his novel and fracturing his gendered and narratological (author)ity in the form of multiple, never fully inhabited selves, White revealed the ultimate fraudulence of any claim to authorial and narrative transcendence.

Keywords: Patrick White; postmodernism; film theory; Lacan; hybridity.

Introduction

But this rough magic

I here abjure ... I'll break my staff,

Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,

And deeper than did ever plummet sound

I'll drown my book. (Shakespeare 2002, 5.1:50–57)

At first glance, the above lines spoken by Prospero in the final act of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* may seem to have little to do with Patrick White's postmodernist text. Yet, Prospero's words may be used as a telling point of entry into a discussion of *Memoirs of Many in One*. Written, like White's novel, near the end of its creator's life, the play, like *Memoirs*, conveys a complex meditation on the role of the artist. This role is paradoxically both defined and dematerialised through a heightened theatricality that propagates the notion of the artist/magus as being the performer and dupe of his own illusions. This is evident in Prospero's ultimate renunciation of his capacity as artist/God and his commitment to 'drown [his] book' in an awareness of art's duplicitous relation to a reality which it recalls, displaces and transmutes, only to be confronted with the frailty of its own illusory strategies. Prospero's acknowledgement of the tenuousness of his authority may be viewed alongside White's self-reflexive deconstruction in *Memoirs* of his authorial powers. These are simultaneously relativised and parodied through the self-ironising gesture of casting himself as a character in the fictional memoirs of a fictional woman, thereby assigning to himself the trivialising mediocrity of a mere walk-on part. The fact that White simply edits these memoirs further subverts the supposedly ubiquitous, God-like status of the author. His proper name becomes an almost superfluous accessory/adjunct to Alex Xenophon Demirjian Gray as the 'real' author of the text.

It therefore comes as a surprise to encounter McMahon's (2010) chapter entitled 'The Lateness and Queerness of *The Twyborn Affair*: White's Farewell to the Novel' (p. 77), in which she describes *Twyborn* as White's 'last novel', dismissing *Memoirs* merely as 'a memoir'. She goes on to say:

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'Moreover, the latter work is signed by the pseudonymous "Agnes (sic) Xenophon Demirjian Gray," rather than Patrick White, who performs a removal from authorship to the role of editor' (p. 77). McMahon is one of the only critics not to view *Memoirs* as White's final novel and, without wanting to detract from the academic excellence of her chapter, I see her stance as being too literal-minded and as ignoring the ironic postmodern impetus behind *Memoirs*. To McMahon, 'The *Twyborn Affair* remains for posterity as White's theatricalised and over-determined farewell to the novel' (p. 77). Whilst *The Twyborn Affair* certainly anticipates *Memoirs*, I would argue that it is, in fact, the latter text which, in its parodic displacement of White as merely the editor of Alex Gray's memoirs, represents White's telling 'farewell to the novel'. In her chapter on *Memoirs*, Melcer-Padon (2018:143) made the telling observation that 'In writing *Memoirs of Many in One*, White is fashioning his own death mask'. By being both death mask and masque, the novel stages its author's withdrawal from his artistic vocation and from life itself, functioning as both an acknowledgement and a defiance of his impending demise.

The critical background

White's narratological self-effacement and his self-conscious repudiation of the monological coherence of the realist author in *Memoirs* need to be set against much of the early scholarly incursions into his work, almost all of which attempt to recuperate his novels within the presumptive universality and homogeneity which the liberal humanist tradition represents. Several of the earlier critical works, two of the most notable being Morley's (1972) *The Mystery of Unity* and Beatson's (1976) *The Eye in the Mandala: Patrick White: A Vision of Man and God*, seek to synthesise White's works into an overarching religious schema. Later studies of White, such as Wolfe's (1983) *Laden Choirs: The Fiction of Patrick White* and Bliss's (1986) book *Patrick White's Fiction: The Paradox of Fortunate Failure*, also succumb to the typically humanist inclusive impulse to reconcile what Lawson (1992) quite rightly saw as the 'opposites, dualities, and dichotomies', which are 'endemic to White's work' (p. 291) within an integrative vision of completion and transcendence. Wolfe (1983) wrote:

The centrality of artists in *Trees*, *Riders*, and *Vivisector* implies a unity of impulse that a survey of motifs from his canon supports. Although different, the novels all depend on each other. White sees life in the round, yoking the depth and mystery of the human soul to the slapstick of everyday existence. (p. 2)

The use of the word 'canon' is revealing. With its primary semantic embeddedness in ecclesiastical law, it has religious intimations that hark back to the critical practice of earlier White scholars who view the author as a type of artist/votary, striving to order the recalcitrant materials of his fictive universe into an ultimately panoptic and cohesive vision.

Wolfe takes his cue from Patrick White's own comment:

Religion. Yes, that's behind all my books. What I am interested in is the relationship between the blundering human being and

God ... God ... made us and we got out of hand, a kind of Frankenstein monster. Everyone makes mistakes, including God. I believe God does intervene; I think there is a Divine Power, a Creator, who has influence on human beings if they are willing to be open to him. (White, in Wolfe 1983:8-9)

It is my contention that, in using this quotation to bolster a belief that White's 'use of correspondences and parallels' portrays 'a divinely ordered universe moving to a single goal' (Wolfe 1983:8), Wolfe is eliding the discontinuities and ruptures in White's fiction. These continually problematise and undermine the idealistic metaphysics by which Wolfe seeks to spiritualise and thereby transcend the disturbing incompleteness that, to my mind, vitiates any possibility of mystical integration. The partiality of Wolfe's response to White's comments is illustrated by the fact that he ignores the import of the words: 'God made us and we got out of hand, a kind of Frankenstein monster. Everyone can make mistakes, including God'. This assertion points firstly to the elements within humanity, which defy containment within a cohesive, sustaining ideology and, secondly, to what White obviously perceives to be a Creator who is only partially in control of his own creation.

