

INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

ProQuest Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600

UMI[®]



Université d'Ottawa • University of Ottawa

**The Queer Philosopher:
Edmund White and the Technologies of the Self**



by: Jonathan Georgekish-Watt

Advisor: Professor David R. Jarraway

Defended: 2000/01/31

Presented to the School of Graduate Studies and Research of the
University of Ottawa in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts in English Literature.



National Library
of Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Acquisitions et
services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-58454-2

Abstract:

My thesis provides a reading of the novels of Edmund White through a theoretical frame based largely on Michel Foucault's "Technologies of the Self" and Julia Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves*, but which also takes into account the "queer" theorizing of Michael Warner, in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet* and the essay "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?" (co-authored with Lauren Berlant). I argue that the "technologies" that Foucault describes, an invention of self through the "care of the self" (*le souci de soi*), are such that they reveal, at the center of subjectivity, a stranger; they reveal the fact that we are, as Kristeva argues, "strangers to ourselves." This is a motif that plays itself out in White's novels, both autobiographical and non-autobiographical; the turn inward and the "stringent self-analysis" implied by a "technology of the self," reveal a "self" that is indefinite, unknowable, "spectral."

Table of Contents:

Abstract.....	ii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1	
The Burning Libraries: White, Foucault and Kristeva.....	8
Chapter 2	
The Stylized, Spectral Self: Autobiographical Fantasy in <i>Forgetting Elena</i> , <i>Nocturnes for the King of Naples</i> , and <i>Caracole</i>	42
Chapter 3	
The Fictional Self in Reality: <i>A Boy's Own Story</i> , <i>The Beautiful Room</i> <i>Is Empty</i> , and <i>The Farewell Symphony</i>	91
Conclusion.....	134
Works Cited.....	138

Introduction:

Edmund White criticism cannot yet, by any means, be considered extensive. Indeed, to date, it has been mostly limited to several blurbs and introductions by David Bergman, and half an issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (16.3, 1996). There are a few other articles and chapters and several interviews, but even with these, the critical reception to White does not seem to befit a writer who has been called “[o]ne of the most prominent and highly acclaimed figures of contemporary gay literature” (Summers, 733), and “one of the country’s most eloquent representatives of the gay community” (“The *Paris Review* Interview,” 240).

If the work that follows is an attempt to address this deficit, it is, at the same time, an attempt to fill what I perceive to be a gap even in the existing body of White criticism. Generally, the critical reception of White has been untheoretical or, even, anti-theoretical. Considerable commentary is made on White as a literary stylist -- “In general,” Bergman writes in *Contemporary Gay American Novelists*, “White is noticed for his style” (393) -- or even as a person or a personality, -- “Now in his fifties,” Bergman writes in the same article, “White retains the dimpled cheeks, the cupid lips bowed in an archaic smile, and most notably, the large baleful eyes of his youth” (386) -- attributes that certainly reinforce his position as the most “eloquent,” but also the most attractive and congenial, “representative[] of the gay community.” Even this “representative” aspect of his work is usually tempered by a generalizing impulse, as if White is to be read as a spokesperson whose subject position should be taken as an

umbrella-subjectivity that could (or should?) cover all American gay men of his generation. White himself warns against this approach to his writing saying of *A Boy's Own Story* (1982) that the novel (and, by extension, the rest of his trilogy, which includes *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* [1988], and *The Farewell Symphony* [1997]) is not “meant to be representative or typical” (“Introduction: ‘On the Line,’” xii), but an attempt to “show one gay life in particular depth” (“The *Paris Review* Interview,” 257).

Ultimately, it seems to me that not enough attention has been paid to White as a theorist of queer subjectivity, to his articulation of the radical Otherness of queerness. By contrast, therefore, my project seeks to demonstrate that White's oeuvre demands and deserves a theoretical criticism that fully explores the radical elements of his work, that argues that White's works are crucial, not only for their relevance to gay life or gay community, but for what they say about a radically queer subjectivity. If White has made his name as a novelist, a journalist (*States of Desire: Travels in Gay America* [1980]), a cultural and literary critic (*The Burning Library: Essays* [1994]), and, more recently, as a literary biographer (*Genet* [1993] and *Marcel Proust* [1999]), my project seeks also to acknowledge that White is, in addition to all these things, a queer theorist and (as White refers to himself in an essay that antedates all his published writing) a “gay philosopher.”¹ If anything, White's alignment with “queer theory”² has problematized his role as a representative of gay “community”: as Berlant and Warner argue, “queer commentary has refused to draw boundaries around its constituency” (345), and “the national gay press – in particular, the *Advocate*, *Out*, *Deneuve*, *Ten Percent* [all

¹ Cf. White's essay, “The Gay Philosopher,” written in 1969, but published for the first time in *The Burning Library*.

² Cf. White's essay, “The Personal Is Political: Queer Fiction and Criticism.”

presumably the “real” representatives of the gay “community”] – have been either oblivious or hostile to queer theory” (347).

To date, critics have only made gestures – some of which I will use as starting points – towards the theoretical or philosophical aspects of White’s work, without fully exploring them. And even critics who have taken a theoretical approach to White have tended to underestimate or undermine White’s radical potential. For example, Nicholas F. Radel, in “Self as Other: The Politics of Identity in the Works of Edmund White,” citing theorists such as Michel Foucault and Monique Wittig, concludes by criticizing White’s failure to articulate an authentic gay identity and arguing, outrageously, that “[b]y internalizing his homosexual self as Other. . . [White] denies himself the possibility of genuine subversion” (191). My own approach to White begins from a similar line of inquiry but draws opposite conclusions. While Radel undermines White’s work by arguing that the latter is mired in the “intractable problems of gay identity” (191), my own argument will demonstrate how White transforms the “intractable problem” into the basis for ongoing philosophical inquiry: White “fails” to “solve” the “problem,” – indeed White purposefully problematizes gay identity – because a queer sensibility requires a “meditation [that] is complex, endless, self-revising” (“The Joys of Gay Life,” 34).

All things considered, therefore, I find that the most important, and most complete, body of criticism on Edmund White produced to date has been proffered by White himself, primarily in the self-reflective philosophical essays included in *The Burning Library*. Thus, in my opening chapter, I begin my reading of White with these essays and trace their significance in the evolution of White’s queer theory, as it anticipates and parallels Michael Warner’s writing on the subject (in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*, and in the aforementioned essay, co-authored with Lauren Berlant, “What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?”). Furthermore, insofar as White approaches queerness from both a Foucaultian and a Freudian position, I shall thereafter

endeavour to conjoin Foucault's theories of the "technologies of the self" with Julia Kristeva's figure of the neo-Freudian "stranger" in a queer reading of White's novels that is both "deconstructive" and "psychoanalytic,"³ and that finally does justice to White's radical and revolutionary import.

Foucault's theory is "deconstructive," insofar as it is "constructive." By arguing that the self is always a construction, a technology, Foucault contests the essentialist notion of the static, "natural" self. The self, therefore, is not a "thing," but a process, a project the subject undertakes. The "technologies of the self," as Foucault describes them, are those "which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (18). As such, Foucault argues that the technologies of the self are one of the most fundamental philosophical endeavours. As he states in a late interview, the *raison d'être* of the intellectual, or of any philosophical inquiry, is "to modify your own thinking and that of others" (cited in Racevskis, 30).

In White, therefore, the "technologies of the self" are manifested primarily in his autobiographical fiction. Their importance is suggested in an interesting passage from *Genet* in which White quotes his subject as saying: "To create is always to speak about childhood. It's always nostalgic. In any case, in my writing, and in most modern writing . . . I created in myself, at the age of thirteen or fifteen, the observer that I would be, and thus the writer that I would become. And this work that I did on myself, then, remains; it's there" (15). Genet's example, it becomes clear, is one that White follows. The

³ I shall, in that opening chapter, revisit these two terms with reference to David Halperin's comments on the various deployments of Foucault's work.

technologies of the self are “work that [one does] on [one]self,” and, as such, are practices through which the marginal subject can question the more readily accepted notions about the self (gender roles, compulsory heterosexuality, etc.) and alternately recognize and internalize traditionally unacceptable, and often suppressed, sensibilities (gender transgression, and sexual dissidence, etc.).

The link between Foucault’s thought and Kristeva’s *Strangers to Ourselves* is made manifest in White insofar as the technologies of the self, the intensive, philosophical inquiry into the self, reveal, ultimately, the stranger, or the foreigner.⁴ By way of example, I should like to turn once again to Genet’s influence. In the biography, White quotes Genet as saying, in a passage that eerily anticipates Kristeva and speaks very strongly to White’s own project:

I was such a *foreigner* -- that’s not too strong a word. Hating France, that’s not going far enough, you must do more than hate it, you must vomit it up. The fact that the French army, the most prestigious in the world back then, capitulated before the troops of the Austrian corporal -- oh, that thrilled me. I was avenged After that I could only feel at home among oppressed people of colour or the oppressed in revolt against whites. Maybe I’m a Black who’s white or pink, but still Black. I don’t know my family. (21)

⁴ Kristeva’s original title, *Etrangers à nous-mêmes*, is less cumbersome; in French, “étranger” is both “stranger” and “foreigner.” In the translation, Leon Roudiez uses “stranger” in the title, but mostly “foreigner” throughout. I shall alternate between the two, as context dictates.

White also explores foreignness in terms of race, but more importantly, White also deploys foreignness as a metaphor for his homosexuality, an uncanny strangeness that becomes his self-definition but, simultaneously, a lack of definition.

After elaborating at length on this theoretical frame in the first chapter, my second chapter will examine what I will be calling “autobiographical fantasy” in *Forgetting Elena* (1973), *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* (1978) and *Caracole* (1985). By “autobiographical fantasy,” I mean to suggest that while the narrators of *Elena* and *Nocturnes* (both first person and unnamed, precisely as in White’s autobiographical trilogy), as well as certain characters in *Caracole*, are by no means literal representations of the author, they nonetheless reflect him and his sensibilities in very important ways. This chapter, then, will consider how even non-autobiographical writing can contribute to technologies of the self, that the work that the narrators effect on themselves have a crucial significance to the authorial self, as well. As Foucault claims, “[e]ach of my works is a part of my own biography” (“Truth, Power, Self,” 11), and this is equally true of White. Through that work, however, White’s novels reveal the inherent foreignness of the self. It is no accident, therefore, that White sets these novels in places that are either foreign or fantastical.

The third and final chapter, then, offers a reading of White’s autobiographical trilogy that seeks to expand on this notion of “autobiographical fantasy.” That is, fantasy remains a crucial part of White’s work, even when he operates in a realistic and more strictly autobiographical setting. As such, my reading of the trilogy follows closely from my reading of the three previous novels, but endeavours always to negotiate the distance between, and the simultaneous conflation of, the narrative voice and the authorial self. Foucault’s theory suggests, however, that the “real” self that is implied in “autobiographical” work is itself a fiction, realized through writing. And once again, this artificial technological self implies the unknowability of the self, reveals what Kaja

Silverman calls, “the void at the center of subjectivity” (63), the site at which appears Kristeva’s neo-Freudian “stranger.”

In citing a broad base of Foucaultian and neo-Freudian theory, therefore, I seek give White his due, not only as a literary stylist and gay spokesperson, but as an important, indeed indispensable, queer theorist and philosopher, as a writer who ultimately transcends the epoch of “gay liberation” from which most of his work has emerged and articulates radical revisions of queer subjectivity.

Chapter 1:

The Burning Libraries: White, Foucault and Kristeva

I don't feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning. If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think you would have the courage to write it? What is true for writing and for a love relationship is true also for life. The game is worthwhile insofar as we don't know what will be the end.

- Michel Foucault, "Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault, October 25, 1982," 9.

In the twentieth century, the serious writer strives to evolve.

- Edmund White, "The *Paris Review* Interview," 251.

The Burning Library, a collection of twenty-five years of essays and articles by Edmund White, is a testament to the life of a writer in constant intellectual motion. The collection suggests that writing is always a work in progress. Many of the essays contain passages which are reworked from previous essays and his travelogue *States of Desire: Travels in Gay America*, and/or are again reworked into portions of his autobiographical novels (the trilogy, *A Boy's Own Story*, *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, and *The Farewell*

Symphony) and some of the short stories collected in *Skinned Alive* (1995). The effect is that of a constant reconsidering, rethinking, restating, rewriting. For White, change is crucial, an intellectual necessity. When, in *States of Desire*, he returns to his hometown of Cincinnati and confronts his father's bigotry and conservatism, he writes: "To my mind . . . the malignant moral climate that permitted my father to maintain his dismal views is polluted because it never stirs. Nothing ever changes in that world, and as a consequence no one imagines that personal or social change is possible" (173). White's project, accordingly, is dedicated to both personal and social change.

Indeed, it may be said that *The Burning Library* comprises White's notes towards a radical queer theory. The queer project, as Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner attempt to define it, is characterized largely by the very flux and evolution that we find evinced in White's essays. As Warner and Berlant argue, in fact, "[t]he danger of the label *queer theory* is that it makes its queer and nonqueer audiences . . . imagine a context (theory) in which *queer* has a stable referential content and pragmatic force" (344). "Queer work . . . has animated a rethinking of both the perverse and the normal" (345), and this is clearly very central to White's own project. As early as the late 1960s and early 1970s, White emphasized, in essays such as "The Gay Philosopher," the importance of rethinking one's own homosexuality, reflecting upon it, in an ongoing search for "metaphors that fit the actual content of [gay] lives and that authenticate, rather than denigrate [gay] experiences" (19).

There are, of course, difficulties at hand when one brings up the notion of "authentication," and these will resurface in a queer reading of White's fiction. In light of White's later writing, "authentication" certainly becomes something of a misnomer and we must note that White's stance in early essays such as this one is sometimes polemical and often what Warner would call, "minoritizing," a term we will revisit in a moment. His position is sometimes narrow and defeatist, even dangerously aligned with the pathologizing logic that states that homosexuality is a genetic defect or a mental

illness. In “The Gay Philosopher” he writes: “[A]lmost all the people I know feel they never *chose* to be either homosexual or heterosexual, and many gay men have chosen to be straight, but to no avail” (4). White, however, comes to recognize the dangers of denying the element of choice, a position which lends itself most easily to a repressive attitude towards homosexuality: that it is a physiological or psychological affliction that ought to be contained and, hopefully, cured. White rejects instead this sense of doom, though, initially, for quite the wrong reasons. He writes: “In college a staff psychologist told me that we never expelled the ‘virus’ of a sickness we had contracted, we simply had to learn to live with it. I flew into a rage. He was restricting my freedom. *I had to be free to make myself into whatever form I wanted*” (5, emphasis added). At that time, however, White seems to have been seeking in vain for the freedom to be straight. Later, having accepted, even embraced, his homosexuality, he acknowledges the importance of the freedom to choose to be queer and, as such, he invests the freedom “to make oneself into whatever form one wants” with a new and infinitely more radical significance. For example, later in the same essay, White points out that his favorite metaphor for the homosexual is the rebel (16), a figure who purposefully chooses to resist and reject the status quo (and of which White’s recent biographical subject, Jean Genet, is an extreme example⁵). In a far more recent essay, “Out of the Closet, on to the Bookshelf” (1991),

⁵ With reference to his work on Genet’s biography White writes: “In my analysis of Genet’s defiant Satanism I never let myself lose sight of the fact that he, like me, like every homosexual before gay liberation, could choose only among the same three metaphors for homosexuality – as sickness, crime or sin. Almost all other homosexual writers chose sickness as their model since it called for compassion from the heterosexual reader. Genet chose the other two, sin and crime, which turned out to define the fiercer, prouder position. Genet wants to intimidate and alternately to seduce

he writes very perceptively about “out” homosexuals and the choice to be queer: “[N]o one [is] forcing us to wear this label” (278). Thus, White rejects the notion that homosexuals are the hapless victims of a poorly understood pathology. Instead, he suggests that, regardless of whether people feel they know why they are gay, they are willfully, rebelliously “queer.” The project which White undertakes in *The Burning Library*, then, is the gradual move from a gay liberationist, though occasionally reductive stance, towards a distinctly queer, and altogether more radical approach to his own life, writing, and politics. As White observes in *States of Desire*: “We know that the values we received as children are worthless now, and that those we presently entertain will have to be revised yet again” (192). This self-revising, constantly shifting stance has prompted David Bergman to note, in his introduction to *The Burning Library*: “The reader of [White’s] essays must expect to be betrayed” (xii).

This retrospective of White’s theorizing is not to suggest, of course, that White’s early writings and beliefs were not radical in their time. Indeed, it is clear that the radical potential was present from very early on. White, for example, was present at the Stonewall Riots in June 1969 after which occasion he writes to friends (in a dense present-tense account): “I give a stump speech about the need to radicalize, how we must recognize we’re part of a vast rebellion of all the repressed. Some jeers, some cheers” (“A Letter to Ann and Alfred Corn” 3). Approximately ten years later, moreover, Felice Picano, in his “Rough Cuts from a Journal,” offers a portrait of White (whom Picano had recently met and was getting to know at the time) as a radical thinker and agitator for change:

his heterosexual reader, not beg him [sic] for forgiveness. Instead of tea and sympathy, Genet offers vitriol and impudence” (“The Personal Is Political” 373-74).

Over the years, Edmund has, I suppose, developed an entire system of thought devoted to understanding the world around him in a practical and theoretical level. He is worldly in the best sense. Also angry at the foolishness around us. Also committed to a socialist restructuring of society. On several occasions we've discussed exactly how awful matters seem to be, and how almost every positive change is really an inverted bow into the overarching capitalist framework. (43)

Along this line of thinking, White echoes some Foucaultian ideas in his review of Foucault's *Herculine Barbin*, "The Politics of Gender: Michel Foucault." He writes:

From a socialist perspective one might find it significant that [an] insistence on nature, on human nature, appeared simultaneously with the triumph of the bourgeoisie. As so many thinkers, from Engels to Adorno, Gramsci to Barthes, have argued, capitalism attempts to obscure its rather recent historical origins and to justify its arbitrary social arrangements by appealing to nature ("You may think our system is cruel, but after all it simply reflects human nature; things have always been this way"). Since nature by definition is unitary and unvarying, thanks to it the bourgeoisie is able to universalize and eternalize its own behavior. Sexuality, as presumably the most basic, animal and irrational aspect of our psychology, becomes the very center of the bourgeois notion of the static natural self. (90-91)

White's project is, accordingly, one that de-centers "bourgeois notion[s]" by consistently challenging the notion of the "static natural self." Indeed, White, who majored in Chinese at university, espouses a somewhat Buddhist approach to the notion of self. In "The *Paris Review* Interview," he states his conviction that "*the self* is an illusion" and that one ought to "rid[] oneself of the notion of identity" (266). Though White, in that same interview, speaks of the difficulties of merging philosophy with fiction ("After all,"

he notes, “fiction writers are not professional thinkers” [264]), I shall argue that such philosophical tenets, the arbitrariness of representation, the transience of selfhood, the existential anxiety of choosing to be gay and openly so, play themselves out in his fiction. His novels, we might say, reflect his philosophy without being purposefully or thoroughly philosophical, without being, as it were, novels of ideas.

The very idea of White as a philosopher, however, must not be ignored. “The Gay Philosopher,” for example, forces his readers to reckon with him as such. As he writes, moreover, in an essay entitled “The Joys of Gay Life,”: “[One of the] joy[s] of being gay is the philosophical turn of mind you are forced to develop. Whereas heterosexuals can, conceivably, grow up without questioning their goals, their motivations, every homosexual must think everything out from the bottom up. We are forced to become reflective” (34). This statement may very well seem indefensibly exclusive to some, or dubiously essentialist to others, but such a defensive response is most likely that of heterosexuals who fail to recognize their own privileged position, a position constructed and maintained at the expense of the queer, the oppressed and yet indispensable “other.” Of course, White’s statement requires some qualification; the implication that *all* homosexuals are always philosophical and reflective is clearly overstated for the sake of argument. Similarly, White’s attack on heterosexuals cannot be taken as all-inclusive. White’s basic point, however, cannot be dismissed: The dominant ideology treats heterosexuality as a forgone conclusion, and this pervasive insistence of its naturalness precludes the rigorous self-examination that White himself underwent. As David Halperin argues,

Heterosexuality defines itself without problematizing itself, it elevates itself as a privileged and unmarked term, by abjecting and problematizing homosexuality. Heterosexuality, then, *depends* on homosexuality to lend it substance -- and to enable it to acquire *by* default its status *as* a default, as a *lack of difference* or an *absence of abnormality*. (44)

The fact remains, accordingly, that homosexuality, or any other manner of queerness (such as bisexuality or transvestism), forces a person to wonder about oneself, to ask questions about oneself that would not otherwise come up. If we may rephrase White's polemical statement, we might say that, clearly, homosexuality has forced at least *him*, Edmund White, if no one else, "to think everything out from the bottom up." It has forced *him* "to become reflective." Reiterating the same point, White explains himself further in a passage from *States of Desire*:

Like Nietzsche, though in a different sense, we could speak of the "gay science," that obligatory existentialism forced on people who must *invent themselves*. Most people's parents are heterosexual (so much for the role-model theory of sexual orientation), and everyone is raised to be straight. Once one discovers one is gay, one must *choose* everything, from how to walk, dress and talk to where to live, with whom and on what terms. (16, emphasis added)

That is to say, for most of their young lives, homosexual people too often live in a kind of semiotic no-person's-land in which they find no symbols or models that reflect their feelings, experiences or aspirations, and this was clearly much more the case in the time and place in which White grew up, the American Midwest of the 1940s and 50s. We have already noted what he has called a "malignant moral climate" in which "nothing ever changes," but, also, in *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, White notes that in that environment, "there was no question of talking about the self and its discontent, isolation, self-hatred and burning ambition for sex and power" (11). White recalls, furthermore, that "[c]ommon sense," the kind of logic that, as above, treats heterosexuality as a given, "was the name my father and his friends gave their smugness" (7).

Hence, there was for White, as there is for the narrator of his novels, the need to turn inward and to invent oneself, a process that, as he finds, never ends. Indeed, White's

constant intellectual motion, as it is documented in *The Burning Library*, suggests that his writing is, as in the epigraph from Foucault, a “game worthwhile insofar as we don’t know what will be the end” (9). Thus, as in another description from Felice Picano’s journal, White is, even in his personal life, “a charming man given to *stringent self-analysis* but hiding it behind a lovely surface of shifting polish and childlike delight. I find him quite one of the easiest people to get to know and yet *one whose various levels will take years to uncover*” (36, emphasis added). And so it is for White’s reader; one is taken, novel after story after essay, with fictionalized or literal accounts of the life of “Edmund White” and yet, to identify the “real Edmund White,” to uncover all of his “various levels,” is not easily done. Thus, it is inadvisable, if not impossible, to take a single theoretical approach to an interpretation of White’s work, or, even, to pin him down to a single philosophical or political stance. Indeed, though *The Burning Library* concludes with an essay entitled “The Personal is Political: Queer Fiction and Criticism,” a radically “queer” retrospective of his own writing and a commentary on fiction in general, it is a closing word that is by no means a final word. Because White has, his entire writing life, clearly held to his mandate to “evolve,” we can only assume that he will continue to do so, that his writing will continue to betray the comfort and self-satisfaction of the reader who has drawn final and definite conclusions concerning White’s project.⁶ The essay denotes, furthermore, that White’s evolution has been that from a gay philosopher to a “queer” philosopher.

⁶ It is noteworthy, for example, that since the publication of *The Burning Library* in 1994, White has been publishing at a rate faster than ever before; *Skinned Alive: Stories* and *Our Paris: Sketches from Memory* were both published in 1995, *The Farewell Symphony* in 1997, and *Marcel Proust* (1999), a short biography, has just appeared.

In light of White's adoption of the word "queer" to describe a mode of criticism, his own fiction, and, by extension, himself, the term and its political and theoretical dimensions deserve further discussion at this point. Michael Warner's introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet* is very helpful in this respect. He points out that "queer" is used "partly to avoid [a] reduction of the issues" surrounding the lives of gay, lesbian, bisexual or otherwise dissident sexual subjectivities (xxvi). Thus, as White comes to argue, to be queer means considerably more than being part of an urban culture of (upper) middle class gay men, as superficially homogeneous as they are homosexual. It seems fitting, in fact, that White, even as he praised the benefits of a gay culture, often referred to the gay male type as a "clone." As such, the gay culture seems to preclude the diversity that queer culture (insofar as something so amorphous can be summed up into a phrase) embraces. In short, the queer turn of mind is one that aims to de-essentialize, to de-specify, to "avoid [a] reduction" of what it means to be gay.⁷ Warner elaborates in very useful terms:

⁷ In an attempt to historicize the evolution of queer theory, Warner cites a long list of thinkers, including Bataille, Deleuze, Reich on Freud, Marcuse, Malinowski, Sade, Whitman, and Wilde, but attributes it mainly to "radical gay social theory revived after 1969 in France, England and Italy . . . to [which] traditions Foucault brought such a reinvigorating transformation that his *History of Sexuality* has become an inescapable text for intellectuals otherwise oblivious to its subject" (viii). In America, the Stonewall uprising of 1969, from which "gay liberation" is often dated, certainly had a significant impact. Edmund White, however, in late essays and in *The Farewell Symphony*, describes a new radicalism, a newly "queer" turn of mind, that is brought on by the advent of the AIDS era at the beginning of the 1980s.

The preference for “queer” represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal... “Queer” therefore also suggests the difficulty in defining the population whose interests are at stake in queer politics. (xxvi)

Hence, “queer” signals a new rhetoric of resistance which steps in to replace a normalizing, “minoritizing,” rhetoric of liberation. The distinction between resistance and liberation is crucial insofar as the latter is an end goal while the former is an ongoing process which implies the restless rethinking and rewriting that has typified White’s career. Foucault, in a late interview, discusses “liberation” and further explains why a liberationist logic is at odds with Michael Warner’s conception of queerness. He says:

I’ve always been a little distrustful of the general theme of liberation, to the extent, that, if one does not treat it with a certain number of safeguards and within certain limits, there is the danger that it will refer back to the idea that there does exist a nature or a human foundation which, as a result of a certain number of historical, social or economic processes, found itself concealed, alienated or imprisoned in and by some repressive mechanism. In that hypothesis it would suffice to unloosen these repressive locks so that man can be reconciled with himself, once again find his nature or renew contact with his roots in a full and positive relationship with himself. (“The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 2-3)

Thus, Foucault critic David Halperin introduces just such a distinction. He claims: “*The aim of an oppositional politics is . . . not liberation but resistance*” (18, Halperin’s italics). In this respect, “liberation” for the queer population implies, at best, the unhelpful metaphor of homosexuals as a minority. This is a metaphor that White brings

up several times only to submit it to what Foucault would call “rigorous examination.”⁸ The problem with the minority metaphor is that it assumes of the queer population a uniformity and homogeneity which simply does not exist. Even the phrase “queer population” clearly needs to be subjected to the “safeguards” that Foucault mentions. The phrase suggests something akin to the notion of a minority or, at least, an easily definable and identifiable group, all members of which are alienated and oppressed to an equal measure and for precisely the same reasons. This is, clearly, not the case, and, for this reason, oppositional queer politics, which resist “regimes of the normal,” challenge the normalizing logic of liberation or of “simple political interest representation.” *States of Desire*, for example, as limited as it is in scope (as White self-reproachingly notes, the book accounts primarily for the experience of white, urban, middle-class, gay men [336]), was nonetheless written to show “the wide variety of gay lives” (“The Personal Is Political,” 372). Partly because White acknowledges that even the wide diversity in the book is only a narrow sampling from the whole queer picture, the book resists the notion of a unified, coherent “queer population.” White therefore closes the book expressing his hope that “it will enable [both] gays and straights to imagine *other lives*” (336, emphasis added).

