Against the Monotonous Surge: Patrick White's Metafiction

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ABSTRACT

For the most part, Patrick White's continued interest in the self-reflexive genre has been overlooked by critics who ascribe the fiction's introspective and self-conscious nature to the author's pathological fascination with himself. However, against such reductive readings, White's metafiction is reminding readers not to persuade themselves that they can unequivocally interpret any texts. Rather than subordinate his fiction to another thematic reading, this study endeavours to show where White's texts assert their metacritical commentaries. From The Living and the Dead to Memoirs of Many in One, White's diverse metafictional strategies play a revelatory role in understanding texts which have often been characterized as enigmatic texts of uncertainty.

Résumé

Pour une large part, l'autoreprésentation dans les textes de Patrick White évoque, selon ses lecteurs, une fascination pathologique de l'auteur avec lui-même. En dépit des analyses qui risquent de simplifier ses récits, la rhétorique métatextuelle de White - qui est effectivement explicite - vise à rendre lisible la polysémie du langage. En ceci, White rejette l'idée que l'interprétation consiste en l'extraction d'une seule signification. De la même manière, ce thèse part de questionnements sur le métalangage en repérant les énoncés métatextuels dans l'oeuvre de White. Sa stratégie discursive augmente la lisibilité de ses textes lorsqu'ils démontrent les procédés produisant la fiction et la réalité. Contrairement à ce que l'on croit souvent, le discours de White cherche à s'établir contre les codes traditionnels; son métalangage est plutôt révélateur qu'énigme.

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For Punkusonlulu

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INTRODUCTION: A Question of Authority

> People nowadays prefer to judge rather than to understand, to answer rather than ask, so that the voice of the novel can hardly be heard over the noisy foolishness of human certainties.
> Milan Kundera

Metafiction is writing "that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" (Hutcheon, Narcissistic 1). The easiest way to describe how metafiction works is to note that it proceeds by drawing the reader's attention to its existence as an imaginary construction. Techniques for exposing the narrative's self-consciousness include writing embedded narratives; weaving fact and fiction together; having characters know that they exist as linguistic signs - in short, metafiction employs rhetorical gestures to express the text's refusal to be delimited.

Patrick White's metafiction reminds readers not to persuade themselves that they can unequivocally interpret, not just his texts, but all texts. Charles L. Griswold says that Socrates rejected writing because of the danger that writing would "not adequately induce self-questioning in its readers or author" (212). Metafiction does not reject writing, but it does recall Socrates's refusal to allow the written word to "persuade ourselves too easily that we are in irrefutable possession of the truth, while in fact we are not" (Griswold 207).

The four texts I have selected for discussion represent the various phases in White's career. It is apparent that the critical and the creative meet in all of his writing. In The Living and the Dead (1941), autogenous individuals are texts to be read and misread; in Voss (1957), White's historiographic metafiction explores how history is written/invented; in

his metafictional self-portrait, Flaws in the Glass (1981), White examines how others have "written" Patrick White and shows how he writes/does not write himself in Flaws; in Memoirs of Many in One (1986), we encounter a corrective against proscriptive readings which ignore evidence of textual instabilities, both within and without the frames of fictive novels. I have not made any attempt to draw White's other novels into this study; after all, systematic approaches are both arbitrary and inimical to metafiction. Indeed, the texts themselves - in the diversity of their metafictional strategies - resist such encompassment.

Although Patrick White received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973, an award which recognizes (and validates) whatever achievement the Royal Swedish Academy discerns in the author's work, he cannot be characterized as a well-known author. However, to read much White criticism would be to reject his writing before even looking at it. Alan Lawson's inventory of "recurrent problems" in White criticism includes "an obsession with categorizing characters, their experiences, and White's responses" (280). By citing White's "epic and psychological narrative art,"[1] the Royal Swedish Academy helped reify a largely presumptive discourse on White's writing. Concerned for the most part with what his fiction means, critics overlook how White's novels mean and how literary self-reflexivity might signal more than just an author's pathological fascination with himself.

Of the many trends in White criticism which dishearten Lawson, he emphasizes the "self-contained isolation, the lack of critical debate, and the patronizing assumption" that each reader-critic "is the first to understand White genuinely" (282). Alternately, a metafictional reading of White's texts cannot pretend to be conclusive. As Linda Hutcheon notes, the metafiction itself "constitutes its own first critical commentary"

(Narcissistic 6). A metafictional reading can, however, show where the texts assert their self-reflexive strategies, thereby restoring critical discourses which might otherwise be made subordinate to the reader's own critical strategies. Metafiction shows that "the success of explicative criticism," to use Howard Nemerov's words, "is exactly its failure" (877). What this metafictional reading hopes to do is respond to Lawson's call for ambitious readings of White's fiction, a call which - more importantly - comes from White's texts themselves.

In Postmodern Fiction, Larry McCaffery suggests that "it might not occur to most readers or critics to discuss John Irving's The World According to Garp" as "experimental or metafiction - it clearly is; it just may seem beside the point to label it as such" (xxvii). I mention this because White's novels might not even be envisaged as metafiction. Although metafiction recognizes self-reflexive predecessors such as Cervantes' Don Quixote and Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy, it is a postmodernist phenomenon which concerns itself largely with self-consciously experimental fiction dating from the late 1950s by diverse authors such as Vladimir Nabokov, Kathy Acker, and John Barth. McCaffery admits that his interest lies with this more experimental or "radical" metafiction (xxvii).

White's earliest novels, however, date back to the late 1930s. And although they obviously employ metafictional techniques, other labels (including "realistic," "mystical," "Jungian," and "Gothic") have become tautologies in White criticism. This is why it may be useful to identify White's metafiction.

As Alan Lawson notes, White is usually blamed "for not measuring up to the critic's hypothesis" (288). Signs of the critical methodologies within

White's creative texts are largely ignored or dismissed as incidental to such analyses. Recently, one reviewer concluded that,

> In general his work is not that of an innovator; on the contrary, he may fairly be seen as the heir of the great nineteenth-century realistic novelists. Admittedly the version of reality conveyed by most of his work is not the photographic fidelity usually associated with the term realism; nevertheless, in form (most of the novels are cast in the mold of a Bildungsroman), in style and in intention the novels and most of the shorter fiction reveal a strong affinity with the solid social realism of the nineteenth century. (Riemer, "Back to the Abyss" 363)

Working against such reductive readings, White's metafiction shows up the critics, illustrating the weaknesses of the molds in which they have tried to cast his self-reflexive fiction.

Ronald Sukenick insists that "[j]ust as one cannot say that a piece of music is 'about' its melody, one should not say that a piece of fiction is 'about' its subject matter - subject matter is just one element of the composition" (433). White's texts not only echo this sentiment, they also examine the role which readers and critics have played in "composing" his novels. Interpretations, White suggests, may be useful, but they can hardly be considered authoritative, given the representational nature of language.

Patrick White is repelled by "the monotonous surge of information" in all spheres (Flaws 214). And this monotonous surge, as Lawson testifies, has certainly overwhelmed White criticism. Instead of acting like Mrs. McD. in Memoirs of Many in One, who speaks of "a cairngorm she found years ago in the Cairngorm Mountains on an expedition organised by a gemstone society she belonged to," which is to say that she didn't discover anything, readers might heed White's metafiction (99-100). Ironically, this means heeding one's own mind, while acknowledging that others are doing likewise.

CHAPTER ONE: THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

> There may be many ways to cook goose but the method we choose and fix on, becoming our only one, defines us, as we define it.
> William Gass

Patrick White's second novel, The Living and the Dead (1941), is often dismissed by critics as the flawed work of a young author, a necessary failure on the road to artistic integrity and subsequent critical success. Thus the obvious influence of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence prompts many critics to write off The Living and the Dead as a derivative text.[2] However, the recognition of these influences is crucial for our purpose, which is to identify the self-reflexive moments in the text and to consider how these moments generate meanings. Insofar as he borrows from literary potentates, White locates his novel within the existing literary tradition, just as the characters in The Living and the Dead self-consciously arrange their lives according to texts, be they rules of etiquette, socialist manifestoes, works of literature, or the texts of popular films.

Admittedly, paradigms change. As Ihab Hassan remarks:

> Criticism, like Literature, is a historical institution; it is neither a Platonic triangle nor a stone pyramid enduring Time under a yellow sun. Our ideas both of Criticism and of Literature are changing, have changed. (23)

Today, the appropriation of literary discourses need not be cited as irrefutable evidence of "immaturity in the writer's technique" (Walsh 14). William Walsh says of Eden's emotional outburst to her boyfriend:

> This seems to me to be Lawrence not quite caught, Lawrence distorted, Lawrence as an unabsorbed influence. Here, when Eden should above all be voicing the truth the novel is supremely meant to distil, we have a curiously mechanical and imitative jargon. (17)

These objections are quashed, however, by the novel's dialogic dissolution of definitive interpretations. Ironically, Walsh's appropriation of the text's "truth" mirrors the translative practices of White and of his characters. Indeed, Walsh rejects the "imitative jargon" which testifies to White's metafictional enterprise.

More specifically, the rehashed Lawrence foregrounds Eden's linguistic predicament. On coming home from college, she decides to rid herself of sentimentality by reading "with more direction" (147). Consequently, she discovers and reads Marx's Capital. Her new social awareness also involves her participation at political meetings. And yet, Eden soon tires of what she calls a "political lie" (253); what she would really like is to unite people with a "capacity for living" (254). "That," she announces, "can be the only order. Without ideological labels. Labels set a limit at once. And there is no limit to man" (254). Eden, not unlike her critic William Walsh, would like to "rescue the truth" (253) from the "scattering of cliché and terminology" (187) - another authoritatively transmitted discourse - which has replaced the bourgeois conventions she had discarded (148). She is rebelling against what George Steiner calls the "essential bookishness" of Marxist ideologies, derived from yet another canon of texts (5). Eden, however, is unaware that the very act of naming man both labels and limits him. In his seminal text, Of Grammatology, Jacques Derrida suggests that "man calls himself man only by drawing limits excluding his other from the play of supplementarity" (224). Because the act of defining objects relies on first establishing difference, Eden's wish for a unity of beings is impossible, the novel implies, unless it is maintained imaginatively.

Our constitutive license when reading The Living and the Dead is thematized by White, who implicates not only ideologies and books, but also people, as texts which are subject to misreadings. This is the case when

Mrs. Standish, who is dining with a friend and interested in a saxophonist, notices her son Elyot at the same nightclub (259). Previously, she thought she had "read criticism in Elyot's face" when she introduced him to the musician, Wally (243). Elyot's only concern, however, was for the package which Wally had delivered. Mrs. Standish had not "read" her son's face at all, but had transformed her own guilt about dating Wally into Elyot's discontent (237). Now, watching Wally play, the woman frets because of her poor interpretation. One might venture that Mrs. Standish's reading of Elyot parallels the activity of reading The Living and the Dead since, as George Steiner notes, both acts are "objectivized" with respect to the reader's personally-willed end (3).

The probative exercise continues when Elyot notices his mother. Quite possibly, the vision of the scholar (Elyot) is no better than that of the housewife, for Elyot believes that he has not been seen (261). He imagines that if his mother had seen him, she would have made his affair with Muriel, his date, "official in words" (261). Again, it remains for us to recognize that White's novel engages the reader (in the text/of the text) in the dissemination of meaning.[3] This role is reinforced when we read that Mrs. Standish has decided not to make it "official in words" because she considers Elyot's love life "too obvious even to suggest" to her friend (261). What are we to make of the various versions of reality proffered by White's characters? As this self-conscious passage suggests, our difficulty stems in part from the constitutive nature of language.

Every character in The Living and the Dead is a writer, imaginatively writing personal versions of himself/herself, along with idiosyncratic tales about friends and family. Elyot differs only in that he writes about this writing; The Living and the Dead recounts his imaginative version

of the autogenous characters' lives. Not only are the characters writers, but they are also avid readers. As a young girl, Kitty Goose (whose name echoes nursery rhymes and silly kittens) sets up a personalized reading program: "She began to read. She read poetry" (23). The short, crisp sentences confer a rhetorical certitude on this undertaking; it is clearly a good decision. She reads Swinburne, William Morris and Maurice Hewlett, after which she weaves their similes "into verses of her own" (23). Connie Tiarks copies "passages from Whitman and Tagore into a leather notebook" (150). And Wally Collins speaks with what some consider a "common voice" (240), although he maintains he has mastered the "code of the grey-haired mother, Deanna Durbin, and the Queen of England" (233).

The difference between Connie's and Kitty's reading lies in the fact that the latter takes the words of Swinburne and integrates them into her own writing, whereas Connie merely transcribes poets' words from one book to another. White anachronistically echoes Michel Foucault's argument that copying is a negative activity, the copyist being reduced to the status of "the books being copied" (109).

Gerald Blenkinsop is another copyist; the "sop" in his name evokes his spongelike nature. He has married above his class and is convinced that he is finally "inside, as opposed to outside" (206). A self-confessed "Wellington in the tactics of snobbery" (205), he knows precisely how he should act:

> Gerald's was a mind of excellent taste. He was proficient in the right names. He read The Times with his breakfast, he sprinted with a possible hare by glancing through the New Statesman at his club, he knew how much money to put on Somerset Maugham. (205)

In truth, this passage implies that Gerald is not in the race because his knowledge is superficial, the product of his father-in-law's having "inspired" in him "a certain emulation" (206). This emulation negates any

genius Gerald believes he is graced with; he races only with a "possible" hare, the allusion to the fable of the Tortoise and the Hare suggesting that this copyist is a loser.

Although the narrative derides Connie's "cheerful aptitude for cliché" (149), Gerald's inspired "emulation" (205), and Muriel's mannerisms, "each tested already by convention" (292), The Living and the Dead suggests that repetition or intertextuality is inevitable.[4] In the search for meaning or purpose in life, Elyot concludes that men and women sustain a "perpetual walking in the same tangle" (353-4), the expression of which becomes "a thin and timeless echo" (354). White's borrowing from various authors accedes to the inevitable appropriation of extant discourses. Mrs. Standish also espouses such intertextuality:

> I shall tell the story of my life, announced Mrs. Standish.
> We want new ones, Biddy groaned.
> There is nothing new, said Mrs. Standish. Or does that sound Chinese? Translated from the Chinese. (325)

The message is clear. When Mrs. Standish wonders whether she has borrowed words from the Chinese, she actually reinforces her insistence that "there is nothing new."

The Living and the Dead emphasizes both language's offensive and defensive capacities. When Kitty meets her future in-laws, the mother's "teeth seized a word and worried it. There was a perpetual killing of words, as if someone in particular might stoop to pick one up, and use it in desperate reply" (34). She marshalls the conversation, offering statements "on a charger to Kitty Goose" (33). The mother's tactics are meant to keep Kitty, a working-class girl, from appropriating a privileged discourse. But the zealous offensive fails. Once married, Kitty (now called Catherine Standish) finds herself lying "in a hot torment of sheets and the dubious comfort of eau-de-Cologne" (54), just as Willy's mother would take "to her

sofa with a pad soaked in eau-de-Cologne" (30). Before long, Catherine senses "that she had learnt by heart all the conversation she had ever made" (68), as indeed she has: "You had to import a brand-new mechanism to cope with the new person, the other values" (37). Examples of defensive language include Muriel hiding "behind the barricade of platitude" (222) at a party; Elyot "making a screen of words to offer to other faces" (226) at the same party; and Catherine creating the comfort she cherishes, "safe again behind the language she had learnt to speak on her afternoons" (258).

Gestures, like words, can also harm others. Thus, when Muriel offers a terse reply to Connie, Muriel's smile "flashed out quickly to destroy, the lumpy, asking face" (224). Instead of writing "to destroy the lumpy, asking face," White has punctuated the sentence so as to emphasize that the object of Muriel's smile is secondary to her urge "to destroy." Muriel's hostility may harbour the fear of vulnerability attending communication, identified by Christopher Norris as the "risk that goes along with entrusting one's words to the ear of the other" (64).

Elyot, the narrator of this novel, realizes that even the most ardent attempts to understand the words of others rarely result in more than a "groping behind the dry symbols of words" (308). The problem in placing too much faith in words arises when Eden and her boyfriend lodge at a house with the Hovis sign outside. During tea, Eden suddenly becomes belligerent:

> She filled her mouth with bread and jam. And then the lid was off. It was all up with the parlour.
> Why? she said, her voice positively shouted, and full of bread and butter. Why is it never Hovis? she said.
> Why should it be Hovis?
> But the sign outside. And there never is.
> Do you mind? he asked.
> No. But I like to know. If a sign.
> I expect they just don't keep it, he said.
> That's one explanation, she said. But it isn't satisfying. (273-74)

Although Joe intends to soothe Eden's feelings, his words prove to be of limited value in filling the vacancy left by the broken promise of the Hovis sign. Eden is contending with the sign's tyranny, which has signalled, in Robert Spire's words, "the absence rather than the presence of reality" (104).