Discussion

An Internet Google Scholar search reveals a striking paucity of scholarly attention to *Memoirs*, which is dismissed by a critic such as Mark Williams in his book on Patrick White where he observes: '*The Twyborn Affair* is White's last great novel. He was to produce one more novel, *Memoirs of Many in One*, before his death. The latter is a slight work by comparison with any of his previously published novels, even *Happy Valley*' (Williams 1993:140). A scholar such as Tacey (1986) is far more critical, viewing what he sees as White's wilful debunking of the transcendent status of the author as a regressive violation of his role as artist:

There is something wild and anarchic in White's recent demonstrations, a desire not only to shock the audience, but also to abuse his own reputation. We are reminded of Hurtle Duffield in *The Vivisector*, smearing his own shit upon his newly completed 'Self-Portrait'. In a sense, White's last two novels, as well as his own *Self-Portrait*, have attempted to smear dirt and shit upon his own religious edifice, his literary *oeuvre*, and his past. He seems to delight in his own self-levelling, to relish his own collapse, and to enjoy the stench of his own decay. (pp. 62-63)

The underlying reason for Tacey's disquietude becomes clear when it is contextualised against the background of his earlier objection to critics such as David Malouf whom he feels over-value White's later works for celebrating 'plenty of good, honest homosexuality and polymorphous perversity' (Tacey 1986:162). Tacey's morbid descent to scatology to emphasise the extent of what he sees as White's perverse self-abuse is significant, as it partakes in the all too familiar homophobic association of gayness with a polluted/polluting realm of abjection/waste, which is first identified by Kristeva (1980) in her seminal work *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*. In this regard, Butler (1990) wrote:

The 'abject' designates that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered 'Other'. This appears as an expulsion of alien elements, but the alien is effectively established through this expulsion. The construction of the 'not-me' as the abject establishes the boundaries of the body which are also the first contours of the subject ... [C]ultural orders ... sanction the subject and compel its differentiation from the abject. Hence, 'inner' and 'outer' constitute a binary distinction that stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject. (pp. 133–134)

It is precisely the notion of a 'coherent subject' that the gay male self calls into question, manifested in his unsettling capacity to unseam such reified unity. In this regard, deconstruction, post-structuralism and postmodernism become useful in furthering the dissident elaboration of gender positions that homosexuality represents. I would therefore strongly disagree with David Coad who, in an article entitled 'Patrick White: Prophet in the Wilderness', avers, with a measure of relief, that:

Modern literary theory has not yet been brought to bear on the oeuvre. Since White does not easily lend himself to a poststructuralist analysis, he has been saved from the feminists, the Lacanians, and the deconstructionists. (Coad 1991:510)

From his equivocal inside/outside position within and without society, the gay self threatens to blur the socially constituted boundary between 'me' and 'not-me', a confusion that White enacts at a narratological level in *Memoirs* in his metafictional sleight as character/author, both inside and outside a text that is neither fully instantiated as a memoir, nor as an autobiography, nor as a novel. As a gay writer who is denied authority, White situates himself in *Memoirs* as both author and authored, thereby deconstructing the self and language so that both occupy a promiscuous realm where authority itself is no longer either indubitable or cohesive.

However, perhaps Tacey's pathologising viewpoint is closer to the truth than he actually realises. He berates White for an act of gratuitous self-effacement, for prostituting his role as an artist by committing the ultimate heresy of substituting shit for paint. The uneasy contiguity between defacing and defecating and obliterating self-presence by confusing waste with 'Truth' is, however, a precise reflection of White's later project to destabilise, relativise and parody all notions of an essentialist self. This proceeds from a sense of self-absurdity as a gay writer who, having 'perverted' the social and biblical injunction for self-procreation, anarchically uses words, the by-products of the self, as self-subverting end products. These refuse to signal or recognise their ends by proliferating in an endless expulsion and multiplication of signs.

White's *Memoirs*, which reprises several of the concerns and motifs of his earlier works in the form of a pastiche of self-reflexive and self-subverting borrowings, may be seen as wilfully rupturing the integrated economy of his textual corpus. The very title of his novel – *Memoirs of Many in One* – sets multiplicity against unity in such a way that identity is

paraded as a constructed, contingent performative, rather than a recoverable essence. Through the prodigality of its theatrical gestures, his text becomes an extension of the somatology of gayness itself as being connected with excess/waste, a supplementarity that refuses the goal-directed telos of Freud's notion of end pleasure, with reproduction as its 'proper' aim. This subverts society's need for what Foucault (1991) refers to in *Discipline and Punish* as "docile" bodies' (p. 138), and recalls *The Tempest* where Prospero, as representative of paternalistic/imperialistic control and order, attempts to constrain what he perceives to be the threatening body of Caliban.

In a further ramification of textual subterfuge, Alex Xenophon Demirjian Gray, whose own personae are heavily invested with a fantasmic Orientalism, exists as a *nom de guerre* for Patrick White himself as gay author and sexual Other/outcast. Interestingly, Fassler (1979) noted that Richard Burton, in his 1886 essay on homosexuality appended to his *Arabian Nights*, marks out certain 'sotadic zones', including Greece and other southern and oriental regions, 'in which there was the greatest blending of masculine and feminine in the personality and, correspondingly, the greatest homosexuality' (p. 245). Alex Gray performs not only as a disguised referent for a homosexual erotics but also (like Theodora Goodman in *The Aunt's Story*) as a signifier of the supplementary femininity with which gay men are traditionally associated in terms of their depiction as feminised males.