Pursuant to the citation from Warner, furthermore, queer theory, in addition to suggesting “the difficulty of defining [a] population,” suggests the difficulty of defining *the self* “whose interests are at stake in queer politics.” Accordingly, White’s aforementioned essay, “The Personal is Political,” underscores the crucial link between these two aspects of White’s writing; for the queer subject, to theorize queerness is, in many ways, to theorize the self. It may be said, in fact, that autobiographical or semi-autobiographical fiction has become the dominant mode in contemporary queer writing. Many writers, including Jeannette Winterson (*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*),

⁸ See, particularly, “The Political Vocabulary of Homosexuality,” 70-71.

Dorothy Allison (*Bastard Out of Carolina*), and members of White's own Violet Quill club (Andrew Holleran, George Whitmore, and Robert Ferro, among others),⁹ have indulged, at one point or another, in what White calls, on several occasions, "the pederasty of autobiography" ("Introduction: 'On the Line'," ix, and "The *Paris Review* Interview," 253). In "The *Paris Review* Interview," however, White dismisses his interlocutor's suggestion that the goal of this kind of writing is to effect a "final self-analysis" (253). As suggested above, and as will be argued throughout my reading of the novels, for White, no self-analysis is ever "final." Instead the point of such a literary practice is considerably less definitive, and, as we shall see, more "queer":

[T]he older self actually loves the younger self in a way the younger self could never have accepted or felt at the time. There is a kind of lapse in time in self approval. One is filled with self-loathing at sixteen, but when one is forty one can look back with this kind of retrospective affection at the younger self . . . (253-54)

Thus, the "pederasty of autobiography" in no way lays claim to a "final self-analysis."

In several senses, furthermore, White makes the endeavour purposefully "queer." In the first place, his choice of the word "pederasty," invests the project with a kind of willful "perversion." Second, and more far importantly, this retrospective view of the

⁹ As David Bergman writes in his introduction to *The Violet Quill Reader*: "Although no formal charter was ever written for the Violet Quill, the members shared several impulses: a desire to write works that reflected their gay experiences, and, specifically, *autobiographical fiction*; a desire to write for gay readers without having to explain their point of view to shocked and unknowing heterosexual readers; and finally, a desire to write, to paraphrase William Wordsworth, in a selection of the language really used by gay men" (xvi, emphasis added).

“younger self” suggests that “self” should not be conceived in the singular. White mentions at least two selves (the younger and the older) which necessitates a separation of self from self or, as in David Jarraway’s reading of the poetry of Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes (“Montage of an Otherness Deferred: Dreaming Subjectivity in Langston Hughes”), a constant deferral of selfhood. The “self” is not singular because it is never finalized, and, as in Jarraway’s reading of Hughes, “[s]omething always exceeds, escapes from statement, withdraws from definition” (William James, cited in Jarraway, “Montage,” 822). For Hughes, most specifically, that something is a “racial something” (822), but, more broadly speaking, for both Hughes and White, selfhood and identity consistently “withdraw from definition” resulting in what Jarraway calls, after Levinas, a “multiplicity of individuality” (828). As such, we might say that White’s “pederasty” offers up multiple “per/versions” of the self.

Michael Warner’s introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet* also sheds light on another important facet of White’s queer politics, and, coincidentally, gestures towards the theoretical crux of my reading of White. Warner notes, still outlining his working definition, that “[q]ueer’ is also a way of cutting across mandatory gender divisions, though gender continues to be a dividing line” (xxvi). In general terms, Warner outlines the persistent gender divisions by pointing out that

[m]en in queer theory, as well as women who write about gay men or AIDS, tend to be strongly influenced by Foucault and constructionist theory in general. They infuse queerness into their work through a mixture of tempered rage and carnivalesque display. Women who write about women, by contrast, typically refer to French feminisms (Monique Wittig, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva) and Anglo-American psychoanalytic feminism . . . (xxvi-xxvii)

My own project, however, will show how the thought of both Michel Foucault and Julia Kristeva, each from opposite sides of Warner's "dividing line," can be made coordinate in a queer reading of Edmund White.

Before drawing out this line of argument, however, it is crucial to note that White himself has long been suspicious of gender divisions, indeed, that White strongly resists the "dividing line" to which Warner refers. For instance, he notes that the gay, gym-sculpted, "clone" culture of the 1970's, with its "newly acquired machismo," was partly to make "[m]asculinity seem[] more like a costume than an eternal and natural privilege" ("Straight Women, Gay Men," 311). Moreover, in a very early story, "The Hermaphrodite" (1960), only recently published in *The Journal of Contemporary Fiction*, White uses the figure of the hermaphrodite as a metaphor for his own homosexuality. As White tells us in his brief preface to the story, very notably referring to himself in the third person: "The twenty-year-old writer [another version of the "younger self"] was already seeking to find a symbol for his confused sexual identity in his version of the hermaphrodite -- a double-natured but far from self-sufficient being" (27). White, then, describes a figure that literally embodies "both"¹⁰ genders, and which, therefore, can never adequately represent either. His review of Foucault's *Herculine Barbin: The Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century Hermaphrodite* elucidates his position:

In the modern world, gender is strictly assigned and the sexual conduct associated with each sex by convention has been raised to the level of an imperative of nature. As a result, sexual irregularities -- the 'passive' man, the 'virile' woman, the lesbian[,] the homosexual [or the

¹⁰ Here, I highlight "both" with quotation marks to cast the notion of two diametrically opposed genders in a dubious light.

hermaphrodite] -- are perceived as *chimeras, errors, false identities*, that run contrary to natural law. And such chimeras are not mere eccentricities, mere white lies, but deep deceptions, because gender is now regarded as the deepest truth about the individual, the *fons et origo* of individuality. (90)

Part of White's project, therefore, is to challenge and resist the widely held belief in the unimpeachability of heterosexual gender constructions. He suggests, furthermore, that gender divisions are based on a false dichotomy between male and female, that gender roles are purely arbitrary, and that, so too is the privilege accorded to men. Such is the implication when White tells us in the story that the hermaphrodite's parents had (despite having ambiguously named "him" "Hilary") "decided to present their child to the world as a boy. There were so many advantages to being *considered a male* -- the independence, the dignity" (27, emphasis added). Hence, White recognizes that the gay man's own "maleness," can work as a kind of disguise or "costume" that allows him to be "considered a male" and experience the *de facto* privilege of that arbitrary (and false) gender assignment.

Much like Langston Hughes' "racial something," therefore, queerness is that space that constantly "withdraws from definition," cannot rightly be named or specified, and which dismantles the gender dichotomy by being neither properly male nor female. White's resistance to "regimes of the normal," then, began very early and is seen as early as 1960, when White was only twenty years old. New ways of thinking about radical otherness were already being conceived. Long before gay "liberation," gay pride or queer theory, White writes of his hermaphroditic protagonist: "He had his pride. It was, of course, a highly constructed, ironical brand of pride. Nonetheless, he could see nothing good about sitting around public places and being treated like a freak. He knew he *was* a freak but he also knew that there were more subtle, interesting ways of approaching freakish-ness than making fun of it" (28). Here, White seems to hint at

some of the political and social repercussions of being queer. These remain unspecified, of course, but queerness is already being conceived as something considerably more than merely odd or unusual, more than simply queer in the original or pejorative sense of the word.¹¹ It is worth reiterating, as well, that White uses the figure of the hermaphrodite as a metaphor for his own homosexuality and thus to note that, long before he began writing autobiographical fiction in earnest, White was already, in “The Hermaphrodite,” (as he would in the dubiously heterosexual and amnesiac protagonist of *Forgetting Elena* and the gay, dapper, worldly yet melancholy protagonist of *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*) presenting the reader with different versions of himself.

By now, White’s *oeuvre* has reflected, to a greater or lesser degree, the entire span of the author’s life. And from the first, White has been theorizing the self. With reference to his earliest writing, an unpublished, semi-autobiographical manuscript entitled “The Tower Window,” White attributes the impulse to write “not [to] an enlightened campaigning spirit but [to a drive] to exorcise [his] demons and establish

¹¹ Indeed, the origins of the word “queer” warrant further discussion. Even its original meanings suggest the willful perverseness of deploying the word as the basis of a theoretical inquiry. The *OED* defines “queer” as “strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric, in appearance or character,” but also as “bad” and “worthless.” The further definition, “not in a normal condition” recalls the aforementioned resistance to “regimes of the normal.” Finally, the *OED* also valuably lists “queer” as a verb. Whereas I shall use it below as a verb meaning “to make strange,” or “to pervert,” “to queer” meant, originally, “to put out of order,” “to put (one) out,” but also, resonantly, “to quiz” and “to puzzle.” This last meaning, in particular, suggests the philosophical nature of queer work. It also suggests, perhaps, an obscure etymological link between “queer” and “query” and “inquiry” (*inquery?*).

[his] right to exist, on the page if not yet in society” (“The Personal is Political,” 369). Here, White gives at once his own sense of the primacy of writing the self, as well as one of its crucial political implications, the assertion of the “right to exist” as a queer subject. In this sense, White can be seen to undertake what Michel Foucault describes as “the history of how an individual acts upon himself [:] the technology of the self” (“Technologies of the Self,” 19).

The link between the technology of the self and queer writing is not accidental. Indeed, it seems that the technology emerges at the point at which the autobiographical and the philosophical elements of White’s work intersect. Foucault begins his essay, “Technologies of the Self,” with a brief review of the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*. He reiterates, for example, the crucial points that “[t]he association of prohibition and strong incitations to speak is a constant feature of our culture” and that “[u]nlike other interdictions, sexual interdictions are constantly connected with the obligation to tell the truth about oneself” (16-17). Foucault is thus prompted to ask: “How [has] the subject been compelled to decipher himself in regard to what [is] forbidden?” (17). This question is one that is very relevant to White’s project, not only because the homosexual is a prime example of just such an interdicted subject, but also because homosexuality itself has traditionally been deciphered in regard to what is forbidden.

It is worthwhile, therefore, to briefly review *The History of Sexuality, An Introduction*. We have already noted the influence this text has had on queer theory, but *The History of Sexuality* is also crucial here insofar as it offers a firm link between queer work and the technologies of the self. Regarding the difficulty of deciphering the self, Foucault argues that the Enlightenment transformed sexuality into a scientific matter, that a *scientia sexualis* was set into place. This new mode of inquiry into sex was characterized by a will to truth and, paradoxically, what Foucault calls “systematic blindnesses” (55). This is a double-edged model that is still in place today; the

“systematic blindnesses” are those that allow the privileged to perpetuate oppression while pretending that there is not a problem to begin with. Thus, the interdicted subject was compelled, for the sake of (scientific) knowledge, to confess his or her sexual predilections for the sake of a truth that was then “evad[ed]” or “mask[ed]” (55).

Foucault elaborates his position further: “The important thing, in this affair, is not that these men shut their eyes or stopped their ears, or that they were mistaken; it is rather that they constructed around and apropos of sex an immense apparatus for producing truth, even if this truth was to be masked at the last minute” (56). Foucault’s claim, then, is that, by means of the *scientia sexualis*, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been “the age of multiplication: a dispersion of sexualities, a strengthening of their disparate forms, a multiple implantation of ‘perversions.’ Our epoch has initiated sexual heterogeneities” (37).

Foucault further argues, pessimistically but with great acuity, that this multiplication of perversions has not led to a liberation of sexuality, as many think, but that this process of teasing out into reality has actually had a policing effect on sexuality. This “liberation” is illusory precisely because the dispersions of sexuality were set into place *as* perversions. As White notes, moreover, “with the politicization of sex . . . people are pressured into more narrowly prescribed ways of rebelling” (*States of Desire*, 94), a position that actually precludes the possibility of rebellion. Thus, the will to truth, coupled with “systematic blindnesses,” is used to place the dissident subject in an unenviable double bind: “You do not have the right to remain silent and everything you say will be used against you.” Interdicted subjects are compelled to confess but not for the sake of defiantly breaking the silence that has surrounded their lives or their activities, not for the sake of speaking up for themselves or in their own defense. Instead, the testimony is used to label, to identify, to codify, to pathologize, to minoritize, and to transform subjectivity into subjection and dissidence into distance. And yet, contradictorily, the discourse is deployed to transform the outlaw into an “in-law,” in

contrast to whom the nuclear family members can define themselves and about whom there is a tacit agreement: the outlaw turned “in-law” is not to be spoken of, is a kind of negative-entity who does not exist in everyday “reality,” and yet, because of the discourse on sex, there is an “understanding” of the pathology which makes this so. It is telling, in fact, that those people who are most single-mindedly certain of the truth behind their “queer theories” are often heterosexuals with homophobic agendas. Foucault, on the other hand, is characteristically uncertain and prefers to pose questions on the matter:

[W]as this transformation of sex into discourse not governed by the endeavor to expel from reality the forms of sexuality that were not amenable to the strict economy of reproduction: to say no to unproductive activities, to banish casual pleasures, to reduce or exclude practices whose object was not procreation? . . . Were these [discourses] anything more than means employed to absorb, for the benefit of genitally centered sexuality, all the fruitless pleasures? All this garrulous attention which has us in a stew over sexuality, is it not motivated by one basic concern: to ensure population, to reproduce labor capacity, to perpetuate the form of social relations: in short, to constitute a sexuality that is economically useful and politically conservative?

I still do not know whether this is the ultimate objective. (36-37)

It is important to note, therefore, that Foucault’s theoretical uncertainty prefigures the queer project that Warner and Berlant describe, a theory “that has not yet undertaken the kind of general description of the world that would allow it to produce practical solutions” (348), that poses questions yet unanswered, in short, a mode of theorizing that signals “a challenge and a hope” (348).

The issue at stake, then, is whether autobiographical and often confessional writing such as Edmund White’s can avoid contributing to the modern version of the *scientia sexualis*. Does White, by offering so much detail about himself, risk codifying,

pathologizing, and minoritizing himself? Does not White find himself in the unenviable double bind described above? He feels compelled to speak out and yet everything he says may be used against him. I will argue, however, that queer autobiographical (or semi-autobiographical) writing such as White's resists subjection and codification by introducing the self as a contested ideological site. In White, the self becomes the radical element which, because it cannot be named, specified or finalized, cannot be contained. Insofar as White uses writing as a vehicle for "coming out" of the closet, he indeed exposes himself, in Halperin's words, to "dangers and constraints" and is "irrevocably marked by the overwhelming social significance of one's openly acknowledged homosexual identity" (30). Deploying Foucault's theory of power, however, Halperin demonstrates that "coming out" is never an unproblematic submission to the *scientia sexualis*:

If to come out is to release oneself from a state of unfreedom, that is not because coming out constitutes an escape from the reach of power to a place outside of power: rather, coming out puts into play a different set of power relations and alters the dynamics of personal and political struggle. *Coming out is an act of freedom, then, not in the sense of liberation but in the sense of resistance.* (30)

Thus as White argues in *States of Desire*, "if someone can face the ridicule of being branded queer, then he is 'outside the flock' . . . He has broken the social contract, and is perceived of capable of anything" (151). The queer subject is therefore dangerous, volatile, always fluctuating, invented and re-invented, spectral,¹² haunting.

¹² The word "spectral" is used in reference to David R. Jarraway's " 'O Canada!': The Spectral Lesbian Poetics of Elizabeth Bishop" in which he argues that Bishop's lesbianism is a crucial, albeit "spectral" presence in her poetry. Obviously, White's

White himself asserts that “homosexuality forced [him] to confess, to express [him]self, to attempt to keep pace in [his] writing with the despair and confusion threatening at every moment to swamp [him]” (“The Joys of Gay Life,” 33). Thus, while White’s writing is, to some extent, confessional, it also, as we have seen, allows him “to exorcise [his] demons and establish [his] right to exist.” At this point, it seems that Foucault’s technologies of the self overlap with his notion of the “care of the self.” Of course, the link I draw between the two is not my own; Foucault himself argues that the technology of the self evolves out of the long tradition of the care of self which he traces back to late antiquity. “The precept ‘to be concerned with oneself’ was” Foucault argues, “for the Greeks, one of the main principles of cities, one of the main rules for social and personal conduct and for the art of life,” and that “[i]n Greek and Roman texts, the injunction of having to know yourself was always associated with the other principle of having to take care of yourself” (“Technologies of the Self,” 19-20). Foucault also points out that “being occupied with oneself and political activities are linked” (26). This observation has considerable bearing on the life of Edmund White, who has always been acutely aware of the links between the personal and the political. For example, in *States of Desire*, White claims that “activism is not only valuable for the community but also essential for one’s mental health” (144), a sentiment he elaborates upon in the final essay of *The Burning Library*:

homosexuality is a considerably more overt part of his own writing. My contention is, as in the context above, that *the self* in Edmund White is spectral, that while it is the key focal point of his writing, that it forms a kind of absent center because it lacks a concrete identity, because White subjects the self to a radical dispersion. This, as we shall see, is undertaken in different ways in the various novels. In some, the self is dispersed over a range of characters; in others, the self, a single character, is presented as multifarious.

What allowed me to write [*A Boy's Own Story*] and its sequel, *The Beautiful Room is Empty*, was the conviction I'd picked up in consciousness-raising groups in the early 1970s that the personal is political. This simple phrase, more than any other, opened the way to a genuine feminist and queer literature. We learned that what we'd endured and survived was not too subjective or peculiar to be of interest to readers. We also learned that what we'd lived through was not a neurosis in need of treatment but a shared experience that called for political action. ("The Personal Is Political," 372)

Thus, in White as in Foucault, the care of the self is a political act. And thus, as previously noted, in queer fiction and queer theory, the political, the philosophical and the autobiographical intersect. As Foucault claims:

[P]hilosophy is precisely the challenging of all phenomena of domination at whatever level or under whatever form they present themselves -- political, economic, sexual, institutional, and so on. This critical function of philosophy, up to a certain point, emerges right from the socratic imperative: 'Be concerned with yourself, i.e., ground yourself in liberty, through the mastery of self' ("The Ethic of Care of Self as a Practice of Freedom," 20).

Foucault also makes a key observation that bears directly on White's literary project. He argues that the care of the self is manifested primarily in writing activity. "[B]y the Hellenistic age," he claims, "writing prevailed, and real dialectic passed to correspondence. Taking care of oneself became linked to constant writing activity. The self is something to write about, a theme or object (subject) of writing activity. That is not a modern trait born of the Reformation or of romanticism; it is one of the most ancient Western traditions. It was well established and deeply rooted when Augustine started his *Confessions*" (27). Thus, writing in general, and *queer writing in particular*,

with its increased tendency toward autobiography (in both novels and memoirs) and philosophical ruminations (as evidenced by the recent advances in queer theory and exemplified by White as a “gay philosopher,” and later, in my estimation, as a “queer philosopher”), is a mode of care of the self and a means through which one can effect technologies of the self. For Edmund White in particular, writing is a way of “keep[ing] pace...with despair and confusion,” in short, a means of “authenticating [one’s] experiences.”

Authentication, however, becomes a problem insofar as the technologies of the self and the care of self yield results that are, perhaps, unexpected. While the technologies of the self, as a mode of introspection, of “knowing oneself,” might be expected to reveal a unified, coherent self or the “true nature” of one’s being, it becomes clear that they do not. In fact, the technologies of the self are crucial to a queer reading of Edmund White *specifically because they fail* to reveal such a coherent, unified self. Instead, this kind of close, rigorous examination serves only to reveal the cracks, slips and gaps in the facade that one creates and calls one’s “self.” The key point of the technologies of the self is that, just as the self is a construction, so too is it always already at risk of deconstruction.

Huck Gutman’s essay, “Rousseau’s *Confessions*: A Technology of the Self,” thus provides a very useful example of how the practice tends toward “failure.” Gutman begins with an epigraph from Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*: “For a long time ordinary individuality -- the everyday individuality of everybody -- remained below the threshold of description” (Gutman, 99). He then demonstrates how Rousseau sets out, in his *Confessions*, to change that. Gutman detects two aspects of Rousseau’s “sensibility”: “the emergence of an individuality, a clearly defined *self*, above the threshold of visibility, and the valorization of the emotive life” (101). The ambiguities of Rousseau’s project, however, come quickly to the fore. As Gutman argues, Rousseau makes repeated claims for the authenticity of the life with which he presents the reader, that he will

present a “portrait in every way true to nature” (Rousseau, 17). And yet, these claims are consistently cast into doubt by references to “immaterial embellishments” and “defect[s] of memory,” and that, among other things, he may “have taken for fact what was no more than a probability” (17). “So deficient reality,” Gutman argues, “is transformed into the imaginary and the imaginary is superimposed upon the real in such a fashion that the imaginary transforms, takes over, becomes, the real” (112). Furthermore, Gutman ponders: “Given Rousseau’s continual flight from deprivation and reality into the imaginary, is it not possible that the *Confessions* itself is a fiction created to remedy this deprivation, to hold the pressures of the actual at bay? And, further, is it not possible that ‘Jean-Jacques Rousseau’ is a character, his self a ‘chimera,’ his subjectivity a construct?” (112). The *objective* answer, here, of course, is that yes, it is eminently possible, if not highly probable. To restate Gutman’s rhetorical question, however, we might say that subjectivity is not so much a construct as it is a means of construction; that is to say, subjectivity itself cannot help but create a “reality” that is consistently at odds with the notion of an objective reality. Resisting this objective “reality,” this “*savoir*,” as Foucault calls it (which may perhaps be best translated, in Kaja Silverman’s terms, as “the dominant fiction”¹³), requires, as Foucault critic Karlis Racevskis argues, “a critique of culture [that] becomes . . . an attempt to escape identity, to get away from oneself – an injunction to “*se déprendre de soi*” (27-28). “[T]o remove oneself from oneself,” Racevskis continues, is done “by undertaking to constantly transform one’s own thinking” (31). Vis-à-vis the technology of the self, therefore, an objective identity becomes a practical impossibility. Identity itself is a subjective construct, and an ideological mechanism we are compelled to enact, through which we make ourselves “defined personage[s] in the social order” (Gutman, 103). At the very least, “identity”

¹³ See *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, chapter 1.

becomes a misnomer insofar as the self is fluid and unknowable, as in White's previously cited challenge to gender essentialism, a "chimera." Thus, as Gutman argues,

it is one of the very great ironies of Rousseau's autobiographical, confessional *oeuvre* that its central strategy, the dividing off of self from not-self and the consequent exploration and celebration of that self, is eventually negated. The individuated self of Rousseau finally proves ineffective, the deprivation it entails finally overcomes the compensatory satisfactions it produces, and Rousseau ends up annihilating -- or desiring to annihilate -- the very boundaries of the self that his confessional works seek to impose. (113)

Such is precisely the case in Edmund White, as well; the technology of the self is used in order to reveal a "multiplicity of individuality," a chimerical self. The key difference, perhaps, is that this "annihilation" of self is willful and purposeful in White, where it is clearly not so in Rousseau.

Even in the very end of his memoir, however, Rousseau insists on the authenticity of his autobiography: "I have told the truth. If anyone knows anything contrary to what I have here recorded, though he prove it a thousand times, his knowledge is a lie and an imposture" (605). White, conversely, even in the novels in which he creates surreal worlds, sticks to the bare "facts" only because the "truth" is so completely unattainable. In *Forgetting Elena*, his narrator claims: "I'll not dare to lie because I know too little about them, *myself, everything*, to lie intelligently" (34, emphasis added). The same novel concludes in a way that is completely opposite to Rousseau's *Confessions*. An observer at a funeral, the narrator tells us: "I look around at this ring of strangers and wonder what this man expects from me. Is there a dead person in that box? Am I a newcomer to the island? I remember nothing" (184). This complete lack of knowledge forces the reader to include the narrator himself in the "ring of strangers." The reader can conclude no more about the narrator (or any other character, for that matter) at the

end than at the beginning. Finally, therefore, the technology of the self is an arduous task that reveals a stranger, reveals the fact that we are, as Julia Kristeva argues, “strangers to ourselves,” a practice through which the “individual ceases to consider himself as unitary and glorious but discovers his incoherences and abysses, in short, his ‘strangenesses’” (*Strangers to Ourselves*, 2).

Before further drawing out the links between Foucault’s technologies of the self and Kristeva’s neo-Freudian stranger, it is worthwhile to discuss some of the fairly obvious complications involved in the collocation of Foucault and Freud, as well as to consider at some length what David Bergman identifies in Edmund White as the “Freudian position.” In a biographical sketch on White in *Contemporary Gay American Novelists*, Bergman observes that “for White, who went through more than the requisite number of years of analysis for a gay man of his class and period and who has spoken rather bitterly about the process, his position is strikingly Freudian” (391). This estimation, however, is supported by an example of Freudianism at its most reductive and stereotypical as Bergman cites a passage from *A Boy’s Own Story*: “I feel sorry for a man who never wanted to go to bed with his father; when the father dies how can his ghost get warm except in a posthumous embrace? For that matter, how does the survivor get warm?” (White 22, Bergman 391). Here we clearly have White displaying the kind of uncanny psychology for which Freud is most easily recognized and for which his thought most commonly meets with suspicion or resistance. In some ways, however, the passage seems to be a rather poor example of the “Freudian position” since it seems to confuse the perceived ends of psychoanalysis with its means. I would, unlike Bergman, argue that it is not necessarily White’s observations or conclusions that are strikingly Freudian but rather the means by which he makes his observations, his philosophical, theoretical, (psycho)analytical mode of inquiry into the self. Indeed, White encourages us to understand his fiction in the way that he describes it in “The *Paris Review* Interview”: as a “neo-Freudian psychological analysis written in a nuanced, flowing style” (245).

If White's self-reflective writing is analytical in a neo-Freudian sense, does this consequently negate the previously discussed Foucaultian aspects of White's literary endeavour? The answer I propose, rather predictably, is no. Certainly, much has been made of Foucault's antipathy for Freud, and psychoanalysis, if it is conceived as a "science," could easily be deemed to be part of the *scientia sexualis* which Foucault describes and decries. Patrick H. Hutton, in "Foucault, Freud and the Technologies of the Self," advances the claim that "[Foucault's] authorship, considered in its ensemble, might be interpreted as an apostrophe to Freud, for their methods of approaching the mind are diametrically opposed" (121). The main reason for this seems to be, as Hutton states, that "Freud wished to bring the mysteries of the human soul, previously the preserve of poets and theologians, into the realm of scientific understanding" (122). The technique that Freud devised to achieve this understanding is, of course, psychoanalysis.