The limitations associated with the use of language are often explored with a sense of humour. For example, when Catherine feels sentimental about life with her husband, she hopes that nothing will "come between her and the expression of what, at moments like these, she felt that she felt for Willy" (60). The reader might as well forego interpretive speculation since the redoubling ("she felt that she felt") undermines the existence of feelings she is not expressing. In truth, the phrase collapses; the woman's affirmation affirms nothing. Dubious statements throughout the novel demonstrate that its coherence is dependent on the reader's particular organization of eclectic information into a meaningful system.

The act of naming does help confer stability to objects. When Kitty marries, she likes to "hear the tradesmen call her Mrs. Standish" because the name establishes "her position more securely than anything else" (37). However, as Linda Hutcheon remarks, "labels are always comforting, but often also castrating" (Narcissistic 2). Thirty years later, Catherine Standish is not quite as pleased with the labels others are attaching to her. Now she feels old and rejected, and she wishes everyone would "tear up the labels, throw them away," even though she also suspects that without them, people might not "recognize" her at all (324). Catherine's suspicions are qualified by the word "perhaps," which implies that the frame which she trangresses - the one valorizing youth and beauty - is dispensable (324). The novel's ambiguous narrative sustains this and other questions by manipulating the "cultural and intertextual frames" Umberto Eco says we bring to reading (8).

When Elyot's sister is named Eden, we are initially led to believe that there is no reason for that particular choice:

> In a moment of romantic stress, her mother decided on the name of Eden. There was no particular reason for this, which made it embarrassing for ever after when people asked you to explain. It was just that, lying in bed on a peaceful morning, Mrs. Standish decided on the name. Behind it perhaps a sense of her own frustration. But she never pinned this down. (64)

The assertion that "no particular reason" was involved is countered with the supposition that "perhaps" the name signals the mother's sense of frustration. This guess can be attributed to either Elyot, Eden, or Mrs. Standish; the reader cannot fix the narrative voice with certainty. We do, however, easily identify with the voice when one possible reason for the choice is suggested, only to be implicitly set to task for attempting to discern motives which have never been determined. A distinctive feature of The Living and the Dead is this uncertainty, which speaks of Elyot's striving with himself, his acquaintances, and his writing. The text is punctuated with speculative remarks which encourage us to consider how desires shape both its writing and its reading:

> Perhaps her origin and childhood had shaped the hands of Mrs. Goose. (22)
>
> Probably it was mostly like this. (135)
>
> He had no control, it seemed, over his own intentions. (151)
>
> Either you began to accept the insignificance of your own activities inside a larger pattern, or it was just plain indifference. Or not this. (303)

Far from being nihilistic, the ambivalent statements invalidate the stale certainty of either/or thinking in favour of eclectic understanding. This may be the crux of Elyot's discovery: "But outside there was a cracking, a splitting of the darkness, that dismissed the two alternatives. He still

failed to grasp, but beyond the rotting and death there was some suggestion of growth" (344-45).

Ostensibly, there is a reason for Elyot's name. We are told that Mrs. Standish hoped to get a reaction from her mother-in-law by naming Elyot after her. Elyot does benefit - he is remembered in his grandmother's will (129). However, what is important here is that, in spite of the disclosed reason, we will still confer personal meanings on the name. For instance, "Elyot" surely alludes to the poet-critic T.S. Eliot, another weaver of texts. Indeed, Elyot Standish is a diffident aesthete reminiscent of Eliot's creation, J. Alfred Prufrock. Second, poetic wastelands enrich White's text. In one example, Mrs. Standish stands in a "marble wasteland," mentioned twice in four lines to reinforce the image (291). Further, "Standish" is an extremely apposite pun, being an archaic term denoting a "stand for ink, pens, and other writing materials."[5] Elyot's surname calls attention to the fact that he is a writing tool for Patrick White in the production of this self-reflexive novel.

Our reading of The Living and the Dead is guided by Elyot's analogy of the "two Chinese boxes, one inside the other," a trope not only for Elyot and his house, but also for his embedded narrative (17;357):

> They were two receptacles, he felt, the one containing the material possessions of those who had lingered in its rooms, the other the aspirations of those he had come in contact with. Even that emotional life he had not experienced himself, but sensed, seemed somehow to have grown explicit. It was as if this emanated from the walls to find interpretation and shelter in his mind. (17;357)

The direction and shape of the novel are therefore guided by Elyot's "sense" of an emotional life which "seemed" to have grown explicit. Consequently, the postulate "as if" appears throughout the text and is shown to generate the conclusions made by Elyot and by the other characters. These suppositions are, as Samuel Weber notes, necessary heuristic devices (150). But,

above all, White's highly-structured frame of identical passages emphasizes Elyot's creative license in the dissemination of the text. Elyot may or may not know about his sister's abortion, which may or may not have been performed. Similarly, the suspicions harboured by Catherine about her husband's infidelity may be entirely Elyot's fabrication. White's narrative framing draws attention to the fact that our scrutiny of his text coexists with Elyot's scrutiny both of how texts are realized and how they are interpreted.

With regard to Elyot's role in writing the text, some readers have insisted that the novel is flawed because readers are forced to assume that Elyot's life improves - the novels ends before these improvements have been written.[6] This complaint ignores the many indications of Elyot's current self, who has already changed and is writing the book which is being read. Theorist Valerie Raoul explains that evidence of a character's current self is manifested when he or she poses questions - often rhetorical - to him or herself (41). Elyot's presence as writer of the text is thereby revealed when he suspects that he

> drifted on the wave of someone else's decision. And behind it all there was still a suspicion that all this might be directionless. Was there a sudden and self-decisive, an undoubted moment of clarity? (117)

Here, Elyot's rhetorical question reveals the auto-critical nature of The Living and the Dead. We obviously know that Elyot is a fictional character who drifts on the wave of another's decision, that of the text's author, Patrick White. And Elyot suggests that he "knows" he is a fiction. As a result, the supreme moment of clarity might be the reader's appreciation of White's provocative strategies which explore the inscription of texts.

The expository sections at the beginning of the novel also disclose Elyot's current self; indeed, his voice summarizes the characters whom the reader has yet to meet:

> Outside in the street the sound of traffic pointed to a less familiar present, that the house, that his mother's voice rose up to deny, her: Elyot, Adelaide is here, or: Do come in for a moment, Elyot, this is Mr. Collins, he plays in a band, isn't that interesting? Even Eden's train had rumbled into a lumber room of images, where Joe Barnett sat in a corner, looking at his cap, his hands, his knees, and Muriel Raphael in a Tissot boater leant against the mantelpiece. (16)

Elyot attends to his past with his enumeration; the rest of the text records his present attitudes toward these characters and events. Admittedly, it remains for the reader to realize that Elyot is, in fact, writing this self-reflexive novel by giving the characters "interpretation and shelter in his mind" (17;357).

Finally, the ironic tone which informs the novel also underlines the antithesis between the seriously smug young writer we encounter and the present Elyot, whose narrative projects an ability to laugh at his own pretensions. For example, when Elyot obliges his mother by going on an errand for her, he catches his face, "sideways,"

> in the window of what had once been Mme. Adorée's, which was now antiques. The bits of bric-à-brac, reminiscent of his mother, reminded him that technically, to the detached observer, he was all filial affection. He kicked his foot against some ironwork and nearly fell. (198)

The Elyot who recounts this incident confides to us the inanity of his previous presumption. Thus, his lofty thoughts about his filial affection are juxtaposed with the reality of his near stumble. "Technically," we should not expect a "detached observer" to have any idea about the purpose of Elyot's excursion. This passage serves as yet another reminder of the role the reader must play in recreating the novel, for we are left to

discern when Elyot slyly ("sideways") thematizes the slipperiness of language by playing metafictional games with the reader.

Of the many narrative techniques employed by White to insist on the semantic opaqueness of the text, the shifts between the impersonal third-person narration and the second-person "you" are most emphatic. The reader will, occasionally, empathize with the new voice:

> He heard the quick gathering of her voice, the determined planting of her feet on the platform as she drew him with her into the world of trivial incident, and the things you talked about before the train moved out. (8)

In this example, the use of "you" evokes ready understanding because the reader is familiar with the customary discussions which take place at train stations. Often, however, the introduction of the second-person does not forge a link between the reader and the addressee:

> You marched down the hill, and you were getting somewhere, in the warm, dusty afternoon, either Somerset or Flanders, you were marching towards some something which it was difficult to describe. (100)

The private nature of Elyot's sense of progress is marked by the self-reflexive term "some something"; his indeterminate goal is modified by indeterminacy. The awkward sentence construction mars what would otherwise have been an emphatic conclusion. Our attention is now directed toward the question of language's ability to convey the importance of Elyot's progress, even though that progress does not appear to be amenable to any one deterministic explanation or description. Similarly, the vacillatory narrative voices preserve our sense of what Foucault calls the pervasive "enigma of language," the heart of White's metafictional discourse (25).

Another source of ambiguity in The Living and the Dead is the omission of quotation marks, which throws into doubt the origin of the reported discourse. Conventionally, the use of quotation marks in novels pretends to give readers the literal content of the characters' talk. The lack,

therefore, symbolizes a refusal to delimit the text authoritatively. Artificial consistency cannot, we infer, be imposed on a novel in which words blow about both the characters and the reader "in little furtive gusts," as they do in this text (86).

Although Elyot distrusts words and their "rattle," he pursues the life of a writer (78). This decision is shadowed by self-doubt:

> Out of his bewilderment he had taken refuge behind what people told him was a scholarly mind. He hung on gratefully, after a month or two of uncertainty, to remarks made by tutors at Cambridge and the more wishful and hence more helpful remarks of his mother. (176)

His subsequent writing, "made out of the requisite notes," is favourably received (177). In discussing Elyot's analyses of literary figures, "critics remarked on his taste, on his catholicity, on his clarity of style" (177). Elyot says he is his own worst critic, and considers his work as playing with salt, "little mounds that rose, only so far, that fell, dry, pure, and limited" (177). Apparently, he rues the fact that he is, in effect, praised for adhering to the parameters established by the academic community. His actions are dictated, much as they were when Elyot was a child. His freedom will be achieved through his participation in the writing of White's self-reflexive text.

The power of institutional endorsement is again evoked, albeit obliquely, when Adelaide Blenkinsop struggles to enjoy her own appearance "in spite of Molyneux" (204). In the introduction to Molyneux's Question: Vision, Touch and the Philosophy of Perception, Michael J. Morgan explains that although Molyneux's name is not well-known today, he was a pioneer in his field, as was his good friend, John Locke (6). Molyneux's investigations led him to conclude that man's knowledge of experience was not innate, but relied on the verbal transmission of ideas (6). Interestingly enough, The Living and the Dead substantiates these deductions, self-reflexively

arguing that the words and actions of each character originate in other, often authoritative, texts. White's subtext, which is signalled by the single word "Molyneux," implies that we should guard against the complacent acceptance of ideas just because they are endorsed by exclusionary, authoritative communities. Thus, although Molyneux's conclusions were dismissed by his peers so that he is now a largely unknown figure (as contrasted with Locke), they do have merit, as White clearly demonstrates.

Against normative paradigms, The Living and the Dead's extended metadiscourse challenges the limits of formulaic understanding (which nevertheless remains useful), and extols the value of what we might call "irrational" beliefs - if, that is, they are the result of an individual's engaged or philosophic inquiry. It is worth noting that although the purpose of speech is to communicate with an other, White's novel shows that a person's discourse is predominantly self-serving, relieving to some extent his or her personal anxieties. Accordingly, much of the information in this text really comments on Elyot. For example, his disgust with Connie's attempt to "identify herself with Art" ironically speaks of his own condition (179):

> The fervid desire of a certain type of feminine mind to identify itself with objects, with nature, with art, drained the dignity from these. They existed in a detachment of their own. He avoided emotional commentary, especially when made by his own reflected face, the part of him that ventured through the glass into the Italian field, out of his own body, away from the environment it had taken, the habits it had formed. This was dangerous because it verged on the irrational. Twentieth-century London was eminently rational. He was glad of it. (179)

Contrary to what Elyot declares, he is not avoiding "emotional commentary" at all. The novel supposedly speaks fully of "that emotional life" which finds "interpretation and shelter in his mind" (17). Furthermore, the idea of an "eminently rational" London is repeatedly undermined by White's

insistence that although rationality may be intended or assumed, it is hardly ever achieved. Eden's illogical equation of her love for Joe will stand as a marker of London's rationality:

> Oh dear, she sighed sleepily, I am impotent, quite impotent, but in love, in love, this has happened, and this, and this, then why not. (276)

The banality of this equation (of all equations?) is intimated by Eden's redundancy. Proof of her love is not forthcoming. However, the text suggests, if Eden's discourse satisfies her own needs, then our opinions on its merits are superfluous.

Elyot's imaginative excursion into the lives of his family and acquaintances does not clarify but rather upholds their mystery. In fact, Elyot realizes he can only write a semantically open text, admitting that

> there were still moments of difference, there would always be the moments of difference, man-made, that you stumbled over. (248)

The metafictional address to "you" enjoins the reader to accept that both Elyot and the reader are destined to stumble over the "man-made" differences inherent in all texts, the irreconciliable ambiguities which are written into the text and into the act of communication itself. Elyot freely likens himself to a "closed door," reminding the reader that any interpretation of the text which attempts to open the "closed door" (248) does so without necessarily securing what lies within.

White's novel endorses individuation as a guiding principle, to the detriment of genuine communication. When Wally's "common voice" upsets Catherine, she feeds him with words in an attempt to enhance his desirability (240). And because he is entertaining the possibility of having an affair with the woman, Wally tries to accommodate her: "He wanted to, what she had said, express, while still failing, while realizing the difficulty of this, his gratitude" (241). The elliptical sentence evinces Wally's

aggravation as he struggles with a foreign vocabulary. When he continues this charade, he feels that "he was talking like something never before, like something in a book" (241). Here, White establishes the fictionality which exists in both literary and extra-literary discourse: the text reminds the reader that Wally is merely a fictional being, "something in a book," but we have also imaginatively brought this character to life, and this living person experiences the perils of speaking a language which is strange to him.

Wally soon tires of his role in Catherine's "superannuated play" (240):

> Sometimes you felt you had stuck around too long, and what was the game anyhow, the game you didn't understand, the words, the meanings. He began to feel free. (290)

His sense of freedom is commensurate with his refusal to speak someone else's language. Ironically, Catherine later follows the same course of action. Although she looks a fright in her red dress, she refuses to correct her "mistake" (316). Her self-orchestrated departure from what she "should" wear to a party frees her from the barren "marble wasteland" she has been foundering in since first dating Wally. This wasteland, we are told, has insisted that she "behave in such and such a way" and has kept her from heeding "any intuition of her own" (291). Both Catherine and Wally believe they are freeing themselves from the tyranny of the other's discourse. Their freedom also echoes Elyot's evasion of the rigid parameters upheld by the academic community, a liberation which is conveyed in The Living and the Dead as the freedom to welcome possibilities otherwise shelved as undesirable or irrational.

By means of negation and supposition, the novel evades a similar tyranny, that of an authoritative reading. Elyot therefore asserts that "[n]othing is done that is not tentative, depending on the wind for its

direction" (108). The "direction" that the text will take is dependent on its reader (the "wind"), who may subject the contents to one of any number of readings. At first glance, this would appear to insulate Elyot Standish and Patrick White from divergent interpretations. After all, Elyot is a "closed door" (248). Indeed, he seems anxious to avoid such analyses, insisting on "the discrepancy between himself and the remarks he made. Words were so seldom a literal translation" (150). And yet Elyot's profession as a writer and the text of The Living and the Dead itself invite, through their discourse, the very translations Elyot denounces. Patrick White has often expressed his vested interest in the interpretations academics accord his novels, upbraiding those who appropriate the texts with no regard for their truths. However, if the text's meaning can be no more than "tentative," as Elyot puts it, then isn't interpretive misunderstanding, as Christopher Norris puts it, the "very condition of linguistic possibility" (63)?

Ironically, many critics address White's apparent dogmatism with equally insistent conclusions. For example, Carolyn Bliss's study of The Living and the Dead regards issues as being

> reduced to simple antitheses. One is either alive or dead; death is bad; life is good; the interplay of opposites which White was developing in Happy Valley has virtually disappeared. (24)

In the desire to attribute a determinate meaning to the text, Bliss refuses White any growth as a novelist and further obliterates the ground of ambiguity in his novel. White's disdain for critics seems justified in view of the exigencies of his self-reflexive texts. But, then again, White's novels are far from being examples of aleatory writing. Christopher Norris's recent reading of Derrida argues that although texts are open to various interpretations, they "cannot be made to mean just anything" (63).