Far from being debilitating, however, this femininity is allied with a textual/sexual motility, which highlights all culturally (man)dated gender roles as mere simulacra of 'real' positions that can never be fully inhabited by anyone. In this regard, White's 'ventriloquization' of the female voice is interesting. His appropriation of Alex's first-person 'I' may be seen as a type of inverted *écriture féminine*, a writing that purports to reflect the specificity of a woman's experience, but which is revealed to be the work of a fraudulent male editor who admits, in a further confusion of authorial origin and an extension of the burlesque of gendered authenticity, that Alex 'might have created me, and I her' (White 1987:180).¹ White himself as 'editor' merely offers an alibi for White as gay male author, whose very maleness is in question by straight society from the outset. This decentredness, based on a superimposition of masks,² all of which seem to be disposable/renewable/interchangeable, is also revealed in the subversive deployment of names. From the beginning of *Memoirs*, these are protean, associated with a feminine masquerade that divests them of their status as ubiquitous patrilineal markers. As camp doyenne/poseur, the mistress of bricolage, Alex Gray is said to acquire 'names as other

1. Here, one is reminded of White's (1981:80–81) comment in his autobiography *Flaws in the Glass* about how his homosexuality enabled him to 'inhabit' both male and female characters in his writing.

2. For an interesting examination of *Memoirs* 'from the point of view of masks and their workings in the text', see Melcer-Padon's (2018) chapter entitled 'White's tour de force: *Memoirs of Many in One*' in her book *Creating communities: Towards a description of the mask-function in literature* (p. 143).

women encrust themselves with jewels and bower-birds³ collect fragments of coloured glass' (White 1987):

[d]islikes her married name: too banal. Her father's polysyllabic 'Papapandelidis' inevitably became a boring joke. As her mother Aliko saw it. Aliko preferred her maiden name, 'Xenophon'. Alex could not very well avoid the Gray bit, but evolved the names under which she was registered in the books of the Nile Cold Storage at the Gare de Ramleh, Alexandria, and later, at David Jones, Sydney: Mme Alex Demirjian Gray. (p. 9)

The fact that Alex's name is abbreviated means that it could take either the feminine or masculine form – as Alexandra or Alexander. This is, of course, in keeping with the semantic/sexual equivocation associated with the flamboyant deconstructive impulses that are ramified throughout the novel and with what McHale (1987:156) refers to as the 'lexical exhibitionism' that typifies postmodernism. Mrs Gray's Christian name is also explicitly connected with Alexandria, the Egyptian city founded by Alexander the Great, thereby re-emphasising the trope of Orientalism, a trope that is further underscored by Alex's mother's maiden name, 'Xenophon', which plays on society's phobic projections related to geographical and sexual otherness. The *NODE* provides another lexical resonance connected with Alex's name in its glossing of the 'Alexander technique', a postural system developed by Frederick Matthias Alexander, an 'Australian-born actor and elocutionist'. This furthers Alex's association with an extended theatrics of role-playing and (im)posture. The fact that Alex's names are humorously referred to as being registered first 'in the books of the Nile Cold Storage ... and later, at David Jones, Sydney', cleverly encodes the destabilising strategies at play in White's novel. The 'Nile Cold Storage' hints at naming as an enforced preservation and perpetuation of patriarchal privilege. However, the reference to David Jones, a well-known department store, recontextualises and rewrites the Name-of-the-Father by conscripting it within a traditionally feminine economy of conspicuous consumerism – the Name as disposable commodity. As Riem (1991) puts it:

Alex refuses her father's surname maybe because, if deconstructed, it can symbolise central, patriarchal power, which she refuses and refutes: 'Papa' – father[.] 'pan' – all, entire[.] 'id' – es, being[.] 'is' – to be; that is: father, or Imperialism, is all, the being, the centre, the 'source'. (p. 97)

In *Memoirs*, however, the father figure is rescripted as the 'not-all', presented only through the distorting lens of memory-as-invention rather than recoverable 'Truth', and even then largely by virtue of the traces of his absence. Significantly, on the first page of Alex's memoirs, she asks her daughter, Hilda: 'Where is Daddy?', to which Hilda replies: 'But he isn't here' (White 1987:17). The fact that Alex persists in talking about her late husband as if he were alive, before admitting that he is, in fact, dead, situates the husband/patriarch within a fictional space, as someone who can be conjured up at will and ultimately dispensed with,

3. Significantly, White described himself as a bowerbird. This again reinforces the interchangeable gender roles between Alex as a female memoir writer and White as a putatively male author (see Marr 1991:364).

thus highlighting the spuriousness of masculine centrality in terms of the Oedipal drama. In White's text, the relative superfluosity of the father is set against a transgressive femininity that exceeds the denotation of Woman as cultural category.

In *Memoirs*, on the other hand, White uses the trope of transvestism, with its stress on the fungibility of gender categories, to interrupt the enculturated space of heterosexism, particularly as this is exemplified through the ritualised normativity of marriage. As Garber (1992:13) put it: 'interruption, [a] disruptive act of putting in question, is ... precisely the place, and the role, of the transvestite'. The transvestite scenes in White's novel function as extradiegetic realms, which, by virtue of their representational excess, interrupt and destabilise the notion of gendered subjectivity as a self-sufficient ground. They also scramble the protocols of reading in such a way that the reader is conscripted into the role of unwitting spectator at a sexually ambiguous peep-show. The transvestite inserts occasion a hiatus between the visual and narratological levels. This centres upon a (homo)nymous equivocation between I/eye, which reflects the gay self's unstable position, suspended between the Lacanian Mirror Stage and the Symbolic, between the lure of self-coherence held out by the former and the cultural interpellation afforded by the latter as the realm coincident with language, with the ability to speak the self through submission to the Law of the Father. In keeping with its postmodernist practices, White's novel initiates a disorienting, carnivalesque play between the visual and verbal modes, linking transsexuality with transtextuality, a writing across established representational and gender-bound categories. Degli-Esposti (ed. 1998) made the interesting point that postmodernism is commensurate with a 'crisis of ideology and [an] increase of both verbal and visual codes in today's languages' (p. 4, [author's own italics]). The proliferation and confusion of these codes in *Memoirs* may be related to the impasse in which Alex finds herself, estranged from the authenticating imperatives of hegemonic culture that confer social/sexual viability upon the individual subject. Significantly, she asserts 'I could have done almost anything if I had an identity But I hadn't found the frame which fitted me' (White 1987:49). Immediately after this, she seems to contradict herself when she comments 'That's rot of course. I've always become anything I intended to be' (p. 49). However, as the novel makes clear through its deliberate blurring of fantasy and reality, Alex's improvised selves are played out in scenarios suggested by her own febrile imagination. This is the only way in which she can temporarily elude the framing devices by which society forbids its normativising practices of control, but she pays the price for her failure to submit to such devices by being treated as psychotic.