The differences between Foucault and Freud, however, seem to have been, in many ways, over-determined. Certainly, their respective professional assumptions are radically different; Freud's method, as a medical doctor, is obviously far more scientific than Foucault's, a philosopher and "historian of systems of thought." Freud's influence, however, is far less medical and scientific than he might have hoped and is felt far more strongly in the liberal arts than in psychiatry and neurology. That is to say, Freud's thought has been and continues to be picked up, revised and expanded upon by thinkers whose professional assumptions are far closer to Foucault's than to Freud's. As Foucault himself notes, Freud's articulation of psychoanalysis was "the initiation of a discursive practice, [not] the founding of a science" (cited in Grosz, 194). At the same time, however, Freud's thought, like Foucault's, presents a challenge to discourse. It is in this sense, then, that Halperin argues that "[l]esbian and gay theorists, influenced by Foucault, have advanced two related explanations [of queer subjectivity], the first in a deconstructive mode and the second in a psychoanalytic mode" (43). He goes on to note that "[t]he modes are distinguishable, but they are in fact often and easily combined"

(43). As Teresa de Lauretis argues in an indispensable article on the subject, “the setting up of [an] opposition between Freud’s and Foucault’s respective theories is ill-advised, as well as unfounded, and that the essentialism/constructionism dichotomy is based on an equivocation” (852). Taking Halperin’s point even further, de Lauretis argues, very convincingly, that, in sexual theory, Foucault and Freud not only *can*, but *must* be combined. For both Freud and Foucault, she notes, sexuality is a “massive social *technology*” (857).¹⁴

Thus, in the hands of neo-Freudian theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Lee Edelman (*Homographesis*) and Kaja Silverman (*Male Subjectivity at the Margins*),¹⁵ to name only a few, Freudian precepts become less a science than a Foucaultian technology: in the

¹⁴ It is useful to note, furthermore, that Freud’s influence has often merged with, indeed sometimes metamorphosed into, that of Jacques Lacan, who “stressed Freud’s originality and subversiveness,” and very usefully repositioned Freud’s scientific precepts into “socio-historical and linguistic terms, that is, in terms more politically palatable than Freud’s biologism” (Grosz, 9). Indeed, several of the metaphors Lacan deploys in his essay on “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I” (*Ecrits*, 1-7), are very useful in my reading of White with respect to both Foucault’s technologies of the self and Kristeva’s figure of the stranger. Lacan argues, in one example, that “the subject flounders in quest of the *lofty, remote inner castle*” (5, emphasis added), which suggests, at once, the aforementioned “failure” of the technologies of the self, and the inherent unknowability of the self posited by Kristeva.

¹⁵ Primarily neo-Freudian in their respective approaches, Edelman and Silverman both fall into Halperin’s model of the queer theorist who uses both Freud and Foucault in a mode of inquiry that is both “deconstructive” and “psychoanalytic.” I shall revisit the works mentioned above in my readings of White.

most general sense, a means of making (*techne*) through knowing (*logos*), of inventing the self by taking care of the self, while recognizing, of course, the unstable, provisional nature of that constructed self. Psychoanalysis, moreover, can be understood as a part of the technology of the self insofar as it is an “art of memory” (Hutton, 124) and as an art becomes characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, doubt. More important still is the way in which “art” suggests artifice, creation, imagination, all of which contest notions of reality, facticity and authenticity. Hence, we may note how post- or neo-Freudian thinkers follow different lines to thought to observations that do not contradict (indeed, often complement), those of Foucault. For Edmund White, for example, the technology of the self meets the “neo-Freudian psychological analysis” when the therapy and analysis that he underwent as a young man, which disallowed him the freedom to make himself into what he wanted and which, even, failed sometimes to admit the possibility that he might actually be gay, is undertaken anew by White himself, on his own terms, in his writing.

Julia Kristeva is the most valuable of the neo-Freudian thinkers insofar as she discusses, in *Strangers to Ourselves*, the figure of the foreigner, or stranger, which forms, as we shall see, a crucial nexus with White’s technology of the self. Kristeva’s thought in this matter speaks literally to the experience of the immigrant or the visible (racial) minority. Her discussion specifically addresses issues of race and the problems of nationality and nationalism in contemporary cosmopolitan society. Her study forces us to ask “the question [that] is again before us today as we confront an economic and political integration on the scale of the planet: shall we be, intimately and subjectively, able to live with the others, to live *as others*, without ostracism but also without leveling?” (1-2). This last formulation is crucial because it seizes on the importance of rejecting the fallacy that we are essentially the same, linked by our common humanity and that all that is required is an assimilation process to usher in (a semblance of) equality. The

injunction, instead, is not to erase difference or otherness but to recognize it in ourselves, to recognize its double-sided nature; if we define a certain group or individual as “other[s],” we ourselves become others with respect, at the very least, to that group or individual and, hence, we have Kristeva’s dictate to live both *with and as* others.

In addition to our literal understanding of the word, however, the “foreigner” is also an infinitely useful metaphor for all marginal subjectivities, as well as for the unknowable dimension in each of us. Indeed, “foreigner” is *only a metaphor*: “The foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners. If I am a foreigner, there are no foreigners. Therefore Freud does not talk about them” (192). Kristeva explicates: “the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder . . . A symptom that precisely turns ‘we’ into a problem, The [sic] foreigner comes in when consciousness of my difference arises . . .” (1). One of the very notable things about this passage is its thoroughly unscientific formulation; the foreign entity begins at the point at which we cease to understand. The foreigner, Kristeva argues, is the part of ourselves that resists knowledge and that manifests itself as difference, an “uncanny strangeness” which “Freud teaches us . . . to detect . . . in ourselves . . . [and] brings us the courage to call ourselves disintegrated in order not to integrate foreigners but rather to welcome them to that uncanny strangeness, which is as much theirs as it is ours” (191-92). As such, in my readings of White, I shall speak of a “disintegration of self.” It is a phrase, certainly, that sounds untowardly negative, but I shall be using it advisedly, in allusion to the passage above. In short, White’s project implies, as in a defiant statement from Foucault, on his visits to America: “As a foreigner, I don’t have to be integrated” (“Truth, Power, Self” 13).

Moreover, when Kristeva points out that “[t]he modification in the status of foreigners that is imperative today leads one to reflect on our ability to accept new modalities of otherness” (2), it seems that her project encourages, if only in part, in

crucial part, a “queering” process, resistant to the normalizing impulses of liberal nationalism, as well as gesturing towards what Michael Warner calls the “fear of a queer planet.” Kristeva describes an assimilating or normalizing process when she writes: “While in the most savage human groups the foreigner was an enemy to be destroyed, he has become, within the scope of religious and ethical constructs, a different human being who, provided he espouses them, may be assimilated into the fraternities of the ‘wise,’ the ‘just,’ or the ‘native’” (2). As an alternative to this, Kristeva appeals to us to “no longer...welcome[] the foreigner within a system that obliterates him but [rather to] promote[] the togetherness of those foreigners *that we all recognize ourselves to be* (2-3, emphasis added). Thus, in a sense, Kristeva argues for the acceptance of the “queer planet”; if we all recognize ourselves to be foreigners, strangers even to ourselves, we can readily accept our own queerness, as well as the queerness of others, even if that queerness is only in the older sense of the word. In any case, Kristeva’s stranger resists the “regimes of the normal.” All this, of course, is not to suggest that we are all uniformly, equally, or even similarly queer. The suggestion, instead, is that we recognize and celebrate our common uncommonness.

Kristeva’s position is also very topical insofar as it gestures towards the spectral nature of the self in Edmund White. The stranger is the part of ourselves that, like Langston Hughes’ “racial something” and White’s “queer something,” remains intangible, an uncanny specter within us. Along these lines, Kristeva encourages us to let the stranger remain spectral. She writes:

Let us not seek to solidify, to turn the otherness of the foreigner into a thing. Let us merely touch it, brush by it, without giving it a permanent structure . . . Let us also lighten that otherness by constantly coming back to it -- but more and more swiftly. Let us escape its hatred, its burden, fleeing them not through leveling and forgetting, but through the *harmonious* repetition of the differences it implies and spreads. *Toccatas*

and Fugues: Bach's compositions evoke to my ears the meaning of an acknowledged and harrowing otherness that I should like to be contemporary *because* it has been brought up, relieved, disseminated, inscribed in an original play being developed, without goal, without boundary, without end. An otherness barely touched upon and that already moves away. (3)

The intangibility and elusiveness that characterize this otherness, this queerness, are crucial to the queer politics Michel Foucault and Edmund White. The queer self remains spectral so that it can be theorized indefinitely, so that a "serious writer" such as Edmund White can continually "evolve," avoiding the self-satisfaction and the smugness that are derived from feelings of certainty and the illusion of complete understanding. Thus, Kristeva argues, the stranger, "multiplying masks and 'false selves' . . . is never completely true nor completely false . . ." (8). "Settled within himself" Kristeva argues, "the foreigner has no self" (8), a position that recalls Foucault's injunction to "*se déprendre de soi*." She describes, furthermore, a kind of Foucaultian dissimulation, the result of the technology of the self: "I do what *they* want *me* to, but it is not 'me' -- 'me' is elsewhere, 'me' belongs to no one, 'me' does not belong to 'me,' . . . does 'me' exist? (8).

Kristeva's allusion to Bach's toccatas and fugues, moreover, provides an interesting link, however coincidental, with White's writing style, which has often been described, by critics and by White himself, as "baroque." As Kristeva argues, "the foreigner is a baroque person" (21). The notion of the baroque is one that will serve well to frame readings of White's not-strictly-autobiographical novels, *Forgetting Elena*, *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*, and *Caracole*. The baroque element is one that calls to mind a certain flamboyance, irregularity, strangeness and, most importantly, high artifice which contribute to the creation of the spectral versions of self which White presents in these novels. Like Kristeva's appreciation of Bach's toccatas and fugues, the baroque

quality suggests “an acknowledged and harrowing otherness . . . relieved, disseminated, inscribed . . . without goal, without boundary, without end” (3).

The collocation of Kristeva’s theory and White’s fiction is more than a merely coincidental one, however. In “The Gay Philosopher,” White describes the realization of his queer subjectivity (the “consciousness of [his] difference”) in a way that demands a comparison to Kristeva. He writes: “I . . . came out when I was twelve, but I was horrified at myself and I regarded this boy who laid elaborate traps to snare men as *a stranger, a sleepwalker, someone else*” (4, emphasis added). Once again, White exemplifies that kind of dissociation of self, the insistence that the self is multiple and varied. At the same time, moreover, White echoes the Kristevan paradox of rejecting identity “without leveling,” without denying difference, by embracing a contradiction that hinges on two separate versions of himself:

I’m convinced that *the self* is an illusion, and that actually all we are consists of several piles, or, as the Buddhists call them, *skandhas*, of associations and memories and so on, that the way to enlightenment is to dissolve the illusion of unity and return all these elements to their original constituents, thereby ridding oneself of the notion of identity. (“The *Paris Review* Interview,” 266)

Kristeva’s study suggests that White’s contradictory positions are reconcilable. In his fiction, as an artist who “tries to catch a likeness,” White presents the reader primarily with likenesses of himself which do, indeed, tell us *something* about him; that something, however, is a “queer something,” something spectral and intangible that (to reiterate once again) “escapes from statement, withdraws from definition.”

White’s project is, furthermore, in large part, a process of accepting and internalizing his own foreignness. The “pederasty of autobiography” is one way in which this self-acceptance is manifested. By the time of the writing of *A Boy’s Own Story*, White affirms that he has come to feel “an affection for the miserable kid [he’d] once

been” (“Introduction: ‘On the Line’,” ix). This self-acceptance, however, is clearly not the case in the novel itself in which the narrator *is* the miserable kid he had once been. One of the interesting complexities of reading *A Boy’s Own Story* is negotiating the sometimes implicit and other times glaringly obvious gaps between the young narrator’s tormented and desperate state and the author’s simultaneously more refined and radically politicized position. White, unlike his narrator, realizes that his uncanny strangeness need not be a source of misery, that his very foreignness can be a source of strength, that “in crossing a border (. . . or two),” that is, in transgressively and subversively accepting and enjoying his own queerness, “the foreigner . . . change[s] his discomforts into a base of resistance” (Kristeva, 8). While the uncanny strangeness is the touchstone of the surrealistic, “baroque” novels, its acceptance, as we shall see later, is one that is made only gradually as the autobiographical trilogy unfolds.

Chapter 2:

The Stylized, Spectral Self: Autobiographical Fantasy in *Forgetting Elena*, *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*, and *Caracole*

For Genet, Rembrandt . . . was the painter who shows the essential heaviness and carnality of human beings who smell, who shit and whose bodies are warm.

According to Genet's singular view, Rembrandt strips his subjects of every merely anecdotal detail. *The more he removes every identifiable characteristic the more his subjects take on a weight and a reality.*

- Edmund White, *Genet*, 403, emphasis added.

Je est un autre.

-Arthur Rimbaud, cited in White's *Genet*, 137, and in Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves*, 13.

In his landmark biography of Jean Genet, Edmund White makes the acute observation that

[b]ecause *Querelle* is Genet's only novel that is not autobiographical, it permits him, paradoxically, to be more personal (if less intimate). He is no longer linked to just one or two characters . . . but can now distribute

and dramatize his conflicts amongst the full range of characters. And because he is no longer restrained by the need to give a plausible account of his own life, he has the license to discover and stage his hitherto buried obsessions. (290-91)

This “license” seems, as well, to be precisely the case for White and his own non-autobiographical novels. Certainly, it is often very interesting and helpful to note the ways in which *Forgetting Elena* and *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* are based on White’s own life and experience, and that the narrator in each (male, unnamed) often very closely resembles the narrator of White’s autobiographical trilogy (to be discussed in the following chapter). The non-autobiographical novels, however, are clearly not literal representations of the author or his life and are not meant to be taken as such. And this is precisely the point; these narrators may resemble Edmund White without claiming to be the “real” Edmund White. Instead, these versions of White’s “self” are only partial and heavily stylized, and, therefore, spectral. This is not to say, of course, that the characters or events of these novels are implausible (as White suggests that Genet’s *Querelle* may have been), but rather that the novels are punctuated by surreal, or even unreal, elements. For instance, White places the reader unnervingly close to his narrator and forces upon the reader the narrator’s own confusion and wonderment, or longing and loss. Because the settings are stylized, artificial and unfamiliar, the narrator’s perception becomes very much our own; his subjectivity becomes our own; it is our only way into the novel. Much like Rembrandt’s *Self-portrait at the Age of About 21 Years*, in which the artist casts a shadow over much of his face, White’s narrators are too close and too “real” to be seen clearly, or to be clearly known. Thus, as in White’s estimation of Genet’s opinion of Rembrandt, the more White “removes every identifiable characteristic, the more his subjects take on a weight and a reality” (403), and more often than not, White’s *subjects* (plural emphasized) are himself, or rather, his *selves*.

Like Genet, moreover, White is not, in the non-autobiographical novels, restrained to the more literal versions of self of the autobiographical works. The author is, instead, “dispersed amongst the full range of characters.” As I shall argue, both the narrator of *Forgetting Elena* and Elena herself are versions of the author. Similarly, in *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*, White is partly both the young narrator and the older, abandoned lover, and partly neither.

Caracole is clearly exceptional in this context. It is White’s only novel that is narrated by an omniscient third person. There is, as such, considerably less of an obvious suggestion in *Caracole* that one or any of the characters may be a fictional version of the author. There are, nonetheless, important parallels between some of the events of White’s own life and the events in the novel, however fantastically these may be presented. *Caracole* demands attention in the context of this study, however, not because of its autobiographical elements, which, although subtly pervasive, are clearly not central to the novel, but rather, because of its emphasis on the construction of the self, on the *process* of self-construction, and of the impact society has on such a construction.

The “license to discover” that White observes in Genet’s *Querelle* is therefore also crucial to his own work. These novels contain the aforementioned “baroque” elements of strangeness and artifice. *Forgetting Elena* and *Caracole* depict, for example, societies or worlds that are not quite of this world. These novels, as well as *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*, are such that the characters, or narrators, begin as blank slates and endeavour to discover themselves and the world. Therefore, as is argued at length in the previous chapter, the “technologies of the self” are enacted, and result, remarkably consistently, in the discovery of an “uncanny strangeness.” Each of the novels demonstrate that artifice belies substance and that, therefore, identity is fluid, if not a complete misnomer. The “discovery of the self,” then, becomes a partly misleading precept. What is discovered, instead, is that the self is predicated upon nothing, that

identity is an overdetermined and arbitrary construct that society demands of, or forces upon, the individual.

Forgetting Elena is a conundrum, a poem in prose with outbursts of dialogue that are often as mystifying to the narrator as they are to the reader. Although David Bergman's attempt to make a case for the "queerness" of this ostensibly "straight novel" is well-intentioned, certainly, his claim that "[t]he queenly reader in *Forgetting Elena* knows the truth, while the prince suffers from amnesia" ("Introduction: Native Innocence, Alien Knowledge," 11), is far too self-assured and confident in its knowledge. *Forgetting Elena* is a challenge to truth and to certainty. Edmund White, in a curious self-interview (a technology of the self in itself), offers a detail that, in some ways, seems crucial to such an apprehension of the novel. Regarding the conditions under which *Forgetting Elena* was written and published, White recalls:

Anne [Freedgood, at Random House,] asked me to rewrite it to make the mystery story aspect of the book "pay off." This revision surely made the book slightly more accessible, although one curious result was that the *New York Times Book Review* discussed it as a mystery story and it was stocked under that rubric in bookstores for a while. ("Edmund White Speaks with Edmund White," 17)

While *Forgetting Elena* is a fairly dubious mystery novel, it is certainly a very mysterious novel, and the element of "mystery" is clearly key to the novel's construction. The novel takes place on a privileged island colony, in which the narrator awakes one morning having forgotten everything (or claiming to have forgotten everything). The novel unfolds as a quest for identity and understanding in a world that is hopelessly absurd and in which the truth is always deferred. Its temporary classification in the mystery genre seems to be, therefore, a curiously fitting mistake. Harry Mathews, in his article "A Valentine for Elena," is accordingly mystified:

I began by drawing conclusions: Elena embodied the incestuous family attachment that blocks individual growth; the weird ways of island society replicated the scary world a child finds outside his home. I soon came to mistrust such insights. Matters were not so simple; matters -- cards of identity included -- had been dealt double. (31)

This element of doubleness, often a key point of mystery novels as well, is crucial to an apprehension of the novel and will be discussed at greater length below.

I use “apprehension” punningly, here, to suggest that White deliberately makes his reader apprehensive (like Mathews, readers begin by drawing conclusions, or, at least, searching for clues or hints by which to draw conclusions), because the mystery does not unravel neatly before us as we progress through the narrative. “Clues” often prove more unsettling than helpful. Characters often become more mysterious and events increasingly absurd. White’s narrative style implies a considerable gap between the way things seem to be and the way things must “really be,” a knowledge of which, it is implied, is always just out of reach. The reader, therefore, must constantly negotiate this gap. Thus Harry Matthews ponders the novel’s bewildering appeal:

Why did I sympathize with the narrator, a young man surrounded by trivial people and assailed by trivial doubts? He is not even “bad,” merely confused. He does not know what he is supposed to do; he does not know where he is; he can’t remember *who* he is. We sympathize with him, we “suffer with” him because we too are confused. (31)

Is it out of mutual sympathy for his reader, then, that White constructs his narrator to be as confused and apprehensive as the reader? His point is clearly not to alienate the latter. Instead, all three, reader, narrator, and even author, seem to be equally alienated by the absurdity of the events of the novel, or even by a simple lack of understanding of these events. As White says of *Forgetting Elena*: “I remember thinking *I wasn’t fully aware of all the implications of my book* but that didn’t matter as long as I mastered the tone or

rather obeyed it” (“Edmund White Speaks with Edmund White,” 16, emphasis added). He goes on to explain that the novel was influenced by “the spirit of abstract expressionism,” and that in it he “wanted to exploit the traditional structures of fiction such as characterization, dialogue, suspense, but *in order to pile up dream castles in cloud landscapes*¹⁶ – or like Escher to fabricate artistically plausible but realistically impossible perspectives” (16, emphasis added). Thus, the novel seems for everyone involved to be, after Foucault, a “game . . . worthwhile insofar as we don’t know what will be the end” (9). And the end itself, moreover, becomes a void; all the facts gathered over the course of the narrative are suddenly and utterly evacuated, and the amnesia of the opening page returns.

Still, it would seem that some of the idiosyncrasies of *Forgetting Elena* are a result on the part of White of a purposeful lack of sympathy for the reader. In “The *Paris Review* Interview,” he states: “I became so discouraged [by the rejection of my earlier writings] that I decided to write something that would please me alone – that became my sole criterion. And that was when I wrote *Forgetting Elena*” (242). Some of White’s further comments in the same interview can serve to explain why the novel is not, therefore, completely inaccessible. He speaks of writing, for example, as a way of “making the banal strange” (265). He goes on to suggest, furthermore, a theory behind the strangeness of his novels. He explains that “[t]here is a term that comes up in Russian formalist criticism called *defamiliarization*. It’s a way of talking about the events of everyday life . . . and making them utterly weird because they are described by an innocent or inexperienced person” (265-66). This approach seems fitting to each of

¹⁶ It seems worthwhile to note, here, the coincidental echo of Lacan’s “remote inner castle[s],” from the previous chapter.

White's novels, but none more so than *Forgetting Elena* in which the narrator is more than merely "innocent or inexperienced," but amnesiac.

This amnesia, in turn, produces a kind of ontological anxiety. Like White, whose homosexuality, as we have seen, forced him to become philosophical, the narrator, cut off from the mainstream of the society in which he lives, is forced to examine and question everything. This philosophical turn of mind necessarily begins with an examination of self: Who or what am I? What am I doing here? And what is expected of me? These questions lead, eventually, to others more broad: Where is here? Who are all these people? Who or what is motivating their actions? White, therefore, deploys a loss of memory that precipitates a crisis of identity, which suggests, furthermore, that we are nothing but the sum of our memories. White seems to argue, then, that if ever one's memories should somehow disappear, a person is simply nothing. Worse still, for the narrator of *Forgetting Elena*, the loss of memory has disintegrated any meaning that society may have previously held. He is an inquisitive speculator, and to play on "speculate," he attempts to engage society as a speculum of his "true" self, but his efforts serve only reinforce the impalpability of the self.

Contrary to Bergman, therefore, *Forgetting Elena* can be said to be a distinctly "queer" novel, not because "the queenly reader knows the truth," but quite the opposite: queenly or not, the reader finds the truth to be quite inaccessible. White himself draws a parallel between the "straight" and the "straightforward." That is to say, at least some the novel's "queerness" stems from its inaccessability. He claims that "[i]t would be a mistake to say, as some critics have suggested, that I turned to 'straight' fiction because my gay work had been rejected" (15), and, furthermore, that the queerness of a novel is not based directly on homosexual content: "[T]o call *Forgetting Elena* a 'straight' novel would be stretching everyone's definition of that pitiable category, since for the ordinary reader, straight or gay, *Forgetting Elena* is surely more difficult to follow than my earlier (or later) fiction" (15). Thus, the details that the narrator lives in a house of men, that his

relationship with Herbert is subtly homoerotic, that his awkward couplings with Elena betray the arbitrariness of libidinal object choice, while they deserve attention, are not the necessary starting points of a “queer” reading of the novel. Before we even encounter these types of details, the novel is already queer. As White notes: “I was attracted to both gay politics and the gay sensibility, two very different entities [though he fails to explain the distinction he makes]; the tension humming under every page of *Forgetting Elena* was born out of this conflict” (“The Personal Is Political,” 368). The narrator is a queer subject insofar as he cannot find a reflection of himself anywhere in the social order. A voice without identity, he is (like the clothes he wears) “a blaze of anonymous white” (12), or, we might even say, “a blaze of [flaming?] anonymous *White*.”

The play on White’s name is particularly instructive insofar as the narrator is a version of White himself. In the self-interview White draws out some of the links between the novel and his own life. The aforementioned similarities between the novel’s setting and the Fire Island Pines are certainly not accidental. White notes: “I wrote quite a bit of it on Fire Island, probably in 1969 . . . There had been a fire in The Pines that inspired the first chapter” (15). *Forgetting Elena* may therefore be said to be an autobiographical fantasy insofar as the sensibilities that drive the novel are closely shared by both the author and the narrator. We might even say that White specifically endeavours to make connections between himself and his narrator. In *The Farewell Symphony*, in which White recounts his life from 1969 to the present, he states:

My novel was about an amnesiac who has forgotten quite simply who he is and how he is supposed to act; afraid to admit his loss of memory, he patterns his responses on the cues other people feed him. He becomes what they expect -- an extreme dramatization of my own horrid adaptability. (72)

The connections can also be made through details which are less crucial but no less telling. In the self-interview, White recalls: “I was sharing a house with a pedantic

and very beautiful Swede named Kaj Areskoug who was the model for Herbert” (15). Moreover, the physical description of the narrator (“large nostrils, down-turned eyebrows and small chin” [31]), is certainly very brief, but it does list peculiarities shared by the author. White also estimates the narrator’s age: “Late twenties if poorly preserved, early thirties if well” (31). Here, it seems that White, twenty-nine at the time the novel was written, but thirty-three by the time it was published, is being either modest or proud.

The most important link between the author and the narrator, however, is the surname “Valentine”; the name that forms the eventual link between Elena and the narrator is also White’s own middle name. Certainly, White would not have chosen this name if not to draw a subtle link between himself and both his main characters. Indeed, White inserts a subtle joke in the scene in which Elena reads from her (autobiographical) novel (or memoir?) of the “history of the Valentines” (70). Elena reads, “Before I met my friend, the only man I had ever known so well was my brother” (74), to which the narrator responds inwardly: “Am I her brother? Could my name be Valentine? Something Valentine?” (74-75). To the reader who is familiar with the details of White’s biography, it seems eminently possible that his name be “Valentine.” *Edmund Valentine*, perhaps? Could it not be that White’s novel is itself a fantastical “history of the Valentines”? That is, a “history” of various versions of himself?

Hence, the technologies of the self that are enacted in *Forgetting Elena* are both the narrator’s and the author’s. For the purpose of studying the novel, however, it is the narrator and not the author who will be the object of scrutiny. Still, the link between the two is crucial insofar as the narrator is a constructed (and therefore “technological”) and artificial version of the author, a stylized and spectral self. However, the point of discussing Foucault’s technologies in the context of the novel is not to suggest that the narrator is naively or misguidedly pursuing an impossibly unified self.

The narrator is certainly irresponsible and, occasionally, even cruel, but he is neither naive, nor “innocent,” however much he would like to claim it. He proposes,

nonetheless, to construct a narrative upon oblivion. In a sense, the narrator claims to be newly-born on the first page of the novel. When he awakes and opens his eyes upon this “new world,” however, he is already suspicious and guarded:

I am the first person in the house to awaken, but I am unsure of the implications. I can’t be absolutely certain, of course, whether everyone else is still sleeping, but the other two men in the room are breathing heavily and their hands are stretched out, curled or closed in positions that seem at once natural and improbable — in short, I doubt whether anyone would be clever enough to improvise such convincing gestures of repose. Moreover, their closed eyes are ringed with puffy circles and their lips are softly parted. (3)

From the very beginning, then, the narrator’s amnesiac pose is highly problematic. In light of his subsequent confusion and insecurity, of his subsequent avowals of failed memory, of innocence and of inexperience, it becomes very clear, if we return even to the very first page of the novel: already, he knows too much. For someone who claims to have had a complete lapse of memory, he ascribes too much meaning to every detail he observes; his interpretative skills would seem to contradict his “confusion”; his suspicions belie his own “innocence.” As he states (or, perhaps, confesses) shortly thereafter: “I must empty my mind . . . (vain resolution, the mind will not be emptied)” (18).

Later, in various passages, he edges ever closer towards confirming the reader’s suspicions concerning the narrator’s loss of memory. In one example, it seems as though the author (intentionally?) supplants his narrator’s voice for a few moments. He (but which he?) says, clearly not the words of an amnesiac: “I await the woman’s reading with the hope that it will deliver me from the landscape. These books and poems have *a way of fighting off the world*. Terrible new things happening all around us, but people write about only a few old things. Even their ‘suffering’ has a familiar ring” (70,

emphasis added). Here, once again, the narrator knows too much. His opinion is that of a person who is not only widely read, but also very familiar with the world around him; clearly, contrary to his claims, he has not forgotten everything. Much earlier, in fact, when another character puts on a record, the narrator readily identifies it as “Mozart’s ‘Dissonant’ string quartet,” a musical choice he is self-conscious enough to appreciate as a “comment on the state of affairs in our house” (8).

