

The Queer Novels of Patrick White

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I hereby certify that the following is all my own work, and that I have acknowledged all sources used.

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Abstract

The Queer Novels of Patrick White

This thesis argues that the representation of sexuality in the novels of Patrick White articulates and performs a queer politics of critique that resists the trope of identity. If the extant body of White scholarship has struggled to make sense of the sexual dimensions of White's texts, this thesis argues that this is because the sexual politics that White articulates are inherently ambiguous: the closeted aesthetic that White deploys articulates a crisis of representation that is central to White's queer politics of critique. The failure of White's prose to fully circumscribe meaning performs a radical deconstruction of identity that disrupts the basis of the political itself. This thesis argues that White's texts stimulate the gaps, the silences and the ambiguities inherent in the process of signification in order to problematize any narrative of knowable and legible sexual identities. Even in his later texts, where sexuality is thematised more freely and openly, White's texts still refuse to cohere around a comfortably stable gay identity, emphasising instead the failures and ambiguities that attend any attempt to represent the process of coming out. White's overt representations of sexuality emerge as a textual performance of *jouissance*, as the disruption of, rather than expression of, his character's true identities. In addition to his closeted aesthetic then, this thesis argues that it is in White's camp sensibility that we might understand the queer politics that inform his texts: the playfulness, the arch humour, and the wit of White's prose all attest to a critically queer cultural project that is conceived in opposition to the stable referents of politics and identity.

The political White that emerges from this thesis is somewhat different to the one with which most critics of White's texts would be familiar. While White's status as a social and political activist is well known, it is equally well known that this activism did not extend to the politics of sexuality. This thesis argues that if, or perhaps even *because*, White opposed the gay rights movement, it is his literary texts that are the site of a queer project that is resolutely opposed to identity politics. White rarely if ever spoke up about the politics of sexuality in his public speeches arguably because his queer project is conceived in opposition to the identity politics that subtends grassroots political activism. White's opposition to identity politics is expressed – can perhaps only be expressed – as a literary and aesthetic project that stands at a remove from street demonstrations and practical politicking. Queer theory, as a tool of literary analysis, helps us then to articulate a facet of White's cultural politics that would otherwise remain hidden behind the very public portrait of White the activist.

Table of Contents

Introduction: A Queer Patrick White	6
Literature Review	19
Thesis Overview	52
Chapter One -- Is Prowse’s Rectum a Grave?: The homoerotics of Patrick White’s Australian cultural politics	63
Chapter Two -- Love is an exhausted word’: camp performativity, queer politics and the shame of E. Twyborn	110
Chapter Three -- Holding Hands on Terminus Road: The Closet, Fisting, and the Postmodern Architecture of <i>The Solid Mandala</i>	152
Chapter Four -- Theodora’s Closet: The Queer Epistemologies of the <i>Jardin Exotique</i>	193
Conclusion – ‘ Myself is this endlessness ’	238
Bibliography	258

Introduction

A Queer Patrick White

While it would be trite – a statement of the bleeding obvious – to say that Patrick White the man was openly gay when he was alive, to say that he left behind a body of work that articulates and prosecutes a critical and radically queer cultural politics would in fact be something of a novelty. Despite the fact that, as Jennifer Rutherford notes, White ‘wrote books that bent sexuality long before “queer theory” had even been coined’ (‘Homo’ 49), it is only very recently that any critical attention has been given to the representation of sexuality in White’s body of work. Again, it would be superfluous to point out that the paucity of attention to this aspect of White’s oeuvre might pose for us a problem.

Perhaps Eve Sedgwick put it best when she pointed out in her introduction to

Epistemology of the Closet that

an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition... (1)

The representation of sexuality is fundamental to any understanding of White’s works; and to that end, this thesis might be read not as an attempt to fill in a mere omission in the body of scholarship devoted to White, but rather as an attempt to repair a body of criticism that has, until very recently, been unable to adequately apprehend a crucial and highly political dimension to White’s literary project.

More than fifteen years ago, Dean Kiley railed against the failure of Australian literary critics to embrace, or even to engage with, the critical and post-structuralist interventions of the late eighties and nineties that we now refer to collectively as queer theory. Kiley argued that the ‘industry of Australian literature and its critical machinery... continues to occlude, defuse, diffuse, evade and domesticate queer issues’ (Kiley). As a means of showing how such blindness to sexuality had damaged our understanding of Australian literature, Kiley proffered the following characterisation of the critical reception of *The Twyborn Affair*. It stands as a vivid yet apposite summary of the means by which critics have insistently misunderstood the sexual theme of White’s texts:

[White’s] 1979 novel *The Twyborn Affair* has to be the novel Judith Butler would write if she wanted to dramatise queer theory -- it’s an astonishing bravura play with volatile and mobile gender identities and sex and sexualities, the protagonist lives as a young wife, a closeted gay/bi man and a middleaged female bawd, it features a male rape scene and a male-to-female passing tranny in a lesbian scene -- yet Dame Leonie Kramer, in her [Dame Edna] Everage phase, managed to conclude that it was REALLY all about ‘the problem and mystery of family relationships’ and that White was just being ‘evasive’. (Kiley)

Invoking a wonderful turn of phrase, Kiley goes on to note that

other critics clearly had no idea what the genderfuck was going on and characterised White as an existential ventriloquist, a genital mannequin, a Jungian rubik’s cube, a stylistic dollmaker, a metaphysical puppeteer and a chi-chi second-rate stage magician of sexuality. (Kiley)

With its exuberant indignation this passage neatly distils the central contention of this thesis, taking its cues from Sedgwick, that White scholarship is damaged to the degree that it fails to account for the sexual: without a queer theoretical framework, critics of White have not necessarily distorted the representations of sexuality in these texts, but they have rather found themselves contorted by White’s polysemous articulations of diversely queer sexualities. The arguments advanced by each of the chapters in this thesis will show that it is only through a sustained and rigorous engagement with queer theory that we will be able to bring the representations of sexuality in White’s novels into sharper focus. In bringing sexuality into

such sharp focus, this thesis demonstrates that White's novels prosecute a queer politics of critique that unceasingly deconstructs the notion of a unitary, monolithic identity conceived in language. White's novels emerge from this thesis as texts that self-consciously thematise the failure of language to convey meaning, as texts that deploy a closeted aesthetic that gestures towards a reconceptualisation of the social and the political, unbound by the rigid parameters of identity politics. It is this White – the queer White – that has been obscured by the failure of critics to adequately and rigorously engage with the representation of sexuality in this oeuvre. Whether intentional or otherwise, this failure of White's critics has given birth to a rather large pink elephant in the room: an elephant which serves, like Kiley, to ridicule the critical efforts those scholars of White's work who have failed to discern it.

One way in which we might begin to understand the lacuna in critical analysis of sexuality in White scholarship is through recourse to White's closet. As this thesis will demonstrate, a fundamental element in the representation of sexuality in White's texts is the closeted aesthetic under which those representations are made. If the closeted aesthetic deployed by White might be said to account for the lack of critical engagement with sexuality in this body of scholarship, it is also the site at which this thesis begins its analysis and its attempt to repair White scholarship. A typical example of the erasure of the subtleties and queer resonances of sexuality in White's texts is John Beston's examination of the protagonist Theodora Goodman's sexual urges in *The Aunt's Story*. In 'Love and Sex in a Staid Spinster,' Beston concludes that Theodora is haunted by incestuous desires for her father, and that these desires are

ultimately responsible for her mental disintegration. Yet Beston dismisses the sexual as a worthy object of analysis in White's texts:

Sexual experience in Patrick White's two masterpieces, *The Aunt's Story* and *Voss*, is presented only in fantasy or in dreams or through natural symbols. Direct sexual experience itself does not take place at all: Theodora, Voss and Laura live and die without ever experiencing intercourse, and so in these two novels White is exempted from dealing with an area in which he is noticeably weak. He never succeeded in integrating direct sexual experience with the total personality of his figures as an enriching part of their lives. Indeed he rarely attempted to record sexual experience at all. (148)

There is a sense in which Beston's contention that White 'rarely attempted to record sexual experience at all' is correct: arguably the most decisive intervention that this thesis makes to the current body of White scholarship is in arguing that White consistently deploys a closeted aesthetic that occludes and problematises the representation of sexuality. There is however a certain artlessness with which Beston at once invokes, ridicules and dismisses White's articulation of sexuality. There is moreover a sense of obliviousness that leads Beston to conclude that the *only* representations of sexuality worthy of aesthetic and critical judgement are representations of direct sexual experience that are fully integrated with the total personality of the figures involved, and that *only* those expressions of sexuality that comprise an enriching part of their lives are worthy of study. As we shall see (most explicitly in the third and fourth chapters of this thesis), the lack of representational clarity is in fact central to White's articulation of a queer sexuality that resists the politics of identity. Far from being an area in which White as a writer is 'noticeably weak,' this thesis demonstrates that the closeted aesthetic is precisely where White's prose style and his queer politics of critique align most seamlessly: the closet is the site where White articulates one of his most trenchant critiques of the power, coercion and violence that inhere in the imposition of a disciplinary and public sexual identity.

If White's novels represent sexuality in a way that does not facilitate the integration of sexual desire into 'the total personality of his figures' in a manner that forms 'an enriching part of their lives,' this thesis argues that it is precisely for this reason that White's novels should be celebrated. The value of White's novels rests in the queer politics of critique that they articulate; in the vision that these novels present of characters struggling against the strictures of an identity politics paradigm that demands coherence and legibility from its indentured subjects. In light of this then, we might say that there is something approaching poignancy in Beston's observation that White 'rarely attempted to record sexual experience at all.'

By way of illustrating the traditionally impoverished status of sexuality as an object of analysis in Western literary criticism, in the introduction to *Epistemology* Sedgwick poses the following rather cheeky yet nevertheless probing questions:

Has there ever been a gay Socrates?
Has there ever been a gay Shakespeare?
Has there ever been a gay Proust? (52)

Sedgwick goes on to note that 'if these questions startle, it is not least as tautologies. A short answer, though a very incomplete one, might be that not only have there been a gay Socrates, Shakespeare and Proust but that their names are Socrates, Shakespeare and Proust' (52). When we read White's novels, we might profitably ask ourselves a similarly tautological yet salient question: Has there ever been a gay Patrick White?

Inevitably, there is a sense in which the sexual question that hovers over White's work is also a question of biography. If there is a discrepancy between the fairly obvious

sexuality of the man and the want of much critical attention to sexuality in his work, an excellent place to begin thinking about this discrepancy is Guy Davidson's essay 'Displaying the Monster: Patrick White, Sexuality, Celebrity'. Davidson argues that White is a unique figure in the canon of literary modernism in that he effected a 'coming out' through his work (6). While 'the anxieties and potentials associated with the cloaking and disclosure of queer sexuality may be observed in particularly charged form in the careers of many of the leading lights of modernism,' Davidson argues that 'White's career differs from those other queer modernist writers' on account of his 'public "confession" of his sexual orientation – first implicitly in the novel *The Twyborn Affair*, then overtly in the memoir *Flaws in the Glass*' (1). Davidson goes on to note how the public and literary confession of White's sexuality did not inaugurate an immediate flowering of critical attention to this aspect of White's work. On the contrary, Davidson argues that 'White's uncloseting has generally been met in the scholarly context with assiduous recloseting' (5). This is because 'White's compulsion to tell the "truth" by coming out was also related to his attempts to control his public image' (6); the truth of White's sexuality in fact served as a central component of a literary project whose aim is to unsettle and problematise the notion of truth itself:

White's 'display' of his sexuality... in his memoir [*Flaws*] is most productively read not as the revelation of a pre-existing stable identity – as the popular discourse of coming out would have it, whereby a hidden identity is salvifically brought to light – but a kind of performance, in keeping with White's longstanding devotion to theatricality. (6)

While it is true that White speaks openly and publicly about his sexuality for the first time in his autobiography, the self that emerges from this confession is far from clear. This is because, as Davidson so amply demonstrates, the expression of White's 'true' feelings in fact enacts a form of 'grammatical distance' between White the man and White the literary celebrity: the portrait that emerges from White's autobiography is

one of 'the dividedness within the self that theatricality necessarily involves' (6). In projecting and performing his queer selfhood through language, White articulates a selfhood that is othered from itself. As Davidson suggests, 'White harnessed his sexual identity to his claimed ability to engage empathetically with various kinds of otherness' (6). And this unsettled conception of identity, this continuous dynamic of uncloseting and recloseting, is central to any understanding of White's literary project. As Simon

During notes:

White's homosexuality interacts with his writing most powerfully not because, as he (falsely) believed, it enabled him to construct better women characters, or even because he used his writing to express transgressive, anti-parental drives, but because it put him in the closet. As he himself knew, without the closet he would not have been the writer that he was. (72)

Far from elucidating one more facet of the truth in White's fiction then, the transversality of White's sexuality is rather the site at which biography, as a stable underpinning for the analysis of White's works, begins to break down.

Davidson is not alone in arguing that the torsions inherent in the literary confession of White's sexuality advertise a broader thematics of deconstruction and critique in White's work. Georgina Loveridge's 're-visioning' of White's autobiography confronts directly the conflict between biographical and textual approaches to White's work. Loveridge grounds her argument in the adoption of a sceptical stance towards previous readings of *Flaws* that have read it uncritically as non-fiction; but she is equally sceptical of more recent critics who have re-read White's autobiography as simple fiction. Loveridge seeks instead to demonstrate that '*Flaws* tells us not *the* truth but *about* truth' (101 original emphasis): *Flaws* points to the systematic thematisation and interrogation of meaning and the process of meaning-making that permeates White's corpus. Taking her cues from the

very title of White's autobiography, Loveridge reads *Flaws* as a fundamentally problematic text, a text that 'warns of the problems of truth, the fallibility of memory, the limits of self-knowledge and self-representation and the inadequacy of language' (103). Like Davidson, Loveridge characterises *Flaws* as a slippery text, as 'the culmination of a long-term public relations campaign' (102), the implications of which ramify back throughout White's entire oeuvre, becoming particularly salient when we begin to look at the representation of sexuality and the queer politics of critique that those representations articulate.

This thesis takes the enterprise of both Davidson and Loveridge as its point of departure in examining how White's texts function discursively and independently from the author's biography. But whereas Davidson and Loveridge each read White's problematisation of language and identity in terms of its theatricality and the significance that pertained to the control of White's public image and the manipulation of his status as a literary celebrity, this thesis takes a slightly more overtly political stance: it argues that the failures of White's language dramatise the struggle of language to circumscribe identity, and that the main theatre of this battle plays out in White's novels through the representation of sexuality. White's novels articulate a queer sexuality that refuses the trope of identity, and, in doing so, refuses the very basis of the social and the political as they are currently conceived. If critics of White's novels have readily magnetised the stature of the man and his achievements to the literary merit or otherwise of his output, this thesis makes the opposite claim: if, as Peter Wolfe suggests, 'readers have started to feel that Patrick White is a good writer because he is Patrick White,' and if readers 'can admire one of his novels because if it weren't good he wouldn't have written it' (1), this

thesis argues, to the contrary, that the value of White's work inheres in the queer problematisation of identity that his texts articulate and perform.

If a general survey of the scholarship devoted to White reveals a paucity of attention to the representation of sexuality, this speaks to a state of affairs identified by Elizabeth McMahon, who observes that it is only recently that we have been equipped with the theoretical and conceptual framework to 'rise to the critical challenge of calibrating' the sexual in White's oeuvre (90). In rising to the critical challenge of reading the representations of sexuality in White's texts, this thesis uses a queer methodology that invokes three key concepts that have animated and preoccupied the body of queer thought: the closet, *jouissance* and camp. These three concepts are used to orient and elucidate what this thesis reads as the queer politics of critique that animate White's texts. All three of these concepts are bound up with White's style: the self-consciously textual nature of White's prose emerges in this thesis as a sustained engagement on White's part with the crisis that sexuality poses to representation itself. The closet, *jouissance* and camp are engaged with as a dynamic interaction, with each informing our understanding of the other and each thoroughly enmeshed in the readings of White's texts in this thesis.

If the densities and opacities of White's style perform the insistent difficulty of positing an identity in language, White's closeted aesthetic could be said to articulate a queer politics that would seem to have little investment in the act of coming out. Indeed, this thesis argues that not only does White's style reinforce the epistemology of the closet, but it also posits that closet as a key conceptual resource for a politics of queer resistance. As noted above, Davidson has already begun the process of analysing the effect that White's literary and

personal coming out had on his fiction. The first two chapters of this thesis accord with Davidson's argument that White effected a coming out 'by making the experience of gay male sexuality central to one of his novels' (4), but they also seek to refine and enrich our understanding of the ambiguously queer resonances of this coming out. In their readings of *Twyborn*, these chapters emphasise Davidson's conceptualisation of White's coming out not as 'the revelation of a pre-existing stable identity... salvifically brought to light' (6), but as a 'kind of performance' that takes a measure of 'grammatical distance' from any stable and knowable identity (6). To that end, the first chapter of this this examines not just the flamboyantly homosexual erotics of *Twyborn* that can be said to constitute White's literary coming out, but also how those erotics strive to undo the emergence of any homosexual identity that might otherwise congeal around those desires. Chapter Two of this thesis argues that any attempt to historicise *Twyborn* by reading it in the context of the gay liberation movement must be tempered by the challenge that White's text poses to historicity itself. White's closet functions in Chapters Three and Four of this thesis as a resistance to the discursive disciplinarity of sexuality. *The Solid Mandala* is read in the third chapter as a text that insistently foregrounds the failure of language to convey the reality of embodiment: here White's closet gestures away from language and towards a spatial dimension; here the closet emerges as a series of spaces and embodied physical practices that resist an articulation in language. In the fourth chapter, *The Aunt's Story* is read such that White's closet is conceptualised temporally: as a poetics of reading backwards. The closet is shown to suffuse White's entire body of work, with the later, more openly queer and out texts interacting with the earlier, more closeted works to effect a breakdown of text and oeuvre. White's body of work is ultimately shown to be a queered body of intermingled texts whose various epistemologies of sexuality are refracted and diffused by their encounter with the closet.

Another facet of the queer methodology that this thesis uses to read the interstices of White's prose is the concept of *jouissance*. This thesis draws on Leo Bersani's conceptualisation of the sexual as *jouissance*, as the performative disruption of the subject, to argue that the semantic fluidity of White's style generates an erotics that consistently undermines the ability of language to contain identity. *Jouissance* is read as another expression of White's queer poetics: the first chapter of this thesis reads the eroticised representation of the male body in *Twyborn* as a site that has the potential to disrupt the power of masculinity itself. Similarly, the third chapter reads the eroticised thematisation of the written word as a disruption of the protagonist's legibility. And in the final chapter, Theodora Goodman, the protagonist of *The Aunt's Story*, is read as the standard bearer of a shattered and fluid deconstruction of identity: the shattering of Theodora's mind presaging a reconceptualisation of being and sociality.

The final means by which this thesis reads White's style as queer is through the concept of camp. Chapter Two argues that White's camp sensibility can best be understood in terms of affect, as a sensibility that once more gestures beyond language through its relationship with shame. White's camp is read as an attempt to cope with the shame that inevitably accompanies a fluid and performative conception of identity. If the protean protagonist of *Twyborn* is characterised by her/his refusal to conform to the categories of gender and sexuality demanded by any historicised conception of identity, embracing instead expressions of gender and sexuality that are reiterative and performative, camp is the means through which such expressions occur. In a similar vein, Chapter Four reads the linguistic and rhetorical tropes of *The Aunt's Story* as the camp articulation of Theodora Goodman's investment in a vicarious disidentification with herself. In both the

second and the fourth chapter of this thesis, camp emerges as a material form of queer praxis, as a means of living through and performing a queer politics of critique.

As we shall see in each of the chapters of this thesis, the queer methodology that is used is characterised by a preoccupation with the liminal and a certain conceptual slipperiness that takes its cues from White's own textual aesthetic. The methodology of this thesis emphasises the value and the spacious affordances that inhere in this transversality; and in this sense this thesis is deeply indebted to Sedgwick's groundbreaking articulation of queer itself:

Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive – recurrent, eddying, *troublant*. The word 'queer' itself means across – it comes from the Indo-European root *-twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *toquere* (to twist), and English athwart. A lot of queer writing tends toward "across" formulations: across genders, across sexualities, across genres, across "perversions." The concept of queer in this sense is transitive – multiply transitive. The immemorial current that 'queer' represents is antiseparatist as it is anti-assimilationist. Keenly, it is relational, and it is strange. (*Weather* 188-9)

Not only then is queer theory a useful means of apprehending the representation of sexuality in White's texts, but it is to be hoped that this thesis also demonstrates the inestimable value of Patrick White's novels to the field of queer critical inquiry. If, as we shall see, White's novels consistently operate in defiance of stable and legible sexualities, it is hoped that this thesis will be of interest not only to White scholars, but also to scholars working with queer theory more generally.

Literature Review

This thesis argues that it is possible to read the representation of sexuality in White's texts as a queer transcendence of language. If the vast majority of scholarship devoted to White's novels has to date been concerned with the metaphysical, the transcendental and the spiritual dimensions of his texts, it is nevertheless possible to read the sexual thematics in White in concert with this body of scholarship, to the extent that both the sexual and the spiritual in White are conceived of as nodes of resistance to the generation of meaning through language. Peter Beatson is perhaps representative of the dominant strain of White scholarship when he characterises White as a fundamentally religious writer. Arguing that 'his work stand[s] apart from the secular tradition of psychological, natural or social realism,' Beatson states that

Patrick White has taken the language of the familiar and injected into it a sense of the arcane and the esoteric that transforms his words into the hieroglyphs of a vision that may be disquieting to those reared in a predominantly secular society. The familiar is fused with the strange to transform the map of Australia and the topography of the inner life into a realm of myth. That which is known and rational is used in the service of the unknown and the non-rational. (1)

But if earlier critics of White's work have argued for the centrality of what they see as the spiritual preoccupations of White's novels, this does not necessarily suggest that the contributions of those critics are irrelevant or unconnected to the sexual dimension of White's literary project. If this thesis takes White's style and the performance of linguistic failure that his texts execute as a central concern, this is a concern that many of White's metaphysical readers share. To take the passage of Beatson's quoted above as a good example, the self-conscious engagement with language that White's texts exhibit is central to *both* a religious and queer reading of White: if Beatson reads the 'disquieting'

‘hieroglyphs of a vision’ in White’s novels as inimical to a ‘secular society,’ this thesis shows how those same disturbing hieroglyphs can be read as an even more profound critique of the coherent, rational selves of an identity paradigm that underpins the social. Where Beatson conceptualises White’s thematic concerns in contradistinction to ‘that which is known and rational,’ this thesis might be said to characterise the ‘unknown and the non-rational’ in White as a thematisation of, for example, the epistemology of the closet, or of the disruptive potential that inheres in White’s representation of sexuality as the *jouissance* that disrupts the rational coherence of the self. Though it is beyond the scope of this thesis to attempt a thorough analysis of all the resonances and dissonances that pertain to the sexual and the religious in White’s work, it is hoped that this thesis will provide, by its sustained and thorough engagement with the sexual, the basis for such an enterprise.

While there are considerable areas of overlap between the spiritual and sexual thematics in White’s novels, it must also be noted that reading White religiously has been a primary means by which critics have de-politicised White’s oeuvre. And it is in this respect that this thesis most stubbornly resists many of the religiously-minded readers of White. Wolfe, for example, argues that the spiritual dimension of White’s novels serves to distance these novels from more worldly concerns; Wolfe argues that ‘despite his awareness of social mobility in the industrial state, White rarely tries his hand at journalistic realism or institutional criticism’ (1):

No social historian he. He doesn’t show the expansion of cities and the growth of railways in Australia, nor does he chart the corresponding decline of sheep and cattle raising, gold mining and grain growing. White offers visions, not programs... White belongs in the Flaubertian tradition of the writer who disavows literature as a practical guide. No teacher or prosecuting attorney, he doesn’t want to lecture or to foment social and political activity. (1-2)

If Wolfe argues that White's novels render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, this thesis argues to the contrary that White's novels do indeed foment social and political activity, but they do so in a somewhat oblique manner. White's novels may not be about 'the expansion of cities and the growth of the railways,' but they certainly are about the historical and social forces that construct our perception of reality: sexuality is one of the vessels through which this thematisation of historicity is expressed. White can be thought of as a 'prosecuting attorney' when it comes to his examination and critique of these historical forces, particularly when we consider how his novels so consistently disrupt the implication of language in regimes of discursive power. If White's queer politics is deconstructive and critical, this is not to suggest that his visions are purely metaphysical. We might do well to think of White's queer politics as something abstract: his novels do advance a political program, but this program is a theoretical and aesthetic project; it may not provide us with a template for immediate political action, but it does gesture towards a goal that lies just over the queer horizon.

Implicit in the queer readings of White's texts that this thesis advances is a new conceptualisation of the political White. This thesis shares Frederic Jameson's opening contention in *The Political Unconscious* that the political perspective is not 'some supplementary method' or 'an optional auxiliary to other interpretive methods,' but is rather 'the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation' (17). Of course, White's career as a social and political activist is well known, and has already been thoroughly documented in, for example, David Marr's biography, *Patrick White: A Life*, his own memoir *Flaws in the Glass* and in the collection of his public speeches, *Patrick White Speaks*. Arguably less well appreciated is the ambivalent relationship between White's

activism and his sexuality. Brigid Rooney argues that White's 'political activism is rendered ambiguous, even delegitimized, by association with theatricality, exhibitionism, and homosexuality' ('Recluse' 6). For Rooney, these facets of White's activism advertise 'the author as narcissist, inviting simple refusal or simple compliance, and diverting attention from complicities otherwise set in motion' ('Recluse' 6). Indeed, as Rooney notes, it was White himself who circulated these associations ('Recluse' 6) and White himself who, as Davidson notes, 'maintained [an] official stance of disdainful opposition to the gay rights movement' (4). This thesis argues that if, or perhaps even *because*, White opposed the gay rights movement, it is his literary texts that are the site of a queer project that is resolutely opposed to identity politics. Rooney is quite correct to state that sexuality delegitimises White's on-the-ground political activism; but this is precisely why the queer theoretical framework of this thesis is so valuable in analysing White's texts. White rarely if ever spoke up about the politics of sexuality in his public speeches arguably because his queer project is conceived in opposition to the identity politics that subtends grassroots political activism. White's opposition to identity politics is expressed – can perhaps only be expressed – as a literary and aesthetic project that stands at a remove from street demonstrations and practical politicking. Queer theory, as a tool of literary analysis, helps us then to articulate a facet of White's cultural politics that would otherwise remain hidden behind the very public portrait of White the activist.

With the queer theoretical framework that we now have at our disposal, we are in a position to examine the relationship between White's sexual thematics and his spiritual thematics; and in a very astute reading of *The Twyborn Affair*, Brian Kiernan has begun to do just that. Kiernan argues that we might profitably begin thinking about scholarship of White's novels in terms of an 'Old' school and a 'New' school in White studies. For

Kiernan, the ‘Old’ school reads White as ‘a traditional novelist with a religious or theosophical view of life’ (291), while the ‘New’ school reads White as ‘a sophisticated, ironical modern mistrustful of language and sceptical of ever being able to express what might lie beyond words’ (291). To illustrate his point and to demonstrate how the dynamics between these two schools of reading might pertain, Kiernan reads one sentence of *Twyborn* as an example of how the two schools might begin to converge: “‘in certain circumstances, lust can become an epiphany’” (296). Kiernan argues that ‘an “old” reader might ask whether this [line] is a portentous gesturing towards a deeper, religious significance, or a parody (and self-parody?) of literary pretensions to incarnate the transcendent through language’ (296); whereas “‘new” readers, rather than agonising over White’s precise “tone” or “stance” might less problematically see him as maximising the play, and clash of disparate signifying codes’ (296). Kiernan’s point is that White’s literary aesthetic is rather uniquely placed to accommodate the theoretical underpinnings of both ‘old’ and ‘new’ schools:

If you want (as many have wanted) to seize on White’s statement that he sees himself as essentially an old-fashioned writer, and to present him as adopting such modes as the historical novel, the comedy of manners, or the *Bildungsroman* for traditional ends, then the protean structure of his work will allow this... If, however, you wish to present him as a proto-postmodernist, then you will stress *The Aunt’s Story*, possibly *Riders in the Chariot*, *The Solid Mandala*, and – the winning card in your pack – *The Twyborn Affair*. But really, of course, he is and always has been both; and my unsurprising conclusion is that, as critical interest and emphases continue to shift, White’s work will continue to answer to them, as it has answered to different, and even opposed, interests in the past. (298-9)

This literature review follows Kiernan in using these two schools of White criticism, but again it should be stressed that this is not intended to represent a hierarchy of value.

Though this thesis itself sits much more comfortably within the ‘New’ White criticism, this is not to suggest that the ‘Old’ is worthless or irrelevant. If the stated aim of this thesis is to repair the body of White criticism by thinking through the implications of the sexual in White, then an engagement with the ‘Old’ scholarship is just as necessary as engagement with the ‘New’. And even if this thesis situates itself within the ‘New’

school of White criticism, it must also be stated that the ‘New’ criticism’s investment in the queer itself demands a transversal movement back and forth between ‘Old’ and ‘New’ that must inform our understanding of the body of White scholarship as a whole. This thesis aims then to facilitate a dialogue between the two schools of White criticism.

The ‘Old’ White Criticism

Given its scope and centrality, the body of religiously-minded scholarship that pertains to White’s work must be accounted for as part of this thesis’s examination of the representations of sexuality in White’s texts. To do otherwise would be to repeat a sterile pattern in White criticism, discerned by Michael Giffen, who notes that ‘many secular critics do not know what to make of White and take their speculations no further than noting his criticisms of [organised] religion, while the religious critic knows there is something in his work which lies at the foundation of the Western religious tradition’ (5). If, as Giffen suggests, White’s novels are deeply influenced by a tradition of religious writing, while at the same time giving sustenance to those who read in his texts a critique of organised religion, we can profitably position this thesis at the site of this seeming impasse: this thesis shares the preoccupation of White’s religious readers with his problematic prose – his attempt to express the inexpressible – while also engaging with the spirit of critique that animates his more secular readers. If Giffen argues that ‘what is so unpalatable about White’s vision is, in fact, its theological orthodoxy’ (5), this thesis argues, in a similarly perverse vein, that it is White’s orthodoxy, his respect for the ineffable and the failure of language, that motors his

queer politics of critique. In this way we can begin the labour of bridging the gap between this thesis and the ‘Old’ White criticism.

White’s preoccupation with the limitations of language, being central to the argument advanced by this thesis, proffers itself as the crux of my engagement with the ‘Old’ White criticism in this thesis. We can take a passage from *The Solid Mandala* as a way of illuminating not only the scope of critical possibilities that arise from White’s rendering of linguistic inadequacy, but also as a means of sketching in outline a critical reading practice that draws on the spiritual dimension to White’s novels.

Once Arthur dreamed the dream in which a tree was growing out of his thighs. It was the face of Dulcie Feinstein lost among the leaves of the higher branches. But Mrs Poulter came and sat on the ground beside him, and he put his hand out to touch what he thought would be her moth skin, and encountered rough, almost prickly bark. He would have liked to wake Waldo and tell him. In the morning of course he could barely remember. (260)

Giffen’s reading of this passage ‘engages with the text as a tropological discourse’ (23), imputing to each character here one of the hermeneutical horizons of what he calls the ‘Western Eye’ (20). In this respect he might be taken as a representative example of the preoccupations that animate the ‘Old’ White criticism:

Why is it the dream rather than a dream? Who is part of the dream and who is excluded? Why is the Jewish character lost in the higher branches? Why is the Christian character on the ground and within reach of the Primitive character? Why did the Primitive character think his encounter would be smooth when, in fact, it was rough and prickly bark at the base of the tree? Why does the Primitive character dream the dream, and why does the tree grow from his loins like a phallus? Why are the Primitive, Jewish and Christian characters all part of the dreaming, while the Classical character is excluded from the dream? (22)

These questions posed by Giffen arise from the fundamental ambiguity that subtends White’s use of language, and traditionally this ambiguity has been explained with recourse to the transcendental. We might align the religious parameters of Giffen’s

inquiry with that of Rodney Edgecombe, who argues that it is ‘through recourse to the cement of religious archetypes and even to a somewhat rickety scaffold of quasi-Christian doctrine’, that ‘the threshold of incoherence’ is to be understood in White’s prose (*Vision* 1). This thesis demonstrates however that there is more than one way to approach the ineffable. Sedgwick argues that epistemological absence and silence are the defining characteristics of the representation of sex and sexuality throughout the history of Western culture. Building on the argument expounded by Foucault in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Sedgwick demonstrates in *Epistemology* that the closeting of sexuality finds its origins in the Biblical story of genesis, wherein ‘what we now know as sexuality is fruit – apparently the only fruit – to be plucked from the tree of knowledge’ (73). Sedgwick conceptualises the thematisation of knowledge itself as sexual knowledge, to the extent that ‘cognition itself, sexuality itself, and transgression itself have always been ready in Western culture to be magnetized into an unyielding though not an unfissured alignment with one another’ (73). This thesis argues that all the ‘whos’ the ‘whys’ and the ‘wheres’ that attend Giffen’s religious reading of Arthur’s dream constitute precisely the sort of epistemological closet that Sedgwick conceptualises. Sedgwick’s insight provides readers of White’s novels with a new means of approaching his work, such that, in *Mandala* when Arthur simultaneously gets a hard-on, finds a woman’s flesh repellent, and wants to talk to his brother about it but cannot find the words, we are now in a position to begin our own process of textual ‘exfoliation,’ to begin the task of re-animating White’s texts in the light of a queer reading practice. Arthur’s priapic dream might be said to emerge from this thesis as Sedgwick’s tree of knowledge, effecting a marriage of sorts between the biblical and the sexual impulses that propel White’s fiction.

It is only through an engagement with the epistemology of the closet that we can begin to trace the means by which readers and critics in the past have (perhaps inadvertently, sometimes vehemently) straightened White out. Perhaps the most obvious means by which this straightening out of White has been executed has been in the simple assertion of many critics that the religious constitutes the fundamental horizon of White's thematics. For the 'Old' school is overwhelmingly religious; and it is arguably this zealous certainty as to the fundamentally religious theme of White's novels that has contributed to the neglect of the sexual in this oeuvre. Although William J. Scheick is correct in stating that 'no formulation of the principal concerns of Patrick White's work comes easily' (131), the preponderance of White scholarship has been concerned with the meaning and the significance of the transcendental and the metaphysical. Cynthia vanden Driesen goes so far as to state that it was in the theme of religion that 'Patrick White himself unequivocally asserted the central concern of his novels' (77). In *The Mystery of Unity*, Patricia Morley begins her study of White's novels with the claim that:

The view of man which underlies White's novels is religious in its basic intentions. His heroes are seeking the true permanence or unchanging structure beneath the illusory flux, the true freedom which is valid even beyond physical certainty. (1)

Critics of the 'Old' school can be identified by the overwhelming centrality they accord to the religious in White. In *Patrick White: A General Introduction*, Ingmar Björkstén is yet another critic who identifies the religious facet of the human condition as White's central concern: 'purposefully and intrepidly, Patrick White uses his pen to reveal ever deeper layers of human soul' (1). But even though there has been general agreement over the centrality of the religious in White's novels, the precise parameters and characteristics of this religious impulse have been the source of much debate. In brief, early critics generally agreed that White's texts are religious in theme, but there has been little

consensus with respect to which religious creed or creeds these texts adhere. And it is from within these gaps, these silences and opacities that punctuate the spiritual dimension of White's texts that this thesis makes its primary intervention in the 'Old' White criticism in analysing the queer mysteries of these texts. Only in this way can we begin to qualify and engage constructively with a body of religious criticism that has often seemed oppressive in the broad sweep of its claims and the certainty of its faith.

The earliest critical examinations of White's novels tended to highlight their Christian ethos. Manfred MacKenzie, for example, asserts that 'White [the man] may not be a Christian – in *The Tree of Man* he is radically protestant rather than Christian in any specifically Protestant sense – but his religious temper is Christian in some important ways' (405). Foremost amongst the ways in which these novels have been characterised as Christian is through their recurrent occupation with the theme of suffering. Indeed, it is argued that it is through suffering that White's characters come to know God. A. K. Thomson argues that each of White's novels 'contains a character who is the afflicted of God' (21) and that each novel enacts a 'parable' (26) of Christian suffering. For A. A. Phillips, *Voss* is an extended (even laborious) re-presentation of the New Testament: 'in *Voss*, White's schema demands a long series of detailed correspondences between episodes in the book and events in the life of Christ' (460). In contrast, Veronica Brady has argued that the presentation of suffering and that which is 'normally regarded as disgusting' in White's novels leads her to the conclusion that Divine Grace is 'the only thing that finally matters in White' (39). While being characterised as Christian and preoccupied with the nature of suffering, White's texts have simultaneously attracted the attention of critics intrigued by what they discern as the muted shades of existentialism.

Björkstén, for example, observes that ‘an oppressive sense of emptiness, sterility and the rootlessness of existence is part of Patrick White’s concept of life’ (29). Marjorie Barnard also argues that ‘Patrick White is obsessed with pain and loneliness, the inability of human beings ever to know one another, which is the ultimate loneliness’ (170). It is the ineluctability of suffering, according to R. F. Brissenden, as well as its isolating effects that lend the theme of suffering in White’s novels its uniquely Christian and existential dimensions:

Patrick White sees suffering not only as something which must be undergone if one is to attain self-knowledge and humility, but as something which is inevitable anyway... The thing that disturbs Patrick White most about suffering is not that it is painful, but that, like all other profound human experiences, it is in the last resort something private, personal and incommunicable. (416)

Thus it might be said that Christ’s agony, his isolation and death by crucifixion, stands as a template for the spiritual journeys undertaken by White’s myriad protagonists. In this way we can see how suffering underpins many of the Christian readings of White.

Just as this thesis reads the closet as a possible site of convergence between the religious and the sexual in White, so too might we read the theme of suffering in White’s novels: suffering emerges from this thesis as the ecstatic suffering into which many of White’s characters plunge during sexual encounters, but also as a symptom of the injunction by the forces of history to conform to the legibility of identity. Where earlier critics read the theme of suffering as a religious theme with both positive and negative affective registers, so too does this thesis examine the broad affective scope of White’s suffering. If Christian suffering is one prominent way in which White’s novels have been read to date, this thesis reads the sexual excitement generated by White’s representation of masculine physicality in terms of *jouissance*: through the visual

erotics of masculinity, this chapter argues for a conceptualisation of the sexual as a humiliation of the self, as a moment wherein the self's pretences to coherence and stability are momentarily disrupted by the earth-shattering bliss of sexual climax. The shattering of the self in *jouissance* is advanced by this thesis as a means by which we can further enrich our understanding of White's thematics of suffering, extending it beyond the religious frame of reference that has pertained to analysis of this theme to date. But in addition to the blissful potential of *jouissance*, the sexual also emerges as a key site in the generation of negative affect in White's texts. This thesis reads shame in particular as a form of suffering that results from the insistent refusal of White's protagonists of the trope of identity. What unites the positive and negative affective registers of suffering in White's body of work is the redemptive nature of this suffering: both *jouissance* and shame are articulations of White's queer critique of identity that operate by making the coherent, legible self suffer. Whether as a reminder of the pain and violence that inheres in any attempt to force mind and body to conform to categories of historical contingency, or as the theatrical and sentimental performance of suffering that constitutes an important dimension to the closeted aesthetic deployed by White, White's queer politics of critique is never situated very far from what Carolyn Bliss calls the 'necessary, illuminating and redemptive failure' (60) that characterises White's spirituality.

The ambivalence of White's style is central to the arguments put forward by this thesis and it is central to this thesis's examination of White's queer politics of critique. But if this thesis argues that an erotics pertains to the lapses in meaning and ambiguities of language, it would perhaps be better to say that White's queer politics constitute a deconstruction of categories

as monolithic as ethics and morality. Critics of the ‘Old’ school of White criticism are correct to argue that White’s texts are preoccupied with morality, but this thesis argues that the queer representations of sexuality in White articulate a broad cultural politics, rather than a specific teleological exploration of the characters’ personal morality. As such, this thesis challenges the doctrinal and ethical certainties of certain critics of the ‘Old’ school of White criticism. Working within an implicitly Christian paradigm, early criticism of White’s work often sought to uncover a clear and legible ethical instruction within White’s spirituality. MacKenzie put the issue most starkly when he argued that the ‘theonomous universe’ depicted in White’s novels necessitated a religious conceptualisation of morality:

The Tree of Man discovers a theonomous universe. Therefore, its ethical content or characterisation... is always motivated by overall conceptions of the holy and the profane. We can now understand ethical experience in White as beginning in, and dividing itself into two broad categories, the redemptive act and the act of violation, desecration, and obscenity. The given situation always mixes these categories to start with – is deeply ambiguous. But the ‘telos’ of each situation is always in favour of their final separating out. (414)

For MacKenzie, White’s moral universe is manifest: ‘the good is always the power of good in Patrick White, and the bad a power likewise’ (416). The moral confidence of MacKenzie stands in fairly sharp contrast to the queer politics of critique advanced by my reading of White in this thesis: while I would agree with MacKenzie in his identification of an impulse towards ‘violation, desecration, and obscenity’ in White’s works, it is precisely from within these allegedly ‘bad’ impulses that White’s queer vision emerges. This thesis emphasises and celebrates the moral and ethical dissolution of White’s protagonists to the extent that it reads the rhetorical, affective and instructive power of these characters through their strivings away from the ethical injunctions of an identity politics paradigm. As such, White’s political vision is articulated by this thesis not as a teleological development or a ‘final separating out,’ but rather as more of a coming together: White’s queer politics articulate the sexual development as a climax of dissociation and wholeness, an emptying of the self that is simultaneously a

plenitude. And it is from within this breakdown of the self that the ambiguities of White's ethical and stylistic habits are made manifest. Central to the ambiguities that attend White's style is a spirit of deconstructive queer critique that ceaselessly interrogates the rhetorical and political underpinnings of binary categories like 'good' and 'bad,' striving instead for something altogether less certain but arguably more seductive and inspiring.

But for all the faith and certainty displayed by certain luminaries of the 'Old' school of White criticism, there is an equally large cohort of religious readers animated by White's doubt and ambiguity. It is this fluid conception of White's ethics and morality that this thesis seeks to excite through a close analysis of White's style. But whereas the 'Old' school of White criticism has read the ambiguities of White's style as an expression of a transcendentalist faith, this thesis takes the same ambiguities and uncertainties and reads them as a queer preoccupation with the disruptive rhetoric of sexuality and the radical politics of critique that is its offspring. Arguably, MacKenzie is an outlier with respect to his zealous certainty. In contrast to MacKenzie's confident reading of White, Peter Beatson discerns in these novels a fundamental 'idea of antinomy'. 'No principle, emotion, action or image is unambiguous in its implications. There is an ambivalence in everything, so that redemption or disintegration can flow from the same source' (Beatson 21). Peter Wood detects in White's novels the same profound and irreducible ambivalence, which, he argues, is married to White's style:

If we make the general point that the 'imponderables' in White's writing lend an ironic edge to the inclusiveness of his preoccupations with man, suffering, isolation and humility and to the epic ambitiousness of the novels within which the preoccupations function, it is not for any lack of recognition of White's concern for his art as a moral force. Nor is it the inability to see that on a certain level its general tone is critical of many of the moral and social touchstones of contemporary Australia. (25)

Wood draws a characteristic link between the ambiguity of White's moral themes and his style. This junction between morality and style has been the site of much disputation amongst critics of White. Edgecombe, for example, uses 'the continuity of vision and style' as a normative 'yardstick' with which to measure White's achievement as a novelist ('Vision' 87). Edgecombe is perhaps unrepresentative of a critical consensus in White scholarship in dismissing both *The Aunt's Story* and *The Twyborn Affair* as outright failures according to his normative standard; but when he states, with admirable pith and poetry, that 'Patrick White has squeezed words to make the juice of meaning run' ('Vision' 85), he is expressive of a fairly general critical agreement around the essential fluidity of White's moral vision. And it is the same juices of ambiguity and linguistic adventure that might be said to lubricate the queer politics of this thesis, generating a pleasant and productive friction between the arguments advanced by this thesis and the extant body of 'Old' White criticism.

Giffen articulates what is arguably the queerest conception of White's spirituality when he reads the essence of this theme in White's texts as a transversal movement. Giffen's reading of White's spirituality is an important touchstone for the argument advanced by this thesis to the extent that it engages with White's postmodern style and thematics. Many critics of White's work have sought to read White's texts in terms of specific religious dogmas; and a general survey of this field reveals a kaleidoscopic vista of spiritualities. 'Typically,' according to Lars Andersson, 'critics have argued over the specific nature of... White's spiritual paradigm: to what extent is White a Gnostic thinker? Is his fiction an exploration of Judaism? What role does Eastern philosophy and mysticism play in his literature?' (201). As Beatson observes, the spiritual dimension of

White's novels cannot be contained within a strictly delimited Christian theology: 'if White is a Christian (and this is by no means certain) his Christianity is not orthodox, and readers must be prepared for departures from accepted Christian dogmas. White has clothed his religious sensibility in garments borrowed from many cultures' (2). K. Chellappan, for example, attempts to show that Voss's journey 'is more universal than simply Christian as it has also affinity with the Indian concept of the identity of Atman and Brahman' (92). But for Giffen, transcendentalism in White's novels is not a question of fitting themes, symbols and allegories into a narrative of accepted religious doctrine, but a question of how the different religious viewpoints interact with and differentially constitute each other. But more to the point, Giffen argues that what unites the diversity of White's spiritual offerings is the very thing they are all trying to transcend:

For the dominant language in White is language which invokes a dialectical critique of the logical positivism of reason... Thus Modernity (and Postmodernity) has the double goal of examining our understanding of reason and, at the same time, of interrogating what reason is or represents. These Postmetaphysical movements seek to achieve this by "enlightening the Enlightenment about its narrow-mindedness"... [T]his is the very palimpsest upon which White's literary vision rests. (33-4)

Spirituality, the theme that has done the most to agitate, confound and inspire critics of White's work, is given a much broader scope by Giffen: by reading White's spiritual thematics as a thematisation of knowledge itself, Giffen extends the metaphysical concerns of White's texts beyond the traditional bounds of doctrine and bestowing on it new significance to secular readers of the twenty-first century.

In the 'dialectical critique of the logical positivism of reason' that Giffen discerns in White's spirituality there is a clear echo of the queer politics of critique that this thesis reads into White. The heterogeneity of White's religious imagination finds a parallel in the

deconstruction of sexuality that this thesis identifies in White's novels in that both are tethered – or rather, untethered – by the very slipperiness of White's prose. This joyous slipperiness finds expression in this thesis's engagement with *jouissance* and the pleasure that inheres in White's textuality. The way in which White plays with words can be read as a multivalent and open spirituality, but it can also be read as a camp playfulness with signification, an articulation of a fluid and dynamic selfhood that resists the claims of identity politics. The holy mysteries of White's prose gesture simultaneously towards a spirituality of transcendence and the hushed silences of the closet. Thus, if spirituality has for so long been read by the 'Old' White criticism as *the* central concern of White's texts, this thesis seeks to show how *jouissance*, camp and the closet are similar gestures of transcendence that seek to stymie and mystify the historical present. We can align what Giffen reads as the peripatetic spirituality of White novels with the beguiling way in which White's prose also articulates a critique of identity. In the final analysis, this peripatetic spirituality might usefully be aligned with the mobilities of Sedgwick's conceptualisation of the queer as a 'continuing moment, movement, motive – recurrent, eddying, *troublant*' (*Weather* 188). It is in this alignment that we can situate the queer politics that this thesis extracts from White's novels most productively within and around the spiritual concerns that have animated so consistently the 'Old' White criticism.

The 'New' White Criticism

In its postmodern orientation, the argument put forth by this thesis concerning the queer potentialities of the representations of sexuality in White's texts belongs to the 'New'

White criticism. If that which might be said to unite the voices of the ‘New’ White scholarship is a preoccupation with the challenges White’s prose poses to the stable and coherent transmission of meaning, then both the ‘New’ White criticism generally and this thesis specifically advance a vision of White’s texts attuned to the self-consciously textual nature of White’s prose. But to better make sense of the ‘New’ White criticism, we might profitably break this emerging body of work into three distinct but interlocking strains of subject matter. The first strain is constituted by the nascent queer readings of White’s texts. The second of these strains seeks to read the transcendental and metaphysical thematics of White’s texts – the bread-and-butter of the ‘Old’ school – from an overtly post-colonial perspective. And the final strain of the ‘New’ White criticism is a body of deconstructive readings preoccupied with the textual nature and rhetorical effects of White’s prose. Implicit in each of these three strains of criticism is a political imperative: the queer, the post-colonial sacred and the deconstructive analyses of White’s texts are all animated by a radical conception of White’s cultural politics. As we shall see, this thesis emphatically shares both the politics and the textual preoccupations of the ‘New’ White criticism, but argues that that it is in the realm of the sexual that one of the most potent and radical expressions of White’s cultural politics is executed.