Degli-Esposti (ed. 1998) noted how, within postmodernism, fragments often:

... [b]ecome grandiose and acquire spectacular excessiveness inside the visual frame ... The recodification of meanings ... diverges the attention of the spectator from the plot and from the

great picture of things to center on the marvel and the stupor they can effect. They almost become more relevant than the whole to which they belong and constitute excessive, baroque, hyperbolic iconic forms of estrangement that can, in postmodern times, be referred to as 'neo-baroque'. (p. 8)

Degli-Esposti's comments are made in the context of film theory, yet they have a definite relevance in terms of White's novel, which stages a transgressive hypertextuality, a narrative border crossing that mobilises the productive contiguity between the hermeneutic codes of literature and film. The intertextual/intersexual spaces in *Memoirs* set up an equation between the specular and the spectacular, which may be related to the novel's imbrication within a heightened *visual* semiotics. I aim to show that there is a disruption and renegotiation of conventional modes of narration and identification in the novel, whereby the reader is at times compelled into a spectatorial position with regard to the text. This allows White to circumvent the instrumentalism of language, with its entrenchment of the cultural and gendered verities compelled by phallogentrism.

As Coward and Ellis (1977:45) point out, realist texts rely upon 'the limits that society gives itself', and often 'veer towards the mere repetition of sociolects'. Postmodernism, on the other hand, with its characteristic nomadism, fragmentation and bricolage, empowers White to undermine the ideological fixing that typifies the perpetuation of a normative social and sexual inscription. Coward and Ellis (1977) stressed that:

The realist narrative functions to uncover a world of truth, a world without contradictions, a homogeneous world of appearance supported by essences ... The subject of narration is a homogeneous subject, fixed in a relation of watching. It is precisely this relationship of specularly that becomes clear in the analysis of films ... (pp. 49-50)

The scopophilic regime enacted in *Memoirs*, far from entrenching the realist narrative's dependence upon what Heath (1976:98) calls 'the inscription of the subject as the place of its intelligibility', actually frustrates the mimetic passivity that underlies realism and its complicity with hegemonic socio-sexual structures. The volatility in the relationship between the verbal and visual modes that typify the transvestite inserts in *Memoirs* points, ironically, to the overdetermined ritualisation associated with phallogentrism's dominant citational practices and the ways in which these are embodied within the exogamic norm of the nuclear family. In White's text, the male/female binary is disarticulated and gendered subject positions are enacted as commutable roles, rather than as homogeneous signifiers.

With these comments in mind, I should now like to turn to an examination of two transvestite scenes that occur early on in *Memoirs*, showing how they disrupt and actively subvert the process of suture. As Brian Finney puts it in his article 'Suture and literary analysis', 'suture' is a term:

[m]ost frequently used in surgery where the lips of a cut or incision are sutured or stitched together. All forms of narrative necessitate sewing over discontinuities – jumps in time or location, switches from one consciousness to another. (Finney 1990:131)

Finney (1990) went on to point out that:

This led Lacan to offer a psychoanalytical explanation of how a subject is bound to discourse by its need to suture over gaps constantly opening up between it and its representation in discourse. In 1969, this Lacanian concept of suture was applied to the nature of cinematic narrative and quickly became a staple element of film theory. Although from time to time it has been suggested that the theory of suture should be equally applied to written narrative, to date [1990] no one has tried to do this in any detail. (p. 131)

Finney's application of suture to 'written narrative' provides a perfect point of entry into my analysis of the transvestite scenes in White's novel, as these actively thwart the process of suturing, instead of exposing the narratological 'discontinuities' that would normally remain hidden. *Memoirs* foregrounds the apparatuses of enunciation so that the position of the reader/viewer is dislocated. This occurs in such a manner that he/she is confronted with the spectre of his/her essential contingency, with the discomfiting possibility that he/she has been framed/duped by the fiction of Lacanian Symbolic cohesion.

The first scene functions as a visual frame, but one which White as novelist/director fails to contextualise. It may be viewed as being similar to shot 1 in a cinematic set, but the reader/viewer is deliberately denied the orientating response of a reverse shot, with the latter being essential for accomplishing suture in a film. The scene occurs as a bizarre and totally unexpected intervention into a conversation between Alex and her daughter, Hilda, taking place, significantly, within the mundane domestic space of their kitchen. The visual image of Alex is suggested by the sudden movement of her own first-person reverie (White 1987):

When it's a question of saving myself, I'll unpack my uniform, the tarnished 'pips' – isn't it what they are called? the service ribbons – the food spots which declare themselves most volubly on old musty drill which has not completely lost the smell of male armpits. Patrick will appreciate all of that. (p. 23)