This amnesia, therefore, is clearly, for the narrator, “a [deliberate] way of fighting off the world.” Whenever he catches himself knowing a little too much, he backs away from his conclusions: “[T]he shirts were marked L for ‘large’ (I’m only guessing that’s what L means - it could be an initial, of course” (12). At certain points, however, his feigned innocence and ignorance become nothing short of ludicrous and self-parodic. In a kind of baby talk, he observes: “The yellow water has stopped coming out Jimmy. He shakes himself. A small trickle dribbles under low pressure” (122). Immediately, however, the narrator belies his own pose of innocence with an ironically poetic appreciation of the moment. He continues where the last citation left off: “The marigold [in his boutonniere], pinned on upside down, splattering into petals, comments on the urine, as does Billy’s chuckle on Jimmy’s words, flower to water as laughter to language” (122-23).

Thus, in one sense, White employs the aforementioned technique of defamiliarization to render the banal beautiful. More importantly, however, the amnesia upon which the narrative is constructed is a sham, is itself an artificial construction that precipitates a reconstruction of the self. Harry Mathews makes a similar observation, but states his case more harshly:

The narrator . . . claims to have just learned Elena’s name. He is lying.

He is lying to no one but himself – the narrative is pure soliloquy – but lying all the same. He has been lying with an insistence desperate enough to shut out reality except for a few occasional chinks, such as the slip he

makes after noticing a perfume in Elena's bedroom [87] . . . He claims to remember nothing; he knows everything. (38)

He knows, for example, or seems to know, that he is Elena's brother. In the aforementioned reading scene, at Elena's passing mention of her brother, the narrator jumps to the unlikely conclusion that he might be her brother (74), an unlikelihood which nonetheless proves true. Matthews, however, hints at, but does not discuss the possibility of the purposefulness of this artificial amnesia. The narrator suffers from an ever-increasing anxiety as his memory gradually encroaches upon him, which suggests the calculating and deliberate nature of his amnesia. It is a calculated pose which allows him to disintegrate the self and construct a new version. Like White, the narrator needs "to be free to make [him]self into whatever form [he] want[s]."

As noted earlier, the narrator begins the story as a clean slate. "My mind's a blank" (16), he confesses to Herbert, and though this is ostensibly only because he has been asked to spontaneously compose a poem, the words are deeply resonant. He intimates to the reader: "Herbert nodded, never guessing that what I wanted from him was a lesson in the most basic conventions: the number of syllables, rhymes and so on" (16). Searching the cabinets in his room for clues, furthermore, he finds clothes that "fitted so perfectly that [he] could only assume that they belonged to [him]": "White slacks, white shirts, a black comb, white socks, white underwear" (12), a uniform of perfect blankness and anonymity, nothing to suggest personality, occupation, or even taste. The only clue he finds is not a clue at all, but a cipher: "a pair of comical wire spectacles framing yellow glass circles. They did nothing to improve my vision, and I concluded they were merely an eccentric prop" (12). Thus, White illustrates the Lacanian proposition that every recognition is a misrecognition; the eyeglasses that do nothing to improve vision seem to succinctly capture this notion. They are a "prop"; in other words, the narrator recognizes them for what they are supposed to be, tries them on,

and realizes his misrecognition; the glasses do not do what they are supposed to do.

After René Magritte, "*Ceci n'est pas une paire de lunettes.*"

From very early in the novel, the narrator attempts to determine his own place in the social order. Is he at the center of the privileged society he keeps? Or is he, as he fearfully suspects, an underling at the foot of the hierarchy? Though the narrator and the reader discover simultaneously that the narrator is, in fact, the prince of the island, it is this reality, the reality of his own centrality, of his own power as a male monarch, that he is endeavouring to forget. It is this reality that he is "fighting off." Indeed, White's depiction of a closed, hierarchical society, and his use of the motif of royalty, compel us to consider, in fact, the narrator's technology in terms of Kenneth S. Rothwell's contribution to *Technologies of the Self*, "Hamlet's 'Glass of Fashion': Power, Self and the Reformation". This is because, in many important ways, White's narrator is an updated version of Hamlet. He is a prince who, for reasons not quite clear, has not ascended to the throne. His island colony is Hamlet's Elsinore, a closed society and a microcosm of the greater world. He, like Hamlet, is racked by uncertainty and indecision, as well as guilt, which, in the case of our narrator, is manifested in an increasingly desperate and belaboured insistence upon his own innocence. His narrative, furthermore, is all soliloquy, the means by which he and his literary ancestor articulate their constructions of self. Moreover, the similarities between Elena and Ophelia bear comment: both find themselves betrayed by the prince and his "madness" and both die as suicides.

Our narrator, then, is a Hamlet who has completely forgotten his father. The implications of this paternal amnesia are considerable; White's Claudius is Herbert, the regent until the narrator "comes of age," and with whom the narrator has a tense and ambiguous relationship that culminates in an unspoken homoerotic bond. (Could this be the reason for *our* Hamlet's inaction?) It seems to be no coincidence that the regent is a stand-in for the father who seems to have been expunged from the narrator's

consciousness. If he has forgotten his father, however, he has also forgotten (or is struggling to forget?) the “Name-of-the-Father” and the “Law-of-the-Father” as they are formulated by Kaja Silverman. She describes the link between the Name-of-the-Father with Lacan’s symbolic order, which she reconsiders and reformulates as the “dominant fiction”: “[O]ur present dominant fiction,” she argues,

is above all else the representational system through which the subject is accommodated to the Name-of-the-Father. Its most central signifier of unity is the (paternal) family, and its primary signifier of privilege the phallus. “Male” and “female” constitute our dominant fiction’s most fundamental binary opposition. (34-35)

White’s novel thus proposes an alternate fiction, one in which the signifiers do not signify and the Name-of-the-Father has been forgotten. Thus, Hamlet’s debate has been taken out of question. The narrator’s amnesia signals a resistance to the implied *savoir* of the society in which he finds himself. When, towards the end, his memory has returned, the narrator remembers hearing, through Herbert, the implied voice of the father. He tells us, describing a death scene he never witnessed, but was only reported to him, one which eerily recalls reports of the death of Hamlet’s father:

In this very room, in this carved chair, my father died, or so they tell me. *Toppled over. In his sleep.* I never had a face to go with his name, but the name itself became as disturbing as a face you can’t quite see in the dark but which you know is there because you can hear someone talking to you.

What was he saying? I’ll never be certain. Herbert put posthumous words in his mouth (Your father wouldn’t have wanted you to . . .) “Your father disliked that family . . . ” “When your father appointed me regent he suggested that you and I . . . ”). (180)

It is the influence of this voice that the narrator, throughout the novel, through his amnesia, seeks to resist. Here, he even expresses his doubt of its authority. Even the Law-of-the-Father is incoherent and unknowable. It is, as Silverman argues, “a [dominant] fiction,” an interdictive, prohibitive fantasy, arbitrary to the point of inscrutability. It is a voice, as White suggests, without a face, speaking out of the darkness. “What was he saying?” our narrator wonders. “I’ll never be certain.”

Another key difference between the two princes lies in Rothwell’s argument that Hamlet finally succeeds in creating “a new self . . . out of the remnants of an older self” (94). His argument is contextualized by the Renaissance and the Reformation, Hamlet being, he argues, a figure with a foot in each; where the Renaissance had reconstituted man as a social and political animal, Rothwell suggests, the Reformation brought a new emphasis on individual subjectivity, a re-formation of self. He argues, in short, that the change that took place between the Renaissance and the Reformation hinges upon “the medieval conflict between body and soul” (80). It is thus that in Rothwell’s estimation “Hamlet locates within himself a power he can no longer find without” (93), which Rothwell interprets as the shift within the play from the political to the personal, from the Renaissance to the Reformation. Regardless of how much faith one places in Rothwell’s claims, one thing is certain: White places no such faith in the self as unimpeachable, cohesive, empowered. For White, if the self is re-formed, or “refashioned,” to use Rothwell’s term, is it never conclusively so, but merely one step towards ongoing reformation and refashioning. The circular pattern of *Forgetting Elena* (amnesia -- gradual recollection -- amnesia) attests to the endless process.

The narrator’s ignorance of his own royalty allows him adopt the position of the outsider, potentially dangerous, but always unsure of his own standing in the society. He attempts, for example, to place himself according to the clothes that he and Herbert are wearing: “I was alarmed to see that like me he was dressed in white -- were he and I, then, on the same footing? -- until I noticed a black pin, a maple leaf, clipped to his

sleeve. My own sleeve, I observed, was innocent of all badges" (17). He assumes, therefore, that his social position is lower than that of Herbert. His worse fears seem to be confirmed, furthermore, when Herbert asks him, seemingly reproachful, "I think we have a little work to do today, don't you?" (30), and the narrator eventually finds that he is the only one working at the seemingly Sisyphean task of raking pine needles.¹⁷

The very fact that, as White reiterates throughout the novel, the self is stylized and artificial, forces the narrator to embrace or, at least, to confront Kristeva's stranger, the foreigner within the self. One may think, accordingly, of David Bergman's interesting comparison of White's narrators to that of Nabokov's *Lolita*: "Like Humbert Humbert, the narrators often possess a perfect command of the language but an imperfect knowledge of the culture in which they are placed . . . It is not that they are wholly alien – they understand enough of the manners of their adopted homes to get around – but they lack the unconscious spontaneity of the native" ("Introduction: Native Innocence, Alien Knowledge," 9). Here, however, some qualifications need to be made. For one, it may be said that *Forgetting Elena*, like America for that matter, is a challenge to the very notion of nativeness. The island is a colony; with the possible exception of Maria, Elena's constant companion, none of the novel's characters are "natives." The natives seem to be the blacks that the narrator periodically observes running along the beach (38-39), who, to paraphrase Kristeva, represent a "harrowing otherness," barely observed, "and that already moves away" (3). White's narrator, then, specifically differs from

¹⁷ This scene provides another interesting link between the narrator and the author insofar as it anticipates a nearly identical scene from *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, in which the narrator's father, attempting "to drive the queerness out [his son] through manual labor," put him on a "strict regime of yardwork, mainly raking . . . pine needles" (48-49).

Nabokov's insofar as the foreignness in question in *Forgetting Elena* is not "literal," that is, cultural, linguistic or nationalistic, but rather, psychological, which, as Kristeva argues, is the only foreignness worth mentioning. ("The foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners. If I am a foreigner, there are no foreigners" [192].) As such, the narrator's fake amnesia, this deliberate unlearning of (almost) everything he has once known, reveals the only genuine foreignness, the void at the center of subjectivity; the narrator purposefully brings himself face to face with his own otherness. Thus, in a passage that could have been taken from Kristeva, the narrator, having had attention drawn to his mood, can declare: "My mood isn't visible (at least I trust it's not); *my presence is simply an indecipherable sign marking the frontier of a new country*" (59, emphasis added).

The narrator's alliance with "the woman," is clearly one that allows him, even encourages him, to resist the "powerful orbit of court society," but also, crucially, to resist the powerful orbit of identity. Indeed, she says, seemingly of him (certainly a purposefully ambiguous reference): "[W]hen he was alone he was no one at all" (75). It is crucial, therefore, that the narrator's alliance with Elena not be considered a betrayal, in favour of heterosexuality, of the homosocial / homosexual order, suggested by Herbert and his company of men. Instead, White transforms this dubiously heterosexual relationship into a mode of rebellion; it implies a rejection of the island's status quo; it is itself a kind of queerness, a rejection of something White has noted about the gay life he himself has experienced. "[W]ith the politicization of sex in the Seventies," White observes in *States of Desire*, "people are pressured into more narrowly prescribed ways of rebelling" (94). White, however, had already articulated this notion, almost ten years earlier, in *Forgetting Elena*: Elena reads from her "history of the Valentines":

I . . . recognized that the strange is acceptable only if it fits people's familiar notions of it. An oddity that suits everyone's preconception must be nothing more than a slight variation on the ordinary. If a dancer turns

left instead of right, or shrugs after the fourth beat instead of the third, then her daring will be endlessly discussed; but if she insists that dancing itself is absurd, forget it. (72)

Thus White presents an analogy of the “narrowly prescribed ways of rebelling” which seem to be a proviso of the illusory “liberation” discussed in the previous chapter. What White seeks to articulate, by contrast, is a new and empowering kind of strangeness, a more thorough resistance to the “regimes of the normal.”

White’s opinion in this kind of matter is echoed once again in his several defenses of drag queens, who are, as White observes, queers among queers, reviled by many gays, who would seek to make homosexuality acceptable and “normal.” Transvestism is clearly not one of the aforementioned “prescribed ways of rebelling.” As White says of all gay men, however, “Fear of transvestism is fear of homosexuality and until we accept drag queens we have not accepted ourselves” (*States of Desire*, 51). The link of this discussion to *Elena* is that the narrator’s identification with the woman seems to reflect a queenly subjectivity, and insofar as both are versions of the author, the pair represent a double subjectivity, part “male,” part “female,” but neither exactly one nor the other. As in Silverman’s discussion of “Femininity in Male Homosexuality,” “we must be prepared to entertain the possibility that a gay man might deploy signifiers of femininity not only because to do so is to generate a counter-discourse, but because an identification with ‘woman’ constitutes the very basis of his identity, and/or the position from which he desires” (344). It is not, however, Silverman’s purpose, nor mine, to essentialize categories such as “feminine” or “masculine,” nor concepts such as “identity.” Rather, the notion of the feminine man presents a serious challenge to these concepts; how is it, for example, that “feminine” and “masculine” continue to signify when, clearly, they can so often be attributed to the gender they are meant to oppose? And how is it, therefore, that something as fluid as gender can be the most fundamental identifying characteristic? White’s narrator’s identification with the woman does not manifest itself in explicit

homosexuality, but can be considered, instead, an ideological transvestism, which counters the society's status quo and provokes the unease and the scorn of the other islanders. For the narrator, to ally himself with Elena is to embrace the feminine in himself, while, to some extent, to *forget* Elena represents the societal injunction to suppress the feminine.¹⁸

Thus, as we have seen above, Elena is, for the narrator, almost an inner voice, a little devil on his shoulder tempting him toward the so-called "eccentricity" -- more rightly, the uncanny strangeness -- that shocks and enrages the islanders. She encourages in him, moreover, a certain philosophical turn, ("When you're left alone for a moment," she says to him, "you go so far into yourself." [58]), to which he seems to blindly adhere ("Do I? I do. You're quite right." [58]). Hence, he begins to question the nature of the self, only to find a nexus of contradictions, inscrutable and unknowable. He comments on the outer world, for example, as a reflection of his own sensibilities: "Like a page where the commonest words are inexplicably thrown into italics, my mind is investing

¹⁸ One way in which their affair is distinctly perverse is the repeated suggestion, one that is never clearly confirmed nor denied, that the narrator and Elena are brother and sister. I have, earlier, taken it for granted that they were in order to draw the link between the two characters and the author (Edmund *Valentine* White). Whether the narrator is indeed Elena's brother, he certainly believes he is. As she reads from her memoir he thinks to himself: "I wish she'd tell us more about me, her brother" (75). Later, more ambiguously, seemingly confirming the incestuous nature of their relationship, he observes: "The lady in gray stands -- it's the woman! My woman, *my sister*, my Valentine, *my love*" (118, emphasis added). We might add, as well, that "sister," is gay argot for "homosexual," a detail that adds another perverse dimension to the narrator's peculiar affinity with Elena.

objects and sounds with a significance devoid of meaning” (69). (Here, White comments on his own project as much as his narrator’s; just above, on the very page, the reader finds the words “*heart*” and “*mind*,” “inexplicably thrown into italics.”) The more he concerns himself with himself, the more spectral he seems to become. Experimentation, as he calls it, seems only to reinforce his unreality:

Scuffing my bare feet across the sand, I scatter showers of fool’s gold.
Plankton. Experimenting, I jump in place and awaken a circle of light
around me, gilded lotus supporting a Bodhisattva. Then I jog for a
moment, digging my heels in deep, and observe over my shoulder fading
footprints, the farthest already subsiding into darkness. I swoop down and
hurl clumps of cold, wet sand in front of me, minuscule meteors flaming
apart and landing silently on this imperturbable planet of moonlight and
shadows. (86)

The significance of this passage is in the details: the illusion that is “fool’s gold”; the self-negating Buddhist Bodhisattva; the “fading footprints,” suggesting the passage of a ghost; the “planet of moonlight and shadows,” in which everything is cast in an unreal sheen. The narrator’s feeling, immediately after this episode, is one of radical otherness. “I feel like a fish flung on land,” he confesses (86). Also, “[e]merging out of the dark, surprising [him], a man and a woman walk past.” Significantly, “[t]hey don’t see [him]” (86); he is not part of their appreciable reality. His reaction to them, furthermore, seems to suggest the complete arbitrariness of sexual identity: “I would like to join them or be him or her” (86). That he does not specify what he means by any of these options, leaves the passage open to interpretation and multiple possibilities: bisexuality (“join them”), heterosexuality (“be him”), and homosexuality, or perhaps even transexuality (“be her”).

In the Kristevan context, what is key about White’s narrator is that he is “known” to the other characters and he tries to divine his identity from them; he is, indeed, a stranger only to himself. During the love scene between Elena and the narrator, he hopes

that the woman will use his name, but instead, “ ‘My darl, my darling,’ she whispers, never once, not once, calling [him] by [his] name” (94). In the subsequent chapter, furthermore, the narrator is to be introduced: “Jimmy looks up from the records. ‘Doris, Daryl, we have a visitor.’ I grow tense -- will he give my name? ‘Daryl, meet our neighbor’” (105). From this, he extrapolates possibilities but concludes nothing: “So. I’m a neighbor, a permanent neighbor, and not Herbert’s guest, not a newcomer. Daryl was introduced to me, and not I to him; I’m more important than he. Or merely older. I’ve learned nothing, then” (105).

The search for a name is a rather pointless endeavour, however. In another scene, he seems to know, or remember, that his surname is Valentine. He says to himself trying to decipher a cryptic message from Herbert:

[Billy] hands me a pale-green sheet of paper folded neatly into a triangle, a single pine needle pierced through the apex. I open it: no words, only a red circle. [. . .] A single needle. A red circle . . . Perhaps Herbert’s telling me to start raking the grounds of the Detached Residence at sunrise tomorrow. Or the needle could be a phonograph stylus and the circle the label of a particular record, and the message is excerpted from the words of that song. Or the needle suggests sewing, to sew, possibly “So” and the disc is red which rhymes with bed: “And so to bed” -- I must retire, this is the hour to come home and sleep. Or the needle stands for “pine” and red for my name, which rhymes, “Valentine,” and my heart; he’s telling me that he pines for me. Or all of these things. (107-108)

This, one of the richest passages in a very rich novel, suggests so many things. In the first place, he knows his name and it contributes little or nothing to his quest for identity. Its significance contributes only to the fantasy that he constructs around the riddle which Herbert has presented him. Every link he makes, however, is so arbitrary and provisional that his name might as well be anything but Valentine. To take one of his comments as a

gloss on the entire novel, the narrator is indeed “in the presence of a fantasy [he] do[es]n’t understand” (88), and, this, despite the fact the fantasy, that is, the entire narrative, is entirely his own construction. And thus it is that he can make the preposterous and meaningless connections he makes above, and have them be, ultimately, the correct ones.

Secondly, the passage is also key because it implies the homoerotic bond that develops between Herbert and the narrator. To pick up where I left off the last quotation: “He loves me, his love is enduring, evergreen, but singular, only a needle, a sharp stinging needle in his heart; and I must meet him at dawn beside the Detached Residence. That’s it” (108). Thus, by cloaking a homoerotic attraction in an inscrutable and confusing semiotic apparatus, White demonstrates how homosexuality, because it has been so vigorously excluded from reality, made other, effaced as much as stigmatized, has been, consequently, overdetermined and heavily constructed. This point ties in very well with some of the key arguments White has made about homosexuality. In “The Joys of Gay Life,” he notes that “[o]ur relationships have little social or legal reality” (34), that they are always, to some extent, unreal. Also, White has argued that the queer self is necessarily constructed from scratch. “[W]hen I was a boy,” he recalls, “I never heard homosexuality mentioned once” (*States of Desire*, 135), and hence we may recall White’s formulation of “the ‘gay science,’ that obligatory existentialism forced on people who must invent themselves.”

In *Forgetting Elena*, however, all signs point the narrator to the uncanny strangeness of being. Elena interrupts the narrator and Herbert’s early morning meeting, and, after Herbert leaves in a huff, the narrator returns to his earlier transgressive heterosexuality. In doing so, he becomes even less real than before; the entire scene, in fact, dissolves into something dreamlike:

I run to her, seize her hands. As I fold her in my arms my *astral self*,
trembling with joy, covers her with kisses in the gold light clashing like

gold just above our heads, kissing and weeping in that gold splendor
 where gold plumage and rolling eyes turn in baroque confusion, in
 expanding gold. (140)

This scene, in all its “baroque confusion,” demands to be interpreted in terms of Kristeva’s question: “Can one be a foreigner and happy?” (4). The narrator finds himself “trembling with joy,” just as, Kristeva argues, “[t]he foreigner’s face burns with happiness” (3). “The foreigner calls forth a new idea of happiness,” Kristeva claims,

Between the fugue and the origin: a fragile limit, a temporary
 homeostasis. Posited, present, sometimes certain, that happiness knows
 nevertheless that it is passing by, like a fire that shines only because it
 consumes. The strange happiness of the foreigner consists in *maintaining*
that fleeing eternity or that perpetual transience. (4, emphasis added)

And in my emphasis lies the burden of White’s novel, or at least that of its narrator; the technology of the self brings one face to face with “that perpetual transience.” With a kind of Kristevan crypticness, for example, White’s narrator says of himself and a cat he has been observing: “We’re both poets of phantom inconsequence” (118). Thus even in the end of the novel, the narrator, his memory having gradually returned (or his knowledge having been relearned?), having been completely integrated, indeed venerated and placed at the center of the society he so distrusts and misunderstands, chooses to dismantle himself yet again. Until the novel’s final paragraph, he remembers, but *then* chooses, once again, to forget:

Four pallbearers led by Billy bring the coffin on their shoulders to
 the site. They lower it into the hole. Silver spades start to scoop up the
 dislodged earth, but stop when Herbert raises his hand.

“Do you want to say a little something about Elena?” he asks me.

I look around at this ring of strangers and wonder what this man expects of me. Is there a dead person in that box? Am I a newcomer to the island? I remember nothing. Who is Elena? (184)

The self, therefore, is constantly revealed as a void. Just as the novel follows a cyclical pattern (amnesia – gradual recollection – amnesia), so too does the process of self: the utter foreignness of the self demands of the subject a technology of the self, a rigorous introspection that reveals, finally, a stranger.

With *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*, a narrative that unfolds as an open letter to a deceased former lover, White inches us closer to the autobiography of his later work. As in *Forgetting Elena*, however, White's subjectivity is dispersed over a "range of characters." In *The Farewell Symphony* (1997), referring to *Nocturnes*, he links the novel to the events of his own life, particularly his relationship with a character he names Kevin, a handsome younger man who only grudgingly returns some of the love White offers him:

Kevin was right about one thing -- living with him was the high point of my artistic life and with him I wrote a book that some readers consider my best. No matter if that book is not as original and charged as its defenders claim or as sentimental and obscurantist as its critics allege, what was crucial for me was the experience of living with a restless young man who would sometimes, just when I'd given up hope, make love to me and who flickered into and out of the fantasy of sharing the rest of his life with me. (199)

The element of fantasy mentioned here is one that, with respect to White's novels, I have reformulated as "autobiographical fantasy," and which is crucial to *Nocturnes*. Like "Kevin" in his own life, the narrator and the characters of *Nocturnes* "flicker[] into and

out of the fantasy” that White unfolds throughout his narrative. Later in *The Farewell Symphony* he attempts to distinguish the fantasy from the reality:

[In] my new book [*Nocturnes*] . . . I confused my fantasies with reality, replaced the simple past with the past-subjunctive of wish fulfillment. I turned my boring father into a satanic playboy, my hysterical mother into an operatic madwoman. My narrator was Kevin twenty years older, who regretted that he’d rejected his patient, wise lover (an amalgam of Frank O’Hara, God and me). (253)

It may thus be said that *Nocturnes* is a fantastic treatment of Kevin, the author’s parents, Frank O’Hara (a poet who, certainly, influenced White to some extent¹⁹), God and the author himself. What is clear here is that, in this particular commentary, White casts himself primarily as the older, abandoned lover.

In contrast to the above passage from *The Farewell Symphony*, in his 1994 introduction to *A Boy’s Own Story*, White situates the young lover more firmly as yet another version of himself. These conflicting reports should not be held against each other but rather used in conjunction: White’s conception of the self is fluid because

¹⁹ For example, White’s early story, “The Hermaphrodite” (1960, 1993), reads remarkably like a prose version of O’Hara’s poem “Hermaphrodite” (1954, 1955). More tellingly, however, and much more closely related to the subject at hand, *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* reads like an epic version of O’Hara’s “Nocturne” (1955, 1970), which opens with lines that might have been spoken by White’s own narrator, whose narrative is a posthumous embrace, spoken to someone who has passed away: “There’s nothing worse / than feeling bad and not / being able to tell you” (224). O’Hara also, much like White, disintegrates the speaker: “My eyes, like millions of / glassy squares, merely reflect. / Everything sees through me . . .” (225).

identity itself is fluid. Once again, however, White describes the novel as “wish fulfillment,” which implies the extent to which the self is stylized in fiction and never quite what one thinks it should be in “real life”:

I had already written a non-realistic novel, *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* (1978), in which I’d given an exaggerated, condensed and abstracted version of my childhood. Much of the book was wish-fulfilment: I turned my father into an amoral playboy, more attractive than the boring self-made businessman he actually was. (xi)

In *Nocturnes*, therefore, White is both the first and the second person, the “self” and the “other.”²⁰ This radically shifting stance is used to de-specify the self. More than simply de-specified, however, the authorial self in *Nocturnes* is dispersed and multiplied, not only *between* the first and second person characters, but *within* each as well. In the first place, White constantly shifts the narrative person. The narrative is a first person account which is addressed to a second person, an invisible, intangible “you,” the absent center around which the text revolves. Sometimes, however, if one stands too close to something, one cannot tell what one is looking at. Such is the case in White’s novel. Through proximity, White dispenses with focus. The second person is an overbearing presence and, yet, it is often possible for the reader to forget that the narrative is, indeed, addressed to a specific “you.” Indeed, even the narrator seems to sometimes forget to whom his story is directed: “I’ve wandered so far from my subject, my dear, which is you” (63). However, even the overbearing “I,” the present center to the second person’s absent center, is sometimes effaced from the narrative. For example, the novel’s opening paragraph suggests a third-person narrative:

²⁰ Cf. Nicholas Radel’s “Self as Other: The Politics of Identity in the Works of Edmund White.” I shall return to this article below.

A young man leans one shoulder against the wall, and his slender body
 remains motionless against the huge open slab of night sky and night
 water behind him. He is facing the river. Little waves scuttling shoreward
 from a passing, passed scow slap against boards: perfunctory applause.
 On the other side of the water, lights trace senseless paths up across hills,
 lash-marks left by an amateur whip. (1)

As such, the novel begins with neither first nor second person. The eventual first person narrator begins as a disembodied observer. It is not until the following sentence that he introduces himself: “He turns toward me a look of hope tempered by indiscretion, eyes dilated by a longing too large . . . to focus on any single human being” (1). Thus, White introduces the “I” through unfocused, “dilated” eyes, and also, crucially, as more than “any single human being,” which sets a standard for the character throughout the rest of the text; he remains out of focus, spectral, intangible, as well as manifold.