There is a sense in which the ‘New’ criticism is not new at all. Going back fifteen years, in *The Gauche Intruder*, Rutherford’s compelling and theoretically charged reading of *Riders in the Chariot* as a critique of the nationalist imagination – what she calls the Australian Good, psychoanalytically conceptualised in contrast to a Lacanian Other – would be a prime example of a ‘New’ kind of criticism that sought to engage with the

postmodern and post-structural resonances of White's texts. Going back further still, J.M.Q. Davies's semiotic analysis of historicity in *A Fringe of Leaves* uncovered a strikingly new and original portrait of the novel's protagonist: Ellen Roxburgh emerges here not as an analogue of the nineteenth century character trope of the fallen woman but as a representative of the counter-culture of the late 1960s, 'seeking personal fulfilment beyond the pale' (217). Davies's analysis of the historiographic dimensions of *A Fringe of Leaves*, the close attention he pays to the temporal and semantic fluidity of White text, stands as a very good example of 'New' White criticism *avant la lettre*. Similarly, Joan Kirkby's use of Kristeva's psychoanalytic theorisation of abjection in her analysis of *The Twyborn Affair* – appearing in the same volume as Davies's essay, published over twenty years ago – posits White's penultimate novel as an ambitious reconciliation of the masculine and the feminine through a truly radical representation of abject masculinity. A small note at the end of Kirkby's essay records the fact that it was completed the day that Patrick White died (162). This poignant detail rather eloquently conveys the sense in which these early examples of White criticism, in rendering their object of study in explicitly theoretical terms, rest both literally and figuratively on the death of the author. And it is from this point that this thesis begins both its analysis of the sexual in White and its intervention in the 'New' White criticism: sexuality emerges as the primary vehicle through which we might understand White's texts as texts, independent of authorial intention, to the extent that sexuality is the very site of identity's unbecoming in White's oeuvre. If the 'New' White criticism has thus far sought to imagine White's texts as discursive artefacts, then the argument of this thesis's excavation of sexuality and identity in White provides a crucial point of leverage in that endeavour. Sexuality in White serves as a *petit mort*, as yet another figurative death of the author.

A postmodern sensibility marks the point at which the 'Old' White criticism transitions into the 'New,' and it is in this sense that this thesis can be situated most forthrightly within the 'New' school of White criticism. In the introduction to a recent volume of essays, *Patrick White Beyond the Grave: New Critical Perspectives*, Ian Henderson argues that the essays collected in this volume 'are lodged in forward- oriented methodologies of the critical present' (7). With his complimentary remarks, Henderson makes the case for a more textual approach to White's work: one that is both suspicious of the claims of the biographical criticism that has dominated the 'Old' school of White criticism, and one that gestures towards the semiotic mobility and instability of White's texts. Henderson states plainly: 'Whether or not one believes in the epic myth of White's personal artistic odyssey, for so many readers his words (consciously arranged and/or intuitively assembled) occasion new ambitions of their own' (1). The independent ambitions of White's texts, their ability to be read as dynamic assemblages is, as Alan Lawson notes, a result of the self-consciously textual style of White's prose. Indeed, Lawson characterises White as a prototypical post-modern:

Now I want to suggest that one of the theoretical problems that *The Aunt's Story* makes very accessible to us is the very idea that the text has any such thing as a single, central meaning, or indeed that the text, to put it slightly differently, *achieves* a single final meaning. And in undermining that concept, we undermine one of the traditional ways of regarding the very acts of reading and of interpretation themselves. (9)

For Lawson, White's fiction advertises the fact that 'unity is culturally- and historically-specific and not one of the universal laws by which we must behave. Indeed it is not one of the universal laws, as we are now discovering, by which the universe behaves' (10).

Although associating White with earlier writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Wolfe of the modernist school, in characterising White as a 'purveyor of novelistic discourse' Charles Lock, to take another example, focuses on the essential lability of White's language: 'the plot of *The Aunt's Story* undertakes some sort of movement analogous to that which we can trace

in novelistic discourse. Words in novels are unlike themselves elsewhere' (82). This central vacancy, this evacuation of meaning also informs the post-modern marriage of text and self, of aesthetics and reality, that Mark Williams reads into *Twyborn*:

Eddie Twyborn in his incarnations as Eudoxia Vatatzes and Eadith Trist discovers the endless possibilities for transforming the self that are part of lived reality and in so doing becomes perhaps White's most compelling and convincing artistic figure. The bizarre deceptions he practices as a man and as a woman are his artform *and* his life. There is no longer any difference. (100)

This thesis takes the poetics of fluidity and disintegration that Henderson, Lawson, Locke and Williams discern in White, and asserts that an erotics therein pertains. The closet, *jouissance* and camp are all shown to be absolutely dependent on a postmodern rearticulation of White's prose.

But the major intervention that this thesis makes to the extant body of post-modern readings of White is through its argument that White's prose performs as much as it asserts the deficiencies of language when it comes to forms of identity, knowledge and meaning. The closet, *jouissance* and camp are all examples of the means by which this thesis demonstrates that White's novels perform a queer politics of identitarian critique. This thesis accords then with Henderson's argument that White's 'words (consciously arranged and/or intuitively assembled) *occasion* new ambitions of their own' (1 emphasis added). Furthermore, this thesis argues that the occasion, the event, the performative dimension of White's prose is most consistently deployed when White's texts attempt to represent sexuality. As will be shown, White's closeted aesthetic effects a queering of White's entire body of work: White's later texts, such as *Twyborn* and *Flaws*, perform a coming out that forces us to re-read the earlier, more heavily closeted texts. The *jouissance* that White's texts perform also forces us to engage with

the pleasure that these texts generate: a pleasure so intense that it not only articulates a queered subjectivity but performs this blissful de-subjectification on the person reading it. And in a similar way, the wit and humour of the camp sensibility that suffuses White's texts transcends the textual to the extent that it is an embodied sensibility, one that is inextricably bound up in the affective currents of shame and the shamelessness of White's texts. If Lawson argues that White's texts perform the failure to 'achieve a single, final meaning' (9 original emphasis), and if Williams argues that these texts effect a breakdown of the categories of art and life, this thesis argues that such performances are inherently queer: the performativity of White's texts is most keenly felt in the crisis of sexual representation that these texts fail to fully articulate.

The critic who has done the most to date to bring the queer articulations and performances of White's texts into focus, and the critic who has done most to both inaugurate the 'New' White criticism and to queer it, is McMahon. McMahon's essay, 'The Lateness and Queerness of *The Twyborn Affair*', has been lauded for the transformational effect it has had on the body of White criticism as a whole. As Henderson notes,

In bringing conceptions of 'late style' and queer epistemologies into dialogue, McMahon also punctured traditional teleologies of a writer's development. Queer readings, then, range across the work, seeking later explicit features of White's writing that were 'always already' there. (6)

McMahon's essay demonstrates how queer theory can be used to shed new light on White's oeuvre. She uses Sedgwick's conceptualisation of minoritising and universalising tendencies in homo/heterosexual definition to uncover a much more complex and nuanced understanding of White's status as a standard-bearer for a high, universal modernism. The implications of McMahon's reconceptualisation of White's

body of work are the subject of sustained analysis in the final chapter of this thesis. It suffices at this juncture merely to note the departure that McMahon's reading of White effects from a biographical focus of the 'Old' White scholarship. As Henderson argues, it is the death of White the man that, more than anything else, has occasioned the 'New' criticism of his work. He argues that one of the things that the 'New' criticism does is to register 'the structural difference between analysing developments in the ongoing work of a living writer and treating the oeuvre of a still recently dead author for its peculiar mix of contemporary relevance and historic artifact' (2). Through an engagement with the queer White, this 'New' criticism registers a structural difference between White's works and his texts; and it is this that most saliently differentiates the 'New' criticism from the 'Old'. Queer criticism, as McMahon's intervention attests, is the primary vector of such a transition in that it foregrounds the tensions and pleasurable slippages between identification and reading in White's fiction.

What this thesis adds to McMahon's analysis is a more sustained engagement with Sedgwick's conceptualisation of the closet and the consequences this has for our understanding of White's politico-literary project. McMahon argues that a close analysis of White's prose reveals a dynamic interaction between secrecy and disclosure:

Seemingly blunt and unornamented statements may be just as illegible or opaque as so-called closeted statements, which, we imagine, operate by more veiled means such as innuendo, euphemism, and metonymy. And if *The Twyborn Affair* is the most explicit in regard to a lived practice of sexuality, it is simultaneously the most veiled and the most figurative on this subject. The line between the inside and outside of the closet is not, in White's fiction, or elsewhere, clear, easily defined, or stable. (87)

This thesis takes this observation of McMahon's as a point of departure in its examination of the subtly layered representations of sexuality in White's texts. This thesis seeks to lend more

weight to McMahon's dynamic conceptualisation of White's closet by showing specifically how the later, more sexually forthright of White's texts must inform our understanding of the closeted aesthetic that characterises White's earlier works. While McMahon uses Sedgwick's conceptualisation of universalising and minoritising understandings of homosexuality to read the sexual politics of White's late style, her use of Sedgwick is confined to a relatively small facet of the argument advanced in *Epistemology*. In contrast, this thesis engages with the more dominant facet of Sedgwick's concept of closetedness, namely her argument that closetedness is constituted as such by the speech act of a silence, and that that silence accrues particularity by the rhetorical and discursive manoeuvring that thereby constitutes it. Through this shift of focus, this thesis seeks to answer McMahon's appeal for 'the specificities of White's homographesis' to be 'addressed in their no doubt complex relationship to the aesthetic of modernist universalism that underpins White's fiction' (88). Through a sustained engagement with Sedgwick's conceptualisation of the closet, this thesis shows how the purportedly 'modernist universalism' of White's fiction is repeatedly and comprehensively thwarted by the countervailing thematics of White's mobile and dynamic closet. In this light, White's texts comprise a queered oeuvre, no longer able to carry the weight of what many critics of White's work have thought of as his grand, his epic, his universal literary project. Instead, this thesis articulates a different vision for White's texts: one that is centred on small, localised and personal acts of resistance; whether it be Eddie Twyborn's defiance of the ontology of difference, Waldo and Arthur Brown's queer reconfiguration of bodies and selves, or Theodora Goodman's resistance to the discourse of sanity and selfhood. In each of these cases detailed in this thesis, McMahon's argument – that White's novels render 'unstable' 'the accepted terms of shared humanity... requiring [a] re-negotiation of the contract between the text and the reading subject' (88) – looms large indeed.

This thesis argues that White's queer politics of critique demand a re-evaluation of his status as a canonical national author, and that the allegedly representative claims of his texts are repeatedly brought into question by the queer sexuality that subtends them. The disputed claims of national representation that many critics have sought to read into White's fiction are the touchstone for what we might call the second strain of the 'New' White criticism: the postcolonial sacred. For queer is not the only force behind the 'New' White criticism. The second strain of the 'New' White criticism engages with the metaphysical concerns of White's texts, but seeks to reimagine these concerns in a distinctly post-colonial context. In this respect it is a departure from the metaphysical readings of the 'Old' White school. The postcolonial sacred readings of White's texts emphasise the tension inherent in the national spiritual dimensions of White's texts. In 'Intimate Distance: Patrick White and the Australian Sacred,' Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden take one of the primary concerns of the 'Old' White criticism – the sacred – and contemplates it from a more abstract, linguistic and theoretical perspective. This essay is concerned not with speculating on the opaque religious convictions of the author and how they might be expressed in his works, but reads the sacred in White's texts rather as an encounter with the limits of language and knowledge. Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden argue that White's novels testify to the inability of language to apprehend the sacred; as such, White's language displays a characteristic restlessness, a diffidence even, where 'the surfaces of language are fractured and reassembled in order to body forth the moment of silence' that constitutes the transcendental sacred (36). For these critics, this restlessness, this endless movement towards a constantly vanishing 'horizon of language' typifies White's aesthetic and thematic concerns. And the image of a horizon thence becomes a metaphor for the relationship between the style and the spirit of White's texts and the politics of nationhood they (dis)articulate, because 'whether in distance or proximity, or both in strange collusion – *place*

remains the path to the sacred' (36) in White's works. And the politics of place are distinctly post-colonial in that the sacred constitutes 'the very *aporia* of nation building, an *anti-nationalist* struggle lying at the very centre of national experience;' the radical, unutterable sacred is 'a reality that can never be captured by the mantras of nationhood' (35 original emphasis).

Like Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden, this thesis uses a post-structural mode of analysis to queer the representations of nationhood and White's engagement with Australia's nationalist literary past. But whereas the emphasis of much of the 'New' school of White critics has been on the post-colonial and racial dimensions to White's politics, this thesis argues that a crucial element of White's political project and his thematisation of nationhood rests in his representation of sexuality. To give one example, this thesis engages with White's oblique relationship to Australia's nationalist literary heritage in reading the figure of the colonial bushman in *Twyborn* as a site of disruptive sexual desire. The pornographic reading that this thesis articulates shows how White's text queers the masculinity that underpins the Australian mythological imaginary. Through the performative disruption of *jouissance* and the pleasure that resides in White's text, the pornographic reading of the bushman might be cited as another example of the '*aporia* of nation building' that Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden identify as emblematic of White's post-colonial sacred. In this sense, this thesis can be read as an attempt to put some flesh on the bones of the critique of nationhood that post-colonial sacred school of White criticism advances. The queer White emerges from this thesis as an alternative locus for the anti-nationalist politics that complicates this canonically Australian author's oeuvre from within, through its subversive intimacies.

Most recent analysis of the sacred in White's work has tended to move beyond the function of doctrine in these texts towards what Andersson calls an 'anti-hegemonic exploration of the sacred' (199). This avenue of inquiry figures White, again, as a distinctly postmodern writer, following a similar path to Giffen's, and is concerned with 'the tension or conflict between utopian and ideological material in the socio-political unconscious' (Andersson 201). Brady and Ashcroft have each separately attempted to draw out the political underpinnings of White's spirituality. In 'God, History and Patrick White,' Brady's analysis of *Riders in the Chariot* fuses an understanding of the spiritual epiphanies of the novel's four protagonists with the currents of history:

Riders in the Chariot wrestles with the question which preoccupied many thinkers in the aftermath of World War II: how to find an alternative to the history of violence which threatened the world... White implies that the issue is ultimately theological, a question of the God who is worshipped. This question, he suggests, is the crucial one facing the world today since it is only a proper understanding of the word and of the reality to which it gestures, however ineffectually, which can offer an alternative to the 'poverty of thought and morals' evident in the history of our times. ('God' 176)

Ashcroft approaches the sacred in White in a very similar vein to Brady, figuring saintliness as a possible response to the spiritual and intellectual poverty of materialist modernity generally, and of colonialism in particular. Ashcroft reads *A Fringe of Leaves* as a parable wherein Ellen, the protagonist of White's novel, experiences an authentic moment of transcendence in the Australian bush which represents 'the discovery of a self beyond the fringe, engaging in an atavistic sacrament, a self finally belonging to the land... cut off from the fringe of colonial protection that hides it' ('Edge' 17). Ashcroft's conception of a post-colonial sacred 'reverses the myth of Aboriginal abjection' ('Edge' 15) by reading the first Australians as the agents of Ellen's epiphany. Joan Newman advances a similar argument in her reading of the Aboriginal presence in *Voss* (115). But in *A Fringe of Leaves*, according to Ashcroft

The heart of darkness has revealed itself as the possible heart of illumination, if only the fringe of civilisation, an expendable fringe of leaves, is torn away... But in its place comes the horizontal possibility, the provisional region of discovery. This novel will not make the mistake of formulating a utopian resolution to this deep hope for an Australian sacred. But it is the function of language, of literature to open the imagination to the possibility of an embodied, proximate Australian sacred. ('Edge' 20)

The post-colonial sacred of the 'New' White criticism differs from earlier readings of the religious themes of White in its insistently political impetus: Brady and Ashcroft are both engaged in a project of articulating White's radical cultural politics. As Andersson notes, with the sacred, 'White attempts to explore the possibilities of a space that is not-capitalism, not the commercialised utopia of the suburbs' (202).

This thesis shares the political animation of the post-colonial sacred, to the extent that the political underpinnings of this strain of criticism rests in its transcendental gestures beyond the complicities and violences of history and colonial identity. It is precisely because the transcendental in White's novels rests in close proximity to the contestation of selfhood that the extant body of transcendentalist White criticism might provide fertile ground for a continuing project of analysing the queer cultural politics of White's texts. Bliss's analysis in *Patrick White's Fiction: The Paradox of Fortunate Failure* characterises the transcendental self in White's work as a striving for states of 'dissolution': 'a process by which the self seems to melt and dissolve, abandoning, as White puts it, the condition of sculpture for that of music and thereby expanding until its limits approach those of the unifying all' (9). As we shall see, in this thesis the sexual rests in close proximity to the transcendental through the critique of identity conceived in language that it articulates. What this thesis calls *jouissance*, the pleasure of White's texts, or the self-shattering potentialities of the sexual, might also be read as what Bliss refers to the 'mystique of failure' that permeates White's novels. If this thesis reads E. Twyborn as a protagonist whose various personas exhibit a cycle of repeated

collapse and rebirth, then the cross-dressing performativity, the gender- and persona-switching of this protagonist are indeed another gesture of transcendence, but one arrived at through means more profane than sacred. On a more general plane, the political imperative that animates the post-colonial sacred readings of White is one that is emphatically shared by this thesis. The queer White that emerges from this thesis is certainly ‘anti-hegemonic,’ certainly one opposed to ‘the commercialised utopia of the suburbs,’ certainly one that reads ‘the heart of darkness... as the possible heart of illumination’ (Andersson 202). If Bliss reads the essence of White’s spirituality as a ‘Christian paradox’ wherein ‘the self must be sought and found only to be relinquished’ (8), this thesis argues that such a gesture of transcendence is also a sexual one, that the queer White ‘becomes most himself when he least seeks to be’ (8).

The third strain of ‘New’ White criticism engages more explicitly still with White’s texts *qua* texts; this strain is what we might call the deconstructivist strain of White scholarship, and is preoccupied above all with the negotiation between language and meaning that White’s texts adjudicate. Ivor Indyk discerns an aesthetic and thematics of textual excess in his reading of *The Eye of the Storm*, reading into the breakdown of syntax and grammar, and into the expressionistic emotional register of the text, a ‘theatrical conception of the self’ (132) that points to the poverty of words alone, demanding less textual criticism and more ‘careful navigation’ (132). In ‘Knockabout World: Patrick White, Kenneth Williams and the Queer World,’ Henderson also makes the point that ‘Whitean language alludes to obscurity per se, or rather to language’s occulted carnal knowledge, its abject record of bumping bodies’ (187). But Andrew McCann has been for a long time the most forthright exponent of this textual turn in White criticism, and his impressive essay

‘Patrick White’s Late Style’ continues in this vein. McCann’s argument might also be read as an attempt to marry all three strains of the ‘New’ White criticism: his thesis being that a radical form of the sacred is central to White’s fiction and that this sacredness is characterised by ‘its ability to empty out, to travesty and to rephrase as ruin the very signifiers of its own theological orientation’ (119). For McCann, the sacred in White ‘is the paradigm in which we become properly postcolonial, not a relic of an older, anachronistic imperialism’ (118); and it is wedded to both the queer and the postcolonial through the excess, the fragmentation and dissolution of meaning that his texts put forth. White’s work – his late works in particular, which are the focus of McCann’s analysis – ‘emblemize the ruin of art itself’ (121) and thus render any form of stable identification with and through the sacred (or the national, or the sexual) unviable. It is this ‘inoperativity’ that is the key to White’s late novels, novels that are ‘constantly interrupting [their] own theological orientation with the increasingly absurd excesses of [their] signifiers’ (120).

This ‘inoperativity,’ grounded in the instability of White’s prose, stands in contrast the high modern and high minded, the universal and canonically national Patrick White that McCann is determined to efface. This thesis seeks to build on McCann’s re-characterisation of White as a queer radical; and perhaps the most prominent way in which this is achieved is by taking McCann’s reading of the abject in White and weaving it into the heart of White’s literary and political project. Indeed, McCann’s post-modern deconstructions of suburbia and the abject in White’s texts have arguably done most to bring White’s work into the aegis of the critical present. Of central concern to McCann’s critical endeavours is a desire to ‘rescue’ White from the charge of conservatism levelled against him by some critics. In ‘The Ethics of Abjection: Patrick White’s *Riders in the*

Chariot,’ McCann documents how White’s aristocratic mien, his alleged racism and misogyny, his perceived disdain for the Ordinary Australian, and his ostensibly insufferable allegiance to High Art have all been read as talismans of his conservatism (153). But for McCann, White is an essentially subversive writer; and this subversiveness rests for him in that which is queer and perverse in White’s texts:

[T]he absence of the idea of perversity in White criticism (along with the consensual refusal to engage with White as a gay writer) is the condition on which critiques of White’s conservatism remain plausible... White’s prose is an affront to this aesthetic conservatism. It acknowledges that norms and forms of representation have a significant role to play in the mediation of sociability – that culture can be a site of decomposition in a way that resists affirmative visions of a falsely reconciled world, visions which, in Australia at least, have hinged on the fantasy of a place called suburbia. (‘Decomposing’ 70-1)

Both McCann’s approach to reading White and the complimentary approach taken by this thesis might be thought of as a means of engaging with White in a spirit of reparation: if White has been for so long misconstrued as old and conservative, this thesis can be read alongside the efforts of McCann as an attempt to render unto White’s texts the shock of the radically new. But ironically, the means by which this reparation will be brought about is through an emphasis on White’s perversity. In order to rescue White, we must embrace a queer White. To borrow McCann’s terminology, this thesis is committed to the ‘affront’ that White’s prose poses to its readers: the representations of sexuality in White’s texts serve as a primary locus of ‘decomposition,’ and a site of humiliation for the self and for the nation to which White’s ostensibly conservative texts are supposed to be wedded.

Thesis Overview

White's Critically Queer Politics

Undergirding each of the four chapters of this thesis is the contention that White's novels posit a queer politics that is prosecuted through the failures of language.

Rutherford's reading of White has already begun the process of excavating the gaps and silences that permeate his language. Rutherford conceives of White's literary project as an attempt

to eviscerate the dominant Australian mythos of a heroic pioneering tradition. In the place of the bombastic myths of white culture, sentences in *The Tree of Man* falter from lack of breath and words fall from mouths, always failing to find an empty mouth to receive them. *The Tree of Man* is a text preoccupied with the failure of its characters and its culture to arrive at speech. ('Homo' 62)

Rutherford goes on to state that 'with post colonial hindsight, we can recognize the political significance of Patrick White's refusal of the culture's central mythology' ('Homo' 62); and in doing so she signals her preoccupation with race as the axial node of historical difference to which her conception of White's politico-literary project is most keenly attuned. But this thesis argues that 'the white Australian tradition' ('Homo' 62) is not the sole target of White's polemical cultural politics: sitting along side the racist underpinnings of Australian culture is a violent heteronormative assumption which White's novels insistently critique. Tellingly, however, the means by which this critique of heteronormativity is effected is the same as that identified by Rutherford in her reading of White's critique of race: namely, White's novels give voice to the failure of language fully to expunge the Other from the representation of the social. If Rutherford finds that 'in reading White, it is impossible to stuff a story into the empty mouth of the past' ('Homo' 62), this is because the language with which nations are built is never a stable foundation. Rutherford demonstrates how White's 'focus is signification and the way in which cultural discourses and idealisations can both

refuse and illuminate a field beyond its limit' (*Intruder* 178-9). This thesis seeks to demonstrate how the representation of sexuality in White's novels both resists the very language of politics and gestures beyond the horizon of our current social reality. In their refusal to be circumscribed by language and history, White's characters emerge from this reading as the standard bearers for a politics of queer refusal.

This thesis reads three of White's texts, *The Twyborn Affair*, *The Solid Mandala* and *The Aunt's Story*, in order to trace the outline of a queered reconceptualisation of White's oeuvre as a whole. This queered body of work resists a simple and one-directional narrative of White's coming out, emphasising instead the involutions of secrecy and disclosure that characterise the representation of sexuality in White's texts. Part of conceptualising White's oeuvre as a queer body involves excavating the torsions of meaning and legibility in his 'out' texts, while at the same time acknowledging and analysing the covert erotics and flamboyantly camp wit that characterise his earlier, closeted offerings. The three texts that are the focus of this thesis have been chosen because each showcases in varying degrees the operation of White's queer closet. If *Twyborn* is White's most forthright and openly homosexual novel, it nevertheless articulates a distinctly queered homosexuality, the erotic intensity of which serves to disrupt, rather than to reify, a stable and coherent narrative of a coming out bound up in the discourse of identity politics. As such, this thesis might be said to read *Twyborn* more as an exploration of White's closet from without. Moving backwards from here and arriving at the middle of White's literary career, *Mandala* might be said to sit at the very threshold of White's closet. This thesis shows how *Mandala*'s dense textuality both articulates and occludes the queer sexualities of its protagonists, sliding constantly between the poles of silence and utterance. In the instability of *Mandala*'s language is to be

found a gesture of linguistic transcendence: *Mandala*'s closet is figured above all as a spatial dimension that emphasises the inability of language to fully capture the physicality of embodied sexuality. And it is this fundamental resistance, this determination to expose the violence and distortion that the language of the social renders unto sexuality that epitomises the deepest recesses of White's closet in *The Aunt's Story*. This thesis explores how the earliest articulations of White's closet are devoted to an anti-social project of extreme subjectivity, where the epistemology of Theodora Goodman's closet becomes a metaphor for a more generally queered expression of subjectivity. But it is only by reading *The Aunt's Story* in light of White's later out texts that the contours of his closet can be fully discerned. This arc, this intertextual dependence, and this poetics of reverse-engineering that this thesis uncovers in White's texts forms the basis of a reconceptualisation of White's body of work. But ironically, it is this queered oeuvre that provides a more cohesive account of White's body of work, effacing as it does distinctions between the early, middle and late periods of his career through the unity and durability of his closeted aesthetic.

This thesis argues that there is a unity of poetics and thematics to White's texts: the queer reorientation of White's oeuvre that results from the disrupted narratives of closeted sexuality and the poetics of mutual interdependence that constitute this oeuvre form, in fact, a central element of White's thematics and his broader politics of critique. Indeed, one of the most important consequences of the queer politics that White's texts evince is in forcing us to reconsider the very canonicity that pertains to his body of work. The conceptual foundation stone of the argument advanced by this thesis is Sedgwick's provocative claim that 'an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree

that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition' (*Epistemology* 1). But an important dimension to this argument advanced in *Epistemology* centres on questions of canonicity. Sedgwick argues that

Insofar as the problematics of homo/heterosexual definition, in an intensely homophobic culture, are seen to be precisely internal to the central nexuses of that culture, [the] canon must always be treated as a loaded one... Canonicity itself... seems the necessary wadding of pious obliviousness that allows for the transmission from one generation to another of texts that have the potential to dismantle the impacted foundations upon which a given culture rests. (54)

Part of the political value that attaches to Sedgwick's argument can be derived from the exposure that it performs of the 'pious obliviousness' that serves to occlude the queer resonances of canonical works. But at the same time, by excavating the epistemology of the closet, as it pertains to already established canonical texts, we begin the labour of exposing 'the canonical culture of the closet' (57) itself. This thesis is engaged in such a labour: it demonstrates that a queer closet lurks at the very centre of Australia's canon; the queer body of White's work, with its porous contours and non-linear narratives, exposes the pretence of canonicity itself. As such, this thesis is energised by what Sedgwick calls 'the urgencies and pleasures of reading against the grain of any influential text' (55). And in keeping with Sedgwick's suggestive and rather phallic imagery, we might even say that a certain erotics stimulates the queering of White's oeuvre: the three texts selected for analysis in this thesis, in their staging of the dynamics of homo/hetero definition through the operation of the closet, showcase the *jouissance* of White's canonicity. If, as David Carter argues, White's canonisation 'caused a troubled reevaluation of the Australian tradition' (276) by his metaphysical destabilisation of some of the realist certainties that had characterised Australia's nationalist literary canon, this thesis emphasises, ever more urgently, the potential of White's body of work to 'dismantle the impacted foundations upon which a given culture rests' (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 54).

The first chapter of this thesis reads Part II of *The Twyborn Affair* as a text preoccupied with the dynamics of power and resistance that attend the erotics of masculinity and homosexuality. If, as noted above, Davidson reads *Twyborn* very persuasively as a coming out text, as a text that takes gay male sexuality as a central thematic concern, it is also conversely a text that records a certain ambivalence towards the politics of male same-sex desire. Chapter One of this thesis takes as its focal point the sexual relationship between Eddie Twyborn and Don Prowse. The representation of Prowse's exaggerated and overtly sexualized masculinity through the desiring gaze of Eddie is shown to carry with it the potential to subvert a figure that looms large in Australia's nationalist literary heritage: if in Prowse we have an image of the macho Australian bushman *par excellence*, we also have an image that is almost eroticized out of existence. Chapter One reads Prowse pornographically; it demonstrates the performative potential of *jouissance* to disrupt the subject and the currents of power that flow as its inevitable consequence: there is an argument to be made that in getting off on Prowse's physicality, we go some way towards denuding the bushman, and the nationalism which he represents, of the power and privilege with which his once proud subjectivity might have hitherto endowed him. But it must also be kept in mind that *Twyborn's* dynamics of erotic spectacle are volatile and ambivalent; and this ambivalence rests on the text's implication of homosexual desire in the hierarchy of social power and domination. While highlighting the subversive potential of same-sex male desire, Chapter One is also at pains to examine fully the extent to which homosexuality becomes a tool of oppression in *Twyborn*. So long as Eddie's erotic satisfaction with Prowse remains detached, spectacular, even ironic, his desire is subversive; once the sexual degenerates into something personal it quickly becomes a tortured relationship, fully enmeshed in the power struggle that inevitably attends subjection. And so the final section of Chapter One's analysis of *Twyborn* examines the palliative, anti-human currents of this text: in the final analysis, Eddie Twyborn

is celebrated for his rejection of Prowse and, further, for his rejection of the ontological foundations of the social. Eddie's ability to identify over and beyond the difference that separates subject and object, male and female, is coupled with the refuge he finds in a sensual embrace of the Australian landscape to articulate a major theme in White's queer politics of critique. This anti-humanist politics is perhaps best understood in terms of White's linguistic style: the at-times-surreal textual aesthetic of *Twynborn* gestures beyond an overtly nationalised social reality in its immersion in the landscape, in the flora and fauna, of the Australian bush.

The second chapter of this thesis reads the failures of language in Part III of *Twynborn* as a thematisation of historicity. Building on the first chapter's analysis of Eddie's identification with difference, the portrait of the protagonist of this text is further enriched in Chapter Two by looking at how she/he resists the attempts at categorization and legibility that history demands; and in doing so E. Twynborn registers as a figure of shame. Chapter Two looks at an affective dimension to White's novel, at how the protagonist's refusal to cohere within a single identity gives rise to misrecognition and shame. This chapter thence explores how E. Twynborn develops a camp sensibility as a means of coping with the shame that attends her/his failure to submit to the forces of history. The political efficacy of White's camp sensibility is shown to inhere in its relationship to affect: in its mercurial nature, in its resistance to linguistic definition, camp lends itself with facility to the rearticulation of shame and misrecognition as a fabulous performance of shamelessness. Moreover, as an emotional coping mechanism White's camp advertises itself as means of living in defiance of the oppression that comes with social categorization. Chapter Two argues that camp is a sensibility that playfully resists the social categorization of gender and sexuality. But like the

first chapter of this thesis, the second chapter also records a distinct ambivalence in its politics of affect: for all its camp exuberance, *Twyborn* is a text whose conclusion is undeniably tragic. In reading the relationship between Eadith Trist and her lover Gravenor we discover a tantalizing prospect: a radical promise of love that might transcend the categories of man and woman. But to the extent that the transcendence of these social categories is a transcendence of history itself, it is an enterprise doomed to failure. It is the implacable reassertion of history in the form of bombs dropping from the sky that eviscerates this dream at the novel's conclusion – along with the novel's protagonist. But the value of *Twyborn's* tragedy inheres in the affective spasm, in the shattering emotional experience for the reader, that this ending discharges: ultimately *Twyborn* is a text that vehemently refuses to let us forget the pain of history.

The third chapter of this thesis argues that the failure of language to fully circumscribe meaning in White's texts constitutes a closeted aesthetic. In its closeting of the sexualities of its two protagonists, *The Solid Mandala* interrogates the epistemology of sexuality, gesturing beyond the text's two-dimensionality and embracing – physically – the gaping hole between language and reality. The hermetic Waldo exemplifies the idiosyncratic form that White's closeted aesthetic takes: White's closet is best understood as a highly mobile sensibility that slides between a minute obsession with the vagaries and ambiguities that inhere in language on the one hand, and a flamboyant preoccupation with the sentimental performance of the suffering, closeted homosexual on the other. Both of these poles of White's closet converge in *Mandala* in the characterization of Waldo and in the thematisation of the written word: Waldo's failed career as a writer and his job as a librarian are both forms of closeted inscription that stand as metaphors for the process by which homosexuality executes a

(de)scription of the body, an attempt to bring the body under the purview of language. But because *Mandala* exhibits a postmodern preoccupation with the mobility of the signifier and because the text's representation of Waldo resists or closets the inscription of sexuality on his body, White's text forces us to pay attention to the spatial dimensions of the closet. Chapter Three of this thesis argues that *Mandala* represents a series of closeted spaces. One of these spaces is the library where Waldo works; another space is the streets Sarsaparilla, White's fictionalised representation of Australian suburbia; and another is the bedroom that Waldo shares with his brother Arthur. The latter two of these spaces, the street and the bedroom, are where the closeted relationship between the two Brown brothers is plotted. Chapter Three argues that the closeted incestuous desire of the two protagonists is routed through the fist: the image of Waldo and Arthur walking hand in hand down the streets of Sarsaparilla is read as an invitation to begin thinking about sexuality in terms of an insistent physicality that refuses to be bound by language and identity. In this respect, the closeted representation of fisting gives expression to the spatial dynamic of intimacy that pertains to Waldo and Arthur's relationship. Ultimately, the oblique representation of fisting in White's text, in its resistance to enclosure within accepted (and acceptable) narratives of sexuality, allows us to best apprehend the solidity and the spatiality of *The Solid Mandala's* closet.

The fourth and final chapter of this thesis makes the case for a new and queer conceptualisation of White's body of work as a whole. Chapter Four reads *The Aunt's Story* as another of White's closeted texts, arguing that the relationship between the novel's protagonist Theodora and her father is characterised by a suggestive and erotic silence. The means by which the reader gains an awareness of this closeted dynamic is embedded in the structure of the novel itself. The second section of the novel, the infamous *jardin exotique*,

provides a lens through which the closeted dynamics of the previous section become apprehensible. The *jardin exotique* does this in two ways. Firstly by a gesture of rhetorical impaction whereby the knowledge of the reader is reduced, or impacted, such that the reader is bewildered into a state of textual apprehension – *just what exactly is going on here in this jardin exotique?* From within this epistemological maelstrom this section of the text then inaugurates a dynamic of seductive worldliness and knowing. General Sokolnikov, the worldly lothario and old *habitué* of the *jardin exotique* emerges here as seducer of the young Katina Pavlou. If their intergenerational relationship is a closeted affair, this relationship becomes a focal point of Chapter Four in that it provides the key for going back to read the first section of *The Aunt's Story* and the closeted silences that attended Theodora's relationship with her father. The *jardin exotique* section functions in the text as a re-telling of the first, but it is a more knowing re-telling, where the naiveté of an Australian childhood is replaced with a cosmopolitan worldliness that is now fully apprised of the facts of life. The same poetics of reading backwards pertains to White's entire body of work, with the later, more overtly queer novels providing us with an epistemological cypher and a means of re-reading the erotics of silence that reigns over his earlier closeted texts. Like the first chapter of this thesis, the final chapter is concerned with the dynamics of temporality that pertain to White's queer politics: the first chapter read the constant re-invention of the protagonist of *The Twyborn Affair* as a revolutionary inaptitude for identity politics; the final chapter develops this into a poetics and thematics of perpetual re-invention through the example of Theodora Goodman and her detachment from the reality of identity. Like the second chapter of this thesis, the final chapter invokes a camp sensibility as a practical expression of White's queer politics: the outrageously witty tone of the *jardin exotique* inaugurates Theodora's vicarious investment in a self othered from itself. Like the third chapter, the final chapter conceives White's queer politics as resistance to a sexuality conceived in language: whether

it is Waldo and Arthur's closeted attachment to each other through the fist, or the secrets Theodora keeps about her father, White consistently represents sexuality in the interstices of language. This closet emerges in the final chapter as Theodora's emphatic refusal of the politics of sexual identity and the culmination of White's queer politics of critique.

This thesis concludes with a brief discussion of the material, embodied and performative dimensions to White's queer politics. The Conclusion brings the implicit materiality and performativity of the arguments advanced by the previous four chapters into sharper focus so as to reconceptualise White's politics as something other than purely propositional. White's queer politics here emerges as a gesture of textual transcendence that undoes the rhetoric of the self. In making this argument, the Conclusion aims to reparatively position the insistently political – even polemical – arguments advanced by this thesis with the spiritual and metaphysical bias of the large body of White criticism which has tended to privilege the religious thematics of White's texts over their secular politics. The Conclusion argues that the notion of transcendence unites both the metaphysical and the queer White. By invoking the queer Buddhist practice that increasingly occupied Sedgwick's thought towards the end of her life, and with recourse to a short reading of *The Eye of the Storm*, this thesis concludes by conceptualising the essence of White's queer politics as the performative transcendence of language, text and self.

Chapter One

Is Prowse's Rectum a Grave?: The homoerotics of Patrick White's Australian cultural politics

'Fuck that' said Don Prowse, and laughed his throatiest from behind the Adam's apple (*Twyborn* 178).

In posing the question 'Is Prowse's Rectum a Grave?' this chapter interrogates the power dynamics that pertain to the representation of homosexuality in Part II of *The Twyborn Affair*. In taking the sexual relationship between the novel's protagonist Eddie Twyborn and Don Prowse as its focal point, the first section of this chapter argues that the erotics of male same-sex desire articulate a major facet of the queer politics that suffuse White's novel; but they do so only to the extent that these erotics gesture beyond the social imbrication of sexuality as a relationship. In so far as Eddie's desire for Prowse is detached and pornographic, the sexualisation of Prowse's body through Eddie's desiring gaze carries with it the potential to subvert the dominance and power of Prowse's masculinity; this chapter uses Leo Bersani's conceptualisation of the sexual as *jouissance*, as the disruption of power through the humiliation of subjectivity to arrive at such a subversive reading. Bersani's celebrated essay 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' forms the basis for a reading of the erotics that are represented in *Twyborn* through Prowse's masculine physique: Prowse's physical strength is contrasted with the ejection from the currents of power that the *jouissance* provoked by his muscular torso executes. The pornographic reading of Prowse that this chapter advances thereby carries important implications for how we read White as an Australian writer preoccupied with Australia's nationalist literary heritage. For it will be argued that the jackaroo and the

bushman, even working-class masculinity, itself so central to the earliest expressions of Australian literary nationalism, are represented in this text through the lens of desire. This pornographic lens of desire reads Prowse the bushman as a representative figure of Australian literary nationalism that is repeatedly humiliated by the desiring reader he engenders. The pornographic reading of Prowse in this chapter runs counter to the critical consensus in White scholarship which has tended to read the sexual encounter between Eddie and Prowse as rape. While this chapter is concerned with the power dynamics that attend this sexual relationship, it argues that the pornographic image of Prowse might also be read as a site of pleasure.

This is not to dismiss wholesale the concerns that other critics have expressed in reading Prowse as a rapist; any reading of *Twyborn* must take account of the implication of homosexuality in the power struggles of the social hierarchy represented in White's text. The second section of this chapter argues that it is, to quote Bersani, '*the degeneration of the sexual into a relationship that condemns sexuality to becoming a struggle for power*' ('Rectum' 25, original emphasis). As the sexual dynamic between Eddie and Prowse becomes more involved, as it moves away from the detached, pornographic gaze sketched in the first section of this chapter, and moves towards something more resembling a relationship, the currents of desire become the tools of power. To the extent that it becomes a relationship, Eddie and Prowse's affair betrays the self-dissolving potential of *jouissance* and lapses into something more sinister: to quote Bersani again, 'as soon as persons are posited, the war begins' ('Rectum' 25). It is with this in mind that the second section of this chapter invokes Eve Sedgwick's homosocial spectrum to demonstrate how the sexual gets caught up in the politics of class and gender. If the eroticisation of Prowse's masculinity was somewhat de-fanged by a pornographic reading, the second section of this chapter details the process by

which this is reversed. The site of this reversal is the love triangle that develops between Eddie, Prowse and Marcia Lushington. It will be argued that the homosexual desire that Eddie and Prowse share is refashioned into a tool with which to ultimately subjugate both male parties. Following Sedgwick's conceptualisation of the homosocial spectrum and the dynamic of homophobia within that spectrum, Eddie and Prowse's game of one-upmanship in competition for the affections of Marcia is exposed as the motor of the text's tragedy. The relationship between Eddie and Prowse is ultimately read as a cautionary tale, a demonstration of homosexuality's baleful potential to be implicated in the exercise of power.

If the sexual desires of Prowse and Eddie are corrupted by their degeneration into a relationship, the third and final section of this chapter argues that it is in Eddie's ultimate rejection of this relationship, and in the rejection *tout court* of the ontological foundations of sociality, that *Twyborn* articulates its queer politics of critique. This chapter concludes by invoking Bersani's concept of 'homoness' to argue that Eddie Twyborn's ability to identify over the boundary-markers of social difference serves as a template for a radical homopolitics based on a rejection of difference and an embrace of sameness. In *Homos* Bersani argues that within the notion of homosexuality itself there resides a disruptive potential and a way out of the seemingly interminable quagmire of social struggle. By privileging an ontology of sameness, homosexuality gnaws at the root of sociality, at the difference that defines the social: subject and object, you and I. To the extent that it disrupts the psychology of difference, the very sense of selfhood upon which the entire edifice of the social rests, Bersani's conceptualisation of homosexuality gestures beyond the politics of identity. Ironically then, it is Eddie's rejection of a homosexual relationship with Prowse that is the true marker of his radical homoness; Eddie's rejection of Prowse is, to quote Bersani,

emblematic of ‘his fundamental project of *declining to participate in any sociality at all*’ (*Homos*, 168 original emphasis). This chapter concludes by arguing that Eddie’s sensual embrace of the landscape figures his rejection of the social. This queer rejection is articulated through White’s style: in the rocks and sticks of White’s prose and in the anti-human representation of the landscapes of the Australian bush.

This vision of political critique brings with it important consequences for how White’s novels have been read and the position that White’s body of work obtains within Australia’s cultural politics, and within its nationalist literary heritage in particular. By way of situating the argument this chapter makes, an important reference point in White scholarship is Jennifer Rutherford’s essay “‘Homo Nullius’: The Politics of Pessimism in Patrick White’s *The Tree of Man*.” Rutherford’s essay can be read as an attempt to rescue White’s works from the criticism and neglect they sustained in the years following the author’s death. According to Rutherford, at the end of the twentieth century and well into the first decade of the twenty-first, White’s oeuvre came to be regarded by his critics in the academy as ‘an embarrassing relic of the old Humanities’: ‘White was an elitist, pessimistic, metaphysical modernist who had cashed in on Australia’s attempt to forge a national identity – a Leviathan who had clambered from the colonial sea but never beached on the shores of postcolonialism’ (52). In her survey of the dominant strands of negative White criticism, Rutherford singles out the treatment administered by Simon During in his characterisation of White’s texts as largely unread and unrepresentative of a modern Australia, and of White himself as ‘an iconic national literary figure’ in every pejorative sense of that term (50). But for Rutherford, White is anything but a representative of the ‘conservative Old Guard;’ she argues to the contrary that White was ‘a melancholic writer... for whom the writing of melancholy has provided the

means of expressing the paradoxes, inconsistencies, blind spots and fractures of the culture’ (52). Rutherford casts White as a writer who pointedly questions the racist, misogynistic and homophobic assumptions that underpin the fabric of Australian nationhood. For Rutherford, White’s entire literary project can be characterised as an attempt to ‘identify outside the circumference of the white imaginary’; and he achieves this by taking as his literary objects the shibboleths of Australian national character. Rutherford’s investment in White rests on ‘the way he illuminated neighbourliness, ordinariness, and the moral codes of the fair go and of plain speech as intrinsic to a fantasy of Australianness that excluded as much as it included’ (48).

Central to Rutherford’s casting of White as a figure of melancholy critique is what she reads as White’s invocation of an Australia peopled by ‘*homo nullius*’ (59). Rutherford reads White’s *The Tree of Man* as a foundation text – a book of genesis – for white Australia, but she does so from a very oblique angle: White’s foundation of white Australian settlement is effected not in rosy hues of triumph and celebration, but rather, according to Rutherford, in tones of melancholy resignation. This “queering” of one of the foundation-myths of European settlement in Australia is achieved through the inability of the characters in White’s text to arrive at utterance: ‘in the place of the bombastic myths of white culture, sentences in *The Tree of Man* falter from lack of breath and words fall from mouths, always failing to find an empty mouth to receive them’ (62). For Rutherford, ‘*The Tree of Man* is a text preoccupied with the failure of its characters and of its culture to arrive at speech’ (62). This cultural politics of nationalist critique is one that suffuses White’s entire body of work; but this chapter seeks to demonstrate that melancholy is but one of the affective modalities through which this critique is enacted. This chapter argues that the ego shattering bliss of *jouissance*

is yet another ‘affective tonality’ (61) by which we can apprehend ‘White’s refusal of the culture’s central mythology’ (62).

If the ‘Old’ White criticism took as a central tenet of White’s Christian thematics the notion of redemptive suffering, this chapter will show how the flesh can be read as an integral site of this redemptive suffering. The Literature Review of this thesis noted that White’s spiritual suffering is characterised by its ineffability. Brissenden observes that it is not the pain of suffering that most disturbs White’s fiction, but rather the fact that human suffering is private and ultimately incommunicable (416). The stone-cold portrait of Eddie Twyborn that this chapter paints, and his relationship with the icy landscapes of the New South Wales Snowy Mountains, point to a blissful reimagining of suffering-in-silence as a radically anti-social current in White’s cultural politics. This politics is shown in this chapter to be vectored insistently by a queer representation of homosexuality through which the social itself is dislocated. The alpine setting of this novel is another site in which the spiritual and the queer might be said to meet: the revolutionary rejection of the social that this chapter identifies in *Twyborn*, and the concomitant investment in the language of landscapes, can be read as a repudiation of the either-or thinking that characterises much of the ‘Old’ White criticism. If Wolfe argues that the spiritual and social are pure antagonists in White’s fiction – and that metaphysical ‘visions’ stand in the place of political ‘programs’ in White (1) – this chapter re-iterates this asceticism as a queer meditation on the transcendent potential of language itself.

The work of reading the queer resonances of White's engagement with nationalism has only just begun. Elizabeth McMahon's argument that *Twyborn* 'aligns[s] an iconic national graphesis with a homographesis' (79) is an important first step in coming to terms with the juncture of White's sexual and national politics. McMahon argues that we need to take into account the 'explicitly homosexual' (79) Eddie Twyborn alongside his iconic representative status as an Aussie jackaroo and with the nationalist resonances of the text's Snowy Mountains setting. When we do, we find here that this staging by White 'compounds the crisis of *representation* played out in a novel with a crisis of White's status as national literary *representative*' (79 original emphasis). For McMahon, this crisis is never fully resolved: in aligning imagery of the national with the homosexual, White's novel 'leaves us with many questions and at least one profound dilemma that goes to the heart of reading and interpreting his work' (90). This dilemma hinges on the competing claims of the universalising and minoritising tendencies of the text: how are we to negotiate the intermingling of a minority homosexual experience that the protagonist of the text embodies with the universalising impulse to represent the nation that is quite obviously a hallmark of White's literary project? Later on this chapter will engage more deeply with the intriguing and alluring 'slippages' that McMahon's essay strokes in her reading of *Twyborn*, but on a more general plane this chapter is dedicated to the call that comes at the end of McMahon's essay when she says that 'we may now be equipped with the frameworks with which to rise to the critical challenge of calibrating the minority terms of the universalist claims made in and by [White's] fiction' (90). This chapter and this thesis as a whole aim to ratify McMahon's claim that the framework of queer theory provides a new and generative means of understanding the seeming representational crisis of White's cultural politics.

Reading the Australian Bushman as Pornography

One of the most productive ways of approaching this crisis of sexual and national politics in *Twyborn* is to be found in Bersani's psychoanalytic conceptualisation of *jouissance* and its application to the erotic representation of one character in particular: Don Prowse in his guise as an Australian national icon. For it is clear that the character of Prowse taps into a distinctly nationalist Australian literary sensibility. As David Coad has suggested, Prowse is 'a Wild Colonial in the Snowy River tradition: aggressively masculine, virile, even bestial' (125). Prowse evokes the trope of the working-class male that, as A. A. Phillips famously argued, is identifiable as a uniquely Australian literary figure. In Phillips' memorable phrase, Australian literature was the first to be written 'of the people, for the people and from the people' (*Tradition* 53). But this 'Democratic Theme' is also heavily, even oppressively, gendered. In the words of Joseph Furphy, quoted approvingly by Phillips in his essay, Australian literature valorises 'the axe-man's muscle' over 'gentlemanly deportment' and 'half-a-dozen hard-muscled white savages, any one of whom could take his lordship by the ankles, and wipe the battlefield with his patrician visage' (*Tradition* 55-6). Prowse embodies Australia's nationalist literary heritage through the same conjunction of class and gender. We can see this at the beginning of Part II of *Twyborn*, when he comes to collect the newly arrived Eddie from the train station:

A door was torn open and slammed shut before the driver came round and showed himself. He was of middle age, a reddish man in clothes which seemed to inconvenience him judging by the contortions to which he was subjecting his shoulders, while easing his crotch, and flinging evident cramps off a pair of well-developed calves. In spite of the rights he enjoyed as a native, he might have felt that the stranger stationed above him on the platform had him at a disadvantage. For he took up a stance, legs apart, hands on hips, as he stared upward. (175)

The very first interaction between these two characters is tellingly conducted on uneven ground: Eddie is 'stationed' above Prowse; indeed, as the son of a judge, he comes from a higher station in society. And this class difference between these two characters is framed

and expressed in roundly gendered terms: Prowse's 'disadvantage' provokes an aggressively masculine pose – with 'legs apart, hands on hips' – while it is the manager's brute, manly frame, conditioned by physical labour – with bulging calves, 'musclebound shoulders' (176) – that emerges from the banged-up ute. More tellingly still: Prowse's status in this passage as a 'native' grounds his expression of class and gender in expressly Australian soil while displacing the patrician – albeit equally native-born Australian – Eddie, rendering him a 'stranger' in the Australian bush. Through the interaction of class and gender then, this introductory encounter between Prowse and Eddie clearly establishes the former's status as the vivid embodiment of Australian literary nationalism.