And we might choose to exonerate White for his vitriolic denouncements of critics on these grounds.[7] However, we are also bound to acknowledge that analysis must be supported with frequent references to the particular text's words. White's self-reflexive novel is infused with this question of authority, introducing what Norris calls the "problem of knowing what to make of a text which simultaneously asserts and undermines its own powers of theoretical command" (66).

There is no doubt that Elyot's self-scrutiny inspires him to legitimate ambiguity as his ruling ethos. Once assured that uncertainty prevails, he feels free to value the "sudden revelations" which occasionally emerge from the "dry symbols of words" (308). The marvel of these sudden, personal insights is contrasted with the innocuous virtue of watching movies:

> You adapted yourself as a matter of course, the relaxed body to plush and, more important, the relaxed mind to the play of the pre-determined incident. That was the virtue of the cinema. You knew on paying your two-and-six, you knew exactly what would happen. Outside your own uncertainty. (352)

"Outside" the "uncertainty" which Elyot now embraces, "you" are left with the arid virtue of the "pre-determined incident." There is no denying that Elyot's description of film appreciation applies equally to readers who expect that a novel, once read, will have left none of our questions unanswered. However, as is characteristic of self-conscious narrative, The Living and the Dead poses more questions to the reader than it appears to answer. Again, the appellation "you" extends beyond the world of the text and enjoins us to see the dynamism of the written word. Elyot, as principal spokesperson in this text, advocates the end of senseless or stuporous reading which expects the novel to resolve every mystery which arises therein with determinacy. He questions the value of a "relaxed mind" which, because it adapts itself to the conventions of popular films, is

necessarily weak, pliable - a valuable trait as far as film producers are concerned, but not for the unimaginative persons themselves. As Catherine Standish puts it, an active participation in the "tyranny of the making of one's own story" is much better than submission to the words of others because of that "something that happens in yourself" which represents a "supreme statement of your capacity for power" (316). Admittedly, by concretizing White's textual message of semantic openness, we contravene its freedom even as we appreciate it.

This distrust of language, along with the refusal to accord a simplistic representational validity to words, often move Elyot to silence, for "silence itself soothed" (306). Silence is valuable in much self-reflexive writing because, as Hélène Cixous argues, it remains "pregnant" with all possibilities (qtd. in Conley 123). Language's endless possibilities are therefore figured in the images of pregnancy found in The Living and the Dead.[8] And yet Elyot capitulates to the inevitable articulation of thought in words. Quite possibly, he writes with the consolation that his feelings cannot be univocally expressed, by either him or his readers, without distortion.

While waiting for his sister's train to arrive, Elyot notices that Eden

> was as stubborn in an attitude, as unchanging as a picture on the wall, the surprised child or the sulky flapper, was the same Eden in a different frame. (354)

The "different frame" is Elyot's imagination and is specific to him. Beyond this, White draws our attention to his novel, which is also as "unchanging as a picture on the wall" until the reader picks it up and reads it, thereby imbuing the text with a frame of his or her own making. Elyot's creative license, then, enables him to establish a common ground with his enigmatic sister:

> She was convinced of the rightness of this, just as you were convinced there was some other way, not so very different perhaps, the means different, if not the end. You were aware of the same end. The arch-enemies were the stultifying, the living dead. The living chose to oppose these, either in Eden's way, by the process of self-destruction, or by what, by what, if not an intenser form of living. (354)

Elyot continues to resist the reification of his self, allowing only that "perhaps" his way is not so different from that of Eden, who is going to Spain in support of the war. The words "or by what, by what" expose the engenderer, Elyot, writing his thougnts as they come to him, and point to the writer's ever-evolving discourse.

Finally, the phrase "the stultifying, the living dead" evinces the marvellous ambiguity of words because "living" and "dead" can be used to modify each other. In one context, the "living dead" alludes to those dead authors Elyot has studied, "living" by virtue of the actual use he makes of them (176-7; 220). Elyot successfully opposes these "living dead" by creating the text of The Living and the Dead, finally evading the tyranny of "correct approval from the Sunday press" which takes refuge in safe analyses of canonized authors (17). Alternately, the "living dead" alludes to people like Adelaide, Gerald and Muriel, who are "smothered in a plush complacency" (305). Both Elyot Standish and Patrick White defy these "living dead" by rousing the reader from a complacent reading of their novel. This metafictional text, as lifeless object, proves to be teeming with meaning if the reader, like Elyot and the text itself, relentlessly questions legitimized ideas. It also proposes that we continue this endless investigation, in the absence of final meanings, like Elyot, who, when he leaves us, is on a bus, "It was any bus," bound "nowhere in particular" (358). Armed with a new system which valorizes uncertainty, the diffident

writer emerges from the confines of his house, prepared to explore the possibilities of language:

> If only to touch these almost sentient faces into life, to reach across the wastes of sleep and touch into recognition with your hand, to listen to the voices, like the voices of people who wake and find they have come to the end of a journey, saying: Then we are here, we have slept, but we have really got here at last.
>
> He yawned. He felt like someone who had been asleep, and had only just woken. (358)

In apprehending the metafictional concerns of The Living and the Dead, the reader may very well have made Elyot's dream a reality.

CHAPTER TWO: VOSS

> He who investigates history is the same being
> as he who makes history.
> Wilhelm Dilthey
>
> Alas,
> Whither has wandered now my partial tongue
> When all remains untold which ye would hear!
> Percy Bysshe Shelley

Set in the 1840s, Voss (1957) tells the story of a German explorer who meets his tragic death in the Australian wilderness. Some readers of this novel are no doubt attracted by the fact that White based the plot on the life of the German explorer, Ludwig Leichhardt. On the dust jacket for Voss, White's publisher explains that "it was the true record of Ludwig Leichhardt, who died in the Australian desert in 1848, that suggested Voss to the author," which is not quite true if we are to believe White's version of the novel's genesis. In Flaws in the Glass (1981), White says that he had already "sketched the skeleton" for Voss when he came across a school textbook which suggested a "connection between Voss and Leichhardt" (104). He did borrow details "from the writings of those who found themselves enduring" Leichhardt's leadership, but he also insists on the difference between the "real Voss" and the "actual Leichhardt," favouring the authenticity of his character to the ostensible reality of Leichhardt as recorded by his companions (104). As noted in Australians: A History Dictionary, the constant "bickering" between the men and the "personal attacks on Leichhardt's character" would have undoubtedly affected the men's objectivity when they wrote in their journals (239). Moreover, contemporary reference texts, such as the Collins Australian Encyclopedia, suggest that Leichhardt is "remembered more for the mystery of his final disappearance

than for his achievements" (378). His life story, then, for all the journals and records which remain, is incomplete and open-ended. Ludwig Leichhardt's enigma serves as an ideal introduction to White's metafictional project in Voss, for its self-conscious preoccupation with writing emphasizes the creative or imaginative component in all narratives or texts, be they historical, literary, or ideological.

Voss abandons Germany and then Sydney, Australia for the rewards of the desert. He is disgusted by the words of "unseeing people" (27) even though, as Friedrich Nietzsche argues, "[a]ll seeing is essentially perspective, and so is all knowing" (255). The people of Sydney do believe they arrive at reasonable conclusions for everything, but their reason resembles that described by Hans Blumenberg: it "presents itself as the agency that establishes things rationally, even before its claims are fulfilled" (170). Tom Radclyffe's opinion of Johann Ulrich Voss illustrates how "reasonable" people determine truths without the benefit of evidence:

> "Today confirmed the impression I received at our meeting a few months ago," said Lieutenant Radclyffe. "A madman. But harmless mad."
> "Oh, Tom, what an accusation to make," said Mrs. Bonner, who was in a mood for kindness, "and with no grounds, at least that we can see - yet." (27)

Radclyffe does not even suffer the burden of proof since his opinion is evidently shared with Mrs. Bonner, who only objects with a quirk of kindness. Another a priori assessment of Voss is made by the townspeople who are already planning the statue they will build:

> What kind of man is he? wondered the public, who would never know. If he was already more of a statue than a man, they really did not care, for he would satisfy their longing to perch something on a column, in a square or gardens, as a memorial to their own achievement. They did, moreover, prefer to cast him in bronze than to investigate his soul, because all dark things made them uneasy. (109)

These citizens, in their predisposition to appropriate whatever will promote their own prestige, get the better of Nietzsche and his rejection of historiography as "retroactive confiscations" (qtd. in Hayden White, Metahistory 363) because they don't even wait for Voss's expedition to be history before rewriting it.

Mr. Bonner, Laura's uncle, believes he is a reasonable man, although the narrative intimates that the socially-sanctioned texts he regurgitates make his understanding worthless. Such texts are reductive and they leave their adherents imaginatively impotent:

> How people act or feel on specific occasions had been reduced for Mr. Bonner to the way in which he had been told people do act and feel. Within this rather rudimentary, if rigid, structure of behaviour, he himself did also behave with jolly or grave precision, according to rule. For such souls, the history primers and the newspapers will continue to be written. (103)

Mr. Bonner is not aware that his vision of things has been mediated by the imaginations of others. Paradoxically, he has no vision at all. Furthermore, the narrative edict that reductive history primers and newspapers "will continue to be written" challenges the reader to really consider the nature of such factual texts.

Words are both powerful and limited because, as Robert Anchor puts it, "until words are used by some one on a particular occasion for a particular purpose, they can mean anything or nothing" (131). To this, however, White's reader might want to suggest that even after they are used for a particular purpose, words can still mean anything or nothing. The narrative imparts the formidable latitude of communicative symbols when the explorers find some rock drawings:

> The simplicity and truthfulness of the symbols was at times terribly apparent, to the extent that each man interpreted them according to his own needs and level. (279)

And it is only when "any real attention" has been paid to the drawings that they may become intelligible (279). As Voss recognizes, the meaning of symbols is far from clear. Earlier, when Mr. Bonner intimates that Voss's expedition will occasion one outcome, Voss demurs:

> "You are aware, I should say, what it could mean?"
> "If we would compare meanings, Mr. Bonner," said the German, looking at each word as if it were a round pebble of mystical perfection, "we would arrive perhaps at different conclusions." (20)

Laura Bonner concurs with Voss's opinion when she is badgered by Dr. Badgery for an analysis of Voss:

> "And what manner of man is this German?"
> "I do not know," said Laura. "I cannot judge a person on superficial evidence. Sometimes," she added, for she had by now lived long enough, "it will even appear that all evidence is superficial." (320)

Contrary to the popular truism that knowledge or wisdom comes with age, Laura has lived "long enough" to see that any knowledge is "superficial" - apparent rather than real. And yet even this conclusion is clouded with ambiguity. Thus the evidence "appears" superficial "sometimes." In effect, White aligns the reader with Laura and Voss so that we, too, are wary of letting our personal experience (of the novel) "crystallize in objective visions" (15).

Judd, the illiterate ex-convict who joins Voss's expedition, has little use for words:

> He who could squeeze the meaning out of a line by pressing on it with his finger-nail, always hastened to remove himself from the presence of true initiates when they were at their books. All the scraps of knowledge with which he was filled, all those raw hunks of life that, for choice, or by force, he had swallowed down, were reduced by the great mystery of words to the most shameful matter. Words were not the servants of life, but life, rather, was the slave of words. So the black print of other people's books became a swarm of victorious ants that carried off a man's self-respect. (203)

Although it might appear that jealousy of his literate mates dictates his feelings, Judd does experience "true pride" when he records his inventory of equipment using "his own signs" (181). It seems that Judd, like Voss, believes that interpreting life is a personal and even unpleasant act - not unlike squeezing a pimple. Judd favours his own personal knowledge, as opposed to the knowledge in "other people's books."

The novel's linguistic self-consciousness is heralded by the ironic narrative voice. It puts us on guard when the characters believe they speak the truth. For example, when Laura tells Mr. Palfreyman about her dreams of visiting foreign lands, she confides: "Names should be charms, Mr. Palfreyman. I used to hope that, by saying some of them often enough, I might evoke reality" (106). Names are charms, Laura. They not only evoke the reality of the novel I am reading, but they also evoke the reality constructed by your fellow citizens. Consequently, you are "possessed of brains, and in consequence not to be trusted" (57) if we abide Una Pringle's opinion of you. The narrator of Voss is also endowed with brains, but here it is a matter of our apprehending his metadiscourse, not of trusting another's text (as Bonner does).

Metafiction may be described as a literature of revelation in that it unbares the "truth" of its inventedness. This labyrinthine novel suggests, however, that there are no absolute truths in the novel, apart from those imposed on it by its readers. This open-endedness is frequently signalled in Voss; one of the most entertaining clues is the fact that Palfreyman's uncle has been "engaged for many years on a key to the Revelation of St.John the Divine" (263). Apparently, the saint's revelatory book requires further codification in spite of the fact that it purports to be complete. Indeed, St. John warns readers in the final chapter that "if any man shall add unto

these things" or "if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy," bad things will befall the man (22:18-19). And yet, as Voss illustrates, interpretive distortions are inevitable, born of the dialogic and rhetorical nature of narrative which, unless understanding is restricted to what others say is true, elicits singular responses.

Mr. Bonner is providing Voss with the necessary funds for the trip and expects, in return, to be kept completely informed of the group's progress. To this end, Voss finds himself keeping "presumptuous notebooks in which he was scribbling the factual details of their journey" (214). Voss considers the notes "presumptuous" because writing not only captures experience, it also transforms it. The uselessness of his notes is also suggested by the word "scribbling" which denotes writing with little or no sense. Laura also recognizes the presumptuousness of writing, and she shares her feelings on the subject with Voss:

> "When I was younger," said the girl, as if it had been a long time ago, "I kept a diary. Oh, I wrote down everything, everything. I could not express too much. And how proud I was to read it. Then I no longer could. I would stare at a blank page, and that would appear far more expressive than my own emptiness." (91)

Voss is sympathetic to words which ironically convey the inexpressibility of Laura's feelings in words for how, save in words, can she communicate her feelings to others?

Suppose that the novel is Voss - this would echo Frank Le Mesurier's thoughts about the journal he keeps. When Frank takes up writing, "all that this man had not lived began to be written down" (142). However, once the book is complete, it is Le Mesurier: "his life was contained in its few pages: in lovely, opalescent intaglios, buckets of vomit, vistas of stillest marble, the livers and lights of beliefs and intentions" (380). And when Le Mesurier tears up his journal, he tears it "by handfuls of

flesh" (380-1). Somehow, we have to distinguish between the man and how he is actualized, for the images of convolutions, spewed matter and solidity speak of language's ability to obscure as much as it reveals. Nevertheless, Voss reads one of Le Mesurier's poems and finds himself "accused" (296). This interpretation is clearly presumptuous. The poem even has a line drawn underneath the title "so deep it defended like a moat" (294). Voss chooses to see himself described therein, ignoring his previous assertion that "poetry will not bear translation" or interpretation (81). Nor does he heed his own endorsement of individuation: "it was not possible really, that anyone could damage the Idea, however much they scratched it. Some vomited words. Some coughed up their dry souls in rebounding pea-pellets. To no earthly avail" (44). Obviously, Voss's interpretive confiscation aligns him with the townspeople he has rejected and, more importantly, reminds the reader of Voss's creative ground which is similarly violated when we re-create the text's meaning. As for Le Mesurier, the inadequate yet necessary act of communication is unreal: "When I no longer expected," he writes, "then I was rewarded by knowing: so it is. We do not meet but in distances, and dreams are the distance brought close" (295). These dreams of understanding allow us to derive pleasure from White's text, just as Voss extracts painful self-knowledge from Le Mesurier's poem.

One of the functions of the narrative is to point out the gulf between the avowals and practices of various characters. Thus, Mrs. Bonner's drinking is represented as follows:

> Whether as a prospect or a memory, a party made her quite tipsy - figuratively speaking, that is - for Mrs. Bonner did not touch strong drink, unless on a very special occasion, a sip of champagne, or on hot evenings, a glass of delicious brandy punch, or sometimes of a morning, for the visitor's sake a really good madeira, or thimbleful of dandelion wine. (77)

Although the figurative term "tipsy" is meant to illustrate the woman's sobriety, the ensuing amplification discloses the potential inadequacies of linguistic representation. As Gerald L. Bruns remarks in Inventions: "It is not that no literal (or referential) statements are possible, only that such statements are only figuratively possible, for it is figuration that makes discourse possible" (91).

