

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Male Beauty in the Eye of the Beholder? Guys, Guises and Disguise in Patrick White's *The Twyborn Affair* Jean-François Vernay

The Twyborn Affair (1979) critically confronts the politics of sex while revealing the author's private inner world. Patrick White's last novel but one adumbrates the representation of traditionally invisible alternative models of sexuality in literature which, according to Robert Dessaix, have been given topicality in the 1980s and 1990s due to a loosening of sexual repression.¹ The themes of homosexuality and transvestism which White tackled earlier in his fiction are now the cynosure of all eyes and fused with identity concerns, even though the author did not intend his novel to be a piece of queer activism.²

The Twyborn Affair is quintessentially a social comedy verging on the comedy of errors in which the traditional gendered dichotomy is subverted in order to blur clear-cut distinctions between what is meant to be masculine and feminine. This essay will explore the themes of literary representation, psychology, seduction, gender deconstruction, sexual identity and the politics of ambiguity in relation to male beauty in the novel.

The Genesis of *The Twyborn Affair*: Reality in a New Guise.

The starting point for *The Twyborn Affair* is the portrait of Herbert Dyce-Murphy, an English gentleman transvestite, which White saw in the Victorian National Gallery (Melbourne). Later, his friend Barry Jones, who pointed to the subject in the painting, reported to him a conversation between Herbert and his mother Mrs Murphy:

‘Are you my son, Herbert?’ Mrs Murphy had asked this familiar figure in a dress.

‘No, but I am your daughter, Edith.’

‘I’m so glad. I always wanted a daughter.’ (PWAL 545)

¹ In the 1970s, Australian society gradually came to an acceptance of same-sex desire: homosexuality have been decriminalised throughout the various states in fits and starts from 1975 till 1997, starting in South Australia and reaching completion in Tasmania. See Bryce Fraser & Ann Atkinson (eds.), *People of Australia : Key Events in Population, Society, the Environment* (NSW: Macquarie University, 1998) 195, 216.

² Judging from David Marr's official biography, the discreet White has never been interested in queer activism and never got involved in the Gay Rights Movement. ‘The first demonstrations for homosexual rights began in Australia in 1971. White never marched. His advice to those who suggested he take part was to get off the streets and get on with their lives. Homosexuality was lived not debated by him. ... White was contemptuous of those who pretended not to be homosexual. He made no secret of it, nor did he make declarations. As he gossiped about everyone in the most precise detail, so he gossiped about homosexuals, but his own sexuality was not a topic for general discussion at Martin Road. His house was never a homosexual enclave and he scorned those who lived in a coterie of queens. Yet for all this he and Manoly Laccaris were the best-known homosexual couple in the country’ David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life* (Sydney: Random House, 1991) 526 (henceforth abbreviated as PWAL).

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All the core ingredients which are central to White's introspective novel – namely, gender-bending, disguise and homosexual references – are contained in this *donnée*. From then on, *The Twyborn Affair* became the 'Murphy novel' which was commenced in early 1977 and completed by the end of the following year. The author regarded *The Twyborn Affair* as one of his four best novels and the most autobiographical of all his novels at that.³ As he explained to Manning Clark, 'All my novels have been to some extent autobiographical, but the present one is more explicit than the others. There are still plenty of disguises of course, otherwise it would be the kind of humdrum documentary expected by Australians' (PWL 506). Being his most personal book in which his homosexuality is fully explored, *The Twyborn Affair* can be construed as the author's coming out,⁴ since White thought it was best to talk embarrassing things out rather than having other people expose them. The publication of *The Twyborn Affair* even prompted him to write his heretical autobiography entitled *Flaws in The Glass* (1981) in which he is even more outspoken about his sexual inclinations. In a letter to Graham Greene, White even predicted when writing this 'abrasive novel' that it 'will probably earn me complete social ostracism in Australia' (PWL 506). When *The Twyborn Affair* appeared in November 1979, he was proved wrong. The critical reception of the novel was a complete success, benefiting from commendable reviews and good sales (PWL 522).