But if Prowse stands as a metaphor for a certain tradition of Australian writing, we must also note the oblique angle from which this tradition is observed: Prowse is consistently figured in the text through Eddie's desiring gaze. Just after the scene of introduction described above, as Prowse drives Eddie back to the homestead, Eddie feels 'a tingling attraction on his own side, generated, if he would admit, by those hands lying heavy on the wheel' (177). From here on, the reader, through Eddie, is posited as a desiring subject of Prowse, who is in turn constructed as a desired object. Repeatedly, Prowse is reduced to the sum of his body parts in a manner that verges on the pornographic. He is variously described as: an 'overtly masculine back' (180); 'a torso' (185); 'his manliness' (188); 'Prowse in his smelly overalls' (201); 'that scabby fist' (202); 'the sweaty brute' (203); 'nipples surrounded by whorls of rosy fuzz' (235); 'the armpits and biceps' (238); 'very erect' (251); 'his chest through the gap in his pyjama coat' (257); 'masculine strength and native brutality' (259); 'armpits' (260); 'armpits' (again) (268); 'red nipples' (272); 'impressively muscular in a singlet' (279); 'Prowse's bulk' (283); 'chest and thighs'

(284); ‘like a ram or a stud bull’ (289); ‘the Brute Male’ (294); ‘this hairy body’ (296); and finally ‘thick lips’ (299). This exaggerated depiction of Prowse’s masculinity draws upon a very particular subset of aesthetic conventions that are typical of gay pornographic spectacle. As Richard Rambuss observes:

Gay male porn is dick and muscles; it’s hairy or shaved chests and butts. It’s jockstraps, briefs, and boxers. It’s a male fantasia of desirable and desiring men... The gym and the locker room, the barnyard and the construction site remain classic situational turn-ons. So do law enforcement and military scenes... Mainstream gay male porn runs on the desire for masculinity, on an erotic intensification of it. (202)

It is interesting to note here how gay porn, to a far greater extent than straight porn, is almost always happening in relation to an imagined public: the gym and the locker room, the barnyard, the construction site, the police station and the military barracks are all spaces that situate the gay sex of gay porn in relation to images of public spaces. Rich Cante and Angelo Restivo argue that in gay porn, ‘paradoxically, one’s awareness of oneself as a member of a “minority” is inextricably bound to one’s recognizing oneself as an element of the anonymous “mass” and ‘it is precisely this tension between anonymity and self-recognition that we discern in the spatial logics of all-male porn’ (153). Focalised through Eddie, the reader’s arousal by Prowse’s pornographic representation, although a private affair, is mediated by a furtive relation to a very public image of Australian nationalism. Prowse closely adheres to the “cowboy” trope of gay porn, as the following topless portrait attests: ‘Prowse was at his most ostentatiously virile, in faded moleskins and heavy, conspicuously polished boots, a generous golden fell wreathed round the nipples of the male breasts. He stood looking down at the passive figure before him on the bed’ (211). But rather than the American cowboy, Prowse represents a distinctly Australian variation on this theme: as it turns out, Stetson hats and leather chaps translate quite easily into moleskins, R.M. Williams boots and an akubra. Prowse’s pornographic physicality thus functions so as to arouse a specifically gay male reader of Australian nationalism, who is in turn made aware of his

status as member of both a minority community and an anonymous mass – otherwise known as the nation – to which a nationalist literary sensibility is passionately enjoined.

The sexual arousal generated by Prowse, and the experience of *jouissance* that his eroticised portrayal provokes, are generative prisms through which we can refract the representation of Australian literary nationalism in this text. Bersani places *jouissance* at the heart of his psychoanalytic conceptualisation of sexuality. Drawing on a pointed (mis)reading of Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Bersani posits sexual climax as an ego-destroying process of psychic disorganisation, where 'the sexual emerges as the *jouissance* of exploded limits, as the ecstatic suffering into which the human organism momentarily plunges when it is "pressed" beyond a certain threshold of endurance' ('Rectum' 24). Bersani thus equates sexuality with a loss of identity, and in doing so, offers us a way out of the constitutive oppressions that the self and subjection to the nation state entail: for 'it is the self that swells with the excitement of being on top, the self that makes the inevitable play of thrusts and relinquishments in sex an argument for the natural authority of one sex over the other' ('Rectum' 25). Following Bersani then, a pornographic reading of Prowse aims to subvert the very gender and sexual oppression that he allegedly embodies, through a humiliation of subjectivity. The exaggerated depiction of Prowse's physicality and the graphic depictions of sex between him and Eddie instigate a dynamic of erotic spectacle, executing another slippage that refigures mere description as a textual performance of sexual desire and 'constitutes precisely the sort of writing that is designed to be "read with one hand"' (Cante and Restivo 150). In getting off on this image of Australian nationalism that Prowse's manly frame has come to represent, we go some way towards rescuing it. According to Zabet Patterson

the pornographic image can be a particularly dense semantic site, but it is one which functions only in and through a direct visceral appeal to the body. Much of the academic writing on pornography sees this direct address to the body as grounding both its limitations and its possibilities. (106)

This appeal to the body is discussed further in the second chapter of this thesis. But by incorporating Bersani's concept of *jouissance*, a pornographic reading broadens its appeal from the merely physical to the intensely political: pornography proffers itself as a radical mode of queer praxis and identitarian critique. Prowse's rectum becomes a grave – amongst other things – in which the masculinist hegemony of Australian nationalism and its attendant legacies of misogyny and homophobia might be lovingly interred along with subjecthood itself. And, as Fiona Nicoll observes, dissolution and shattering have been an integral part Australia's nationalist psyche from the very beginning, as the image of the wounded, defeated ANZAC digger attests. Nicoll concludes in her study of the configurations of Australian national identity by stating that 'the composite digger is unable to function as a phallic signifier because its incorporeal nature deprives it of a (male) organ' (93). Prowse's rectum then is just another sense then in which we might understand Carter's characterisation of White's work as a 'shadow' that taps into 'an alternative stream of "Australian literature"' (275).

Gay porn is an apposite genre through which to inflect our reading of *Twyborn*, in that it dramatises a tension – a tension with which queer scholarship of White's work has only just begun to grapple – between universalising and minoritising understandings of homosexuality, their relationship to White's texts and to the Australian canon. Davidson's characterisation of *Twyborn* as White's 'coming-out text' draws attention to a postmodern, camp sensibility in White's work that represents a significant departure from the spiritual, transcendental and ostensibly universal concerns of his earlier, high modernist works (7).

Davidson also observes that White worried about how such a literary coming out might affect his status as the preeminent Australian writer of his time (4). Similarly, as noted above, McMahon argues that *Twynborn* rehearses a ‘dilemma of representation’ (84), that runs throughout White’s oeuvre, between a universalising, modernist aesthetic on the one hand which is engaged in a ‘humanist project’ to convey universal, human truths (85); and a preoccupation on the other hand with queer, minoritised sexualities which endanger this universalising project. This dilemma is intimately related to White’s engagement with Australian literary nationalism, with such an engagement strongly aligned with a universalising current. Echoing this tension in White’s oeuvre, McMahon writes:

The danger of foregrounding the particular operations of a queer ontology or aesthetic, then, is that they may preclude access to the broader category of the human, for to be homosexual is to be not fully human. For Australian readers, there is also an anxiety that if the writing is homosexual it cannot be general, therefore it cannot represent ‘us’, the nation, the national literature. (85)

Most appropriately, McMahon goes on to use the word ‘slippage’ to describe the way in which critics of White’s work have elided the queer specifics of his work by concentrating on the perceived universal themes of his texts; this ‘slippage’ occurring ‘between the putatively universal subject of White’s fiction... and a universalising reading practice that is “sex blind”’ (86). But if White’s readers have, until very recently, ignored the queer resonances in his texts, *Twynborn*’s gay porn aesthetic presents itself as a perfect occasion to rectify this. A pornographic reading of *Prowse the bushman* amounts to nothing less than a furious and stimulating slippage back and forth between queer specificity and nationalist representation. One of the ways in which *Twynborn* seeks to overcome the dilemma of representation is in demonstrating the force of minority experience’s embrace of the universal through the spatial logic of gay pornographic spectacle. A pornographic reading of *Twynborn* negotiates the competing universalising/minoritising impulses in this text with what we might view as an agreeable forthrightness, a camp flamboyance even. Such enjambment testifies to a writing

practice that is both specifically homographetic yet indelibly marked by the national and the universal.

Homosexuality and Power

The mere sexualisation of Australian nationalism by a desiring gay reader does not however inoculate this literary sensibility from critique. From a feminist standpoint, we must be sharply conscious of the potential danger that a pornographic reading of *Twyborn* runs of simplistically glorifying an already hegemonic masculinist paradigm. Signposting the putative thin ice upon which a reading such as this stands, Susan Lever finds, and not altogether unjustifiably, ‘a clear misogyny in the novels of Patrick White’ (*Relations* 95). While arguing that *Twyborn* is perhaps the least misogynistic of White’s novels, Lever nevertheless concludes that ‘White’s vision remains masculine’ and that ‘White cannot be called a feminist writer’ (104). Furthermore, Gillian Whitlock makes the point that the pallocentrism of Australian literary nationalism has been accompanied with a consistent ‘base note’ of homophobia (235). Such concerns are rendered very salient indeed when reading the first sexual encounter between Prowse and Eddie, in which Prowse is depicted ‘pushing his *opponent* around and about with chest and thighs, spinning him face down in the chaff,’ ‘tearing at all that had ever offended him in life,’ while ‘his *victim*’s face [is] buried always deeper, breathless, in the loose chaff,’ ‘for the *indignity* to which he was being *subjected*’ (284, *emphases mine*). This language of sexual confrontation, domination and submission that illustrates the moment when Prowse penetrates Eddie is also the moment at which Eddie’s desire ceases to be purely visual and fantasmatic. The reality of this scene alerts us to the dangers that a pornographic reading of Australian nationalism entails. This point will be

pursued further as this chapter progresses; but it is sufficient at this point just to register a very salient warning from Bersani himself: ‘the logic of homosexual desire includes the potential for a loving identification with the gay man’s enemies’ (‘Rectum’ 14).

It is perhaps the ferocity of this depiction of sex in *Twynborn* that has moved critics to characterise it as a crime, as Prowse’s ‘rape’ of Eddie (Lever 99; McMahon 89; Schapiro 58). Perhaps more surprisingly, even David Marr describes Prowse as ‘the overseer at Bogong who raped the jackeroo’ Eddie (107). But this critical consensus might be said to suffer from an undue reliance on a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ identified by Sedgwick in her influential essay ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading’. For Sedgwick, ‘the methodological centrality of suspicion to current critical practice has involved the concomitant privileging of the concept of paranoia’ (*Touching* 125) and hence an over-emphasis in critical theory on ‘exposing and problematizing the hidden violences in the genealogy of the modern liberal subject’ (*Touching* 139). The characterisation by critics of Prowse and Eddie’s sexual relationship as rape is exemplary in this regard: positing a sexual dynamic of power and domination on one side of the ledger (the top side, if you will) and violence and oppression on the other (the bottom side). Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with a paranoid critical standpoint, and Sedgwick is at pains to refine her argument by saying that paranoia represents ‘a way, among other ways, of seeking, finding, and organizing knowledge. Paranoia knows some things well and others poorly’ (*Touching* 130, original emphasis). But one of the things that paranoia perceives very poorly indeed is pleasure. Sedgwick shows in her essay how pleasure is ‘inadmissible’ under a scheme of paranoid reading: paranoia operates exclusively on an economy of pain, aversion and suspicion as the means of exposing and quashing social oppressions.

Given the pleasure that has been shown to reside in the text's construction of Prowse's being, a pleasure that is routed through Eddie's desiring gaze, it seems unduly presumptuous reflexively to assume that Eddie would not consent to a roll in the hay with Prowse, even in a posture of submission. Indeed, at several junctures in the text, Eddie contemplates coming onto Prowse himself: 'he was tempted to do it' (259). The sex scene in the stables is painted as deeply ambiguous, and we can leave open the question of interpreting the following lines of post-coital *tristesse*: 'Eddie Twyborn was breathing chaff, sobbing back, not for the indignity to which he was being subjected, but finally for his acceptance of it' (284). It is perhaps more than understandable if some critics should call this rape; yet sex is here painted as something that is degrading and yet accepted; Eddie's body is a 'slender offering' (284) which, having been offered up to Prowse lays curled next to him, their bodies 'coupled' and 'breathing in some kind of harmony' (285). But in inflexibly characterising the sexual dynamic between Prowse and Eddie as that between rapist and victim, a hermeneutics of suspicion forecloses on the possibility that any all-male erotic pleasure might be had here. And it is ironic, to say the least, that paranoia – a system of knowing that places its unalloyed faith in exposure of *hidden* operations of power as *the* means of political change – should fail to account for the flagrantly visible homoerotic pleasure that inheres in Prowse's bodily representation, and which might still be said inhere in this sex scene. As is typical of paranoid critical reading practices, analysis of this text has heretofore seen high crimes occurring at the site of possible pleasure.

But if the characterisation of the sexual encounter between Prowse and Eddie as rape is an overstatement, this is not to suggest that sexuality, as it is represented in *Twyborn*, is a completely benign force. Indeed, the very opposite is the case: at almost every turn this text documents the implication of sexuality in the social struggle for power. And so it is not sufficient merely to cite the pornographic spectacle of Prowse's representation – as disruptive and as pleasurable as it may be – as a panacea. All by itself, Bersani's notion of *jouissance* cannot bear the weight of an entire social and political revolution. A more fulsome account of the representation of sexuality is still required: we still need to diagnose more precisely the power games which so emphatically infect the sex-lives of the characters in Part II of *Twyborn* if we are to more profoundly articulate the text's radical potential. The erotic charge emitted by the representation of Prowse's torso is but one instance of this text's politics of critique.

If our task now is to analyse how sex becomes a tool in the exploitation of power in White's text there is perhaps no better diagnostician than Sedgwick. In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Sedgwick argues that any analysis of the bonds between men, be they sexual or otherwise, must be conducted with regard to their 'intimate and shifting relation to class;' and furthermore, that 'no element of [these bonds] can be understood outside [their] relation to women and the gender system as a whole' (*Between* 1). As a conceptual tool for analysing how relationships between men are structured, Sedgwick's homosocial continuum seeks to uncover the different ways in which power relations between men are constructed by differentials of class, and how such differentials inform the construction of a socially and historically contingent homosexual identity. Sedgwick argues that sex is 'an especially charged leverage point,

or point for the exchange of meanings, *between* gender and class... the sets of categories by which we ordinarily try to describe the divisions of human labor' (*Between* 11). One such exchange of meaning occurs, according to Sedgwick, over the sexually denigrated body of the female:

[I]n the presence of a woman who can be seen as pitiable or contemptible, men are able to exchange power and to confirm each other's value even in the context of the remaining inequalities in their power. The sexually pitiable or contemptible female figure is a solvent that not only facilitates the relative democratization that grows up with capitalism and cash exchange, but goes a long way – for the men whom she leaves bonded together – toward palliating its gaps and failures. (*Between* 160)

Right from the very beginning of their association, we can see the operation of a certain homosociality between Prowse and Eddie. The first thing Prowse does after meeting Eddie, in a routine attempt to generate empathy and a sense of fellowship, is to offer to take Eddie to a brothel: 'This is the way to Woolambi. Where the good times are – six pubs, four stores, the picture-show. Get a screw too, if you're interested in that' (178). Having ranted to Eddie about his employer's disgracefully effeminate desire to 'see the rhodradendrons' of the Himalayas (177), Prowse's incitement to heterosexuality can be seen here as a point for the exchange of meaning between class and gender: although Don Prowse and Eddie Twyborn occupy vastly different social strata, they (ostensibly) occupy the same position in the hierarchies of gender and sexual desire; and on this common ground they might be expected to start bonding. Through a shared desire for a pitiable or contemptible women, Eddie might cease in Prowse's eyes to be one of those 'moneyed bastards' (187) and start to be one of 'the Men' (189).

To be sure, sexuality is implicated in struggles for power, struggles between men and over women; but these struggles are not simple, and nor are they always foregone conclusions: within Sedgwick's homosocial continuum there are affordances, as well as foreclosures.

Though the homosocial continuum exists in the service of patriarchy, the function of gender within this system is neither rigid nor entirely predictable:

At this *particular* juncture, that is to say, as so often in history, ‘patriarchy’ is not a monolithic mechanism for subordinating ‘the female’ to ‘the male’; it is a web of valences and significations that, while deeply tendentious, can historically through its articulations and divisions offer both material and ideological affordances to women as well as men. (*Between* 141, original emphasis)

The particular and peculiar social juncture occupied by Peggy Tyrrell, the housekeeper at ‘Bogong,’ and her golden friendship with Eddie Twyborn offers an excellent case study in the lability of social hierarchy and the role that sexuality plays therein. From their introduction, Peggy and Eddie are presented as a partnership, seemingly members of the same team: ‘so they staggered on, and into the house, allies, it could have been, against the manager’s overtly masculine back’ (180). This amity between Peggy and Eddie is grounded mutually on a sense of alienation from masculine hegemony; that this alienation should exist at all on Eddie’s part seems strange, given that he is a man himself. But then Eddie confesses to a feeling, to the reader if to no one else, of ‘spiritual nakedness.’ Previously this nakedness had been clothed in a ‘pomegranate shawl and spangled fan,’ in the female guise of Eudoxia Vatazes. But in his current circumstances, Eddie now finds himself somewhat stranded: having transgressed the pact of masculine fellowship implicit in the homosocial fold, Eddie finds himself adrift: a man with a secret and a cross-dressing past that renders him vulnerable. But in Peggy, Eddie finds an oasis of compassion:

But on entering the world of Don Prowse and the Lushingtons he suspected he would find the natives watching for lapses in behaviour. All the more necessary to cultivate his alliance with Mrs Tyrrell: women whose wombs have been kicked to pieces by a football team of sons, and who have married off daughters still in possession of their natural teeth should be more inclined to sympathise with the anomalies of life. (183)

And for Peggy, the feeling is quite reciprocated:

‘It’s the girls I miss out ‘ere. Never the boys. Not that you isn’t a boy,’ she realised. ‘But different. A woman can speak out ‘er thoughts.’
He should not have felt consoled, but was, to be thus accepted by Peggy Tyrrell. The flowering lamp he set between them on the oilcloth made a little island of conspiracy for the woman’s face and the pale ghost of what people took to be Eddie Twyborn.
(185)

The conspiracy between these two characters is specifically rendered as a conspiracy between a woman’s face and a pale ghost because this conspiracy is a result of Eddie Twyborn’s failure to signify as a homosexual within the homosocial continuum. The pact of homosocial bonding rests on an assumption that its male participants remain straight and that any homosexuals remain abject. What we see in these two passages is desire, in the sense that Sedgwick uses it – not as ‘a particular affective state or emotion, but [as] the affective or social force, the glue... that shapes an important relationship’ (*Between 2*) – circulating freely between a working-class woman and an aristocratic homosexual. We see that when a woman and a homosexual share the same abjection by and from the cult of homosocial masculinity – as they so often do – this can become a source of intimacy. We might thus elaborate on Sedgwick’s contention by saying that homosexuals, as well as women, can profit from the varied articulations and divisions of patriarchal oppression: as Peggy observes of her domesticated friend, he is in so many respects superior to straight men: ‘you’re not one of those *helpless* males – I can see by the way you use a needle’ (207). Repeatedly, this fellowship – with Peggy herself having been ‘slashed to shreds in her time, what with the climate and a family of seventeen’ (238) – is presented so as to accentuate the social and historical contours of their relationship, structured in opposition to both masculinity and heterosexuality, as when Peggy bids Eddy a tearful final farewell:

Mrs Tyrrell was tearful. ‘I dunno wot’s took you, Eddie. I thought you was more dependable. Most men aren’t dependable. Rowley weren’t – though ‘e was me husband, an’ dead since. The boys aren’t – they got their wives. Only the girls. Well, that’s ‘ow it is. I thought you was different – like me daughters, but different. (297)

If her goodbye is not a little bitter, the relationship between Peggy and Eddie, however improbable, poignantly approaches the closest thing to a tender and honest friendship, more so than any other interaction depicted between any two characters in *Twyborn*; and in this respect, their friendship constitutes a real luxury.

For the most part however, social relations in Part II of *Twyborn* are conducted in a spirit of antagonism, with sexuality being used as the primary tool of leverage. An important insight to be gleaned from this representation of sexuality can be gained from Sedgwick's argument in *Between Men* and the way in which she conceptualises the coercive force of sexuality in a social context. Sedgwick writes:

The importance – an importance – of the category 'homosexual,' I am suggesting, comes not necessarily from its regulatory relation to a nascent or already-constituted minority of homosexual people or desires, but from its potential for giving whoever wields it a structuring definitional leverage over the whole range of male bonds that shape the social constitution. (*Between* 86)

It is important to remember that at the time when Sedgwick was writing *Between Men* – the book was published in 1985 – the theoretical salience of sexuality was only just beginning to be articulated. Sedgwick's conceptualisation of sexuality was quite unique at the time in the grounding it took from Marxist notions of class struggle. This is in contrast to, say, Foucault, who viewed the danger of sexuality's regulating function in the way it operated internally. For Foucault, sexuality is a means by which an individual's desires are shaped, moulded and manipulated discursively such that a subject's desires are foreclosed on and subordinated to the demand that those desires maintain their legibility to others, and to themselves. In this respect, in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault's primary point of reference – and contestation, it must be said – is Freud. Sedgwick takes something of a different tack. As we can see from the quote above, her argument in *Between Men* is less concerned with

how a subject's innermost desires are shaped by social discourse, than how those desires become tools, weapons even, in the arena of class struggle. And it is perhaps her deference to Foucault, and to other competing conceptualisations of sexuality that were still very much in the process of being born in the mid-eighties, that explains her qualification or her characterisation of her own argument about sexuality as 'an importance' rather than 'the importance.' Having said that, the real theoretical purchase that Sedgwick's conceptualisation of homosociality gives us is its Marxist pedigree. Arguably, homosociality's most trenchant theoretical insight is this: where men bond with men to take advantage of women, the ability to cast someone out of that cartel, by calling someone out as a homosexual, by wielding the definitional levers of sexuality, is a powerful point of 'leverage.'

We see the operation of this leverage – another name for it is homophobia – in a context of class distinction in the tripartite interactions between Greg Lushington, Eddie and Prowse. Lushington is the owner of 'Bogong,' the sheep station on which Eddie is working as a jackaroo and where Prowse works as the station manager. Greg and Eddie share a chummy bonhomie that is firmly rooted – ahem – in their shared class origins: Greg was once good friend with Eddie's father, Judge Twyborn. And it is in this close reciprocity that we can see the bonding, the intimacy, that homosociality posits as a hallmark of what is, in Sedgwick's phrasing, 'men promoting men's interests' (3). Greg takes a protective attitude to a fellow member of the Australian aristocracy, as we see in the following passage when Greg begins talking to Eddie:

Turning his full gaze on his new acquisition as he had not up until now, he told him, 'In Sweden they boil a piece of fish skin in the coffee. It's supposed to bring out the flavour.'

'And does it?'

'Opinions vary,' Mr Lushington said.

He continued staring full face at his protégé from behind the gold-framed spectacles with a solemnity the younger man could only return. Till simultaneously each burst out laughing.

It was too much for the manager. He had lost control of his star puppets. He began to scowl. There was a smell of class in the air.

[...]

It was positively a courtship. (196)

What is striking here is the overtly sexualised texture of this relationship. In looking after ‘his new acquisition’ or his ‘protégé,’ Lushington’s posture towards Eddie becomes increasingly intimate. But this whiff of ‘class in the air’ is also a vulnerability. Consider Prowse’s reaction to the homosocial *pas de deux* between Greg and Eddie. As the landowner, manager and jackaroo sit down to lunch on the latter’s first day working at ‘Bogong,’ the following scene of delicate subtlety unfolds, coming just after the ‘courtship’ quoted above:

Mrs Tyrrell had supplied Eddie with chops, but he could not have joined the tea ceremony if Greg Lushington had not eased his own blackened quart in the direction of his friend’s son.

Blinded by smoke and steam, scalded by the tea in which he sank his mouth, Eddie lowered his eyelids to convey his appreciation of a ritual. Judging by his smile and the expression refracted by the spectacles, Mr Lushington was delighted, but Don Prowse swallowed what could have been a lump of gristle. He began to cough, and frown his orange frown. (198)

Prowse’s displeasure with the ritual of upper-class collusion, solemnised over something so effete as a tea party, clearly illustrates the interaction between homosexuality, homophobia and class privilege within the continuum of homosociality. We see how the intimacy fostered by class privilege works to exclude and disempower those, like Prowse, from the lower orders. Having worked his way up to the position of manager at ‘Bogong,’ a position where he would otherwise be in charge of the newcomer jackaroo Eddie, Prowse finds himself instantly emasculated by the aristocratic alliance between Greg and Eddie. But this instance of Greg protecting another member of his own social class – the old boy’s network in full swing – is given perhaps its most telling expression by Prowse when he remarks to Eddie at the end of this passage, in a just-barely-contained snarl, that ‘you look fucked out!’ (199).

The relationship between Greg and Eddie is rendered such that it foregrounds an erotics of furtive mutual back-scratching that goes hand-in-hand with the operation of homosocial class privilege. Indeed, in arguing that homosociality forms a continuum, Sedgwick is making a case for conceptions of intimacy, bonding and fellow feeling that bridge the gap between material and emotional gain. As Sedgwick rather wittily observes:

The apparent simplicity – the unity – of the continuum between ‘women loving women’ and ‘women promoting the interests of women,’ extending over the erotic, social, familial, economic, and political realms, would not be so striking if it were not in strong contrast to the arrangement among males. When Ronald Reagan and Jesse Helms get down to some serious logrolling on ‘family policy,’ they are men promoting men’s interests... Is their bond in any way congruent with the bond of a loving gay male couple? Reagan and Helms would say no – disgustedly. Most gay couples would say no – disgustedly. But why not? Doesn’t the continuum between ‘men-loving-men’ and ‘men-promoting-the-interests-of-men’ have the same intuitive force that it has for women? (*Between* 3)

The whole thrust of Sedgwick’s argument in *Between Men* is that it does, if not intuitively then at least theoretically; and the text of *The Twyborn Affair* strongly suggests the same, if the following flirtatious exchange between Lushington and Eddie is anything to go by:

Greg Lushington had turned his back on the present. ‘Your dad used to come down here. Do a bit of fishin’. When we were younger...’ From his fixed stare and muted tone of voice, old Lushington was re-living it visually. ‘A good looker in those days. Still is – the Judge. And you’ve inherited the looks – if I may say so without turning a young man’s head.’ (196)

We might venture to suggest that one of the reasons the homosocial continuum is so effective at maintaining the privilege of patriarchy is the way in which the collusion between men on which the whole system is based is not always immediately apparent. That Greg Lushington’s admiration of Eddie’s physical beauty should go hand in hand with his promotion of Eddie’s interests in the social hierarchy at ‘Bogong’ does not, at

first glance, seem either congruent or suspicious. But the naked maintenance of hereditary privilege, an attractiveness that in this passage is passed down from father to son, is seldom ever advertised. There is a sense in which Greg's desire for Eddie is closeted; and there is a sense then in which men-loving-men and men-promoting-the-interests-of-men are married together.

The closeting of male homosocial desire is therefore a necessary consequence of the vulnerability it engenders. In promoting the interests of other men, in bonding and colluding with other men, the upper classes open themselves up to accusations of homosexuality; and in doing so, they jeopardise their position at the top of an implicitly heterosexual patriarchy. Granted, there may not actually be any homosexual activity occurring in the upper echelons: the mere suggestion of it suffices to imperil the social order. We saw at the beginning of Part II of *Twyborn*, when Prowse and Eddie first met at the train station upon Eddie's arrival in the Snowy Mountains, that the social dynamics between these two characters obtained a distinct topography: Eddie was 'stationed' on top of the train platform while Prowse flaunted an aggressively masculine pose, with 'legs apart, hands on hips, as he stared upwards' (175). As the novel progresses however, this terrain begins to shift; and it does so through what can only be characterised, however balefully, as Prowse's deft deployment of homophobia to advance his position in the social pecking order at 'Bogong'. Consider the following passage depicting Eddie's decision to go for a swim in a creek one afternoon after lunch:

As he swam he glanced up, gasping, blinking from under a wet fringe, at Prowse and Denny seated on their horses, staring down, the horses snorting, Denny embarking on a frightened giggle, Prowse frowning, or glaring, lips drawn back in a smile which conveyed both scorn and unwilling admiration.

‘Better watch out, Ed. If you flash yer arse about like that, someone might jump in and bugger yer.’ The message was made to sound as brutal and contemptuous as possible. (251)

The deployment of homophobia here reverses the hierarchy that has governed the association between Prowse and Eddie since their first meeting. The social topography here is quite literally up-ended: when he denigrates him sexually amongst other men Prowse is re-stationed above Eddie, staring down contemptuously and an Eddie rendered naked and exposed. Prowse’s observation here can be taken as the embryonic expression of a homophobia that he will later come to express even more urgently, when the terrain beneath their relationship begins to shift once more.

The point to bear in mind is that the homosexual dynamic between Eddie and Prowse is increasingly implicated in struggles for power as the novel progresses. Prowse’s homophobia, to take but one example, is rooted in a complex of class anxiety that Eddie comes literally to embody. But as distasteful as he found the early chumminess between Eddie and Greg, it is only when Eddie’s class privilege directly impinges on Prowse’s material interests that homophobia as a social tactic, at its most ruthless, is finally deployed. And by material interest, I mean, of course, the ownership of a woman: Marcia Lushington. Marcia occupies a central position in the social machinations of ‘Bogong’: she is at once mistress of the homestead, a loving wife to Greg, and a lover to both Prowse and Eddie. This should hardly come as a surprise, given, as Sedgwick argues, that the social position and trafficking of women is central to any understanding of the homosocial continuum:

Obviously, it is crucial to every aspect of social structure within the exchange-of-women framework *that* heavily freighted bonds between men exist, as the backbone of social form or forms. At the same time, a consequence of this structure is that any ideological purchase on the male homosocial spectrum – a (perhaps necessarily

arbitrary) set of discriminations for defining, controlling and manipulating these male bonds – will be a disproportionately powerful instrument of social control. (*Between* 86, original emphasis)

When Prowse outs Eddie to Marcia – ‘he’s nothun more than a bloody queen’ (289) – he is attempting to marshal the structuring definitional leverage of homophobia over Eddie. Prowse’s homophobia is not innate, biological, astrological or even the crude psychological symptom of his own repressed desires: rather it is the product of powerful historically contingent forces. Such that, when he finally fucks Eddie (using the technique most powerfully assaultive, according to the perverse and contradictory logic of homophobia), he is said to have entered into history itself: ‘his victim’s face was buried always deeper, breathless, in the loose chaff as Don Prowse entered the past through the present’ (284). But it is worth noting that Prowse is only goaded into action by his suspicion that Marcia’s ‘fine relationship’ (289) with Eddie might undermine his position at ‘Bogong’: his jealousy is both sexual *and* material. And if all of this sounds awfully utilitarian: it is! The imagery used by Marcia to describe Prowse is exemplary in this respect: ‘useful – practical – profitable. Like a ram or a stud bull’ (289). We see in this image the compaction of masculinity, exploitation, flattery and desire. Prowse himself confirms that this characterisation is indeed flattery when he uses the same imagery to seduce Marcia: ‘and now you want the bull again’ (289). The position within the power dynamic that governs his relationship with Marcia, which is the very thing that Prowse is attempting to maintain by maligning Eddie, slides effortlessly between the poles of physical desire, emotional need and material gain. Marcia herself states it most plainly and pithily: ‘we might as well admit there’s a practical side to every human relationship’ (287).

The Anti-Social Style of White's Queer Politics

At this point it is perhaps understandable how a suite of more or less dismal readings of *Twynborn* have dominated the critical reception of this text. As noted above, this tone of criticism is in evidence in the characterisation of Eddie and Prowse's sexual relationship as rape. But on a more general plane, John Beston dismisses *Twynborn* as a 'weak work,' which 'added little to [White's] stature' as a writer (14). More disdainful yet is Laurence Steven who writes that *Twynborn* 'seems to be a compendium of everything that we have seen to be questionable in [White's] work: from the misanthropic lack of sympathy for the characters... to the solipsistic questing for a transcendent wholeness' (147). Rather amusingly, if unintentionally so, Steven characterises these regressive tendencies as 'backsliding' (147) on White's part. Yet the anal erotics of Steven's phrasing provide a neat segue for this chapter's final theoretical pivot, back to Bersani and to the question posed by this chapter's title: in what sense is Prowse's – or for that matter Eddie's, or anyone's – rectum a grave? This question foregrounds the anti-social argument that appears in Bersani's 'Rectum' in embryonic form but finds its most fully developed articulation in his book *Homos*, where he attempts to think through the anti-communitarian, anti-identitarian impulses unleashed by his conceptualisation of sexuality as *jouissance*. And it is in the anti-social orientation of Bersani's argument that we might begin to make better sense and better use of the 'solipsism' and the 'misanthropy' for which *Twynborn* has been so roundly criticised in the past; and, perhaps more urgently, address the charges of rape and violence that have attended critical readings of this text. The final section of this chapter argues that with Eddie Twynborn as its figurehead, the radical cultural politics of White's text is executed on three fronts: through Eddie's ability to transcend the social through an identification with difference; through the disrupted structure that the novel's plot assumes; and through the ravishing linguistic and textual

aesthetics the novel deploys. As we shall see, each of these three aspects of White's text can be read as articulating his queer critique of sociality; and it is from this perspective that we have a means of re-evaluating – even celebrating – the solipsism and misanthropy of White's novel.

Central to Bersani's anti-social argument is a rejection of the very relationality that subtends the social; and this point is encapsulated in perhaps one of the most stirring and memorable lines from his 'Rectum' essay: 'it is perhaps primarily *the degeneration of the sexual into a relationship that condemns sexuality to becoming a struggle for power*. As soon as persons are posited, the war begins' ('Rectum' 25, original emphasis). It is with a tone of flamboyant defiance, and a concomitant assertion of male homosexuality's radical potential, that Bersani inaugurates his anti-social argument: 'far from apologising for their promiscuity as a failure to maintain a loving relationship... gay men should ceaselessly lament the practical necessity, now, of such relationships, should resist being drawn into mimicking the unrelenting warfare between men and women, which nothing has ever changed' ('Rectum' 25). The final part of this chapter shares the sense of defiance and homosexual promise articulated by Bersani, and seeks to show, above all, how *Twyborn* can be read so as to assert and express this queer politics. It is possible to read *Twyborn* as a text wherein Bersani's anti-social critique aligns with White's own cultural politics, to the extent that White's protagonist embodies Bersani's rejection of social difference, and to the extent that White's style articulates a rejection of the social through its invocation of the linguistic scrub of the Australian bush.

But it is not enough, according to Bersani, merely to cite the psychic disruptiveness of sexuality through *jouissance*; indeed, he suggests that to do so merely makes explicit ‘the erotic satisfactions sustaining social structures of dominance and submission’ (*Homos* 97). As such, Bersani is sceptical about the political efficacy of simplistically eroticising masculinity; he believes it is ‘extremely doubtful that resignification, or redeployment, or hyperbolic miming, will ever overthrow anything’ (*Homos* 51). The exigency and relevance of such remarks should be obvious from the way in which this chapter’s argument has developed: as was noted earlier, there is a need, politically speaking, to address some of the insufficiencies of the argument put forward in the first part of this chapter. As the antithetical second part of this chapter’s analysis suggests, the implication of sexuality in the power struggles of White’s text demands a more nuanced appraisal of its representation. Such nuance is provided by the argument put forward by Bersani in *Homos*, where the homosexual is celebrated for its ‘homo-ness,’ its same-ness, its potential to transcend the differences that separate ‘you’ and ‘me’ into that thing we call society.

Bersani’s argument about sameness and difference in *Homos* aims to marshal the forces unleashed by his conceptualisation of sexuality as a form of psychic injury into something of a coherent and efficient political manifesto (to the extent that the psychoanalytic and deconstructionist assumptions of his argument allow for such an endeavour).

Psychoanalysis is an important reference point in Bersani’s political thinking because, he argues, ‘the cultural constraints under which we operate include not only visible political structures but also the fantasmatic processes by which we eroticise the real’ (*Homos* 64). And so, according to this logic, that which is most politically disruptive – or queer – about the figure of the homosexual is its stubbornly indeterminate positioning within the

Oedipal formation of sexual desire, standing in stark contrast to the ‘defensive and traumatic nature of the so-called normative development of desire’:

An exclusively heterosexual orientation in men, for example, may depend on a misogynous identification with the father and a permanent equating of femininity with castration. The male’s homosexual desire, to the extent that it depends on an identification with the mother, has already detraumatized sexual difference (by internalising it) *and* set the stage for a relation to the father in which the latter would no longer have to be marked as the Law, the agent of castration... (*Homos* 58)

Within this psychoanalytic schema, ‘homosexual desire is less liable to be immobilised than heterosexual desire in that, structurally, it occupies several positions’ (*Homos* 58); and, moreover, ‘its privileging of sameness has, as its condition of possibility, an indeterminate identity. Homosexual desire is desire for the same from the perspective of a self already identified as different from itself’ (*Homos* 59). This sense of transcending the axial nodes of difference (in this case, gender difference) opens up a space of radical homo-ness and the potential for a more liberated and more truly ‘outlaw existence’ (*Homos* 76). The queered homosexual, through his ability to identify fantasmatically with, or to desire from the position of, the mother, and through his refusal of the castrating logic of the Law of the father, instantiates a ‘potentially revolutionary inaptitude – perhaps inherent in gay desire – for sociality as it is known’ (*Homos* 76).

Through his seeming ability to identify psychologically over multiple axes of difference, the protagonist of *Twyborn* might be said to incarnate the ‘outlaw existence’ of which Bersani speaks. The most important, and the most obvious, of these planes of difference, just as it is in Bersani’s conceptualisation of homosexuality, is gender. But it is not just Eddie’s cross-dressing – or in other words his ability to identify as female – that marks him out as a radical homo who transcends the ontological differences that sustain sociality; rather it is the manner in which his sexual desire both replicates an Oedipal dynamic that embeds gender difference

within the constitution of subjectivity itself and, thence, how those desires move around promiscuously and rebelliously within this structure. The Oedipal structuring of Eddie's sexuality is displayed more or less overtly, as when we consider the following passage of post-coital *tristesse*, coming just after his first sexual encounter with Marcia:

He buckled his belt, which to some extent increased his masculine assurance, but it was not to his 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... (222)

In this passage we see Eddie conforming to the so-called normative development of heterosexual desire (appropriately enough, given that he has just had sex with a woman for the first time): we see here how Eddie's (hetero)sexual desire is articulated in Oedipal terms, as a fantasmatic recollection of childhood experiences and the occupation of the father's (or simply 'a male') position within his mother's bed. Heterosexual desire is here represented as stemming from a childhood wish to usurp the socially and structurally mandated position of the father and to occupy exclusively the affections of the mother. However, on the very next page, as Eddie leaves the Lushington homestead in the dead of night to return to his own lodgings, we are confronted with the following passage which calls into question this narrative of ostensibly normal heterosexual desire:

As Eddie let himself out into the night the images of Eadie his mother and Joan Golson joined forces with that of Marcia Lushington, who had, incredibly, become his *mistress*! The trio of women might have been shot sky high on the trampoline of feminine deceit if it hadn't been for the emergence of Eudoxia Vatatzes at Eddie Twyborn's side. (223)

The emergence of Eudoxia Vatatzes here is very telling: at this crucial moment of what should be, according to an orthodox Oedipal understanding of sexual desire, Eddie's accession into full male genital heterosexuality, he finds himself instead met with his feminine alter ego. Moreover, Eddie's sexual desire for Marcia is revealed to be

something of a palimpsest: overlaying the images of Marcia his mistress is that of his mother Eadie and her mistress Joan Golson. But more radically still, this juxtaposition of heterosexual desire and homosexual desire serves to engender a fluidity between subject and object: Eddie is the desiring subject of Marcia, whose status as a desired object is shared by that of Eddie's mother Eadie through the operation of the Oedipal complex; but the emergence of Eudoxia Vatatzes at this moment means we can also read Eddie as identifying as a homosexual – structurally, Oedipally – with his mother, who in turn is the desired homosexual object of Joan Golson, who also happens to have spent all of Part I of *Twyborn* as the desiring subject of the very same Eudoxia now standing at Eddie's side. If all this seems a little jumbled and confusing, it is also more than a little bit exhilarating: what we have here is a representation of sexual desire undermining the structural heft of Oedipal development from within; what we have here is an articulation of sexual desire that is beginning to break down the ontological barriers of subjectivity, between subject and object, between identification and desire, between self and other; what we have here is a representation of queer desires displaying a 'revolutionary inaptitude... for sociality as it is known' (*Homos* 76). Having been the object of a homosexual desire on Joan Golson's part, while occupying the social position of a woman, there is a sense revealed in this passage's kaleidoscopic rendering that Eddie's desire for Marcia is both a desire for something different (a man desiring a woman) and astonishingly, a desire for the same (a woman desiring another woman). Indeed, Eddie's ability to identify as female secures his ability to transcend difference in a very profound and potentially radical way: it is the emergence of Eudoxia Vatatzes *alongside* Eddie Twyborn that prevents the 'trampoline of feminine deceit,' or the sense of alienation and antagonism that derives from this axis of difference, from springing into effect. This

alliance, or this ability to identify over and above difference is a wonderful example of the revolutionary homo-ness theorised by Bersani.

The representation of Eddie's homosexual desire as the transcendence of gender difference within a post-structuralised Oedipal framework is the key to understanding the radical politics embedded in White's text. As Lever suggests in her psychoanalytic reading of *Twyborn*, 'in this novel, sexual desire depends on a fiction of the body; it does not rest on the anatomically sexed body but on the imaginative patterns of meaning associated with bodies' ('Beyond' 296). The point that needs emphasising however is that these 'patterns of meaning' are inherently mobile, subject always to the vagaries of signification. And so it comes to pass that we can observe a heterosexual tryst between Eddie and Marcia in this text being queered and twisted into a game of shifting identifications and desires, with the immediate consequence that the norms of bourgeois heterosexuality are summarily undone. In the very same passage quoted above, the sentence which conveys Eddie's desire for Marcia as akin to a return to childhood, to 'morning embraces,' 'toast' and 'chilblains,' and most strikingly of all, 'sticky phalluses in Sydney gardens,' this same sentence continues its stream of reverie with the following:

... his mother whom he should have loved but didn't, the girl Marian he should have married but from whom he 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. (222)

Thus within the span of a single sentence do we see here how Oedipal heterosexual desire is twisted into a rejection of family and marriage. We also see how Eddie's expression of heterosexual desire fails to shore up his masculinity; indeed, it does the exact opposite: sex with Marcia leads to him directly to a flight from his becoming a 'decent, boring man.' And twinned to this rejection of masculinity is a rejection of the 'socially acceptable': his

rearticulation of the Oedipus complex – the very structure that is supposed to secure the foundations of identity and sociality – instead articulates an anti-social politics of critique. This presentation of heterosexual desire thus forms part of a much broader critique of capitalist political economy and the psychoanalytic structures that are complicit in its maintenance.

But if Eddie Twyborn does incarnate a politics of critique, there is also a sense in which he fails to live up to the promise of this radical politics; and central to this failure is his relationship with Prowse. The relationship between Eddie and Prowse is notable for its refusal to embrace the anti-social homo-ness espoused by Bersani, and is marked instead by a heightened competitiveness, and a stubborn adherence to the rigid differences in gender and identification that condemn sexuality to an expression of power. The fundamental premise upon which Bersani's conception of homo-ness rests is, as noted above, the transcendence of social difference. The radical homosexual figures this transcendence through his ability to identify with structurally mandated positions or identities that are not his own. In desiring men, the homosexual's 'incorporation of woman's otherness' from within 'the available social field of desiring subjects' (*Homos* 60) effects the dissolution of rigidly defined identities and the social organisation that is the consequence of such legible identities. One valuable benefit that flows from such an articulation of homosexual desire is the sense of reciprocity that it engenders – an embrace of sameness, of empathy and fellow feeling. Shorn of the angst and competitiveness that mars the normative Oedipal conceptualisation of desire, this homo-ness instead foregrounds a more generous political economy of the libido. This

constitutes a moving and spectacularly novel rearticulation of homosexuality, as we can see in the following passage from *Homos*:

We might imagine that a man being fucked is generously offering the sight of his own penis as a gift or even a replacement for what is temporarily being “lost” inside him – an offering not made in order to calm his partner’s fears of castration but rather as the gratuitous and therefore even lovelier protectiveness that all human beings need when they take the risk of merging with another, of risking their own boundaries for the sake of self-dissolving extensions. (112)

We noted in the first part of this chapter that the dynamic that pertains to Prowse’s sex appeal, from Eddie’s point of view, is one of hypermasculinity. To be sure, this pornographic representation of Prowse is not totally bereft of a radical political pedigree. And yet it must be conceded that this pornographic representation does fall back on a libidinous political economy of exploitation; indeed it is nourished and sustained by the virile prowess of masculinity’s proximity to power.

So perhaps the greatest tragedy depicted in *Twyborn* (recognising utterly the pathetic enormity of this claim) is the failure of both Eddie and Prowse to recognise the radical potential that inheres in the homo-ness that defines homosexuality and that might otherwise have revolutionised and inspired their sexual relationship. For one thing that emerges from the scenes wherein Prowse fucks Eddie and wherein Eddie fucks Prowse is the ruthless competitiveness, the dearth of generosity, which governs the dynamic between both parties. As noted earlier in this chapter, Prowse’s penetration of Eddie is effected with such force that many critics have been moved to characterise it as rape. Less remarked upon however is the similar violence that Eddie metes out to Prowse when the tables are turned:

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. Prowse was crying, 'Oh God! Oh Christ!' before a final whimper which was also his ravisher's sigh.
They fell apart finally. (296)

Here the glimmering promise of Eddie's 'feminine compassion' is snuffed out in favour of a tenebrous 'male revenge.' Rather than embrace the self-dissolving extensions of homosexual desire, rather than share in the phallic gifts that both have to offer, and rather than risk identifying rebelliously within the Oedipal matrix of desire and run the blissful, the revolutionary risk of dissolving their differences and merging with each other, both Eddie and Prowse are trapped within a sexuality that subsists as an argument for social hierarchy. We might say that this rejection of homo-ness is consummated utterly and finally when Eddie and Prowse part for the last time: as Prowse begins to sob and express remorse for his conduct during their association, Eddie is stonily unmoved. And as a final act of retribution he commits an act of symbolic castration that is, to be frank, shocking in its cruelty. He says to Prowse: 'Oh, go on, Don! Don't be a cunt – for God's sake go!' (299). Here we have a crystalline distillation of gender difference – here raised to the pitch of abjection – which Bersani's conceptualisation of homo-ness seeks to overcome. Bersani's arguments have consistently warned us that 'the gay man always runs the risk of identifying with culturally dominant images of misogynist maleness' (*Homos* 63); and in Eddie's symbolic castration of Prowse we are confronted with a near-textbook example of the sheer tragedy that this entails.

Eddie's relationship with Prowse is a tragically flawed endeavour to the extent that it is enmeshed in the social itself. As we saw earlier, the dynamics of desire between Eddie and Prowse showed promise in the optics of Prowse's eroticisation and its potential for

jouissance. But sociality, the difference this engenders, and the power games that are its inevitably bitter offspring are all on obvious display as the sexual desire of the two parties congeals into a relationship. If Prowse's rectum is the grave of subjectivity and its attendant struggles for power, it is at best a shallow grave. Prowse's rectum exists as a grave only to the extent that the disruptive desire that it articulates is visual, phantasmatic or, in a word, ephemeral. If we are to find a more durable model for the homo-ness of which we caught a brief glimpse when Eddie's heterosexual desire morphed momentarily into a trans-differentiating alliance with his homosexual self after sex with Marcia, and if we are to find the homo-ness that Bersani proscribes as the only way out of the seemingly interminable implication of sexual desire in struggles for power, it will not be found in Prowse's rectum, but elsewhere. And in *Twyborn*, that elsewhere is to be found, funnily enough, outside society: in the vast, unpeopled landscapes of the Snowy Mountains, and in the *jouissance* that attends the representation of the landscape in this text.