The reinscription of the characters and their lives is apparent from the text's ellipses, which reveal the editorializing narrator. In her last letter to Voss, for instance, Laura says that writing is necessary for her and wonders, "Was the firm, upright, reliable character one seemed to have been, a myth?..." (329). Although her writing is of the utmost importance to Laura, it is not as important for her readers, or so at least believes the narrator who interrupts Laura's letter to describe the room in which she writes. In fact, it looks as though portions of her letter are being withheld from the reader. Laura is writing, we are told, in her "red" room, and her "eyelids were turned to buckram" (329). She is being portrayed as a book - the red room shields her like the covers of a book, and her eyelids bind her message, buckram being the stiff cotton fabric used in book-binding. Laura is, like Voss and Le Mesurier before her, a predicated text. This being shown, the narrator allows us more of her letter:

> She wrote:
>
> ...It would seem that the human virtues, except in isolated, absolved, absurd, or oblivious individuals are mythical. Are you too, my dearest, a myth, as it has been suggested?... (329)

Laura is alluding to the divergent, and therefore mythical, readings of Voss. Some would build a statue commemorating him; others, like Tom, would dismiss him as a madman. There are several textual indications in Voss which emphasize the truly indeterminate qualities of every character in the novel.

The above ellipses intimate that the narrator has suppressed parts of Laura's letter, sections which we might have found significant and/or interesting. In effect, the narrator practises the very isolating gesture to which Laura refers, adjudging the merits of the myth to be read. Patricia Waugh notes that metafiction recognizes that social and cultural codes bring life "closer to the philosophical and mythic than was once assumed" (16). In these terms alone, Voss proves to be such a work.

In fact, the mythologizing "conspiracy" practised by the narrator is in evidence throughout the novel (427). Many years have passed when Colonel Hebden attempts to find out what happened to Voss's expedition. After two excursions into the wilderness, he is still bereft of answers. Hebden blames his self-pronounced failure on the elusive native, Jackie, who becomes, "because of his elusiveness, the key to all secrets" (427). The narrator then explains why Hebden will not know:

> If he had but known - there was a great deal that Colonel Hebden did not know; it was almost as if there had been a conspiracy against him - if he had but known, Death had just apprehended Jackie, crossing a swamp, during a thunderstorm, at dusk. The boy had not attempted to resist. He lay down, and was persuaded to melt at last into the accommodating earth, all but his smile, which his tight, white, excellent teeth showed every sign of perpetuating. (427)

If there has "almost" been a conspiracy against Hebden, there has definitely been a conspiracy against the reader who expects a reasonable, conventional novel. The novel's artifice is suggested, first of all, by the details of Jackie's death, which are pinpointed for the reader with cartographical precision. Furthermore, Jackie's Cheshire-cat grin taunts the reader: when the boy is finally "persuaded" to melt into the earth, our attention is unmistakably drawn to the persuader writing this tale. The promise of Jackie's perpetual smile suggests that his inscrutability will endure as does the printed text, in spite of the face that Voss is a complete text.

Frank Le Mesurier's analysis of the poem he has written emphasizes the generative nature of written texts:

> Often he took it out, and if some of it had died, for then, there opened out of it other avenues of light. It was always changing, as that world of appearances which had given him his poem. Yet, its structure was unchanged. So, he was truly strong. (142-3)

A text's potential for various readings turns out to be a strength, and not a weakness. In his preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray, Oscar Wilde opines that "Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital" (6). Similarly, Harold Bloom wagers that only inferior or weak poets can be read "accurately" (272). To put it simply, Jackie's perpetual smile and Le Mesurier's "always changing" poem flaunt the vitality of their own textual existences and the vitality of White's self-reflexive Voss.

Voss is historiographical metafiction in its enunciation of historical narratives' poetic qualities.[9] There are several indications that history not only records events, but also represents, as Robert Weimann puts it, an "imaginative assimilation" of those events ("History" 183). We are told that journal-writing helps Voss's men mark the passage of time when days are confusingly similar: "Yet, a variety of incidents did also occur, or were created out of the void of inactivity, mostly quite trivial events, but which uneasy minds invested with a light of feverish significance" (284). A couple of these incidents are copiously inscribed in Voss. The first tale, about the day their cattle disappeared, does not leave the reader wondering about any details. Its outcome is satisfying to both the reader and the principals. And yet, the tale is followed by Voss's journal entry, which adds nothing and seems redundant, unless we understand its corroborative effect:

> Nothing was added to the incident. Voss recorded it without comment in his journal:
>
> May 28th. Jackie returned at night with cattle, one head short. Before retiring, rewarded the boy with a ration of damper. He was quite pleased. (286)

Immediately after the cattle story, the reader is introduced to another adventure, which begins as follows: "About this time there occurred also the incident of the mustard and cress. Turner had been expressing himself in something like the following strain:" (286). In this story, nothing much seems to happen. Palfreyman plants some seeds; discovers that someone or something is eating is plants; does not express his anger to Voss when he is discovered. The seeds are described as "miraculous seeds" "standing upon pale threads, then unfolding. It was very simple and very quick" (288). The tale recalls Jesus' parable of the mustard seed, recounted in the books of Matthew (13:31), Mark (4:31), and Luke (13:19) - texts which are, incidentally, intertextual. Could Palfreyman's experience, however, also allude to the strength of narrative which, although made of weak words, becomes strong when the seed is planted; that is, when the narrative "threads" are woven as the tale unfolds for the reader or listener? We could then conclude that when Palfreyman desists from asking whether Voss knows that the seed "had been sown by hand of man" - although he suspects this is so - the text alludes to the pleasure we take in imaginatively bringing the characters of Voss to life. We would rather not be reminded while we are "reaping" the bounty of the novel, as Voss "reaps" the bounty of Palfreyman's seeds, that Patrick White has sown the tale. White, however, will not desist.

Theorist Valerie Raoul claims that we tend to transform such contingent incidents into "adventures" or "stories" (5). In the above examples,

however, the men's adventures have obviously been re-created, the narrator deigning to provide us with "something like" their words and actions (286). We are thereby alerted to the interpretive component of narrative.

In his examination of historical discourse, Hayden White notes that historians rely on records such as journals and letters to substantiate the narratives they write (Tropics 55). Voss shows that such records are far from being reliable indicators of the past, echoing Hayden White's insistence that historians select and interpret what they want to convey or record for posterity (56). Thus, a young girl writes of the "noble" ships which have put in at Sydney:

> If one or two professional sceptics, possibly of Irish descent, remarked that Nautilus and Samphire were insignificant and very shabby, nobody listened who did not wish to; moreover, everybody knew that a coat of paint will work wonders, and that the gallant ships were already possessed of those noble proportions and inspiring lines, which confirm one's faith in human courage and endeavour, as one young lady recorded in her diary. (298)

The possibly accurate perceptions of the sceptics are overruled by the girl's desire to discover confirmation of "human courage and endeavour." Her account emphasizes the truth of history as defined by Anchor: it is "something created by the historian in the present in and through the story he tells" (124). Or, as Hayden White puts it, "facts do not speak for themselves"; rather, it is the historian who "speaks for them" (Tropics 125). We need not distinguish between literary and historical narratives for they share, as Hayden White argues, the freedom of arranging events in order to express what the author believes is the correct understanding of the described events (Tropics 55).

Similarly, when a gentleman inquires about Voss, Laura answers that "his legend will be written down, eventually, by those who have been troubled by it" (448). Clearly, this suggests that White's text of Voss represents

only one of many potential versions of the explorer's story. One can say, in effect, that the narrative of Voss and the young girl's diary entry are both products of history-makers.

At certain moments, it seems quite obvious that it is more important to tell a good story than to get the facts right. For instance, Voss takes the opportunity to visit Judd's property before the expedition begins, and chats with Mrs. Judd while her husband finishes his chores. Their conversation is recorded matter-of-factly, along with the impressions each has of the other, until:

> The woman raised her head again, with that same cunning which had shown itself once before, plumb in the middle of her honesty.
> "Would you, perhaps, have an interest in the expedition, that you are come to see him?"
> "Yes," said the stranger. "Voss."
> And did click his heels together funny, the woman related ever after. (147)

The narrative has suddenly abandoned its reportage in order to tell us how the woman will relate her story "ever after." The phrase "ever after" points out the irony of a fictional character telling a tale, and implies that the clicking heels are an imaginative addition to Mrs. Judd's story which will make Voss's strangeness more vivid.

Another example of enhanced history involves Harry's account of his unexpected encounter with some natives. The narrative announces his creative bent by saying that, "in the interval before fear, the situation remained objective for all concerned. Then it became better understood" (338). Understanding is not, the narrative suggests, a completely objective phenomenon. Harry is shocked when he runs into three natives trying to build a fire and he quickly runs away. However, "upon telling his story afterwards, he remembered also to have caught sight of a second, more distant fire the moment before it was extinguished" (338). As was the case

with Mrs. Judd, Harry's after-words embellish the incident in order to make it sound more dangerous and exciting. Voss implicitly questions the weight of historical narratives: when Mrs. Judd and Harry so easily alter the substance of their own experiences, the reader may well wonder about texts which are both products and producers of history.

On one occasion, Palfreyman finds himself "sucked back by the dreadful undercurrent of the past. "As he could no longer hope for rescue," he tells Voss about his uncle, his sister, and their home (261). Voss listens quietly and poses polite questions until Palfreyman speaks of his sister's attempted suicide:

> "And you rescued, or condemned, your sister," Voss accused, "by denying her the Gothic splendours of death. Her intention was glorious, but you rushed and tied a tourniquet, when all you had to offer was your own delusion."
> "You cannot destroy me, Mr. Voss!" Palfreyman insisted.
> "Then," continued Voss, "not very long after, you left for the Antipodes, and retreated farther and farther from your failures, until we are sitting beneath this tree, surrounded by hazards, certainly, but of a most impersonal kind."
> "Yes," said Palfreyman. "Yes."
> He broke a stick.
> "I think I have realized all this," he said. "And that I did not have the strength to endure it. And must make amends." (264)

Voss has "dreamed" the conclusion of Palfreyman's story (264). White thereby insists that histories, personal or otherwise, are not privileged possessions because they can always be appropriated by new story-tellers. Author and theorist Ursula Le Guin describes this tradition of embracing others' stories as follows: "by remembering it he had made it his; and insofar as I have remembered it, it is mine; and now, if you like it, it is yours" (199). In fact, although Voss has "dreamed" the conclusion, it is no less valid because it transforms the past into something Palfreyman can use

to guide his actions. As Robert Anchor remarks, history's value lies in transforming our view of experience (126-27).

It is not a coincidence that the autocritical nature of Voss is also advanced through White's use of German. After singing a song, for example, Voss laughs and says to Dugald: "Ach, Dugald, Wörter haben keine Bedeutung. Sinnlos!" "Nonsense," he adds, and asks, "Do you understand nonsense?" (190). The German words, roughly translated, says "Words have no meaning. They are nonsense."[10] Ironically, the sentence foils the efforts of the industrious reader who expects to gain added insights into the novel by translating White's secretive language.

Later in the novel, the explorer's mother tongue again speaks of interpretive resistance when the cave drawings are discovered:

> "What do these signify, Jackie?" he asked.
> The boy was explaining, in his own language, assisted by a forefinger.
> "Verfluchte Sprachen!" cried the German.
> For he was doubly locked in language. (274)

Voss has cried "Cursed languages!" The explorer is inescapably and "doubly locked" in language because, first of all, he does not share Jackie's language. Their attempted communication implies an infinite chain of translations, for Jackie translates the drawings' meanings (which are, in turn, transcriptions of the artists' experiences) into his own language, which he then offers to Voss in broken English (274). This necessitates further translation, though, since English is not Voss's native tongue. White's epistemology of translation is espoused elsewhere in the novel, as when Voss realizes that he "continued to express himself in foreign words, in whichever language he used, his own included" (199). As for the second sense of Voss's emprisonment in language, he no doubt acknowledges that he is a fictional character, written and therefore "locked" in print (which

nevertheless yields an infinite number of possible discourses with his readers, if not with Jackie).

When Voss and his entourage are captured by natives, Le Mesurier asks the leader about his plan. Voss answers that he has none, speaking "wryly, for the words had been put into his mouth" (379). Here again, Voss admits that he is a fictional character. This is reinforced when Le Mesurier begins, "If you withdraw," to which Voss replies: "I do not withdraw," "I am withdrawn" (379-80). And when Le Mesurier asks whether Voss will give the group any hope, Voss concludes: "I suggest you wring it out for yourself, which, in the end, is all that is possible for any man" (380). This call for reflection inevitably consists of "wringing" out one's hopes or truth. The twisting imagery implies that reflection or interpretation distorts and transforms a given situation. Other examples which ally representation with twisting or alteration include the "blurry mirror of the big, darkish room" (9); the "convolutions of polite behaviour" (25) which Voss pretends not to know; the words which "continued to writhe" about Voss (73); the certain poignance of Laura's "Italian hand," which denotes both an elaborate medieval (i.e., confiscated) script and a crafty or subtle nature (192): the letter which Laura writes and then attempts to tear, which, because it is written on excellent paper, remains "twisted up" (330); and the "Great Snake" which is "grandfather of all men" and which will devour man - conjuring up images of a twisted language which consumes men in reductive texts (378). "Man is a tempting morsel," as Voss says (379).

Colonel Hebden's questions will only be satisfied when he can fill in the gaps in Voss's story. He asks Laura whether Voss's "unfortunate qualities" might have "weakened his hold as a leader" (412-13). Laura knows

she cannot answer, and she shudders with what is either rage or desperation:

> "You would cut my head off, if letting my blood run would do you any good."
> "It is not for my sake. It is for Mr. Voss."
> "Mr. Voss is already history."
> "But history is not acceptable until it is sifted for the truth. Sometimes this can never be reached."
> She was hanging her head. She was horribly twisted.
> "No, never," she agreed. "It is all lies. While there are men, there will always be lies. I do not know the truth about myself, unless I sometimes dream it." (413)

Claude Lévi-Strauss has suggested that there are two impulses which motivate historians: the impulse to convey information and the impulse to explain that information (qtd. in H. White, Tropics 56). Hebden is compelled to know why the expedition never returned and how Voss affected his men. The reader understands that Hebden lies when he tells Laura his queries are not for his own sake. Any text which Hebden produces will be a rhetorical narrative which satisfies his queries, just as the inferences made by readers of Voss satisfy their own expectations. It is worth noting that Hebden's preoccupation with the "truth" is in distinct contrast to the dreams which sustain Laura and Voss. These opponents are suited to Ihab Hassan's prescript:

> Imagination, intuition, dream, elegance, beauty, interest: these, rather than the word "truth," occur most often in the discourse of workers at the edge of knowledge. (178)

At the beginning of Voss, Laura's decision that she cannot "remain a convinced believer" in God is revealed (9). She suspects that she has become what "might be called a rationalist" because she has read a "great deal out of such books as had come her way in that remote colony, until her mind seemed to be complete" (9). Here, two qualifiers disclose the narrator's ironic attitude. First of all, if Laura has read a "great deal" of the books, it is possible that she has skipped important sections,

sections which might alter or improve her understanding. Second, the books she has read are those available in "that remote colony," which suggests that many useful books have not "come her way." At any rate, we soon discover that Voss portrays the development of this girl from a so-called "rationalist" to a "mythical" character (329). Actually, Laura synthesizes rationality and mythification as necessary complements to understanding. Mythologist Hans Blumenberg has described this synthetic relationship as follows:

> For with regard to the effort - which spans all of human history - to overcome anxiety relating to what is unknown or even still unnamed, myth and enlightenment are allies in a way that, while easy to understand, is reluctantly admitted. (163)

Laura's new attitude is revealed on the final page of Voss when she answers Ludlow's question about the explorer, "this familiar spirit, whose name is upon everybody's lips, the German fellow who died" (448). Her enigmatic answers accommodate both aspects of her understanding:

> "Voss did not die," Miss Trevelyan replied. "He is there still, it is said, in the country, and always will be. His legend will be written down, eventually, by those who have been troubled by it."
> "Come, come. If we are not certain of the facts, how is it possible to give the answers?"
> "The air will tell us," Miss Trevelyan said.
> By which time she had grown hoarse, and fell to wondering aloud whether she had brought her lozenges. (448)

Thus ends the novel. Laura's replies are not definitive, leaving room for Ludlow and the reader to ascribe their own theses. Earlier in the novel, when Voss's death is described, we read that "his dreams fled in the air" (394). This air also kept Voss's kites aloft, kites he flew as a child and to which he attached messages: "Sometimes the string would break, and the released kite, if it did not disintegrate in the air, must have carried its message into far places" (275). White's pun on the "strings to which"

Voss's words "are attached" proposes that "finders must content themselves with guesses" (275). The reader might well suppose that the "air" of which Laura speaks is the tenuous air of our imaginations. Laura's ambiguous answers, moreover, seem to have contributed to her sore throat. We might imagine how much worse her throat would have felt had she given definitive answers.