How does one 'read' Alex here? The moment of rupture/aporia introduced by this enigmatic insert thwarts the classical realist illusion (whether filmic or literary) of the seamless body of the text and further frustrates conventional reader/viewer identification with the central character that conventional suture is designed to encourage. It also fails to reduplicate the Lacanian history of the subject whereby the viewer experiences shot 1 as what Silverman (1983) calls 'an imaginary plenitude', the 'site of a jouissance akin to that of the mirror stage prior to the child's discovery of its separation from the ideal image which it has discovered in the reflecting glass' (p. 203). Instead, Alex is associated with a disaggregated, illegible body, one, which cannot be logically deciphered or

reclaimed in terms of a comfortable mirroring of social/sexual norms. In this way, White denied suture's typical aim of accomplishing what Silverman (1983:212) refers to as the viewers' 'passive insertions into pre-existing discursive positions'. The encrypted sign system embedded in this scene is particularly interesting: to use Baron's (1998) words describing one of the effects of Robert Altman's film, *The Player*, the 'play for a subject' in White's novel, too, 'becomes a game that rewards insider knowledge' (pp. 25–26). In the case of *Memoirs*, there is a covert appeal to a gay audience and, in terms of this audience's 'insider knowledge', Alex's reference to her 'uniform' may be seen as a camp textual clue which signals its potential for disruptive play through promiscuously troping off the word's multiple semantic valences. Alex's comment at the end of her transvestite fantasy that 'Patrick will appreciate all of that' shows that White, as gay author/editor, is already in on the joke. Interestingly, one of the *NODE*'s definitions of 'uniform' is 'a code word representing the letter U, used in radio communication'. In terms of the novel's encoded motifs, the transvestite insert discussed above highlights the overdetermined shibboleths enshrined in society's juridical invocation of sexual unity/sameness/uniformity.

Furthering a sense of the textual resonances within the first transvestite scene in *Memoirs* are the comments by Garber (1992), made in the context of the links between transvestism and the military established by the homosexual rights advocate, Magnus Hirschfield, the man who first coined the term 'transvestite':

Women joined the army, [Hirschfield] suggested, because they liked to dress up in uniforms. Men who wore uniforms did so in part because they unconsciously understood them to be 'fancy dress'. Whatever the specific semiotic relationship between military uniforms and erotic fantasies of sartorial gender, the history of cross-dressing within the armed services attests to a complicated interplay of forces, including male bonding, acknowledged and unacknowledged homosexual identity, carnivalized power relations, the erotics of same-sex communities, and the apparent safety afforded by theatrical representation. (pp. 55–56)

The enigmatic inscription of Alex in this episode under discussion, where there is an emphasis on dress as part of the ambiguous, rather than essentialist, performatives of gender, hints at a potentially lubricious relationship between outward vestimentary sign and inner, gendered essence. This threatens both to expose and to subvert the defensive cultural imperative that there should be an absolute correlation between the two. Dress becomes conflated with a semiosis of anarchic transgression, whereby sartorial signifiers can be misread or read both ways (at once), thereby aligning dress with the duplicitous iconography of camouflage and disguise.

Garber (1992) mentioned that, in Allan Bérube's book, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two*, camouflage is 'a term covering costume, set design, camouflage design for combat – and gay identity' (p. 56).

Significantly, in White's novel, the colour grey, with its punning resonance on Alex's married name (Gray), is heavily invested with the trope of camouflage and with a productive slippage between Gray/gray/gay. Early on in the novel, when looking at her daughter, Alex thinks to herself:

She was looking greyer than ever. She must have inherited it from his [her father's] side, a true Gray (a horrid pun I realise every time I come up with it, but unavoidable. (White 1987:18)

Culler (1983:130) made the important point that puns 'both evoke prior formulations, with the meanings they have deployed, and demonstrate their instability, the mutability of meaning'. Extending Culler's comments, Craft (1994) noted how the pun has 'a power of phonemic blending and semantic bending', the ability to open in language 'a counterhegemonic or revisionary space, a plastic site in which received meanings ... may be perversely turned, strangely combined, or even emptied out' (p. 130). It is highly appropriate that grey should be the colour/state synonymous with punning and camouflage in White's text and also with an insouciant destabilisation of the taxonomic orthodoxies of binarised sexual difference. As a colour 'intermediate between black and white' (*NODE*), grey in *Memoirs* exploits the liminality with which it is associated in ways which both evoke and subvert the seemingly intractable opposites between which it oscillates and upon which it plays. Significantly, as part of the duplicitous sliding with which it is also connected in White's novel, grey is 'a neutral colour or shade' (*NODE*). The word 'neutral' derives from the Latin *neutralis*, meaning 'of neuter gender' (*NODE*), hence furthering the semantic resonances of the colour grey to include not only the dichotomy black/white but also male/female. The neuter/neutral implicit in the word 'grey' calls to mind, too, the conventional homophobic casting of the gay male as neuter in his denial of the procreative imperative, which is the fundamental premise of exogamy. However, in an ironic twist, *Memoirs* undermined the reductive formulation grey = neutral = neuter by setting one of the meanings of 'neuter' (to 'render ineffective; deprive of vigour or force': *NODE*) against itself. Gayness-as-neuter is recontextualised through a suggestive reinscription in the novel, one which deprives the neuter of its emasculating force.

Furthermore, the novel exposes the imposture inherent in the encoding of hegemonic culture's power and gender differentials as innocent and neutral, an encoding that cloaks the rigorous scapegoating mechanisms by which it seeks to police and thus to stabilise its scrupulously defended borders. Through its author, camouflaged as Alex Gray (whose surname intersects with that of her [in]famous namesake, Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray), the novel insinuates gay valences into its textual typology in such a way that these borders are rendered permeable. The book does this from *within* the very space of heterosexual marriage, heavily freighted with cultural privilege and reified as transparently 'natural'. This has the effect of showing that the category of nature and the natural, as Dimen (1995) astutely observes, is 'itself a technology of power, a cultural mediation on normality

and morality that, by masquerading as the mirror of nature, effects social control' (pp. 129–130). In terms of its radical revisionary focus, the novel enacts the scandal of marriage as being itself a grey area ('an ill-defined situation or field not readily conforming to a category or to an existing set of rules': *NODE*). In this way, marriage (and by extension the family) is dislocated from its role of providing the fundamental nexus for the propagation of cultural continuity. In an extension of this, the punning on Alex's married name, which she refers to as 'too banal', and the reference to her father's name as 'a boring joke' (White 1987:9), divests the Symbolic paternal signifier of its hypertrophic power of social organization and exposes instead what Craft (1994:133) refers to as 'the frail transmissibility of [*the*] father's empowering names'.