In order to document this novel of multiple identities, White returned to the Monaro to capture the landscape of his early jackarooing days back in 1930. The biographical lineaments which one classically finds in fiction are scattered throughout the book. For instance, White's exploration of the South of France and his visit to the Parc Hôtel in Hyères were disguised in his fiction as the Golsons' Grand Hôtel Splendide des Ligures in Saint Mayeul. In addition, he has incorporated Greek history as a homage paid to his long-life partner Manoly Lascaris, with whom he shared over forty years of elective affinities. What is more, the erotic scene as observed by Monsieur Pelletier takes its source in White's childhood when water was associated with sexual boyishness. As the novelist recalls bathing with his companions,

water played a leading part in my developing sexuality. I was always throwing off my clothes to bathe. ... We continued joking, to hold more serious thoughts at bay, while we plunged, turning on our backs after surfacing, spouting water, exposing our sex, lolling or erect, diving again to swim beneath the archways

³ David Marr, ed., *Patrick White. Letters* (Sydney: Random House, 1994) 488. This reference will henceforth be abbreviated as PWL.

⁴ The fact that White chose not to speak to his reading public about his sexuality in explicit terms until the publication of *The Twyborn Affair* is an apt illustration of Robert Dessaix's historicising statement about the 1970s in Australia: 'In the wake of the liberalisation of laws on homosexuality in most Australian States, the rolling back of virtually all censorship restrictions, ... the arrival of Black Wattle Press in Sydney (specialising in publishing gay writing for a gay readership), the flourishing of the Sydney Mardi Gras and the introduction of courses in gay studies on several Australian campuses, writing on gay and lesbian topics has proliferated' (Dessaix 16). As Brigid Rooney points out in *Literary Activists*, 'homosexuality was not for public view in the 1950s, and Marr's biography records the local "fiction" of the two bachelors, business partners, living together at Dogwoods' (Rooney 40).
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made by open legs, ribs and flanks slithering against other forms in the fishy school, as a flamingo moon rose above the ashen crowns of surrounding trees.⁵

The element of water is crucial here in terms of sexual and Freudian imagery, being as much a male symbol of fertility as a matrix of sorts. Psychological realism in *The Twyborn Affair* is not only achieved through recalling and drawing on actual personal experiences but also by having recourse to projection. White's commentators have noted that while the bulk of his characters expressed fragmented aspects of his self, Eddie was the most complete expression of himself. Even though Patrick White wanted to steer clear of Freudian psychoanalysis,⁶ he seems to be in tune with the Freudian axiom according to which the psychological novel is the result of the writer's habit to split his ego and project fragments of his own self onto the various characters:⁷ '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' (FG 81). In other words, White slips into the shoes of his imaginary figures to accommodate to an androgynous mind. In his Nobel Prize address, he confessed that 'my flawed self has only ever felt intensely alive in the fictions I create.'⁸ Fiction thus becomes a means to overcompensate the cracks in life which can hardly be papered over. In this particular light, White appears as a puppeteer toying with his fictitious creatures, an idea which seems to fall in with Susan Lever's conclusion. She explains:

In *The Twyborn Affair* White exposes his role as novelist, as the one who dresses his characters in one sex or the other, as the voyeur who watches them suffer, or the brothel keeper who creates roles for them to play. Despite his claims to transsexual understanding, White's vision remains masculine, but in this novel he allows his readers to recognise his role as the master of his characters' sex and sexuality.⁹

She is not only right in seeing White as sharing the same part as his literary creations but also as a kind of demiurge playing over his model theatre. Like children role-playing while projecting their minds and emotions onto their toys, Patrick White impersonates his male and female characters so that his 'flawed self' may finally retrieve original unity and a sense of completion by imaginatively embodying both sexes at once.

⁵ Patrick White, *Flaws in The Glass* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1981), 51-2 (henceforth abbreviated as FG).