Voss has lost his head in the attempt to be better than the ignorant people he shunned in Sydney. His journey into the desert serves as a symbolic demand for what Blumenberg defines as a "critical destruction" of a stagnant reality, after which a truly rational foundation might be built (163). If we didn't know better, we might think that Nietzsche was describing Voss and Voss's invigorating metafictional form: "When this master of destruction, of self-destruction, wounds himself, it is that very wound that forces him to live" (257). Voss does appear to constitute, in its self-reflexivity, a humanistic gesture of the type embraced by Linda Hutcheon, in that it

> teaches and indeed compels him [the reader] to respond "vitally," to attribute human significance to the process of creating imaginary worlds in words. (Narcissistic 117)

Voss's obstinate rejection of others' blindness effects a similar blindness in him. He is, however, well aware of his sophistical understanding. Thus, he admits to Le Mesurier that he is distressed at his "own great folly in continuing, like a worm, Frank, butting my head at whatsoever darkness of earth, once I have conceived an idea" (44). Similarly, when Laura broaches the possibility that Voss's expedition will end in disaster, he rejects the strength he sees in her, "preferring the illusion of his own" (69). Palfreyman summarizes Voss's (and his own) foolhardiness: "man is right, even if, to establish this, he would have to prove that he himself had been

wrong" (127). The self-destruction of Voss and of Palfreyman is worthwhile, the text intimates, if their readers are guided toward further explorations into this thing called "truth."

When Mrs. Bonner tells a story about the bushrangers who stopped a couple's carriage in order to "appropriate every single valuable" they had, she feels she has "done her duty," even though her companions listen "as if" her words "were not addressed to them personally" (56). The woman then looks out her carriage and ruminates:

> As for the bushrangers, she personally had never encountered such individuals, and could not believe in a future in which her agreeable life might be so rudely shaken. Bushrangers were but the material of narrative. (56)

But - the reader glibly remembers - Mrs. Bonner is also mere narrative material. To paraphrase her tale, the exigencies of narratives may also appropriate what is valuable to the individual reader. White's characters are, in fact, narratives that both rob and are robbed. Most of them are robbed because they will not listen to, nor do they understand, the parables of individuation. The characters rob us, their readers, if we fail to recognize the didactic component of White's metafictional text.

When Voss's long-awaited memorial statue is erected, his immortality seems assured: "Johann Ulrich Voss was by now quite safe, it appeared. He was hung with garlands of rarest newspaper prose. They would write about him in the history books" (440). The explorer is "safe" because the commemorative statue frees him from the danger of reproach. He is, however, "hung" both in the sense that he is receiving accolades and because the texts and statues kill (or attempt to) his "mystery," his "personal prerogative" (267). And although "rarest" is a superlative, previous references to newspapers' reductive understanding (103) and to the Sydney Herald's serviceability in catching a newborn's placenta (229) undermine the

above approbation. Finally, it only "appeared" that Voss was safe because, as Laura explains, Voss is written and is therefore mutable.

Although the narrative never overtly addresses the reader as recent metafictional texts often do, it has provided ample evidence of its self-reflexivity. In one passage, Voss tells his men to prepare for an early morning start, although they have been waiting at Boyle's station for the mailman to arrive:

> "You are not waiting, then, for this feller Thorndike?"
> "Yes," said Voss. "It is certain. He will come before evening."
> Boyle was rather diverted by this intelligence.
> "The smoke message have got going?" he inquired lazily. (180)

Voss does not respond; he is busy directing his men to count and pack their equipment. Voss's almost mystical knowledge has distracted many of White's critics, especially when a team is seen approaching:

> "It is Thorndike, then," said Voss, running out without a hat, which left the white of his forehead exposed: he could have been emerging from a mask.
> "Damn me, if you were not right," contributed Boyle. (184)

Voss does emerge from a mask for the reader who appreciates the discursive function of these two passages. As Patricia Waugh notes of metafictional texts, Voss's certainty attests to the artifice of contingencies written into the novel (18). One might also hazard that Voss's forehead alludes to that progenitive marvel, Zeus, from whose forehead sprang his daughter, Pallas Athena (Hamilton 29). Voss's role does parallel Athena's role, described by Edith Hamilton as the "protector of civilized life" (29).

Patrick White, for that matter, also shares Athena's purpose of defending "the State and the home from outside enemies (Hamilton 29). The personification of "outside enemies" in Voss is Mr. Ludlow who, "though fairly drunk with brandy punch," remains "an Englishman" at Belle Bonner's

party (447). His formidable opponent is Laura Trevelyan, who defends the interests of Voss and Patrick White. Laura is the antithesis of one possible prototype, George Macaulay Trevelyan (1876-1962), immortalized in Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own (43-46). When Woolf's persona looks to see "what history meant to" Trevelyan, she discovers that women were rarely mentioned in his single-volume text, the History of England, which was intended to be comprehensive (46). Laura, as we have seen, refuses to pretend that she can comprehensively convey the History of Voss.

As for Ludlow, White's penchant for puns does not fail us: "Ludlow" is a typesetting term for a machine which casts slugs (lines of type set in metal) from handset matrices in a "composing stick."[11] Thus, when Ludlow announces that he has been travelling through Australia, "forming opinions of all and sundry" and has been "distressed to find the sundry does prevail," the reader may understand the danger of Ludlow's corrective attitude (448). As Linda Hutcheon points out in "Canadian Historiographic Metafiction," "[t]o write either history or historical fiction is equally to raise the question of power and control" (235). Through the antagonism between Laura and Ludlow, White clarifies his novel's argument that the reader's/the individual's/Australia's growth is retarded by indifferently heeding the tongues of others. The threat of outsiders is also expressed when a comet appears:

> "In the absence of an official astronomer, Mr. Winslow is recording his observations," the merchant revealed, "and will send a report Home by the first packet to leave." (375)

Winslow's observations will have to do, we infer, because an authoritative "official" (read Englishman) is not available. The dire consequences of this dependence on "Home" is illustrated by another exhortative (and more

blatant) pun. The surname "Win/slow" submits that an unquestioned allegiance to the will of others can guarantee no more than a belated victory of personal vision.

CHAPTER THREE: FLAWS IN THE GLASS: A Self-Portrait

> The nineteenth-century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass.
> Oscar Wilde

> Half those professing to admire Voss did so because they saw no connection between themselves and the Nineteenth Century society portrayed in the novel.
> Patrick White

> Donald was not what my reading told me a butler should be.
> Patrick White

If psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan regards "the function of the mirror-stage" as the means whereby a "relation" is established "between the organism and its reality," then Patrick White's Flaws in the Glass points to the deficiencies in that relationship (4). Hélène Cixous has privileged glass as a metaphor for the ideologies through which "realities" are filtered. In her opinion, this glass must be shattered (or flawed) if one hopes to undermine univocal texts which repress and censor (Conley 31). As his title suggests, White hopes to distort the mirror of logocentrism long associated with the German romantics (see, for example, M.H. Abram's The Mirror and the Lamp). To this end, White symbolically dismisses "Weimar's two great poets, one a manufactory of German platitudes, the other a genius who founders in his hypocrisy and pretensions as a human being" (40). White, however, obviously embraces the platitudes and pretensions of his critics in Flaws. In so doing, he underscores language's role both in producing and in reinforcing monological systems of knowledge. Truths are not givens; they are, as Alice Jardine reminds us, "logics produced through language" (Gynesis 44).

Labels, including the title White has chosen for his self-portrait, quickly become banal figures. Perhaps this is why he quickly gets the image out of the way - it appears on the first page of his text, three paragraphs in:

> there was the Long Room, at one end of the garden, at the other the great gilded mirror, all blotches and dimples and ripples. I fluctuated in the watery glass; according to the light I retreated into the depths of the aquarium, or trembled in the foreground like a thread of pale-green samphire. Those who thought they knew me were ignorant of the creature I scarcely knew myself. (1)

White's portrait is also "gilded" in that it has the pleasing appearance of being a self-representation to which publishers and critics cling, even though it is truly a mask of superficial worth to White. He dutifully gilds his portrait with mirror imagery, but every reflection he describes is fluctuant:

> The glass above the dressing-table showed me palpitating in green waves. (21)

> On a landing a wall-mirror framed in Mid-Nineteenth Century gilt showed my diffidence, still awash in the glassy shadows (40)

> The mirror in the bathroom at "Dogwoods" had a flaws in it like a faint birthmark. (142)

A regular mirror, in its reflectiveness, is not selective; it reflects everything in its path. The observer, on the other hand, may discriminate. White tells of his cousin Peggy who, in her self-absorption, made him her mirror:

> [she] had no need for a tame antipodean cousin, unless as a mirror when she came downstairs flicking back her freshly washed hair. (69)

Peggy found in White what she was looking for. White, however, does not like being used for others' self-serving strategems. His disdain is reflected in his title, Flaws in the Glass, which flaunts the text's multi-faceted quality.

In an address prepared for Australia's National Book Council Awards in 1980, White draws a distinction between two modes of writing - the "self-portrait" and the "autobiography":

> I've never wanted to write an autobiography, trundling over a long life introducing the celebrities one meets for five minutes and most of whom aren't at all interesting anyway. Instead I decided to do a self-portrait to try to show what I think I am, and how it came about. It's the kind of writing which survives only if it is the quintessence of truthfulness. I should say the most difficult kind of factual writing. ("Patrick White Speaks" 99).

Although he never says "This is the difference between the autobiography and the self-portrait," White does leave some clues:

> It has always troubled me that so many Australian novelists are content to explore an autobiographical vein instead of launching into that admittedly disturbing marriage between life and imagination - (100)

White opens this speech by saying he will "try to talk about" "how the pursuit of truth differs in factual writing and fiction" (99); he is not reaffirming the traditional dichotomy which equates fact with autobiography and fiction with novels.[12] This seems to be why White opts for a self-portrait - autobiography's diligent adherents do not recognize that a writer's creativity, "obsessions and delusions" are involved in all writing (99). Unfortunately, White hints, his metafictional markers are missed by readers "taught to revere the pragmatic, the documentary approach" (100).

The question of truthfulness is often raised in Flaws, although it does not question truthfulness so much as the capacity of writing to speak truth:

> 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 that again could be vanity. If I believe this today, tomorrow I may feel that truth is the property of silence - at any rate the silences filling the space between words, and over those I sometimes have control. (42)

White suggests (silently, but with words) that the property of silence is inherent in words as well. Words, however, are especially vulnerable, subject to endless interpretations.

When the Second World War ended, White "grew drunk cultivating a garden of words and sensations which had been waiting years to germinate" (127). White's companion of more than forty years, Manoly Lascaris, also works endlessly on a garden:

> He is still adding strokes of colour and removing misguided formal details. It could go on for ever. There is no end to a garden, unless the bulldozer; just as a writer's hand is halted only by death or paralysis - or worse still, the rambling side-tracks of senility. (149)

Just as Manoly works to remove "misguided formal details" from his garden, White's metafictional portrait attempts to weed out the "misguided" critics who have pulled details from his writing as "formal" evidence for their interpretations.

Penny Gay finds in Flaws yet more proof that White is a tortured and monstrous artist. She argues that he is "like Frankenstein's monster" in that "words seem to offer the possibility of redeeming his hideousness" (406). White is, she adds, full of "revenge;" even those closest to him are marred "with a bleak sense of humour" (406). Gay's article is just one of many which show that White was tagged by his critics a long time ago, and that these labels have stuck. He knows this, and tricks the reader with disappearances enabled by words:

> One thinks to escape, but doesn't, or not wholly: the fingerprints were taken early on. The past recurs in the dressing-table mirror, wisps of it in benign dreams, or those darker ones in which unfulfilled, half-forgotten lusts explode. Worst of all are the consciously created fictions, because concrete evidence of what one has not dared admit. (46)

The "concrete" evidence is double-edged, referring not only to the fiction's actuality, but also to language's solidity or inaccessibility.

Later in the self-portrait, White explains that his "conscious self can't take full responsibility " for his novels (187). It is incontrovertible:

> The masks I put on in my fictions are very different from those which strangers try to force on me, or to use another metaphor, the characters of whom I am composed cannot include those not yet revealed to me. (182)

The "strangers" are the "interviewers, the visting professors" and the "thesis writers" (182). If we force masks on White, how does he like the masks which acquaintances and friends provide for him? Not surprisingly, he detaches himself from those labels as well: "Of course there are individuals, often very close, including the one who is closest, who consider they know me better than I know myself. These are the most deluded of all" (182).

White's predications on the presumptuousness of others do not prevent him from presuming to tell us how others feel: "As always, the neighbours must have found us odd - a couple of men living together. A writer, moreover, might write about you" (148). By addressing "you," White intimates that Flaws in the Glass may be writing about me and how I interpret his texts.

The self-portrait meets what Roland Barthes calls the "cultural resistances" a text encounters with equally insistent resistances of its own (85). White writes scripts for the reader which presume to silence the latter by denying his or her own grasp of White's words. Flaws is a work of criticism which subverts the critic's usual position as one who knows what a text means and what its author believes. Flaws is a text of unresolved tensions, supplicatory and slippery, earnest and evasive by

turns. And yet, it remains a dialogic text, for when it seems to deny the reader an unfettered voice, it may serve to initiate a dialogue on the repressive nature of texts:

> Sceptics may argue that these are fictitious memories, that the moment of arrested time and moonlit sculpture in a desert somewhere between Khartoum and Alexandria is too good to be true. I don't believe so. Anything that has remained so distinct can only have happened. (90)

Even those readers who were not skeptical pause for a moment - can White's belief and the distinctiveness of the image really support his conclusion? Later in the text, he writes poetically of the Parthenon's tragic decline at the hands of tourists and polluters, after which he concludes: "No doubt these will be interpreted as elitist sentiments in 1981" (116). Here, as in the previous example, White ascribes thoughts to the reader which are clearly presumptuous. Will the reader recognize White's emulation of his critics?

Ironically, even though White displaces himself through his meta-fictional texts, the cultural resistances he has had to confront figure prominently in the publisher's dust-jacket notes for Flaws:

> The author insists that this book is neither autobiography nor memoir, but merely a self-portrait - sketches of various times and places, from early childhood to late sixties, and from Australia to England, Africa, Greece, and back. Perhaps the economical and expressive lines with which the picture is drawn are most analogous to portraiture at its finest, but in scope and depth and feeling, Flaws in the Glass outstrips autobiographies many times its length.

One can imagine the publisher's desire to find an appropriate analogy for White's portraiture, and "perhaps" they found it. More importantly, these notes serve to assure readers who might consider the book suspect. After all, the excerpt printed on the back cover does allude to White's "arrogance," his "sexual ambivalence," and his belief that he is composed of a

"cast of contradictory characters" (20). The publisher is saying that, in spite of the odd notions the author has about what his text is and isn't, Flaws in the Glass is essentially an autobiography. The publisher thereby disregards White's repeated insistence that knowledge of another is impossible without some destruction of that other.

As White sees it, his belief is "contained less in what is said than in the silences;" his words might even dispatch dissimulation, and not description:

> Am I a destroyer? this face in the glass which has spent a lifetime searching for what it believes, but can never prove to be, the truth. A face consumed by wondering whether truth can be the worst destroyer of all. (70)

Edmond Jabès, author of The Book of Dialogue, also discusses language's limitations. He maintains that "you only understand what you destroy" (47). As long as White disperses himself through his metadiscourse, he is far from being a destroyer because he thereby testifies to the vitality of the linguistic sign. This is not the case for naive critics who believe they can pin White down. "Nowadays," he closes the door on such "importunate, destroyer face[s]" (60). White opts for the subtitle "self-portrait" as an explicit commentary on convertive language. His publisher's editorial gouache, discussed above, only emphasizes the importance of White's aim to free people and texts from the repressive machinery of interpretive communities: "That is what I think tonight; no doubt I shall see differently in the morning, and as differently on every other morning I am fated to live through" (183).