Central to almost all of Bersani's thought is a rejection of what he terms the 'pastoral impulse' that lies behind the 'redemptive intentions' of much theorising about sex and an embrace of an anti-social politics of critique that, in turn, informs a broader concept of aesthetics:

Negativity in art attacks the myths of the dominant culture – the pastoral myth, for example, of sexuality as inherently loving and nurturing, of sexuality as coterminous with harmonious community. Only by insisting on the bleakness, the love of power, even the violence perhaps inherent in human relations can we perhaps begin to redesign those relations in ways that will not require culture to ennoble them. Or, put in other terms, how do we control the historical precipitates of a passion for violence without denying our intractable implication in that passion? ('Art' 34)

It is perhaps ironic then that the very instance wherein *Twyborn* should share Bersani's theoretical posture most ardently is situated in the protagonist's sensual embrace of the pastoral landscape of the Monaro:

In his own experience, in whichever sexual role he had been playing, self-searching had never led more than briefly to self-acceptance. He suspected that salvation lay in the natural phenomena surrounding those unable to rise to the spiritual heights of a religious faith: in his present situation the shabby hills, their contours practically breathing as the light embraced them, stars fulfilled by their logical dowsing, the river never so supple as at daybreak, as dappled as the trout it camouflaged, the ambience finally united by the harsh yet healing epiphany of cockcrow. (223)

Veronica Brady argues that 'for White, solitude, not society, is the true human milieu, and passivity, not action, the proper mode of being' ('Necessity' 111); and in a similar vein, Lever argues that 'Eddie Twyborn is most liberated in his encounters with the landscape of the Monaro. The elusive object of desire seems not to be man or woman, but the "wordless poem" found in direct encounters with nature' (*Relations* 102). In the shabby hills, in the logical dowsing of the stars, and in the river never so supple as at daybreak we can most assuredly feel some of the melancholy that Rutherford ascribes to White's engagement with Australian nationalism. Indeed, for Rutherford White's writing is characterised by 'the failure of its characters and of its culture to arrive at speech... White's melancholic vision is of a culture that has not arrived at that primal act of settlement; the movement of a word from one empty mouth to another' ('Homo' 62). There is a clear synergy between Rutherford's argument and the one that this chapter has sought to advance; the only real point of contrast might be said to come from the affective coloration of the two arguments. Whereas Rutherford characterises White's politics as melancholy, the argument of this chapter has sought to show that the *homo nullius* who resides at the centre of *Twyborn* is a character also capable of blissful evacuation. In the 'salvation' Eddie derives from the land, we have a rejection of the social itself and an indictment on the historical forces that constitute and govern the

channels and expression of libidinous desire; his 'salvation' conveys a desire for desires beyond the Oedipal, beyond language, Law and the self; ultimately, this *tableau* of the Australian bush represents a transcendental aesthetic that foregrounds the boundless limitations of representation itself. In the healing epiphany of a crowing cock, on the frosty planes of the Snowy Mountains, is the *jouissance*, or the homoerotics of White's own unique articulation of a nationalist cultural politics finally consummated.

Eddie Twyborn's rejection of society is an expression of an anti-social, of even an embryonically queer cultural politics that suffuses White's text. Some scholars have characterised White's representation of the Australian landscape as formative of his characters' inception into an Australian identity. Jessica White, for example, argues that 'the skins of many of White's characters are marked... by their travails in the bush or beneath a harsh sun, demonstrating the landscape's inscription on their bodies, and their subsequent metamorphosis into Australian creatures' (143). It would be difficult however to characterise Eddie's experience of landscape as one constitutive of a sense of belonging to an Australian society. Far from it, like the snow-capped peaks of the Monaro, Eddie Twyborn is an essentially cold and distant character; he makes for an unconvincing jackaroo. We have already seen the extent of his coldness in his brutal rejection of Prowse; and if Prowse stands as an image of Australian nationalism and the bushman myth, then Eddie's rejection of Prowse's overtures might also be read as a rejection of the nation state itself. More pointedly still, Marcia's revelation to Eddie that she is carrying his child is the ultimate catalyst for Eddie's departure from the Snowy Mountains at the end of Part II of *Twyborn*: Eddie has no wish whatsoever to contribute to the continuity of Australian society by siring a little Australian of his own. The

ramifications of this pregnancy and Eddie's rejection of it will be explored further below; however it is sufficient at this point merely to note that Eddie's connection to the Monaro is not one upon which a nation-building project, in the traditional sense, might be read into White's text: to the contrary, Eddie Twyborn is positively disloyal to the Australian bush and its inhabitants, in a fairly specific yet also quite exciting sense. To quote Bersani, Eddie is at his most revolutionary when 'declining to participate in any sociality at all' (*Homos* 168), when he is at his coldest and most distant.

The fragmentary, tripartite structure of *Twyborn* and the identitarian fluidity of the protagonist that accompanies this structure – with each Part of the novel consecrated to each of the protagonist's various guises – embodies the same spirit of revolt that animates Bersani's thought. Implicit in the trifurcated structure of *Twyborn* is the articulation of an anti-social subjectivity. If the fundamental premise upon which Bersani's conception of homo-ness rests is, as noted above, the transcendence of social difference, then the way in which this theory is put into practice is through a process of what Bersani calls the replacement of 'the social world of essences' with a 'private domain of fractured and multiple identities' (*Homos* 176). This overthrow is to be effected by 'a curative collapsing of social difference into a radical homo-ness, where the subject might begin again, differentiating itself from itself and thereby reconstituting sociality' (*Homos* 177); but this overthrow 'will only be effective if... subjectivity can no longer be related to as an oppressed subjectivity' (*Homos* 177). In addition to his ability to identify over and between nodes of social difference, as demonstrated above, Eddie Twyborn's transit through the three separate parts of the novel, his continuous shedding of one identity after another, inaugurates the radical homo-ness of which Bersani speaks so hopefully. The

protagonist's multiple identities – Eudoxia, Eddie, Eadith – are each examples of a self 'differentiating itself from itself.'

But perhaps more pointedly, as the plot of *Twyborn* progresses, it becomes clear that none of the other characters in this text know about the protagonist's alter-egos: Eudoxia Vatazes is never revealed to any of the characters at 'Bogong'; Eddie Twyborn is unknown to the whores of Beckwith Street in Part III. The societies or worlds of each of the three parts of the novel are thus wholly dependent on the personas that the protagonist assumes. In shedding each persona a certain mode of sociality is also undone; a society is thence reconstituted anew along with the rebirth of the protagonist's assumption of a new personality. The ending of each part of *Twyborn* thus performs a figurative *jouissance* through a symbolic death of the protagonist's ego. The erasure of this ego is rendered quite explicitly: for example, Part II ends with a letter from Eadie Twyborn, Eddie's mother, to Marcia Lushington, wherein she laments the fact that her son has once more disappeared: 'You ask what news I have of Eddie. I can only answer NOTHING. As the first time, so the second. He is swallowed up. Whether in death or life, it is the same. We should not have aspired to possess a human being' (303). What is notable here is the repetition of death and rebirth: there is something almost Buddhist in Eadie's realisation that the possession of a human being is futile. This cyclical structuring of *Twyborn*, reinforcing as it does Eddie's fluid and repeatedly evacuated subjectivity, recalls Bersani's observation that 'in a society where oppression is structural, constitutive of sociality itself, only that which society throws off – its mistakes or its pariahs – can serve the future' (180). If the structure of *Twyborn* enacts the continuous *jouissance* of its protagonist, representing as series of social deaths and rebirths, the continuous shedding

of one persona after the next, it also heralds a radical restructuring of sociality itself through a self made repeatedly different from itself. The revolutionary bliss of this fluid state of being is perhaps best expressed by Eddie himself, when he describes himself so aptly as neither here nor there: invoking *jouissance* – linguistically, figuratively – as the very centre of his hyphenated being, Eddie is, in the end, ‘this pseudo-man-cum-crypto-woman’ (298).

For Bersani, a radical modernity in literature is perhaps the most fundamental resource we have for articulating ‘a private domain of fractured and multiple identities’ and the overthrow of the ‘social world of essences.’ This radical modernity is a space and a literary aesthetic where ‘identities spill over’ (*Homos* 146) and where the identities of characters are extended ‘beyond the delimited individuality plagued with sexual misassignments, and into other generations, other species, even into the inanimate’ (147). Bersani cites Proust and Genet as the standard bearers for this radically modern, homosexual sensibility. To these two writers, as this chapter’s argument as sought to demonstrate, we might add Patrick White. The supple literary aesthetic of *Twyborn* – its attentiveness to the flexibility of language itself, its daring associations and imaginative use of imagery – executes another prong of a radical cultural politics. It has often been remarked by scholars that White’s style is nothing if not writerly. Lyn McCredden argues that as a writer White ‘began to seek ways of writing about how meaning is made, in Australia and beyond; and how meaning is made alone, and in community’ (43). Jessica White also invokes a nexus that pertains to White’s writing style on the one hand and an active negotiation between society and solitude on the other when she discusses ‘the vegetation of White’s writing.’ Jessica White even goes so far as to metaphorise Patrick

White's style as the Australian bush itself: 'on first glance a swathe of muted greys and greens that, as you walk slowly through it, reveals itself to be hundreds of beautiful, tiny leaves, strips of bark and minute blossoms' (149). For Jessica, it is the slow-revealing, scrubby-hallucinatory quality to White's writing that bears witness to the truly revolutionary magic of his style: 'in being scratched by and exposed to the density of his prose, his readers will, one hopes, recognise and champion his rendering of those who struggle to find, or who are forced into, a mode of being beyond the mainstream' (149).

Like the sensual embrace with which Eddie Twyborn seems to melt at times into the landscape of the Monaro, so too does the reader of *Twyborn* find that the language of this text forces us outside of the differences and boundaries that define the social. Nowhere is this more apparent than when, at the end of Part II, Marcia confronts Eddie with the news that she is now pregnant with his child. As Eddie sits down for afternoon tea with Marcia he notices that 'a hornet was somewhere ceaselessly working on its citadel, and under the eaves hung a swallow's nest temporarily abandoned by its owner, in each case evidence of the continuity which convinces animals better than it does human beings, unless they are human vegetables.' The scene then proceeds with Marcia's announcement:

She sat up jerkily on the edge of the grating chaise.
'There you've caught me out, Eddie. You've caught us both. Because,' and now it was her turn to look out along the bleached plain, 'I find I'm pregnant.'
The hornet was worrying the silence worse than ever, a fiery copper wire piercing but never aborting a situation the enormity of which could only be human. (296)

If the hornet fails in its attempt to abort the silent situation Eddie here finds himself in, the idea cannot fail but flicker past our consciousness: we know damn well that Eddie does not want this child, not least because he has just told Marcia that he does not love her and that he intends to leave 'Bogong' for good. This word – 'aborting' – is fascinating

in that it stands as a brilliant emblem of the radical literary aesthetic White employs in this text: nearly approaching a Freudian slip, there is something almost humorous in the way this sentence renders the instantaneous, visceral and completely unguarded response of the protagonist to his prospective paternity as the buzzing sound of a semiotic abortion. And it is in this respect that White most deeply invokes the radical spirit of homo-ness that Bersani articulates: White's playfulness with language, his inclination to stretch and distend and manipulate words, to deracinate and re-pot his words in new climates, this literary aesthetic of radical modernity is precisely what Bersani admires most from those other homos, Proust and Genet: they 'let us hear them failing or getting high on linguistic waste, and so they compel us, perhaps in spite of themselves, to re-think what we mean and what we expect from communication, and from community' (*Homos* 181). Eddie's longing for an abortion that never arrives at utterance forces us to rethink our conceptions of the social: the citadels of insects and the nests of swallows push the structures and institutions of the social outside the exclusive remit of the human; all the while Eddie dreams his anti-social dreams, of nothing less than a discontinuation of his putative contribution to the survival of the human species. White's is a literary aesthetic that gets high on human waste, on 'human vegetables,' on a fundamental rejection of the social and an embrace of the natural idiosyncrasy of language itself. Ultimately, to 'get' White's writing is to bridge the divide of social difference and to recognise his intrinsic homo-ness.

As this thesis continues, it will become clear that the thematics of self-transcendence that this chapter identifies in *Twynborn* form the fundamental basis, the performative poetics even, of White's politico-literary project. The pornographic reading of White's erotics

advanced here demonstrates White's commitment to an overcoming of the self through the sexual, rather than any attachment to a congealed homosexual identity enmeshed in the violence of social relationships. This chapter has dwelled on the violences of identity and homosexual relationships so as to accentuate the real sense of liberation and transcendence that inheres in their overcoming. E. Twyborn's 'revolutionary inaptitude... for sociality as it is known' (*Homos* 76), as Bersani puts it, has been shown in this chapter to form the basis of an almost meditative practice of anti-social identifications with difference itself. And it is through White's style, in *Twyborn*'s sustained meditations on the modernist flexibility of language that this cultural politics has been expressed. In the coming chapters, it will become clear that performativity and materiality form the touchstones of White's queer politics, with these being the only way to do justice to White's politics of the body and the spirit. It should be noted finally, then, that this chapter has demonstrated how queer theory's deconstructionist and literary sensibility, articulated prominently here by Bersani, works in tandem with the arresting and performative effects of a politics that aims for nothing less than the transcendence of the self and identity. Ultimately, this chapter has been a queer reflection on the many deaths, re-births, auto-differentiations and comings together to which *Twyborn*'s protagonist bears witness.

Chapter Two

‘Love is an exhausted word’: camp performativity, queer politics and the shame of E. Twyborn

The second chapter of this thesis reads the failures of language to fully circumscribe meaning in Part III of *Twyborn* as a thematisation of historicity and an invitation to examine the affective dimensions of White’s text that seem to defy a post-structural mode of analysis. This chapter begins by painting a portrait of the protagonist of this text by looking at how she/he resists the attempts at categorization and legibility that history demands. E. Twyborn registers in this chapter as a figure of shame on account of her/his refusal to cohere within a single identity. For Eve Sedgwick, shame is an intriguingly queer affect in that it attunes the self to the vagaries of social, cultural and historical contingency, whilst reinforcing a discrete (albeit painful) individuation and separation from these historical forces. Sedgwick’s affective conceptualisation of shame is a useful way of approaching the protagonist of *Twyborn* in that it gives us a means of fleshing out E.’s refusal to submit to historically contingent categories of identity. The question of history, specifically the dynamic interaction between past and present selves, is shown in *Twyborn* to require an account of identity that goes beyond mere historical contingency to include the modulation and qualitative differentiation wrought by affect. In the first section of this chapter I read the central relationship in Part III of *Twyborn*, between Eadith and Gravenor, as a dramatization of the queer dynamics of shame: Eadith’s desire for connection with Gravenor is inhibited by the constant threat of misrecognition. In the absence of an identity that is stable and legible, the relationship between these two characters is rendered through affect and the sensation of touch. It is in this tactility, this gesturing beyond the remit of language and towards a more fluid and embodied

conceptualisation of identity, where White's thematics begin to align with his queer politics.

But if shame appears to tyrannise the life of Eadith Trist, that subjugation is not total: shame's very performativity gives birth to a defiantly camp persona that reroutes shame as the performance of shamelessness. For Guy Davidson, the camp aesthetic of *Twyborn* functions in response to apprehension surrounding the author's actual and literary 'coming out': 'in coming out, White did not simply offer himself up in naked vulnerability to the public gaze... the camp aesthetic that he adopted as he came out, with its emphasis on masking, parody and play, enabled control as well as revelation' (17). In this chapter, I argue that affect comprises an important dimension to the camp literary style White adopts in *Twyborn*. White's camp sensibility emerges here as a means of coping with the shame, with the 'naked vulnerability,' that inevitably attends a queer and fluid conceptualisation of identity. If the performativity that camp foregrounds is shown to be always shadowed by the threat of misrecognition then camp advertises itself as a means of living in and living through the performance of gender and sexuality. Shame is thus an important resource for both understanding the protagonist of White's text and understanding the camp politics of queer critique that (s)he embodies.

E. *Twyborn*'s affective politics are read in the final section of this chapter as an attempt to embody the feelings and sensations that language and text render abject. If the camp theatricality of *Twyborn* articulates a queer mode of being in defiance of a historically mediated identity, the tragic ending of White's text reminds us of the painful affective

remainder that attends the inevitable failure of such an enterprise. The failure of this enterprise is made all the more painful by *Twyborn*'s promise of queer reconceptualisation of love: if the relationship between Eadith and Gravenor is governed by the dynamics of shame, it nevertheless advertises a vision of loving outside the bounds of historicity and identity. Because this promise of love is never fulfilled, I conclude this chapter by suggesting that shame and abjection – being incidental to any attempted apprehension of affect, tactility and camp performativity; and being painfully and tragically literalised in the final pages of this text – are a necessary and crucial dimension of the queer politics articulated and performed by this text. My reading of *Twyborn* seeks to render this text as an emissary of an affective queer radicalism that strives ceaselessly and tragically beyond the bounds of history, text and identity. Ultimately, the value of this queer politics resides in its ability to make us, the readers of *Twyborn*, feel the real pain of history.

What MacKenzie, as an exemplar of the 'Old' White criticism, read as White's theological preoccupation with 'violation, desecration and obscenity' emerge in this chapter as the affective dynamics of shame and camp. Here, the 'Old' preoccupation with teleology and ethics is reiterated as a queer insistence that the pain and shame of history never be forgotten. Where the limitations of language were read by previous critics of White as an orthodox respect for the ineffability of the spiritual realm, this chapter argues that White's language is rather striving after a different kind of transcendence. McCann's characterisation of White's linguistic recovery of abjection (153) becomes in this chapter a poetics of abjection that dramatises the tragically transcendent longing of White's protagonist for a spirit and a flesh unbound by the strictures of society and history. Camp, as the political and emotional coping mechanism that *Twyborn* articulates, aligns with

White's unique brand of spiritual 'antinomy' where, in the words of Beatson, 'there is ambivalence in everything, so that redemption or disintegration can flow from the same source' (21). And it is in this affective flow, this shameless dance between the agony and ecstasy of a stubbornly queer body that refuses language itself, that White's queer metaphysics is manifest.

Heather Love argues in her book *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* that political utility has dictated and motivated what she calls an 'affirmative turn' in queer studies. Love observes that 'the premium on strategic response' in queer theory's reading habits has meant that 'the painful and traumatic dimensions' of texts from the not-too-far-distant past which have sought to represent queer sexuality have been 'minimized and disavowed' (3-4). Love's project in *Feeling Backward* is in large part animated therefore by her desire to avoid this "affirmative turn" because it runs the risk, she argues, of erasing the history of queer suffering, of rendering it illegible. Love seeks to 'dwell at length on the "dark side" of modern queer representation;' she argues that 'it may be necessary to check the impulse to turn these representations to good use in order to see them at all' (4). It must be conceded that the first chapter of this thesis sketched if not an entirely optimistic, then at the very least a radical and transformative cultural politics that might be said to inhere in the representation of sexuality in Part II of *Twyborn*. This reading of Part II affirmed the political utility of the radical homo-ness that Eddie Twyborn articulates and the disruptive potential of a pornographic *jouissance* that the text performs. And while it is true that the same spirit of radical transformation animates the third and final part of this text, neither can it be denied that this novel ends on a note of tragic disappointment. The second chapter of this thesis therefore attempts to do justice

to this tragedy by resisting an “affirmative turn” and embracing the darkness, even if, as Love admits, ‘it is not clear how such dark representations from the past will lead to a brighter future for queers’ (4). Animated then by this spirit of fidelity to the dark histories of sexual oppression, this chapter aims to render legible, to celebrate even, A. D. Hope’s famously vicious attempted take-down of White’s writing as ‘pretentious and illiterate verbal sludge’ (49) by unpacking the illiterate and sludgy aspects of White’s writing. White’s poetics of abjection will be shown to be illiterate to the extent that it is driven primarily by affect; and affects are intrinsically abjecting and sludge-like because they are contagious, seeping over and beyond the clean boundaries of the text’s pages. In this respect Part III of this text can be understood as gesturing beyond the merely literate and reclaiming the abject to the extent that it rejects the historicising and textual frameworks of identity.

Love’s central thesis in *Feeling Backward* is that backwardness characterises and informs any understanding of the queer. Love reads ‘figures of backwardness as allegories of queer historical experience’ as she seeks to ‘create an image repertoire of queer modernist melancholia in order to underline both the losses of queer modernity and the deeply ambivalent negotiation of these losses within the literature of the period’ (5).

Historically, the ‘backwardness’ of queers has been fashioned into a discursive cudgel:

Whether understood as throwbacks to an earlier stage of human development or as children who refuse to grow up, queers have been seen across the twentieth century as a backward race. Perverse, immature, sterile, and melancholic: even when they provoke fears about the future, they somehow also recall the past. (6)

How we process the images of the crazed and the closeted, the beaten and defeated queers of recent, pre-Stonewall historical memory, and how such representations from the past might illuminate our understanding of queer sexuality today are of critical importance to

Love. She argues that the feelings of shame and rejection that such historicised representations of sexuality provoke has resulted in a certain impetuosity to overcome or move forward from these feelings. Love, however, sees the value in exploring, or in simply being attentive to, these traumatic affective hinterlands and ‘adequately reckoning with their powerful legacies’ (19). She rejects the ‘haste’ with which queer studies has sought ‘to refunction such experiences’ of historical trauma, and argues instead that ‘turning away from past degradation to a present or future affirmation means ignoring the past as past; it also makes it harder to see the persistence of the past in the present’ (19). Love’s thesis demands an affective understanding of backwardness, a reckoning with shame and despair and dejection, not so much so that we might overcome the narratives of history but so that the past might more profitably inform the present.

If the protagonist of *Twyborn* is the incarnation of Love’s backwardness *par excellence*, (s)he is also on account of this the site at which attempts to historicise the sexual in White’s oeuvre become problematic. Not only is E. Twyborn a persona whose past lives begin to encroach on the present, especially towards the end of the novel in Part III where a temporal palimpsest of identities becomes increasingly prominent, but the sticky end to which E. Twyborn is subjected at the novel’s conclusion is precisely the sort of tear-jerking tragedy that characterises representations of queerness in the historical twentieth century. Indeed, many critics have attempted to historicise the thematisation of sexuality in *Twyborn*, and, it must be noted, with vastly differing motives. John Beston, for example, sees the development of a more overt sexuality in White’s work as something akin to decadence: ‘the vogue of *The Twyborn Affair* was no doubt helped by the fact that as a novel treating transvestism and homosexuality, it was taken up by a Sydney which was fast becoming as relentlessly liberal as it had previously been relentlessly illiberal’ (14). Beston’s reading of this text is an attempt

to situate *Twyborn* within the historically specific context of a ‘relentlessly liberal’ Sydney in the early 1980’s and a broader movement of post-Stonewall sexual liberation. However, in reading White’s text as an emissary of the changing social mores of a specific period in history, Beston finds his own judgement, his ability to actually read the text, becoming clouded. Beston states that ‘transvestism and homosexuality are given only superficial treatment in the novel: we never really see into Eddie’s mind to understand his sexual identity or behaviour’ (14). Here an attempt to place *Twyborn* in a historical context has actually served to occlude the text. In a similar vein, albeit coming from an arguably more enlightened standpoint, Davidson’s characterisation of *Twyborn* as a ‘coming out’ text – the ramifications of which were explored more thoroughly in the previous chapter of this thesis – might also be seen as an attempt to situate White’s text in the historical context of late twentieth century sexual liberation in its invocation of one of the gay liberation movement’s most prominent and important catch phrases. But in historicising *Twyborn*, by turning it into White’s own literary ‘coming out,’ with all the baggage of progress and positive development this entails, we run precisely the risk identified by Love of rendering inadmissible and abject the tragic demise of E. Twyborn in a rush towards gay pride and affirmation. The fact that E. pointedly and poignantly does *not* live happily-ever-after with her/his mother in the gay-friendly environs of Sydney’s eastern suburbs at the novel’s conclusion militates against a reading of *Twyborn* as an uncomplicated performance of ‘coming out’ and moving past a history of homophobia.

As other critics have pointed out, White’s texts do not engage with history in a straightforward and uni-directional fashion. Elizabeth McMahon, for example, argues that *Twyborn* evinces a ‘Janus-faced temporality’ that speaks backward through time and through White’s oeuvre (78). For McMahon, *Twyborn* ‘invites the reader into a new mode

of reading and provides a new prism for a hermeneutics that cannot but circumscribe his earlier works within it, thereby offering a new mode of reading across his fiction' (78). The 'Janus-faced temporality' of *Twyborn* is discussed at length in the final chapter of this thesis, but it suffices presently to note that an important facet of McMahon's argument is the representation of *Twyborn*'s protagonist: 'S/he is a composite within him/herself across the novel and of the oeuvre. Indeed, the range of the text's allusions breaks down the boundaries of text and oeuvre, sole authorship, life, and art' (80). This sense in which *Twyborn*'s protagonist performs a dynamic interaction with White's previous novels, reaching beyond the text to re-write the past while at the same time allowing the past to seep into its present representation, is a potent example of the 'backwardness' that Love invokes in her conceptualisation of a queer subjectivity. As Veronica Brady argues, the thematisation of history in White's texts is characterised by its tendency to turn away from 'historical time' and embrace instead 'the polysemous time of myth' ('Dragon' 132). For Brady, White's transcendent metaphysics is to be read as a form of striving 'beyond the divisions of history and society' ('Dragon' 132). Brady reads *Riders in the Chariot* as a polemic against a suburban Australia that has 'surrendered to history' and a paean in favour of those four central characters whose vision of the chariot 'enables them to see beyond the maelstrom of history' ('Dragon' 133). Both McMahon and Brady alert us to the fact that White's works demand a subtler and more thoroughgoing investigation of the historicity of White's texts than has heretofore been present in this body of scholarship.

I am proposing that one way in which we can apprehend the impulses to both transcend and problematise the historicity that White's texts thematise is through recourse to affect. In doing so, I am not seeking necessarily to discount that body of critics whose readings

of White's texts render what Alan Lawson has termed a 'secular, immanent White-of-his-time;' but nor do I propose to necessarily privilege an 'other-worldly, metaphysical, transcendent White-of-all-time' ('Art' 355). Rather, I proffer affect theory as a means of unifying these two divergent streams of White criticism: affect's ability to register diagnostically the scars of the historical past within the historical present is an important theoretical resource in this respect. And, when it comes to reading White, it must be noted that tentative steps have already been made in this direction: Mark Williams reads *Twyborn* as that novel where 'White no longer sees language and life as separate orders' (141). For Williams, fluidity and performativity are at the heart of *Twyborn*'s representation of selfhood; Williams takes what we might call a proto-affective approach in the close attention he pays to the 'sensual' in this text (141), and in the role that textiles, touch and clothing in particular assume in the text's construction of the self. Williams argues that clothing in *Twyborn* 'is representative of the inescapable inauthenticity of human beings, our need to dress up our personalities and the lack of any essence behind the disguises we adopt' (142). To this performative dimension of self-representation Williams adds that *Twyborn* espouses a fluid conception of the subject: 'the reality behind the fictive masks we adopt is always shifting and elusive' (143). Both the performativity and the fluidity in this text problematise, according to Williams, a purely historical account of the self; Williams shows how 'even as a jackeroo, enacting the thirties belief that working people are closer to the real, Eddie cannot believe in his rough (and in the terms of Australian naturalism, "realistic") garb' (143). Williams's reading of *Twyborn* thus gestures towards a more thoroughgoing and theoretically rigorous account of affect and historicity in this text, which this present thesis chapter aims to provide. And in this way, I hope to show how the 'White-of-his-time' becomes the 'White-of-all-time' and vice versa.

The Shame of Eadith Trist

In the introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick famously adumbrates a series of axioms from whence her deconstructive/queer critical project proceeds. The very first of these axioms is so simple that at first glance it verges on the territory of truism: ‘*people are different from each other*’ (22 original emphasis). Despite this seemingly self-evident fact, Sedgwick notes ‘how few respectable conceptual tools we have for dealing with’ such human variation. ‘A tiny number of inconceivably coarse axes of categorisation have been painstakingly inscribed in current critical and political thought: gender, race, class, nationality, sexual orientation are pretty much the available distinctions’ (*Epistemology* 22). Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Sedgwick’s first axiom is simply how right it feels at the level of basic intuition, as when she writes of

the sister or brother, the best friend, the classmate, the parent, the child, the lover, the ex-: our families, loves, and enemies alike, not to mention the strange relations of our work, play, and activism, prove that even people who share all or most of our own positionings along these crude axes may still be different enough from us, and from each other, to seem like all but different species. (*Epistemology* 22)

This deceptively simple observation of Sedgwick’s carries far-reaching implications for the projects of criticism and post-structuralism as they have been understood:

in spite of every promise to the contrary – every single theoretically or politically interesting project of postwar thought has finally had the effect of deligitimating our space for asking or thinking in detail about the multiple, unstable ways in which people may be like or different from each other. (*Epistemology* 23)

For Sedgwick, deconstruction itself, as an enterprise in examining the historicity of meaning and ‘founded as a very science of *différ(e/a)nce*, has both so fetishized the idea of difference and so vaporized its possible embodiments that its most thoroughgoing practitioners are the last people to whom one would now look for help in thinking about particular differences’

(*Epistemology* 23, original emphasis). Sedgwick thus advertises the limits of a historical mode of analysis when it relies too heavily on the coarse axes of social difference and fails to account for the differentiating impulses that flow within the individual.

Any understanding of Eadith Trist, the third incarnation of White's protagonist in *Twyborn*, must take account of these embodiments of difference that seem to defy historicisation, given that 'she was sceptical of history except at a ground-floor level' and particularly given that she is a strident advertisement for such embodied difference 'for being herself a muddled human being astray in the general confusion of life' (403). Eadith's fluid selfhood accords with Brian Massumi's critique of post-structuralist cultural analysis (and hence with his argument for the very urgency of an affective critical practice). According to Massumi, deconstruction 'catches the body in cultural freeze-frame,' conceptualising a purely discursive body that occupies a series of signifying 'positions' on a 'grid.' And while 'a body occupying one position on the grid might succeed in making a move to occupy another position,' while a body might even 'unmake sense by scrambling significations already in place' (*à la* Judith Butler), ultimately, 'movement is entirely subordinated to the positions it connects': 'the very notion of movement as qualitative transformation is lacking. There is "displacement," but no transformation; it is as if the body simply leaps from one definition to the next' (2-3). Having inhabited two different identities previously, analysis of the history and identity of Eadith Trist seems especially, uniquely dependent on a critical theory capable of conceptualising difference and movement, as the following passage demonstrates where Eadith learns of the death of her father in the middle of a dinner party:

So why was this woman acting queer?

For the invisible bird, throbbing and spilling like blood or sperm, had brought Eddie Twyborn to the surface. [...]
At the foot of the stairs the reduced Eadith Trist was brought up against the one she most needed but hoped to avoid at the present moment.
'All this evening, Eadith, you would have avoided me if I hadn't practically handcuffed you under the table. I realise you must hate me.'
Again he put out a hand, as controlled as hers was trembling, and which she must resist whatever the hurt.
'Who's to decide – love and hate – not hate, *despair* – where one ends and the other begins?' (391)

In the first chapter of this thesis I argued that the separation of *Twyborn* into three distinct parts occasioning three separate social realities and inhabited by the protagonist in three distinct personas was a powerful articulation of White's radical commitment to a queer critique of the social. But, as this moment of grief occasioned by the discovery of the death of her/his father neatly illustrates, this argument requires something of a qualification. As the critiques of Sedgwick and Massumi attest, what we see in this passage is a personal history governed more by an affective, visceral intensity than anything else. This passage metaphorises an encounter with a historically contingent, psychoanalytically inflected relation between father and son – the Law of the Father, if you will; but crucially, the death of Judge Twyborn (an encounter with history if ever there was one) precipitates not an insight into but *a breakdown of* identity for Eddie/Eadith – despite the attempts of others to 'practically handcuff' the protagonist. To be sure, the affective intensity of the moment does ratify Eddie/Eadith's identity, but it does so in terms that are resolutely beyond the bounds of historical contingency: the intense feelings being felt in this passage cannot even be identified, 'where one ends and the other begins'. This passage is an example of the way in which affect cuts through our post-structuralist understandings of mediated identity and functions as 'a switch point for the individuation of... consciousness, of bodies, of theories, of selves – an individuation that decides not necessarily an identity, but a figuration, distinction, or mark of punctuation' (*Touching* 116-7). Of course drag (read: resignification) and identity-cum-performance (read: the discursive body) are important themes in this text,

but Part III of *Twyborn* insists on an affective account of selfhood because of the lack of stasis, because of the difference and movement, which is to say, the dynamic of *fluidity* that runs between the protagonist's past and present selves. In Part III, the past, the present and the future are all felt a certain way: identity in this text is as constituted by the modulation of internal affect as it is by the currents of history.

The affective note to which these thematics of history and identity vibrate most insistently in this text is shame. Drawing on the work of Sylvan Tompkins, Sedgwick's conceptualisation of shame in *Touching Feeling* encompasses two more-or-less distinct yet tightly related affective scenarios, both of which serve to ramify our understanding of the relationship between history and identity. In the first instance, shame is that moment when

the circuit of mirroring expressions between the child's face and the caregiver's recognised face... is broken: the moment when the adult face fails or refuses to play its part in the continuation of mutual gaze; when, for any one of many reasons, it fails to be recognizable to, or recognizing of, the infant who has been, so to speak, "giving face" based on a faith in the continuity of the circuit. (*Touching*: 36)

Although strictly speaking this early scene between adult and infant is a representation of what is more accurately termed by Sedgwick a 'protoaffect,' it also captures one essence of shame proper: shame can be said to be felt as a result of an entreaty rebuffed, as an expression of interest that is ignored, or in the event that a claim to recognition, an expectation, is misplaced. In this guise, shame is 'a moment, a disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication' (*Touching* 36); it is a response to sudden social isolation and expressive of a desire for re-connection. But there is a second aspect to shame that somewhat complicates the picture painted above. By way of illustration, consider the following scene described by Sedgwick:

Lecturing on shame, I used to ask listeners to join in a thought experiment, visualizing an unwashed, half-insane man who would wander into the lecture hall mumbling loudly, his speech increasingly accusatory and disjointed, and publicly urinate in the front of the room, then wander out again. I pictured the excruciation of everyone else in the room: each looking down, wishing to be anywhere else yet conscious of the inexorable fate of being exactly there, inside the individual skin of which each was burningly aware; at the same time, though, unable to stanch the haemorrhage of painful identification with the misbehaving man. That's the double movement shame makes: toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality. (*Touching* 37)

In this manifestation, shame enunciates an identity that is not quite. As in the protoaffect exhibited by infants, in this second scenario one is 'burningly aware' of one's own selfhood, yet – and this is crucial – this sense of selfhood is immediately contingent on the 'haemorrhage of painful identification' with an other, with the outside world. For Sedgwick, shame is 'not at all... the place where identity is most securely attached to essences, but rather... it is the place where the *question* of identity arises most originally and most relationally' (*Touching* 37). And, moreover, 'if the structuration of shame differs strongly between cultures, between periods, and between different forms of politics, however, it differs also simply from one person to another within a given culture and time' (*Touching* 63). Lying in an insistently liminal identificatory space between the essential and the historical, where 'the alchemy of the contingent involve[s] itself so intimately with identity' (Sedgwick 2003: 98), shame offers itself as a new means by which we might begin to think about the self.

The central relationship in Part III of *Twyborn*, that between Eadith Trist and her patron Gravenor, is both structured and governed by the affect of shame. It is clear from very early in their association that Gravenor fancies Eadith; on their first date, at 'a famous garden thrown open to the public for some charitable purpose' (327), he says as much:

'For God's sake, the reason I keep coming back is for you – not any of your boring whores. Risking every bone in my body with some thrashing negress, exposing my parts to an

angular Midlands schoolteacher. If you won't let me fuck you, darling, what I enjoy is the supper, or best of all, breakfast when you cook it for me.' (328)

But Eadith's response to this candid delineation of romantic intention from one whom, she admits to herself, she 'would have loved to receive... inside her, to leave her mark on his skin for others to discuss and deplore' (328) is not, as one might expect, forthcoming. Instead, Eadith muses to herself about her ambivalent relation to gender, wondering if she would have been happier if her life had 'been simple':

She thought she wouldn't, then that she would. And again, not; she did not covet the confidence, the 'strength,' the daguerreotype principles of even the most admirable one-track male, nor, on the other hand, those mammary, vaginal, ovarian complications, the hells of a sex pledged to honour and obey. Yet she would have liked to receive this dry-cool man Gravenor inside her... (328)

It is clear from that all-important 'Yet' that Eadith's ambivalence stands as a barrier to her own feelings of romance and lust. And then this scene suffers a sharp interruption:

'What is it?' he asked.
'Nothing.' (328)

Even though it is not spelt out in the text – perhaps because it is not spelt out in the text – we feel the downward glance, the averted eyes, the flushed cheeks: in a defining moment of hesitation, Eadith finds herself unable to reciprocate Gravenor's entreaty and is flooded with shame. This is a moment of social isolation coupled with a desire for re-connection. Because she is not what she appears to be, Gravenor's entreating gaze fails to be recognising of Eadith's own. Here we have an eloquent example of a moment when the circuit of mirroring expressions is broken: even though she wants to be, Eadith cannot be 'fucked' in the traditional sense, nor in the sense that Gravenor intends ('vaginal, ovarian complications'). It is important to note that Eadith's reticence is not born of mere self-loathing or disgust or contempt for the very simple reason that, as Sedgwick puts it, 'unlike contempt or disgust, shame is characterised by its failure ever to renounce its object cathexis, its relation to the desire for pleasure as well as the need to avoid pain'

(*Touching* 117). Eadith desperately wants Gravenor, feels she is unworthy, but at the same time she is not exactly disgusted with herself (indeed she appears to be quite happy inhabiting a neither/nor space between male and female); hence her ‘desire to be recognised’ (337) by Gravenor, and by the wider world generally. Indeed all attempts by others to get to know Eadith Trist provoke shame: when propositioned by one of the clients to her establishment, the physical manifestations of shame – downcast eyes, trembling hands – are quite conspicuous.

‘I’m not in the habit of sleeping with my clients.’
‘Lovers, then?’
She glanced down at the blotches on her withering hands. ‘Not even lovers. No longer. I’ve learned to suspect love, as you, apparently, suspect me.’
She really must manage her trembling. (334)

What ultimately stops her from consummating the relationship with Gravenor, with anyone, is, very fittingly in the context of shame, her own sense of indeterminate or illegible selfhood.

It is clear that the feelings Eadith has for Gravenor touch upon the very foundations of her sense of self. And I use the word ‘touch’ here advisedly, for the relation between the protagonist of *Twyborn* and her beau is a distinctly tactile one.

As she tramped the Embankment, her hand skimming the parapet between herself and the river, she was touching Gravenor’s squamous skin: the ignoble lord, her would-be and rejected lover, who might have wrecked the structure of her life by overstepping the limits set by fantasy. (322)

Incidentally, throughout *Twyborn*, the word ‘squamous’ almost assumes the status of a metonym for Gravenor through sheer repetition: ‘the cold, squamous Gravenor’ (323); ‘most tangible proof were her recollections of the squamous skin, pronounced finger joints, stone lips fleshing out whenever her mouth consented’ (336); ‘it was not the Judge’s hand, too freckled, the joints too pronounced, the skin too squamous’ (376). But

the broader point is that the affective, textured rendering of this relationship serves to further break down the ‘parapet’ between herself and the river’s fluidity. As Sedgwick observes:

[T]o perceive texture is to know or hypothesize whether a thing will be easy or hard, safe or dangerous to grasp, to stack, to fold, to shred, to climb on, to stretch, to slide, to soak. Even more immediately than other perceptual systems, it seems, the sense of touch is always already to reach out, to fondle, to heft, to tap, or to enfold, and always to understand other people or natural forces as having done so before oneself, if only in the making of textured objects. (*Touching* 14)

In much the same way as shame, our perception of touch both reinforces and forces us out of ourselves. It is this conceptual double movement that inclines Sedgwick to argue that ‘a particular intimacy seems to subsist between textures and emotions,’ and indeed that ‘the same double meaning, tactile plus emotional, is already there in the single word “touching”’ (*Touching* 17). The romantic relationship between Eadith and Gravenor, so central to the plot of Part III of *Twyborn*, has as its centre of gravity, the very same tactile dynamic of ambivalent selfhood. To touch Gravenor’s squamous, scaly skin is to be affectively alert to the slippery lamella between self and other. It is also instructive to note that a similar dynamic governs Eadith’s relation to herself: ‘Eadith Trist sat scratching herself. She might have felt more at ease had she heard the body-hair answer back. Her person, her life, her arts, constantly failed to convince her, though others seemed taken in’ (353-4). This disposition suggests an unease much more fundamental than merely having the wrong set of genitals: it almost suggests the impossibility of knowing Eadith Trist beyond her own cutaneous reality; and affect also intensifies our understanding of Eadith’s motivation in maintaining so agonisingly ‘the limits set by fantasy,’ supplementing the obviously coarse and limiting considerations of gender and sexuality.

The Shameless Performativity of Camp

Shame and the performance of heterosexual femininity are tightly bound in the final part of this text. And it is this nexus of shame and performativity that Sedgwick identifies as its most conceptually generous quality:

Shame interests me politically, then, because it generates and legitimates the place of identity – the question of identity – at the origin of the impulse to the performative, but does so without giving that identity space the standing of an essence. It constitutes it as to-be-constituted, which is also to say, as already there for the (necessary, productive) misconstrual and misrecognition. Shame – living, as it does, on and in the muscles and capillaries of the face – seems to be uniquely contagious from one person to another. And the contagiousness of shame is only facilitated by its anamorphic, protean susceptibility to new expressive grammars. (*Touching* 64)

The somewhat incongruous opening of Part III of *Twynborn* signposts both the contagiousness of shame and the question of identity at the origin of the performative. Part III begins with a rumination on the lives of Gravenor's maiden aunts, Kitty and Maud: two characters who thereafter make no further appearance in the text. Why then are they afforded such prominence? I believe the answer to this question lies in their relational, specular interaction with the Bawd of Beckwith Street, however distant:

Even Maud was given to smearing a trace of lipstick over the cracks in pale, rather tremulous lips, while Kitty went the whole hog, and blossomed like a tuberous begonia. If she no longer enjoyed sleep, and teeth made eating a difficulty, she could toy with the thought of shocking. But whom? Most of the shockable were dead. Unless, under their lipstick, Kitty and Maud themselves, who were intermittently shocked by what Kitty visualised, and the timorous Maud only dared suspect was going on at Eighty-Four. (305-6)

Both Kitty and Maud are constituted, brought to life even, by the contagious shame of Eadith Trist: the intermittent shocks of shame inject an affective intensity and even play 'the most considerable part in their otherwise withering, insomniac lives' (307), in much the same way that the presence of the wandering vagrant contaminates the affective lives of the students who feature in Sedgwick's illustrative thought experiment. Importantly, however, the shame of Kitty and Maud passes through their beings and gets re-expressed in a very specific camp performativity. Shame's contagion manifests itself in the

application of ‘lipstick over the cracks in pale, rather tremulous lips’ and in Kitty going ‘the whole hog, and blossom[ing] like a tuberous begonia’. It is the ministrations of Eadith and her whores across the road that effect in Kitty the ‘thought of shocking’ the ‘shockable’. The shame of these maiden aunts takes on a specular relation to the activities of Eadith’s brothel in that shame passes back and forth between these two social poles, is internalised, re-routed and released again as a camp performance of femininity: Kitty and Maud are ‘roused by disgust for overt immorality’ (306) at first, but ‘after an oblique fashion, the sisters [begin] shedding their opposition to the establishment across the street,’ and even derive ‘a voluptuous pleasure in associating themselves with imagined rituals of a sexual nature’ (306); meanwhile, the same process is mirrored across the street, with Eadith taking to ‘waving a long arm, and smiling out of a chalky face’ in response to the silent remonstrance of the Bellasis girls, ‘by more blatant light,’ ‘looking out from their separate bedrooms’ (307). Eadith herself embodies the anamorphic, protean susceptibility to new expressive grammars of shame in the camp, theatrical manner with which she is introduced in the text by Evadne, Kitty and Maud’s maid:

Mrs *Eadith* Trist.

It was Evadne who came up with what one could hardly refer to as the woman’s ‘Christian’ name, together with the unsolicited detail that you spelt it with an ‘a’. (308)

This very contrived, very camp entrance – and the bitchy rejoinder with which that ‘Christian’ name is freighted – is executed in pursuit of obscuring the more ‘shameful’ aspects of her character and behaviour. Drag here is a means of concealing the homosexual Eddie underneath, but it is also true that the camp performance of identity re-animates this shame, the experience of which is perhaps reserved for those who see – who enjoy! – the performance of Eadith Trist in light of all its exuberant and communicable shamelessness.

To draw camp into the realm of shame is to begin to think about camp in terms of affect. Such an approach seems eminently necessary in light of camp's notorious resistance to definition. In surveying the history of critical attempts to analyse and characterise camp, Fabio Cleto notes, in his introduction to *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject (A Reader)*, that 'the state of the art, and the whole tradition of critical writings, can in fact be summarised in a series of oppositions, enacting the binary logic that is at once *challenged* and *invoked* by camp as a queer, transversal, "across" issue' ('Introduction' 23, original emphasis). Cleto goes on to list some of the binaries through which camp has been conceptualised, including, but in no way limited to: 'camp as sensibility vs. camp style and taste'; 'camp as fully modern vs. camp as metahistorical'; 'camp as a sign of homosexuality vs. camp as an aesthetical dimension'; 'camp as a secret, closeted code vs. camp as flaunting, flamboyant, histrionic'; 'camp as private, seclusive vs. camp as community experience'; 'camp as aristocratic vs. camp as democratic'; 'camp as ironic mode vs. camp as parody' ('Introduction' 23). As the heterogeneity of this list attests, camp performatively enacts its love of semiotic excess and discursive resistance at a conceptual level. In light of the fact that eminently plausible cases can be (and have been) made for both sides of each binary listed above, Cleto concludes that 'camp won't be traceable on one of these polarities, the one that should be taken as the originary and real deployment of camp: it will be in the *movement* across, in the mobile and transversal relation of the two polarities' ('Introduction' 23, original emphasis). And it is from this point that we can begin to incorporate affect into our understanding of camp. Indeed, we might even be so bold as to suggest that camp, given its inherent semantic instability, requires affect if we are going to make any sense of it at all.

When it comes to the social phenomenon known as camp, one of the great strengths of affect theory is its insistence on thinking about fluidity and on the distortions inherent in a purely linguistic conceptualisation of the real. As Massumi argues:

If passage is primary in relation to position, processual indeterminacy is primary in relation to social determination. Social and cultural determinations on the model of positionality are also secondary and derived. Gender, race, and sexual orientation also emerge and back-form their reality. Passage precedes construction. But construction does effectively back-form its reality. Grids happen. So social and cultural determinations feed back into the process from which they arose. Indeterminacy and determination, change and freeze-framing, go together. (8)

If camp is best understood as a fluid movement between cultural signifiers, it makes sense to examine it as a continuity under a conceptual rubric of qualitative transformation. I propose to examine camp as a field, placing to one side attempts to classify and codify it (as language, as meaning) while foregrounding its performative, ontogenetic dimensions. In this context, we can take our cue from Susan Sontag's famous asseveration that 'to talk about camp is therefore to betray it' (53): I believe it is much more useful to examine the ways in which camp is felt, sensed and expressed. Indeed, like all analyses of cultural representation, approaches to camp will be

incomplete if they operate only on the semantic or semiotic level, however that level is defined (linguistically, logically, narratologically, ideologically, or all of these in combination, as a Symbolic). What they lose, precisely, is the expression *event* – in favour of structure... For structure is the place where nothing ever happens, that explanatory heaven in which all eventual permutations are prefigured in a self-consistent set of invariant generative rules. (Massumi 26-7)

It may be a penetrating glimpse into the obvious, but performativity – the *event* – is the place where camp happens, and this is why it so consistently resists enclosure within any 'explanatory heaven' that seeks to pin it down. And Sedgwick herself recognised this when she suggested, if only 'parenthetically,' that 'shame/performativity may get us a lot further with the cluster of phenomena generally called "camp" than the notion of parody will, and more too than will any opposition between "depth" and "surface"' (*Touching* 64).

The elaborate attention paid to manners in Part III of *Twyborn* is a camp disposition deployed as a means of coping with the flashes of shame that are, for Eadith Trist, the inevitable companions of knowledge of the self. In her interactions with Ursula, the imperative to maintain a convincing performance of femininity gives rise to a camp fixation on ornament and gesture. However, this preoccupation with the surfaces of society does not thereby delineate an inner depth or personality in opposition to a putative exterior but rather it advertises the deep imbrication of affective (inner) and social (outer) realities, or the collapse of this binary altogether.

As Brigid Rooney argues: ‘often noted for its painterly texture, White’s prose yields irritable energies directed towards the carving out of depths, so that surfaces become, paradoxically, sites of intensity of feeling, and this does the work of affective and social excavation’ (‘Imagining’ 51). Similarly, Davidson also speaks of ‘White’s addiction to decorative detail, his tendency to dwell over sensuously rendered materiality,’ adding that this materiality has a tendency in White’s characters to blaze up within them as an ‘aesthetic-affective intensity’ (11). This is evident the night before Eadith is invited to afternoon tea at Ursula’s (although the word invitation hardly does justice to this piece social manoeuvring): ‘You’ll be the first madam she’s met – and rare objects are her obsession. She’ll add you to the Julius Untermeyer Collection’ (341). This visit is the cause of considerable consternation on Eadith’s part: in trying to explain to herself ‘why Ursula and Rod [Gravenor] were attracted to her’ Eadith concludes that ‘they were excited by

their own perverse behaviour' in consorting with the madam of a brothel and 'the more perverse dangers which Nanny Trist was able to provide'; however, she also worries that

if her noble charges were to detect in Nanny a flaw they had not bargained for, she suspected they would not hesitate to reduce the whole baroque façade of her deception to a rubble of colonial wattle-and-daub; no compunction would save Nanny from the sack. (355)

In aestheticising her relationship with Ursula and Gravenor in 'the cosiness of the nursery fire, with Nanny and a fender to protect them from its perils, in their still childish middle age' (355), Eadith's sense of shame is hereby lent an edge of camp mockery, with 'Nanny' (in her rather overwrought femininity) patting these little aristocrats on the head and enjoying something of an inside joke at their expense, if only for the sake of decorum. It is instructive to note how the 'baroque façade' and the achingly gauche 'colonial wattle-and-daub' are here vividly rendered as the sites of Eadith's shame with the exterior and interior of her identity beginning to mingle at the potential site – or sight – of social disgrace.