⁶ In a letter to Tom Maschler, White confesses: 'Perhaps I am too ignorant of the technicalities of psychoanalysis to appreciate it all. In any case, psychoanalysis is a dark cave into which I'd never venture for fear of leaving something important behind' (PWL 416).

⁷ In 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming', Freud believed in the capacity of psychological novelists, who cared to go through self-observation, to split up their ego 'into many parts-ego', with those parts being projected onto several characters – characters he generically termed 'heroes'. These parts-ego could be seen to epitomise the 'conflicting currents' of the writer's mental life.

⁸ Paul Brennan and Christine Flynn, eds., *Patrick White Speaks* (Sydney: Primavera Press, 1989) 42.

⁹ Susan Lever, 'The Human Hierarchy of Men and Women: Patrick White's *The Twyborn Affair*,' *Real Relations: The Feminist Politics of form in Australian Fiction* (Rushcutters Bay, NSW: ASAL & Halstead Press, 2000) 104.

This mental androgyny scattered throughout the text in a multifaceted protagonist may account for the fact that most critics found it difficult to wring meanings out of *The Twyborn Affair*. Besides, the destabilising effect of having a character impersonating a young woman (is it just cross-dressing or transvestism?) and then a young jackaroo who purports to be a Lieutenant and then the Madam of a London brothel, all point to ‘a queer unity’¹⁰ in this most bizarre novel which challenges masculinity and segues into fantasy.

The Challenge of Masculinity and the Concept of Male Beauty.

Let us take a closer look at the publisher’s blurb on the back cover of the 1995 Vintage edition, in which *The Twyborn Affair* is wrapped up in the following nutshell:

Eddie Twyborn is bisexual and beautiful, the son of a Judge and a drunken mother. With his androgynous hero – Eudoxia/ Eddie/ Eadith Twyborn – and through his search for identity, for self-affirmation and love in its many forms, Patrick White takes us on a journey into the ambiguous landscapes, sexual, psychological and spiritual, of the human condition.

The adjective ‘beautiful’ could as much be the fruit of the publisher’s subjectivity as it could refer to the narrator’s comment on Eddie’s beauty halfway through the novel: ‘She smiled at their son. She may have wished to touch him, but something she could not have defined frightened her into resisting the impulse. Perhaps it was his good looks. Handsome men were inclined to intimidate Eadie Twyborn.’¹¹ Apart from this excerpt, in which the omniscient narrator mainly tries to account for Eadie’s attraction to her son, nowhere is it explicitly stated in the book that Eddie is an Adonis. To be sure, the literary representation of beauty would essentially rely on White’s characterisation skills. But if his protagonist is indeed repeatedly associated with lust and perceived as being ‘different’ on more than one occasion, readers are never given a detailed physical description of Eddie’s purportedly good looks. Very much like most of the sex scenes in the novel, Eddie’s male beauty is mostly understated and implicit rather than thrown in the face of readers. In short, male beauty is neither presented as being objectively inherent to the protagonist nor to be found in White’s subjective representation of E.

The chief reason why Eddie’s male beauty underpins *The Twyborn Affair* without being pinpointed through a cluster of focalisers in an attempt to acknowledge her/his beauty through consensual judgement is that Patrick White could not foster some form of ambiguity and play on sexual indeterminacy without shying away from depictions of his protagonist’s masculinity. It is quite significant that in the Aristide Pelletier episode (TA 72-6), the first (homo)erotic scene in the book, Eudoxia’s naked figure – shorn of any guise – remains unmistakably ambiguous:

¹⁰ See Noel Macainsh, ‘A Queer Unity – Patrick White’s *The Twyborn Affair*,’ *Southerly* (43.2: June 1983), 143-54.

¹¹ Patrick White, *The Twyborn Affair* (Sydney: Vintage, 1995) [1979], 157 (henceforth abbreviated as TA).