From the outset, the first person is introduced only to be disintegrated. He describes himself immediately as “the retreating guard” (1), who backs away from the main scene into a cathedral, symbolic perhaps of Lacan’s “lofty, remote inner castle” which the subject believes to be the essence of self, but which always remains unattainable: “For me there was the deeper vastness of the enclosed ruined cathedral I was entering” (1). And, fittingly, as the novel begins and the narrator retreats into the cathedral, the author correspondingly delves into the structure of the self, only to find the architecture implausible, the technology lacking in some way, the self the skeleton of a building never to be completed.

It is crucial to take into account, as well, the ways in which the novel’s subject, the second person, is also submitted to a technology of the self. Because both “you” and “me” are, variously, different versions of the author, however, the implications of these constructions are not always clear. White makes a point, for example, of excising distinctions between the narrator and his subject. The narrator makes two references to

“impersonating” (86, 136) the older lover. More resoundingly, however, White suggests, by merging the two, that the self is always a delicate interplay of “you” and “me,” a chimera: “[Y]ou’d mistaken for my approach the accelerating wheel of your own circling thoughts spinning around the fixed idea of you, me, you, me, you and me, unity” (86). What becomes clear, however, is that the technology of the self is enacted on both the “self” and the “other.” Thus, the narrator observes, “You had loved me so intensely that you’d convinced yourself you had invented me” (85). He makes it clear, as well, that this process of invention is reciprocal: “You are the song I wanted to sing, the god I wanted to celebrate or conjure. Before I knew you I loved you, now you’ve gone I find you everywhere, and for me you are my past, present, future, unchanged, equivalent only to yourself” (63). Conjuring, however, contests the claim of equivalence, insofar as the narrator finds bits of that mythical “you” scattered everywhere he looks. “[Y]ou are everywhere beside me” (22), the narrator claims, in “three images of children,” for example: “The first was a French boy, no more than fifteen . . . His skin was as soft and firm as yours, but his hair was different The second child was the six-year-old daughter of a German painter . . . I noticed that her nails were as smooth and clear as yours The third child I saw on an island in the South that belonged to Didi’s family . . . a boy in a sailor suit with eyes as large and serious as yours” (39–41). As such, technologies of the self reveal spectral versions of self wherever the narrator turns.

As the narrative progresses, the narrator only becomes increasingly self-conscious of his role as an artificer, or, as he calls himself, “the magus.” The “you” is consciously dispersed and multiplied, as in the novel’s closing sentence:

As I looked at the other passengers, I could easily pick out those expressionless, intriguing beauties I address as *you*, those same faces, dark or fair, brooding or elated, whom I’d always believed I could love, even if I’d seen them only for a moment on a train or a bus or passing me on the street as I headed away from your dinner table, your saints, into the noisy,

quicken night, its shouts muted by the containing glass sphere that you,
 or I, the magus, hold though it roll across a billiard table as green as the
 paradisaal hoods of the sultan and his beloved within their garden, its
 pomegranate, palm and fountain besieged by mist and the howls of two
 lost dogs. (148)

The technology of the self reveals, therefore, a “multiplicity of individuality” (Jarraway, “Montage,” 828). The pivotal “*you*” is pluralized: “expressionless, intriguing beauties” and “ faces, dark or fair, brooding or elated.” This resistance to singularity is crucial because it becomes a resistance to identity. As the narrator puts it, early in the novel: “Old friend, you studied me too closely, as though deeper scrutiny would finally reveal my mystery” (15). The scrutiny that the technology of the self demands, however, only reveals further mystery. The self, in short, is a mystery that will not be revealed.

As Nicholas Radel suggests, therefore, the “self” in *Nocturnes* is “other.” Regardless of the fact that Radel’s interpretation of that otherness has little to do with the context of my own reading of White, this basic observation is key. Radel argues, correctly, that *Nocturnes*, as well as *A Boy’s Own Story* and *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, “contain gay characters who fail to achieve a coherent sense of self” (175). His interpretation of this observation, however, is unhelpful. He attributes this incoherence of self to a failure (in the most negative sense) on the part of White to formulate and articulate the essence of gay identity. It never occurs to Radel that this de-specifying of “gay identity,” this “queer-ing” project (in Michael Warner’s sense, begun, however, long before the vogue of the term itself), is precisely the point of White’s writings, both fictional and non.

To return to the cruising scene that opens the novel, then, it is interesting that the narrator claims: “What I was looking for were *the other men, secreted* in corners, or posted on dilapidated stairs, or only half visible behind tarred bollards” (2, emphasis added). The almost ambiguous use of “secreted” suggests a porte-manteau of “secret”

and “secrete” which, together, succinctly capture the clandestine, anonymous sexual liaison for which the narrator is searching. Indeed, the practice of cruising, described most poetically in *Nocturnes*, but in far greater detail and variety in White’s trilogy, is, in fact, a practice of “*se déprendre de soi*.” It is a practice that disintegrates identity, an exchange without names, sometimes without faces, an experiment in transience. As White describes: “Congeries of bodies; the slow, blind tread on sloped steps; the faces floating up like thoughts out of ink, then trailing away like thoughts out of memory; entrances and exits, the dignified advance and retreat . . .” (3). Cruising, White argues, moreover, is a practice of “gathering darkness” around oneself: “On my way home I see one last man pressed against the wall, gathering about him the last tatters of darkness to be had” (5), a darkness that is, of course, fleeting. It is thus that White can claim to be, as he does in *States of Desire* (his follow-up to *Nocturnes*), “an aficionado of the provisional” (154). He may even may be rightly considered the prose-poet of the provisional, insofar as his writing concerns itself with the liminality, the transience, and the uncanny strangeness of the queer self.

The cruising scene sets the tone for the novel insofar as, in it, White deprives his narrator of all identifying characteristics. The narrator is a stranger among strangers and he remains characterized by this intangibility throughout the rest of the novel. Indeed, he becomes typified by exile, as an American in Europe, but even in far more minor ways. When his apartment is destroyed by fire, he writes:

Free of all possessions, retaining only my black face and blue eyes, I moved *like a specter* through that city of well-dressed men, women and children. They fell back at my approach. Students, after leaping on a passing bus, looked at my charred progress; they swayed on the open platform, dresses and shirts fluttering, books dangling on leather straps like suspended disbelief. (29, emphasis added)

Set loose from reality, homeless and rootless as Kristeva's foreigner, therefore, the narrator is unable to decipher himself. "A secret wound," Kristeva points out, "often unknown to himself, drives the foreigner to wandering" (5). Everything, including the self, becomes alien. The narrator wonders to his lover: "'Doesn't it ever strike you as strange to be a man rather than a woman, to be here rather than,' pointing toward the crown of candles, 'there, for instance?'" (14). And crucially, even in the end, this feeling has not gone away: "My old adolescent feeling," the narrator reiterates toward the end of the novel, "that it was odd to be a man rather than a woman, to live here rather than there, now rather than then, struck me again" (144). Thus, the interval of time and of growth that is implied does nothing but reinforce that uncanny strangeness. Indeed, the novel, in some ways, is a meditation on "how arbitrary it is to be locked into this century, this language, this skin" (146).

White, moreover, makes his narrator a literal stranger to friends and family, particularly his father. In the first chapter, the narrator finds himself at a party: "Behind me stood my father. He did not recognize me and I kept hesitating to introduce myself My father didn't recognize me. That made me become all the more a white suit and tanned hands and face" (6,7). He describes himself, as well, as "the unrecognizable face above the white shirt" (8). Like the narrator in *Elena*, therefore, the narrator here is faceless, dressed in a uniform of blankness. In some ways, the strangeness of the self begins with the transience of appearance, as in the following passage in which White collapses years of aging into a few moments: "At dusk [gathering darkness around himself?] and from a distance I'm still mistaken for seventeen, though every step toward me adds a month, a year -- until, at ten paces, three decades descend on me and I'm an adorable gnome" (138).

That his father fails to recognize him, however, suggests his escape from a paternal influence. As a counterpoint to *Forgetting Elena*, whose narrator has forgotten his father, in *Nocturnes*, it is the father who has forgotten the son. The experience is,

nonetheless, quite harrowing, and the narrator notes the possibility that he has been recognized, but ignored: “His decision to ignore an adult son might easily have been . . . a stratagem, a sacrifice to vanity, to his own ageless face” (7). Similarly, later in the novel, the narrator must introduce himself to his father, who does not recognize him (98). The father’s response is equivocal:

He experimented with a few gestures -- one that did deny me another that indicated confusion. The third was an embrace . . . I tightened in his arms, aware that *we were two strangers* locked in an embarrassing social predicament, but after a moment a huge blind infant within me began to squall (Love? isn’t it Love who wears a handkerchief tied over his eyes? who stays a baby?). The stuffy room dimmed like a medical amphitheater full of attention and darkness and all that remained visible was the surgeon, struggling to deliver me of this big baby. (99, emphasis added)

Thus, the feeling that the moment provokes is itself an uncanny strangeness, not intrinsic to the narrator, an uncomfortable otherness inside him from which he wishes to be delivered. He calls the feeling “love,” but personifies it in order to distance it from himself; it is not so much a feeling as a symptom.

The paternal relationship only becomes more strange when the father coaxes the son to confess his homosexuality and takes a kind of gloating satisfaction in the fact. The narrator describes his father’s reaction: “My father is immensely relieved. He pinches my cheek and smiles . . . ‘Yes, my boy,’ Daddy says, taking my arm, ‘I thought you were unnaturally fond of me. Don’t worry about it. We’re all open-minded. Don’t worry one bit. I can take care of enough women for both of us’” (104). In the essay, “The Personal Is Political,” White writes of this scene: “The father, if anything, seems *relieved* that his son won’t be competing with him for women” (371). In some ways, therefore, White seems to recast the unnatural fondness as the father’s. It is interesting, then, to go back to the first chapter, that the narrator observes: “The girl with my father, yes, reminded me

of myself" (7). This similarity, in turn, causes him to remember a moment when he "was sixteen and he leaned over the table and said softly, 'A boy your age could be a girl'" (7-8).²¹ The father-son relationship that White depicts, therefore, is so ambiguous as to be almost inscrutable: it would seem that the father wishes his son to be a daughter or to be gay because he feels that either of these would be a more fitting tribute to his power and influence (insofar as the narrator's homosexuality is interpreted as an "unnatural fondness" for the father) and, consequently, his vanity. What is clear, however, is that this relationship serves to reinforce the narrator's sense of uncanny strangeness. He in no way takes after his father; the relationship is all contrast; he is radically *other*. Or, to state the matter in Kristeva's terms: "The foreigner would be the son of a father whose existence is subject to no doubt whatsoever, but whose presence does not detain him. Rejection on the one hand, inaccessibility on the other" (5).

The parental theme in *Nocturnes* is also crucial because the novel records the deaths of both the narrator's parents. Though the father reappears as a more fully developed character after the initial forewarning of his death, it is in the very first chapter that the narrator mentions: "A month later he was dead in Majorca" (9). Thus, even as the narrative travels back (and forward) in time from the first chapter, the father,

²¹ This detail is reiterated in White's short story "Cinnamon Skin," a closely autobiographical piece that reads like a lost chapter from *A Boy's Own Story*. After confessing that his "whole family was awash with incestuous desires" (262), White recalls: "When I was twelve . . . Daddy took me to dinner at the Gourmet Room, a glass-walled dome on top of the Terrace Hilton . . . [He] drank a lot of wine and told me I had my mother's big brown eyes. He said boys my age were rather like girls. He said there wasn't much difference between boys and girls my age. I was thrilled. I tried to be warm and intuitive and seductive" (262-63).

throughout the novel, is already “dead.” The death of the mother, on the other hand, a more minor character, is recalled at a specific moment in the novel. The scene that precedes it hints at the constant deferral that typifies the novel:

My mother’s door is half-open. When I peek in, I see everything is impeccable; the accumulation of dishes has been removed, the bed is made, the curtains flung back, the floor swept. Her long suffering is over. The maids will return . . . we’ll go for swims together; we’ll go to the country club Sunday suppers . . . grownups will come by for drinks; she’ll smile and ask questions and invite guests to stay on for dinner; the phone will ring -- but where is she? Where has she gone? (62)

“Her long suffering is over,” clearly foreshadows what the narrator, at the time of writing, already knows, but which he, at the time written, could not have possibly known. The narrator, as a child, believes that his mother, a depressive, has recovered sufficiently to have set her room in order and hopes that the ideal life he imagines will be realized. White demonstrates, however, with the most radical example, the disjunction between expectation and fulfillment. Indeed, White interjects the story in question with a digression addressed specifically to the second person in the narrative (“an amalgam of Frank O’Hara, God and me”). He writes: “I shall list you for my recompense. Gold, songs, a dive, a kiss -- recall your face, perhaps, but you elude me still. I’m on your trail, but you elude me” (64). And thus, to an extent, the narrator eludes himself, as does the life he imagines before he discovers the death of his mother: “The car motor is running and the garage is filled with exhaust . . . Behind the wheel is my mother, jaunty in her leopard-skin coat and matching turban and gloves. She’s dead. So is Timmy [the dog] beside her. I’ll hang my harp on the willow” (64).

The significance of the deaths of the narrator’s parents is suggested by Kristeva’s discussion of the foreigner as an orphan. Kristeva asks the resonant question: “To be deprived of parents -- is that where freedom starts?” (21). Certainly, for the narrator, the

death of each parent implies a kind of freedom, sometimes desirable, but often not. More importantly, these deaths introduce the narrator into a literal and metaphorical otherness, literal insofar as he becomes an exile, first at a boarding school, then in Europe, and metaphorical in that the deaths separate him from the reality he had known and envisioned for himself; thus, Kristeva argues, “the foreigner constantly experiences the necessary, aberrant unreality” (23). Of his time at the boarding school, the narrator writes: “Knowing my freedom depended upon remaining inconspicuous, I kept myself camouflaged, timing my movements with the shadows of clouds, placing my tweed jacket against the stubble of dead grass, concealing my shock of blond hair in a dart of sunlight glancing off a distant window pane” (92). The narrator, then, has espoused the transient intangibility of the foreigner. He is, in Kristeva’s words, once again, “a devotee of solitude, even in the midst of a crowd, because he is faithful to a shadow” (5). Moreover, Kristeva makes an interesting reference to Camus’ *Meursault*: “The foreigner, thus, has lost his mother. Camus understood it well: his *Stranger* reveals himself at the time of his mother’s death. One has not much noticed that this cold orphan . . . is *a fanatic of absence*” (5, emphasis added). And what has White’s narrator proven himself if not a fanatic of absence, an “aficionado of the provisional” (*States*, 154)? His story is, after all, an elegy addressed to a dead subject. *Nocturnes* exemplifies perfectly how the foreigner is, in Kristeva’s words, “a dreamer making love with absence, one exquisitely depressed” (10).

Caracole, the least autobiographical and most peculiar and distinct of White’s novels, is certainly the one in which the technologies of the self are the least obvious. The story begins with young lovers, Gabriel and Angelica, who emigrate separately to a strange city and encounter a large and disparate cast of characters, each of which exerts an influence on the young, impressionable couple. Gradually, however, the reader loses sight of these two characters, as they are absorbed into the *bal masqué* of the strange

society into which they have been introduced. The novel is, perhaps not coincidentally, a kind of society novel and, therefore, the least psychological of White's novels. It is, moreover, the only one in which the narrator is not an unnamed first person whom the reader is to assume is a version (however fictional) of White himself. For this reason, perhaps, it is *Caracole* that offers, as in the aforementioned analogy, the most direct equivalent of Genet's *Querelle*. Compare, for example, my own introductory comments on *Caracole* with White's editorial introduction to "Querelle" in *The Selected Writings of Jean Genet*: "*Querelle* is the only novel Genet wrote that is not autobiographical and is not told by a first-person narrator named 'Jean Genet' Since *Querelle* is not autobiographical, nor linked to the facts of real-life experiences, in it Genet is free to release his erotic fantasies" (157). With respect to White's oeuvre, correspondingly, *Caracole* seems to be the novel in which the author's own concerns and sensibilities are "distribute[d] and dramatize[d] . . . amongst the full[est] range of characters," certain characters, of course, being more closely analogous to White than others.

Caracole presents problems of authorial voice, however. One may wonder, for example, whether any of the characters reflect White's sensibilities, in a novel in which there are no homosexual characters. *Caracole* was published in 1985. By then, White had already written and published several openly gay books, including *Nocturnes*, *The Joy of Gay Sex* (with Dr. Charles Silverstein), and *States of Desire*. Following these, he had even reached a quasi-mainstream audience with the publication of *A Boy's Own Story*, which critic and novelist Neil Bartlett calls, "The American Gay Novel" (63). As Bartlett points out, White "has nothing to hide" (65), or, to take a more cynical view of the critics, he certainly had nothing *left* to hide. The criticism, levelled at him at the time of the publication of *Forgetting Elena*, that White suppressed his homosexuality in hopes of reaching a broader audience, could scarcely be levelled twelve years later. Indeed, the critical reception of *Caracole* was, at best, mixed, confused or confusing, and at worst non-existent. Bartlett, for example, notes that his article was "written partly as a defense

of the novel in the wake of criticisms in which gay reviewers, developing a new twist on the traditional view that homosexual artists *couldn't* write about the heterosexual world, pronounced that they *shouldn't*" (67). And in *The Farewell Symphony*, White recalls that "[w]hen the eighty-year-old French-American poet Edouard Roditti read it he said, 'It's a very fine novel and if you publish another one like it your career will be over'" (386). He also supposes that "the [critical] blackout may have just been an expression of general confusion, since I'd become identified as a gay novelist and this book had no gay characters" (386).

Bartlett contends, however, that, regardless of White's chronology, *Caracole* could not be a "cryptic homosexual story." He explains: "[H]istorically that genre no longer exists and certainly isn't about to be revived by the author of *The Joy of Gay Sex* . . . So why does the story, entirely heterosexual, feel so gay? Perhaps it is the details" (65). Bartlett goes on to interpret the novel, keenly and with alacrity, his only fault being that his conclusions are too conclusive; his argument for "gay details" is too essentializing, almost ghettoizing. He asks, perhaps a bit too confident in his rhetoric:

Would any straight writer remember to include a dab of white lubricant in his lovingly detailed buggery scene? Would any straight writer begin a sentence on the difficulties of his male characters are having in communicating their feelings with the phrase, "If two men are not lovers . . ."? Would anyone but a queen of White's grace and skill characterize one of his heroines by reference to "her lack of culture, her infamous politics, her obvious intelligence, her outre but effective white fox coat"? (65)

Here, particularly in the last example, however compelling, Bartlett seems to reinforce the stereotype that gay men are necessarily "fruity," and that only a sissy of White's magnitude could ever consider garish accoutrements to be "outré" yet "effective." With respect to the first example, it should be said that even the most robust, swaggeringly and

abrasively heterosexual writer (Norman Mailer), has “lovingly detailed” a “buggery scene” from time to time (*Ancient Evenings*, *Harlot's Ghost*). To argue, therefore, that *Caracole* is essentially, necessarily *gay* is somewhat inaccurate. Instead, White entertains a less specific and more radical and polymorphous *queerness*.²² Clearly, White has not suppressed his own homosexuality (hence, Bartlett’s “gay details”) in order to imagine straight lives, but, rather, has queered the world of his novel in order to allow his readers, gay or straight, to imagine queer lives. He seems, abstractly but succinctly, to state his project in the novel’s opening pages: “The queer light plunged the lusterless world into hot sugar water and pulled it up candied” (22). Echoing Bartlett, we may ask, here: Could anyone but a candy-ass of White’s grace and skill plunge the lusterless world in such a queer light?

The queering of the world, (or of “the planet,” to echo Michael Warner’s *Fear of a Queer Planet*) is clearly central to White’s project. However, it is when his characters are ostensibly straight that the worlds he creates are more fantastic and surreal. Such is the case, as we have seen, in *Forgetting Elena*’s island kingdom and, as we shall see, in *Caracole*’s setting which is certainly fantastic, almost fabulous. Gabriel, the novel’s protagonist, is raised in a provincial manor called Madder Pink, “after a local wildflower” (5), and as a boy, he passes time riding his toy horse on and around Troublesome Mountain, curious details that add a fairy tale quality to White’s novel. At the same time, White’s setting is enough of this world to include the detail of “French windows” (6) as part of the decor of Madder Pink. The city that Gabriel moves to, to live with his uncle Mateo, is also a curious, surreal locale. White notes that “*Caracole* is based on those thirteen summers I spent in Venice with David Kalstone” (“Edmund

²² It would, of course, be anachronistic of me to expect this terminology and this distinction from Bartlett, who originally published his article in 1986.

White Speaks with Edmund White,” 20). Bartlett also identifies elements of “Venice . . . but also contemporary Paris and certainly also Manhattan” (63), the latter two, both cities in which White had lived by that time. There is also, in the novel, a hint of New Orleans (which White had visited a few years earlier during the writing of *States of Desire*): “The city was crowded with tourists who’d come to celebrate carnival, its original religious meaning long forgotten but the event maintained as a commodity” (115). The world of *Caracole* is, therefore, not our own, but a kind of broken-mirror image of it, details refracted into disorder.

How, then, can this novel represent White’s ill-fated return to “straight fiction”? By placing these heterosexual characters against such a queer backdrop, he makes even these “straight” lives seem uncannily strange. When one of the characters claims, “*Messy Lives*, that’s the name of the book I’m going to write” (289), there is an extent to which White is certainly referring to his own book. In *The Farewell Symphony*, he refers to *Caracole* as a “bitter novel that satirized some of the people I’d known in New York” (386). Regardless of whether these lives were messy to begin with, he certainly takes them and messes them up. Accordingly, Bartlett notes that “[t]his is a novel that provides the deepest pleasure of the form: that of imagining other lives” (62).²³ Some of White’s friends and acquaintances, however, were not pleased to have their “other lives” imagined for them. White recalls: “Max [a character from *Farewell*] decided that he was one of my principal targets, although the character he thought was based on him actually had been meant as a self portrait. He and the other injured parties turned against

²³ Here, Bartlett is certainly echoing the conclusion of *States of Desire* where White notes: “The value of [this] book, I hope, lies in its bearing news from quarter to another . . . or from one group to another . . . I hope it will enable gays and straights to imagine other lives” (336).

me” (386). White also recounts a scene which could have been taken from *Caracole* itself: “My editor gave a masked ball in New York to launch the book and one of the offended people I’d based a character on came to it with bullwhip to beat me; fortunately he was turned away by two guards” (386). More important, however, is the curious reversal White has effected. He bases heterosexual characters on people (including himself) who are (for the most part) gay in real life; *in this queered world, queer people are “straight.”*

Moreover, even without the benefit of *The Farewell Symphony*, which details the period of White’s life which is fantasized upon in *Caracole*, Bartlett has keenly discerned (62) that the novel has interesting autobiographical implications. While Bartlett observes these only in the details, *The Farewell Symphony* shows that even the main characters and the broad themes of the novel are based on White’s own life. Chapter one concerns itself with Gabriel and Angelica, characters who reappear in *Farewell* as Gabriel and Ana, the narrator’s nephew and his (the nephew’s) girlfriend, who to come to live with the narrator / author in New York. The uncle is nameless in *Farewell*, but named Mateo and nicknamed Teddy (suggesting Eddie, Ed, Edmund?) in *Caracole*. White himself, however, came, as a young man, from the “provinces” to the big city, an autobiographical detail that suggests that Gabriel is a also version of the author. In effect, White blends his own youth with that of his nephew. Certainly, Gabriel’s languishing, aristocratic father (“silent, stubborn” [3], and ultimately tyrannical) and mother (doting but ineffectual, an “inactive volcano” [4]) seem to be gross caricatures of White’s own parents, as they are described in various places, particularly in *States of Desire*.

Thus, the technologies of the self, in *Caracole*, are undertaken by a number of characters. Even when these technologies resist an authorial correspondence, White, who has noted that all his novels are, to some extent, about initiation, argues that the self is a construction based on this kind of entrance into the greater world. In other words, the self is subject to initiation: created gradually, peremptorily, arbitrarily. The novel

illustrates, in fact, “that each life was a lonely project, patient, scrupulous” (257). The paradox, however, is that the project further disperses rather than unifies the self; each character becomes less unitary and, as it were, less *substantial* as the novel progresses. I refer to “substance” here because, as Foucault argues, the technologies of the self involve “the care of the activity and not the care of the soul-as-substance” (“Technologies,” 25). The point of the “lonely project,” therefore, is the process itself, not the end.

As such, Gabriel, much like the narrator of *Forgetting Elena*, mystified by the world around him must design a self based on observations, sense impressions, whatever is at hand that can be patched into a mosaic of self. Gabriel’s “own heritage interested him not at all” (5), however, suggesting a desire to transcend the merely traditional, to resist the world. However, to avoid the influence of the world, not to construct the self in the image of the way one perceives that the world sees one, proves difficult. When Gabriel meets Angelica, for example, he defines himself in the way he imagines she sees him. Touching his acne-covered face, she asks him what happened, if he was burned:

For a second he considered saying yes More likely she was making fun of him, gangly white thing that he was with a blistered face gabbling to a stick between his legs, frightened of deer, son of a man powerless to drive her kinsmen off his own property and of a woman entangled in fouled sheets who lacked hunger but possessed a thirst that couldn’t be quenched . . . [H]e must be the most laughable of all, the eldest son, overgrown and dirty, humming as he surveyed his patrimony of weeds, his face showing for him the scarlet shame he was too degraded to feel.

(10-11)

Thus White makes this portrait of Gabriel a product of his own imagination, and gives us no indication of how Angelica actually perceives him. He constructs himself in his own mind, using others to hold up a mirror to himself. Not unlike the amnesiac narrator of *Forgetting Elena*, therefore, Gabriel is sufficiently unfamiliar with himself as to have to

invent himself from scratch. White writes: “He was self-conscious and had to think each motion out from the beginning, invent ‘yawning’ and ‘drinking’ . . . Sometimes he feared he’d make even breathing volitional and he’d suffocate in his sleep” (48).

When Gabriel meets his uncle Mateo, the latter inspires him to undertake further technologies. The uncle’s influence on the nephew depicts the way in which individuals, in Foucault’s words, “effect . . . a certain of number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves” (“Technologies,” 18), but also denotes the artificiality of these operations. Gabriel decides:

Never again would he live entirely in the present, give up the dignity of yesterday, tomorrow, and some wonderful day and inhabit now like a dog . . . Gabriel’s homemade code turned him toward discipline, toward an idealized future where he would behave with the same cool elegance as his uncle . . . Abstinence must be refined. (53-54)

The self, in order to meet any specifications, must be “idealized” and “refined.” The mixed construction of a “future *where*” seems purposefully to suggest that, insofar as the future is a place, the self is a trajectory and a process.

We can observe the same type of constructions of self in White’s characterizations of Mateo and Edwige. Mateo, in light of *The Farewell Symphony*, is the novel’s closest portrait of the author. Like the narrator in *Farewell*, Mateo is the worldly uncle who escaped “the provinces” and “lived in the capital. He was a great man, although Gabriel couldn’t remember at what, for Mateo hadn’t returned to Madder Pink in twenty years or more” (26). Still, Mateo’s rural background forms an important part of the technology of self: “He’d styled himself as a country squire, someone whose sophistication masked a rustic simplicity, who could always return to pastoral innocence” (62). Other details, though presented in a heterosexual context, mesh neatly with White’s

own experience of gay life and culture. He explains, for example, Mateo's vague reluctance to adopt Gabriel:

Because he'd never married, never spent any time with children, Mateo had scarcely noticed he was growing older . . . He who followed every fashion, hummed every new tune, learned every new dance, spoke and sometimes coined the newest slang, could scarcely feel outmoded.