It is primarily through this process of aestheticisation that camp operates as a means of coping with the shame that motors the performance of gender in *Twyborn*. Before sitting down, before 'the "things" were arranged' (358) for tea, the hostess leads her new friend through a tour of her mansion, which turns out to be a veritable gallery of portraits of Ursula. At this point there is a slippage in perspective between that of a more or less objective narrative voice and that of Eadith herself. Where once the text fetishized Eadith as something of a camp bitch-goddess – 'mauve was her colour when in full panoply'; 'she dressed with extravagant thought'; 'the more baroque aspects of her self indulgence'; 'the encrustations of amethysts and diamonds, the swanning plumes, her make-up poetic as opposed to fashionable or naturalistic'; 'for the more normal perspectives of life she could not lay it on too thick' (310) – it is now the figure of Ursula that comes under the

gaudy spotlight. Halting in front of one of the more prominent of Ursula's portraits, the image is thus described from Eadith's perspective:

[S]he noticed a larger, more formal portrait of the mistress of the house in white satin and long, white gloves, the highlights and the blue shadows in satin, kid, and diamonds suggesting a noble icicle. Beneath the golden urn of unswept hair the face might have looked warmer if the painter had been interested as well as paid, or perhaps he had not detected warmth, or perhaps his subject was unfeeling. The cheeks of a young Ursula looked like crisp apples which had not been bitten into. (356)

In the noble icicles of jewellery, the golden urn of unswept hair we see an echo of Art Nouveau's tendency, noted by Sontag, to 'convert one thing into something else: the lighting fixtures in the form of flowering plants, the living room which is really a grotto' (56). And in those apple cheeks we see the invocation of an Aubrey Beardsley etching: a blend of the grotesque, the decadent and the (frankly) erotic. Eadith's barbed appraisal of Ursula's image perhaps betrays a note of shame on the part of the former, owing to her own sense of feminine inadequacy, which is expressed in an aestheticisation – a transformation – of an admittedly mediocre painting into an image full of style, wit and incident. And if this gallery of portrait upon portrait upon portrait of a lady serves to underline the shame of the Bawd, the arena of the salon into which the party of two proceeds for tea heightens further still the stakes upon which Eadith's performance of femininity rests.

However, Eadith's use of camp in response to gender-shame is not necessarily bound to her own personal circumstances but is rather stems from the performative nature of gender generally. While it is true that, from its inception, camp has functioned at the nexus of shame and gender, this has really only ever been clearly articulated from within a distinctly male-homosexual context. Philip Core, in *Camp: The Lie That Tells the Truth*, compiles a list of what he calls 'Camp Rules,' in another quixotic albeit perhaps

typical attempt to get at the essence of camp. The following is a representative selection from this list:

CAMP depends on where you pitch it.
CAMP is not necessarily homosexual. Anyone or anything can be camp. But it takes one to know one.
CAMP is a lifeboat for men at sea.
CAMP is an ephemeral fundamental.
CAMP is cross-dressing in a Freudian slip.
CAMP is behaving illegally with impunity; Hemingway defined it perfectly as 'grace under pressure'.
CAMP is embarrassment without cowardice.
CAMP is gender without genitals. (80-1)

It is the last entry in this list that interests me here. If camp is gender without genitals, then well might we ask: what does camp mean to women? Or to put it another way: what might drive a woman to affect a camp disposition? Such questions seem pertinent in light of the very prominent prospect that femininity obtains within Core's camping-ground. In *Twyborn*, as we saw earlier with Kitty and Maud, camp performance, shame and gender identity are intimately, even contagiously, linked. Affect is therefore an important conceptual resource in analysing the dynamic interaction between camp and gender, this 'ephemeral fundamental'. Clare Hemmings notes in characterising Tomkins's conceptualisation of affect that

In terms of our relations with others, Tomkins asked us to think of the contagious nature of a yawn, smile or blush. It is transferred to others and doubled back, increasing its original intensity. Affect can thus be said to place the individual in a *circuit* of feeling and response, rather than opposition to others. (552 original emphasis)

Thus, Eadith's trepidation the night before tea at Lady Ursula's is, if not entirely misplaced, certainly not her exclusive burden because it becomes clear during tea that the spectre of gender-shaming looms large over both parties on account of shame's infectiousness. We see a circuit of feeling running between these two women in the following passage:

She sniggered inexplicably. It made Ursula glance at this grotesque creature with cream and raspberry smeared over magenta lipstick. Because of all she had been taught, Ursula was quick to ask, 'That lipstick, Eadith – tell me the shade, and where you get it.' Only then Eadith came out with, 'I hate it! It makes me look old, ugly and common.' She visualised her tongue sticking out from between her lips like that of some frilly lizard baited by a terrier bitch. 'Oh, but *darling!*' 'No, it's true.' Ursula sat tossing her ankle in Alice-in-Wonderland style. She was reared an expert at ignoring. Eadith knew by now that Ursula would never refer to Dulcie's amateurish abortion. (359)

In this exchange we can see Eadith's shame flare up like a frill-necked lizard, before it gets transferred to Ursula and re-articulated as the camp performance of a woman who administers the word '*darling*' in italics. We also see camp doubling back onto Eadith as she mentally anoints her interlocutor as a 'terrier bitch'. Crucially, this affective dynamic is generated by a tube of lipstick, by a moment of misrecognition of the parameters – or the correct 'shade' – of feminine performance. Therefore, we might think of the shame generated by gender's performativity as an explanation for a straight woman's foray into camp. Camp, shame and gender assume a looping, circuitous figuration. It is on account of Ursula's camp disposition, her 'Alice-in-Wonderland style,' that Eadith comes to the conclusion that the former would never refer to the botched abortion she witnessed on her previous visit to the latter's brothel, a conclusion that may seem arbitrary if we were not able to grasp the manner in which camp encloses, or covers up like make-up, an abortion which stands, however unfairly, as a prominent cultural signifier of a woman's ostensible shame. Moreover, this tea party, with its lashings of 'high-treble' laughter, 'charitable non-kisses' (356) and 'mock-apologetic coughs' (357), turns into a parade of effete femininity, wherein any pretence to a feminine essence is worn out, through gesture and stylisation, leaving a hollow, yet – as Eadith's own genital situation attests – infinitely reiterative and endlessly fabulous performance.

But if, as Dean Kiley suggests, *Twyborn* is a novel of gender performativity *par excellence* – ‘the novel that Judith Butler would write if she wanted to dramatise queer theory’ (Kiley) – it must also be stressed that the cross-dressing protagonist of this text is not the *sine qua non* of said performativity. Ursula’s use of camp (it’s not just for queers) also advertises the fact that affect, specifically shame, is an inevitable component of Butler’s fundamental conceptualisation in *Gender Trouble* of gender as a performance and a routine. Because gender is a performance that is continuous, is something that must be maintained as a performative event, is, in Butler’s phrasing, an ‘apparatus of production’ (*Trouble* 10), it becomes susceptible to precisely the ruptures in the circuit of mirroring expressions, gestures and assumptions that Sedgwick incorporates into her affective conceptualisation of shame.

The temporality and repetition of Butler’s conceptualisation of gender is in contrast to what she terms the ‘stasis’ of ‘heterosexist structuralism’ (*Bodies* 90). If gender is a continuous performance it is attended by the same shame that haunts an actor who has forgotten her lines: if the circuit of expectations between the performer and her audience is broken, shame is the result. And it is on this basis – through the spectre of shame that hunts the performance of gender – that we can begin to incorporate femininity into our understanding of camp. Butler herself gives us our cues here: ‘*in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*’ (*Trouble* 187, original emphasis). The camp sensibility’s penchant for repartee is analogous to this ‘imitative structure of gender’ while at the same time underscoring the necessity of a turn to affect in any conceptualisation of gender as performative. Indeed

Butler's definition of the performative itself is precisely analogous to camp in its relation to shame:

Performativity describes [a] relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, [a] turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a 'pure' opposition, a 'transcendence' of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure. (*Bodies* 184)

In their utilisation of camp as a means of coping with the shame of gender, Eadith and Ursula are not unlike the jonquils in the windy garden outside, 'blowing but recovering themselves, like frail but erect Englishwomen' (355) – a foppishly floral image which is telling in its expansive reference to general (or at the very least, English) womanhood that must be performed over and over before a tough audience.

The camp sensibility with which the shame of performative gender is re-articulated in *Twyborn* is a subtle, mannered and aestheticising affectation; this is in contrast to the more intense shame that is attached to performative sexuality, which elicits another mode of camp that is altogether more histrionic and flamboyant. Of course, it comes as no surprise that gender and sexuality should be bound to shame in similar configurations, as Butler attests:

Precisely because homophobia often operates through the attribution of a damaged, failed, or otherwise abject gender to homosexuals, that is, calling gay men 'feminine' or calling lesbians 'masculine,' and because the homophobic terror over performing homosexual acts, where it exists, is often also a terror over losing proper gender ('no longer being a real or proper man' or 'no longer being a real and proper woman'), it seems crucial to retain a theoretical apparatus that will account for how sexuality is regulated through the policing and the shaming of gender. (*Bodies* 182)

Butler argues that shame operates to curtail aberrant sexuality *through* gender; but the argument I am making is slightly different. I would argue that the shame of sexuality operates *parallel to* that of gender, and that the foundations of this shame are to be found in the

typifying gesture of this affect: the sense of misrecognition. It is not simply through the gender of object-choice that shame colours sexuality, but rather sexuality, as Sedgwick notes, carrying as it does ‘far greater potential for rearrangement, ambiguity, and representational doubleness’ than gender (*Epistemology* 34), also carries far greater potential for, and perhaps even deeper registers of, shame. Indeed, as Sedgwick argues, the fact that ‘no one person can take control over all the multiple, often contradictory codes by which information about sexual identity and activity can seem to be conveyed’ (*Epistemology* 79) opens up an incredibly volatile social space in which the misrecognitions that presage shame are given a wide latitude indeed.

We see this very phenomenon in *Twyborn* when one of Eadith’s whores calls in sick – ‘Bridie was the worse for an orgy of Guinness and oysters’ (339) – and Eadith’s friend, Diana Siderous, volunteers to cover Bridie’s shift. But Diana fails to recognise exactly what it is she is getting herself into. We are told, with delicious relish, that ‘though Diana’s repertoire was extensive and included the game of whips and chains, she hadn’t bargained for what she got: she had never been on the receiving end’ (339). Emerging from Bridie’s filthy room afterwards, exposed in her folly, ‘disgust rattl[ing] at the back of her throat as she restored her lips at Eadith’s rococo glass’ (339), Diana – in a manoeuvre which should by now be familiar to us – marshals all her powers of theatrics for an exercise in deflection and coping with shame:

Not until Madame Siderous had got herself back into the paste bracelets, her cabuchons and pearls again nestling at her ears and throat, and doctored her nerves with a powerful slug of Armagnac, could she consider translating this gross physical outrage into an anecdote to amaze a dinner party of intimate friends.

She tried a little of it on the bawd. ‘My poor hands, martyred by oyster shells! My knees, crucified on the lust – of some little – civil *servant* – or mingy *professor!*

Mon Dieu, my sweet, what these girls consent to! Does it excite their bodies? Does it stimulate their minds? Do you think they can enjoy an *orgasm*? (340)

In this passage we have a different aesthetic range of camp to that which we have associated with gender. Here we see camp in its more over-the-top manifestation: here we have the outrageous sacrilege of the martyr to bad taste; the jewellery no longer a chic diamond-icicle but more redolent of kitsch and something altogether warmer, more flamboyant, nestling at the neck; there is something even a little coarse and guttural in that ‘powerful slug of Armagnac’ and the exclamation marks which repeatedly arouse this scene. And the doubts expressed by Diana at the end of her monologue only serve to underline the degree of ‘ambiguity’ and ‘representational doubleness’ and hence, the scope for misunderstanding and shame, to which sexual expression is susceptible. Sontag distinguishes between the two competing camp aesthetics according to class and history, but rather than posit a conceptual rupture between the two, an understanding of camp as a spectrum of affective intensity could more easily accommodate both:

The old-style dandy hated vulgarity. The new-style dandy, the lover of Camp, appreciates vulgarity. Where the dandy would be continually offended or bored, the connoisseur of Camp is continually amused, delighted. The dandy held a perfumed handkerchief to his nostrils and was liable to swoon; the connoisseur of Camp sniffs the stink and prides himself on his strong nerves. (63)

It is most apt that Diana’s ordeal should conclude with Eadith offering her a small souvenir, a ‘memento of what I underwent one afternoon as a professional whore’ (340). This ring ‘on which an ancient black scarab was rolling in perpetuity a ball of agate dung’ (340) stands as an eloquent metaphorical articulation of the flagrant reiterability of sexuality’s shame.

It is worth emphasising that Diana’s shame is not necessarily rooted in any moral condemnation, self-inflicted or externally imposed, but is rather associated in this instance with her misapprehension of the nature or quality of the sex to which she had committed

herself. This is an important affective facet of sexuality that is often occluded by an over-eager (and distorting) fixation on the deconstruction of homo/heterosexual definition. In *Epistemology*, Sedgwick distills this shameful aspect of the sexual in the following entry of her list of possible differences that frustrate a single, monolithic understanding of sexuality as the difference between gay and straight: 'For some people, the possibility of bad sex is aversive enough that their lives are strongly marked by its avoidance; for others, it isn't' (*Epistemology* 25). Conceptually speaking, what I love most about this dimension of the sexual is the potential generosity that inheres in the word 'bad': it covers both an understanding of 'bad' as in awkward or uncomfortable and therefore liable to provoke shame; at the same time it can be taken to mean 'bad' as in *outré* or seedy or the things in respect of which you would prefer your mother remained blissfully ignorant. *Twyborn* thematises this axis of sexuality in its representation of 'bad' sexuality as a vector of shame. When a man appears in the lobby at Ninety-Four Beckwith Street, Ada, Eadith's assistant, informs her mistress of his presence, warning that he 'could be one of the big-time cops' (332). In the event it transpires that what Hugh is actually after is sex with Eadith herself; she declines, but not before being told 'we [the police] all know you're running a house of a pretty corrupt kind' (334). Eadith fires back with the following defiant peroration:

'Do you think a brothel will corrupt those who are already corrupted – or who'll corrupt themselves somewhere else – in their own homes – in a dark street – if overtaken by lust, in a parked car, or corner of a public park? All of us – even those you consider corrupt – I'd like to think of as human beings.' (334)

Twyborn consistently advertises the universality of sexual oppression through its consistent, even at times oppressive, focus on shame. The possibility of bad sex, and hence the shame that attaches itself to sexuality, is as much a feature of heterosexuality as it is a feature of queer sexuality. When Gravenor walks in on Eadith and the policeman, he recognises the latter and offers a friendly greeting. Hugh's reaction is thus described: 'a visible melting had

started in her inquisitor' (335). Having been sprung soliciting 'bad' sex in a brothel, a straight man is here filled with shame. And further, burdened by the straight man's allergy to camp, Hugh is bereft of any resources for coping with shame; he slinks away, laughing 'somewhat frenetically' and with 'the least possible exchange of routine masculine geniality' (335). Arguably, without the jewel-encrusted armour of camp theatrics, the straight man is even more vulnerable to the shame of bad sex, possessing none of the *élan* displayed by *Twynborn's* cast of female characters. And when even straight men are afflicted with the burning shame of bad sex, the suffrage of sexuality is expanded into something all too human.

Feeling Backward and the Shame of History

From here we can begin to see how shame is being deployed in *Twynborn* as an expression of the same queer politics that the first chapter of this thesis sought to identify, as part of a critique of the ontology of social difference. Critics of White's work have only just begun the process of investigating this current that runs through these texts. Arguably, the most prominent amongst the readers of White's oeuvre to engage with the radical politics that these texts express is Andrew McCann, who organises White's critique under the concept of the abject. In his analysis of *Riders in the Chariot*, McCann argues that

[T]he utility of the abject in White's work is that it elucidates and undermines the very oppositions that structure what we might call a fiction of the normal, revealing that the apparently normal subject comes into being through a repression and displacement of his or her own inability to fully comply with the demands of a particular social order. ('Ethics' 146)

Pointedly, McCann figures 'the normal' in White's fiction in terms of the politics of race and the discourse of post-colonialism; for McCann, 'abjection is a symptom of and counterpoint

to the political and aesthetic norms of both colonialism and suburbia' and 'White's use of it suggests an attempt to destabilise the oppositional frame that colonial society and suburbia seem to have in common' ('Ethics' 147). But the abject can also be understood to function in White's fiction as an expression of queer politics, as a destabilisation of discreet taxonomies of body and sexually contingent identity; and the abject does this through its intimate relation to shame.

If, according to McCann, abjection is 'figured most emphatically in those objects that signify the dissolution of the boundaries fortifying the self' ('Ethics' 146), then it is fairly clear how the affective registers of shame – already active in disrupting coherent notions of gender and sexuality, as detailed above – might be thought of as prosecuting the same radical politics as that of the abject in this text. Consider the character of Maisie the prostitute: we have an image of abjection personified tied emphatically to a politics of critique: 'toothless for her illness' and 'leaking gas and sickroom smells,' when Eadith pays a visit to Maisie in her sick bed the former is depicted 'mopping up Maisie's incontinence, and flushing its more solid parts down a grey and reluctant lavatory' while the latter's conversation is dotted with pauses 'to clear some phlegm out of her throat' (362). For McCann, 'the expulsion, the abjection of filth, and the repression of social difference' are intimately linked: 'in order to solidify one's allegiances to a modern, national culture, filth must be managed, contained or expelled, confirming the ways in which the modern subject is distanced from a dirty, backward other' ('Ethics' 151). The depiction of the decrepit Maisie in *Twyborn*, who is not shy in advertising 'the honest-to-god professional fuck' (362) she was wont to give her clients in her salad days, advertises the abject's proximity to a shamefully queer politics through an association of sexuality and a certain mode of identificatory fluidity that society rejects.

Maisie is literally encircled by a modern, national culture that depends on firm demarcations of body and self, both sexual and national. Across the road from Maisie's, 'at a church the curtain was going up on a fashionable wedding; at a house the guests, both invited and parasitic, were boring into a reception for a Balkan princess' (363). It is hard to avoid the pointed irony of this reference to a Balkan princess: if ever there was a region that advertised the violent dangers of a rigid national identity paradigm and the urgency of a (queer) critique of such a conceptualisation of being and belonging, surely the Balkans is it. Indeed, within this suburb of London, Masie is tellingly domiciled 'in the attic of a house belonging to a rich, benevolent queer' (362). The fantasies of nationalism and heterosexuality, the 'fiction of the normal,' is here quite literally erected on the abjection of whores, deviants, and queers. And, as Eadith's affective reaction to poor Maisie attests, an essential element which we must begin to incorporate into our thinking about the political dimensions of the abject can be found in shame:

Her cheeks were growing flushed as her mind wafted her. If the five-bob tart [Maisie] was raised by her delusions towards apotheosis, the successful bawd [Eadith] was racked by the clearsighted view she had of her own failures, her anxieties, her disproportion. There was little more that she could do for the present beyond leaving an assortment of notes beside the oiled carton in use as a sputum mug, and in the kitchen, a saucepan of soup she had brewed up. (363)

It is clear that abjection and shame operate in an almost identical manner, indeed that there is considerable conceptual overlap between the two: both function, in their characteristically paradoxical fashion, to undermine and reinforce our sense of selfhood, but without, as Sedgwick notes, 'giving that identity space the standing of an essence' (*Touching* 64). Through their uncomfortable infectiousness, both the abject and shame advertise their most insistent and valuable quality: they can act as a spur for political change, like the small acts of personal charity evinced in Eadith's friendship with Maisie.

Of course, at this point it would be tempting to lapse into optimism; but one only needs to bear in mind the conclusion of *Twbyorn* to appreciate that this is a text of exceptional darkness and despair, with moments of kindness such as the one noted above constituting – at best – a flash in the pan. This despair stems from the necessary sacrifice and emotional forfeiture that inheres in the very queer politics of radical critique that constitutes both the text’s primary theme and its performance. The protagonist of *Twbyorn* is the embodiment of this queer politics in her/his rejection of stable and coherent identities of gender and sexuality – a rejection that becomes more emphatic as Part III of *Twbyorn* progresses towards its conclusion with E beginning to oscillate with increasing frequency between identifications with Eddie and Eadith. In this respect, the eyes of E. Twbyorn offer us a window through which we can glimpse a singularly protean soul: ‘neither blue, nor grey, nor green, but a mingling of them all, changing probably according to mood or light’ (49-50). When contained within the iris, this variability is beautiful – ‘the finest eyes Mrs. Golson had ever seen’ (49) – but a key facet of *Twbyorn*’s queer politics of critique is the difficulty that such fluidity lends to the maintenance of a stable loving relationship, traditionally constituted.

This problematisation of love that *Twbyorn* suggests – amounting to nothing less than a problematisation of the social itself and quite similar to that which we found in the first chapter of this thesis – finds one of its catalysts and its focal points in the relationship between E. Twbyorn and her/his mother Eadie. Contemplating the prospect of reunion with her/his mother, E. muses about ‘The Judge and Eadie: Eadie and the Judge. Nothing

more difficult than to fit the parents into the warping puzzle without committing manslaughter and condemning yourself for the monster you are and aren't' (403). That this process of bloody and monstrous abjection should occur at the site of parenthood is telling in the way it draws parenthood and the problem of love into a painful, an intimate, and a psychological proximity. In this respect we would do well to turn again to McCann's theorisation of the abject in White's fiction, being as it is so heavily freighted with motherhood. For McCann, the connection 'between the abject and the maintenance of the social order' lies at the heart of 'White's fictional project' ('Ethics' 146) If, as McCann argues, 'the process of socialisation involves a consolidation of boundaries that attempt to demarcate the autonomy of the individual' then psychoanalytically speaking, 'this process requires a renunciation of an incestuous attachment to the body of the mother, as a condition of autonomous subjectivity in a predominantly heterosexual, patriarchal society' ('Ethics' 146). But strikingly, E's conviction that 'she must find Eadie' (403) towards the end of Part III of *Twyborn* can actually be understood, in conjunction with her/his refusal to demarcate the autonomy of her/his individuality, as a deeply equivocal act: it is at once a refusal to renounce the body of the mother as an object of cathexis *and* a longing for the social. It is a bitter irony indeed that this queer longing must inevitably appear abject to arguably the one person most intimately invested in the coherence of her/his selfhood:

They were looking into each other's eyes, Eadith's of fragmented blue and gold blazing in their tension, their determination not to melt, Eadie's of a dull topaz, the eyes of an old, troubled dog. The soft white-kid face, the pale lips, began to tremble so violently she had to turn away at last. (422)

If, as I have demonstrated above, the abject shares with shame a propensity to seep into those with whom it comes into contact (in addition to shaming that human object which is abjected or from which this abjection emanates), it can also be said, through this imbrication with shame, to foreclose on the possibility of love. Even though Eadie

accepts her progeny in the guise of a different gender – ‘I am so glad. I’ve always wanted a daughter’ (423) – this acceptance is predicated on an identity that signifies monolithically as ‘daughter,’ on a discursive body that remains wedded to a two-dimensional grid: and so ‘the searchlights had woven their subtle aluminium cage’ (423). This love and acceptance cannot integrate the queer and affecting fluidity of E’s shifting identities, for want of a solid object to latch onto; the dream of love and acceptance is only possible ‘if Eadith could have unbent. But if she had, she might have broken’ (422); and ‘as from all such golden dreams, the awakening would surely devastate’ (423). E. Twyborn is thus fated to remain, in the eyes of her/his mother ‘Eddie Eadith her interchangeable failure’ (431), her abject failure, and ultimately, a source of shame. An unstable identity necessarily entails a degree of misrecognition which, when combined with the affective intensity of love’s attachment, becomes fraught with the potential for shame.

If there is a promise of love in this text, it is always only ever a promise: heightening the tragedy of *Twyborn*’s finale is the tantalising prospect of Gravenor’s radical reconceptualisation of love that exists, alas, only as a deferral. This promise of love, being untethered from any fixed object, is, quite literally in this text, a challenge to history and ultimately an emissary of shame. *Twyborn*’s tragedy is raised to its pitch of emotional intolerance by the possibility that is held out for a new form of love that is contained in the letter E. receives from Gravenor just before her/his death. In this letter – so poignant it was ‘done with a pin, one would have thought’ (426) – Gravenor declares his belief that ‘men and women are not the sole members of the human hierarchy’ and points to a queer reformulation of love: ‘I shall continue to accept you in whatever form

your puritan decides you should appear, if we survive the holocaust which is preparing' (426). Although this love bears the agonising promise of loving without a fixed object or identity at its core and fundamentally disrespecting any of the hierarchies implicit in the taxonomies of gender and sexuality, it seems, with the full weight of history's holocaust bearing down upon it, beyond the realm of history's imagining: the "if" upon which that holocaust depends is certainly a very big one.

Ultimately this ideal of love exists not as a historical artefact but rather as a desire, or to be more specific, as a spectrum of affect that ranges from longing to despair, as the conclusion to Gravenor's letter resigns: "Love" is an exhausted word, and God has been expelled by those who know better, but I offer you the one as proof that the other still exists' (426). Love, as Gravenor conceives it, exists in a temporal twilight: indeed its temporality and its history are rendered void by its perpetual recession into the darkening horizon. Gravenor's love exists rather in the shame Eadith feels for having for so long misrecognised the truly wonderful man that Gravenor is and having deferred the consummation of his love. Love (Heather Love, that is) arguably articulates best the affective predicament that *Twyborn*'s politics enact when she states that

Queers face a strange choice: is it better to move on toward a brighter future or to hang back and cling to the past? Such divided allegiances result in contradictory feelings: pride and shame, anticipation and regret, hope and despair. Contemporary queers find ourselves in the odd situation of 'looking forward' while we are 'feeling backward.' (27)

Gravenor's letter deftly speaks to contemporary queers through its ability to both look forward and feel backward. For contemporary queers, love is arguably an exhausted word that articulates the tragedy of our history.

And so when the end finally comes for E. Twyborn it is nothing if not affecting – indeed it is nothing short of devastating. But there is value in this devastation and this value is derived from the act of remembrance that our devastation performs over and over. Many critics have noted the salience of the negative to queer politics. Sian Ngai, for example notes that queer politics are ‘negative’ in the sense that they are ‘organised by trajectories of repulsion rather than attraction, by phobic strivings “away from” rather than philic strivings “toward”’ (11). *Twyborn* ends with an image of hope forgone: Eadie dreams of herself and her ‘daughter’ living happily-ever-after – ‘sitting in the garden, drying our hair together amongst the bulbuls and drizzle of taps we shall experience harmony at last’ (432). Every reader of the text knows that this by now an impossible dream – E. is dead – but it is also one laced with violence: impossible because it was not Eadith who emerged from Eighty-Four Beckwith Street for the last time but a balding Eddie, with a ‘salt-and-pepper tonsure’ and wearing a ‘cheap suit he had bought in a hurry’ (427), on his way to ‘a short but painful visit to his mother’s womb’ (428) to inform her that he is not her ‘daughter’ and that he will not be returning with her to Australia; it is a violent dream because it, just like the bombs dropping on London, extinguishes the reality of E’s dynamic selfhood, the human whose being accommodates both the ‘steely tonsure,’ ‘the shoddy suit, the pointed shoes, the cropped hair’ of a man and ‘the great magenta mouth... still flowering in a chalk face shaded with violet, the eyes overflowing mascara banks, those of a distressed woman, professional whore, or hopeful amateur lover’ (428). The final incarnation of E. Twyborn is neither ‘daughter’ nor ‘son’ but a self at odds with the historicising forces of gender and sexuality. Bombed out and abjected by history, E. Twyborn is, to use Love’s phrasing, deeply ‘attuned to the queer historical experience of failed or impossible love’ and embodies a disposition toward the past that embraces loss

and risks abjection: the very sense that Love means to evoke with the phrase ‘feeling backward’ (30). E. Twyborn is the standard bearer of an affective politics that insists, as Love does, on ‘the importance of clinging to ruined identities and to histories of injury. Resisting the call of gay normalisation means refusing to write off the most vulnerable, the least presentable, and all the dead’ (30). E. Twyborn is ultimately presented as an impossible love object for the reader: lost to us through her/his failure to register as written history yet endlessly remembered as a touching fate, an affective remainder.

According to McCann, ‘what critics often find scandalising in White’s writing is precisely [the] linguistic recovery of abjection, a recovery which also frequently dissolves the rules of syntactic logic and multiplies rhetorical figures in a way that suggests the semantic multiplicity of a distinctly poetic language’ (‘Ethics’ 153). To this linguistic abjection – which we have already noted in the first chapter of this thesis is an invaluable resource in the articulation of White’s queer politics – we can further adduce in White’s fiction an affective poetics of abjection: even E. him/herself is ‘disgusted’ by the clash of man and woman staring back in the reflection of the plate-glass. As the body of E. Twyborn is finally shattered into abject catastrophe, bleeding to death amongst the rubble of a London street during the Blitz, we too feel shattered. The devastation of the novel’s ending is an affective register, deeply inflected with shame, that both thematises and enacts a resistance to a legible and historicised self. But the defiantly camp tone of E’s final words – ““fetch me a bandaid, Ada” he croaked over his shoulder, while flowing onward, on to wherever the crimson current might carry him’ (430) – demonstrates that it perhaps makes little difference if we shamefully dissolve in a mess of laughter or tears in the face of history’s practical tyranny. Often and repeatedly we do both. Either way,

when readers so viscerally affected do dissolve over the final pages of *The Twyborn Affair* they are laudably engaged in a very queer act of feeling backwards.

But if *Twyborn* ends on a note of love disappointed and selves shattered, this is not to suggest that resignation should necessarily constitute the singular horizon of this novel's cultural politics. As this thesis has shown, and will continue to show as it proceeds, this shattering is for White a powerful and ultimately blissful mode of transcendence; it comprises the spiritual backbone of his literary and political project. Camp performativity has been shown in *Twyborn* to be a vital lifeline in the struggle to live queer in defiance of history: the stylisations, the slightly-off repetitions, the ironic personas and subversive re-iterations that characterise White's representations of gender and sexuality in this novel are all strivings for an evacuation of the essential self. It is in the endlessness of these performances that this novel generates so much of its vitality. To be sure, this cycling through different selves is the occasion of much shame and pain when experienced within the context of the social. And as this chapter has demonstrated, such performative excess does come at the expense of what has been traditionally called love: between parents and children, between lovers themselves. Acknowledging these negative affects and the material, embodied dimensions that subtend his texts is one of the essential tasks in comprehending White's queer politics. But, as shall become clearer later on in this thesis, it is also possible to experience these negative affects as the mere birth-pangs of a new and more promising mode of being: as singular moments in a more expansive cycle of queer becoming.

Chapter Three

Holding Hands on Terminus Road: The Closet, Fisting, and the Postmodern

Architecture of *The Solid Mandala*

It is little wonder that Waldo refrains from heterosexual activity throughout his career. The only surprising thing is that White does not have him engage in homosexual activity since Waldo has the classic psychological disposition for the homosexual lifestyle. We can only assume that White was reluctant to disclose his homosexual preference at this stage in his work, and was forced to repress his character's libido and have him lead an aridly celibate, passionless life (Tacey 133).

This chapter argues that the ambiguous prose of *The Solid Mandala* constitutes a closeted aesthetic that highlights the failure of language to fully enclose the physical body and the representation of sexuality in this text. This chapter proffers a postmodern reading of *Mandala* as a means of engaging with White's closeted and self-consciously textual style of prose. White's closeted textual style is exemplified in the characterisation of Waldo: this character's obsession with privacy is read as an example of the secrecy that forms the basis of Eve Sedgwick's conceptualisation of the closet. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick argues that closetedness is constituted by the speech act of a silence. But if Waldo is a doggedly private person, his sexuality is also performed through a flamboyantly visible and sentimental suffering. As such, the first section of this chapter argues that the closeted aesthetic that *Mandala* exhibits is constituted by a dynamic interaction between secrecy and disclosure: the closet is a mobile space that can be as much an explosive performance of maudlin sentimentality as it can be the act of shutting up. In order to apprehend a sexuality that is both flagrantly legible and seemingly invisible, this chapter turns to the theorisation of a gay reading practice articulated by Lee

Edelman in *Homographesis*. If homographesis describes a discursive process whereby the linguistic signifiers of homosexuality are inscribed on a body thereby made socially legible as homosexual, then *Mandala* represents this process quite literally in its thematisation of the written word: Waldo's career as a writer and as a librarian stand as textual signifiers of his same-sex desire. But an integral part of Edelman's theorisation of homographesis is a double movement wherein the concept of homosexuality also advertises the written word's inability definitively to circumscribe identity. It is this resistance, this 'de-description' that is the result of the arbitrary relationship between sign and signifier, that ultimately characterises the refused representation of Waldo's sexuality in this text.

Because *Mandala* exhibits a postmodern preoccupation with the mobility of the signifier, and because the text's representation of Waldo resists or closets the inscription of sexuality on his body, White's text forces us to pay attention to the spatial dimensions of the closet. The second section of this chapter examines the way in which space comes increasingly to mediate the representation of sexuality in this text. The spatial dimension is of crucial importance when thinking about *Mandala*'s closet. One such space is the library where Waldo works: this is a space where Waldo's desire for one of his male co-workers is enacted. Whereas Nicholas Birns reads the library in *Mandala* as an institution of stability and social security, this chapter argues to the contrary that the library is the site of Waldo's disruptive sexual desires. But more broadly I argue that the library itself stands as a metaphor for the poetics of inter-textual fragmentation that informs *Mandala*'s closeted representation of sexuality: the closet in this text is represented inter-textually, through references to other texts. This poetics of textual breakdown and *Mandala*'s dependence on other texts to generate its closeted meanings is read as a postmodern delegitimisation

of text itself. This inability of the text to independently convey meaning presages a shift in emphasis towards a spatial mediation of reality. And it is within this spatialised reality that *Mandala* articulates its queer politics of resistance to identities and sexualities conceived solely in language.

The final section of this chapter argues that the central relationship between Waldo and Arthur Brown is mediated through the space of postmodernity. In the closeted space of their parent's bedroom, Waldo and Arthur Brown express desires for each other that refuse to congeal into a socially legible sexuality. As such, their desire can best be understood by its spatial coordinates: theirs is a passion that is routed through the fist, drawing these two men together into an ever tighter bond, over ever more painful thresholds of intimacy, such that the boundaries between self and other, inside and outside loose all traction. In this sense, *Mandala*'s impenetrable prose emerges as its inverse: not a constriction of meaning but a yawning dilation of textual possibility. In embracing the refusal of Waldo and Arthur's relationship to coalesce around a disciplinary sexuality, this chapter concludes by invoking Lynne Huffer's conceptualisation of fisting as a mode of sexual expression that resists any Foucaultian impulse to confess. Fisting is read into *Mandala*'s closet and the representation of Waldo and Arthur's sexuality through its postmodern thematisation of textuality, selves and spaces.

Nestled even within its very title, *The Solid Mandala* articulates a thematic tension between the textual and the tangible: the two-dimensionality of written text seems to belie

White's invocation of a mandala that can only be danced by its co-protagonist Arthur and an epiphany that is resolutely solid. Theoretically speaking, this tension finds an echo in the argument that this chapter advances, which is on the one hand a literary and explicitly deconstructive or textualised approach to reading *Mandala*'s closeted aesthetic and, on the other hand, an attempt to engage with the spatial conceptualisation of postmodernism that Jameson posits and which the text's thematics seem to demand. More broadly still, this is a tension with which queer theory itself continues to grapple. As Birns notes, queer theory has often and repeatedly expressed its disquietude with the debt it owes to deconstructionism as its intellectual and theoretical patrimony; for Birns, queer theory even went so far as to conceive of itself as a reaction against this deconstructivist legacy: 'despite its rhetoric of play and game, deconstruction... has often seemed ascetic and monastic... Queer theory discourses shared the freedom and subversiveness of deconstruction, but they enabled that freedom to be less purely cerebral, more embodied' (*Theory* 267). But Birns is perhaps a little too hasty in characterising queer theory's break with deconstructionism as a *fait accompli*. Some contemporary queer theorists, such as Judith Halberstam, continue to give full-throated expression to their concern that queer theory is unduly obsessed with 'unnervingly tidy and precise theoretical contractions,' and that some queer academics have lost themselves in 'a self-enclosed world of cleverness and chiasmus' (107). Halberstam takes aim at one queer academic in particular: she critiques Lee Edelman's literary and deconstructivist style of queer criticism for its failure to 'fuck the law, big or little L,' and for succumbing to 'the law of grammar, the law of logic, the law of abstraction, the law of apolitical formalism, the law of genres' (107). Like Birns, Halberstam conceives a queer theory that is not an 'ascetic and monastic' academic discipline, but rather as something much more solid and ropeable, as a movement 'willing to turn away from the comfort zone of polite exchange'

and embracing ‘a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, the speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock, annihilate’ (110). As this chapter attempts an analysis of the representations of sexuality in *Mandala*, it is clear then that we must find a way to mediate between the seemingly contradictory impulses towards the the textual and the embodied to which this novel of White’s gestures.

The richness and variety of spiritual allusion in White’s novels, or what Beatson characterises as White’s propensity to ‘[clothe] his religious sensibility in garments borrowed from many cultures’ (2) advertises the characteristic gesture of transcendence that White’s metaphysics performs: the transversal movement away from stability and coherence towards a more kaleidoscopic vision of epiphany. The figuration of a solid mandala that is danced by Arthur through the pages of *Mandala* similarly point to a gesture of transcendence: the movement from the textual to the physical. If White’s spiritual thematics play ceaselessly with the borders of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, the queer effacement of inside and outside that this chapter argues is constitutive of White’s postmodern architecture of selfhood works to unsettle the very foundations of selfhood. And in doing so, the sexual practice of fisting, unmoored from the temporality of identity, can be read as an almost spiritual yearning for a deeper and more radical kind of physical relationship.

My reading of fisting in *Mandala* is an attempt to bridge the gap between the literary and the physically embodied by invoking a form of sexual expression that is distinctly postmodern in

its insistent physicality and the problem of its representation. If Jameson's conceptualisation of postmodernism shares the Yale School's conviction that the sign is not coterminous with signification, he also extends that logic beyond the pages of mere text and applies it to the architectural referents of our physical world. For Jameson, the expression that postmodernism finds in its architecture is analogous to the rhetoric of deconstructive literary criticism: Jameson reads a building as if it were a text and finds that postmodern architecture is characterised by its deconstruction of the room:

The room itself – characteristic of that mainstream American society and social space into which the Gehry house has been inserted – stands as some last minimal remnant of that older space as it is worked over, cancelled, surcharged, volatilized, sublimated, or transformed by some newer system. In that case, the traditional room could be seen as some feeble, ultimate, tenuous reference, or as the last stubborn, truncated core of a referent in the process of wholesale dissolution and liquidation. (*Postmodernism* 119)

Ultimately, postmodern architecture abolishes, according to Jameson, 'something even more fundamental, namely, the distinction between the inside and the outside' (98), and it is here that I hope to show how Jameson's thought begins to accord with Halberstam's viscerally embodied and politically active articulation of queer theory. In this chapter I will propose that fisting is the figuration of a postmodern and queered sexuality, in that it is a practice which – like Jamesonian architecture – seeks the abolition of the distinction between inside and outside but does so at the level of embodiment and subjectivity. In doing so, fisting resists the logic and grammar of reference itself, inhabiting the very crisis of representation to which *The Solid Mandala's* title and its closeted aesthetic so insistently speak. Just as Corey McEleney argues that queer theory 'can always benefit from a writerly apprenticeship' and 'training in the rigorous unreliability of language' (159), so does this chapter aim to show the continuing salience of the more overtly deconstructionist and literary stream of queer thought that critics like Sedgwick and Edelman represent by demonstrating a solid continuity between these approaches and a more physically and politically informed reading of White's text. In bridging the gap

between the literary and the physical, my reading of fisting is an attempt to lift White's text off its pages, to endow it with the physicality it demands.

A De-Description of Waldo's Sexuality

One name for the crisis of representation to which the title of *The Solid Mandala* refers is the closet. One might be tempted to characterise *Mandala*'s repeated obfuscations as an example of the closeting that Sedgwick so masterfully conceptualises in *Epistemology of the Closet*. For Sedgwick, closetedness is 'a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence' (*Epistemology* 3). A centrepiece of *Mandala*'s characteristic opacity is to found in the figure of one of its protagonists: Waldo Brown's abiding concern for the extent and integrity of his privacy foregrounds a sense of paradox and unease wherein the reader is at once privy to the character's thoughts through close narrative focalisation and at the same time presented with a deafening cognitive silence. When, for example, Waldo is given over to reflection on his personal papers and the status of the writer in the public sphere, he muses: 'the vanity was that men believed their thought remained theirs once turned over to the public' (118). It is concern to prevent such an occurrence, to prevent his papers from becoming 'what they were never intended for: done-by-the-public sculpture' (118) that Waldo decides to burn his life's work. Waldo's literary *auto-da-fé* is a typical example of the means by which this novel both reveals and occludes its character's interiority, by which the text performs silence through utterance:

Waldo liked that. It made him look rather sly. Now they would go home, and while Arthur was occupied with some bungling business of his own, he would take down the private box, he would take out the current notebook. *Always taking, taking renews, give too much and the recipient expects all.* He liked that, he would write it down. For his PRIVATE pleasure. And the bit about *form of youth, time and memory*. In that way he

would continue living. In the notebooks. In his secret mind. In spite of Arthur. And Goethe. (119)

I say that it would be tempting to characterise Waldo's 'private pleasure' as a closeted desire because it would appear that this passage quoted above adheres rather neatly to what Sedgwick argues is the central mechanism of the closeted aesthetic, namely the process whereby 'the subject – the thematics – of knowledge and ignorance themselves... become not contingently but integrally infused with one particular object of cognition: no longer sexuality as a whole but even more specifically, now, the homosexual topic' (*Epistemology* 72). This passage is remarkable for the particular intensity of its narrative focalisation, incorporating a combination of third person declaration ('Waldo liked that') with something approaching – though not quite achieving – the steady flow of a stream-of-consciousness. This act of drawing the reader into a narrated trickle-of-consciousness has the paradoxical effect of reserving part of that consciousness under the protagonist's conscious contemplation of privacy: it is tantalising in its refusals. The reader is here put in the position of the expectant recipient of knowledge: the very person that Waldo seeks to deflect. And in this deflection he is quite successful, because although the reader is granted access to scraps of his thoughts ('*form of youth, time and memory*') we are not granted any useful access to their meaning, such that this narrated consciousness stands, more than anything else, as a jarring yet suggestive riddle. The enjambment of writing (as opposed to knowing) and a closeted homosexuality will be analysed in further depth as this chapter proceeds, however it is sufficient to note at this juncture that Waldo's 'private pleasure' and 'secret mind,' which is to say his 'current notebook,' are stashed in his mother's old David Jones dress box – the same box which once held his mother's glass-bead dress; the same dress which is the occasion for Waldo's outing to the reader.

Sedgwick's conceptualisation of the closet is concerned with 'the differences it makes when secrecy itself becomes manifest as *this* secret' (*Epistemology* 74, original emphasis); but the homosexuality of Waldo is one of the few things in this novel that is resolutely *not* a secret. Walking hand in hand down Terminus Road at the novel's commencement, the sexuality of the Brothers Brown is well-nigh advertised in the manner of a lurid, floodlit billboard: Waldo and Arthur are 'that pair of poofteroos across the road' (18). Although their neighbour Bill Poulter's rabid accusation carries with it all the subtlety of a lynch mob, what Sedgwick calls 'the underpinnings... for both a gay male sentimentality and, even more, a sentimental appropriation by the larger culture of male homosexuality as spectacle' are to be found in the same paradoxical relationship of secrecy and disclosure that we saw in Waldo's trickle-of-consciousness outlined above:

The kid in Ohio who recognises in 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow' the national anthem of a native country, his own, whose name he's never heard spoken is constructing a new family romance on new terms; and for the adult he becomes, the sense of value attaching to a 'private' realm, or indeed to expressive and relational skills, is likely to have to do with a specific history of secrecy, threat, and escape as well as with domesticity. (*Epistemology* 144)

Bill Poulter's brutal outing of Waldo and Arthur circulates easily within this 'history of secrecy and escape' that Sedgwick articulates. So too does the depiction of Waldo's cross-dressing. The scenes of Waldo's cross-dressing might best be taken as an example of homosexuality as maudlin spectacle, or the drama of the closet that Sedgwick theorises. This scene where Waldo dresses himself in his mother's dress can be read as a *cri de cœur*, as the dramatised spectacle of suffering occasioned by the closet's stifling repression. In this scene Waldo is very much the image of a sad, sentimental Friend of Dorothy's:

Exposed by décolletage, his arms were turning stringy. The liquid ice trickled through his shrinking veins. Shame and terror threatened the satiny lap, under a rustle of beads. Each separate hair of him, public to private, and most private of all the moustache, was wilting back to where it normally lay. (193-4)

Moreover, this scene enacts a new, and decidedly more fraught, family romance on new terms, because ‘all the family were in the glass: Dad and Mother, Uncle Charlie, Cousin Mollie and “Adelaide”, all huddled in the darkened box, waiting to see, not only what offered itself for killing, but how their own blood would run’ (291). The jilted family romance, or the lurid hysteria of a family meltdown being one of the touchstones for homosexual sentimentality: thus do we begin to see how the trope of sentimentality both attaches itself to and undoes the secrecy of the closet. *Mandala* advertises the need for us to further refine our understanding of a closeted aesthetic as something more nuanced than a simple equation, because the representation of the closet as flamboyant suffering in this text means that homosexuality is not always coterminous with absence and silence: as Waldo’s costume demonstrates, ‘his ribs shivery as satin, a tinkle of glass beads silenced the silence’ (193).

Indeed, in the absence of a more finely grained understanding of textual closeting we run the risk of violently re-inscribing the very sexual legibility that *Mandala*’s characterisation of Waldo so insistently resists. Waldo dreads exposure. With his obsessive concern for secrecy he might be said to derive a not altogether undesirable sense of security and safety from the closet; Waldo’s ‘public life’ becomes ‘an assurance’ to the extent that nobody ‘would be expected to strip in public’ (194). Frantically wondering whether Arthur had seen him dressed in their mother’s dress, the text asks of Waldo: ‘Was he caught? Breathe a thought, even, and it becomes public property’ (194). Here we see the closet operating in the guise of a defence mechanism while exposure becomes synonymous with vulnerability. We would be committing an act of textual violence were we to conclude our analysis of the closet in this text simply by outing

Waldo: not only is the scene of Waldo's transvestism 'an evening set aside for subtlety' (192), but this revelation must also mark the beginning of our enquiry rather than its conclusion, as the text itself remarks while Waldo resumes his 'normal' façade: 'Now at least he was free, in fact, if not in fact' (194). More broadly, one of the issues that *Mandala* raises for a queer theoretical/literary heuristic is the extent to which the closet might be theorised as something other than a door that simply needs opening.

The written word is thematised in *Mandala* such that books themselves come to stand as a metaphor for homosexual desire, as the closeted representation of homosexuality. When Waldo decides to take his neighbour from across the street, Bill Poulter, as a friend, there is a suggestion that Waldo's desires might be more than platonic. Waldo's approach is referred to as 'tak[ing] the bull by the horns, as it were' (142). But from the outset, the reader is placed in a decidedly indeterminate position and Waldo's intentions, characteristically, remain opaque. Like Waldo then, we are invited to make of this scene whatever we like: 'but take Bill Poulter – virgin soil, so to speak. He [Waldo] might turn Bill into whatever he chose by cultivating his crude manliness for the best' (142). Given the opacity that clouds this scene the following exchange between Waldo and Bill might be taken as a prime example of the closeted aesthetic employed in this text:

The situation couldn't be called desperate. The climate was too positive. A smell of male exertion on the air encouraged Waldo to come to the point. 'Ever go in for reading books?' he asked very cautiously. 'Nah.' Bill swung the axe, and split the knottiest chunk of wood. 'Never ever have the time.' (143)

We see here the manner by which inscription itself comes to inscribe this scene as a homosexual encounter, marked as 'what they called in the papers an indecent proposal' (144). The whiff of indecency emanating from the stimulation of Waldo's enthusiasm by

Bill's male exertion; the otherwise inexplicable sense of apprehension that accompanies Waldo's entreaty: both these elements find their erotic catalyst in the figure of the written word, where, to come to the very phallic point, reading books is clearly meant to be read as 'reading books,' the 'going in' for which creates a very suggestive epistemological vacuum. If central to Edelman's conceptualisation of 'homographesis' is the 'inscription of "the homosexual"' within a tropology that produces him in a determining relation to inscription itself' (*Homographesis* 9), then this scene can be read not only as Waldo's attempted seduction of Bill, but also as a metaphor for homosexual desire generally.

Metaphor is a particularly apt means through which to focalise our reading of this scene, for if 'the superimposition of an allegedly stable metaphoric significance upon the metonymic category of desire *makes possible* conventional figurations of the legibility of a distinctively homosexual "morphology"' (*Homographesis* 11), then this scene very ably catalogues the signs by which a stable, twentieth century understanding of "the homosexual" can be traced: the cautious, furtive approach; the careful cultivation of crude manliness; the threat of criminal prosecution and a tabloid scandal; even the telling detail of Waldo's limp wrists hanging 'between his squatting thighs as he watched Bill Poulter chop' (143); all these signs coalesce around the central metaphor of reading in this scene to produce a very legible morphology of what it means to be a homosexual. And if reading is read as the secret expression of homosexuality, then writing becomes its confession. When Waldo's mother asks her son about the book he is writing, Waldo 'could feel the flesh shrivel on his bones' (161). The scene becomes another one of those cringing, sentimental, archetypically homosexual scenes:

‘What book?’ he asked.
Her question, her look had been practically indecent.
‘You needn’t tell me,’ she said, ‘if you don’t want to.’
And continued smiling at him in the way of those who know through hearsay
or intuition that something is being hushed up. (162)

Perhaps because the encounter with Bill Poulter and his mother’s questioning both fall short of the spectacular sentimentality of Waldo’s cross-dressing scene, they stand nevertheless as neat demonstrations of the process by which the closet moulds a metonymic desire into a decidedly more legible metaphor of sexuality.

It must be stressed at this point however that while homographesis is a process of inscription, it is also simultaneously a demonstration of the limitations of the written word to apprehend and fix a stable notion of identity. As Edelman notes, homographesis exists in two guises because writing itself, in relation to speech, exists as ‘a secondary, sterile, and parasitic form of social representation’ (*Homographesis* 9).