To recall Craft's comments quoted earlier, I should now like to turn to a second important transvestite scene in *Memoirs*, one which, like the pun, has the ability to open out 'a counterhegemonic or revisionary space'. This *mise-en-scène* (White 1987) extends the inverted relationship with filmic suture discussed in connection with the first insert and offers a vital querying and queering of the marriage relationship:

Lovers who marry young are often quickly turned into an indeterminate sex where they remain until it is decided who is husband, who wife. The afternoon of Patrick's visit the glass shows me up. In spite of the lovely film of sari, the pale lipstick, the black liner framing the shameful Greek blue of my eyes, I can see the grains of powder trembling on the hairs of the moustache, feel the more-than-down on my forearms, details of the disguise Hilary had forced on me as part of a pre-meditated revenge. (p. 26)

The fact that Alex is once more conveyed in terms of the trope of transvestism would seem to indicate that this second scene is designed as an answering reverse shot to the first. However, this second scene/shot deepens rather than sutures the 'wound' of narrative, which the first scene represents, and heightens rather than assuages the alienation experienced by the viewer/reader. Silverman (1983:203) pointed out that the vestiges of this alienation or unpleasure already haunt the initial feeling of *jouissance*, which the viewer experiences when contemplating shot 1, a *jouissance* which, as I stated earlier, White's equivalent shot 1 – the first transvestite scene in *Memoirs* – fails to offer in even rudimentary form. The impetus for this unpleasure lies in the viewing subject's sudden awareness of what Silverman refers to as 'the limitations on what it sees At this point shot 1 becomes a signifier of [an] absent field'. As Dayan (1976) writes in an article entitled 'The Tutor Code of Classical Cinema':

When the viewer discovers the frame – the first step in reading the film – the triumph of his [*sic*] former *possession* of the image fades out The spectator discovers that his possession of space was only partial, illusory He discovers that he is only authorized to see what happens to be in the axis of the gaze of another spectator, who is ghostly or absent. (p. 44)

Oudart (1977/78) calls this spectator who occupies the missing field '*l'absent*', the 'Absent One' (p. 35).

The Absent One corresponds to the speaking subject of the reverse shot that answers shot 1 and that is supposed to

suture the void which shot 1 opens up. This Absent One or Other is coded within the semiotics of film as implicitly masculine, having, as Silverman (1983) points out, 'all the attributes of the mythically potent symbolic father ... everything which the viewing subject, suddenly cognisant of the limitations on its vision, understands itself to be lacking' (p. 204). However, in the case of the two transvestite inserts which I am examining from *Memoirs*, the roles of speaking subject and viewing subject are switched and blurred. The differentials of power which they embody in terms of the cinematic model of the shot/reverse shot – the speaking subject associated with mastery and phallic presence, the viewer with limitation and lack – are travestied. Significantly, as the *NODE* makes clear, both the words 'transvestite' and 'travesty' have their etymological origin in the Latin *trans* – 'across' and *vestire* – 'clothe'. This once again echoes the subversive cross-switching which I have discussed in connection with the trope of transvestism as it operates in White's novel, a trope that continues to exert an anarchic pressure in terms of the model of suture that is denaturalised in *Memoirs*. This denaturalisation is already apparent in the first transvestite scene, the novel's equivalent of shot 1.

Here, Alex's fantasy, which involves donning an as-yet-unnamed man's army uniform, is described by her, the speaking subject ('I'll unpack my uniform' – White 1987:23). However, through her description, she is also simultaneously inserted as the putative viewer of her own envisaged transvestite sequence, with herself in the starring role. In this way, the parts of speaking and viewing subject and their unequal purchase on power are relativised and destabilised. Alex is *doubly inscribed* as viewing subject *and* speaking subject or Absent One. Her military uniform has already signified an Absent One in the form of an absent gender, the absent original male owner of the military uniform. Adding to the sense of doubling and redoubling in this scene, one remembers, as stated earlier in this article, that Alex is a stand-in or persona for her gay author. Consequently, White himself is inscribed *in absentia* as the Absent One in the form of Alex the 'mythically potent symbolic father' in drag. This 'double-cross' affords a parodic 'double-take' on the phallic privilege enjoyed by this 'symbolic father'. The gender confusion which Alex/White enacts shows that the Absent One is not one at all, not the embodiment of monolithic male presence signified by a univocally masculine signifier, but multiple – both male and female, same and Other.

The second transvestite scene quoted earlier is remarkable for its staging of gender categories, not as 'appropriate' (in terms of their cultural valorisation within heterosexual marriage in particular), but as appropriable. The episode is set on an afternoon that is 'all hibiscus trumpets and gold spangles' (White 1987:26). The contiguity between the natural world and the 'gold spangles', which suggest show business glitter, has the effect of denaturing the natural. This is important in terms of the insert's later stress on gender as performance, a stress that implies that, as far as culture's naturalisation of discrete, univocal gender identities is concerned, the natural