Whether the stranger, a naked one at that, was a man or a woman, Monsieur Pelletier could not be sure: there were enough *folles Anglaises* along the Coast to make it a woman; there were plenty of romantic Englishmen and pederast-poets to provide a possible alternative. The equivocal nature of the scene made Monsieur Pelletier shiver worse than ever. (TA 73)

Beauty fails to be gendered in this context and, regardless of what sex the indistinct model belongs to, Monsieur Pelletier projects his Romantic yearnings onto Eudoxia by reifying her/him into a work of art reminiscent of the quintessential beauty epitomised by Greek or Renaissance statuary. The underlying logic behind this analogy is that the best way not to define a subject is to turn her/him into an object:

There stood the person poised on a rock above the sea. Because a romantic, Monsieur Pelletier saw the naked flesh as white marble, or perhaps ivory overlaid with the palest gold leaf, though if in possession of telescope or binoculars, he might have had to admit to its being a dirty grey in keeping with the tonal landscape. (TA 73)

The scene is steeped in uncertainty and so is Monsieur Pelletier who, after a short spell, still cannot determine the swimmer's gender in the innermost recesses of his soul as he is equally assertive that the figure is a man, or else a woman ('must be a man'/'could only be a woman').

It was still impossible for the watcher to decide whether the hair, illuminated by sudden slicks of light, was that of a *folle Anglaise* or *pédéraste romantique*, but in whatever form, the swimmer was making for the open sea, thrashing from side to side with strong, sure, professional strokes. It must be a man, Monsieur Pelletier decided, and yet there was a certain poetry of movement, a softness of light surrounding the swimmer, that seduced him into concluding it could only be a woman. (TA 73-4)

White makes it clear that the gender of the desired person is of little importance when it comes to lust. Sexual tension has overwhelmed Aristide Pelletier to such an extent that he must release it through a pleasure-seeking interlude of autoeroticism.

Whether the swimmer were the young wife of the crazy Greek or some unknown woman or youth, neither physical passion, nor even a burst of lust, could enter into a relationship which presented itself as a tremulous abstraction, and which must remain remote from his actual life. In one sense disgusting, his regrettable act of masturbation seemed to express a common malaise, his own and that of the swimmer headed for the open sea, as well as a world despair gathering in the sea-damp newspapers. (TA 76)

Broaching the concept of male beauty in a novel when the protagonist is precisely shunning any clear-cut gender definition of himself/herself appears to be a near impossible task. As a psychological tripartite novel, *The Twyborn Affair* shows

the progress of an ambiguous gender-bender character, bearing a new name for each part of her/his life. The protagonist – the son of Judge Edward Twyborn and his spouse Eadie – is first Eudoxia, the sexual partner of an ageing Greek man, then Eddie Twyborn going through bisexual experiences and finally Eadith Trist, the madam of a London brothel. Despite these multiple identities, Eudoxia, Eddie and Eadith are one and the same person born to the world as masculine. So even if Eudoxia is clearly acknowledged as a female in the narrative, referred to by other people and herself as ‘Madame Vatatzes’, ‘Angelos’ ‘charming wife’, ‘the hetaira’, ‘Empress Eudoxia in name’ in Section One and appears as a ‘madam’ in Section Three, we shall still refer to her male beauty in terms of biological identity.

Male beauty might be defined as a set of inner and/or outer qualities inherent to a biological man which provides the male or female beholder with an experience of visual delight which may result in some form of appeal. Inner qualities may involve immanent features like personality, grace, charm, elegance and intelligence while outer qualities imply physical criteria such as youthfulness, symmetry, complexion and health. The first section of *The Twyborn Affair* opens on Joan Sewell and E. Boyd (Curly) Golson, a wealthy Australian couple who end up on the Côte d’Azur intending to meet up with Joanie’s friend, the flamboyant fellow-Australian Eudoxia Vatatzes. Eudoxia, in her/his mid twenties, is the partner of the decadent widower and sexagenarian Angelos Vatatzes whom she/he met for the first time in Marseille. While any old man might be attracted to a twenty-five-year-old partner – youthfulness being one of the criteria of outer beauty – it is difficult to see how the reciprocity works out. But while Eudoxia asks herself ‘Why am I besotted on this elderly, dotty, in many ways tiresome Greek?’ (TA 23), she ascribes their mutual homosexual attraction to her/his being trapped in a mirror relationship:

I can only think it’s because we have been made for each other, that our minds as well as our bodies fit, every bump to every cranny, and quirk to quirk. If I hate him at times it’s because I hate myself. If I love him more deeply than I love E. it’s because I know this other creature too well, and cannot rely entirely on him or her. (TA 23)

E, in this excerpt, stands for Eudoxia who seems to have a split perception of her own self which points to some kind of identity muddle from the outset of *The Twyborn Affair*. Even though there is rich psychoanalytic territory to be explored here in terms of psychosis¹² and Eddie’s intensely close relationship with her/his mother Eadie,¹³ I shall not dwell on what remains beyond the remit of this essay. However, it gradually becomes apparent as the book unfolds that Eddie shares many similarities with her/his mother, among which an inclination for cross-dressing. Eddie’s rejection of masculinity through disguise, even though she/he asserts himself as male gendered in

¹² Patrick White took an even greater interest in split personality and psychosis with his last novel dealing with schizophrenia. *Memoirs of Many in One* (1986) was published under the pen name of Alex Xenophon Demirjan Gray, an (imaginary) Greek female author whose novel Patrick White would have edited.

¹³ Incidentally, Eddie and Eadith are onomastically speaking near anagrams of Eadie with whom the protagonist is literally equated in the narrative on page 150.

the narrative – ‘I’m a boy’ (TA 182), claims Eddie Twyborn to Mrs Tyrell – can be explained by the fact that Eadie has ‘always wanted a daughter’ (TA 423), a desire which Mrs Tyrell has intuitively sensed when she replies: ‘Bet yer mum would’ve been glad of a girl’ (TA 182). All things considered, it seems that Eddie’s ambiguous mindset has been shaped by what has been expected of him. It ensues that the concept of identity – in which beauty would be factored – comes in the form of a social positioning co-dependent on the perception of others.

Beauty Is In the Eye of the Beholder.

‘Beauty is in the eye of the beholder’ does not appear as a proper quote in the novel, although Eudoxia touches on its essence when telling Angelos, with (homo)sexual innuendoes reminiscent of a Shakespearian style, ‘My body’s what you make of it’ (TA 30). This proverbial phrase on beauty has captured a sense of wisdom that turns the tables on the relationship between beholder and beheld object. Male beauty as a concept will be more stable when assessed in the eyes of the beholder (given that the beholder has a fair idea of his definition of male beauty) than if it is meant to be encapsulated in a specific male body (for people’s opinions would range from alleged beauty to the lack of it). In a heterosexual situation, male beauty would logically be informative of a woman’s conception of male aesthetics. But what happens if the male model like Eddie Twyborn has cross-dressed himself as in Section One of the novel? In this excerpt, the female beholder is Joan Golson, Curly Golson’s wife, who has lesbian tendencies. In a letter to Eddie’s mother,¹⁴ Joan confesses her crush on Eudoxia and hints at her past affair with Eadie Twyborn. Speaking of Eudoxia, she says:

She is in any case a radiant creature such as you before anyone, darling, would appreciate. On meeting ‘Eudoxia’ I could have eloped with her, as you too, Eadie, would have wanted, had you been here. We might have made an *à trois*, as they say! I would have been jealous. I would not really have wanted to share our bed of squalor with anyone else, after escaping from husbands, prudence, the past, into some northern town of damp sheets, iron bedsteads, bug-riddled walls. To lie with this divine creature, breast to breast, mouth to mouth, on the common coverlet, listening to the activity on the street below, flowing by gaslight over the wet cobbles. (TA 128)

It is interesting to observe that in a classic heterosexual situation, White has chosen to subvert the female/male attraction into a lesbian relationship. Therefore, Mrs Golson’s crush on Eudoxia cannot be informative of male beauty canons because she is only interested in the feminine aspect of the young Vatatzes.