Like writing, then, homographesis would name a double operation: one serving the ideological purposes of a conservative social order intent on codifying identities in its labor of disciplinary inscription, and the other resistant to that categorisation, intent on *de*-scribing the identities that order has so oppressively *inscribed*. (*Homographesis* 10)

This process of de-description hinges on the figure of the homograph: words that share the same written form (spelling) but are of different etymologies and have different meanings. The word ‘bank,’ for example, is a homograph because it can refer to both the edge of a river and a financial institution. Homographs are an important component of Edelman’s conception of homographesis because they

insist upon the multiple histories informing graphic ‘identities,’ insist upon their implications in various chains of contingent mutations, that lead... to situations in which the quality of sameness, once subjected to the ‘graphesis’ that signifies writing as de-description or as designation through differentiation, reveals the impossibility of any ‘identity’ that could be present in itself. (*Homographesis* 13)

Through the figure of the homograph then, homographesis incorporates a conception of identity as a socio-linguistic construct, positing homosexuality as ‘a refusal of the specifications of identity (including sexual identity) performed by the cultural practice of a regulatory homographesis that marks out the very space within which to think about “homosexuality” itself’ (*Homographesis* 14).

This queer refusal of a stable, essential core of identity which homographesis epitomises in its second guise is a useful means of examining a second erotic encounter that occurs in *Mandala* between Waldo and his colleague at the Sydney Municipal Library, Walter Pugh. Given that the text is more or less overt about the nature of Waldo’s feelings for Walter – ‘Waldo might have loved Wally, if that truth had been admitted’ (128) – the extent to which we can characterise this relationship as closeted is, again, questionable; but the dynamic between these two men does reveal an important dimension of epistemological ambiguity that attaches both to the nature of this relationship and thus to the identities of its participants. Indeed, the word through which such ambiguity is generated – ‘admitted’ – is itself a homograph: are we meant to make of Waldo’s love something that is not admitted because it is not allowed, or as something not admitted because Waldo refuses to confess his true feelings? ‘Admitted’ as ‘allowed’ or ‘admitted’ as ‘confessed’: this double sense in which the word ‘admitted’ operates serves to destabilise the parameters of this relationship, in that the reader is forced to interrogate the process by which relations between two men are inscribed as homosexual. Well might we ask: like the proverbial tree falling in the woods, is the dynamic between these two characters homosexual if no one is prepared to act on their feelings?

The interactions between Waldo and Walter are littered with such homographs, such that the reader can never be sure where the line between mateship and sexual desire lies. Walter repeatedly and homographically calls Waldo a 'lucky bugger' (122), 'old bugger' and 'you bloody old bugger' (123). Whereas the encounter with Bill Poulter advertised the signs that might identify a homosexual, the profusion of homographs articulating Walter and Waldo's relationship put this process into reverse, making identification itself an increasingly baffling endeavour. At one point during a discussion in the library lavatory about sexual frustration, the identificatory distinctions between the two librarians seemingly breaks down completely, as when the following line from the text is given over to a paragraph of its own:

'Who?' asked Wal. (123)

The rhetorical impaction of interlocutors at this moment, the inability of the reader at this point to definitively ascertain which character is speaking and which one is listening leaves us asking: who is saying 'Who?' to whom? Does 'Wal' refer to Walter or to Waldo? This sentence graphically dramatises the inability of graphemic signs to pin down a stable, essential concept of identity while advertising the intimacy that subtends the active questioning of identity. Paradoxically, the desire that Waldo feels for his co-worker works against the process of inscribing a sexuality. Here sexual desire is figured as a self-dissolving extension, as the ambiguous posing of the question: 'Who?' We are left here with a conception of sexuality that disturbs, rather than reifies, the self. Tellingly, 'Walter Pugh was Waldo's gravest source of disturbance' (128).

Postmodernism and the Closet of Intertextuality

Implicit in my use of both Sedgwick's and Edelman's constructions of the closet as a deconstructive framework for analysis of *Mandala* is an attempt to emphasise the self-consciously textualised and writerly manner of White's prose. It will become clearer as this chapter progresses that this style of writing speaks to a postmodern discourse of language that critics of *Mandala* have for the most part failed to appreciate. Of course there are exceptions to this: Gregory Graham-Smith's reading of *Mandala* as a 'palimpsestic narrative' wherein 'White writes (out) the gay self' (168) through his 'innate scepticism regarding the power of art to impose order on the intractable chaos of human existence' (170) is deeply attuned to the distinctly postmodern style that White's text exhibits and its imbrication with the text's closeted representation of sexuality. Graham-Smith argues that *Mandala*'s closeted aesthetic is motored by discursive impossibility:

Through a constant process of inflexion, White ensures that the twins function as multivalent signifieds, whereby narcissism, gayness, and incest as sexual signifiers cannot operate conclusively. This enables Arthur and Waldo to stand (in) for the gay subject himself as being unlocatable and unfigurable... (172)

Graham-Smith goes on to draw a direct parallel between *Mandala* and White's later and more overtly postmodern *Memoirs of Many in One*, arguing that both aim to mock 'the humanist idealization of the artist as gifted visionary,' and that *Mandala*'s use of 'multivalent signifieds' (172) and 'superimposed narratives' 'occasions a hiatus within the heterosexist register which relies on a myth of seamlessness' (173). And in a similar vein of postmodern thought, David Coad argues that 'a rich network of intertextual references' demonstrates the dependence that *Mandala* owes to its 'hypotexts' in order to generate meaning (111).

For the most part however, critics have tended to emphasise *Mandala*'s modernist credentials; and in doing so have missed the torsions and occlusions of *Mandala*'s closeted aesthetic. Foremost amongst these modernist readings is Birns' essay 'The Solid *Mandala* and Patrick White's Late Modernity', in which he argues that *Mandala* is 'a prototypical evocation of late modernity that indicates precisely why and how it was different from the neoliberal and postmodern era that succeeded it' ('Modernity' 1).

Birns' argument would appear to be at odds with the postmodern reading of *Mandala* that this chapter has advanced thus far; indeed Birns argues quite plainly that 'the narrative in which they [Waldo and Arthur Brown] are encased is late modern and not postmodern' ('Modernity' 7). However, Birns' argument is also an overt attempt to historicise White's *Mandala*; Birns' aim is to show how this novel 'reflects certain values of its period' and reads the text as a commentary on the specific social, economic and political context of 1960s suburban Australia which he characterises as late modernity ('Modernity' 2). The emphasis of this historicist approach is somewhat different from the argument that this chapter has advanced in that the reading of *Mandala*'s closeted aesthetic outlined above is concerned primarily with how the text functions less as product of its time and more as a text that resonates within a literary discourse of postmodernism. Indeed, Birns himself readily admits that 'to historicise late modernity presents a paradox' ('Modernity' 1); he notes that 'to historicise a mentality that claimed history no longer mattered... is one of the many cognitive quandaries with which the twenty-first-century examination of late modernity – and of Patrick White's fictions of it – must contend' ('Modernity' 1-2).

Given that, as Birns himself puts it most eloquently, 'the very method of historicisation is an effect of a postmodern viewpoint, and in a sense is a token of the epistemological irrecoverability of the late modernity it at least effectively seeks to reclaim' (1-2), we might say that the theoretical distinction between modernism and postmodernism is

porous at best, and I am content to leave this debate more or less to one side. Arguably, such distinctions between modernism and postmodernism are unhelpful when reading White. As Michael Giffen demonstrates quite persuasively, the ‘dialectical critique of the logical positivism of reason’ that White’s texts invoke draws on currents from both streams of thought. Giffen notes that both modernism and postmodernism have been animated – insistently, rigorously – by ‘the double goal of examining our understanding of reason and, at the same time, of interrogating what reason is or represents’ (34). And to the extent that White’s text is concerned with the deconstruction of systems of knowing, it can also be said to occupy a shared space of overlap between postmodernism and its antecedent.

Having said that, one point of contention that needs to be addressed concerns the centrality that Birns gives to the figure of the library in his reading *Mandala* as a text representative of late modernism. This is so because the library is, as we saw above with Waldo’s dalliance with Walter in the bathroom of the Municipal Library of Sydney, a figurative closet where a project of coherent, utopian selfhood is defeated. The library in *Mandala* can in fact be read as the setting for something of a ‘primal scene’ for a postmodern reading of this text that is attuned to the *Mandala*’s closeted textuality. Central to Birns’ conceptualisation of postmodernism, and the primary reason why he argues that *Mandala* should not be read as a postmodern text, is his conceptualisation of the ‘precariat’: for Birns, in postmodernity ‘the paradigmatic class is composed of people subject to risks beyond their control (and not controlled for them by the state)’ (‘Modernity’ 2). According to Birns, Waldo is not a member of the precariat, and hence

not to be read as a postmodern subject, as a consequence of his stable occupation at the Municipal Library, with a salary paid for by the mid-twentieth century welfare state:

Waldo and Arthur, the co-protagonists of *The Solid Mandala*, are people who, in the late modern paradigm, however tormented and limited their lives are in individual terms, are provided a firm social foundation by their polity... The Browns are not part of 'the precariat' in White's novel because there is not yet any precariat. Indeed, the lack of risk in their lives, their plodding routine, is one of the factors that particularly frustrated the would-be self-dramatist in Waldo. ('Modernity' 3)

Notwithstanding the ample drama and risk animating Waldo's life that I have already shown to exist, and the volatile impulses of the 'vast corrosive satire on the public service' that Waldo wishes to write while at work, even the Municipal Library itself is a scene of considerable precariousness for Waldo. Not only is it the space in which his illicit desire for Walter Pugh is enacted, and therefore the space in which Waldo's secure sense of self is most at risk, it is also a space in which Waldo seems determined to humiliate himself by the most forthright of means:

And sometimes even then, in the stacks of the Municipal Library, in the sound of dust, and the smell of decaying, aged flesh, he would open a book to dedicate himself anew. And he would stand shivering for the daring of words, their sheer ejaculation.
[...]
He shut the book so quick, so tight, the explosion might have been heard by anyone coming to catch him at something forbidden, disgraceful and which he would never dare again until he could no longer resist. He looked round, but found nobody else in the stacks. Only books. A throbbing of books. He went to the lavatory to wash his hot and sticky hands. (121-22)

Admittedly, the 'precariat' is used by Birns in a historical sense; it refers specifically to the material living conditions of members of the working class (what modernism called the proletariat) after the 'rise of a revitalised capitalism and rhetoric of unfettered globalisation that we have come to call neoliberalism' ('Modernity' 3) and which herald the dawn of postmodernity. That said, Waldo's *jouissance* in the library stacks is incredibly precarious. As Leo Bersani famously argues in 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' – and as we saw in the first chapter of this thesis – *jouissance* 'advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self dismissal, of *losing sight* of the self' ('Rectum' 30, original

emphasis). It is this self upon which the material considerations of historicity are based. The ‘risk of the sexual’ that Waldo’s explosive climax performs renders problematic Birns’ claim that the protagonist of *Mandala* is a paradigmatically late-modern subject with a firm social foundation: the daring of Waldo’s ‘forbidden, disgraceful’ masturbation wrenches him from the safety of a stable polity with all the propulsive, kinetic energy of sexuality’s anti-social tendencies. Indeed it is interesting to note the two alternate terms that Birns borrows when invoking postmodernism – ‘liquid modernism’ and ‘risk society’ (‘Modernity’ 1) – in that both might stand as more than adequate descriptors of the ecstatic suffering into which Waldo is momentarily plunged and the ‘sticky hands’ which come just after. Rather than a stable late-modern subject then, Waldo the librarian and the closeted desires he exhibits are arguably an example of what Jameson in his *Postmodernism* calls ‘the new non-subject of the fragmented or schizophrenic self’ (345).

A fuller demonstration of the library’s contribution to a postmodern thematics of closeting in *Mandala* can be found in the (non)-reference to a poem quoted in the space of Waldo’s orgasm. For Birns, the presence of what he calls ‘hints of historicity and reference’ are a key facet of *Mandala*’s putatively late-modern aesthetic (‘Modernity’ 15). In his essay, Birns demonstrates how the name ‘Waldo’ connects *Mandala* to the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson; to Waldo Farber, the protagonist of Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* which provided the epigraph to *The Aunt’s Story*; and to Peter Waldo, ‘the late twelfth century southern French heretic, [who] championed an asceticism that challenged the opulence of Catholic conformity’ (‘Modernity’ 15). Birns states that ‘these speculative tracings are not intended as mere *quellenforschungen* or

trivia' ('Modernity' 15); rather, they serve to underscore the importance of the library as an institution to his late-modern reading:

they are indications of how late modernity at once hinders access to the past by boxing it up in the reliable circularity of the library but also permitting, through its striated mesh some hints of historicity and reference. These hints are all the more valuable for being hints and not full-fledged substrates, as they would be in postmodern historical fiction... The sources of the names in the books are nuggets to be found in the library, not sustaining or animating bases for a larger and, for better or for worse, more transformative cognition. But, even as nuggets, they resonate meaningfully in the Library's framework of knowledge. ('Modernity' 15)

Birns' characterisation of historical and extra-textual references in *Mandala* as 'nuggets' and 'hints' is anchored to the names and labels attached to them, these being the animating and essential components of the library's 'framework of knowledge.'

However, this framework is challenged by the fragmentary reference to a poem that is inserted in the text with no attribution or sign of its origin whatsoever. In the space between the two passages from *Mandala* quoted above, the space between Waldo's 'sheer ejaculation' and his shutting of a book, in the space that delineates Waldo's 'literary' bliss stand the following lines:

In my dry brain my spirit soon,
Down-deepening from swoon to swoon,
Faints like a dazzled morning moon.
The wind sounds like a silver wire,
And from beyond the noon a fire
Is pour'd upon the hills, and nigher
The skies stoop down in their desire... (121-22)

This fragment is bereft of anything that 'the reliable circularity of the library' might attach itself to in order to identify it. But if this unattributed fragment falls straight through the 'striated mesh' of late-modernism's library, it yields its identity very easily to a quick Google search – a very postmodern mode of cataloguing with a firm facility with fragments. The lines quoted above are a stanza from a poem by Tennyson called 'Fatima'. Situated textually at the very moment of Waldo's shattering climax or 'dry brain,' the poem already functions 'like a dazzled morning moon' as a signifier of erotic

feeling, with all its swooning, fainting, and skies set fire with desire. However, the extent and significance of this stanza's closetedness and the true ambit of its erotics is revealed in the sentimental excess that becomes evident with knowledge of the original poem. The last stanza of 'Fatima' illustrates this point well:

My whole soul waiting silently,
All naked in a sultry sky,
Droops blinded with his shining eye:
I will possess him or will die.
I will grow round him in his place,
Grow, live, die looking on his face,
Die, dying clasp'd in his embrace. (34-5)

Not only is the rest of the poem explicit as to the male gender of the desired object, thus helping to further clarify the nature of Waldo's desire as that of a closeted homosexual, it also helps to register the doomed fatalism that is attached to it and thence to Waldo's yearning. It is instructive to note that the poem was originally published without a title (33). Without 'Fatima' the persona of this poem becomes ambiguous, and this, as Sedgwick argues, is a key trope in the conceptualisation of a closeted homosexuality that is expressed through a flamboyant sentimentality: 'the gender equivocal first person, or the impossible first person – such as the first person of someone dead or dying – are common and, at least to me, particularly potent sentimental markers...' (*Epistemology* 143). Through the androgynous 'I' of 'I will possess him or will die,' and in the mortal 'I' that dies 'dying clasp'd in his embrace,' 'Fatima' functions as a highly charged sentimental marker laced with homoerotic potential. We might call this potential for cross-gendered focalisation and the resultant sentimental appeal the Gloria Gaynor Effect ('At first I was afraid, I was petrified'; 'I Will Survive'). The presence of Tennyson's poem in *Mandala* might therefore stand as another example of closeting as the performance of flamboyant suffering.

But the point to emphasise here is that the closeted intertextuality that ‘Fatima’ epitomises is one that is only yielded by a postmodern literary discourse and the technologies of post-modernity. Birns’ late-modern library is virtually useless in helping uncover the operation of the closet here. Properly speaking, what we have here is an example of Jameson’s conceptualisation of intertextuality; what we see here is a phenomenon wherein

one text is simply being wrapped around another, with the paradoxical effect that the first – a mere writing sample, a paragraph or illustrative sentence, a segment or moment torn out of its context – becomes affirmed as autonomous and as a kind of unity in its own right... (*Postmodernism* 103)

Granted this autonomy, Tennyson’s poem functions as a ‘full-fledged substrate,’ animating and sustaining a ‘more transformative cognition’ by differentially reconstituting both Tennyson’s and White’s texts through a dynamic of intertextual relationality: Tennyson’s female protagonist (Fatima) accrues potential as a potent object of homosexual identification; and White’s theme of homosexuality-as-flamboyant-suffering, already shining quite prominently during Waldo’s cross-dressing scene, is given yet another coat of gloss. The closeted fragment of Tennyson’s poem, identified by typing just one line into Google’s search bar, is capable of rendering *Mandala* as a postmodern artefact. In Jameson’s words, The unreferenced Tennyson poem in White’s novel facilitates a ‘loosening [of] the primary unity, dissolving the work into a text, releasing the elements and setting them free for semiautonomous existence as information bits in the message-saturated space of late-capitalist media culture’ (*Postmodernism* 103).

A Postmodern Architecture of the Self

If the reading of *Mandala*'s library outlined above demonstrates the imbrication of White's closeted aesthetic with his self-conscious (inter)textual style, it also presages the eclipse of the text and gestures towards the spatial dimension as a mediator of identity. The final section of this chapter argues that the lived environment and domestic architecture of White's Sarsaparilla induces a sense of vertigo that problematizes a linguistic and historicised account of the self: the modularity and reiterability of these spaces effaces the distinction between inside and outside. For it is clear that White's representation of suburbia demonstrates that time no longer reliably clocks the movements of a dawning postmodern reality; Sarsaparilla fosters a sense that space has become the dominant conceptual mediator of reality:

After that the road opened out into one of those stretches, a replica of itself at many other points. On the road to Barranugli it was usual for Waldo Brown to forget which bits they had passed, even going quickly in the bus. In the end the bush roads of childhood were no slower than those made by men in the illusions of speed and arrival. The same truck, the same sedan, would stick screeching, roaring, smoking, on its spinning, stationary tyres, no longer in the same rut, but in the same concrete channel, the same stretch of infinity. (60)

In deeming the modern, utopian notions of 'speed and arrival' as mere 'illusions,' this passage replaces a linear articulation of time and history with a dizzying, continuous loop that is both 'spinning' and 'stationary'. As Brigid Rooney puts it, the suburbia of *Mandala* is a place where 'beginnings turn into ends, and ends turn into beginnings' ('Recluse' 13). In this 'same stretch of infinity,' past and present are merged into 'the same concrete channel,' forming the main artery of suburbia. Lining the streets of Sarsaparilla we find not houses with histories but rows and rows of replicas and brand-names, like the aisles of a supermarket. Waldo observes that 'from a reasonable angle the houses remained the labelled boxes which contain, not passions, but furniture: *Green Slopes, Tree Tops, Gibber Gunya, Cootamundra, Tree Tops, The Ridge, Tree Tops*, less advisedly, *Ma Réve*' (58). In Jamesonian terms, when it comes to the architecture of Sarsaparilla's streets 'the elements

float loose under their own momentum, each becoming a sign or logo for architecture itself, which is thereby, needless to say, consumed like a commodity' (*Postmodernism* 100-1).

If postmodern suburbia offers the Brown brothers a comfortably modular reality where literally everything is a low-hanging 'bit,' ripe for rearticulation, it is also 'fascinating,' even 'overwhelming'. The lived environment of Sarsaparilla overwhelms the stability and coherence of the identities that inhabit it, rendering Waldo and Arthur as part of the furniture, so to speak:

The old men weaving along the main street, the one stalking, the other stumping, had known their surroundings so long they could have taken them to bits, brick by brick, tile by tile, the new concrete kerbing, and Council-approved parapets. They would even have known how the bits should be put together again. The old men were still fascinated by what they knew while often overwhelmed by it. For it was overwhelming, really. Take Woolworths. (54-5)

The spatial must begin to displace the temporal in our analysis of Waldo and Arthur's characterisation, because 'nobody seeing the Browns now connected them except in theory with the past, because the past was scarcely worth knowing about. It was remarkable how many of those walking along the Barranugli Road on present errands had only just been born' (60). If Nathaniel O'Reilly notes that White is almost universally characterised as an anti-suburban writer, and that *Mandala* has been 'considered the primary evidence of White's alleged disdain for suburbia and its inhabitants' (98), he goes on to argue that White's texts present 'a much more ambivalent and nuanced representation of suburbia than critics have previously acknowledged' (99). In the commodification of reality that *Mandala* represents, the sense of vertigo that Woolworths induces, we have both an avenue for re-appraising the critical reception of White's

representation of suburbia, and an example of how *Mandala* begins to articulate a postmodern architecture of the self.

More specifically, *Mandala* shows how the lived environment and the domestic architecture of the Brown house on Terminus Road constitutes and re-constitutes the selfhood of its inhabitants, the boundaries of which are in turn revealed to be defined as much by mobility and modularity as are the streets that Waldo and Arthur daily traverse. The house is erected as a metaphor for its owners from the very beginning. When Waldo and Arthur's father is deciding what colour to paint his newly constructed house George Brown settles on an eponymous shade of brown: 'Brown is a practical colour. And, by George, appropriate, isn't it?' (38). The permeability of the signs by which the house and its owners are distinguishable – George Brown choosing brown, by George – runs parallel to the permeability of the house's physical boundaries. In *Postmodernism*, in a chapter devoted to architecture, Jameson observes a similarly analogous configuration of relationality pertaining to the architecture of personal space:

The modern room comes into being only as a consequence of the invention of the corridor in the seventeenth century; its privacies have little enough to do with those indifferent sleeping spaces that a person used to negotiate by passing through a rat's nest of other rooms and stepping over sleeping bodies. This innovation, thus renarrativised, now generates cognate questions about the origins of the nuclear family and the construction or formation of bourgeois subjectivity fully as much as do queries about related architectural techniques. (106)

The renarrativised room of postmodern architecture seeks to interrogate the processes by which a unitary, coherent self is constructed by exposing the elements of architecture as mere signs; and it is in this sense we can think of the architecture of the Terminus Road house as postmodern, as the following description attests: 'It seemed as though the house had grown elastic with time, and they would have to accustom themselves to its

changing shapes. The rooms which they had used before, or not, according to their needs, began using them' (286). As the rooms and forms of the house shift, as it becomes increasingly difficult to disentangle the Browns from the brown house, the inability of the reader to draw hard and fast identificatory boundaries between people and between spaces reveals a postmodern architecture with an affinity for the artistry of a conjurer's trick, as the constructed reality of the house itself assumes the status of an epistemological limit, or even a holy mystery:

It seemed fitting to Arthur that the house which had been built in the shape of a temple should be used as a place of worship, and he took it for granted it would continue to fulfil its purpose, in spite of timber thin as paper, fretting iron, sinking foundations. Like the front gate, it would hold together by rust and lichen, or divine right. (291)

With Arthur's 'worship' of his house, we see how the heart and soul of this character comes to be enmeshed in the space he inhabits in a way that challenges any rational or legible account of the self.

The closer one inspects the house on Terminus road, the more difficult rational apprehension becomes. Thus the same paradoxical dynamic of intimacy and secrecy that pertained to the reader's experience of Waldo's consciousness, to the maudlin spectacle of the cross-dressing scene, and to the relationship between Waldo and Walter Pugh also applies to the house on Terminus Road: the closer one gets to it the less one knows. It is appropriate then that the very centre of the house should be a space of camouflage: the dining room is where Waldo pretends that he is not home when his schoolyard bully pops round unexpectedly to visit. Waldo retreats into the intimate core, 'that dark sanctuary at the centre of the house' (188) in order to hide from the visitor, 'if visitor he were. And not some busybody of an unidentified colleague. Or blackmailer in search of a prey. Or or, Waldo racked his memory, and was racked' (187). If Waldo himself feels racked, he

is also racked in the reader's estimation. The intermingling of his self and the closing of space around him 'in the brown gloom' (24) stretches our sense of Waldo's selfhood to breaking point. We can thus begin to think about a postmodern architectural aesthetic that degrades the gateway between self and other, between inside and outside:

'This gate, Waldo,' Arthur was saying gently, 'will fall to bits any day now.' Sighing.

He was right. Waldo dreaded it. Averted his mind from any signs of rusty iron, or rotted timber. Unsuccessfully, however. His life was mapped in green mould; the most deeply personal details were the most corroded. (26)

The decay of the house down Terminus Road and the erosion of the gateway between inside and outside are thus enjambed with the process of breakdown that defines a postmodern architecture of self-effacement.

Throughout *Mandala*, this breakdown of interiors and exteriors assumes the threatening aura of a taboo. To say nothing of the dread that Waldo feels at the corrosion of his fiercely defended barriers of privacy, from an early age the boys are taught that a man's home is his heavily fortified castle; and when Arthur is chided by his mother in the following exchange, we become privy to the visceral response liable to be triggered by any attempt to penetrate the space of another person:

He loved other people's houses, and never quite succeeded in breaking himself of the habit, it shocked Mother terribly, of opening cupboards and drawers to look inside. Mother continued shocked even after he pointed out it was the best way of getting to know about the owners.

'It's a form of dishonesty,' Mother said.

'It's not! It's not!' Arthur shouted.

'I shouldn't like to think you were dishonest.'

He could feel inside him the rush of words which wouldn't come.

'What's dishonest,' he blathered, jerking his head against the gag, 'when all you want is know, talk to people? I can talk better if I know them better.'

'People tell you as much as they want you to know.' 'Is that honest?' (219)

That Arthur's mother should object to her son's intrusions on the grounds of honesty is instructive in that it sets up the enclosure of personal spaces as a means of mediating the truth. But in *Mandala*, as Arthur's protestations demonstrate, the spatial mediation of epistemologies does not go uncontested: Arthur's ringing accusation – 'Is that honest?' – actively invites the reader to 'get to know about the owners' by rifling through their closets.

Giffen argues, as we noted earlier, that 'the dominant language in White is language which invokes a dialectical critique of the logical positivism of reason.' For Giffen, 'Modernity (and Postmodernity) has the double goal of examining our understanding of reason and, at the same time, of interrogating what reason is or represents' and this is 'the very palimpsest upon which White's literary vision rests' (33-4). It should be clear by now that much of my analysis of *Mandala* thus far accords with Giffen's basic characterisation of White's work: the closet in particular, as I have already shown, is a powerful means by which White confounds any pretence to logical positivism. I mention this now because Giffen is quite correct in arguing that White's texts force us to look 'between and behind the words,' and that 'White's intention is consistently to make his characters and readers aware of their false imaginative horizons of language, and to become aware of the necessary discomfort of looking beyond language' (25). The only thing I would add to this assessment would be to note that the limit of language – or the operation of the closet at its most intense – has very specific spatial coordinates in *Mandala*. If we want to properly understand what Giffen calls the 'discomfort' of the extra-linguistic, we must enter the bedroom of the Brothers Brown; we must peer into the space where, for Waldo, 'some things [are] too private, except perhaps in front of Arthur'

(43). For it is when sleeping in the same bed – their parents’ bed no less! – that the boundaries between the brothers are most flagrantly assaulted: this is where Arthur ‘look[s] almost right inside [Waldo] when they opened their eyes on twin pillows in the morning’ (39); this is the place where ‘they would lie together, and the dark bed was all kindness, all tenderness towards them,’ where ‘skin was never so velvety by day,’ where ‘eyelashes plait together in darkness,’ and where Arthur feels there is ‘nothing more venerable than the conjunction of myself with my brother’ (229); this is a space where language articulates secrets instead of truths and logical positivism falters with a metaphysical caress; a space where ‘Arthur usually got possession of what Waldo did not tell... because he had his sense of touch, and from lying beside Waldo in their parents’ bed, on nights where his brother needed comforting’ (274). If the bedroom of the Terminus Road house is a hushed, closeted space, it is because it is a locus of incestuously permeable erotic investment: a place where Waldo is constantly assaulted by the worry that Arthur might open ‘the bedroom door without warning’ and ‘[catch] him in a state of nakedness examining a secret’ (148).

But what then is the nature of the ‘secret’ that pertains to Waldo and Arthur’s relationship? How might we understand what it is that the brothers are doing in bed with each other and what might the significance of this be? Is this even possible? Deferring this last question momentarily, if the preceding analysis is any guide, then two elements should inform the qualitative assessments that we make of the brothers’ sexual relationship. Firstly, as outlined above, theirs is a sexuality that foregrounds the breakdown of a selfhood predicated on an internal/external binary: ‘the lives of the brothers fused by consent at some point’ (81). Secondly, theirs is a sexuality that

foregrounds the spatial dimension: we might do well to call their sexuality a set of bodily and emotional configurations rather than the signs of an identity formed in language. This can be inferred from the fact that it is a sexual relationship that is closeted in the most literal of senses: it is enclosed within the space of a closet (or in this instance, their parents' bedroom); it does not form the basis for social recognition because, for the most part, it does not enter society, because it does not leave the house. If it were possible, we might think of the boys' sexual relationship as almost pre-oedipal, pre-linguistic or pre-social. What we can say is that within this closet the boys' desire can best be plotted in space, as when 'that night Arthur tried to drag him [Waldo] back behind the almost visible line beyond which knowledge could not help' (47). This is 'the way the relationship had been arranged' (256); it is 'more a harness than a relationship' (24).

However, to the extent that their sexuality is both visible and knowable, it is perhaps traceable by the one outrageously public image of the brothers that immediately strikes the reader as queer: the image of Waldo and Arthur holding hands, walking down the streets of Sarsaparilla. This is the very first image of the brothers we encounter, and it quickly becomes clear that the hand, the fist and the wrists all figure in this text as registers of emotional intensity between the two men; a register for passions as intense as love and hatred, where a sudden flash of hate directed at the world moves Waldo to 'yank at the oblivious hand' (58) he holds as he walks with Arthur; Waldo's boyhood anger towards his brother sees him screaming 'how many times have I told you not to hang on to my hand?' (45). Conversely, rare displays of affection between the brothers are also routed through the fist, even from their very earliest days, as when 'sometimes Waldo buried his face in the crook of Arthur's neck, just to smell, and then Arthur would punch, they would start to punch each other, to ward off any shame, as well as for the pleasure of it' (32); or when 'Arthur was taking, had

taken him [Waldo] in his arms, was overwhelming him with some need' (47). It is also clear that Waldo is stimulated beyond tolerance by hands – but then again who isn't from time to time? – to the extent that hands themselves come to stand in his mind as symbols of a radical sexual openness. Having had his marriage proposal spurned by Dulcie Fienstein, Waldo is transfixed by Dulcie's hands playing the piano and fumes bitterly that 'anyone coarsening so early as Dulcie, in both arms and figure, could only have acted openly': 'how could Dulcie have learned the accompaniments, if not at some sing-song for the boys? Thumping out worse, no doubt, in a vulgar low-cut blouse, as the bacon-faced men, smelling of khaki and old pennies, propped themselves up on the piano' (137). But as the novel approaches its climax, the hands, the fist and the wrist assume a prominence that cements them at the centre of Waldo and Arthur's life-long passion for each other. It is a proposition from Arthur to Waldo that lies at the emotional centre of *Mandala's* denouement. The reason Arthur agrees to daily walks with his brother is revealed in Arthur's offer of complete openness with Waldo, in his vision of spiritual communion. All this is firmly routed in the ambiguous, even homographetic depiction of a manual gesture.

Then Arthur said, with that fluency and lucidity which his crumbly face would suddenly produce: 'That's all right, Waldo. Because we'll be together, shan't we? And if you should feel yourself falling, I shall hold you up, I'll have you by the hand, and I am the stronger of the two.' (210)

If only Arthur can 'guess their final secret through touch' (240), the reader is left to speculate on what it means to be lovingly taken by the hand, or, even more suggestively, to be 'held up' by a hand. But for all that, Waldo refuses to accept Arthur's hands: when Arthur reaches for Waldo he does so with 'one of the hands which disgusted Waldo if he ever stopped to think about them' (169).

Given the postmodern aesthetic that pervades this text, fisting usefully stands here as an expression of sexuality that scrambles the inside/outside scheme of subjectivity through its grounding in dimensions of space. But perhaps the most persuasive element of a fisting reading is its ability to imbue the novel's climactic murder with the pathos of a cautionary tale that is expressive of White's queer politics of identity. If Waldo's tragedy is his failure to let Arthur in, then fisting makes this failure both sexual and literal; it reveals Waldo's dogged maintenance of boundaries between the internal and external as a self-defeating exercise; and it makes failure all the more poignant by offering an aching close but ultimately missed opportunity. After the fire and brimstone of their fight in the reading room of the Mitchell Library, the promise of rapprochement is tantalisingly within their grasp back at Terminus Road:

And when there was silence, Arthur took Waldo by the hand. 'Whatever happens,' Arthur said, 'we have each other.' 'Yes,' said Waldo. (202)

But even if 'Arthur was determined that Waldo should receive,' even if 'by this stage their smeary faces were melted together,' Waldo ultimately refuses his brother's 'gothic embrace' (208). In fact, the whole argument in the library between the brothers – the story of their lives, in fact – can be boiled down to this single manual gesture: 'Arthur had to lean across the table and try to take him by the hands. He, the lost one, taking his lost brother by the hands. When Waldo started snatching back his property' (284-5). This contraction on Waldo's part marks his tragic demise, because it marks a death both physical and spiritual. At the moment of his death, 'Waldo, in the agony of their joint discovery, reached out and grabbed him [Arthur] by the wrist, to imprint him forever with the last moment.' Already dead, 'Waldo was lying still, but still attached to Arthur at the wrist.' Even in death, he is still clenching as tightly as ever: 'the fingers of this dead man

were determined, in their steel circlets, to bring him to trial' (294). Perhaps more so than any other in the annals of literature, Waldo is a character ultimately undone by his implacably anal personality.

To read fisting into *Mandala* is admittedly a bit of a stretch; but that is entirely the point. The absence of a definite scene of fisting in this text speaks to a paradox that has unfolded throughout this chapter's analysis of the interplay between the closet and identity. More broadly, this paradox accords with Huffer's characterisation in *Are the Lips a Grave?* of fisting as 'a figure that registers the paradox of sexual repression and expression at the heart of the queer' (74). For Huffer, 'fisting points to the paradoxical position of queer theory itself in relation to the repressive hypothesis Foucault critiques' in that it dramatises how the 'the discursive shock effect of words like *fist fucking*' and the queer 'incitement' 'to talk dirty in theory' effect the counterintuitive re-imposition of a disciplinary, normative sexuality (74, original emphasis). In talking about fisting in an academic context, in bringing it into discourse, queer theory begins to denude fisting of any radical potential it may have. Huffer contends that

Following the logic of the repressive hypothesis, queer theory not only aligns sex with power but also runs the risk of reproducing disciplinary sexuality within a system of power-knowledge. In this sense, one could justifiably argue that queer utterances, far from disrupting the regime of sexuality, in fact reinforce it; indeed, the queer speaking of previously unspoken acts perpetuates the repressive myth of sex as a secret to be confessed. Thus, fisting becomes yet another example of sex as confession in a system of power-knowledge. (76)

In precisely the same way in which the outing of Waldo earlier risked the inscription of an oppressive homosexual identity paradigm onto a resistant morphology, so too does the impression of the fist on this text have the potential to circumscribe our reading of the Brown Brothers' relationship within a regime of rigid, knowable and legible sexuality.

This resistance to discourse is one that is exhibited consistently throughout White's oeuvre and will be explored in further depth in the final chapter of this thesis. But given that a queer reading practice that seeks to give life to *Mandala's* closeted aesthetic also has the potential to perpetuate a model of sex as perpetual confession, it is vitally instructive to note that Huffer's conceptualisation of fisting relies on a framework of temporality; she considers that 'we all know that the fist is also a hand, its shape determined by its temporal unfolding: folding, unfolding, and folding again' (78). On account of this temporal dimension, 'the fist as hand is like a narrative performance: never fully open or closed... the process of reading allows the fist to expand: becoming a hand, it opens to the new, becomes other than itself, then closes again for another reading' (78). But if for Huffer the fist becomes an explicit invitation to a deconstructive literary hermeneutics, it is also a hermeneutics that will be circumscribed if we ground it within in a purely temporal framework. The connection here between the fist's temporality and its ability to be read and reread also constitutes an invitation to incorporate other conceptual dimensions to fisting. It must be said that the fist is not just a narrative that can be plotted in time but one which – perhaps more than any other form of sexual expression – demands to be read in space. Indeed other critics, such as David Halperin, have argued that the practice of fisting is one that positively resists a temporal conceptualisation: for when considering fisting, 'intensity and duration of feeling, not climax, are the key values;' fisting might be said to be 'a kind of anal yoga' (91) that resists narrative and floats instead in the liminality of nirvana. If we are to take Huffer's suggestion that fisting engages with the 'paradox [that] inhabits queer theory's founding investment in Foucault's thought' and the 'paradox of identity' (77), we might be better

placed to do so by conceptualising the fist not within a temporally-bound narrative of climax – or *jouissance* – but as a spatial reconfiguration of the dynamic between sex and identity. We might think about fisting as a sexual practice where selves become twinned in protean configurations of exchange. Whereas queer theory has heretofore thought about sexuality and identity as either a Foucaultian narrative of incitement and confession, or as a Bersanian conceptualisation of sexuality as *jouissance* and a dismissal of the self, fisting draws sexuality and identity into a dynamic of spatial relationality where one body is quite literally sucked into another. Instead of a fixed narrative of climax, fisting gives birth to an open-ended merger of bodies and selves; this merger thence articulates an intimate dependence, a constitutive interdependence, of self and other in pursuit of this new state of being.

This is similar to the way in which E. Twyborn's homo-ness sought, as we saw in the first chapter of this thesis, to overcome the constitutive differences that form the basis of an ontology of the self. It might even be that this new subjectivity embodied by fisting is foreshadowed in one of *Mandala*'s epigraphs provided by Paul Eluard: 'there is another world, but it is in this one'. Again, it is probably a bit of a stretch to read this line as an invitation to fisting, but the textual stress that this reading exerts does accord with the process by which *Mandala*'s various architectures of selves and sexualities are deformed and reformed; not by a narrative of temporal plotting but by a spatial modularity. Worlds and selves do take on a concentric figuration in this text. The structure of the text means that the reader's experience of reality becomes a process of differential construction: the reader's interpretation of characters and events being subject to a constant process of re-evaluation through the mediated accounts of synchronous scenes from Waldo's and

Arthur's varying spatial perspectives. The relationship between Waldo and Arthur demonstrates the potential for spatial emplacement to disrupt disciplinary subjectivity, be it in lifetime cohabitation, or in being joined to another human being by the hand. Their relationship points to a solution to the problem identified by Huffer of queer theory's seemingly inevitable contribution to a disciplinary discourse of sexual identities. There is no such a thing as a 'fister;' it does not register as a legible social identity. So to the extent that it *resists* the imputation of sexuality, and to the extent that its representation remains closeted, the image of Waldo and Arthur holding hands gives birth to a new conceptualisation of the sexual: interlocking oneself with another human being can be a surprisingly radical reconfiguration of our narratives of subjectivity.

The absence of textual support in *Mandala* advertises the eclipse of language by gesture: this body language that *Mandala* utilises forces the reader outside the purview of the written word and forces us to reconsider White's novel not as a self-contained modernist 'work' but rather as a sustained meditation on the postmodern concept of textuality itself. The distinction that Jameson draws between a 'work' and a 'text' is one of the signal differences that distinguishes postmodernism from its modernist forebear; the former 'work' is characterised by a discernable – though tenuous – link between sign and referent, thus forming modernism's invitation to hermeneutics; the latter 'text' is characterised by by a complete disjunction between sign and signifier and the concomitant problematisation of meaning itself. In the wake of the 'work'

we are left with that pure and random play of signifiers that we call postmodernism, which no longer produces monumental works of the modernist type but ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of pre-existent texts, the building blocks of older cultural and social production, in some new and heightened bricolage: metabooks which cannibalise other books, metatexts which collate bits of other texts – such is the logic of postmodernism in general... (*Postmodernism* 96)

In this chapter I have sought to demonstrate how the logic of postmodernism informs the operation of a closeted aesthetic in *Mandala* and why postmodernism might usefully form the basis of our understanding of the construction and deconstruction of sexuality's representation in this text. We have seen a postmodern resistance to meaning in the too-tight focalisation of Waldo's narrative, such that any attempts at definitive, final interpretations of this character are quickly starved of oxygen. We have seen how the signs of secrecy and flamboyant disclosure are scrambled in this text by a sentimental performance of closeted homosexuality. We have seen how homosexuality itself becomes textualised during Waldo's encounter with Bill Poulter, where the fragmentary signs by which homosexuality is recognised are collated into a metaphor, or metatext, of sexuality; but we have also seen how the very same process of textualisation works to de-scribe a stable homosexual identity, and how the fallibility of the written word is advertised by the homographetic failure of Waldo's relationship with Walter Pugh to signify textually. We have seen how the use of fragments such as Tennyson's poem work to undermine the coherent systematisation of knowledge production, such that the figure of the library itself stands as a prime target in this text, while gesturing towards the closet as an intriguing co-culprit in this exercise. We have seen how a ceaseless – and timeless – reshuffling of the older building blocks of culture characterise the space of *Mandala's* Sarsaparilla, and how the dimension of space comes to overwhelm suburbia's already meagre pretences to a temporally plotted historicity. In the rambling postmodern architecture of the self that the house down Terminus Road articulates we have seen how the spatial dimension mediates reality to such an extent that selves and spaces become deeply interwoven; and we have seen how the space of a house or a bedroom is implicated in the commodious closeting of Waldo and Arthur's relationship.

It is at this point that fisting marks the closet's slippage into the discourse of White's postmodern queer politics, where 'the postmodernist text... is... defined as a structure or sign flow which resists meaning, whose fundamental inner logic is the exclusion of the emergence of themes as such... and which therefore systematically sets out to short-circuit traditional interpretive temptations' (*Postmodernism* 91-2). Given all the signals the reader can work with, the temptation to interpret the sexuality of Waldo and Arthur is manifest. But at a very fundamental level – what we might call a textual level – *Mandala* resists the arrival of a conclusion about the nature of the brothers' sexuality. When we refer to a postmodern hermeneutics we are, properly speaking, talking about an anti-hermeneutics. In this light, fisting, as a sexual practice that resists the imprint of a disciplinary sexuality, also becomes a textual practice that encapsulates the manner in which *Mandala* pushes textuality out of language and into space. Nowhere is this more evident than in *Mandala*'s emphatic un-thematisation of words, where Arthur's advice to Waldo that 'words are not what make you see' (57) might stand as a pithily epiphanic slogan for postmodernism's relegation of language to mere textual commentary. If commentary 'makes up the special field of postmodern linguistic practice,' and if this is a linguistic practice which seeks to disabuse 'the pretensions and illusions of philosophy in the preceding period... that with some secular pride and confidence set out to say what things really were after a long night of superstition and the sacred' (*Postmodernism* 393), then the sheer solidity of *The Solid Mandala* stands as an appropriate image of a postmodern anti-hermeneutics where words are not up to the task of articulating reality in this text. We need only look at George Brown's fumbled attempt to explain the concept of 'totality' to his son Arthur, through recourse to a dictionary, to see this.

Dad read out: 'Totality is "the quality of being total".' He looked at Arthur.

‘That is to say,’ said Dad, he could not clear his throat enough, ‘it means,’ he said, “‘that which is a whole”,’ adding: ‘Spelt with a *w* – naturally.’ Then Arthur realised Dad would never know, any more than Waldo. It was himself who was, and would remain, the keeper of mandalas, who must guess their final secret through touch and light. (240)

A fist could be situated in that which is the gaping (*w*)hole of George Brown’s uncomfortable experience of linguistic eclipse. Not language but the relational construction of the self in space is the reality of postmodernism – like Mrs Poulter in the final line of this novel, readers of *Mandala* must inevitably put a book down at some stage and re-enter their actual sphere of life. This is *Mandala*’s real epiphany; this is why Arthur’s mandala cannot be found in a dictionary and must be danced. Indeed the fourth corner of Arthur’s mandala seems a very appropriate place to conclude this discussion of the physicality of postmodern hermeneutics. It may or may not depict a scene of fisting; but again, this slack textual open-endedness is entirely the point and *Mandala*’s typifying, its enduring gesture:

In the fourth corner, which was his brother’s, the reeds sawed at one another. There was a shuffling of dry mud, a clattering of dead flags, or papers. Of words and ideas skewered to paper, persecuted, what should have risen in pure flight, dropped to a dry twitter, a clipped twitching. He couldn’t dance his brother out of him, not fully. They were too close for it to work, closest and farthest when, with both his arms, he held them together, his fingers running with candle wax. He could not save. At most a little comfort gushed out guiltily, from out their double-image, their never quite united figure. (266)

Materiality itself, or the way in which the physical constantly enfolds the language of *Mandala*, has been shown in this chapter to constitute the spiritual ethos of this text. This insistence on embodiment, this plotting of selves as bodies in space rather than as identities to be read in time, is a central element of White’s queer politics. It is also one of the signal means by which White’s queer style is oriented always towards transcendence. For White, the body that moves through space emerges in *Mandala* almost as an object of

worship. The spiritual ecstasies that Arthur experiences as he dances the four corners of his mandala advertise the blissful and transcendent potential of the body in White's text. This chapter has shown how the closet operates in the interstices of signification; and in doing so, this chapter has sought to emphasise the de-descriptive potentialities of the closet. *Mandala* showcases the inability of the written word to apprehend and fix a stable notion of identity, and it does this most efficaciously in the character of Waldo Brown. If Waldo's life never truly comes to life on the pages of *Mandala*, if he remains not just a failed writer but a failure also to be written, this only serves to underline the more spacious affordances offered by this chapter's speculations on the erotics of his relationship with Arthur. This playfully postmodern reading of *Mandala* has demonstrated that White's queer literary project strives ceaselessly away from knowable and legible identities and always towards new configurations of bodies and ecstatic becomings.

Chapter Four

Theodora's Closet: The Queer Epistemologies of the *Jardin Exotique*

The final chapter of this thesis argues that the queer epistemologies of *The Aunt's Story* posit closeting itself as an expression of White's resistance to the politics of identity. As such, this chapter argues that the closet functions as a fundamental element in any conceptualisation of White's oeuvre as a whole. In making this argument I will be building on Alan Lawson's contention that '*The Aunt's Story* is "about" breaking down... those linguistic and narrative codes with which we have already structured our world and the interpretive narratives we use to explain it' ('Bound' 15). Paying full deference to Lawson's analysis of *The Aunt Story's* poetics of fragmentation, and concurring utterly with his doubts as to whether we can say that this text is definitively 'about' anything at all, I will nevertheless demonstrate that this thematisation of knowledge itself constitutes an important and productive dimension of this text's representational logic. Through a sustained engagement with Eve Sedgwick's deconstructive conceptualisation of the closet, I will show how the baffling *jardin exotique* section of the text functions as a lens through which we can reread the first section of the text set in Meroë. In performing such a re-reading, we are able to uncover one of *The Aunt's Story's* closeted secrets: the suggestion of an incestuous relationship between Theodora and her father. This relationship is closeted in the sense that it is represented through the speech act of a silence; but it is in this very lack of textual representation, in this performance of a silence, that *The Aunt's Story's* critical politics of refusal is made manifest. I will thus be arguing against those critics who have sought to paint this text as Theodora's 'quest after true knowledge of her self and her world' (Loney 483); I will argue to the contrary that

the closeting of Theodora's sexuality renders any such achievement of true knowledge quite problematic; and that rather we might better think of Theodora as a prototypical queer subject; a subject who begins the process of forging a new mode of vicarious and fluid identification.

Elizabeth McMahon's essay 'The Lateness and Queerness of *The Twyborn Affair: White's Farewell to the Novel*' is an important conceptual lodestar for the argument advanced by this thesis. McMahon argues that White's last novel alerts us, with its frank and graphic depictions of sex, to the closeted aesthetic of White's earlier works. In this respect her argument echoes that of Guy Davidson who argues that White's last novel functions performatively as a 'coming out' text. Davidson argues that with *Twyborn*, White effected a 'coming out by making the experience of gay male sexuality central to one of his novels' (4). McMahon takes this argument one step further, suggesting that as a coming out text *Twyborn* 'reflects retrospectively on White's preceding fiction and proleptically on his future work' in that it 'invites the reader into a new mode of reading and provides a new prism for a hermeneutics that cannot but circumscribe his earlier works within it' (78). *Twyborn* does this, according to McMahon, through the invocation of a 'Janus-faced temporality, turned to the past works and those of the future' (78). In this way, *Twyborn* functions so as to performatively upset or queer White's other texts: *Twyborn's* return to the *topoi* of the earlier works (the Monaro of *Happy Valley*, the London of *The Living and the Dead*, the Southern France of *The Aunt's Story*), as well as the volatile articulation of its protagonist's (and the author's) selfhood, cumulatively effect for McMahon the break-down of 'the boundaries of text and oeuvre, sole authorship, life and art' (80). This Janus-faced temporality stands as an invitation to re-

read White's earlier texts in light of the later disclosures. *Twynborn* thus presents itself in McMahon's conceptualisation as 'a site of tension' in White's oeuvre, as 'a profound re-making that marks the juncture at which White's writing, so deeply embedded in modernist aesthetics and thought, becomes postmodern' (78).