is itself a disguise. This disguise masks the fact that the ritualised enactment of so-called normal/natural sexual positions is, ironically, facilitated by means of persistent artifice, through repeated enactment. In terms of the novel's heavily encrypted sign system, the hibiscus flowers offer a veiled reminder of the suggestive symbol of the orchid in the 'La Race maudite' section of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. As Sedgwick (1994:219) described it, the orchid 'can be fertilised only through the providential intervention of exactly the right bee' and, by extension, 'the rarity and fragility of orchid mating' is explicitly associated in the book with the 'model of same-sex desire' (p. 220) – with the traditional stereotypical linking of such desire with non-productivity, hermaphroditism and sterility. Why I feel the implicit connection with Proust is relevant to this particular scene in *Memoirs*, is that the latter demythologises and radically denaturalises the site of heterosexual marriage putatively occupied by Alex and her husband, Hilary. It does so by compelling an awareness on the part of the reader/viewer of a paradoxical complicity between heterosexuality and homosexuality, an interrelationship that must be occluded in order for heterosexuality to continue to assume its position of hegemonic priority. The innate, yet unconsciously repudiated, relationship which heterosexuality has with homosexuality is, ironically, a productive one. By defining itself against homosexual 'sterility', heterosexuality can ensure its perpetuation as a valorised norm. However, by embedding gay valences within the scene which I am examining here, White recontextualises heterosexuality's sustaining investments. By highlighting its disavowed imbrication with a homoerotic sub-text, White rescripts *heterosexuality* as predicated upon a sterile, because overdetermined, signifying practice. As Gibson (1999) pointed out 'To insist on gender categories is precisely to ensure and even to intensify a continuing confusion of and about them' (p. 39).

In this particularly complex scene, where Alex comports herself in front of her bedroom mirror, there is a productive proliferation of and slippage between, hetero-, homo- and bisexualities. By emphasising bisexual characteristics as being intrinsic to the marriage of Alex and Hilary Gray, White exposes the ruse of monolithic presence by which marriage is valorised as a seamless unit of cultural production. In his acknowledgement of the work of Clare Hemmings, Gibson (1999:40) mentioned how she sets out 'to theorize bisexuality as precisely what gets left out of the current hetero/homo divide, challenging the traditional boundaries of both, but also disrupting the very existence of the boundary'. Significantly, the scene under discussion exploits the disruptive capacities of both bisexuality and drag. These two modes are typified by Gibson (1999) as reflecting:

... [T]he instant in which the present of gender is doubled up and divided from itself, in which the contemporaneousness of gender is fissured ... In drag and bisexuality ... the present is 'crossed' in more senses than one. The chimerical character of gender as the truth of presence is put on display. (p. 41)

It is precise that this vertiginous reduplication and cross-switching inform the second transvestite insert. When Alex

muses that '[l]overs who marry young are often quickly turned into an indeterminate sex where they remain until it is decided who is husband, who wife' (White 1987:26), she neut(e)ralises the proscriptive essentialism inherent in sexual binarism. She suggests that conjugal roles, far from being predetermined by biological sex, can, in fact, be arbitrarily assumed and transposed at will.

The scene proceeds to enact its transgressive sexual politics through a scrambling of gender codes. Significantly, the black eyeliner that Alex uses once again conjures up the figure of Cleopatra, the role that Alex plays later on in the novel. Cleopatra is characteristically depicted with eyes heavily outlined in kohl, traditionally an Eastern article of make-up. Interesting, too, is the fact that in this episode, Alex's physical features seem to segue into those of her husband, in a textual equivalent of cinematic lap dissolve, thus affording a visual reflection of an earlier throwaway line by Alex to her daughter: 'I would have been better as a father, and often was' (White 1987:20). The gender interchangeability between husband and wife has already been conveyed in the applicability of both Alex and Hilary's first names to either male or female gender. This also recalls the seemingly interpenetrative identities of Antony and Cleopatra who are famously mistaken for one another (I.ii.80). In Shakespeare's play, the transvestite motif, by virtue of its covert perpetuation – given that Cleopatra's role would have been played by a boy actor – serves to re-enshrine the lovers under the mantle of a transcendent heterosexuality. By comparison, in *Memoirs*, the transposability of Alex/Hilary becomes part of a radically subversive erotics, for one discovers that the second transvestite episode offers more than a reflection of carnivalised gender relations and anarchic indeterminacy. The anomalous moustache and hirsute appearance, which transect the seeming uniformity of Alex's feminine masquerade, take on a deeper significance when she describes them as 'details of a disguise Hilary had forced on me as part of a pre-meditated revenge' (White 1987:26). This teasing observation carries the implicit suggestion that Alex can only signify as an object of desire for her husband by impersonating a masculine subject and, furthermore, one who resembles Hilary himself. If Woman's role is simply to act as a passive reflector of an always prior masculinity, to complement the male by reflecting and returning his image back to its source, then her role as 'Other' is called into question. In fact, what the disguise which Hilary is said to force on Alex makes clear, intrinsic to Woman's posturing as the Other, her ability to masquerade as the Same. Hence, if one follows this line of argument to its logical conclusion, Woman is really reduced to playing a man in drag.

Continuing its subtle exposure of what Butler (1990) calls 'the foundational illusions of the [*heterosexual*] masculine subject position' (p. 45), the cross-gendered dynamics of the Alex/Hilary relationship depicted in the second transvestite scene also subvert Freud's valorisation of heterosexuality. However, following on from my earlier comments related to Lacan, the depiction of Alex and Hilary's relationship accomplishes a transgressive recoding of gender norms through its suggestion of a homosexual, narcissistic dynamic

at the very heart of heterosexuality itself. For Hilary (and by extension the putatively heterosexual male subject's), love object is simply a recovered version of himself. By literally displacing the gendered marks of the male subject (in this case, Hilary Gray's moustache and hairy arms) onto Alex, his feminine Other, the ruse of *heterosexual* male self-constitution is highlighted, a ruse that relies on the occultation of the straight man's *shared* (his)story with the homosexual/narcissistic position which he has ostensibly overcome. Through the visual chicanery that typifies the second transvestite episode, White reveals how, even in his relationship with Woman as a supposed site of true alterity, it is really *himself* whom the heterosexual Man takes as his sexual object.