Paradoxically, he had acquired more experience at playing the young man than any literally young man could have done. (63)

White suggests, here, that even youthfulness can be stylized and refined, even as it slips away. More than this, youthfulness, White argues, *must* be stylized and refined insofar as the young person is simply youthful, a basic, if fleeting, attribute, and need not strive for youthfulness; the very concept of youthfulness thus implies a distance from youth itself.

Mateo is therefore

capable of saying, "You know, under all this I'm really very innocent."

Yes, but the *all this* has become a considerable carapace; were it to be pierced, would searchers find this celebrated innocence cowering within?

Even the coarse, automatic way of alluding to innocence is only one more proof of how well-travelled the road is, that road called "sincerity." (178).

White is always careful, then, to denote how a pose belies actuality; there is no authenticity because all that is called "authentic" is merely an appearance. The more manifest a characteristic, he suggests, the more it becomes merely surface, artifice, and, accordingly, the less natural it becomes; "youth" need not feign youthfulness and "innocence" knows not the meaning of the word.

In adopting Gabriel, however, Mateo is forced to age somewhat, to become respectable, and to reconstruct himself as such:

Before, he'd taken hours to assemble himself and to construct an optimistic mood for the evening. Now, by contrast, he had to follow a

regime in order to set an example. And now (he had to admit) he was playing to an audience: this is how a gentleman behaves. He rises at a reasonable hour no matter how late and drunkenly he went to bed, as though an imperturbable orderliness by day will excuse any degree of nocturnal anarchy. (66)

Mateo, therefore, reinvents himself as need be. This passage even suggests that the reinvention is a daily habit; the self, dissolved, made incoherent overnight by sleep and dream, must be reassembled and reconstructed anew each day. As White notes later, Mateo must “condense[] his dispersed matutinal fogs into a simulacrum of a human being” (162).

If Mateo is a version of White himself, however, the colligation of Mateo with Gabriel suggests that the author represents himself in both. He writes of Mateo: “[I]n his nephew he inherited a mirror” (70). He explains further: “To love some idle, feebly pulsing blond woman, to stroke that hair and smooth those long limbs was no problem; it was almost a zoological delight. But to love this dirty, sluggish, shockingly vulnerable boy was . . . like loving oneself, which is before everything else an aesthetic problem” (70). Here, White seems to bring his aforementioned “pederasty of autobiography” to life. In the more literal autobiographical trilogy, the pederastic attraction is of the author for his subject, but in a fantastic novel such as *Caracole*, the older self and the younger self can come face to face; time is collapsed, becomes more geographical than chronological, and the influence of self upon self, the practices of reinvention are highlighted in all their artificiality.

The character of Edwige is also an interesting case of self-invention. For one, Edwige is clearly a female version of “Kevin,” from *The Farewell Symphony*. Just as Edwige withholds love from Mateo, White writes: “Kevin had withheld love perversely, I decided. When I’d write about him (*and he kept showing up in my fiction, even as a woman*), I couldn’t resist picturing him as a cold careerist whose flinty heart kept him

from succeeding as an artist” (321, emphasis added).²⁴ That Edwige is based on a man lends her the uncanny demeanour of the drag queen. Indeed, her characterization is aptly summed up by what poet/memoirist Mark Doty calls “the drag queen’s perennial message”: “*we’re all self-made here*” (275). As one character says of Edwige, for example: “[S]trip away the clothes and those suffocating perfumes she cooks up and she’d be colorless – but as an *artifact*, damn it, she’s exquisite, one in a million, inimitable” (109). White seems to argue, therefore, that individuality, the characteristics that make Edwige “one in a million,” for example, are cultivated and put on, not intrinsic or natural to the self.

Edwige’s profession of actress, furthermore, suggests a constant staginess. As White writes: “She’d fabricated every gesture and pronunciation” (87). Her influence on Mateo’s household thus reflects a technology of self: “Edwige initiated a melancholy reign of chaos over the palace . . . She accepted no new roles, starved herself, slept all day, and roamed the palace by night. She wore strange costumes of her own devising, patched together out of things she’d found in the attic or at the flea market” (181). The costume, here, seems to be a metaphor for the self, “patched together” from scraps and rags. White, however, also describes this reinvention with an interesting literary, or at least textual, metaphor: “Edwige . . . pursued her nocturnal efforts at self-transformation, as though she were a larva slowly metamorphosing herself inside the palace into a moth with immense white wings separated by the slenderest black body, like luxuriously blank pages enclosing a velvet bookmark” (182). Here, White suggests that the individual is

²⁴ Despite having drawn the parallels between Edwige and Kevin, one cannot, however, ignore the former’s curious name, “Edwige,” suspiciously echoing “Ed White,” suggesting that this character is yet another version of the author.

like a book, itself a work of art, complex and manifold. Unsettlingly, however, the pages of the self are blank.

In light of this metaphor, moreover, it is fitting that Edwige's acting becomes itself a kind of literary endeavour, a way of telling stories and creating mythologies: "She'd tell all these men fake stories about herself . . . Dissimulation was her method of feeling her way into new characters" (207). In this respect, then, the character parallels the author; indeed, the novel at hand is an exercise in "dissimulation," in "decant[ing] private obsessions [Kevin, for example] into other [heterosexual] terms" (207). Also, *Caracole*, insofar as it is a *roman à clef*, is a collection of "characterizations of people [the author] has observed" (207).

Wilfully, ardently perverse, however, White transforms heterosexuality itself into an uncanny otherness. Like one of his characters, White is clearly "suspicious of the 'naturalness' of love" (286). Certain phrasings clearly denote, furthermore, the arbitrariness of sexuality and gender: "If the boy had been a girl . . ." (120), one sentence begins, or, "If two men are not lovers . . ." (121) begins another. As in *Forgetting Elena*, libidinal object choice in *Caracole* is not a given, as Gabriel's earliest sexual encounters demonstrate: "He was lost to his own desire, lost in the shifting intricacies of her body, losing grip as she gripped more tightly what he could only with effort call *his* penis since now it had become this blunt greedy child that somehow belonged to her as much as to him" (14). White argues, therefore, that any kind of sex, straight as much as gay, always involves, to some extent, an uncanny strangeness and a despoiling of the self. In the passage above, for example, Gabriel's own body ceases to be his own and becomes "other": "He was too slender, too delicate, too girlish to support this penis, this monstrous child; its ambitions for roughness, for excitement, were horrifying. He was ashamed" (14). If sex is monstrous, however, it is also ecstatic. That is, sex, White suggests, is a way out of oneself, not necessarily by way of fear and dread, as above, but also by sheer pleasure. This seems to be the case when White writes:

“Does that feel good?” [Gabriel] asked, moving inside her. He meant nothing by the question. But Angelica seemed startled. *Had she forgotten him? Herself?*” (14, emphasis added).

Even as these early scenes set a heterosexual standard for the novel (every “coupling,” as White puts it, is ostensibly male-female), White nonetheless introduces a pervasive thematic of transvestism, a further “queering” of this mythically heterosexual world he has created. When Gabriel is married to Angelica in a tribal ceremony, the couple are made to watch a dumbshow in which the characters are uncanny abstractions of themselves:

Two women in dresses identical to Angelica’s came forward, one young the other old . . . The queen removed her crown and placed over her face the clay mask she had molded from Gabriel’s features. The various shards of the mask had been glued together along crude white seams. The brown clay shell and its zigzag seams did not resemble Gabriel since the likeness was pressed into the concealed lining; the exterior looked rather like a coconut crushed here and there to reveal fissures of white meat. (42)

Here, White seems to de-center identity by making these representations so crude, by making the mask an “interior mask,” representing nothing. He challenges it further when one of the tribespeople says to Gabriel, “She is you” (42), and White, perversely and resonantly, refers to the character as “the queen-as-Gabriel” (43), seemingly endowing Gabriel with a queenly subjectivity, or presenting him with another, feminine version of himself. The entire ceremony, in fact, has an intriguing effect: “oblivion” (46), but also, significantly, an erasure of gender difference: “Angelica was now his friend, *they were not really so different from one another*; they were twins, *not opposites*, twins who had found this way to make each other sleep” (46).

The theme of transvestism is also seen in the character of Edwige. We have already noted some of the ambiguity of her femininity, but it is also worth observing that

this character (based on a man) and made incarnate in literary drag (as a woman) comes full circle and cross-dresses in the novel as a boy: “She’d worn a drummer boy’s uniform and half the time passed for male. Her male freedom -- and the freedom of the general chaos -- had been unbounded, and if she’d found it to her taste, that was because her taste had been formed by this very freedom” (275). Thus White insistently and consistently unhinges the gender dichotomy. White’s suggestion is that gender is fluid, transferable, but that the ideology of gender roles is deployed in a system that arbitrarily oppresses (hence, “male freedom”) and attempts to categorize the uncategorizable.

Insofar as gender is almost always the basis of identity, White’s novel treats the latter as an unviable system as well. It is fitting, then, that White’s main characters are foreigners in the city to which they have relocated. The world to which they have immigrated is thus endlessly strange. Disintegrated by his perpetual foreignness, for example, Gabriel “wandered the city, feeling like the only ancient hero, heavy under gold, in an insubstantial world of modern men and women almost *spectral* with indifference” (283, emphasis added). As Gabriel thinks to himself: “The world had no logic, given over as it was to pauses pregnant, then aborted, to wails that signaled nothing and to unreadable scrawls of light on a wet brick wall” (60). If the world is inscrutable to these characters, however, it is because they themselves are inscrutable. To return to the scene in which Gabriel invents “yawning” and “drinking,” White notes: “This concentration on the habitual rendered his body strange to him and stuffed his mind with instructions” (48). It would seem, however, that, as above, these “instructions” are no more than “unreadable scrawls.” Even Mateo, who (in a passage that could have been borrowed from Kristeva) “had lived in the city for some twenty years, [but] still thought of himself as the shunned outsider, the petitioner at the gate, desperate for recognition from his peers, the other nobles of this besieged city” (67). Kristeva’s metaphorical foreignness anticipates literal foreignness, however. Before he had ever ventured out into

the larger world, Mateo's "childhood at Madder Pink . . . had left him unconvinced of his own existence" (64).

Thus White submits his characters to the "absorption of otherness" (Kristeva, 2). They are, like White himself, "addicted to uncertainty" (151), "commit[ted] to transience" (248). Through an uncompromising queerness (clearly uncompromised in even in the "straight" novels), White concerns himself perennially with the void at the center of subjectivity. It is this void that he seems to describe, or at least gesture towards, in one of *Caracole*'s finest and most essayistic (or at least aphoristic) passages:

If there were any wisdom (and there isn't -- there's everything and nothing to be learned) it would consist of learning to fall freely. For we are in full, flaming descent, but we move so slowly we imagine we can hold on to certain things (at least this friend, at least this moment). If we fell faster we'd call out in panic. But our speed is slow if constant and some things and people are falling at the same rate; relative to them we don't seem to be moving at all. But then something we are holding (as Mateo was holding his sleeping nephew) accelerates and slides out of our grasp -- and suddenly we glimpse blackest rushing night through the gap. (128)

As such, in this passage that speaks to all his novels, White posits a notion of self that recalls Silverman's "void at the center of subjectivity" and strongly resists the idea of a "static natural self." As we shall now see, this is a philosophical precept that he continues to explore in the autobiographical trilogy.

Chapter 3:

The Fictional Self in Reality: *A Boy's Own Story*, *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, and *The Farewell Symphony*

Whatever romances I've engineered or endured, whatever notions about the artist I've tried to live up to, whatever distant places I've traveled to or haunted in my imagination -- they've all been footnotes to those pages I read as a child, for hasn't [James] Merrill . . . called our lives 'fiction in disguise'?

-White, "On Reading: An Exaltation of Dreams"

[M]y plots are all scrapbooks.

-White, *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*

The more strictly autobiographical turn in White's fiction signals a new modality in the technologies of the self. White calls these works novels, not memoirs, but writes in such a close, intimate voice, and also provides so many details that echo or mirror his memoirs and essays (*States of Desire*, *The Burning Library*), that it is almost impossible to not think of the narrator as, very literally, White himself. The autobiographical turn implies, therefore, that the narrator is somehow more than mere fiction, that the character whom the author calls his "self" is grounded in some non-fictional reality. Even as White

insists on the fictionality of these novels, he undermines it. In *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, for example, he cunningly withdraws his narrative from a fictional realm. He writes of “a distinctive odor I’ve never encountered since except once, recently, in the Chanel boutique of a Paris department store. I almost asked the saleswoman what the smell could be, but the most important things in our intimate lives can’t be discussed with strangers, *except in books*” (15, emphasis added). Suggesting, therefore, that this passage of the novel is not fiction, the narrator is unable to transcribe a fictional disclosure to a stranger. Thus, each autobiography and fiction strain against the other. White demands that the reader consider the implications of the self as a fictional character, as well as the implications of a fictional character that represents an authentic “self.”

However, just as biography undermines fictionality, so too does autobiographical *fiction* challenge “authenticity.” Autobiographical fiction, as such, challenges reality itself, tests its historicity, questions its truth-value. Thus, even in a realistic setting, realism is set aside to fantasy and artifice. The narrator of *A Boy’s Own Story* notes that, at any rate, “the ‘realism’ of the last century seemed to me tinglingly farfetched: vows, betrayals, flights, fights, sacrifices, suicides. *I saw literature as a fantasy, no less absorbing for all its irrelevance – a parallel life*, as dreams shadow waking but never intersect it” (41, emphasis added). Thus it is that “autobiographical fantasy,” the phrase by which I choose to define White’s non-realistic novels, could equally apply to the trilogy at hand, meaning, however, something somewhat different; even the realistic setting, the bid for historicity, the often distinctly *non-fictional* authorial voice (the voice that can cause critic Robert Gluck, erroneously, but not blameworthy, to refer to *A Boy’s Own Story* and *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* as “memoirs” [59]), do not preclude the element of fantasy. As the narrator of *A Boy’s Own Story* explains his actions: “I couldn’t go against the decorum of my own fantasies” (24).

White's trilogy demonstrates, therefore, that the self can be both "real" and "fictional." For White, autobiography must be fictionalized (that is, White is a novelist and not a memoirist) because the self is inherently a fiction. As he claims in "The *Paris Review* Interview":

[A]ny writer who is writing about childhood as an adult is bound to falsify experience. But one of the things you try to do is to find *poetic approximation*; an elusive and impossible task. It is like trying to pick up blobs of mercury with tweezers -- you can't do it. You nevertheless attempt to find various metaphorical ways of *surprising that experience*. I think you oftentimes feel *it is there, but you can't get at it* and that's the archeology of writing about childhood. (254, emphasis added)

An extreme example of this kind of falsification, or, more ideally, this "poetic approximation," is the scene in *A Boy's Own Story* in which the narrator recalls his third birthday. Aside from the question of how well one can even remember one's own third birthday, White's commentary on the marionette troupe's performance of *Sleeping Beauty* is clearly decades removed from the three-year-old version of the narrator who witnessed it: "[T]he reduced scale of the stage had engulfed me, as though I'd been precipitated through a beaker and sublimated into another substance altogether . . . In this lighted cube my emotions coalesced because they were given a firm bounding line and because things devolved with the logic of art, not life" (63). As such, White collapses time and lets a childhood experience speak to him across the years and take on a significance that the child could never have conceived nor expressed. This passage also suggests the importance of conceiving of the technology of the self as a function of artistic endeavor, and through it, of the self as a kind of work of art. To elaborate on the previous passage, then, we might say that the "archeology of writing about childhood" is to enact a technology of the self, to retroactively construct the self, granting that this "self" is a but a cipher. Even in the trilogy, which forgoes the surreal, "baroque"

elements of the novels discussed in the previous chapter, and which posits a dimension of reality, the self is nonetheless a fluid, radical element that the author “fails” to contain. What, in fact, unites the “surreal” in the baroque novels and the “real” in the present trilogy is their predication upon the “unreal”; both need that counterpoint as a basis for differentiation. Thus, whether the setting is “real” or “surreal,” White uses it to highlight the unreality of the self.

This problematic is not limited to the writing of childhood, however. For example, White introduces *The Farewell Symphony*, the only volume of the trilogy in which the narrator is adult throughout, with a kind of disclaimer to this very fact, a note to the reader which, retrospectively, would seemingly apply equally to *A Boy's Own Story* and *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*:

The Farewell Symphony is an autobiographical novel. Although its action parallels many of the events in my life, it is not a literal transcription of my experience. The characters are stylized versions, often composites, of people I knew in those years. Sometimes I have used Proust's method of merging or mitosis, i.e. condensing two people into one or distributing the traits of one person over two or more characters. These changes have been made to protect the privacy of the people living – and of the numerous dead – but also to give a coherent shape to so many destinies.

(x)

Coherence, however, is not easily attained, and often seems not be White's goal at all. As David Bergman has pointed out, “for White, the line between fiction and nonfiction has always been thin” (“Introduction: Native Innocence, Alien Knowledge,” 7), and nowhere is this more true than in the trilogy which alternates between a fluid, narrative prose and self-conscious and self-reflective asides, mini-essays and aphorisms, unexpected flashbacks or flashforwards, which jar the reader from the purely fictional

realm, but in turn create a contrast that serves to emphasize the fictional nature of the endeavor at hand.

Thus, in White, as in the passage about the *Sleeping Beauty* marionette performance, time is elastic. In *The Farewell Symphony*, White writes that “[m]emory and repetition . . . [is] a way defeating their cure-all, time” (33). Autobiographical fiction is therefore a resistance to the inexorability of time. Indeed, White often manipulates it, as above, for the sake of “poetic approximation.” In *The Farewell Symphony*, having been diagnosed with HIV, and suffering from what might have been a “tracer illness,” White writes, “I sat there stunned, indifferent, hundreds of years old” (388). Or of his lover Brice, he writes, “he’d been only twenty-seven when I’d met him. Now, five years later, he’d aged by several millennia” (193). Even if “defeating time” becomes much more of an urgency or an imperative in the AIDS era, it is no less a theme throughout the rest of the trilogy. In *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, he writes of his friend Maria: “She was like one of those characters in a Chekhov story . . . who fills a silence by asking, ‘What do you think people will be doing a hundred years from now?’ Now, a hundred years later, I distrust ideas and have few enough” (22).

The cyclical pattern of *A Boy's Own Story* challenges the novel's historicity. As in the second epigraph with which I introduce the chapter (one of the aforementioned self-conscious asides), the plots of White's autobiographical trilogy “are all scrapbooks” (*Beautiful Room*, 136), and none moreso than *A Boy's Own Story* which unfolds as a series of scrapbook memories, taken randomly from the shelf and pored over as they come, regardless of chronology. White, modestly or perversely, has blamed the “circular chronology” of the novel on drugs and heavy drinking, which, he claims, prevented him from “hold[ing] the design of a book in [his] head” (“Introduction: ‘On the Line,’” xviii). Since it is not always advisable to take everything an author says about his own work at face value, let us turn to Robert Gluck's article on *A Boy's Own Story* in which the critic

finds a method to the author's drug-addled madness. Gluck argues, more convincingly than White I daresay, that the "manipulation of forward momentum sends us into the thematics of the story; it provides the leisure for these thematics to develop associatively and through figurative language" (56). He notes, furthermore, that "White abandons the conventional time line of story about a boy's education. We don't travel with this boy into his future" (56). Instead of rehearsing Gluck's argument here (the ultimate concerns of which generally differ from my own), suffice it for me to borrow from him a starting point: White manipulates momentum in order to resist its inexorable forward movement and, thereby, to resist the constraining logic of maturation; it is thus that the self can be continually revised. As White notes in an essay published in the wake of *A Boy's Own Story*, homosexuality is sometimes derided as a failure to mature normally, as a prolonged adolescence:

That's always the insult tossed ever so casually at gays by modern moralists, those artful dodgers who have learned they dare not tell us we're bad but who don't hesitate to tell us we're 'immature.' I should mention right away that the charge may or may not be accurate, but it never sounds to me as condescending as intended; I have no contempt for that time of life when our friendships are most passionate and our passions incorrigible . . . The volatility and intensity of adolescence are qualities we should aspire to preserve ("Paradise Found," 155)

We do not travel with the boy into his future because adolescence is, in White's opinion, "the dismissal of the solid future in favor of the shimmering present" ("Paradise Found," 155). If, furthermore, homosexuality is explained away as a normal adolescent phase, White writes elsewhere, "I can be only grateful I've never outgrown it" ("The Joys of Gay Life," 35). And herein lies the importance of White's novel of his youth, and his resistance to chronology: the self is a vision and a revision, and, therefore, to elaborate on Gluck's observation, instead of travelling with this boy into his future, we travel with

the man into his past, and, as he puts it in *A Boy's Own Story*, “allow [him] for a moment to exist yet again” (84), to relive that “shimmering present.”

As such, *A Boy's Own Story* offers a parody of the *bildungsroman*, insofar as the story would seem to have all the necessary characteristics, but, strictly speaking, misses the mark. The self is pieced together through an archeology of memory, but only circumspectly, provisionally, never conclusively, a “failure” that is emphasized by the novel’s non-chronological progress. Its temporality is, accordingly, problematized; White alternates constantly between the past and present tenses, suggesting a constant adjustment of the zoom lens of the mind. The novel ends abruptly, some might say unsatisfyingly, with a kind of anti-conclusion; thus, the narrator’s moral and psychological development (the requisites of a *bildungsroman*) curiously incomplete. To refer back to Gluck’s “thematics of the story,” however, White’s novel must be considered purposefully incomplete. White tells the reader near the novel’s close, “Oh, there are lots of stories I could tell” (216), foreshadowing the open-endedness of his endeavor. If White’s autobiographical fictions are technologies of the self, they come to emphasize process, technology as a means rather than an end. Thus, a technology of self is actually a deferral of self, a means by which the whited sepulchre of “identity” is held constantly at bay. *A Boy's Own Story* makes the crucial point of always building towards the narrator’s self-actualization, but, simultaneously, always deferring that toward which it is aimed.

The novel’s cut-and-paste technique also serves to emphasize the narrator’s continually changing sensibilities. The novel opens with a nighttime boat ride which, in certain passages, sets the tone for the novel. The water of the lake seems to represent, for the narrator, the unfathomable self, the void at the center of subjectivity. “In such a listless, enfeebled world,” White writes, “the whine of the motor seemed particularly cruel, like a scar on the void” (30). And as the narrator reflects in an earlier passage: “I rested my arm on the rubber tread of the gunwale beside me and my chin on my arm and

stared into the shiny water, which was busy analyzing a distant yellow porch light, *shattering the simple glow into a hundred shifting possibilities*" (6, emphasis added).

From the void, therefore, come possibilities, and as such, White's scrapbook of a novel is a technology of the self insofar as he explores these multitudinous possibilities, refuses to simplify subjectivity, and renders the self, unreconciled, in all its complexities and contradictions.

As in *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*, therefore, White disperses the self, not over several characters, as in the novels discussed in the previous chapter, but by exploring a "multiplicity of individuality." As a very young child, the narrator entertains a host of imaginary playmates, each offering a particular insight into the queer sensibilities that he articulates:

There were three of them. Cottage Cheese, the girl, was older than I, sensible and bossy but my ally. She and I tolerated our good-natured younger sidekick, Georgie-Porgie, a dimwit we fussed over for his own good. We felt nothing of this benign condescension toward Tom-Thumb-Thumb, the hellion who roamed the woods beyond the barbed wire fence guarding the neighbor's property, off limits to us and to him too, I'm sure, though he ignored this rule and all others. (61)

Cottage Cheese and Tom-Thumb-Thumb are particularly interesting as alternate versions of the narrator. In Cottage Cheese, the narrator, who has just noted with envy that "[his] sister was [his father's] true son" (60), imagines a female shadow of himself, that his father might prefer to an effeminate son: "She [Cottage Cheese] was something of a tomboy, not by being athletic (she was as afraid of sports as I) but by being straightforward, hearty, confiding" (62). As such, Cottage Cheese seems to signify a kind of psychic transvestism that recurs throughout the narrator's life (but that had appeared earlier in the achronological text). As a teenager, planning to run away from home, the narrator intends to affect an English accent and bleach his hair, two superficial changes

which precipitate a remarkable transformation of self: “As an English blonde I’d evade not only my family but also my self and emerge as the energetic and lovable boy I longed to be. Not exactly a boy, more a girl, or rather a sturdy, canny, lavishly devout tomboy like Joan of Arc, tough in battle but yielding before her visionary Father” (54). White thus uses the act of running away as a metaphor for the regeneration of self, of “evad[ing]” the old self and “emerg[ing]” anew, but also uses this regeneration to effect a psychic crossing of gender. The new self is imagined as a girl, but, like Cottage Cheese, a tomboy. The narrator, a son that his bigoted father cannot love, dreams of becoming the daughter his father would love, even if (or particularly if) the father had wished his daughter to have been born a boy.

This psychic tranvestism also enlists a motif of royalty and recalls the “queen-as-Gabriel” of *Caracole*. Also suggesting Lacan’s aforementioned “lofty, remote, inner castles,” White writes: “In the sand I built castles that took on a splendor only the sea could fathom. In the winter I re-created my royal residences and processions in the snow. The ruler was an empress -- isolated and superb -- and she wandered sleeplessly through miles of gray dilapidated corridors” (81). The ruler, of course, is the builder of these transient palaces, here, recast as female royalty, a “drag empress,” perhaps. Like the lake water of the first chapter, furthermore, the snow castle seems a metaphor of the unfathomable self:

Headlights coming around the curve transected me, so crystalline had I become, a transporence dancing attendance on my imperial insomniac. She penetrated farther and farther into the unmapped mysteries of her palace; tuppity, tuppity; she pushed aside a leather curtain, entered the surprisingly small old throne room. There on a raised chair sat a skeleton, bracelets like manacles on its wrists and a gold hat eating its way into the tiny brown skull. (82)

Thus the narrator effaces his “real” self, calling himself “crystalline” and “transparen[t],” while re-emerging as the empress. The uncanny image of the skeleton, furthermore, seems emblematic of the despoiling of the self to its barest elements (a fundamental nothingness, a mere rack of bones) that White’s narrator is broaching.

Even a gender position that resists the notion of two diametrically opposed genders, however, risks codification in negative stereotypes. That is, the narrator feels the empowerment that he finds in the metaphor of royalty is turned against him in stereotype of the “sissy”: “Unlike my idols I couldn’t play tennis or baseball or swim freestyle. My sports were volleyball and Ping-Pong, my only stroke the side stroke. I was a sissy. My hands were always in the air” (9). White also inserts a little joke at the expense of masculinity, in order to betray the arbitrariness of these stereotypes:

A popular quiz for masculinity in those days asked three questions, all of which I flunked: (1) Look at your nails (a girl extends her fingers, a boy cups his in his upturned palm); (2) Look up (a girl lifts just her eyes, a boy throws back his whole head); (3) Light a match (a girl strikes away from her body, a boy toward -- or perhaps the reverse, I can’t recall). (9)

Thus, when it comes to striking a match, “masculinity” could go either way.