When it comes to gay relationships, male beauty should logically be as much an eye-opener on the aesthetics of the beholder as on the canons of male beauty, in terms of literary representation. But the Angelos/Eudoxia relationship is expressed rather in terms of sexual desire than in terms of aesthetics. If I wouldn’t go as far as to

¹⁴ It might be worth noting that Joan, when she sends a letter to her friend Eadie (Eddie’s mother) is unaware that her other friend Eudoxia (Eddie) is Eadie’s son, who she has not seen for many years.

veer round to Susan Lever's opinion arguing for a 'pattern of voyeurism'¹⁵ in *The Twyborn Affair*, I still agree with the fact that visual perception is a strong component of the book. There is no denying that desire could well be aroused through the visual stimulation of aesthetic beauty, but Angelos Vatatzes' 'predatory eye' (TA 24) in this instance is more likely to be construed as a giveaway of his sexual appetite for Eudoxia, which could be a matter of pheromones for all that. From the outset of the novel, readers are told through one of Eudoxia's epistolary interior monologues that she attracts concupiscent thoughts from both sexes:

Aware of Madame Réboa's plan, the whole of Les Sailles watched us with the complacent expressions of initiates: the postmistress, the baker's wife, Monsieur Pelletier in his newspaper kiosk, even the fishermen mending their nets. Am I absurd? Perhaps I am. I must accept it when people stare at me. Angelos says, 'They are planning what they will do with you, Eudoxia, after dark, when they can enjoy the freedom of their thoughts.' (TA 27)

It is noteworthy that desire in both aforementioned cases is read through other people's eyes and never expressed through the eyes and minds of the beholder. Therefore, Angelos' reported lust for Eudoxia could well be an expression of Eudoxia's secret wish to be desired and Angelos mediating the desire of other people might just be a projection of his own desire for Eudoxia.

In the event that a man appeals to both male and female beholders, would it imply that gay men and straight women share the same aesthetics of the male body? Would both of them seek and value the same things in a partner? Unfortunately, *The Twyborn Affair* has no answer to provide because it is not Eddie Twyborn's masculinity which appeals to Marcia Lushington and Don Prowse in Section Two. Marcia, the sexually unfulfilled wife is taking a vested interest in an extramarital affair with Eddie, but not because of Eddie's manly qualities, rather because of his feminine aspect:

He buckled his belt, which to some extent increased his masculine assurance, but it was not this masculine self that Marcia was making her appeal. He was won over by a voice wooing him back into childhood, the pervasive warmth of a no longer sexual, but protective body, cajoling him into morning embraces in a bed disarrayed by a male, reviving memories of toast, chilblains, rising bread, scented plums, cats curled on sheets of mountain violets, hibiscus trumpets furling into sticky phalluses in Sydney gardens, his mother whom he should have loved but didn't, the girl Marian he should have married but from whom he had escaped, from the ivied prison of a tennis court, leaving her to bear the children who were her right and fate, the seed of some socially acceptable, decent, boring man. (TA 222)

¹⁵ Lever 199. The bathing episode in which Eudoxia is taking a plunge at the beach under the discreet surveillance of Monsieur Pelletier is the main voyeuristic scene of the novel. It came under the close scrutiny of Claire Patin in 'Poésie et poétique du récit: sur un passage de *The Twyborn Affair* de Patrick White', *Commonwealth* 13: 2 (1991) 104-8.