In the second insert, White continues to imbricate gender within a labile semiotics of both doublespeak and double vision. There is a subtle cross-fading of this scene with Alex in front of her bedroom mirror, a scene occupying the novel's present tense, but which is made, through the flashback of Alex's memory, to merge with a vision from the past. Here, Alex meets up with her now estranged husband 'in a back room of the seamy Macleay Street hotel':

I could feel my moustache trembling with rage, Hilary sitting smooth and silky in front of an exercise book. 'What do you think you are doing?' I asked. 'Writing my memoirs'. (White 1987:26–27)

This passage, which begins with a parodic juxtapositioning of a hirsute, 'masculine' Alex with a depilated, 'feminine' Hilary, ends up by staging a complete role reversal. Alex, cast insistently in the position of memoir-writer, now has her role taken over by her husband. Subject to the distorting lens of White's own bifurcated vision as editor and actor in the text, the roles of husband and wife are replicated/duplicated in such a way that gender is effectively denaturalised. Who exactly is playing whom: Alex/Hilary, or vice versa? As Garber (1995) comments:

'[V]ice versa' derives '[f]rom the Latin phrase meaning 'with reversal of the regular order, conversely'. 'Vice' here comes from the same word as 'vicinity', or place. Thus vice versa; places turned; contrariwise. (p. 14)

Gendered identities fail to be reproduced or enacted faithfully in the novel and, in this regard, it is significant that Hilary should accuse his wife of having made their home '[a] stage for [her] performances' (White 1987:27). For it is the house in *Memoirs*, which is reconfigured as theatre and hence as a heterotopic space that recalls similar spaces in *The Aunt's Story*. This divests the notion of 'home' of its traditional function as a ubiquitous signifier of a mythologised domestic order commensurate with the nuclear family as valorised heterosexual norm. Even the Dobbins's home that Alex uses as a refuge later on, with Mollie and Frank acting as substitute parents, has elements that preclude its idealisation. The surface impression of wholesomeness is interrupted by Alex's image of Mollie's loaves of dough resembling 'babies my surrogate mother and I had prepared for their holocaust' (White 1987:51). This highlights what Edelman (1998:21–22)

refers to as the 'strategically misrecognized narcissism endlessly animating pronatalism'. The bizarre and disturbing symbolism here implicitly subverts the stereotypical associations of homosexuality as a perversion of the procreative injunction enshrined in marriage, recontextualising such associations as reflecting instead the sterility that shadows the mundane rituals of suburban life.

In White's novel, then, gender is performed outside the frame within which it is traditionally depicted, being rendered instead as masque/mask, as an appearing that, to use Butler's (1990) words, reduces 'all being to a form of appearing, the appearance of being, with the consequence that all gender ontology is reducible to the play of appearances' (p. 47). In terms of the transgendered border-crossing, which is portrayed in the second transvestite scene, there is a slippage between appearance and ontological essence. 'Appearing' is manipulated in the service of an active deception that highlights all gender as imposture, as something that has constantly to be re-enacted in order to pose as real. As a corollary to this, so-called 'true' heterosexuals can only ever be said to *pass* as straight. This is a passing that always implies a precariousness, an openness to a queering appropriation by homosexuals who can also pass as their heterocounterparts, male or female, a form of surpassing mimicry that undoes the categorical notion of gender even as it is being asserted.

Conclusion

The final pages of *Memoirs*, whilst appearing to subscribe to the tenets of resolution and closure which traditional narratives afford, actually subvert the promise that they superficially offer. This is already hinted at in Alex's tour of outback Australia, which has obvious resonances with the expedition into the interior undertaken in *Voss*. In *Memoirs*, the linearity of the male quest motif is subjected to a parodic deflation by virtue of the farcical theatricalisation with which it is associated and also through the deliberately ironic names of the towns through which the 'actors' pass: Toogood, Baggary Baggary (with its punning association with buggery), Aberpissup and others. Even Alex's death is pure theatre, described in terms which partake of Gothic melodrama: 'The skull fell back against the pillows, a trickle of garnet-coloured blood escaping from one corner of the mouth' (White 1987:183). In keeping with the constant reduplication which occurs in the novel, Alex's death is mirrored in Santa Chiara's mummy that Patrick and Hilda visit in Assisi as part of their overseas tour. Looking at the embalmed remains, Patrick remembers a similar figure (White 1987):

The candles, the incense, the glitter of embroideries, could not prevent me re-living a personal relationship with a barely human figure in another setting, life slipping from the dark skull as we watched. I could have sworn I could see a thread of garnet-coloured blood trickling from a corner of Santa Chiara's mouth. (p. 189)

Significantly, Patrick and Hilda have already been told by a Franciscan that the 'saint' is a fake. This carries an implicit reminder of the equivocation that transvestism occasions

between an original and copied, or artefactual, gender. As Slavoj Žižek remarks, in Bergstrom's (ed. 1999) book, *Endless Night: Cinema and Psychoanalysis, Parallel Histories: if an ironic imitation of an "original" ... succeeds too well, this means that, in a sense, the original itself is already a fake, that its status is that of ironic imitation*' (p. 122).

Upon Patrick and Hilda's return to Australia, the former realises (White 1987):

[M]ost forcibly that [Hilda's] mother had taken her revenge. Years ago Alex had said, 'I often think, Patrick, you should marry Hilda. I don't mean for sexual reasons. I'm sure my Hilda abhors the whole idea of the sexual act. But so that she could have something to look after. (p. 192)

Even the apparent resolution of this fake 'marriage' is, however, submitted to a further ironic twist that queers its superficial appropriateness. That he is now 'Hilda's possession ... To be dressed and undressed. Cosseted. Her thermometer always at the ready' (White 1987:192), means that White only superficially occupies the role of Hilda's putative 'husband'. As part of the novel's last pun, the fact that Patrick is finally installed in Alex's home and bedroom, to be '[c]osseted' by her daughter, actually means that he has taken Alex's place and become a 'Mummy'. By merging with his own creation, White confuses the boundary between author/authored, original and simulacrum, performing in the space of his own undoing and making his text an unattainable script that ultimately eludes even the actors themselves.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

Author's contributions

I am the sole author of the work.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article, as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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