White argues that his attentive readers must "have seen" that he has known "far more admirable women than admirable men" and that he "constantly" reads that he is a "misogynist" (252). By inference, White believes that he has few attentive readers:

> Of course my women are flawed because they are also human beings, as I am, which is why I'm writing this book. Every day as I sit down at my desk I struggle to overcome a revulsion for what I am doing. But it had to be done. (252)

The sudden shift from the present tense to the past tense in the last two sentences evokes the image of White at his desk - now writing, and therefore no longer struggling. The revulsion is overcome. Penny Gay - among others - seizes on this image as the "expression of the digust which many readers find the most memorable thing about White's book," arguing that he doesn't get any pleasure out of writing (408-9). Ironically, Gay's mistaken understanding is anticipated by White. He therefore records that "Generalisations and juxtaposing are tempting games," and proceeds to play the game as well as any of his critics have: "I see Australian humour as pretty wooly till the middle of the Twentieth Century" (33). He also argues that there is a lot of room for improvement: "Even so, satire remained suspect if aimed at 'warm' Australians, the majority of whom are not the golden-hearted beings they would like to think" (33). White is establishing the conditions of the metafictional games he plays, for those who pay attention:

> I have never disguised a belief that, as an artist, my face is many-faceted, my body protean, according to time, climate, and the demands of fiction. (153)

If anything, White gamely caters to the "demands of fiction" his readers have produced, gratifying their hegemonic versions with White the stone-flinger (16); the admirer of Mad Women (20); the "changeling" (46); the horrible boy who spat in his mother's face (22); the boy who once "half-throttled" his sister (28) - a veritable monster. Rather than struggle to "overcome a revulsion" for what he is doing, it is just as likely that White is enjoying deluding his deluded readers. The trickster does caution us: "What to tell and what to leave out while conveying the truth remains the

great question. The actor in us cannot always resist the laugh" (134). The "black in White" contributes the satiric elements in Flaws. Satire is an appropriate medium for White's metafiction because it is, as Jonathan Swift put it: "a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own, which is the chief reason for the kind of reception it meets in the world, and that so very few are offended with it" (qtd. in Cuddon 598).

White admits to a thirst for knowledge: "From an early age I was inquisitive: anxious to hear, to see, to open any unopened door, to experience, to know" (18). Against this desire is "the mystery of locked words," whose very intangibility promises "a release from boredom" (7). Roland Barthes has remarked that the desires to know, to write, and to be a critic are all expressions of the same "demand" for the "impossible object" (qtd. in Ulmer 73). White's flawed portrait underscores his neverending quest:

> The ultimate spiritual union is probably as impossible to achieve as the perfect work of art or the unflawed human relationship. In matters of faith, art, and love I have had to reconcile myself to starting again where I began. (74)
>
> I have to get on with what has still to be written. (142)
>
> We collect ourselves as far as it is ever possible. (256)

Christine Brooke-Rose insists that "All writing is necessarily" "a piecemeal attempt to master a totality, to impose a structure, through the holes of which fall the infinite other pieces" ("Self-Confrontation" 132). It is this attribute of writing which aligns Patrick White with his reader even as he dismisses the latter's project. It is a paradox which has touched the work of all metafictional writers whose texts have become authoritative despite their focus on the multivocity of language, writers

like Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes. The notion of the sign's "flight" has been written, and has therefore set like sculpture.

There are numerous indicators in Flaws in the Glass which should sensitize the reader to the creative component of White's text. For example, he speaks of meeting Australian balladeer Banjo Peterson (noted for spinning yarns), and wonders: "Whether the stranger spoke to a child whose face was buried in a slice of melon I can't remember" (6). The discrepancy between White's vivid image of the boy standing in the garden and the blank he "draws" about whether or not Banjo spoke to him is jarring. In another example, White's grandparents are described as an "imposing, handsome, violent couple;" White cites "hearsay and their photographs" as evidence (8). One clue to these puzzles is White's admiration for his Uncle Clem and Sid Kirk, early sources of information for the writer: "If each was inclined to improve on fact, their improvements were gifts to an emerging novelist in a generally unimaginative world" (11).

Of his second chapter, "Journeys," White explains that

> in speaking of Greek Islands I am not setting out to compile a guide complete with archeological sites, dates, distances, and heights. What I shall try to show is how they add to this self-portrait I have undertaken, and the most important relationship of my life. (171)

Nevertheless, the rest of the chapter does read like a Baedeker. In effect, White is saying - by omission - that to write directly of his relationship with Manoly would be to falsify it. Just three pages earlier, White said that his life with Manoly "could not" be shared "with anybody else" (168). The gulf between how this chapter reads and how White says it should be read is underlined when he propitiously notes: "We did the sites, but this is not a guidebook" (173). Funny, it reads like one. Still later, he insists that "Nobody writing a book on the Aegean Islands would link those

I'm about to include," as if to confirm that he is still writing about Manoly (187). Finally, when he writes about "those foreigners who want to possess, and who incidentally destroy an island" (183), the mention of the resultant destruction is not "incidental" at all because the violence the islands have suffered parallels the "brutality of half-knowledge" which White has suffered (256).

Flaws in the Glass is an ideal vehicle for White's denouncement of critics, including one representative of the school of unequivocality:

> ambivalence has given me insights into human nature, denied, I believe, to those who are unequivocally male or female - and Professor Leonie Kramer. I would not trade my halfway house, frail though it be, for any of the entrenchments of those who like to think themselves unequivocal. (154)

Of course, in saying this, White merely usurps Kramer's entrenchments with those of his own. He lets the reader know that he is fully aware that he attacks his critics just as stubbornly as they assess him: "Where I have gone wrong in life is in believing that total sincerity is compatible with human intercourse" (155). True or false? The trickster continues by admitting that his "pursuit of that razor-blade truth" has made him a "slasher" (155). Naomi Schor's description of the "cutting edge" ('la coupure') in George Sand's writing, another writer who transgressed norms, is germane: "The 'coupure' figures the diacritical slash that institutes difference within sameness" (qtd. in Miller 263). How, then, does White establish differentiation? The images of cutting in Flaws show that it is predicated on the silences in his texts, silences due to language transforming its object. White represents the violence of inscription in the following vignette:

> I can still visualise the blood of those pine trees congealing in silver-grey gouts where initials had been carved or schoolboys' vicious boots had scarred them. (17)

The carved initials represent authorship and the "silver-grey gouts" evoke White's omnipresent mirror; the act of carving itself and the "vicious boots" both attest to writing's brutality. The tree, now transformed, has bled. This blood represents the text's freedom from fixed interpretations. Blood is, as White explains elsewhere, "the river which cannot be crossed" (251).

Of his experience at boarding-school, White says: "Somehow I survived and became a different kind of brute, far sharper if I had known" (17-8). Meanings proliferate. Perhaps White alludes to his selection of sharp subjects since a few of his novels "were ignored in the beginning, some reviled and dismissed as pornography" (145). The "sharp" brute may be acknowledging his own cleverness in writing metadiscursive texts, texts which have apparently proved too "sharp" for most readers. White wonders at one point: "What makes a situation funny to an Englishman and cruel to an Australian?" (33). His answer: "Perhaps the early days in Australia were too brutal to encourage a cutting wit" (330). White is that "cutting wit" and he hopes the time will come when his metafiction will be better understood.

In fact, White likens his mind to a bag, "stuffed with snippets of material of contrasting textures and clashing colours" (38). He contends that "it is this rag-bag of a disorderly mind which has more than anything offended some" critics, and pontificates: "For them the controlled monochrome of reason, for me the omnium gatherum of instinctual colour which illuminates the more often than not irrational behaviour of sensual man" (38). White's complaint is against "academics" (38) and, as Linda Brodkey has noted, "academic" is often understood "as a pejorative" and not merely a "generic term" (4). And, as if the "monochrome of reason" weren't enough

("monochrome" designates a painting done in various shades of one colour), White has to add that the critics' techniques are "controlled." The critics' reading, White implies, is confirmatory rather than exploratory, smoothing over what David Caute calls "the artifice and disguises endemic to art" ("Commitment" 268). Were he to even attempt such control, the world Caute depicted would emerge "crippled by innocence" (268). White meets the same challenges in both his literary and extra-literary endeavours:

> foreigners who have spent five minutes in Australia and grown sentimental over their superficial acquaintanceship think you have gone off your rocker or that you are another of those Australians with the so-called inferiority complex if you tell them the truth about it. What you truly feel about a country or an individual of great personal interest to you, generally shocks when you are honest about those feelings. (201)

Flaws in the Glass foresees its critical reception, leaving tantalising clues for the reader: "This was one of the more memorable occasions when we spent hours waiting for the connecting bus at a crossroads, in this event Para - cryptic name" (209). Without the secretive "cryptic," the reader would probably have continued reading without a second thought to yet another name from White's tour of Greece. However, by insisting that the town's name has a secret or ambiguous meaning, White plays with the reader's desire to interpret the text definitively. Perhaps this is why he praises the Greeks who "are accustomed to wait" "without an inkling of what is in store," even as the reader is wondering what White means by calling Para cryptic. When White suggests that nobody who "has suffered paradiarrhoea in a filthy Para lavatory, waiting for the bus which doesn't arrive" will ever "be the same again" (209), is he castigating the verbal diarrhoea of critics trying to exorcise the silences in White's texts?

White again invites our scrutiny of his novels' reception with the following admonition:

> Don't despair however, any of you who have continued reading; it is possible to recycle shit. Could this be my positive message to the Australian optimistic jingle-writers of today? (116)

The sardonic wit aside, White sets the ground for a critical discourse which will not pretend to monopolise multivocal texts. The word "recycle" reveals the transformative possibilities of White and of his writing. As he says, "I am probably pretty average crap, which will in time help fertilise the earth" (183), said, perhaps, in contradistinction to the paradiarrhoeic malady of those "academic vultures" (250).

Because White's texts are dispersive, he has little use for the dyadic thoughts of some readers:

> Throughout my writing life I have encountered fiercely contradictory judgments: That Himmelfarb is/is not a Jew; that I know everything/nothing about women; that what I write illuminates, or on the other hand, that my novels are incomprehensible, boring rubbish. But I expect any writer who takes risks has had this battle fought out over his body, live or dead. (150-1)

The violation of his texts/body aligns White's poetics with those of (post)feminist critics. And, indeed, he does voice his empathy: "Only the feminists, understandably, would have accused" (252). His economy of language and sexuality, however, is anarchic in that he contradictorily accepts and rejects membership in marginal societies, acknowledging the "lightning flashes of homosexual perception" (135) at one point, whereas at other times he chooses to range in all directions:

> I see myself not so much a homosexual as a mind possessed by the spirit of man or woman according to actual situations or the characters I become in my writing. (81)

White embraces the marginal status which others have accorded him because it frees him from the narrow confines inflicted on the so-called "normal" members of society (103,151):

> Once I set fire to a gunyah to show that it couldn't be shared with strangers. Years later I persuaded myself that I hadn't been acting merely as a selfish child, but that an avatar of those from whom the land had been taken had invested one of the unwanted whites. (16)

The punster's "one of the unwanted whites" refers not only to the caucasians who took the land from the aboriginals, but also to the author as unwanted "White," an idea which recurs in his self-portrait: "When I returned to France I was told I spoke French with a German accent; just as at school in England I was accused of being a cockney or colonial, and back in Australia, 'a bloody Pom'" (41). Family members also rejected him when his first novels were published: "'He didn't get it from the Whites!' One of the 'Saumarez' spinsters was very firm on that score" (43). His mother was also ashamed, but White transforms her hurt by according himself a special place in Australian history:

> "I never thought I'd have a freak for a son!" As Suzanne may have been the prototype Australian Sue, Paddy was probably its first labelled freak. (43)

Although the above ruminations read rather tongue-in-cheek, White does value his ambivalence:

> I recognized 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)

Labels are out, as the following indicates: "Those who discuss the homosexual condition with endless hysterical delight as though it had not existed, except in theory, before they discovered their own, have always struck me as colossal bores" (80). Like Nietzsche before him, White argues that there is only one norm: that of the individual (Birth of Tragedy 34).

Flaws in the Glass is a political text which speaks of conventions (18) and masks (103,182) which have been forced on White and on his writing, albeit unsuccessfully, since they are afforded protection by that "eternal

barrier of speech" (47). For example, when his head master was dismissed under unsavory circumstances, White felt obliged to scorn the man as his classmates' "tribal convention demanded" (18). Nevertheless, his personal convictions remained constant; he continued to sympathise with the dismissed (18). Brooke-Rose says, with finality: "such paterronizing still fogs my frays (but not my phrases), the abolishers of my discourse still dog my dialogue but not my dialogizing" ("Self-Confrontation" 131).

Flaws in the Glass is the political outcome of White's "responsibility" to Australia (201). In fact, he seems a bit apologetic that he wasn't politically active sooner:

> Of course the real reason for my no more than theoretical involvement with the Spanish Civil War was a relationship with somebody "on the wrong side." (63)

He seems to recall having been influenced in this by Roy de Maistre, but he graciously concedes: "However it was, I can't hold it against him" (63). Now, White asks: "[H]ow is it possible for any but a superficial artist to live and work inside a vacuum?" (226). Ironically, White does speak about "coming out" in this self-portrait, but he refers to his politicking and not to his homosexuality. The personal risks associated with "coming out" accentuate the importance of White's struggle against Australia's status quo.

Because White's heuristics embrace contradiction, he can speak fondly of "the most scurrilous conversation" he once shared with the painter Dobell (135-6), whereas another friend - regrettably - "remembers with some inaccuracy the scurrilous conversations" shared with White in Kassala (89). By means of his antithetical discourse, this exaggerated egotist dissolves what Alice Jardine calls "narcissistic fixations- dissolving them before they become rigidified as sociosymbolic structures" ("Opaque" 109).

Actually, although White does see rigidification in some academic and social discourses, it is not too late to act. Accordingly, he tries to sway his reader:

> A pragmatic nation, we tend to confuse reality with surfaces. Perhaps this dedication to surface is why we are constantly fooled by the crooks who mostly govern us. (128)

His use of the words "we" and "us" emphasize White's solidarity with his fellow citizens. The implications for the reader who is looking into an object called Flaws in the Glass are equally conspicious. And yet, against this picture of allegiance is the abuse which White has suffered from readers and critics who saw him "as an intruder, a breaker of rules, a threat to the tradition of Australian literature" (139).

White describes his introduction to local politics in a section entitled, "Incident in Martin Road and the Shocking Career which Developed out of It" (221-27). The by-line, which mimics sensationalistic journalism, is a sarcastic comment on what attracts a reader's attention. None of what follows is shocking, not even the fact that White tells us the name of the neighbour who approached White for help; he draws a blank about the second man: "an academic whose name I forget" (222).

In 1975, Australia's governor-general "dismissed the Government elected by the Australian people" (231). White mentions this and then immediately defers:

> Too much has been written already about this shoddy episode of history. I shall not go into it again in what is intended as a self-portrait. (231)

For White, however, this ignominious occasion proves that "this supposedly sophisticated country is still, alas, a colonial sheep run" (232). Far from being beyond the scope of his self-portrait, his country's political climate

is pertinent because the people's voice was appropriated by the governor-general. White's metadiscursive texts would give back that voice, or rather, have each person take what is rightfully his or her own, as White does himself in Flaws in the Glass.

Clearly, White feels that the onus is on him to liberate the minds of others. He recounts the time he spoke with a student, a "young god" and "putative artist in his mother's book" (253):

> ME: ...the Camus book your mother told me - I expect it's L'Etranger.
>
> Y.G.: Yair, that's the one we're doing now...
>
> He is wiping the sweat from his cheek. Is it such a terrible experience to be asked what was only half a question? I try again.
>
> ME: And what about the English books?
>
> Y.G.: (grunts, almost groans at this old man's perversity) ... can't remember ... (gasps again, this time brushing the sweat from his forehead) I'll let yer know ... (253)

White does not expect the boy to become a better communicator, but sees it as his job to be better understood. When the writer wonders, "If I live long enough to communicate with him at all," his assumed obligation is manifest (253). In this, White may be a candidate for John Barth's model of the "ideal postmodernist": he "aspires to a fiction more democratic in its appeal," texts which appeal to more than just the "professional devotees of high art" (203). Far from being "Patrick White the artist/monster," "stuck" - as Penny Gay reads him - in the "modern world," White is a life/text/discourse stuck only by those readers who ignore the evidence of his dispersion (408). These readers prefer to glue their articles and essays together into what White metaphorically refers to as their "papier mâché version of monsters left over from the pre-historic landscape" (256).