Likewise when, further on in the narrative, Prowse makes a pass at Eddie, male beauty is irrelevant. Don Prowse is rather attracted to Eddie's feminine traits. As he argues before he plays the masculine part in this homosexual affair, 'I reckon I recognised you, Eddie, the day you jumped in – into the river – and started flashing yer tail at us. I reckon I recognised a fuckun queen' (TA 284). The roles will be switched in a companion scene in which Eddie will take a more active part in their sexual intercourse.

Eddie Twyborn's feminine compassion which had moved him to tenderness for a pitiable man was shocked into what was less lust than a desire for male revenge. He plunged deep into this passive yet quaking carcass offered up as a sacrifice. He bit into the damp nape of a taut neck. Hair sprouting from the shoulders, he twisted by merciless handfuls as he dragged his body back and forth, lacerated by his own vengeance. (TA 296)

This bisexual experience can be interpreted as Eddie's exploration of sexuality which his tantalising sex appeal serves to facilitate.

The situation is further complicated when Eddie Twyborn becomes Eadith Trist, the notorious madam of a sophisticated London brothel. In this new instalment, male beauty becomes irrelevant because the protagonist has assumed a new guise – that of a woman – all the while sustaining an unflinching power of seduction. Does the protagonist's beauty transcend gender identity or is desire totally unrelated to beauty? This twin question may be left unanswered because *The Twyborn Affair* provides no clear answer in this respect. In the third section, when we meet E in a new guise, sex is no longer an issue. Rather, it is lived vicariously through the 'sexploitation' of the girls on the premises. All the while repressing her own desire and rejecting the advances of suitors such as Rod Gravenor, Eadith is in charge of orchestrating and staging desire for her bawds: 'Their clothes she chose herself, and she made it a rule that clients should not see their prospects naked in the public rooms; nakedness, she felt, discourages desire, though many would have dismissed her view as morbid idiosyncrasy' (TA 324). At this stage, Eadith has morphed into a Jungian archetype, the unattainable virgin and the whore, as one of the characters points out: 'You know, Eadith, I believe you have a savage nymphomaniac inside you, and a stern puritan holding her back' (TA 344). This third part paves the way for the sublimation of Eros, with the protagonist epitomising the symbolic rose of courtly love, which is beautiful, loveable, and desirable, but ungraspable because of its prickly stem. Her name, Trist – which might have been spelt 'tryst', for want of a less conspicuous allusion – involves a kind of mock Romanticism disclaimer but also fittingly points to the dynamics of prolonged desire through the refusal to surrender to the lust of her suitors who are attracted to Eadith's femininity.

Deconstructing Gender and Redefining the Canons of Male Beauty.

White's unflattering portrayal of women in his works has set him up for charges of misogyny,¹⁶ a misunderstanding he tries to clear up in his autobiography *Flaws in The*

¹⁶ See for example, David Tacey, *Patrick White: Fiction and the Unconscious* (Melbourne: OUP, 1988) 233. 'In White the misogynist strain is rife, and woman is experienced as an enemy and threat to

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Glass: 'In life I have known far more admirable women than admirable men. ... Of course my women are flawed because they are also human beings, as I am, which is why I'm writing this book' (FG 252). One gathers from his answer that White's conception of double gendered masculinity, which stems from Freudian theories¹⁷ and Jungian contrasexual archetypes, highlights his sense of man's incompleteness. It takes only a small step from this observation to redefining the canons of male beauty and seeing man's perfection as embracing the full gamut of human emotions and roles through double gendered physical and psychological responses. As David Marr puts it,

White was one of those homosexuals who see themselves as part woman and part man: not so much a woman as to be effeminate, but enough to understand and share feminine virtues. He admired in others signs of his own ambivalence: men of unexpected gentleness, and women with masculine strength. (PWAL 581)

And 'ambivalence' in this context should be taken as a byword for disguise. In other words, White advocates feminine virtues in the guise of male bodies which he perceives as some form of superiority over those who would be less rounded in terms of personality. In his own words,