It is this inscription himself as a “sissy,” however, that impels him to “invent[] another life,” as he puts it when he describes his friend Kevin as his opposite: “Kevin was the sort of son who would have pleased my father more than I did,” he explains. “No irony, no superior smirks, no fits of longing or flights of fancy removed [Kevin] from the present. *He hadn’t invented another life; this one seemed good enough*” (9-10, emphasis added). For the narrator, however, typecast as a sissy, and thus as an outsider, this life seems distinctly lacking. He, unlike Kevin, is subject to “fits of longing” and “flights of fancy.” He must be free, therefore, to invent another life. To return to the imaginary playmates with which this discussion began, therefore, Tom-Thumb-Thumb, is just such an invention, another version of the narrator that represents “an irrepressible

male freedom (all the freer because he was a boy and not a man). He needed no one, he'd listen to no reprimand" (61). If, in the figures of the Cottage Cheese, Joan of Arc and the empress, homosexuality is a challenge to gender, in Tom, queerness becomes an ever more uncompromising rebellion. As noted in my introductory chapter, the figure of the rebel is White's favorite metaphor for queerness and, in Tom, we have an incarnation of just such a metaphor. At the same time, however, the narrator makes a point of distinguishing Tom from himself (just as he distinguishes Kevin from himself). Indeed, Tom seems to be typified by otherness, distance, silence and intangibility. "He was just a rustle of dried leaves," White writes, "a panting of quick hot breath behind the honeysuckle, a blur of tanned leg and muddy knees or a distant hoot and holler" (61). As such, Tom becomes emblematic of a lack and a desire. It is a desire, however, tempered by fear. White writes: "I . . . envied his sovereignty, though the price of freedom -- total solitude -- seemed more than I could possibly pay" (61). Tom thus represents a radical principle, a freedom (to invent oneself, to defy or be heedless of labels such as "faggot" or "sissy") for which the narrator is striving, but cannot attain. It is crucial to note, therefore, that the narrator's earliest homosexual desire is an uncanny, unattainable ideal, a figure that hearkens back to that undefinable "queer something" that constantly "withdraws from definition."

Later (chronologically), the technologies of the self become a more distinctly literary endeavor. In the fact of White's novel, we have a testament to this process in writing. As he argues in *Genet*, "writing autobiographical fiction [is] . . . the quintessential form of prolonged introspection" (398). The narrator, however, first encountered the literary impulse in reading. In terms of both reading and writing, then, White repeatedly casts his life, as above, as "fiction in disguise." He recalls:

[L]ast week I had read *Death in Venice* and luxuriated in the tale of a dignified grown-up who died for the love of an indifferent boy my age. This was the sort of power I wanted over an older man. And I awakened

to the idea that a great world existed in which things happened and people changed, took risks -- more, took notice: a world so sensitive, like a grand piano, that even a step or a word could awaken vibrations in its taut strings. (10)

Thus, literature inspires one of those aforementioned flights of fancy which allow the narrator to imagine other lives (in which the disempowered are empowered) and other worlds (in which “things happened and people changed,” an antidote to the “malignant moral climate” (*States of Desire*, 173) of the Midwest, where White was raised). The allusion of the world as a grand piano, furthermore, suggests the power of art to create the world and, for that matter, the self. This creation is an artifice, however. As the narrator notes, later: “I was always reading and often writing but both were passionately abstract activities” (41). The selves and the worlds that literature yields are, therefore, equally abstract. Life, White argues, imitates art, however, and as the narrator plans to run away to New York, he attempts to plot himself in the co-ordinates of “that Balzac novel” in which

a penniless young man had made his fortune on luck, looks, winning ways. New Yorkers, like Parisians, I hoped and feared, would know what to make of me. I carried the plots and atmosphere of fiction about with me and tried to cram random events into those ready molds. But no, truthfully, the relationship was more reciprocal, less rigorous -- life sang art's songs, but art also took the noise life gave and picked it out as a tune (the cocktail pianist obliging the humming drunk). (54)

Thus, we have the tuxedoed, grinning, well-rehearsed artifice of the cocktail pianist directing the shabby, humming drunkenness of reality.

Time and again, therefore, the narrator is cast as a character within a character. As if the world of the novel is an appreciable reality, the narrator consistently elaborates fictions within fiction. For example, when the narrator confides in a minister of his

parents' imminent divorce and is asked if he would rather see his parents stay married, he writes: "The sympathy in his eyes caused me to say, 'Yes.' Once I had, I realized that this single lie had made me into a character in a story . . . 'I want them to -- yes.' I felt my face become more beautiful" (69). The result, therefore, as in the imaginary playmates and the figure of the empress, is a dislocation of self, a removal of self from self, the self as other. The self, therefore, becomes no more than a role the narrator plays:

This precocious role I took in the world was possible only because the world was so unreal, the stage transected by lights, its fourth wall missing in order to afford a view to thronged but shadowy spectators. Everything I did was being watched. If I turned right rather than left, someone took careful notice. If I repeated a magic phrase, the words were recorded and obeyed. Those spectators were certainly real, though I did not know them yet, but what they were watching, this dumb show in which I played such a decisive role -- it was merely a simulacrum of actual feelings. (70)

This passage has many implications: the narrator's feeling that he is being watched seems to be symptomatic of the atmosphere of ideological constraint in 1950s America; the turn to the "right rather than [the] left," accordingly, suggests the political spectrum, and seems to indicate the political trend of the era and the conformity toward which the narrator feels impelled; that the narrator hides his "actual feelings," and provides only a "simulacrum," further suggests the power of conformity and the need he feels to hide his homosexuality.

What is most resonant about this passage, however, is that to the narrator, "the world seemed so unreal," an unreality which is clearly contiguous with the unreality of the self, both of which seem to be indicative of the uncanny strangeness of the novel and its narrator. In his introduction, White writes: "I was determined to keep in some of my eccentricities [many of which we have already noted], even my creepiness, and I was

later stunned to learn that so many readers could identify themselves with such an odd young person" (xii). If White's readers recognize themselves in the novel, it would seem to suggest the author's ability, paraphrasing Kristeva, "to welcome them to that uncanny strangeness, which is as much theirs as it is [his]" (192), and not that White has determined to make his novel palatable and apologetic. Indeed, *A Boy's Own Story*, despite its wholesome title, is characterized by an uncompromising queerness. As Robert Gluck observes:

[T]he book was a bit confusing in 1982. Unapologetic homosexuality was not the only unusual matter it brought to the larger realm of American letters -- its portrayal of aggressive child sexuality, its savaging of the nuclear family, its unapologetic love of surface and preoccupation with artifice. *A Boy's Own Story* didn't jibe completely with the smaller realm of gay community self-description -- healthy, moral, natural -- or nature that had been victimized. (58)

If White's novel presents a counterpoint to the agendas of gay apologists, it certainly "jibes" with Michael Warner's definition of queerness, insofar as "queer politics opposes society itself" (Warner, xxvii). White explores the metaphor of the homosexual as rebel and as outsider, but also, crucially, points out, in Warner's words, "a wide field of normalization...as the site of violence" (xxvi). Indeed, *A Boy's Own Story* hinges upon the narrator's attempts to despoil himself of the societal imperative of normality. Having planned to run away with a hustler he met on the street, the narrator says: "Like a heroin addict or a Communist, I was outside the law" (57). Of course, to embrace the role of outcast, to make the conscious decision to exclude himself from the mainstream of society, is not easy; it is done incrementally, in starts and false starts, and, indeed, becomes part of the *process* of the technologies of the self. Eventually, the narrator is forced to ask the resonant question: "[H]ow could I despise what I needed so much?"

(110). And, hence, there is a gradual acceptance and internalization of a radical otherness. As Bergman, points out, “[f]or White, the unseemly is a way to open up the seamless” (“Introduction,” xiv).

For the narrator, however, the process begins early, before any conscious decision is made. In an early portion of the novel, the narrator discovers another America, foreign to him, economically and racially segregated, to which he refers as “something mysterious and anguished beyond my experience, if not my comprehension” (46). The narrator, from a white (“White”) upper-middle class family, writes of the maid and the handyman, both Black, in his father’s employ. Each influence the narrator in a particular way; Blanche, the maid, inadvertently introduces him to “Negro music,” which was “forbidden,” but which “excited [him]” (46), while Charles, the handyman, would “lecture [him] about the Bible, the Second Coming and Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey and Langston Hughes” (46).²⁵ One night, however, is particularly memorable. An emergency trip into the ghetto to drive Blanche’s daughter to the hospital takes the narrator into a part of the city he has never seen before, indeed, a part of America he has never seen before, and has a profound effect on him, no less for his father’s acute anxiety: “Roll up your windows, for Chrissake, and lock the doors,” he remembers his father shouting, “Dammit, use your heads -- don’t you know this place is dangerous as hell!” (48). The narrator later ascribes his father’s panic to “a night that

²⁵ The impact of “Blanche” and “Charles” on White’s life can also be seen in White’s (unpublished) play, *The Blueboy in Black*, which was produced off-Broadway in 1964. “It was about a black maid and gardener,” White writes in “The Joys of Gay Life,” “who set out to destroy the family they work for. It was produced . . . at the height of the civil rights era, and its presentation of black anger puzzled white members of the audience -- and thrilled black theatergoers” (32).

had dipped disturbingly below the normal temperature of tedium he worked so hard to maintain” (49). In the break of tedium, however, there is, for the narrator, a kind of exhilaration and beauty that White preserves in the details:

[T]he crowds of naked children playing in the tumult of water liberated from a fireplug . . . The smell of something delicious -- charred meat, maybe, and maybe burning honey -- fill[ing] the air . . . [Blanche’s] radio . . . playing that Negro music . . . [Her] two rooms, scrupulously clean in contrast to the squalor of the halls, her parrot squawking under the tea towel draped over the cage . . . the filched wedding photo of my father and stepmother in a nest of crepe-paper flowers . . . (48, 49, 50)

“That had been another city,” White continues, but an interesting choice of words and details -- “liberated,” “delicious,” “[exciting] Negro music” -- makes that city emblematic of what White later refers to as “the enchanting unknown” (171). For White’s narrator, himself a foreigner in the stultifying atmosphere of the American Midwest, otherness, a lack of affinity, becomes, paradoxically, the basis for affinity. White writes in “The Joys of Gay Life”:

I drifted towards blacks at an early age . . . I’m aware I may sound like one of those racists who say ‘Some of my best friends are black,’ but I assure you that the only reason I mention this moment in my life is to establish one point -- that I think my gayness, something I perceived even when I was a child -- that this sense of being different made me feel as though I were a member of a minority group and that I shared *something* with other minorities. (32, emphasis added)

The point he makes in this essay, of linking homosexuality with racial minority, seems equally to be the point he makes in the novel, in the passages discussed above. White, however, clearly does not want to force a minoritizing logic into the connection he draws between American blacks and American queers. Suffice it then to say that he “shared

perhaps no more than a “willful and perverse . . . Otherness” (“Montage,” 819), an affinity through lack between Hughes’ “racial something” and White’s “queer something.”

For White, therefore, the “queer something” manifests itself as a foreignness. He writes that “it was men, not women, who struck me as foreign and desirable” (169), and this collocation of foreignness and desirability becomes crucial to White’s queer theory. It contests, for one thing, the notion of masculinity, as in the following passage:

By day I gave myself over to a covert yearning for men. I’d linger in the locker room . . . Imprisoned under all our layers of [winter clothing] . . . were these tropical bodies . . . [E]ach of these bodies spoke to me with a different music, though *all sounded to me unlike my own and only with the greatest effort could I remember I was longing after my own sex. Indeed, each of these beings seemed to possess his very own sex: the Italian with the hairy butt . . . the blond darling of the football team with the permanent blush in his full cheeks . . .* (153, emphasis added)

As such, the logic of gender, which posits a fundamental sameness between men, a fundamental sameness between women, and a fundamental difference between the two, is radically undermined. White, instead, emphasizes strangeness, both in his dissociation of himself from traditional “masculinity” (an “unnatural” association with masculinity) and in the distinctions he makes between the other boys. Foreignness forms the basis for attraction, just as it is basis of his queerness.

It is in this sense, therefore, that the narrator refers to his homosexuality as a “sexual allure so foreign to my understanding yet so central to my being” (198), and, in this formulation, foreignness is internalized, becomes an essence of self that is not an essence. Thus White continues:

What I daydreamed of was a lover who . . . would prize me for my sexuality which was at once my essence and also an attribute I was totally

unfamiliar with, like the orphan's true name, a magical identity he knows nothing about until the very moment of revelation. The name ennobles the orphan, just as one's sexual nature confers a previously undivined but achingly anticipated *human* nature upon love's candidate. (198)

As long as homosexuality is construed as *unnatural*, however, it fails to confer the "identity," the "human nature," or even the "sexual nature" that the narrator mentions. In an interesting passage, White transforms the pathologizing logic of his psychotherapist into a site of resistance:

In Dr. O'Reilly's version, I was wrestling with my unconscious, an immense, dark brother who seeped around me when I was awake, flowed over me when I slept, who sometimes invaded my body, caused my pen or tongue to slip, who erased a name from the blackboard of memory -- a force with a baby's features, greedy orifices, a madman's cunning and an animal's endurance, a Caliban as quicksilver as Ariel. (175).

Instead of fighting this uncanny strangeness, White's narrator perversely embraces his "dark brother." Indeed, O'Reilly's diagnosis eerily resembles Gluck's impression of the novel, with its "unapologetic homosexuality," "aggressive child sexuality," and "savaging of the nuclear family." Instead of striving for integration, therefore, White's narrator "fight[s] for [his] right to choose [his] exile, [his] destruction" (204). This destruction, however, must not be taken in a negative sense, as, for example, suicide or psychosis (White's narrator certainly never succumbs to either), but seems, rather, closely akin to what Kristeva calls "destructuration": "[U]ncanniness," Kristeva argues, "is a *destructuration of the self*. . . [which] fit[s] in as an *opening* toward the new [as in White's "exile"], an attempt to tally with the incongruous" (188). This "destruc[tura]tion" also echoes Kristeva's contention that "the shattering of repression is what leads one to cross a border and find oneself in a foreign country" (30). As such, metaphorical or not, Kristeva continues, "[e]xile always involves a shattering of the

former body” (30). This will to exile and destruction is, furthermore, a theme that White pursues in *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, the second volume of White’s trilogy.

The Beautiful Room Is Empty opens with (and takes its title from) a passage from Kafka’s letters, a passage, to borrow from one of the characters of the novel, “shimmering with ambiguity” (127):

Sometimes I have the feeling that we’re in one room with two opposite doors and each of us holds the handle of one door, one of us flicks an eyelash and the other is already behind his door, and now the first one has but to utter a word and immediately the second one has closed his door behind him and can no longer be seen. He’s sure to open the door again for it’s a room which perhaps one cannot leave. If only the first one were not precisely like the second, if he were calm, if he would only pretend not to look at the other, if he would slowly set the room in order as though it were a room like any other; but instead he does exactly the same as the other at his door, sometimes even both are behind the doors and the beautiful room is empty. (ix)

Kafka’s own meaning, here, is difficult to discern. In the context of White’s novel, however, the excerpt is highly suggestive. For one, it recalls what Kafka refers to elsewhere as a “fugitive awareness” (“Conversation with the Suppliant,” 14). The room, “which perhaps one cannot leave,” suggests a metaphor for subjectivity inhabited by a self and an other (“the first one” and “the second one”), both, however, fleeting presences, almost absences. The very strangeness of Kafka’s scene, the constant elusiveness of the subject, suggests Kristeva’s “otherness barely touched upon and that already moves away” (3). Finally, that the beautiful room is “empty” suggests, once again, the void at the center of subjectivity, certainly one of the key themes of White’s novel, if not his entire oeuvre.

The Beautiful Room Is Empty is the transitional novel of the trilogy. It is the one that traces the narrator's course from adolescence to adulthood, the episode during which he attends university and moves from the Midwest to New York City, perhaps the most significant initiation the narrator undergoes over the course of the novels. It is thus that the primary motif of *Beautiful Room* is the process the narrator undertakes, already hinted at in *A Boy's Own Story*, of escaping "himself" in order to become ultimately more "himself." It is perhaps for this reason, however, that the novel is the most *angst*-ridden of the three. White demonstrates, in effect, the process of coming to terms with one's own radical otherness. That is, the novel insists that both "himselves" in the equation above are fluid and inconsistent entities. The narrator, furthermore, who had always felt a sense of disjunction from any kind of society, comes to feel, finally, a sense of community in the wake of the Stonewall riots, the culminating point of the novel. It should be noted, however, that the sense of community is not one of legitimacy or authenticity. Indeed, the novel's conclusion reinforces the exclusion of queerness from reality. "It's really our Bastille Day," one of the characters enthuses. "But," the narrator concludes the novel by saying, "we couldn't find a single mention in the press of the turning point of our lives" (228). Instead, the sense of community is one, as in Kristeva, in which the subject can "call [himself] disintegrated in order not to integrate foreigners . . . but rather to welcome them to that uncanny strangeness" (192).

More than any other Edmund White novel, *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* is a *bildungsroman*, insofar as it follows, more traditionally than any other, the protagonist's development, a somewhat linear growth toward a kind of maturity, however ill-defined. Still, in this novel as well, White problematizes the notion of *bildung*, as it were. The parody is certainly more subtle here than it was in *A Boy's Own Story*, but, nonetheless, White takes the narrator of *Beautiful Room* into the future, once again without consolidating a sense of "maturity" or finality.

This protagonist's development, moreover, takes shape as an evolution of criminality, metaphorical or literal. Indeed, White's technologies of the self are manifested here primarily as an articulation of a queerness that, more than ever (that is, more even than in *A Boy's Own Story*), "opposes society itself" (Warner, xxvii).²⁶ This challenge begins as a challenge to the implied *savoir* of society. The narrator notes, for example, that "'common sense' was the name my father and his friends gave their smugness" (7). Insofar as identity is, as we have noted, "provoked by what we oppose," White's narrator thus refuses to partake in this commonality and articulates, instead, an "uncommon sense," even an "uncommon sensibility."

Nonetheless, the narrator begins the story as "a fearful, conservative boy" (10). Thus even as the novel has a recurring theme of self-hatred and fear, to read the novel (as Koponen does in *Embracing a Gay Identity*) only as a document of self-hatred would be a grievous error insofar as White, once again, continually implies a significant distance between the young narrator and older author. In a sense, there are two narrative voices simultaneously at work: that of the young narrator struggling for self-acceptance and that of the author, two decades removed, recounting the process. Indeed, having written it in the wake of AIDS, White's intentions for the novel are nothing less than radical: "I hoped the book would remind gay readers of the need to fight lest we fall back into the self-hating, gay-bashing past" (*The Farewell Symphony*, 405). As such, the novel represents the process of queering, through which the aforementioned "conservative boy" is radicalized. Moreover, because the narrator's conservatism is based on fear, and not,

²⁶ On a related note, on the topic of the technologies of self, that is, the transformations of self and the role-playing involved in sadomasochism, White asks the pertinent question: "Could it be that gays don't want to be respectable, that S and M is a nostalgia for the criminal past?" ("Sado Machismo," 60).

for example, on “common sense,” or a “smugness” like his father’s, we already have a strange kind of conservatism, already tempered by dissent and discontent. Insofar as White himself, in his epigraph, suggests a debt to Kafka, we might be well served to draw a point of comparison between White’s narrator and Kafka’s disaffected protagonists. “No one’s afraid but me,” Kafka writes in “Conversation with the Suppliant” (16), a sentiment that seems uncannily suited to White’s narrator, not only for the element of fear, but also for the element of isolation and alienation. Kafka writes, also, in a passage mentioned above: “There had never been a time in which I have been convinced from within myself that I am alive. You see, I have only such a *fugitive awareness* of things around me that *I always feel they were once real and are now fleeting away*” (14, emphasis added). This passage, it seems, would have made an equally suitable epigraph to the novel; like Kafka’s speaker, White’s narrator seems typified by a sense of deferral. Almost echoing the passage above, White writes: “I’d come to see every aspect of my being as vague and shifting, and in that very cloudiness had lain my definition: I was the boy who hadn’t started living yet” (82).

If, above, I linked a “fugitive awareness” to Kristeva’s “uncanny strangeness,” I should like to draw, as well, a link to the aforementioned theme of criminality. White’s technologies of the self as criminal are crucial insofar as they open up many important metaphorical and theoretical possibilities. They reflect a subjectivity that is always volatile, dissident, fugitive, that is, a subject position that is not a position but a lack of position, an escape, primarily, of the constraint and the conformist atmosphere of middle America of the 1950s. “That was a time and place,” White argues,

where there was little consumption of culture and no dissent, not in appearance, belief, or behavior . . . Everyone ate the same food, wore the same clothes, and people decided whether they were Democrats or Republicans. The three most heinous crimes known to man were Communism, heroin addiction, and homosexuality. (10)

It is in this context, therefore, that White writes, “I was a sort of criminal; I’d chosen crime, sex crime” (148). And even if, here, he equates homosexuality with crime on a metaphorical level, there is also a very literal dimension to the equation. White writes of “a series of arrests of homosexuals in the toilets” at his university (149), from which one of the narrator’s friends receives “a seven-year suspended sentence, provided he reported every month to his parole officer and saw a state-appointed psychotherapist three times a week” (150). As such, White examines how what Foucault calls “technologies of power” are deployed against queers. Foucault defines these technologies as those which “determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or *domination*,²⁷ an objectivizing of the subject” (“Technologies of the Self,” 18).

An even more explicit example of a “technology” at work is provided when the narrator’s mother, having discovered that her son is gay, would like him to submit to “interesting treatments” in which “they implant female hormones in your leg...because estrogens neutralize your sex drive altogether” (148). She explains the “logical” and “desired” end of this treatment by claiming that “they neuter you and soon you’re free to lead a normal life” (148). White continues: “Her right hand made a small rounded motion in the air when she said the word *normal*. I could see the pure technology of the hormone pack appealed to her practical side” (148). Of course, White’s narrator refuses to submit to such a technology of domination:

²⁷ I place emphasis on “domination,” here, because insofar as I consider the technologies of the self to be technologies of power in themselves (and so we must, if we accept Foucault’s contention that “power is everywhere”), I shall heretofore refer to the “technologies of power” as “technologies of domination” in order to distinguish them from the technologies of the self.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I said, but a sudden chill grasped me, exactly as though my lungs were being squeezed by cold hands. My mother went on to ask if I thought I should be put in a psychiatric hospital -- and the hands squeezed tighter. It occurred to me that this woman, who was as familiar and shameful to me as my own body, could take it into her head to lock me up. (148)

Thus, the introduction of sexuality into the economy of juridico-medical domination places the narrator in a very real danger; if the ideological climate of his time and place has long constrained his desire to be “free to make [him]self into any form [he] wanted,” here, the possibility of incarceration threatens even physical freedom.

He has also clearly made a point, however, in his mother’s own words, of revealing the impossibly flawed logic of the “freedom to be normal.” What is “freedom,” after all, if it does not include the freedom to be abnormal or, moreover, the freedom to question the viability of either category, to denounce normalization as the site of an extremely pervasive ideological violence? Still, even as he acutely feels the impact of this violence, the judgements and reproaches of his parents, his psychotherapist, and the world at large, the narrator claims that “something wild and free in [him] didn’t want to give in to them” (149). Instead, the narrator would have the world give in to him: “I never doubted the world could make me happy, if only it would give in” (29). Later in the novel he finds a modicum of validation from his sister, who had long teased him for being a “sissy”: “I discovered that my sister no longer thought I was a weirdo but someone who’d had the courage to lead a free life” (220-21).

In the contexts of both criminality and freedom, therefore, it is deeply significant that the narrator describes himself as “un-American” (119). It becomes a cruel irony that in “the land of free and the home of the brave,” “freedom” is, indeed, as the narrator’s mother suggests, no more than the freedom to be normal. Real freedom, and the courage required to live it, becomes “un-American.” This self-definition is, moreover, clearly a

deliberate thumbing of the nose to Senator Joseph McCarthy's notorious House of Un-American Activities (particularly in a novel that is full of what we might euphemistically call "un-American activities"), but also a resistance to what it meant to be "American" at that time:

It felt, at least to me, like a big gray country of families on drowsy holiday, all stuffed in one oversized car and discussing the mileage they were getting and the next restroom stop they'd be making, a country where no one else was like me -- or worse, where there was no question of talking about the self and its discontent, isolation, self-hatred, and burning ambition for sex and power. (11)

Thus white contends that American-ness is not only anti-freedom but, on some level, distinctly anti-philosophical and that, in this sense, the technologies of the self are already, inherently, a revolt and a resistance.

The un-American self, moreover, presents a challenge to nationality and, most importantly, posits the narrator's inherent foreignness. "[B]y explicitly, obviously, ostensibly occupying the place of difference," Kristeva observes, "the foreigner challenges both the identity of the group and his own" (42). Accordingly, as above, the narrator often writes of the isolation that is borne of this sense of foreignness. "I was alone with my sexuality," the narrator notes, at one point (58). Occasionally, this alienation results in the kind of amnesic role-playing that we have observed in *Forgetting Elena*: "I distrusted everyone . . . Of course heterosexuals had to be placated and amused. When I was with them, I memorized their reticences and enthusiasms, the subjects they would guffaw over and those they ignored, embarrassed. But *I felt not at all attached to any other human being*" (149). Thus, our narrator exhibits the kind of alienation that Kristeva detects in Camus' stranger (another criminal): "Meursault's words bear witness to an interior distance: 'I am never *at one* with men, nor with things,'

is what he seems to say. ‘No one is akin to me, each word is less the sign of a thing than that of my distrust for them’” (27).

Like *A Boy's Own Story*, therefore, *Beautiful Room* is characterized by an “anguished but not apologetic” (“On the Line,” xv) queerness. Much of this comes from the influence upon the narrator of a character named Lou, who “despised squares” (132), “found anything extreme to be ‘beautiful’ or ‘moving,’ even ‘heart-breaking,’ and [whose] favorite phrase was ‘shimmering with ambiguity’” (126-27). “I loved his own ambiguity,” the narrator writes, “shimmering from male to female” (134). Still, because of the time period in which the novel is set, the late fifties and early sixties, “Lou recognized, as everyone had to, that homosexuality was sick” (131-32). He surprises the narrator, however, by perversely “insist[ing] on the sickness” (132). As such, Lou encourages in the narrator an uncompromising and unrepentant queerness and a thorough resistance to the “regimes of the normal.” “[T]hrough some curious alchemy,” White writes, “he’d redeemed our illness by finding beauty in it” (132). One night, passing a women’s prison, Lou and the narrator see two women calling out to their lovers on the inside:

“Look at them, Bunny (Lou’s nickname for the narrator), they’re so heroic these dykes, they don’t give a shit about all these Village Beatniks and dull-normals, they just want to wail out their love, keep that prison cunt faithful till release, ah!” and Lou pressed a broken hand to his chest as though he were a Saint Sebastian pierced by melancholy, “*it’s so beautiful, this beautiful poetry of gay life.*” (163, emphasis added).

Thus Lou confirms something that the narrator has previously suspected, that “to be an outsider [is] not a cause for shame but a condition to be capitalized on, even capitalized” (36).

This opposition to society, however, also manifests itself as an alienation from the self. The period described in *Beautiful Room* includes the narrator’s university years,

during which time he majored in Chinese and became heavily influenced by Buddhism. Of course, the narrator's Buddhism is only an intellectual, theoretical one, insofar as Buddhism demands a rejection of desire, a theological injunction White's narrator clearly refuses to heed. It is crucial to note, as well, that this theoretical Buddhism is what leads the narrator to a distinctly Kristevan position and to the uncannily coincidental assertion that he is a "stranger to [him]self" (23). The narrator claims that "the Buddhist doctrine of the non-soul, the *annata*, attracted me so much, because it suggested I was potentially everything and actually nothing" (82). The aforementioned amnesia, which impeded the narrator's connection to the world, thus also problematizes identity, "[does] away even with the serviceable illusion of continuity" (147), and leads to White's contention that "there is no self. We're only one discrete state of consciousness succeeding another, and our so-called memories are just deceptions invented now . . . and now . . . and now" (147). Likewise, Kristeva argues that, "[a]vailable, freed of everything, the foreigner has nothing, he is nothing" (12).