White's tale of the incoherent youth shows that his complaint resides with society's infrastructures:

> As for the artist, there is no faint flicker that has not been effectively quenched, by upbringing, education, organised sport. The artists are here all right, but they have to elbow their way against the surge of the colonial sheep race. (253)

Rather than bleat with the "frustration" of the "kids and lambs" "when the dirty calico bags attached to their mothers' udders denied them access," White would have us become our own source of sustenance (88). This does not preclude having the ability to laugh at ourselves; White laughs at himself in Flaws, even at the risk of sometimes sounding like a television commercial:

> sexuality refreshes and strengthens through its ambivalence, if unconsciously - even in Australia - and defines a nation's temperament. (154)

"Even in Australia"! Laughter, as Luce Irigaray has argued, challenges "the adequacy, the univocity, the truth ... of a discourse which claims to state its own meaning" (qtd. in Berg 69). The humour in White's metafiction helps, as he hints in Flaws, to "exorcise the community voice" (49) which prevents us from responding creatively to the contingencies in life. White entertains the possibility of generating offspring, stressing that his wish depends on the reader's appreciation of his metafictional strategies. Flaws in the Glass could make his wish more viable:

> Manoly and I won't breed another generation unless those who read and understand my books. I believe that books could breed future generations in spite of the pressures on Australian children to choose illiteracy and mindlessness, or if home-bred totalitarians and foreign invaders do not destroy our tentative Australian literature. (201-2)

CHAPTER FOUR: MEMOIRS OF MANY IN ONE

> Very frequently writers interpret their anti-realist vocation in terms of writing about a novelist writing about a novelist writing about a novelist ... ad infinitum. This is tedious, introspective, and masturbatory.
> David Caute

> They tell you to keep a notebook. That's where all such splinters and masturbatory devices are stored. Indispensable after death, for the parasite students and academics who eat out your liver and lights - your heart.
> Alexandra Xenophon Demirjian Gray

Readers cannot overlook the metafictional markers in White's latest novel, Memoirs of Many in One (1986), an exciting departure from his earlier texts in communicating its narrative self-consciousness. Its ludic qualities are displayed on the title page, which says that the memoirs have been written by Alex Xenophon Demirjian Gray and edited by Patrick White. Why is it, then, that White's name appears in capitalized, bold-faced type, leaping from the page as Alex's name, long as it is, does not? And why, on the facing page, are the novels, stories, plays and autobiography "by the same author" those of Australian novelist, Patrick White?

The title, which frames the text, evokes the "age-old image" of the snake with its tail in its mouth, in that "Many" is subsumed in "One" (which is the binary opposite of "Many").[13] At the same time, use of the neuter gender, as Maurice Blanchot puts it, "makes all synthesis impossible" (qtd. in Taylor 232-33). Ursula Le Guin also discusses the hoop snake analogy, imploring the reader/writer to "[t]ake the tale in your teeth" (199). Alex Gray has obviously figured this out for herself. She writes: "I spent a delicious morning with myself, my writing" (64). Her metafictional memoirs

encourage respect for the "difference in the text (in the textual self)" so that we will resist the "impulse to homogenize it" (Rendall 64).

Alex is a literary crusader who rejects norms for those of her own choosing on all of her pilgrimages. Her excursions sue for the primacy of the creative process:

> In my writing-book I write cross out write cross out again again can I believe that I AM I I must find the Mystic I must find Dog ... (96)

There are no (Derridean) erasures in this passage, even though she writes about crossing out parts of her text. As a result, the reader recognizes both the exposed writing process and Alex's opposition to corrective readings.

On the very first page of her opus, Alex wonders: "I don't know where to begin what may turn out a monstrous mistake - start at the beginning? Plunge in today?" (17). In writing this, Alex both plunges in and alludes to the impossibility of her writing from any place other than where she is. This opening sentence acknowledges that, as Edward Said puts it, a verbal beginning is "both a creative and a critical activity" (xi). Even if the reader has missed the metafictional markers on the title page of Memoirs, the first sentence quickly reiterates the novel's orientation.

Alex may often declare: "I shall remain I - Empress Alexandra of Byzantium Nicaea Smyrna Benha and Sydney Australia," but her identity as such is decidedly problematic (116). For instance, she pleads with her daughter and their family friend, Patrick White: "If only you'll believe in me - both of you" (23). However, she immediately wonders about her request: "Did I I I believe in what I was saying?" (23). Her self-questioning, on numerous occasions, supports David Caute's contention:

> A literature which invites its audience to question the prevailing social structure and social consciousness must constantly question and expose itself. (Illusion 22).

Alex's exaggerated emphasis on the personal pronoun, here and elsewhere, also recalls Merleau-Ponty's dictum that

> "I" will never be. To write about oneself is implicitly to posit oneself as an "other", to narrate or historicize oneself as a character in one's own discourse. (qtd. in Waugh 132)

The various personae Alex Gray adopts testify to her (the text's) inscrutability: "A freshly acquired name gives me a fresh leave of life," she says (177). "Myself always in the shadows. I was nothing. I am nothing" (74). Alex establishes her independence from others' interpretations, speaking of the freedom her "body and mind enjoyed only in writing and dreams" (66), and reminding her editor that, "Enfin, I am not as others ..." (129).

Alex's daughter, Hilda, considers herself the family archivist, although she is no more than an imposter or fraud in Alex's estimation: "Those silly old papers of yours - the so-called archives," Alex complains, "are only half the truth. That's why I'm writing my memoirs. Archives have no soul. You wouldn't understand that" (21). Whereas Alex is aware of the falsification involved in writing, Hilda clings to the belief that archival records are unbiased and factual. Little does she realise that she is a "cheat who needs" Alex's "answers to pass her exam" (52). Editor White mentions Hilda in his introduction:

> At first appearance, her mother's slave, she was also her mother's keeper: she kept the archives, as opposed to Alex's arcane memoirs. Whether archives or memoirs contained the truth it might be difficult to decide. (16)

In saying this, the editor is not necessarily suggesting that truth is contained in one of either the archives or the memoirs. His comments do,

however, suggest that memoirs are, as a rule, subordinate to archives; Hilda is therefore "keeper" of Alex because Hilda "kept the archives." The archivist blurs the line between the memoirist and her writing.

When Hilda discovers Alex sitting in front of an open suitcase "overflowing" with letters, she immediately wants to know what they are (83). She stirs the contents with her hand but withdraws it quickly, "as though bitten by a spider" (83). Alex's arcane memoirs prove inimical to the archivist's hand. Alex has already drawn our attention to her Arachnean text: "I am protecting myself by cultivating this jungle of words. None of the Boobies will investigate me if I plait the branches densely enough" (51). Meanwhile, the usurper would have those letters - letters of love and doubt, of vulnerability - on documentary grounds alone: "You must hand over the suitcase," Hilda commands (84). "All these letters are my concern - as archivist" (84). Regardless of her demands, the letters won't yield much information to Hilda. Alex opens a letter which is sealed with mould and folded in a "dart or aeroplane," signs of the letter's 'flight' from those who would secure its meaning. Hilda advises her mother to "let others interpret the past - objectively," but the memoirs - implicitly - express the final word on the matter: "She snaps the hasps on the bulging Globeite. And that, Hilda believes, is that" (emphasis added) (84).

Not one to stop assailing the daughter's deficiencies, Alex also notes the archivist's love of romances. One evening, Hilda hears her mother talking and goes to her:

> "Try to sleep. Shall I bring you a cup of warm milk with some honey in it?"

Alex replies:

> "No. You must have been reading the Cartland woman." (35)

Alex also mocks Hilda's romantic tendencies when their conversation turns to a friend of Hilda's brother. Alex begins:

> "I believe his name is Morgenstern - 'Morning Star' if you must know."
> "Never heard of him. But what a lovely name."
> "That's what Herman Wouk thought."
> It was wasted on her. (57)

It looks as though Alex hopes her snideness won't be wasted on her readers. She would readily agree with Janice Radway's characterization of the romance reader's attraction to the genre as a "ritual of hope," anticipating satisfying conclusions before she has even begun reading a romance (207-8). The formulaic narratives are therefore reinforcing one myth. Alex realizes that even if Hilda reads a thousand romances, she will really only be reading one reductive "text." This accounts, in part, for Alex's distrust of the archivist's methods. Radway's comments further explain the antipathy:

> The romance's peculiar narrative strategy seems to encourage the reader in her desire to have it both ways. She can read the story as a realistic novel about what might plausibly occur in an individual woman's life without having to face the usual threat of the unknown. (207)

In the words of Mark C. Taylor, Hilda's is a "quest for certainty and security" (41). As such, it is contrary to the uncontainable excesses in and of Alex's Memoirs.

In her review of this novel, A.S. Byatt suggests that Alex may be, "at least in part, the disreputable fantasy-female other half of White's public autobiography, Flaws in the Glass" (357). Alex's metafictional machinations, however, are far from being disreputable - again and again her self-conscious insights into her fictivity manouevre the reader (or at least endeavour to) into a theoretical understanding of her creative license. As Byatt remarks, White "is playing games, with himself and with his readers,"

but Byatt is not amused (357). Memoirs is, she concludes, "in many ways a tedious fantasy. Alex's tatty epiphanies are grotesque and bathetic, and she herself lacks vitality and autonomy. You could argue that this is the nature of the exercise" (357). But Alex is fully aware of every bathetic moment in her memoirs, moments which she herself has orchestrated. To mention just one of several examples, Alex writes: "I look at the watch I realise I am not wearing" (154). The others are deluded, not she. Nor are there "epiphanies" as such because, as mentioned earier, hers is a thoroughly metadiscursive text. It highlights the "grotesque" attempts to assert any vision as "real" or correct, to use Byatt's words. And Alex does exude "vitality and autonomy," flaunting her textuality and, consequently, her dispersion. Yes, Memoirs is an exercise, but we can hardly forget that "the world it makes believe to engage" is a self-consciously manipulated world of make-believe (Byatt 357).

If the reader wants to prove that Alex is White's "other," it is easily done. For example, when a ferocious dog takes over Alex's bed, her notes read:

> I pray with all the violence I am capable of injecting into my prayers. I pray to be removed to another situation. And as usually happens, my prayer is answered. (If I keep up this sort of thing I may qualify as a candidate for canonisation. I may even pass the Test and contribute something to the Australian tourist industry by becoming Centennial Park's Very Own Saint). (106-7)

Is it just a coincidence that Patrick White also lives at Centennial Park (Flaws 147)? No - Alex's epistemology admits that there is no coincidence without the observer who creates it. As Christine Brooke-Rose notes in A Rhetoric of the Unreal, "[t]he experiencer relates, institutes differences, similarities and identities" (365). The successful "violence" of Alex's words does accentuate the power of rhetoric, but it also alludes to its often unwarranted or unjust strength. It is not at all miraculous, she is

saying, for her prayer to be answered. How, she asks, can we forget that this fiesty, stubborn woman is powerfully evoked through language, as are her actions?

The numerous parentheses in Memoirs form, along with the preface, epilogue and footnotes, the extremely useful "paratext" of White's latest novel.[14] As Alex's parenthetical note - quoted above - suggests, once arcane texts are appropriated by society, the magic of the creative process is ignored in favour of a formula which translates living texts into profits and prestige. Numerous parentheses in Memoirs permit, as Robert Morrissey explains, "the introduction of metadiscursive elements" (50). He adds that parentheses represent a "manner of slashing into the text" which allows the reader to better grasp how authors ground "what seems to be a constantly-shifting narrative" (49). The "fundamentally disambiguating role" which Morrissey attributes to parentheses accounts for their predominance in White's metafictional text (50).

Alex has little use for figures of authority and the rules others expect her to abide. She claims, for instance, that at a department store it is "far simpler to help oneself to a lipstick in passing," even though she has more than enough money to pay for it (38). When she grabs a purse in which to carry her lipstick, a parenthetical note shows us that Alex's compunction is not for transgressing a law, but for hastily snatching an object which is not to her liking: "I could only snatch clumsily in passing, and my hand came away with a glaring patent-leather handbag (not at all my style)" (38).

Alex has barely closed the purse when a salesclerk identifies her: "That's the one. A real professional" (38). But, whereas the clerk, "corseted" inside "regulation" black, calls Alex a pro, the memoirist has

other ideas, as another parenthetical confession makes clear:

> (A strange admission: I could never admit to a friend, let alone my writing-books, that I am an amateur in any sphere of art, life, or spiritual practice. Alas, it seems I am a hypocrite - perhaps at this early stage only half of one. [...]) (98)

Contrary to what Alex writes, what is strange is her written admission that she could never admit her amateur status in her writing-books, especially strange since it is situated within the "privileged place" of parentheses (Morrissey 49). This discrepancy makes her a hypocrite. However, what really makes her a hypocrite, or "only half of one," is the paradoxical bind which has trapped other theorists, such as Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes. Alex's words and actions assert a metafictional resistance against mastery and yet, in exposing her inscrutability, she also assumes the mastery she otherwise denounces. Were she other than an amateur, the measure of her expertise would contravene her professed freedom from various interpretive communities.

Although Alex presumes to teach her readers (and is, consequently, a hypocrite), perhaps she is consoled by the fact that she is self-trained. As she tells a cabdriver, "I've got to discover - by writing out - acting out my life - the reason for my presence on earth" (157). She listens to herself, and not to what others tell her is right or valid:

> I have studied practically nothing beyond my own intuition - oh, and by fits and starts, the Bible, the Talmud, the Jewish mystics, the Bhagavad Gita, various Zen masters, and dear old Father Jung who, I am told, I misinterpret. (54)

Ironically, Alex lists (as an afterthought) some of the most sacred and revered canons in the history of the printed word. As for "dear old Father Jung," Alex might just be taking a stab at the preponderance of Jungian interpretations accorded Patrick White's writing.[15] In any case, it would

matter little to a discoverer like Alex to be "told" she "misinterprets" Jung. She is interested in her own answers, not those sanctioned by others.

Alex's fight against the tyranny of authoritative discourses also points to the invasive influence of the media. When she considers the problems she will have bringing a derro-Mystic into the house, she concludes that she had, and still has, "what the radio calls 'problems'," as if the radio's appellation authorises the reality of Alex's problems (95). She alludes to the hold the media has on her fellow citizens when she describes an opening night audience, "contributing to life by being where the cameras are. It's expected of us" (166). Characterised as pawns of the media, Alex then imagines how the poet Emily Dickinson, a very private and individualistic artist, might have served the media:

> What use would Emily Dickinson have been keeping to her room with her supraterrestrial preoccupations? The media wouldn't have stood for that, they would have dragged her down to ground level amongst the plastic and adulteries, and bugger her grain of sand. (166)

The media, Alex concludes, would have reduced Dickinson to an object, an object for which they would have no use. Alex implicitly suggests that we rise up and "bugger" the powerful media as she does. By avowing that she has "no need of media bounty," Alex rejects the violence of the bounty hunters whose accounts are attained at the price of killing; the hunters, at any rate, believe they have captured and mounted the object, person, or text under scrutiny (166).

The memoirist's recollection of a ballroom dance at the Adolf Hilter Hotel, Washington, D.C., pits her transgressive and liberating dance against the absolutism figured by the hotel's name and location (44-46). However, in the course of Alex's shoeless, jewel-strewing eurythmics, her foot is wounded. This creative spirit is vulnerable to her critics:

> I am led, always limping, away, to laughter and applause, the skitter of kettledrums diminishing, saxophones huffing, gulping, sighing for someone who can only be classed as a failure in the land of success (emphasis added). (45)

Decades later, Alex is still a dancer. She tells Hilda: "You don't realise how supple I've remained from being a dancer" (85). Hilda apparently ignores Alex and must be reminded: "You forget how supple I am after years of yoga and dancing" (99). Vera John-Steiner argues that "the expressive possibilities of movement reside in their lack of full conventionalization" (166). Dance, therefore, is an apt paradigm for Alex's metadiscourse because it "leaves part of the task of interpretation to each individual" (John-Steiner 166). Is Alex allowing her audience interpretive latitude? She does tolerantly express the hope that "somebody may understand in time" her altarity (86).[16]

Alex claims that she envies her daughter's self-satisfaction since her own "beauty is a mask," her "writing a subterfuge" (57). The hypocrite has, however, put the reader on guard; often, Alex's announced subterfuge is the subterfuge. The editor also advertises the subterfuge of his methods. One of his editorial sections is preceded by the illuminating title, "Editor's Intrusion," disclosing his violation of Alex's memoirs (60). In his review of Memoirs, A.P. Riemer protests that, "to be honest, the editorial work is not up to the standards of scholarly excellence one would expect. The notes, for instance, seem particularly random" ("Patrick White" 239). Riemer also finds fault with the occasional editorial silences at (his) points of puzzlement. He concludes that "White should not have left it to the possibly misplaced ingenuity of the reviewer to sort out this puzzle" (239). And why not? If anything, the "particularly random" notes appear to comment on the dubious authority of all editors.

In his "Editorial Intrusion," the editor recalls his stroll with Hilda: those who might have "bothered to notice [...] would not have looked long enough to work out who was guiding who - in the idiom of our day" (61). Like Alex, editor White expects onlookers "to work out" their own understanding of their universe. However, at the same time that White advocates personal discoveries, he blatantly mocks the "idiom" which breaks rules of grammar. Ironically, he argues for the freedom of expression correctly expressed! Rules, the editor/novelist implies, are inevitable and perhaps even useful.