In fact sexuality refreshes and strengthens through its ambivalence, if unconsciously – even in Australia – and defines a nation's temperament. As I see it, the little that is subtle in the Australian character comes from the masculine principle in its women, the feminine in its men. Hence the reason Australian women generally appear stronger than their men. Alas, the feminine element in the men is not strong enough to make them more interesting. (FG 154-5)

White's first queer¹⁸ protagonist equally sharing feminine and masculine sensibilities reflects his own ambiguous mindset. The protean character E – E for enigmatic, Eudoxia, Eddie, or Eadith – struggles against prejudiced minds to set free 'the woman in a man and the man in a woman' (TA 360). Onomastically speaking, the young Twyborn is obviously twice born, first as a man and later as a woman, Eudoxia – which is in his eyes, and as his name indicates, the 'good norm', the perfect blend which sustains mobile and volatile identities in terms of gender and sexuality. The trouble is, where White craves fluctuation, nuances, ambiguities and complexity, society begs for binary systems, dichotomous solutions, and single gender-marked

consciousness. There is a need for masculine reinforcement, and this takes the form of homosexuality, Australia's most recent, genital version of mateship. Mates and gays both require masculine support; both are engaged in emotional flight from the feminine.'

¹⁷ Freud has it that psychosexual identity is obtained through the expansion of one side of our bisexual natures which is achieved by the shaping force of a deterministic childhood environment.

¹⁸ As Leo Bersani contends, '*queer* has a double advantage: it repeats, with pride, a pejorative straight word for homosexual even as it unloads the term's homosexual referent. For oppressed groups to accept the queer label is to identify themselves as being actively at odds with a male-dominated, white, capitalistic, heterosexist culture.' Leo Bersani, *Homos* (London: Harvard University Press, 1995) 71.

identities. This is the reason why the psychological complexity which the novelist tries to achieve fails to make itself conspicuous in the verbal constructions of the narrative:

Eudoxia/Eddie/Eadith (E.) Twyborn's body may be seen as participating in a binary language structure, where it must be either male or female and where both elements cannot be expressed at the same time. In this way, the novel addresses the problem of embodiment on two levels: E's several changes of sexual identity insist that E.'s body can never fully represent E. while the novel's self reflexive strategies suggest that reality slips away from language.¹⁹

Born in a male body, E. faces the *Soma sèma* predicament.²⁰ His female identities (Eudoxia/ Eadith) are a sure means of deconstructing gender, of neither belonging to the male or female group, and of eluding classifications. As John Colmer puts it, even though 'dressed as a man, Eddie's sense of identity is still uncertain and ambiguous.'²¹ Besides, like drag, the protagonist's female identities might also be proof in a very Butlerian fashion that gender is essentially performative.²²

Conclusion

The Twyborn Affair is proof that male beauty in literature can be either classically represented through a detailed description of a man which accords with the traditionally accepted canons of male outer and inner beauty or implied through the universal sex appeal of a character such as Eudoxia/ Eddie/ Eadith. But can male beauty be discussed when masculinity is unstable and challenged by its polar opposite gender? Can a set of commonalities be found in people's perception of beauty in the event that male beauty is assessed in the eye of the beholder? Eddie Twyborn's gender-bending, bisexuality and ever-shifting nature do not enable readers to pin down the representation of his elusive male beauty. Having said this, E's ambiguity points to a modern concept of male beauty epitomised in a mix of feminised and manly traits – a concept lately advertised as 'metrosexual'. White might have been well ahead of his times in this respect. The indecision of choice has left him with an abiding interest in the politics of ambiguity that informs *The Twyborn Affair* and champions sexual indeterminacy.

¹⁹ Lever 98.

²⁰ Not in the classical spiritual sense, but in a very down-to-earth physical way. In other words, the protagonist might just be the epitome of *anima muliebris in corpore virili inclusa*, which is Latin for 'the woman imprisoned within the male body' (Bersani 132).

²¹ John Colmer, *Patrick White* (London: Methuen, 1984) 80.

²² See Judith Butler's seminal work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).