The final chapter of this thesis seeks to broaden the scope of McMahon's argument about the interrelationship of the texts in White's oeuvre by looking closely at how *Twynborn*'s performative function as a coming out text modifies and disrupts the ways in which one of White's earlier texts, *The Aunt's Story*, has been and can be read. But in doing so, I will also seek to refine and clarify some of the key parameters of McMahon's argument. Specifically, this chapter will argue that the postmodern poetics that McMahon attributes to *Twynborn* are in fact operative throughout White's oeuvre, that a closeted aesthetic in *The Aunt's Story* operates in just as disruptive a fashion as *Twynborn*'s aesthetic of flamboyant disclosure, and that *The Aunt's Story* deploys the same Janus-faced temporality and the same injunctions to read and re-read White in its execution of this closeted dynamic. This carries important implications and a shift in emphasis in how we conceptualise White's body of work as a whole: it demands a refiguring of this corpus as a queered body, whose texts interact dynamically with each other; and it demands that we place the performative dimensions of the closet at the heart of our understanding of White's queer politics of resistance to the violence of identity. Indeed, the vicarious investment of White's texts in each other, their interrelationship and dependency, point more broadly to the queer politics of critique that White's texts articulate; for it is this vicariating impulse that rests at the heart of White's queer reconceptualisation of identity.

At its core, the final chapter of this thesis seeks to give the most comprehensive account to date of White's queer politics of self-transcendence. This chapter describes the means by which White seeks to transcend the self by embracing both the closet and camp performances of multiple, vicarious identities. The ultimate effect of this oscillation between secrecy and disclosure is an evacuation of the self: this is Theodora's triumphant achievement at the the end of *The Aunt's Story*. For Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCreddin, the transcendental sacred in White is situated in White's writing style, where the 'surfaces of language are fractured and reassembled in order to body forth the moment of silence' (41). To the extent, then, that White's queer politics of closeting and camp aims at freeing oneself from the violence of identity, it might be characterised as a gesture of transcendence. In this chapter, Theodora Goodman comes to embody White's queer radicalism: though cloistered by society in the confines of a psychiatric facility by the brutally sane and rational, Theodora goes willingly, laughingly, and freely. Ultimately, the final chapter of this thesis showcases the means by which Theodora finds freedom within her closet.

An Exotique Re-Reading of Meroë's Closet

The Janus-faced temporality on which McMahon pins so much of *Twyborn's* disruptive potential can also be observed in *The Aunt's Story*, primarily through the effect that the *jardin exotique* section of the text exerts on the earlier Meroë section. In forcing the reader to re-evaluate their understanding of the preceding section, the *jardin exotique* invites us to critically examine the regimes of truth under which meaning is produced in

this text. In an influential interpretation of *The Aunt's Story*, John and Rose Marie Beston argue that the *jardin exotique* is a figment of the protagonist's imagination, that this section of the novel takes place 'entirely within Theodora's mind' (119). Central to the Bestons' rendering of the *jardin exotique* as Theodora's imagination are the uncanny similarities between the characters in the French hotel and those at Meroë. The Bestons cast the centrifugal drama of the *jardin exotique*, that between Mrs Rapallo and General Sokolnikov, as an imaginative re-enactment of Theodora's home life as a child back in Australia, where 'Mrs Goodman is perhaps most fully represented by Mrs Rapallo' and 'when as a magenta sword she opposes the rubbery Sokolnikov, Mrs Rapallo is setting the castrating qualities of Julia against the impotence of George Goodman' (132). And if 'in their wrangling over the nautilus, Mrs Rapallo and Sokolnikov represent Theodora's parents fighting over possession of her' (132), then it follows that this fight is one over the very terms by which we meant to understand this section of the text and how it functions: the fight over Theodora is a fight over her imagination and how we are to interpret the text by looking back at Meroë through the *jardin exotique*. In going back and re-reading the first section of *The Aunt's Story* in light of the second section we discover, in the slightly suggestive phrasing of Lawrence Steven, that *The Aunt's Story* contains 'between its covers two stories [that] share an uncomfortable existence' (13). This sense of discomfiture between the sheets arises, I would argue, from the ambiguous representation of the relationship between Theodora and her parents; or more specifically, between the intimacies enjoyed by Theodora and her father, and the hostility and jealousy thereby engendered in Julia Goodman. Of course, such hostility and such a drama might have gone over the heads of many readers of Part One of the text, so dormant does it seem there. Indeed, it is instructive to note that Meroë is introduced with a gesture of closeting: Theodora responds to her niece's request to hear the story of her Aunt's

childhood with the remark that ‘there is nothing to tell’ (13). It is moreover suggested that this vacuity is actually something of a cover-up: ‘the human body had disguised its actual mission of love and hate’ (13). What this ‘actual mission of love and hate’ might be is not initially apparent. It is only in the *jardin exotique* that we might say that this closeting is made manifest through the vivid and dramatic Rapallo-Sokolnikov feud. This drama can be read as a re-telling or elaboration of the otherwise tight-lipped *froideur* that, up until the *jardin exotique*, has marked the textual rendering of the relationship between Mr and Mrs Goodman and their daughter. In this respect the spectacle of this feud is notable for its structure: it takes the shape of a love triangle with Sokolnikov and Rapallo competing for the affections of Theodora. This competition is vectored through the respective claims of both parties to ownership of a handsome nautilus shell and the role that Theodora plays in mediating this ownership.

But if we are to read Sokolnikov and Rapallo as avatars for Theodora’s parents it is instructive to note that the drama in which all three of these actors are implicated is repeatedly couched in the terms of the closet: not only does the feud take place in an epistemological vacuum -- *did* Mrs Rapallo buy the nautilus fair and square? *Was* it stolen as Sokolnikov alleges? -- but crucial moments of this drama also play out as scenes of oblique seduction. When Sokolnikov entreats his Ludmilla (read: Theodora) to steal the nautilus back for him, he does so with the following suggestion: ‘If you love me, there is still one beautiful act to be done... Ludmilla, if you love me, you will fetch it. You are less resonant than I’ (243). If, as Sedgwick conceptualises it, closetedness is ‘a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence,’ and if that silence ‘accrues particularity, by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it’ (3), then we

can begin to make more sense of the ‘beautiful act’ so desirable to Sokolnikov. This ‘beautiful act’ is given whatever meaning it might obtain by its enjambment to the active question of Sokolnikov’s ‘love;’ and it is all the more closeted for the fact that it is also dependent on Theodora’s silence, or lack of ‘resonance’. When Theodora accepts the proposition from the ‘steamy Slav’ (244) and agrees to steal the nautilus from Mrs Rapallo, it is instructive to note that, in addition to the silence that reigns over this passage, it is also plunged into a very insistent obscurity:

Then the passage was darkness. Darkness flowed whether up or down she did not know, but soft as dandelions to blow. If I have not blown out the darkness before noon I shall have reached Mrs Rapallo, said Theodora Goodman. She watched the darkness for a monkey combing hair: Mignon, she mumbled, recoiling from the paper hands of darkness... Elsie Rapallo is afraid of the dark, said Theodora Goodman. (244)

Excluded by fear from these nocturnal intrigues, Mrs Rapallo remains sleeping while Theodora steals the nautilus, which again takes a very obscure designation: ‘Then Theodora made the darkness move’ (247). Once Theodora has given the shell to Sokolnikov we might say that the affair has at last been fully consummated:

Impatience had made him swell. He filled the door. She could not see his detail, but there was no mistaking his bulk.
‘My lovely shell,’ he said, out of a long distance and a congested throat... Sokolnikov was holding it in his hands. His face oozed long opalescent tears. (247)

Of course, in characterising the nautilus affair as a closeted sexual encounter it is important that we do not get too carried away: as suggestive as the General’s tumescence and the oozing of Sokolnikov’s opalescent tears at the climax of his conspiracy with Theodora are, the sense of epistemological evacuation that attends this passage must be emphasised: like Theodora in this very shadowy passage, the reader cannot see the details. Even if Theodora says that she has ‘never seen more clearly’ after the nautilus affair, she is careful to add that ‘what I see remains involved’ (248). This paradox – the lucid apprehension of obscurity – lies at the heart of Sedgwick’s notion of closetedness as the performance, or performativity, of silence. Later in this chapter we will analyse in

more depth the relationship between the closet and the sexual politics of identification; but it suffices at this point to note Theodora's sense that at the conclusion of the nautilus conspiracy, precious little has actually been explained: 'now the night was denser. Emotions had trodden into the carpet the slight white rime which was what remained of the nautilus. Theodora herself felt considerably reduced' (249).

In reading the relationship between Theodora and General Sokolnikov as a closeted one it is important that we take into account how the epistemological vacuum that pertains to this relationship colours it as sexual. For one possible objection that might be raised to my use of Sedgwick's theorisation of the closet in reading the *jardin exotique* could come from the specificity of male homosexuality to Sedgwick's epistemology of the closet. Sedgwick notes that, by the end of the nineteenth century, 'there had in fact developed one particular sexuality that was distinctively constituted *as* secrecy: the perfect object for the by now insatiably exacerbated epistemological/sexual anxiety of the turn-of-the-century subject' (*Epistemology* 73). Also implicit in Sedgwick's deconstructive project in *Epistemology* is the series of binarisms that, she argues, structure the modern crisis of homo/heterosexual definition and which would appear to be of heuristic value only insofar as the question of sexuality itself is collapsed into a homo-hetero binary. For all this however, it is important to note that the constitution of homosexuality as secrecy comes at the end of a process that began in the eighteenth century and is sketched by Foucault in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*; a process

by which 'knowledge' and 'sex' become conceptually inseparable from one another – so that knowledge means in the first place sexual knowledge; ignorance, sexual ignorance; and epistemological pressure of any sort seems a force increasingly saturated with sexual impulsion. (*Epistemology* 73)

Thus it is also implicit in Sedgwick's argument that the notion of sexuality *tout court* is taboo, that the phenomenon of the closet manifests around any attempt to represent sexuality.

Thus it is towards this dimension to the closet that my argument concerning the relationship between Sokolnikov and Theodora is oriented. More precisely, I am arguing that we can extend Sedgwick's schema of the closet to any tabooed form of sexual expression. It would perhaps be more accurate so say that my argument suggests that the relationship between Theodora and Sokolnikov in the *jardin exotique* is represented 'as if' it were a closeted homosexual encounter; and as such, my argument contends that the closet might be said to have broken free from the historical specificity of late nineteenth and twentieth century homosexuality; that the closet has always encompassed any thematisation of knowledge, or any crisis of representation. As Sedgwick herself notes in her introduction to *Epistemology*, the crystallisation of a distinct homosexual identity at the end of the nineteenth century was itself an arbitrary phenomenon, and one that served to eclipse a whole host of previous categorisations of sexual deviancy (9). Thus in analysing the relationship between Theodora and Sokolnikov, I would emphasise, along with Sedgwick, that there exists 'a plethora of *ignorances*' and 'begin to ask questions about the labor, erotics, and economics of their human production and distribution' (8 original emphasis). Certainly, we should be infinitely grateful for Sedgwick's analysis of 'the differences it makes when secrecy itself becomes manifest as *this* secret' (74 original emphasis), but this is not to say that an analysis of the similarities between *this* secret, *that* secret or *any* secret for that matter, is not equally worthwhile.

When we look closely at the relationship between Theodora and Sokolnikov it becomes clear that the tabooed status of their relationship is sutured to its intergenerational nature. Coming just after the nautilus affair, another scene of seduction occurs between the General and Theodora. This scene is instructive in that it alerts us to the way in which the closet enfolds this relationship, with the central sexual taboo differentially constituted by the age difference between the two participants. As is usually the case in the *jardin exotique*, Theodora is again represented through a cypher: this time it is the young Katina Pavlou who encounters Sokolnikov one afternoon in the winter garden. Their intercourse begins, tellingly enough, with something of a disquisition on the subject of epistemology:

‘Ah, there you are my dabchick,’ Theodora heard.
‘Here I am and nowhere else,’ Katina Pavlou sighed.
‘A little pale, but no less interesting.’
‘I am nothing,’ Katina Pavlou said quite firmly. ‘I know exactly what I am, General Sokolnikov. I know myself. I know.’
She turned the pages of her magazine. Theodora knew that the General was about to bounce. There were all the first indications of elasticity.
‘I doubt,’ he said, ‘whether my moorhen knows the shape of her own ear.’ (253)

How telling that it is the ear that the General should fixate upon, the very organ responsible for our apprehension or otherwise of the sounds of silence, as the vehicle for his epistemology of radical scepticism. And as the scene progresses, this thematisation of knowledge that has been inaugurated by the General’s playful untethering of Katina’s cognitive moorings -- a manoeuvre that we might recognise as one of the oldest tricks in the would-be seducer’s playbook -- is further developed and given its specificity by the General’s observation that ‘you are a child, Katina Pavlou. And I am old’:

‘I am sixteen,’ Katina Pavlou said.
But it fell with no less melancholy, its small bell. Theodora counted the bodies of dead flies.
‘You are sixteen,’ the General murmured.
Theodora realised that his sigh was scented. (253)

From out of the epistemological silence that has henceforth enveloped this scene, the issue of Katina's age rings forth to suggest, subtly but insistently, the melancholy operation of the closet, while the intimacy of the exchange is made manifest in the scent of the General's breath. But the marriage of the auditory to the olfactory in this passage only serves to highlight the triumph of textual ambiguity over empirical fact: when another sense – taste – is brought into play we are only left with yet more questions as to the nature of the relationship between this uncle and his niece:

‘Knowing the sweet tooth of all young ladies...’
‘One Easter they gave me a box of marshmallows. When I was thirteen. And I ate them all. I ate till I was sick. It was quite lovely, I remember, but I was thirteen.’
‘Now you are sixteen,’ the General said. ‘And I shall help you eat these. You shall pop one carefully in my mouth.’ (255)

The active question of Katina's age, where the ante in this passage has been considerably upped (or dropped, as it were), is finally linked again to the active question of the General's love, just as it was during the nautilus affair; indeed the climax of the scene with Katina and the General is almost an exact replay of the earlier one with Ludmilla, with the same question posed by Sokolnikov: ‘Then you do not love me? A little?’ This being said, ‘Theodora hear[s] the rubber silence lean over steamily to touch’ as comes Katina's coquettish reply: ‘Of course, I adore you. If I did not, I would not kiss you. There!’ (255).

But again, there is a sense in which it is important to respect the rubbery silence of this closet: even if Theodora feels that ‘in the little transparent wintergarden’ ‘they were all three considerably exposed’ (256), nothing definite has been identified or exposed in this passage; neither Sokolnikov nor Katina are quite outed here, nor is the precise nature of their relationship ever pinned down with anything as definitive as a secure identity.

Indeed, the very word with which their kiss is performed rather than described – ‘There!’ – diverts the reader’s inquiry elsewhere: the epistemological basis of this kiss and of the erotics of this scene more generally are always over there and just out of reach. Just as it did earlier with the nautilus affair, at the conclusion of the Sokolikov/Pavlou afternoon tea, the text again resorts to its shorthand vocabulary to express this sense of the inexpressible: the vocabulary of devastation. Just as Theodora feels ‘considerably reduced’ at the conclusion of the nautilus affair, the shell itself having shattered, Sokolnikov finds himself lost for words after his encounter with Katina: “‘This is disastrous’” said Sokolnikov, all steam, because he wanted still to show himself something that perhaps he could not show’ (254). What this ‘something,’ this dark and forbidden recess of his self might be, is never quite clarified for the reader. Similarly, and recalling the surety with which Katina began this passage, we can say at its conclusion that Katina’s previous certitudes have been most definitively undone: “‘Dear Miss Goodman, I wish that I could tell. I wish that I knew,’” Katina Pavlou cried. “‘But it is nothing. Nothing. Nothing at all’” (257). Thus we can see how inappropriate it would be to identify the relationship between Sokolnikov and Katina. With the ‘nothing’ invoked by Katina not once, not twice but thrice, with her desperate desire to say and to know, we see, or rather fail to see, into the essence of this closeted encounter.

It is important to understand both the nautilus affair and the relationship between Sokolnikov and Katina not as isolated incidents but rather as typifying the bizarre style, or the delirious rhetorical strategy, of the entire *jardin exotique*. What I have thus far shown is that both these passages thematise knowledge itself: be it the unresolved and obscure mystery of the nautilus shell or particularly with the question of Katina’s ear, both these passages explicitly reference

the always fraught processes by which we arrive (or fail to arrive) at knowledge. When Katina nervously touches her ear during her encounter with Sokolnikov, the latter even remarks: 'Now you are touching it, you are touching your ignorance, but you cannot touch it away' (253). But working in tandem with this explicit thematisation of knowledge itself there is an implicit rhetorical strategy at play, and it is this rhetorical strategy that implicates the rest of the *jardin exotique* in the closeted epistemology of these two passages. Sedgwick calls this strategy a form of 'rhetorical impaction' or a 'crossing whereby the (structurally generalized) vessels of "knowledge itself" do come to take their shape from the (thematically specified) thing known, or person knowing' (*Epistemology* 97). Both the nautilus shell and Katina's ear might be thought of as two examples of such vessels of 'knowledge itself' in that both function as vacant signifiers that serve to highlight the vacuousness and futility of trying to arrive at knowledge through signification. But, as Sedgwick observes, 'such a crossing can only be effected only through a distinctive *reader*-relation imposed by text and narrator' (*Epistemology* 97). An important aspect of the epistemology of the closet is

The inexplicit compact by which novel-readers voluntarily plunge into worlds that strip them, however temporarily, of the painfully acquired cognitive maps of their ordinary lives (awfulness of going to a party without knowing anyone) on condition of an invisibility that promises cognitive exemption and eventual privilege, creates, especially at the beginning of books, a space of high anxiety and dependence. In this space a reader's identification with modes of categorisation ascribed to her by a narrator may be almost vindictively eager. (*Epistemology* 97)

We might say that it is this reader relation that furnishes the closet with its currency: it creates a situation where the value of knowledge itself is inflated, and where those in-the-know wield an oversized degree of authority and charisma. It is not difficult to see that the entire *jardin exotique* runs on this knowledge economy: the dizzying array of characters, the abrupt shifts in setting, even the liberal peppering of untranslated French that accompany this section of the text, all these things serve to strip the uninitiated reader of the cognitive maps she has

painfully acquired in Meroë. It is no coincidence that the theme of knowledge itself is used to introduce the *jardin exotique*:

‘And where is the *jardin exotique*?’ she asked.
‘Ah, vous savez, c’est intéressant, notre *jardin exotique*. It is straight through, at the back.’
They smiled in common knowledge. (155)

Knowledge, both in French (*savoir*) and English, inaugurates the *jardin exotique*. And thus within this hallucinatory maelstrom the quality of worldliness comes to be the most prized: the very first words said to Theodora (in English, that is) upon her arrival at the Hôtel du Midi from Monsieur Durand are ‘Perhaps... but first it is necessary to learn’ (154). This inducement to worldliness, to a European or even cosmopolitan urbanity, can be thought of as the trademark rhetorical gesture of the second section of *The Aunt’s Story*.

And the figure of Sokolnikov, as the oldest and the longest-term resident of the Hôtel du Midi is instructive, because he serves as a key vector of Theodora’s (or Katina’s, or Ludmilla’s, or the reader’s) initiation into the text’s sense of worldliness. That this knowledge of the world is sexual knowledge is only reinforced by the two passages of seduction that we have just analysed. For Sedgwick, Urbane/Provincial and Innocence/Initiation are key epistemological binarisms that structure the silences of the closet. She brackets these binarisms under the term ‘*relations of worldliness*’ or ‘the sense of differentials or thresholds whose manipulation constitutes a “true” knowledge of the world’ (*Epistemology* 98, original emphasis). Sedgwick argues that these relations of worldliness are saturated with homoerotics; but to extend the line of argument I have been making throughout this chapter, we might equally say that relations of worldliness carry are saturated with an erotics more generally. If we conceive the homoerotics of

worldliness in an Ancient Greek setting, we might think of the dynamics that may have pertained to teacher and student, man and boy, in the pedagogic/pederastic School of Athens; a more generalised conception of the erotics of worldliness might bring to mind the image of the ageing lothario and the fair young maiden he seeks to woo on the sly. Sokolnikov certainly fits this latter bill: his first snatch of dialogue – and the reader’s introduction to this character – is notable for its worldliness or, even further, its unblemished *hauteur*: ‘*Il n’y a pas de pâté de foie gras de Strasbourg?*’ (170). Sokolnikov’s game is nothing but smooth, old-word charm, as he introduces himself to Theodora with the following hand-written note:

Madame,

Physical geography is deceptive. I advise you, therefore, not to explore my face. The others, and particularly Mrs Rapallo, will tell you I am mad, a charlatan, a boor, a drunkard, a sensualist, and an old man. Admitting to something of all these charges, I throw myself on your sympathy and understanding, which I can sense across the dining-room, and suggest that some time we discuss each other. I would hand you my soul on this plate if it would do either of us good.

Alyosha Sergei Sokolnikov (171)

This note is so seductive precisely because of its mastery of the terms of the closet: it really is a neat flash of worldliness in a carefully maintained epistemological vacuum. To paraphrase Sedgwick (*Epistemology* 95), Sokolnikov’s representationally vacant, epistemologically arousing ‘physical geography’ takes whatever semantic colouration it might have from the parallel and equally abstract chain of damning ethical designations (mad, charlatan, boor, drunkard, sensualist) that follow, and from their adduced proximity to the General’s expressed wish to ‘get to know you better’. To be sure, these relations of worldliness/knowingness are volatile, as we shall see when we start using Sokolnikov and the *jardin exotique* to re-read Meroë. But it stands to reason that the General, the master and commander of the *jardin exotique*, should also assume the role of seducer-in-chief. And the vindictive eagerness generated by the disorienting aesthetics of the *jardin*

exotique is the perfect environment in which Sokolnikov's magnetic worldliness might best be leveraged in pursuit of his heart's desire.

The *jardin exotique* induces in the reader a sense of worldliness or a new form of knowingness, implicitly sexual, that can be used as a means of reinterpreting some of the stifling silences and opacities that seem to haunt Meroë. Nowhere is this lens more revelatory than when casting a glance over that central figure in Meroë's closet: Theodora's father, George Goodman. Our introduction to him comes in the form of a non-introduction, where what we are told of this character is that his essence is hidden: 'you waited for Father to come out from behind his door... Your father is not to be disturbed, said Mother... He sighed a lot, and looked at you as if he were about to let you into a secret, only not now, next time' (17). If George Goodman's possession of a secret, and Mother's stern injunction to respect his privacy, places him in a coveted position of worldliness and knowing, it is crucial that we apprehend the temporal dimension to which this knowingness is enjoined: at each reprise, Mr Goodman's knowledge is oriented towards the future. The reader is told, just as much as is Theodora, that Mr Goodman's true character will be revealed in time, after we have waited for his entrance from behind the door of his study; we are promised disclosure from this character, 'only not now, next time.' I would like to argue that this deferral of knowledge is not endless, but that it comes later on in the text itself, with the *jardin exotique* providing an insight into George Goodman's 'secret'.

If, as the Bestons suggest, we can draw a parallel between General Sokolnikov and George Goodman, one of the bases on which we might make such a move comes from their ambivalent and volatile grasp that they share of the relations of worldliness. During the nautilus affair, Sokolnikov's epistemological mastery is frequently undermined by lines in the text such as these: 'Alyosha Sergei, you foolish child, Theodora could not say, this is a crisis in which even I cannot protect you' (247). Where the reader is placed here, rhetorically, in relation to Sokolnikov is quite telling: both we and Theodora are here impacted in a position of superior worldliness in relation to the putative master of this domain; all the more so because we now know something that the General does not know that he even needs to know. This show of vulnerability is repeated during the scene of seduction with Katina when the lovers' discourse becomes a not-so-private affair: Theodora coughs and is discovered eavesdropping, causing all parties concerned to be 'considerably exposed' (256), and again undermining Sokolnikov's claim to being the smartest man in the room.

George Goodman finds himself in a similarly ambivalent position at the beginning of *The Aunt's Story*. Implicit in the reader's introduction to the worldly George Goodman is a gesture of rhetorical impaction, where the reader's knowledge of this character is fused to or impacted with that of Theodora. But this gesture of impaction is initially latent, becoming evident only after the reader has been inducted into the realm of knowingness generated by Theodora's experience of the *jardin exotique*. It is this very gesture of rhetorical impaction that exposes the trope of worldliness to the vulnerability exhibited by Sokolnikov that comes part and parcel with the infectious logic of the closet. If rhetorical impaction describes a situation where the reader loses their epistemological moorings through an impaction of the thing known (the character) and the thing knowing (the reader), the ignorances thereby wrought are dependent on the uneven distribution of

the text's knowledge economy. Certain characters know more than others, and when the reader's epistemology is fused with a character's, the reader inherits the knowledges, as well as the ignorances, of that character. Thus, it is only when what the reader knows becomes fused with Theodora discoveries in the *jardin exotique* that we become cognisant of George Goodman's secret. In the wake of the *jardin exotique*, the following passage emerges in a different light entirely:

He sighed a lot, and looked at you as if he were about to let you into a secret, only not now, the next time. Instead, and perhaps as compensation for the secret that had been postponed, he took you by the hand, about to lead you somewhere, only in the end you could feel, inside the hand, that you were guiding Father. (17)

Impacted here are the secret that George Goodman keeps and the reader's relation to the text: a relation that is altered by the worldly initiation gained subsequently in the *jardin exotique*. The *jardin exotique* might be said to stand in for the 'next time' to which Mr Goodman refers in its belated gift of knowledge. What we see in this passage is the vessel of knowledge itself (George's secret) taking the shape of the person knowing (in this case the 'you' impacting both Theodora and the reader). What we (the reader and Theodora) know is dependent on whether we are reading this passage for the first time, or re-reading it at the suggestion of the *jardin exotique*. For want of a better term, we might say that the secret Mr Goodman is keeping is the intimacy he shares with his daughter – the feeling inside the held hand – coupled to the vulnerability this engenders. When we say that the relations of worldliness that scaffold the closet are volatile, this is simply to note that the ability to recognise the signs and signals of a tabooed sexuality implies something of a guilt by association: the ignorance of the truly innocent should be total; only the eunuchs are pure. As soon as one posits knowledge of the closet or a secret, the logic of it-takes-one-to-know-one is activated, with the trajectories of projectile accusations becoming potentially mirrored and difficult to predict. What is perhaps most astonishing then about this passage then is the way in which it evacuates the semantics of worldliness itself:

George Goodman, the man of letters, is here quite literally being led by his young daughter, vulnerable and almost helpless; and if this at first glance raises few suspicions, it is only after both Theodora and the reader have mastered the erotics of knowing in the *jardin exotique* that we can begin to fill in the vessel of this secret.

The rhetorical impaction that accompanies the representation of Theodora's father effects a textual blurring of this character and the relationship he shares with his daughter: George Goodman himself becomes here a mobile signifier. In characterising this relationship as closeted, we need to pay heed to one of the foundational assumptions of Sedgwick's conceptualisation of the closet. Sedgwick's argument in *Epistemology* is 'a deconstructive one... in a fairly specific sense':

The analytic move [*Epistemology*] makes is to demonstrate that categories presented in a culture as symmetrical binary oppositions – heterosexual/homosexual, in this case – actually subsist in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation according to which, first, term B is not symmetrical with but subordinated to term A; but, second, the ontologically valorized term A actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of term B; hence, third, the question of priority between the supposed central and the supposed marginal category of each dyad is irresolvably unstable, an instability caused by the fact that term B is constituted as at once internal and external to term A. (9-10)

What Sedgwick is saying in this syntactically show-stopping sentence is that when we look at the relations of, say, worldliness – Urbane/Provincial; Innocence/Initiation – the constituent elements of these binarisms that coalesce into the master term are in fact linguistic illusions: one cannot separate out the meaning of urbanity from that of provinciality, and these terms therefore subsist not as opposites but as a dynamic mixture to be manipulated by the whims of discursive power. These 'unsettled and dynamic tacit relations' by which we come to designate something or someone as worldly are in full display in the characterisation of George Goodman. Here we have a man who is well-read

and multilingual, but is also on account of this made to feel, as we shall see, diffident, and thence brought under a cloud of suspicion; he is knowing, but his possession of a secret begets vulnerability and other attendant ignorances; his foreign travels might be a marker of his cosmopolitan urbanity and maturity but they also register a certain short-sightedness and earn him the scorn of his provincial Australian countrymen: ‘gadding off to foreign places... Sellin’ off a paddock here and a paddock there... George Goodman has no sense of responsibility to his own land’ (20). All of which serves to evacuate any semantic purchase that a category like worldliness might possess: upon closer inspection the deconstructed term is in isolation quite meaningless. Thus do we arrive at a deeply ambiguous and ceaselessly shifting representation of George Goodman and the relationship he has with his daughter; and it is this ambiguity that generates the erotic subtext to this relationship.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that this closeted relationship, subject always to the mobility of signification and the volatile rhetoric of worldliness, should be figured in the text by... text itself! In a gesture that will be familiar to us by now from the previous chapter’s reading of *The Solid Mandala*, the first suggestion of suspicion that we are given concerning the worth of George Goodman’s character comes from the cook at Meroë, Gertie Stepper, who laments that ‘your father is one for books’: ‘the tone of Gertie Stepper’s voice made it something sad and incurable, almost as if it were an illness, what Father did with books. And old books, foreign books’ (17).

Notwithstanding the way in which this passage dances back and forth between representing Mr Goodman’s worldliness and vulnerability – reading foreign books as if

it were an illness! – but it is also instructive to note that this illness is something that he only shares with Theodora; it is a signifier of their intimacy:

He had grey eyes. Above the heavy grey-black thicket of the beard the eyes were light and clear. But they did not always look.
'You must come in, Theodora,' Father said finally.
'You must come in whenever you like, and take to books.'
'Better a girl than a man,' said Gertie Stepper. (18)

What are we to make of Gertie's rather barbed comment here? Are we to take it merely that Gertie believes the effeminate pastime of reading is one more appropriate for Theodora than her father? Or are we to read this line as an expression of Gertie's belief that whatever it is that father and daughter are doing together whilst ostensibly 'reading,' at least it is heterosexual 'reading': better that Mr Goodman 'read' with a girl than with another man. The text here admits both possibilities. But either way we read it, this passage bears, quite literally, a textual instability, the blank stare of eyes that do not always look, teamed with the suggestion of depravity that typifies the closet. If nothing else, we must take George and Theodora's love of reading as an invitation to read between the lines.

In using the *jardin exotique* as a device through which to read Meroë we might say that we are reading the text self-consciously, as a text whose utterances and silences generate a multiplicity of meanings and possible interpretations. As such, it is necessary that we examine how the text itself supports such a self-conscious reading practice. An important dimension to *The Aunt's Story's* self-reflexive poetics is its use of intertextuality. As we saw in Chapter Three of this thesis, intertextuality is a device that White frequently employs in the vicinity of the closet. Classical allusions in particular are used as a means of conveying the presence of ostensibly aberrant sexual practices to the reader covertly – or

more precisely to a certain kind of reader, an urbane, well-read and worldly kind of reader. In *The Solid Mandala*, a reference to the myth of Tiresias was deployed in order to obliquely refer to Waldo's cross-dressing and secret 'writing' habits. Similarly, a reference to Laocoön and his sons entangled by snakes is used in *The Tree of Man* to lend phallic weight to the bouts of 'wrestling' engaged in by Ray Parker and Con the Greek while the two are alone in the latter's shed at the bottom of the garden. In *The Aunt's Story*, one of the few glimpses we are granted inside George Goodman's library (or closet) opens with the following deliberately obfuscating setting of the scene via a literary allusion:

More actual even than the dream of actuality was the perpetual odyssey on which George Goodman was embarked, on which the purple water swelled beneath the keel, rising and falling like the wind of pines on the blue shores of Ithaca. George Goodman sat with his beard spread above the book... When Theodora came into the room, into the green, cold sighing of the pines, his eyes, she saw, had not returned. (70)

The convoluted formulation of the library here as 'more actual even than the dream of actuality' again serves to upend the reader's cognitive foundations: the inception of a dream within a dream sets the stage for another scene of seduction, much as Sokolnikov did with his epistemological riddles in the *jardin exotique*. The intertextual reference to the George Goodman's Odyssey is also telling, particularly in so far as the conversation continues between Mr Goodman and Theodora: "have you ever thought, Theodora," Father said, "about Nausicaä, the name? It is as smooth and straight and tough as an arrow" (70). In Book Six of Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus first encounters Nausicaä when he is shipwrecked on the island of Scheria. During his scramble to the shore Odysseus loses his clothes; and so when he sees Nausicaä doing her laundry by the sea-shore he rushes over to her and begs her for some clothing. Nausicaä grants Odysseus this request, but then becomes fearful that rumours might be spread about her virtue, having been seen in the compromising presence of a stark naked man. Nausicaä is also notable as a

character in the *Odyssey* for the unrequited love she bears for Odysseus. But it is also instructive to note that Chapter Thirteen of James Joyce's *Ulysses* is entitled "Nausicaä," and there are significant parallels between Joyce's rendering of the story and Homer's: both are stories of erotic temptation; Joyce's chapter explores the erotic dynamics between Gerty McDowell (read: Nausicaä) who spends the whole chapter tempting Bloom (read: Odysseus). All of which serves to illustrate how intertextuality is being used in the Meroë section of *The Aunt's Story* to covertly inaugurate the scene of seduction in which George Goodman and Theodora find themselves. This intertextuality also ramifies back through the text itself, with the same dynamic of interdependency pertaining to the different sections of *The Aunt's Story*. But perhaps more importantly, the text's dependence on other texts (and on other sections of the same text) to generate meanings also reinforces *The Aunt's Story*'s dynamic relation to its reader: operating on two fronts, the intertextual reference's multivalent significance is wedded to the epistemological vacuum figured by George Goodman's library; with both of these fronts serving to quietly background the erotics of knowing that permeate this scene. And sitting always in the centre of this figurative closet are Theodora and her father.

Perhaps nowhere is this dynamic of intertextuality more pertinent than when we come to appraise *The Aunt's Story* in the context of White's oeuvre as a whole. McMahon argues that we need to be careful about how we frame the epistemology of White's closet, his homographesis, and the coming out that *Twynborn* purports to execute: 'if *The Twynborn Affair* is the most explicit in regard to a lived practice of sexuality, it is simultaneously the most veiled and figurative on this subject' (87). This obliquity arises from the relationship of dependency that exists between *Twynborn* and White's late style on the one

hand, and the ‘gentlemanly contract’ under which his earlier texts insist on being read (87). McMahon argues that ‘the overt declarations of homosexuality in *The Twyborn Affair* are being heard by a readership skilled in the deflection of homosexuality’ cultivated by his earlier closeted texts (87). Thus, ‘while White may shout this statement of identity from the metaphorical rooftops of *The Twyborn Affair*, it does and does *not* alter the conventional reading practices of his work...’ (87 original emphasis). My argument has sought to demonstrate that *The Aunt’s Story* also occupies fully this liminal space of yes and no identified by McMahon. But what I have sought to draw to the fore in this chapter is the fact that White’s closeted aesthetic permeates his oeuvre from top to tail; I argue that White’s oeuvre is a queer body in its entirety; and that an early work such as *The Aunt’s Story* grapples with the epistemological double-binds of the closet just as much as does a late work such as *The Twyborn Affair*. So, if there is a distinction to be drawn between White’s late and early styles with respect to the closet and sexuality, we might say that earlier texts of White’s explore the closet from the inside out, while his later texts are on the outside peering in.

If there is one minor divergence between McMahon’s conceptualisation of White’s body of work and my own it pertains only the emphasis she places on White’s late style as the vector of his queered politics of identity. McMahon argues that ‘the complex of interrelation, accretion, and reprisal in *The Twyborn Affair* deploys the conventional metaphor of the body of work, the fictional corpus, by which the composite body of the protagonist is the site of composition and decomposition’ (82). McMahon thus links the uncloseting of *Twyborn’s* protagonist, and her/his subsequent corporeal shattering, as a highly eroticised allegory for the role that *Twyborn* plays in White’s oeuvre as a whole and as an ‘allegory

for reading White's fiction' with *Twynborn*'s protagonist as 'the body on which this allegory is written' (82). For McMahon, this marks a decisive shift in White's career as a writer: it 'marks the juncture at which White's writing, so deeply embedded in modernist aesthetics and thought, becomes postmodern' (78). However, I think we need to proceed cautiously before making such a sweeping claim. If, as McMahon argues, the coming out that *Twynborn* performs is constitutively dependent on knowledge of White's earlier, closeted writing, it follows that this reading-dynamic is not a one-way street: the closeted dimensions of the earlier texts also exert a pressure on the later "outed" texts. If we were to characterise this pressure more precisely, we might say that *The Aunt's Story*'s closeted representations of identity force us to be cautious when reading White's later and ostensibly out-and-proud texts as unproblematically out-and-proud. McMahon is absolutely correct in refusing to frame White's coming out in conventional narratives that forge and secure an identity and a politics from such an act; she readily concedes that 'the line between inside and outside of the closet is not, in White's fiction, or elsewhere, clear, easily identifiable, or stable' (87). All I would argue is that this articulation of the closet is not characteristic of a discrete late style, or a shift in White's poetics, his habits of representation. Indeed, I would argue that the 'Janus-faced temporality' that McMahon identifies in *Twynborn* and uses so skilfully throughout her argument does not lend itself to a linear conceptualisation of White's oeuvre, divided into and developing through an early, middle and late phase. If anything, *Twynborn*'s Janus-faced temporality should encourage more circuitous and peripatetic readings of White's texts, with their complex of interrelationships unhindered by notions of development, progression or progress. And, as I have sought to show in this chapter, such a post-modern conceptualisation of how we read is more than encouraged by a text as early in White's career as *The Aunt's Story*. Granted, such a move is not a comfortable or easy one to make. This is particularly

so when we grapple with the overtly modernist feel of White's earlier texts. To characterise *The Aunt's Story* as postmodern might seem aesthetically jarring and anachronistic, but if we accede to the intertextual dynamic of closeting and outing that pertains to White's body of work, we must also accede to the play of signs and signifiers that are implanted in works as early as *The Aunt's Story*; the sheer textuality of White's works, with *The Aunt's Story* perhaps standing as a prime exemplar of this, forces such a reckoning.

Furnished with the knowingness acquired in the *jardin exotique*, reading the louche Sokolnikov as an avatar for Theodora's father, we are thus able to re-read Part One of *The Aunt's Story*. But in doing so it is important, as was the case when we peered into the closeted passages that enveloped the General, to recognise the limits of such a venture: although the gesture of rhetorical impaction seems to align the epistemological point-of-view of Theodora with that of the reader, the two are not entirely fused. If we are to read the *jardin exotique* as a re-telling of Meroë from Theodora's unique, warped, or, depending on how you look at it, insightful and revelatory perspective, it must be noted that we, the reader, do not become one or synonymous with Theodora: she still guards some secrets and keeps some things to herself. Paramount amongst these secrets is the precise nature of the relationship with her father: it is and remains, in a word, closeted. The *jardin exotique*, as a projection of Theodora's imagination, alerts us to the existence of this closet but it does not necessarily reveal its contents. We might say therefore that Theodora's mastery of the erotics of knowing is supreme in this text; or at the very least, superior to our own. It is *The AUNT'S Story*, which is to say Theodora's story, after all. This mastery is a consequence of the privileging of her point of view that is implicit in

any reading of the *jardin exotique* as a projection of Theo's imagination. If the reader is inducted into the realm of knowing by the *jardin exotique*, gaining a superior vantage-point from which to observe Meroë, Theodora's vantage is superior still. For most of the other characters in the text, this erects a startling hierarchy:

‘Fanny is the *artistic* one, Mrs Parrott,’ Mother said. ‘But Theodora,’ said Father, ‘has great understanding.’
‘Of course,’ said Mrs Parrott, who looked frightened, as if it were the first time she had been given this to eat. (28)

Mrs Parrott might blench here, but George Goodman does not; rather than fear his daughter's insight, he embraces it. Indeed, it is Theodora's ability to keep a secret that enables their intimacy.

Vicarious Identities: Queering White's Body of Work

Up to this point I have argued that we get a truer, worldlier perspective on Meroë from having been through the *jardin exotique*; I have argued that the *jardin exotique* functions as something of a looking-glass: that it enables us to share in some of the (implicitly sexual) knowledge that Theodora has known all throughout her childhood though closeted by the text of Meroë. But in the course of making this argument a paradox has emerged: the more we know about *The Aunt's Story* the more keenly we begin to apprehend the limits of that knowledge. We can also take this logic and apply it equally to the text's protagonist: the closer we get to the centre of Theodora, the harder we peer into her psyche as it is represented through the *jardin exotique*, the more opaque she becomes. In a startlingly similar gesture to that deployed by *Twynborn* and identified by McMahon, *The Aunt's Story* might be said to stand as another ‘allegory for reading White's fiction’ (82), though this time it is the opaque psyche of the protagonist, rather

than the impossible body of E. Twyborn, on which this allegory is written. Key to McMahon's argument, and central to any nascent understanding of White's queered politics of identity, is the impossibility of this allegory: McMahon characterises *Twyborn's* 'elaborate allusiveness' as 'a gesture of evacuation and exhaustion, a final grasp at comprehension;' and she further notes that 'the novel's final pages perform the literal explosion of tropes and subject' (81). Again – though I do not want to labour this point – McMahon views this explosion as an example of White's late style. She writes that *Twyborn's* final explosion 'locates the novel in the conventional position of a last work according to the various conventions of an author exhausting and relinquishing the tools of his craft' (81). However, my reading of *The Aunt's Story* requires a recalibration of this argument. Though less explosive than *Twyborn's* 'final grasp at comprehension' and more akin to a slow-burn, like Theodora's niece Lou, when we read *The Aunt's Story* we are left in a near constant state of unslaked desire to know more about this eponymous aunt. It is telling that at the very bridge between Meroë and the *jardin exotique*, just as the former concludes and the latter is about to commence, Theodora has the following conversation with her niece:

I wish...' said Lou.
'What do you wish?'
'I wish I was you, Aunt Theo.'
And now Theodora asked why.
'Because you know things,' said Lou.
'Such as?'
'Oh,' she said, 'things.'
Her eyes were fixed, inwardly, on what she could not yet express.
'Either there is very little to learn, or else we learn very little,' said Theodora. 'You will discover that in time.' (148)

Certainly, part of the experience of having read the *jardin exotique* – part of its performative function – is to satisfy this desire for knowledge expressed by Theodora's niece. And yet this process is never complete: 'there is very little to learn, or else we learn very little' is Theodora's almost coquettish reply to her niece. And so we need to be

cautious about any of the claims we make about *The Aunt's Story*. I cannot, for example, follow the Bestons when they apply layer upon layer of programmatic specificity to their reading of the *jardin exotique* and end their analysis with a lament that 'in more than half a century since this work was written, it is surprising that no satisfactory key to it has appeared' (135). If *The Aunt's Story* does function as an allegory for reading White's fiction, it is in the arbitrary vicissitudes of the signifier and in the closeted obscurity thereby engendered that such a correspondence is to be found.

Closetedness functions in *The Aunt's Story* as a metaphor for a putative queered subjectivity, expressing the same implicit critique of identity politics that *Epistemology of the Closet* did so much to inaugurate. For central to Sedgwick's schema of the closet is a hard-core deconstructivist scepticism and a thoroughly textualised understanding of identity. This scepticism is perhaps given its fullest expression in Sedgwick's reading of Melville's *Billy Budd*, and specifically in her characterisation of the master-at-arms Claggart. Of crucial importance to Sedgwick's reading of Melville's text and her broader argument as to the power-struggles that constitute homosexual definition is the nature, is the essence or identity of Claggart: the ship-board disciplinarian who feels an ineffable attraction and repulsion towards the young and beautiful Billy Budd, accuses him of fomenting 'mutiny,' and thence becomes the victim of the startled Billy's fist. Sedgwick asks us to consider: 'what *was* – Melville asks it – the matter with the master-at-arms?' (*Epistemology* 96). Sedgwick reasons that Claggart could be either a homosexual or a homophobe, but notes that 'the relation between these two possible answers... is of course an odd problem. Suffice it to say here that either could qualify him for, and certainly neither would disqualify him from, a designation like "homosexual"' (*Epistemology* 96). But it is the slippage between these two categories that is of such

crucial importance to Sedgwick's entire conceptualisation of the epistemology of the closet, because Claggart is a closeted character precisely to the extent that 'there can be no full or substantive answer at all to the question' (*Epistemology* 96). 'Claggart represents a pure *epistemological essence*, a form and a theory of knowing untinged by the actual stuff that he either knows or comprises' (*Epistemology* 96). I would argue that Theodora occupies the same liminal space of unknowing as does Claggart. We can quite easily apply Barbara Johnson's analysis of Claggart to Theodora: both are 'a personification of ambiguity and ambivalence, of the distance between signifier and signified, of the separation between being and doing... [S]he is properly an ironic reader, who, assuming the sign to be arbitrary and unmotivated, reverses the value signs of appearances' (573). This is the key to understanding Theodora's closet. She is very much an ironic reader, with the imaginary projection of the *jardin exotique* standing as her wickedly witty spin on the 'child's construction of blocks' (14) that is Meroë. And because of this her essence is infinitely malleable. Theodora is 'everything in imitation, and because of this the importance of what she did was intense' (29): Theodora literally represents this gap between being and doing, between signifier and signified. Along all of our current, exceedingly coarse axes of difference, of identification, Theodora is an unknown. To take one example: Is Theodora a boy or a girl? 'She herself had never considered what could not have been such a different state. Life was divided, rather, into the kinder moments and the cruel, which on the whole are not conditioned by sex' (29). To take another: Is Theodora gay or straight? Violet Adams, Theodora's best friend at Miss Spofforth's Academy, thought she had found a fellow-travelling lesbian in Theodora, but Theodora had other ideas: 'she had left Violet Adams behind. It was less melancholy than inevitable. She did not love Violet less. They could still walk linked through the long grass at dusk, and hate the intruder, but Theodora knew she would also

prefer sometimes to risk the darkness and walk alone' (57). Inside this very poetic image we might say that Theodora's closet and her refusal to countenance any stable identity are married.

Given all this, any conclusions as to Theodora's sexuality must remain admittedly speculative. I am reluctant, for example, to wrap the erotic suggestiveness of the relationship between Theodora and her father up in a simple narrative of violation, trauma and abuse, if for no better reason than on account of her mastery of the erotics of knowing – the *jardin exotique* is her creation, it is the prism through which Theodora's sexuality is viewed (albeit obliquely), and its abiding tone is not one of tragedy but of farce.

Moreover, it is signposted from the very beginning of the relationship that it is Theodora who leads George Goodman by the hand, and not the other way round (17). Having said that, if we are to take Theodora's relationship with her father as traumatic – and I'm not saying there is not scope for such an argument to be made – it is only traumatic to the extent that we might conceptualise the sexual itself as a traumatic humiliation of the self, as, in a word, *jouissance*.

Perhaps the most erotic passage in the whole of *The Aunt's Story*, a passage that brings Theodora's life at Meroë to an end, comes as George Goodman is dying in his library. This scene is marked by both an emotional intensity heightened to the ecstatic pitch of tears – it is the only time we see Theodora cry (93) – and by a radical intimacy between father and daughter: 'Inside the room, of which the windows were open, Father lay on the couch. He was close, closer than her own thought, and at the same time distant, like

someone is a public house' (92). By radical intimacy, I mean something similar to Leo Bersani's theorisation of the sexual as that which draws human beings together only to plunge them into a solipsistic, self-shattering *jouissance* – the ramifications of which I explored more fully in Chapter One of this thesis. We see this paradoxical conceptualisation echoed in the observation that, in his final moments of life, George Goodman is both closer to Theodora than her own thoughts and yet as distant as someone at the pub. The intimacy between Theodora and her father might be said to be consummated in his parting remarks: ““And we are close,” he said. “It is not possible for us to come any closer”” (92). But in coming so close to Theodora we the reader, like George Goodman, are given a suggestion of her sexuality, but no more: ““In the end,” his voice said, out of the pines, “I did not see it” (93); and when it comes to Theodora's sexuality, neither did we.

Thus, when thinking about Theodora's closet, it is to the *jardin exotique* ultimately that we must return. If this text's closetedness stands as a metaphor for a queer critique of the politics of identity, it is in the dizzying maelstrom of personalities and representational slippage, which is another way of saying Theodora's unique mode of vicarious identification, that we see this critique put into practice. As Sedgwick notes, there is ‘a rich and conflictual salience of the vicarious embedded within gay identification’ (*Epistemology* 62). She argues that ‘homosexual attribution and identification have had a distinctive centrality, in this century, for many stigmatized but extremely potent sets of relations involving projective chains of vicarious investment: sentimentality, kitsch, camp, the knowing, the prurient, the arch, the morbid’ (*Epistemology* 62). Part and parcel of *The Aunt's Story's* closeted textual aesthetic is the exuberant campiness of the *jardin*

exotique. If we recall the argument made in Chapter Three of this thesis, where I argued that White's closeted aesthetic oscillates between secrecy and flamboyant or morbid disclosure, we can see the same dynamic pertaining to the first and second parts of *The Aunt's Story*. And, more importantly, if we recall the deconstructing reader of her own life that is Theodora, the 'ironic reader, who, assuming the sign to be arbitrary and unmotivated, reverses the value signs of appearances,' perhaps nowhere are these value signs reversed more thoroughly and repeatedly than when we look at the representation of Theodora's self intermingling with its others in the second part of this text. We have already seen how the *jardin exotique* is introduced with a slippage of identification and desire, in the exchange between Theodora and her niece Lou, where the latter professes her 'wish' to 'be' the former. But the *jardin exotique* extends this vicarious logic much further in its attempts to represent 'the created lives of Theodora Goodman' (333). We see this most clearly during the scene of seduction between General Sokolnikov and Katina Pavlou where it is not clear at all who the actors in this scene really are.