Editor White's record of his conversation with Hilda shows him bombarding the woman with questions:

> "What an inquisition, Patrick."
> "I'm only trying to get to the bottom of what you're telling me - work out a plan of action for the future." (62)

Their conversation constitutes what Brian McHale calls a "topos of postmodernist writing: the topos of the face-to-face interview between the author and his character" (213). McHale likens the result of such conversations to the "short-circuit of the ontological structure" (213). White, appropriately enough, has also indicated Memoir's metafictional "short-circuit" in his preface and postscript, both of which outline his role in (re)writing Alex:

> some of the dramatis personae of this Levantine script could be the offspring of my own psyche. (16)

> While I I - the great creative ego - had possessed myself of Alex Gray's life when she was still an innocent girl and created from it the many images I needed to develop my own obsessions, both literary and real. (192)

White joins Alex in unabashedly foregrounding the latter's role as an agent expressing White's metalinguistic concerns.

One need only consider Alex's treatment of Shakespeare to understand that she scoffs at the thought of becoming a "candidate for canonisation" (107). The metafictionist's disdain for the Bard's unquestioned canon is evident when she speaks of the "traditionalists, the 'bardolators'" for whom she will present "my Viola, Titania, Hamlet, Lear, my Rosalind, above all, my Cleopatra, in excerpts from the plays" (120). As Robert Weimann explains, a literary canon "implicates some socially operative authority in selecting, appropriating, and delegating certain privileged forms, energies, and effects of discourse" ("Shakespeare" 68). Recently, diverse critical theories have questioned the legitimacy of all canons; it is fitting that Alex, too, should participate in the decanonisation of Shakespeare.

The characters she deliberately omits or modifies share a common constitution - they are silent, obedient creatures. For instance, Alex tells Hilda and Patrick that she will insist on a "straw Cordelia" when she plays Lear (121). In this, Alex illustrates the futility of Cordelia's resolve to "Love, and be silent" (1.1.61) in contradistinction to the words of her sisters which, though false, gain their father's approval.

Alex also finds it necessary to adjust the number of actors in Antony and Cleopatra:

> I persuaded the director to cut the role of Octavia, an insipid character any way you look at her. No one could accuse me of having it in for Octavia, when Cleopatra herself shared my opinion. Octavia is dispensable. (131)

Like Cordelia, Octavia is useless because she is without speech. She is a silent partner, obediently complying when her brother, Caesar, pledges her hand to Antony as a truce between the two power-hungry men. Octavia may be a woman "Whose virtue and whose general graces speak," but she does not (2.2.130). She is, as Enobarbus characterises her, "of a holy, cold, and still conversation" (2.6.121-22). Her acquiescence is of no use to Alex.

Octavia's antithesis is Cleopatra, ruler of Egypt, lover of Antony, and Alex's favourite character in Shakespeare. Cleopatra is also, as Harvey Rovine notes, an extremely talkative female character when contrasted with the number of silent women in Shakespeare's dramas (37). Like Alex, Cleopatra is a prolific writer, repeatedly calling for her "ink and paper" so that she can bombard Antony with greetings. Cleopatra encourages her messenger to describe Octavia as ugly and dull because that is what she wants to hear. Nor will Cleopatra hear of staying behind while others fight to determine her future, her meaning:

> Sink Rome, and their tongues rot
> That speak against us! A charge we bear in'th'war,
> And, as the president of my kingdom, will
> Appear there for a man. Speak not against it,
> I will not stay behind. (3.7.15-19)

The ruler's outspoken determination matches the mettle with which both Alex and White discharge archivists, critics, and academics who would leave them out of the discourse on their metadiscursive texts.

As for theatre critics, the Sydney Morning Herald promises and delivers "K.V.H." ("the Critic," as Alex calls him), flown in for one of the theatre company's performances in the Outback. Before the show, various members of the company try to decipher the initials:

> We were all familiar with King Harry, but that V ...
> Linda, who is a bitch, but a nice one when she is on
> side, suggested the V could stand for Vampire, except that
> K.V.H. might have shown more signs of the blood he has
> sucked. (129)

Alex implies that K.V.H. is representative of critics. He is a lifeless vampire, as is his methodology - his parasitical methods depend on the blood/creative processes of the living bodies/texts he robs. Obviously, Alex doesn't think the Vampire is too successful at what he does: "Once or twice I caught sight of the Critic's face (so unmistakably pallid)" (130-

31). Here, the parenthetical paratext alerts the reader to Alex's authorial freedom, even as the textual intrusion emphasizes the failure of the Critic's discourse. The litany continues in Alex's letter to White, in which she quotes K.V.H.'s review. He claims that

> he did not stay for Ms. Gray's monologues Dolly Formosa and the Happy Few because he might have found them "too, too modern." Understandable of course when you and I know that the Critic's last gesture to modernity was many years ago when he invented Brecht. (135)

In The Illusion, David Caute portrays Brecht as "the most formidable opponent of illusionism" (179). Caute describes the playwright's meta-discursive methods:

> Noting that many writers try to give the impression that everything in their work happens of its own accord [...], he comments: "Of course this is a swindle, and apparently the idea is that if it comes off it will increase the spectator's pleasure. In fact it does not. What the spectator, anyway the experienced spectator, enjoys about art is the making of art, the active creative element." (179)

Alex rejects the Critic's lame excuses because if he had truly appreciated or understood Brecht, he could not have suspected any performance of being "too, too modern." Caute also explains that "Genius or talent" makes art "happen" whereas "the critic exists to say what happened" (192). The Herald's critic, however, doesn't even stay to see what happens. It is dismissed out of hand.

For Alex, it is the process of creating, and not the product, which sustains her, literally and figuratively speaking. The metafictional emphasis on process is clear in the review Alex imagines she might receive:

> ... unorthodox to say the least. But do we expect orthodoxy from a great creative artist? No Bernhardt, no Duse, Ms. Gray stands on her own - she flows rather, as rhythmically as the waters of the Nile. If the audience was puzzled at times by what she offered, they may understand in retrospect the experience through which they lived that night in Ochtermochty. For me, it will remain a landmark in the theatre of the unexpected ... (130)

The critic Alex has had the misfortune to know shies away from unorthodoxy. Expecting the unexpected, he rushes back to the safety of Sydney (134).

The responses of Alex's Outback audiences, the immediacy of their reactions, are pivotal. These audiences really experience a "theatre of the unexpected" for, as Alex reminds Patrick, "most of the deprived individuals we play to haven't seen any of these characters in any shape or form. Not like the professional 'bardolators' in the capital cities of this colony" (128). As a result, the company's performances are often accompanied by shouts from the audience: "If the guy's supposed to be fat and short of breath 'e shouldn't look skinny as an old ewe on agistment" (128). Town officials ask the shouters to keep quiet, or to leave, but - Alex writes - "sometimes that doesn't work either. At Peewee Plains there were eggs and tomatoes: quite a scandal" (128). And yet, Alex's opinions on the two types of audiences she encounters suggest that the Outback responses are far from scandalous: the spontaneous and untimely jeers actually seem welcome because they are unpremeditated comments which further a dialogue initiated by whatever is happening on the stage. The audience participation is both vital and individualistic. The importance of the audience participation may be signalled by Alex's introduction of a new character into the Bard's drama, the "Voice From the Dark" (131-32;134).

How do the responses of the audiences from the "wastes of Philistia" (125) fare against those of the "professional 'bardolators'"? Well, when Alex springs out shrieking "I am the Resurrection and the Life" and is whirled around on a fellow thespian's shoulders, the Sydney audience is taken aback:

> The Sand Pit audience, each member probably an unbeliever on principle, is so startled by the unorthodox message, as well as my unexpected appearance, lets out a sustained

> gasp. Are they supposed to laugh? I suspect no one has ever dared at a venue for serious, innovative drama like the Sand Pit (emphasis added). (151)

Alex's actions are ludicrous, as Byatt has noted, and yet the audience forbears for fear of reacting incorrectly. The "sustained" gasp underscores a static or passive existence, the "professionals" relying as they do on the approbation of authorities supposedly more knowledgeable than they.

During rehearsals for the company's next project, Alex notes that the other cast members dismiss her scene as an "excisable (sub-subtext) scene" compared with the play's so-called "contentious issues" (161). But their audience laughs at these issues; that is, they laugh if they are not sleeping (167). Alex wonders, "What will move an audience" watching "this non-revolutionary revolutionary play"; the Critic is wriggling in his seat, just "itching to fling a subtext into the arena" (167). The situation is (meta)critical. Alex concludes: "I must act of my own free will" (167-68). Enter Dolly Formosa. Although Alex thinks the moment "should have appeared menacing and tragic," it suddenly "becomes so farcical" that she bursts out laughing, pulls out a gun and starts shooting, aimlessly, into the "covey of defenceless game" (168). This is the "theatre of the unexpected" which Alex values so highly; it happens when Alex's expectations are thwarted.

Unfortunately for the Critic, his bat wings "are carrying him" safely "into the night," but there is one woman who laughs: "Her laughter resounds so madly it suggests she may have grasped the reason for the exercise" (169). Alex aims at this woman's mouth and shoots. She scores a bull's eye, but

> It does not stop the woman's maniacal laughter. It is louder than ever, only with a slight crackling at its enamelled edges. I fire and fire, till silence. My blanks are spent. (169)

In Emily Dickinson's poem "My Life has stood - a Loaded Gun," the speaker's life as gun depicts a creative, destructive power which frees her from what Helen McNeil describes as a "linguistic betrothal" to her patriarchal master (175). Alex's drastic actions recall this revolutionary gesture, as does the woman's incessant laughter.

Alex criticizes critics, academics, archivists, and other figures of authority throughout Memoirs of Many in One. And she writes with the knowledge that she and her texts will likewise be judged. This is indicated on the first page of her memoirs:

> Who knows where the end will come - and whether in a flash, or a long gnawing: In any case THEY will be watching, from inside the house, from the garden, the Park, or most disturbingly, from above. (17)

"Inside the house," there is Hilda, Alex's archivist daughter. We have already seen that Alex disparages archives as recording only half the truth. From the garden, there are characters such as Mr. Dobbins. His tomato garden is his "asylum" (50). When he must leave the comfort of his garden for the "real world," he and his wife form a "chorus" against their enemies (50). Alex writes (again, parenthetically) that "(such people are the greatest joiners)" (50). Competition, however, is stiff in a joiner-oriented society. In the Park, there are tables which Park "authorities" have installed, used by picnickers and by

> students who like to write their theses at them. The tables are bolted to concrete blocks to ensure permanence, but every so often, members of the public in a fit of joie de vivre, or hate, uproot a table and hurl it into the muddy waters of the lake. (118)

Alex is also tempted to wreck tables which serve to ensure "permanence," "inspired less by hatred," she explains, "than the despair and frustration of any woman, man, person up against the Hildas - and Patricks (yes, I've got to include Hilda's stooge) of the rational world" (119).

The final perspective from which Alex will be watched is, "most disturbingly, from above" (17). Traditionally, a watcher from "above" would have suggested some guiding spirit, whether a god or an inspirational muse. But Alex's supplication to god (later in the text) makes this an unlikely possibility: "O God! I don't know why I should invoke the name of one who probably does not exist" (138). This self-conscious writer, however, knows exactly how to announce her metadiscursive concerns. Alex's consternation is caused by those bent over her text: editor White, who feels obliged to sort out her writing (192); author and metafictionist Patrick White; and the reader, an author who may create Alex, just as the Critic "invented" Brecht (135). These watchers will all interpret Alex according to particular standards. By pointing out the numerous perspectives from which she will be watched, Alex shows that she evades all such appropriative discourses.

Editor White's "Epilogue" might not seem relevant to Alex's memoirs because it details White's relationship with Hilda after Alex has died. The editor describes the relationship as Alex's retribution:

> If she had become my victim in those endless scribblings which I was faced at last with sorting out, I was hers through her authoritarian bigot of a daughter. (192)

And, indeed, Hilda decides that Patrick should live with her, packs his bags, helps him move, drags him along with her to Europe. In short, she seems to make all the decisions: "I did as I was told," the editor claims (185). He further realizes, "most forcibly," that Alex has "taken her revenge" (192). But let's not fall sway to the editor's bigoted and authoritative denouncement of Hilda. He is playing games with the reader, just as Alex did. His 'forcible' realization of Alex's revenge recalls the successful "violence" of Alex's prayers - both memoirist and editor depend

on the power of rhetoric to convince not only themselves, but their readers as well.

A gullible reader might accept the editor's subordination to Hilda, in which case neither Alex nor White would be the so-called "victims" (192); the reader would be, accepting the editor's words, in his exalted capacity as the text's overseer, as conclusive. The paradox of editor White's admitted subjection to Hilda is that it is made by a fictional character. Editor White is a fiction; so too is his capture by the archivist. This is the final metafictional message (or warning) to Memoir's "real," tangible readers.

CONCLUSION

> Let's conclude with the convention of conclusions themselves. As a hallmark of Aristotelian form, endings are meant to be summations, resolutions, terminations of those developing actions which have brought the story to this point; endings are, in other words, final. But is there any way experimental realism can improve upon this oldest and most natural of conventions?
>
> Jerome Klinkowitz

The final section of Flaws in the Glass is entitled "What is Left?" (251-257). White replies: "Memories - friendship - love, however thin its ice - food, if teeth allow - sleep - the dark ..." (251). The question posed alludes to the uncontainable excesses of both life and texts; instead of pretending to write a conclusive summation, White provides not one answer, but many. How many other answers do the ellipses represent?

Similarly, the last paragraph of his self-portrait begins, "If I were to stage the end I would set it on the upper terrace," a gesture conceding that his readers will also "set the stage" according to their own aesthetics (256). All of White's dialogic texts acknowledge that there is no such thing as having the final word. He can't have the final word because his writing is offered up to his readers. We can't exhaustively explain a text because of language's representational, and hence multivocal, nature. But saying this does not preclude final words.

In The Self-Apparent Word, Jerome Klinkowitz translates a thought of writer Philippe Sollers for us: "He who knows not language serves idols; he who could see his language would see his God" (53). Klinkowitz himself concludes: "Reminding readers that fictions are provisional realities and not bedrock truth is the essence of self-apparent writing. Humans create

their own meanings - in religions and in novels" (135). This is the essence of White's metafiction.

I would not pretend to write a definitive conclusion and yet my above remarks, this thesis, betray me. Ronald Sukenick remarks that

> The obligation of fiction is to rescue experience from history, from politics, from commerce, from theory, even from language itself - from any system, in fact, that threatens to distort, devitalize, or manipulate experience. (434)

It is clearly not time to close the book on White and on his writing. As Edmond Jabès argues, "[t]he heart of dialogue beats with questions," not answers (21). White's dialogic metafiction insists on this. Readers, however, will draw their own conclusions.

NOTES

[1] Viking uses this quotation on the dust jackets for White's novels.

[2] See, for example, Brian Kiernan, Patrick White (London: MacMillan, 1980) 18.

[3] For a fuller examination, see M.M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981).

[4] See "Post-Structuralism" in Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983) 127-150.

[5] The Random House College Dictionary, Rev. ed. (New York: Random, 1980).

[6] See, for example, Carolyn Bliss, Patrick White's Fiction: The Paradox of Fortunate Failure (London: MacMillan, 1986) 63.

[7] In 1981, at least two texts were published by White in which he reviled one particular critic. See "Patrick White Speaks on Factual Writing and Fiction," Australian Literary Studies 10,1 (1981): 99-101. See also Patrick White, Flaws in the Glass (New York: Viking, 1981) 154.

[8] Examples are found in the epigraph ("engendreront tes passions"; "après t'avoir fait enfanter mille systèmes"), as well as on pages 137 ("pregnant phrases"); 144 ("chrysalis schoolgirl"); 151 ("pregnant thought"); and 352 ("inside her, something was still perfecting itself. Intent on this process of gestation").

[9] See Linda Hutcheon, "Canadian Historiographic Metafiction," Essays on Canadian Writing 30 (1984-85) 228-238. See also Hayden White, Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978).

[10] Translations were made with the help of Casell's German-English English-German Dictionary (New York: MacMillan, 1978).

[11] Random House.

[12] A special issue of New Literary History 9,1 (1977) addresses this apparently problematic genre. See also Philip Dodd, "History or Fiction: Balancing Contemporary Autobiography's Claims," Mosaic 20,4 (1987) 61-69; Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement," Modern Language Notes 94 (1979) 919-30.

[13] See Carl Jung, ed., Man and his Symbols (1964; New York: Dell, 1968) 26.

[14] The term "paratext" is a commonly used reference, attributed to narratologist Gérard Genette.

[15] See, for example, Karin Hansson, The Warped Universe: A Study of Imagery and Structure in Seven Novels by Patrick White (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1984); Ingmar Bjorksten, Patrick White: A General Introduction (St. Lucia: U of Queensland P, 1976).

[16] See Mark C. Taylor, Altarity (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987).

[17] Texts studied were William Shakespeare, The Tragedy of King Lear, ed. G.L. Kittredge (Waltham: Blaidell, 1967) and William Shakespeare, Antony and Cleopatra, ed. J.D. Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1968).

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