Specifically there is a constant slippage between the characters of Katina and Theodora, in an effect that can only be described as Janus-faced. The scene begins with a conceit: Theodora is ostensibly eavesdropping in on a conversation between Sokolnikov and Katina; she sits 'round another corner of the wintergarden' (252), listening in. However, it quickly becomes apparent that Theodora *is* Katina: at the most crucial stage in Sokolnikov's attempt to woo the young Katina, Theodora melts into Katina, the latter revealed as something like a projection of Theodora's younger self: 'Katina Pavlou had become the amazed and frightened instrument recording some climatic disturbance, still too sudden to accept or understand' (257). Thus, vicariousness must sit at the heart of any understanding of the *jardin exotique* as the closeted re-telling of Meroë; vicariousness is the logic that pertains to this scene, with Sokolnikov and Katina actually acting out a

closeted re-interpretation of the relationship between George and Theodora Goodman. What is most intriguing here however, is the fact that Theodora is literally in two places, is two different people, at once. Such, we might say, is the magic of White's text. Emotions, too, are shared vicariously: 'the landscape was a state of interminable being, hope and despair devouring and disgorging endlessly, and the faces, whether Katina Pavlou or Sokolnikov, or Mrs Rapallo, or Wetherby, only slightly different aspects of the same state' (207). If being is indeed interminable, the *jardin exotique* advertises vicariousness as the slippery space of identification and performance that most becomes the theory of the closet.

The camp tone of the *jardin exotique* enacts a politics of resistance through its refusal to allow the identities of its characters to congeal into the boredom of stability and coherence. In this respect it might be said that *The Aunt's Story* shares the tone of Sedgwick's political rhetoric in *Epistemology* in that in both these texts the very notion of identity itself becomes the butt of jokes and an object of affectionate ridicule. More specifically, we can say that White's text and Sedgwick's argument share an investment in an arch humour that serves as something of a thorn in the side of a stable identity politics. We see this most clearly perhaps when Theodora attempts to introduce herself to Mrs Rapallo in the *jardin exotique*. Mrs Rapallo responds to Theodora's introduction with what is undoubtedly one of the wittiest and funniest passages to appear in *The Aunt's Story*:

'Goodman? There was a young man,' said Mrs Rapallo, 'Lucius, or Grant, I forget which. A very eligible young man. He had a cleft chin, and sometimes wore a derby hat. In addition to money and relations, he had ideals. I was advised that I could not do better, but somehow, Miss Goodman, it sounded like a tombstone. So this Lucius, or Grant, or maybe Randolph Goodman married a woman who canned meat, and then proceeded to die slowly of Chicago. (180)

The humour of this passage rests on one of those vicarious relations identified by Sedgwick as being so central to the formation of a closeted, homosexual identity: we might properly characterise the humour of this passage as arch, or knowing, or an in-joke that presupposes an audience who understands exactly what it means to ‘die slowly of Chicago’. This assumption of knowledge and of a knowing sensibility is, as I have shown throughout this chapter, central to the operation of the closet in this text. But nowhere is this closeted sensibility enjoined so tightly and explicitly to a critique of the notion of identity as it is here: and I’m sure Lucius or Grant or maybe Randolph Goodman would agree with me. To be sure, the stability of money and family are here rendered as dead boring, literally a ‘tombstone,’ but the more thoroughgoing critique of the politics of identity is expressed through the tone of the passage.

We can align the camp tone of *The Aunt’s Story*’s political rhetoric with José Esteban Muñoz’s utopian theorisation of ‘astonishment’ and the well-known camp aesthetics of more canonically queer figureheads like Andy Warhol and Frank O’Hara. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz examines the works of Warhol and the poetry of O’Hara under the rubric of astonishment, characterising these two artist’s ‘campy fascination’ with, say, a can of Coke as a utopian queer political gesture. Muñoz argues that ‘astonishment helps one surpass the limitations of the present and allows one to see a different time and place’ (5). Throughout this chapter I have argued that the *jardin exotique* functions in precisely this manner, as Theodora’s active reimagining of Meroë as a different time and place under the auspices of an arch humour and a knowing sensibility. As such, we might consider the *jardin exotique* and the tone struck therein as a forerunner to the camp aesthetics of Warhol and O’Hara, as they are depicted by Muñoz: ‘Warhol was fond of making speech

acts such as “wow” and “gee”. Although this aspect of Warhol’s performance of self is often described as an insincere performance of naïveté,’ for Muñoz, these speech acts are ‘a manifestation of the utopian feeling that is integral to much of Warhol’s art, speech and writing’ (5). Similarly, Muñoz notes that O’Hara, ‘as even his casual readers know, was irrepressibly upbeat’ (5). In O’Hara’s poem “Having a Coke with You” Muñoz witnesses ‘poetry being saturated with feelings of fun and appreciation’ (5). The *jardin exotique* undoubtedly displays this same sense of detached wonder and camp fascination; one need only consider the following passage at the very beginning of the second part the *jardin exotique*; the similarities with O’Hara in particular are striking:

Theodora looked at her labels, at those places to which apparently she had been. In all those places, she realised, people were behaving still, opening umbrellas, switching off the light, singing Wagner, kissing, looking out of open windows for something they had not yet discovered, buying a ticket for the metro, eating salted almonds and feeling thirst. But now that she sat in the hall of the Hôtel du Midi and waited, none of those acts was what one would call relevant, if it ever had been. (153)

In the breezy detachment, the playful comingling of the profound and the banal – Wagner and umbrellas – we can easily place the *jardin exotique* within a well established tradition of camp astonishment: White’s metro tickets here would not be out of place in Warhol’s Factory; eating salted almonds and feeling thirst seems so much like something over which O’Hara would rhapsodise. But crucially, to this camp aesthetic the *jardin exotique* adds the closet – indeed in a figurative sense it *is* the closet that this campiness inhabits. We might say then that what Muñoz calls the ‘encrypted sociality’ and ‘utopian potentiality’ (6) that characterises Warhol and O’Hara also rather eloquently describes the arch, knowing humour with which the *jardin exotique* dispatches with the politics of identity. We can be fairly sure that when ‘Theodora looked at her labels’ she did so with one eyebrow raised.

But it is in this refusal to take seriously the claims of identity politics that we arrive at a problem that has bedevilled queer theory since its inception. Arguably, Robyn Wiegman best articulates this conundrum in *Object Lessons* where she argues that ‘*queer inquiry cannot have the sex it wants without losing what it wants most from having had it*’ (343, original emphasis). The thrust of Wiegman’s contention is that the more queer theory talks about sex, about the increasingly variegated inflections and articulations of sex, the more it produces ever more thoroughly and precisely the coercive disciplinary monolith identified (and decried) as sexuality by Foucault in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*. This incitement to discourse that attends queer inquiry is of interest to Wiegman primarily on account of the warping effect it has on the goals or the ‘affective investments,’ of queer theory. Politically speaking, queer inquiry has tended to express its critique of identity through the rhetoric of antinormativity. But for Wiegman, this rhetoric of antinormativity is problematic in that it is always haunted by its failure to live up to its promise of lasting emancipation. Wiegman asks us despairingly: ‘how can the field cultivate the antinormative without being committed to the normative?’ (341). Or, posing the question slightly more provocatively: ‘Fist-fucking, BDSM, polyamory, sex with friends, erotic vomiting, stone femininity. What kind of critical attention can avoid the slide into analytic normativity that description and referentiality entail?’ (340). The more we talk about sex, the more we layer it with description, reference and analysis, the more we begin to define it, to delimit it, to discipline it and ultimately to normalise it. This incitement to discourse is the crux of Wiegman’s disquiet, where ‘sex, sexual difference, and sexuality comprise the fraught terrain in which political desires have come to live’:

This terrain is constituted not just by talk of sex or by the social or analytic force of sex, or even by the incommensurabilities of the domains in which the meaning of sex is lived, but by the kinds of contradictions and evasions that attention to sex provokes, including the sheer impossibility of getting a grip on anything so dense and

disconcerting, so ephemeral and material, so intrinsically related and decidedly abstract as an antinormative account of ‘sex itself.’ (342)

This ‘vertigo of critique’ (301) animates Wiegman’s argument: a sense that language, representation and referentiality betray the antinormative promise of queer theory’s so-ardently-longed-for sexual revolution. Wiegman presents us with a symmetrical image of, on the one hand, a theoretical queer enterprise that is betrayed continuously by its marriage to language, and on the other, a terrain of identity politics that is similarly betrayed by the exclusionary effects that necessarily entail any codification of political action or representation.

As a conclusion to this final chapter of my thesis, I would like to argue that Wiegman’s conceptualisation of identity politics as a terrain haunted in perpetuity by its failure to ever fully discharge its ‘political imperative to do justice’ – wherein ‘the [very] critical value of identity knowledges is forged’ (301) – aligns precisely with the deconstructive practice of closeting and re-reading that this thesis chapter has put forth as the means by which *The Aunt’s Story* mounts its politics of critique. In other words, it is precisely in the closet, or in sex’s failure of representation, that queer theory might rescue something of what it wanted in having its sex in the first place. Thus, I propose that we return to the very beginnings of queer theory and, invoking once more a Janus-faced temporality, re-read Sedgwick’s closet in *Epistemology* to inform the current impasse in debates surrounding the political efficacy of queer inquiry in the historical present. For I do believe that the *jardin exotique* presents a utopian vision of the closet and that this vision has much to offer the queer subjects of today. In making this argument, I am aligning myself with Muñoz’s theorisation of queer futurity in *Cruising Utopia*. For Muñoz, ‘queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer.

We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality' (1). But rather than figure queerness as a horizon stretching out ahead of us and signifying the future, I would like to propose that we think of Muñoz's horizon as a ring which encircles us, encompassing not only the edge of the future, but also looping around us to embrace the edge of the past and back again. There can be few better images we might use to illustrate the Janus-faced temporality I have invoked throughout this thesis chapter. Such an image of a temporally ambiguous horizon is more than admissible under Muñoz's schema: he writes 'we have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine the future' (1). Just as Sedgwick goes back to re-read the closeted, pre-Stonewall, 'stigma-impregnated space of refused recognition,' so too might we use the earliest articulations of queer inquiry incarnated in *Epistemology* to inform contemporary debates surrounding the ostensibly paralysing paradoxes that entail queer theory's critique of identity politics. In brief, I propose using the closet of the past to imagine a better future.

Theodora Goodman is the standard bearer for this marshalling of the closet as a site of resistance and utopian imagination; for it is indeed a major note of defiant resistance that sounds in the final passages of *The Aunt's Story*. To extend the musical metaphor: we can think of *The Aunt's Story* in symphonic terms, with the development of the text's themes and ideas proceeding in classical sonata form. Meroë might be said to constitute the primary exposition, the *jardin exotique* standing as a section of elaboration and development, and the final part, Holstius, forming a recapitulation – a return to the ostensible realism of Meroë, but at the same time perceptibly changed by its exposure to

the *jardin exotique* and building to a climactic finale. Thematically speaking, the heart and soul of *The Aunt's Story* is the protagonist's struggle with the notion of identity, and it is this motif that unifies the three sections of the text as something like a symphonic movement. By the end of the first section – Meroë – Theodora might be said to have distilled her understanding, or critique, of identity with the following lines:

But words, whether spoken or written, were at most frail slat bridges over chasms... So it will not be by these means, Theodora said, that the great monster Self will be destroyed, and that desirable state achieved, which resembles, one would imagine, nothing more than air or water. She did not doubt that the years would contribute, rubbing and extracting, but never enough. Her body still slanged and rang when the voice struck.
“Theo-dor-a!” (146)

In the first section of *The Aunt's Story*, Theodora's yearning for liberation from identity abuts the mundane and terrestrial practicalities of responsibility to her family. It is telling that this act of interpellation, this pinning of “Theo-dor-a!” so emphatically to a specific body, at a specific time and in a specific place should come from her mother. We might note for a moment the similarity here between old Mrs Goodman and the figure of Eadie Twyborn in *The Twyborn Affair*. As we can glean from the argument I made in Chapter Two of this thesis, mothers often assume the rather demanding responsibility of bringing the mercurial protagonists of White's texts back down to earth. But in this respect, returning to *The Aunt's Story*, it is absolutely crucial to recall the very first line of the text: ‘But old Mrs Goodman did die at last’ (3): if we again read Meroë's thematics with the Janus-faced temporality so crucial to any understanding of this text, we can clearly see how Theodora has conceptualised her critique of identity as a form of *jouissance*, as the death and dismissal of the self, as the bliss of ‘that desirable state achieved’ resembling ‘nothing more than air or water,’ as a limit to the representative function of language itself and as a liberation from the clutches of her mother. This is where Meroë terminates, thematically: recalling Wiegman's characterisation of the conflict at the heart of queer inquiry's critique of identity knowledges, Meroë's thematic exposition ends with

the dramatic confrontation between Theodora's extra-discursive yearning for a more 'desirable state' of transcendence and the thudding interpolative subjugation of "Theodora!" delivered with an appropriately musical, if admittedly harsh, intonation. This violent confrontation results in a provisional conclusion: Theodora's embrace of the death of her mother, the dismissal of identity, and her flight to the *jardin exotique*.

In the second section of *The Aunt's Story*, as I have shown throughout this chapter, the initial exposition of the first section of the text undergoes a form of elaboration: the scenes and the characters of first section are pushed into a new key; weird harmonies and new sonorities are explored. Theodora attempts to put her critique of identity into action through an embrace of a vicarious, arch and deeply ironic means of identification. The closet is the form of this expression: the representational strategy employed by the *jardin exotique* problematizes Theodora's genealogy, retelling the story of her childhood through a closeting which undermines the efficacy of representation itself: 'the garden encouraged exposure, and then contained it, with all the indifference of zinc' (273). And like the first section of the text, the second also falls back on a metaphorical embrace of the ecstatic potential of *jouissance*. In the conflagration that eventually consumes the *jardin exotique*, it is the erotics of this coming undone that are emphasised. As the fire burns the collection of characters gathered outside shivers in anticipation: 'But for the crowd it was essential that the roof should fall. It waited for this intensification of its lives' (292). The pressure continues to mount until: 'the crowd began to call. The roof would fall, called the crowd. It was time, time, time. The voice thickened. "Ahhhh," cried the crowd in a last desperate spasm of consummation' (293).

But if the *jardin exotique*'s closet is erected with 'all the indifference of zinc,' then it must also be noted that the freedom afforded by the *jardin exotique* is, frankly, a dead end: as the claims of the 'created lives of Theodora Goodman' become more onerous, they demand to know more and more about the Australian spinster; and as the section moves towards its end it becomes apparent that it can only end with fire and a cataclysmic

Götterdämmerung. The final line of the *jardin exotique* is instructive in this respect: Theodora utters 'We must join the others. Listen. They are calling us.' (294). The cast of characters in the *jardin exotique* ultimately repeat the very same act of interpellation that Mrs Goodman performed in Meroë, enjoining Theodora to account for herself. Thence is Theodora resolved to flight once more: "But I shall go," Theodora said, indifferent to any pricking pressure, and dictatorship of the *jardin exotique*' (294). Thus does the second section of *The Aunt's Story* melodically and thematically echo the impasse of the first.

It is only in the final section of *The Aunt's Story* that the text's thematisation of identity is finally resolved, achieving a synthesis of theory and practice at the text's climax. Carolyn Bliss summarises the impasse that confronts Theodora at the beginning of the third and final section of the text. She argues that the challenge Theodora faces is 'not to nullify the self, but to acknowledge the proliferation of selves and the conflicts and contradictions they entail' (45). Bliss's argument clearly echoes Sedgwick's call for a 'lived experiment' within the 'stimulating aether of the unnamed.' The problem Theodora has encountered throughout this text is how to put this closetedness into practice. We might even say that the tripartite structure of Theodora's story is repeated in the same quest for transcendence

in *Twynborn*. As we saw in the first chapter of this thesis, the cycle of self-creation and self-destruction that the structure of *Twynborn* articulates is a crucial element in the transcendence of a social ontology of difference that White's queer reconceptualisation of identity attempts.

In the final section of the text it is clear what Theodora wants: 'she firmly intended that this game for the soul of Theodora Goodman should be finally hers' (329). This desire for agency and independence is also clearly wedded to a closeting refusal: 'she embraced with love the silence of her own room' (329). Theodora's desire runs contrary to the discursive process of truth formation that is the necessary attendant of identity knowledges: she muses to herself that 'Man would be very admirable within his own freckled limits, if it were not for his native slyness, and, more particularly, his desire to strain perpetually after truth' (331). If at this stage it seems as if Theodora's quest for transcendence seems doomed to perdition, into this breach steps the mysterious Holstius. Who or what Holstius is exactly is never clearly established by the text; but it is what he teaches Theodora in the dying pages of *The Aunt's Story* that is important. He calmly informs Theodora of her imminent committal to an asylum by 'those who prescribe the reasonable life' (332). But, he adds, 'you will not be taken in by any of this... If we know better... we must keep it under our hats' (332). As it has been throughout this text, it is in this act of closeting that Theodora's resistance is conducted. However, now there is a key difference; to Theodora's closeted refusal of identity Holstius adds the magical ingredient of temporal ambiguity: 'true permanence is a state of multiplication and division' (332) Holstius says. And it is this that makes all the difference: 'In the peace that Holstius spread

throughout her body and the speckled shade of surrounding trees, there was no end to the lives of Theodora Goodman. These met and parted, met and parted movingly' (332). Then, with two long, spectacular sentences, Holstius synthesises the vicariating gestures of Theodora's closet with the Janus-faced temporality that has been the governing rhetorical principle of the entire text, effecting nothing less than a synthesis of *The Aunt's Story's* thematics with its poetics:

They entered into each other, so that the impulse for music in Katina Pavlou's hands, and the steamy exasperation of Sokolnikov, and Mrs Rapallo's baroque and narcotized despair were the same and understandable. And in the same way that the created lives of Theodora Goodman were interchangeable, the lives into which she had entered, making them momentarily dependent for love or hate, owing her this portion of the fluctuating personalities, whether George or Julia Goodman, only apparently deceased, or Huntly Clarkson, or Moriitis, or Lou, or Zack, these were the lives of Theodora Goodman, these too. (332-3)

In this fertile marriage of past and present we have a consummation of Theodora's vicarious identifications, such that the multiple created lives of Theodora Goodman *become* Theodora Goodman. It is in this ultimate collapse of the distinction between subject and object under the stunning aegis of a flowing temporality, meeting and parting, meeting and parting movingly, that we arrive at the final expression of the closet as a strategy of resistance. In keeping things under her hat, Theodora embodies the rebellious spirit of the closet, incarnating the disruptive potential of the speech act of a silence. And so it is that Theodora, invoking the camp spirit of the *jardin exotique*, can joke lovingly about her forthcoming fate:

'I've come to take you down with me to town, where there are folks who'll make you comfortable.'
He looked at Theodora, sharing a secret and not.
She laughed.
'You Americans,' she said, 'make life positively pneumatic. But how agreeable.'
And she held her head on one side as she had seen ladies do on receiving and thanking for a cup of tea. (336)

Theodora, like the ‘doubtful rose’ that trembles on her hat, is now able to lead ‘a life of her own’ (336). Theodora’s closeted resistance is finally made manifest: “‘I’m afraid that I have set you a problem,’” she said now. “‘Actually I do exist’” (336).

As has been demonstrated throughout this thesis, White’s queer politics is oriented always towards gestures of transcendence. Heretofore, as noted in the Introduction, this transcendence has been read as an expression of something spiritual in White’s thematics. But, as this final thesis chapter has shown, there is also something distinctly sacrilegious in White’s desire to move beyond the paradigm of selfhood. *The Aunt’s Story* is a signal text in showcasing how a shamelessly camp and vicariating playfulness with the boundaries of selfhood effects a blissful evacuation of the self. Here the many lives of Theodora Goodman, and the uproarious show they put on for us in the *jardin exotique*, constitute one of the paths of queer transcendence mapped by White in this text. The other path, as this chapter has demonstrated, tracks to the opposite epistemological pole: from the flamboyant proliferation of vicarious identities, the closet, in contrast, is shown in this text to be another route towards transcendence. In this eschewing the binary logic of the social, both these paths freight White’s queer politics. And most importantly, what unites these two modes of resistance is their commitment to a loose and free-flowing temporality. The poetics of reading backwards as well as forwards that undergirds *The Aunt’s Story*’s queer resistances will be shown, in the forthcoming Conclusion, to constitute the final, unifying element in White’s queer literary project. For it is in the churn of signification, in the act of reading and re-reading that is the very flow of meaning itself, that Theodora Goodman’s endless multiplicities and opacities are known.

Conclusion: ‘Myself is this endlessness’

In the introduction to this thesis I characterised White’s queer politics as a fundamentally critical enterprise, quite separate from the politics of his better-known public activism, and therefore conceived of as an insistently literary project. Each of the four chapters in this thesis has demonstrated how we might discern White’s queer politics through his novels: the readings of *The Twyborn Affair*, *The Solid Mandala* and *The Aunt’s Story* that this thesis has advanced have each shown how the closet, camp and *jouissance* comprise the basic elements of White’s queer thematics, and how this thematics operates in very close proximity to White’s self-consciously textual style. But if White’s queer politics is undeniably writerly, this project is nevertheless endowed with a certain materiality.

Indeed, this thesis has sought to demonstrate both the embodied and performative dimensions to White’s queer politics. The failure of White’s prose to fully circumscribe meaning performs its materiality through gestures of textual excess, be it, for example, in the excessive and disruptive erotics generated by *Twyborn*’s pornographic flirtations, or in that text’s affective logic of abjection; or in the very obvious physicality that subsists as a residue of *Mandala*’s closeted representations of sexuality. In arguing for a reconceptualisation of White’s oeuvre as a queer body, this thesis has shown how the outed sexuality of White’s later texts performatively disrupts the svelte operation of the closeted aesthetic of his earlier texts. But given that the performativity and the material effects of White’s queer rhetoric have been treated implicitly, rather than explicitly, in each of these chapters, this dimension to White’s queer politics needs to be brought into sharper focus. And so, with recourse to a very brief reading of another of White’s texts, *The Eye of the Storm*, the conclusion of this thesis briefly outlines and elaborates on the materiality of White’s queer politics with two purposes in mind: the material dimension of White’s queer politics provides arguably the best means of engaging with the extant

body of White scholarship reparatively; and it is only through White's queer materiality that we can understand how this political project undoes the rhetoric of selfhood. While this rhetoric of selfhood has been the sustained object of analysis by queer theorists – most notably Lee Edelman in his brilliantly polemical *No Future* – this conclusion will demonstrate how the deconstructive literary practice that provides the academic study of queer theory with an intellectual heritage also gestures away from language and text towards a realm of the senses. And it is through this embodied queer theory that another grand intellectual and spiritual tradition, Buddhism, becomes a powerful resource in the struggle to undo the violent monolith of the self.

While the notion of transcendence looms large over the ample body of scholarship devoted to the sacred themes of White's texts, a certain antagonism and tension arises from within this body of scholarship when we attempt to invoke the theme of transcendence with more political or secular aims in mind. Such antagonism seems curious when the notion of transcendence unites both the sacred and the queer in White. This thesis has demonstrated how the representation of sexuality in White's novels encapsulates White's attempts to transcend the self and the violences that attend it, and how this constitutes a queer political project at the heart of White's literary output. But if, as I noted in the introduction to this thesis, many of the sacred readings of White's texts attempt to give voice to a similarly ineffable thematics of spiritual transcendence, the significance of these readings – political or otherwise – often remains muted and unclear. Indeed, spiritual readings of White's texts are often accompanied by a certain defensiveness when faced with the outside world. Peter Beatson provides a neat showcase of this defensive posture and the staged antagonism between the sacred and the secular or

political themes in White when he concludes his study of the religious themes of the work with a quote from White himself:

I suppose what I am increasingly intent on trying to do in my books is to give professed unbelievers glimpses of their own unprofessed factor. I believe most people have a religious factor, but are afraid that by admitting it they will forfeit their right to be considered intellectuals. This is particularly common in Australia where the intellectual is a comparatively recent phenomenon. The churches defeat their own aims, I feel, through the banality of their approach, and by rejecting so much that is sordid and shocking which can still be related to religious experience... I feel that the moral flaws in myself are more than anything my creative force. (167)

Beatson argues that ‘these words of Patrick White justify... the central position that has been assigned’ in his study of White’s novels ‘to the religious factor’ (167). Beatson’s claims to exclusivity and primacy of the religious in White are symptomatic of the very defensiveness that seems to accompany much of the affective real-estate in spiritual readings of White. And yet, as we have seen in White’s celebration of the ‘sordid’ and the ‘shocking’ in his novels, there is the suggestion of a means of reconciling the spiritual to the queer in White. But even if White himself characterised the ‘flaws in myself’ as the driving force behind his spiritual project, and even if this spiritual project is conceived of as a missionary attempt to alter or change the ‘intellectuals’ of Australia, a conceptual framework to effect such a mission has so far been lacking in White scholarship.

This conclusion proffers a suggestion as to how we might reparatively position the insistently political readings of White put forward by this thesis with the heretofore defensive, even paranoid current that runs through much of what I called in the introduction to this thesis the ‘Old’ White criticism. What I want to suggest here is that the idea of transcendence actually advertises the proximity of the religious themes of White’s texts to and with the queer politics that this thesis has shown to inform those very same texts. What I want to suggest is that when White himself speaks, in the passage

quoted by Beatson above, of an ‘unprofessed factor’ in the spiritual thematics of his novels, he is invoking the same limitations of language and the same critique of selfhood that informs his queer politics. Sedgwick speaks of the reparative position as an ‘impulse’ that is ‘additive and accretive’: ‘it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will have resources to an inchoate self’ (*Touching* 149). In showing how the transcendental teleology of the spiritual White is in fact an important resource for fleshing out the queer and ‘inchoate’ selves that White’s novels celebrate, this conclusion aims not only to ease the tension between the spiritual and secular Whites, but to go some way towards fulfilling the promise made at the opening of this thesis to repair that part of the body of White criticism that has failed to adequately address the queer, the ‘unprofessed factor’ of White’s spirituality.

The best means of reconciling the queer White to the metaphysical White is, ironically, through the very materiality of White’s queer politics. This is because both the queer and the metaphysical currents in White can be seen to share one very important thematic concern in what we might call the performative effacement of identity. To give a very salient example: in a recent essay, ‘Greece – Patrick White’s Country’, Shaun Bell gives a detailed account of how White’s Greek and Eastern Orthodox influences contribute to a subtle problematisation of a stable White-identity. Bell argues that White draws a borrowed or affected “Greekness” into a schema of [a] fictional performance of self’ (1); and for Bell, ‘this Greekness serves as a signifier for dislocation across borders of time and country,’ with the ‘squalor and magnificence of the Orthodox Church’ serving as an integral element in this form of ‘endless self-construction’ (11-12). Bell posits White’s Greekness as an affectation that comprises part of a strategy of identity-inflation whereby

the stable parameters of legible selfhood are effaced by an infectious logic of multiplication and addition. In this light, the ‘generative multiplicity of White’s Greek affiliation’ (2) can be read as a means of moving beyond the violence of identity politics: if ‘White’s declarations of belonging are [a] complex rhetoric deployed by a masterful performer of multiple personae’ (1), such nimble agency on this consummate actor’s part articulates ‘the transformative power of migratory displacement’ (7). That White’s Greekness should also figure as an ensemble with his queerness comes down to the fact that, as Bell demonstrates, White’s Greek influences are tied to his lifetime partnership with Manoly Lascaris. But crucially, this partnership defies any stable identity. As Bell notes, White’s strategy of identity-inflation ‘perpetuates the veiling’ of a Manoly who seems always to be receding into the closet: ‘under this regime, White’s diverse public and literary manifestations of Greekness – and any potential correlatives to Lascaris’s life – are flattened under the metonym of “White” the author’ (3). Bell’s reading of White’s Greekness might profitably be read as showcasing another example of the queer critique of identity that White prosecutes through an invocation of the closet, very much in accordance with the readings advanced by this thesis. But it can also be read as a demonstration of how White’s faith – in this instance his ‘inklings’ of Orthodoxy (9) – are interwoven with a queer love between two men that inhabits a realm, not of monolithic identity, but of the transversal movement, the mimicry and the play of a multiplicity of identities inflated out of all manageable proportion. In this way, we can read one facet of White’s spirituality as contributing directly, even literally, to his performance of the queer.

But we can also take the eastern orientation of Bell's argument and push it even further in that direction. Past Constantinople and heading in the direction of the Far East, one way in which we might begin to engage reparatively with the spiritual as an integral and enriching element of the queer White is through recourse to the Buddhism that came increasingly to dominate Eve Sedgwick's thought toward the end of her life. What I am suggesting here is that the plenum of identities to which Bell alludes in his reading of White's multifaceted performance of selfhood might also be thought of as an essential vacuity; that the ceaseless movement in, around and between identities that White's texts document also performs an effacement of the concept of identity itself. In Sedgwick's words, what I am suggesting is that perhaps the best way to apprehend White's queer politics of critique is by thinking of his texts in terms of 'a meditative practice of possibilities of emptiness and even of nonbeing' (*Weather* 69). And while it is beyond the scope of this conclusion to examine the dense theologies of Buddhist thought, we can use Buddhism, as Sedgwick does, as a useful trope to think through the performative dimension to White's queer politics. If transcending the self, the performative and material dimensions of language, and a rejection of the baleful cycles of identity politics are hallmarks of White's queer politics, they are also hallmarks of Sedgwick's engagement with Buddhist thought. To quote Sedgwick, we might say that White's queer texts perform 'a mysticism that doesn't depend on so-called mystical experiences; that doesn't rely on the esoteric or occult, but rather on simple, material metamorphoses as they are emulsified with language and meaning' (*Weather* 113).

This thesis has demonstrated throughout how an implicitly deconstructive reading practice yields a queer and embodied White. In the attention this thesis has given to both

the oblique and overt representations of sexuality in White's texts we have seen how such binary categories as, to take a few examples, self/other, secrecy/disclosure, pride/shame and text/oeuvre are never fixed entities, but rather exist – or subsist – as the tacit and dynamic effects of White's textual rhetoric. If we take deconstruction, as Sedgwick does, as 'a theoretical movement that was premised on the attempt to identify and unpack the many tacit dualisms that structure Western thought and writing' (*Weather* 75), this conclusion can be read as an attempt to frame the deconstructive critical approach of the thesis as a whole in the sacred garb of much White criticism. In its summation of the performative and material effectiveness of White's queer politics this conclusion takes up Sedgwick's mantra that if 'Deconstruction is the theory, Buddhism is the practice' (*Weather* 75).

Sedgwick's attempt to marry deconstructionist literary criticism with Buddhist practice can best be thought of as a woven fabric that limns the continuity of text and textile, of the textual and textural. In an essay entitled 'Making Things, Practicing Emptiness' from *The Weather in Proust*, Sedgwick talks about the spirit of sameness that informs both her role as a queer literary theorist and as a textile artist. For Sedgwick, 'the slow and late-in-life emergence of a distinct artistic practice involving textiles has not mostly involved the construction of an identity, nor a change of identity, nor even the deconstruction of one' (*Weather* 69), but rather emerges as an extension of the queer theory she pioneered, as 'a strangely spacious framework of impermanence in which ideas, emotions, selves and other phenomena can arise in new relations' (*Weather* 70-1). At the same time however, Sedgwick lends a sense of urgency and emphasis to her textile practice when she

complains about ‘one of the most severe discomforts [she had] been feeling in [her]

vocation as a writer and theorist’:

That the very propositional nature of verbal utterance has so many central and misconceived dualisms built into it. One of those dualisms is the way the sentence structure of many languages, including English, both depends on and reinforces a strict dichotomy between the active and passive voice. Any verb, aside from the verb ‘to be,’ generates a doer and a done-to. And by this simple, built-in grammatical feature it thus makes it almost impossible for any language user to maintain a steady sense of the crucial middle ranges of agency: the field in which most of consciousness, perception, and relationality really happen. (*Weather* 79, original emphasis)

It is into this void, this failure of language to express ‘the middle ranges of agency,’ that Sedgwick’s textile art steps: texture is, for Sedgwick, ‘the base-line attraction of any textile art’; and ‘the very fact of texture seems to confound any understanding of perception in terms of passive as opposed to active’ (*Weather* 84):

To perceive texture is always, immediately, and de facto to be immersed in a field of active narrative hypothesising, testing, and re-understanding of how physical properties act and are acted upon over time. To perceive texture is never only to ask or know What is it like? nor even just How does *it* impinge on *me*? Textural perception always explores two other questions as well: How did it get that way? and What could I do with it? (*Weather* 84, original emphasis)

In keeping with her profound commitment to a form of reasoning that resists the impulse to think in terms of either/or, we see the same logic of multiplication and addition here that Bell conceptualised as a key resource in White’s inflationary queering of the politics of identity; we see the same attempt to conceptualise a form of being that floats between subject and object, between the registers of active and passive. For Sedgwick, a queer theory can never be queer to the extent that it does not embrace that material dimension to which her textile art does not so much give voice as occasion an embodied and tactile sensibility of being.

If we take a moment to contemplate the weft and warp of the arguments advanced by the four chapters of this thesis, what strikes me is the neatness with which Sedgwick's description of her fascination with textiles enfolds the queer politics that animates White's texts. The articulation of being as a free-floating interrelationship of ideas, emotions and selves rather eloquently informs the queer critique of identity in White's texts which this thesis has sought to uncover. White's queer politics can be thought of as insistently textural, gesturing constantly beyond language and text. Indeed, the four chapters in this thesis have each demonstrated how the transcendence of the self is the unifying thread of White's queer politics, and how the materiality and embodiment that the representation of sexuality in White's texts foregrounds is the primary means through which this transcendence is effected.

We saw the operation of this queer materiality in the first chapter of this thesis, where I argued that *Twyborn* details the effacement of the ontology of the social and an attempt, on the part of its mercurial protagonist, to identify, paradoxically and pathetically, with difference itself. Such an attempt on the part of E. Twyborn was sutured to an intensely visual erotics whose embodied *jouissance* served to humiliate a self conceived in language. This embodied sexuality was shown to disrupt the nationalist politics of Australia's literary heritage to the extent that it disrupted the self upon whom this politics rests. We also saw in this chapter how the rhetoric of homosexual identity quickly becomes implicated in the social cycles of power and domination. Chapter One concluded by arguing that *Twyborn* performs White's queer critique of identity through its tripartite structure, from within which the text attempts to transcend the politics of identity. *Twyborn* emerges from this chapter as a text preoccupied with the transcendence

of politics and the ontology of the social, effecting its transcendence by a performative effacement of identity and an (impossible) embrace of difference. In this way, the first chapter of this thesis demonstrated how performativity subtends White's queer politics of self-critique.

We saw in the second chapter how the affective dynamics of shame inform White's queer politics, to the extent that the middle range of agency that shame occupies – as both a doing and done-to affect – is posited by the tragic conclusion of *Twyborn* as a valuable albeit painful residue of the violence that inevitably coarsens the relation between ourselves and the forces of history. The second chapter of this thesis argued that affect must inevitably inform our understanding of White's queer politics because shame is an integral ingredient in White's camp sensibility. White's camp style emerges as a very material resource for coping with the shame and misrecognition that inevitably attends any attempt to transcend the social impetus of identity. And while Chapter Two showed how White's queer politics held out a tragically deferred promise of loving beyond the hierarchy of men and women, it nevertheless concluded by characterising *Twyborn* as a text that invokes affect to make the pain of identity and history more keenly felt.

The closeted aesthetic deployed by White was read in Chapter Three as a gateway towards a more embodied and physical conceptualisation of sexuality in White's texts, a physicality that subsists in the crisis of representation that *Mandala's* closeted aesthetic performs. The third chapter of this thesis argued for a more spatial conceptualisation of the closet, one that emphasised the embodiment of selves in the absence of textual

utterance. Homosexuality was read in *Mandala* as a process of de-description, an insistent deconstruction of the legibility of the self. Chapter Three argued that *Mandala* exhibits a material dependence on other texts to effect its closeted aesthetic. Ultimately, the tangibility of White's queer politics was figured in the physical practice of a sexuality that transcends mere text to embrace a yawning dilation of textual possibilities. Chapter Three thus demonstrated that White's closeted aesthetic performs a reconfiguration of selves and identities where the boundaries of inside and outside lose all traction and are subsumed in the blissful, manual embrace of the brothers Brown.

In the final chapter of this thesis I argued that the same crisis of representation as was documented in *Mandala* performs a similar breakdown of the binary distinction between text and oeuvre: my reading of *The Aunt's Story* stands as an example of the interdependence of White's closeted aesthetic on his later literary coming out. Chapter Four demonstrated how the closeting epistemologies of the *jardin exotique* give rise to a queer sexuality that defies utterance and identity. The closeted relationship between Theodora Goodman and her father is rendered through a Janus-faced poetics of reading backwards and forwards through the various parts of *The Aunt's Story*, with the same queer poetics informing White's oeuvre as a whole. The final chapter of this thesis concluded by arguing that White's queer critique of identity is enacted through a series of sensibilities: vicariousness, a camp playfulness, and above all, a performative conception of identity are the means by which White marshals the closet as a site of resistance to the paradigm of the social. In the final pages of *The Aunt's Story*, Theodora emerges as one of White's consummate performers: playing all the different rôles of the *jardin exotique* with such convincing verve that the distinction between performance and identity is lost

entirely. And it is from within this vacuum that Theodora finally begins living a life of her own.

Each of the four chapters in this thesis is, then, an example of the materiality of White's queer politics, and a demonstration of what this queer project does, rather than what it merely says: a performative rather than a purely propositional politics. This amounts to nothing less than a reconceptualisation of the political White. It is indeed telling that the work that most comprehensively documents White's political activism bears the title: *Patrick White Speaks*. Heretofore, White's politics have been conceived through utterance, as a propositional politics. This thesis has demonstrated how we need to modify our understanding of White's politics to incorporate its performative dimension, that we need to go beyond merely listening to what White says and try to work through what White's work does.

This thesis has shown how the works of both Sedgwick and White deploy a queer rhetoric of self-effacement: at the heart of both White's and Sedgwick's queer politics is a mandala wherein the semantic emptiness of the text mirrors the essential emptiness of the self. And this thesis has shown how this mandala is a *solid* mandala to the extent that it uses the intermittences of signification in and around the closeted representation of sexuality to perform a queer materiality that gestures constantly towards an alternate conceptualisation of being and embodied reality. To quote the final line of White's *Mandala*, it is this materiality that might be said to obtain centrality in a queer politics that ceaselessly strives beyond language towards our 'actual sphere of life' (316).

Sedgwick conceptualises this materiality as an extension of the logic of literary deconstruction:

Perhaps the most notable of the dualisms built into language is the simple dualism between the subject and the object of utterance. I'm not referring this time to the grammatical distinction between the subject and the object of a sentence – instead, to the much broader, inbuilt distinction between the writer or speaker on the one hand, and the reader or listener on the other. (*Weather* 105)

As an extension of this logic, Sedgwick argues that the best way to understand the material dimension to text and utterance is through recourse to the teleology of self-effacement so prominent in Buddhist thought: 'the propositional exposition, however enigmatic, of the truth of non-propositionality' (*Weather* 105). And it is in this sense, this paradoxical understanding of the sexual self as inhabiting the very threshold of self and other, mind and body, the verbal and the physical, that we can perhaps best understand the queer White as a Buddhist White. There is a sense in which this thesis has shown how the representation of sexuality in White is nothing less than a sustained meditation on the possibilities of non-being.

To offer one final and illustrative example of how White's texts perform their queer politics, I would like to turn now to what we might take as the summative mantra of White's queer project, the line from which this conclusion derives its title: 'myself is this endlessness' (*The Eye of the Storm* 532). Sedgwick is fascinated by the performativity and queer potential of Buddhist mantras, arguing that a mantra is fascinating precisely because it is 'fully performative, an a-grammatical and thus non-propositional and un-addressed "charm," whose utterance *is* a truth or realisation rather than expressing one' (*Weather* 105, original emphasis). Such mantras encapsulate for Sedgwick her conceptualisation of the queer as a performative politics that avails itself of the ancient

spiritual and philosophical tradition of Buddhist thought. I would like to argue that ‘myself is this endlessness’ might stand as an emblematic and fully performative mantra for White’s queer politics. What I want to suggest is that the mantra of White’s queer politics comes in the final, dying utterance of one of his greatest protagonists, *The Eye of the Storm*’s Elizabeth Hunter, and that the performative, the political efficacy of this mantra can best be understood in terms of the polemical argument put forth by Lee Edelman in his caustic volume, *No Future*. If Edelman’s polemic continues to bewitch us with its ecstatic call to embrace a conceptualisation of the queer that shouts ‘Fuck the social order’ (*Future* 29), I would like to argue that the performativity of White’s queer politics not only articulates such defiance, but also performs it.

In order to understand the performative potential of White’s queer mantra – ‘myself is this endlessness’ – we need to first understand just how fundamental the vagaries of signification and the failures of language are to Edelman’s queer politics; how these accord with White’s own queer politics of critique; but also the limits of a queer politics that concerns itself with language alone. For it is the equivocal nature of White’s texts that advertise what Edelman might call White’s ‘polemical engagement with the cultural text of politics’ (*Future* 3). In *No Future*, Edelman argues for a conceptualisation of politics analogous to the ‘Lacanian Symbolic – the register of the speaking subject and the order of the law,’ where politics functions ‘as the framework within which we experience social reality’ (*Future* 7). For Edelman, politics is ‘the space in which Imaginary relations... compete for Symbolic fulfilment,’ but, crucially, ‘only the mediation of the signifier allows us to *articulate* those Imaginary relations’ (*Future* 8, original emphasis). Therefore, politics itself rests on a ‘hopeless wager,’ on ‘the perpetual

hope of reaching meaning through signification' (*Future 5*). And it is on this basis that Edelman calls for a politics where we 'figuratively cast our vote for "none of the above"' and militate instead 'for the primacy of a constant *no* in response to the law of the Symbolic, which would echo that law's foundational act, its self-constituting negation' (*Future 5*, original emphasis). Thus does a radical queer politics draw its strength from the vulnerabilities inherent to the symbolic's own linguistic logic:

The queer insists that politics is always a politics of the signifier, or even of what Lacan will often refer to as 'the letter'. It serves to shore up a reality always unmoored by signification and lacking any guarantee. To say as much is not, of course, to deny the experiential violence that frequently troubles social reality or the apparent consistency with which it bears – and thereby bears down on – us all. It is rather to suggest that queerness exposes the obliquity of our relation to what we experience in and as social reality, alerting us to the fantasies structurally necessary in order to sustain it and engaging those fantasies through figural logics, the linguistic structures, that shape them. (*Future 6-7*)

As the argument advanced by this thesis attests, I enthusiastically agree with Edelman's characterisation of the queer as a movement that 'insists that politics is always a politics of the signifier'; but I would also qualify this statement somewhat by saying that the queer is not *only* a politics of the signifier. Following Sedgwick, I would argue that the emphasis that the queer places on the signifier's role in its radical politics simultaneously gestures beyond language towards embodiment, performativity and materiality. White's novels might be said to be of value to Edelman's queer politics precisely to the extent that they show us how such an ostensibly bookish obsession with signification might also perform and bring to life a queer and more profoundly disruptive radicalism.

If the narrative climax of *The Eye of the Storm* showcases Edelman's politics of critique, it does so with an emphasis on embodiment and a performative materiality. In this text, *jouissance*, so central to Edelman's conceptualisation of the queer, functions

as a performative mantra of self-effacement; *jouissance* functions as the material and embodied residue of a queer politics of the signifier. This function is illustrated most starkly by the demise of Elizabeth Hunter, and specifically in the representation of her final moments of life. It is in these dying moments that the ephemerality of this female patriarch's selfhood becomes increasingly undeniable. These dying moments of Mrs Hunter's can be read as an eloquent illustration of precisely the sort of queer politics Edelman calls for. The staging of Elizabeth Hunter's death is most notable for the fatal relaxation of the symbolic grammar of selfhood by which this passage achieves its idiosyncratic apotheosis:

[...] the same wind stirring the balconies of clouds as blows between the ribs it would explain the howling of what must be the soul not for fear that it will blow away in any case it will but in anticipation of its first experience of precious water as it filters in through the cracks the cavities of the body blue pyramidal waves with swans waiting by appointment each a suppressed black explosion [...] (532)

The same *jouissance*, the same 'black explosion' that adorns the stream-of-consciousness rendering of Mrs Hunter's death lies at the heart of Edelman's polemic in *No Future*: Edelman argues that 'the future... marks the impossible place of an Imaginary past exempt from the deferrals intrinsic to the signifying chain and projected ahead as the site at which being and meaning are joined as One' (*Future* 10). Shorn of any future by the impending doom of the very character through whom this passage is so suffocatingly closely focalised, this passage documents the fantasy through which any regime of meaning, or any political project, are inflected.

Fundamentally, Mrs Hunter's death resists this impulse of reproductive futurism. It instead presents itself as 'the force that shatters the fantasy of Imaginary unity, the force that insists on the void (replete, paradoxically, with *jouissance*) always already lodged within, though barred from, symbolisation' (*Future* 22). Through its figuration of

jouissance, Mrs Hunter's death emerges as a moment of self-shattering bliss and expiration, a moment where language and meaning lose all traction. And it is on this basis that *The Eye of the Storm* can be said to adhere in its final pages to Edelman's polemically queer politics of resistance. But note the emphasis here: Mrs Hunter's body, no longer solid, now permeated by the wind and the waves of the eye of the storm, is the locus of signification's failure. When the storm shatters the identity of the text's protagonist and the text itself, Mrs Hunter is 'no longer filling the void with mock substance' (532) but rather begins to 'enfold' (532) the spatial dimension opened up by the breakdown of grammar in this passage. In a sense, Mrs Hunter's death cannot be read, but must constantly be re-read: it does not signify but rather performs the churning process of signification itself; it symbolises the process which makes and unmakes our ultimately ephemeral selves and the bodies they attend.

Mrs Hunter's final scene constitutes perhaps one of the most haunting images of *The Eye of the Storm*, that of the 'ravaged queen' 'enthroned' (442) on the commode as her life is blown away. Edelman's conceptualisation of politics is a useful framework through which we can understand this scene, particularly on account of the light it sheds on Mrs Hunter's final thoughts. Stripped of her powers and now at the mercy of her children, Mrs Hunter is gifted her final revelation: 'now surely, at the end of your life, you can expect to be shown the inconceivable something you have always, it seems, been looking for' (526). 'This inconceivable something' clearly exists beyond language and beyond the self: it defies the law of the symbolic. Returning to the eye of the storm, to 'perform whatever the eye is contemplating for me' (532), Mrs Hunter has come to the realisation that 'her attempts to convince others would remain hopeless' (431); but more importantly

she embraces this defeat, deciding that ‘she would lie down rather, and accept to become part of the shambles she saw on looking behind her: no worse than any she had caused in life in her relationships with human beings’ (410). Mrs Hunter’s ultimate fate – tragic and heroic in equal measure – is to embody Edelman’s queer politics of deconstruction, to embody ‘the *jouissance* that at once defines and negates us’ (*Future* 5). It is through her embodiment of this consequence of signification that we can best make sense of queer theory itself ‘as a particular story... of why storytelling fails’ (*Future* 7) and of her own final sentiment, coming just before her inevitable demise: ‘myself is this endlessness’ (532).

This dying scrap of text is the summative mantra of White’s queer politics of embodiment to the extent that it performs, as opposed to merely describing, the disruption of the grammar of politics upon which Edelman’s argument rests. Sedgwick notes that ‘a mantra is not like a prayer to a divine being. Rather, the mantra *is* the deity, is enlightenment, immediately manifest’ (*Weather* 105, original emphasis). We can take ‘myself is this endlessness’ as a mantra in Sedgwick’s terms because of the way in which it performs its politics of queer self-effacement: the first word ‘myself’ functions, grammatically, as both the subject and the object of the clause. Acting as both the subject to the verb but taking the form of a reflexive pronoun that is also the verb’s object, ‘myself’ effectively effaces the difference between the two. ‘Myself’ cycles constantly between what Sedgwick decries as the ‘built-in subject/object bipolarity’ (*Weather* 105) that she identifies as the primary obstacle to any queer project of deconstruction. Sedgwick notes the futility of trying to overcome this binary logic from within the parameters of language alone:

Attempts to make writing more impersonal or anonymous sounding, for instance by banishing the first person singular altogether, using an inclusive sounding 'we' or anonymous 'one,' only seem to inscribe the dualism even more deeply in the effort to make it invisible. (*Weather* 105)

In the mantra intoned by Elizabeth Hunter with her dying breath, 'myself' is liberated from itself by *becoming* an endlessness. It is *this* endlessness, this performative event, this ceaseless churning of signifiers and signifieds that ultimately effaces utterance itself, leaving as a residue the enlightenment of which a mantra does not so much speak but can rather only ever embody. And it is with this mantra that we might begin to overcome the inbuilt and obstructive dualisms of language; it is with this mantra that we can, in Edelman's terms, 'figure the undoing of the Symbolic, and the Symbolic subject as well' (*Future* 27); and it is with this mantra that we can perhaps best understand, in a nutshell, White's queer politics as a meditative performance of self-effacement.

But ultimately, we should perhaps think of the summative mantra of White's queer politics in expressly Buddhist terms in the pedagogical bent of its performativity. If the immediate material effect of this mantra is the effacement of the grammar of selfhood, its secondary effect might be said to reside in the material ballast it provides to Edelman's polemically queer politics. Indeed, Edelman's argument resounds with some very Buddhist echoes of its own. Fundamental to Edelman's queer politics is a rejection of the future, an insistence 'that the future stop here' (*Future* 31). Read from a certain angle, Edelman's queer project resounds with a Buddhist insistence on the sufferings of samsara, of the endless cycle of birth and death that is vectored by the monolith of the future, as when he insists that 'the future is mere repetition and just as lethal as the past' (*Future* 31). This is where Sedgwick's concept of a queered Buddhism is a helpful framework for understanding White's texts as the performance of Edelman's thesis in *No*

Future. Above all, White's texts advertise the pleasurable and sensuous potential of the dissolution of the self. They teach us that until we can acknowledge the ubiquity of the closet and an epistemology of failure as such, and until we fully embrace the bliss of a self shattered by *jouissance* and the pleasure of the text, the baleful cycle of the future, as both a political and personal project, will endure. So repeat after me: 'myself is this endlessness.'

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