Still, the narrator claims: "[M]y pride insisted I could be whatever I chose. Every morning the *tabula was rasa*" (82). He continues: "I could wake up one morning gay or straight -- or as nothing. I was afraid to make a choice of any kind" (82). This indecision is clearly caused by the fact that the choice of complete freedom is a difficult one to make. As we saw in *A Boy's Own Story*, the narrator envies and fears the "sovereignty" of his imaginary playmate, Tom-Thumb-Thumb, because "the price of freedom -- total solitude -- seemed more than [he] could possibly pay" (61). The refusal to make a choice, however, is, in itself, a crucial choice which leaves the narrator open to all possibilities ("potentially everything but actually nothing"); it signals a resistance to conclusion and finality and a dedication to process and transience. As Kristeva asserts: "Being alienated from myself, as painful as that may be, provides me with that exquisite distance within which perverse pleasure begins, as well as the possibility of my imagining and thinking, the impetus of my culture. Split identity, kaleidoscope of

identities” (13-14). As such, we return to the theme of a “fugitive awareness,” an appreciation of the self that must be constantly revised because it is always fleeting, providing a gap in which White can find “perverse pleasure,” and “the possibility of . . . imagining and thinking.”

The Farewell Symphony, the final novel of the trilogy, is White’s longest and most magisterial, and yet, in certain ways, it is a failure. For several years before its publication in 1997, White had been promising a novel “about the AIDS era” (“Introduction: ‘On the Line’,” xii). In “The Personal Is Political” (a speech given 1993, published as an essay in 1994), he says: “[M]y near total silence in the face of AIDS, with the exception of my stories in *The Darker Proof*,²⁸ I consider reprehensible, a lapsus I’m trying belatedly to fill with the novel I’m writing now, *The Farewell Symphony*” (367). Though the novel is in many ways a remarkable achievement, it does not exactly fulfill its promise; generally, White does little to fill that particular lapsus. The novel was written largely in the wake of the AIDS-related death, at the age of 32, of Hubert Sorin, White’s lover of five years. Indeed, the novel begins with Hubert, renamed Brice: “I’m beginning this book on All Saints’ Day in Paris, six months after Brice’s death” (3). Even so, the novel concerns itself only marginally with him, in brief incursions of the present into White’s narrative of the past. Thus White’s narrator confesses in one of these passages: “I have the worst amnesia about [Brice], about our years together, which I suppose is a normal analgesic . . . although for a novelist it’s scary, especially an autobiographical novelist like me. I’m supposed to remember everything” (321-22).

²⁸ *The Darker Proof: Stories from a Crisis*, which appeared 1988, collected stories from White and English novelist Adam Mars-Jones. White’s three contributions reappear, along with six previously uncollected stories, in *Skinned Alive* (1995).

Accordingly, White warns his reader from the very beginning that his narrative may well end up lacking in this respect:

I met Brice five years before he died -- but I wonder whether I'll have the courage to tell his story in this book. The French call a love affair a "story," *une histoire*, and I see getting to it, putting it down, exploring it, *narrating* it as a challenge I may well fail. If I do fail, don't blame me. Understand that even writers, those professional exhibitionists, have their moments of reticence. (4)

And in the end, this passage becomes prophecy. White tries to tell the story, but only barely "get[s] to it," and "putting it down, exploring it, *narrating* it" is a challenge he indeed fails. After the novel's opening passage, White promptly takes his reader back to 1968; the bulk of the novel, thereafter, is set in the seventies. Thus, just as White said in defense of *Beautiful Room* (published in 1988, well into the AIDS era, but mentioning it not at all), so too would it be "anachronistic" (405) to mention AIDS throughout most of *The Farewell Symphony*.

When White finally does get to the AIDS era, a laboriously detailed novel suddenly becomes hastily, even precipitously, narrated; having spent the first ten chapters narrating his life from 1968 through to 1980, he spends only one final chapter on the years from 1981 to 1994. (It should be mentioned also that he skips approximately 8 years, and moves directly from the death of his closest friend Joshua [a character based on literary critic David Kalstone] in 1986 to that of Brice in 1994. This lapse of time certainly allows for more details about the remaining years, but, in itself, is a further indication of White's accelerated narrative.) It is fitting, then, that White's title is taken from Haydn's symphony of the same name. White writes, in a particularly self-conscious passage (how many novels explain so bluntly the origin of their titles?), as so many of his friends, acquaintances and associates die, one by one: "I kept thinking of Haydn's *The Farewell Symphony*. In the last movement, more and more of the musicians get up to

leave the stage, blowing out their candles as they go. In the end just one violinist is still playing” (405). Accordingly, it is not until White’s own “last movement,” that his own players begin to leave the stage. The first 363 pages of the novel scarcely mention AIDS at all, except in the aforementioned incursions of the present into the narrative. Thus, even in this, White’s novel of the AIDS era, the disease is a topic White constantly defers. Such is also the case in *Our Paris: Sketches from Memory*, a memoir that White wrote and for which Hubert Sorin provided illustrations. The book was composed during Sorin’s illness but not published until after his death. White, with almost incredible immediacy, writes in his introduction: “Hubert Sorin, my lover . . . died just two hours ago in the Polyclinique du Sud in Marrakesh” (vii). And while the book is indeed a memoir of the authors’ last years together, it is by no means an AIDS memoir. *Our Paris* suggests, as does *The Farewell Symphony*, that White believes it more important to tell the story of lives than the story of deaths.

As many reviewers point out, however, White makes a significant error in his reference to Haydn’s *The Farewell Symphony*. “Haydn scored his piece so that *two* violins were left on stage at the end,” Christopher Benfey writes (12), while White seems to purposefully reduce this number to one. As he argues early in the novel, “[T]otal isolation [is] our natural state” (99), and we can thus consider White’s reluctance to discuss Hubert / Brice with respect to this distinguishing of his work from Haydn’s. White’s narrator, insofar as he begins the novel with its conclusion, knows throughout the narrative that in the end he will be the lone violin player. To tell the story, however, to reduce, in the narrative, the closing duet to a solo, proves almost too much to bear. On the third to last page of the novel, having deferred it for so long, White finally returns to the story with which he began, but only barely. Writing of a final trip to Morocco, where Brice becomes fatally ill, White breaks off his story even as he summarizes its heart-rending conclusion:

I can't go on. I can't tell this story, neither its happy beginning nor its tragic end, the all-night ride through the snowy Atlas mountains in a freezing ambulance, Brice's angry hateful words to me, the look of his face, dead, when I awakened at dawn, his mouth open, his eyes startled, as though he'd seen something dreadful and I'd not been there, conscious, to share it with him -- (411)

To return to White's link between love affair and story ("*une histoire*"), the end of the love affair necessarily signals the end of the story.

However, though White's narrative avoids AIDS as long as it can, we must, nonetheless, consider that he frames his story with the syndrome he can barely discuss and the death he can do no more than mention. As such, the entire narrative of the past that takes place in the interim is cast in this light. White's memories, framed as they are, become, in the words of critic John M. Clum, "intimations of mortality" (210). Even at the risk of anachronism, White anticipates the future that has become the past:

[W]e were big bucolic gay boys and our brief transactions were redolent of summer camp, irresponsible as a groan heard in a shadowy forest or as transfiguring as the mystery of light glowing on a lake glimpsed through a rood-screen of leaves. We were engaged in a game of touch-tag far removed from the possibility of giving -- or taking -- a life. (37)

As such, *The Farewell Symphony* bears out Clum's observation that "a major theme of gay AIDS literature is what to do with a lost past" (201).

There is thus something clearly more purposeful in White's reluctance and deferral. White seems to constitute AIDS as a gap in his narrative, just as the disease itself creates a gap in his own life. That is, he defers a textual treatment of AIDS only to fill the gap with the stories of lives, friendships, love affairs, which the illness will, in the end, evacuate. White's response to the AIDS epidemic, then, must be understood as a literary monument to the victims of AIDS and its survivors. In the final chapter, the

disease unravels the story he has told as much as it undoes the lives he has portrayed; for White, it would seem, AIDS is as much a negation of text as it is a negation of life. It is in this sense that we can understand White's treatment (or, more rightly, non-treatment) of AIDS in terms of Lee Edelman's essay, "The Plague of Discourse: Politics, Literary Theory, and 'AIDS'."²⁹ As Edelman argues, "there is no available discourse on 'AIDS' that is not itself diseased" (92). Citing a number of disparate sources, from Plato's *Phaedrus*, Derrida on Plato, and H.D. on Freud, to contemporary "AIDS activists" such as Larry Kramer (*The Normal Heart*) and David Black (*The Plague Years*), Edelman demonstrates that

the unremittingly hysterical terms within which the Western discussion of "AIDS" has been conducted reflect an untenable, but politically manipulable, belief that we can separate biological science, and the social policy that draws on that science, from the instability and duplicity that literary theory locates in the operations of language . . . [T]he terms of the discourse that properly *constitutes* "AIDS" are [therefore] implicated in ideological operations that can work at cross-purposes to the explicit political agendas of those who attempt to deploy them against the dominant institutions of power. (80)

Thus, Edelman concludes that "any discourse on 'AIDS' must inscribe itself in a volatile and uncontrollable field of metaphoric contention in which its language will necessarily

²⁹ Edelman, throughout his essays, places the acronym "AIDS" in quotation marks "in order to resist," as he says, "its reduction to a singular, coherent, medical phenomenon, and to call attention, instead, to its status as the ideologically determined site at which a variety of medical, social, and political crises historically converge" (255n). Since my reading of White is aligned with this same resistance, I shall hereafter do the same.

find itself at once appropriating ‘AIDS’ for its own tendentious purposes and becoming subject to appropriation by the contradictory logic of homophobic ideology” (91-92). White’s silence, accordingly, signals a resistance to what Edelman calls the “plague of discourse.” In the essay “Esthetics and Loss,” White anticipates Edelman’s argument and summarizes his own position. “AIDS,” he argues, “is not one more item in a sequence, but a rupture in meaning itself” (216). If, as Edelman argues in a second essay, “The Mirror and the Tank,” “AIDS,” as a signifier, “both connotes and denominates a dense and contradictory array of medical diagnoses, social experiences, projective fantasies, and ‘political’ agendas,” it therefore “resists our attempts to inscribe it as a manageable subject of writing” (94). What I have equivocally called White’s “failure,” then, results from this unmanageability; he discusses “AIDS,” but only when he must, and resists, as much as possible, the compulsion to discourse upon it, refuses to find meaning in it, and, most importantly, refuses to posit an identity with it.

White’s reluctance suggests, moreover, the incomprehensibility of the illness with which the gay community felt targeted. Highly emphasizing the “rupture in meaning,” White begins his writing of the “AIDS” era at its very beginning, before there could even have been a pretense of any real knowledge surrounding the illness, but notes, simultaneously, the “plague of discourse” already spreading. His final chapter begins with an ominous passage:

Somebody at my gym became ill. He’d been a big guy, always snapping towels at buttocks in the dressing room, and he’d had a real mouth on him, but then he came down with something the doctors couldn’t diagnose. Slightly raised brownish-purple spots appeared on his skin. One doctor said they resembled a disease that only old Italian and Jewish men got. The poor guy at the gym just seemed to deflate in front of our eyes . . . He stopped joking, then he stopped talking, then he stopped coming. Someone said he had “gay-related immunodeficiency” (GRID). That was

in 1981. It seemed too horrible to be true, a disease aimed specifically at gay men and contracted through gay sex. (364)

And, of course, it *was* too horrible to be *true*: “GRID” is an ideologically loaded lie that is clearly emblematic of how disease can be deployed against specific groups. Is the illness “gay-related” or something that “only old Italian and Jewish men got”? White’s point is that both options are equally preposterous. White proposes therefore a kind of anti-discourse that, by delving into the misrepresentations of it, treats “AIDS” with negative definition, not what it is, but what it is not. Indeed, at the risk being tasteless, White broaches the horror of ignorance (a grotesque parody of the homophobic deployment of “AIDS”) in the words of his own narrator: “When a German news magazine called me and asked me to comment on the disease, I said, ‘It’s caused by mustaches. If every gay man shaved, it would be cured tomorrow’” (367). Not to let his narrator go unrebuked, however, White writes, in words that seem to summarize Edelman’s argument: “After I hung up, my new lover, Ned, said, ‘Don’t make a fool of yourself. *You have no business making pronouncements, especially frivolous ones, when people are dying*’” (367, emphasis added).

Insofar as “AIDS” is unmanageable, therefore, White’s main thematic concerns lie elsewhere. As he writes early in the novel, “[l]ove and childhood are the writer’s two great themes” (34). While he tackles childhood in the two previous installments of the trilogy, in *The Farewell Symphony* he broaches the topic of love, which, in itself, becomes scarcely manageable. We have already noted White’s inability to speak of his relationship Brice, but, in light of this silence, he seems to double Brice with a previous great love, Sean, who was first introduced in *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*. The topic of love, however, returns White to his most perennial theme, the self and the intractable problems of identity. The death of Sean is also recorded at the end of the novel, an event that prompts White to reflect: “Sean was the abyss into which all of me had fallen”

(412). The key question of the latest novel, therefore, is one that White had originally posed in his short story, "An Oracle":

Now [George] was dead and Ray had to go on with his own life, but he scarcely knew how or why to pick up the threads. The threads were bare, worn thin, so that he could see right through what should have been the thick stuff of everyday comings and goings, could see pale blue vistas.

"You must look out for yourself," George had always said. But what self?

(116)

Thus, the effect of "AIDS" on White's writing is at once a renewed focus on the self, but also a de-centering of that self, or a splintering of self into a multiplicity, and, therefore, a dismantling of the politics of identity that informed gay "liberation." Like Ray in "An Oracle," therefore, the narrator of *The Farewell Symphony* is "having an identity crisis precipitated by [his lover's] death" (124), and as such, the technologies of the self remain a cornerstone of White's autobiographical fiction.

However, if *The Farewell Symphony* is a novel by way of a memoir, an archaeology of memory, this crisis of identity also manifests itself in the narrator's aforementioned "amnesia," which leads to a kind of betrayal of Brice's memory. "I didn't like my familiar self looked at by old friends," the narrator confesses, "I wanted to discover someone new and be someone new to him" (121). The loss of a loved one thus forces an erasure and a redefinition of self. In a sense, a new story requires a new character and each time *une histoire* comes to an end, the "identity," that had been fashioned in the relationship with that other person, is dismantled. After his break-up with "Fox" (Christopher Cox) he writes, "I felt oddly weightless" (370). He makes similar comments at the end of the longest and most troubled love affair of his life, the death of his father: "The closed, snivelling, resentful world of childhood had at last ended, the smouldering sense of rebellion against authority, the petty urge to wound, the

cringing fear of reprisals. It had been replaced by -- well, by space. Empty, untenanted night" (361).

It becomes clear, therefore, that White's purpose is not to devalue any of these relationships, particularly the narrator's relationship with Brice. Indeed, the poignancy of that relationship, and of White's loss, is revealed when he writes: "Brice had been the first man I'd loved at the same time he loved me" (410). The effect of the loss can be seen if we recall the passage from *Caracole*, cited above, in which White writes of the wisdom of "learning to fall freely." "[W]e are in full flaming descent," White argues, "[b]ut our speed is slow if constant and some things and people are falling at the same rate; relative to them we don't seem to be moving at all. But then something we are holding . . . accelerates and slides out of our grasp -- and suddenly we glimpse blackest, rushing night through the gap" (128). If Brice and the narrator were "falling at the same rate," that is, in love with each other at the same time, Brice's death, his sliding out of the narrator's grasp, must necessarily be, for the narrator, a "glimpse [of] blackest, rushing night." Indeed, the entire "AIDS" era seems of have been such and it is perhaps for this reason that his final chapter is itself a swift, sudden eclipse.

It is in anticipation of this eclipse, then, that White writes at the beginning of his novel, "Everything I've lived through in the last five years had changed me -- whitened my hair, made me a fat, sleepy old man, matured me, finally, *but also emptied me out*" (4, emphasis added). As such, maturation, for White, is not a completion or consolidation of identity, but a confirmation of the void. He notes, at one point: "I felt grown up now and experienced the gain in maturity as a loss" (361). White, however, as a theoretical Buddhist, has always prized the void as a paradoxical "essence" of self. As he writes of a statue of a bodhisattva he sees at a museum in Paris: "[I]t was sacred if to

be sacred meant to be Nothing at all” (9).³⁰ Later in the novel, he addresses Brice directly:

Brice, I was so focused on you for our five years together that when you died I felt an enormous silence descend all around me. At the time I said, “It’s as though I’ve been in a totally absorbing play for years and then once, by chance, I wandered out to the edge of the stage, the apron, and then the asbestos fire curtain came ringing down, thud, and there I was, alone, in an immense, echoing theater, separated from everything I cared about.” (120)

Here, White makes more explicit the aforementioned link between Brice and Sean, insofar as he seems to anticipate the metaphor of love as the “abyss into which [one falls].” Once again, moreover, White describes a sense of emptiness borne of isolation (as above, “our natural state”), and, here again, the metaphor of the play lends his life an element of unreality and artifice. The theme of “Nothingness,” moreover, is suggested by the notion of the play performed for no one. We might wonder of this life/play if, like the tree that falls in the forest while no one is around, it makes any sound at all. What once seemed in reach, therefore, has been, once again, deferred. If the 1970s seemed to the gay community of which White was a part a time of consolidation, of authentication, of definitive forward movement, the “AIDS” era that was to follow unhinged that appearance of security. In “Esthetics and Loss,” White describes the effect as a “repatriat[ion] to [his] lonely adolescence, the time when [he] was alone with his writing and felt weird about being queer” (213). This renewed sense of solitude seems to be the direct result of the aforementioned “rupture in meaning”; as Kristeva notes: “‘Solitude’

³⁰ It is only in this sense that I permit myself to use the word “essence”: If the essence of self is “Nothing,” as White posits, there is, clearly, nothing essential about the self.

is perhaps the only word that has no meaning. Without other, without guidepost, it cannot bear the difference that, alone, discriminates and makes sense" (12). Thus White prefigures the sense of uncanny strangeness that remains with him throughout adulthood.

At the same time, the limitations of liberation (as discussed in first chapter), are thrown into high relief. The "AIDS" crisis demands, as White notes, a renewed radicalism that "liberation" had tempered over the course of the previous decade. Of the mainstream, homophobic response to "AIDS," however, White writes: "After gay liberation, we'd dared to believe that we might be blazing a new trail; now we saw that our trail had run out, swallowed up by a forest of indifference" (389). As such, the self and, more than ever, the body, insofar as each is subject to renewed ideological and extra-ideological violence, are reconstituted as highly contested discursive sites, as entities that constantly "withdraw from definition." Appropriate to my own reading of White, Foucault's influence strongly informs White's own reconsideration of the queer self: "I had just begun reading Foucault," White writes,

and I interpreted his writing to mean that since we had a word, *homosexuality* (or for that matter, the word *sexuality* itself), we assumed that those words must refer to real things, to a unified and constant phenomenon, whereas in fact this very act of nomination was only an arbitrary way of creating entities by naming them. (365)

Queerness is, therefore, not constant, not to be unified, and, clearly, not to be normalized. The end of "liberation," as it were, implies that queerness becomes, more than ever before, a site of resistance, a radical position, but also a side to be taken, a choice to be made: "Whereas I'd once imagined I'd chosen a world of artists and homosexuals by default," White claims, "I now saw I didn't want to belong to the mandarinat even if I could" (375).

As such, though it deals largely with an era of gay triumph and "exalt[ation]," as White refers to the 1970s in "Esthetics and Loss," *The Farewell Symphony* is largely, by

means of technologies of the self, a study in transience and deferral. As in White's own commentary on Nabokov, White styles himself in *Farewell* as a "high priest on sensuality and desire, [a] magus who knows everything about what is at once the most solemn and elusive of all our painful joys -- the stab of erotic pleasure, that emblem of transitory happiness on earth" ("Nabokov, Beyond Parody," 168). To this end, White quotes, in *The Farewell Symphony*, a resonant line from Wallace Stevens: "'Death is the mother of beauty,' in acknowledgement" as he says, "that what makes the beautiful heart-rending is our certainty that it is transitory" (210). And as such, love and sex are, for White, emblematic of that transience and deferral: "Love," he claims, "was the great bitter school for me, since it gave me something the minute it took it away" (30). This passage should not be taken to mean, however, that White is railing against transience. Indeed, impermanence is, in itself, crucial to White's ongoing technologies of the self. "I had a priest-like respect for my inner chaos" (142), he writes at one point, and he follows the quote from Stevens by saying:

I wasn't frightened by transience but by tepidness, the feeling that God was no longer taking pains but letting things go to seed. Chipped nails, sloppy proofreading, unreplaced burnt-out bulbs, *received ideas*, *the unexamined life* -- these were the sources of my fear. (210, emphasis added)

Thus, examining ideas and examining one's own life are cited as ways of fighting off the demon of tepidness. To return, then, to the opening statements of my opening chapter, it is clear that, for White, transience is an intellectual necessity and that White is above all a queer philosopher. "In looking at those writers I admired," White observes, "I decided they'd all tackled subjects they were in two minds about. Only dullards knew what they thought about every subject" (71-72). In the trilogy, the subject White tackles is himself, one that he is clearly "in two [or several] minds about."

White's technologies thus reveal the self as transient art. The self, cast in metaphors of art, becomes an artifact that is to be constantly reworked. We have already noted the link between "love affair" and narrative, but White claims, moreover, that "[his] life was an ongoing novel" (218), and, certainly, in the act of writing he has transformed his life into a series of ongoing novels. White, seemingly speaking of himself in the third person, also notes that

[t]he writer's vanity holds that everything that happens to him is "material." He views everything from a distance and even when the cops arrest him for sucking a cock through a glory hole he smiles faintly and thinks, "Idea for Story." As he submerges himself in the bilge of everyday life, all its disorder and tedium, he holds his thumb out at an arm's length and squints, as though to get a take on this patch of swarming nonsense. (211)

Once again, therefore, art and life are placed in radical proximity, almost into a parasitic relationship in which each feeds on the other, to such an extent that they become one and the same; for White, life is art and art is life. He concludes the paragraph cited above by saying: "Each new occurrence offers a new end to the story, in the light of which everything that preceded must be revised" (211). White thus refers, ambiguously, to both his life and his novel as "this fiery posthumous existence I'm inventing" (121).

As suggested above, *The Farewell Symphony* is also deeply linked with Kristeva's "stranger" or "foreigner," and, here, in a more literal sense than ever before. As Kristeva argues, "[a] secret wound, often unknown to himself, drives the foreigner to wandering" (5). During the period tackled in the novel, White, already a Midwesterner in New York City and gay man in a heterosexist world, undertakes several willful, literal exiles, including extended trips to Rome and Venice and eventually a long-term relocation in Paris. If White argues that "[i]n Rome and New York [he]'d fashioned a new personality for [him]self" (158), these relocations also clearly represent a willfully

perverse desire for foreignness. He writes of his time in Rome: “Living internationally as an expatriate invariably promotes a double vision [and] a queasy sense of the arbitrariness of all conventions” (98). Here, “living internationally” must not be considered as equivalent to “living abroad,” that is, away from the United States, but rather, as a more complex, intermediate state, living, literally, between nations; in Kristeva’s words, “he is from nowhere, from everywhere, citizen of the world, cosmopolitan” (30). With respect to France, moreover, it seems fitting, then, that Kristeva notes:

Nowhere is one *more* a foreigner than in France And yet, one is nowhere *better* as a foreigner than in France. Since you remain incurably different and unacceptable, you are the object of fascination: one notices you, one talks about you, one hates you or admires you, or both at the same time. But you are not an ordinary, negligible presence, you are not a Mr. or Mrs. Nobody. You are a problem, a desire — positive or negative, never neutral. (39)

Accordingly, White claims that he does not “want to be entirely at home in any world” (144). Venice, as well, becomes a key location insofar as it is emblematic, for White, of kind of world between worlds: “Venice was both stone and water, permanence and transience, the fluid element shaping but never wholly dissolving the solid” (393).

In many ways, moreover, the self-imposed exile is a desire to escape origins. For White, relocation and travel are an escape from the conservative Midwest. As Kristeva argues:

The foreigner, precisely — *like a philosopher at work* — does not give the same weight to “origins” as common sense does. He has fled from that origin — family, blood, soil — and, even though it keeps pestering, enriching, hindering, exciting him, or giving him pain, and often all of it at

once, the foreigner is its courageous and melancholy betrayer. (29,
emphasis added)

We have already noted, in the section on *Beautiful Room*, White's disdain for "common sense." As such, White's betrayal of origins manifests itself, in *The Farewell Symphony*, not only in travel and exile but in a devotion to otherness and as a revolt against his father's "standard of unexceptionability" (351). White, by contrast, chooses to "flee respectability" (310), and to embrace a "gay life [that] is always aberrant" (92). "I still felt I was an outsider," he claims, "a status I clung to" (188). Thus White, himself long a victim of the self-hatred caused by the societal imperative against homosexuality, and later seeing some of his friends and lovers also afflicted with that self-hatred, comes to reject it in *The Farewell Symphony*, and comes to define queerness as foreignness, in a phrase that could have been borrowed from Kristeva herself. "I . . . had a hard time comprehending this rotting away of the soul from within just because of something that wasn't there: *a lack, a refusal, a departure, silence*" (33, emphasis added), to which list we might add the aforementioned "abyss." This embrace of a gay life and gay love is, therefore, the paradoxical embrace of something that always remains out of reach; it is a theoretical position; it is to be, paraphrasing Kristeva, "a [*queer*] philosopher at work" (29).

Writing, of course, is the primary mode of this work, and, therefore, like exile and queerness, writing becomes crucial to the exercise of foreignness. And herein lies the importance of White's novels. In a deeply resonant passage, he discusses writing as a meeting with a stranger:

I wanted to see if the old ambition of fiction to say the most private,
uncoded, previously unformulated things, might still work, might once
again collar a stranger, look him in the eye, might demand sympathy from
this unknown person but give him sympathy in return. These secret

meetings -- unpredictable, subversive -- of reader and writer were all I lived for. (406)

If, elsewhere, I have called *The Farewell Symphony* a failure, it is, in this respect at least, a resounding success. The novel is full of these unpredictable, subversive meetings. Insofar as his work is autobiographical, however, these meetings with a stranger are, more often than not, a meeting with a discarnate self,³¹ a ghost or a shadow (as he calls it in *A Boy's Own Story*) of himself. White's trilogy is crucial because, as he writes near the conclusion of *The Farewell Symphony*, "[n]othing was settled -- nothing would ever be settled" (399), least of all the self. The continually examined but unresolved question of identity proves, finally, that White is, as he claims, "a pulsing, energized vacuum . . . an Artist, all potential, a capability entirely negative, a field of dangerously unattached and whirling neutrons" (49).

³¹ I owe the diction here to a passage from White's essay, "This Is Not a Mammal: A Visit with William Burroughs," in which he quotes Burroughs as saying: "I also think it's -- I *know* it's possible to live in a -- a *discarnate* state. The one I prefer." At which point White's mind "flashes on his famous remark: 'It is necessary to travel, it is not necessary to live'" (114).

In Conclusion:

By way of summing up, I should like to turn back to a passage from *A Boy's Own Story* that I bypassed earlier. In one of his aphoristic detours outside the fictional world he has created, White writes:

Like a blind man's hands exploring a face, the memory lingers over an identifying or beloved feature but dismisses the rest . . . But in writing one draws in the rest, the forgotten parts. One even composes one's improvisations into a quite new face never glimpsed before, the likeness of an invention . . . I say [] this by way of hoping that the lies I've made up to get from one poor truth to another may mean something most particular to you, my eccentric, patient, scrupulous reader, willing to make so much of so little, more patient and more respectful of life, of a life, than the author you're allowing for a moment to exist yet again. (83-84)

Herein, it seems to me, lies the significance of White's fiction. In his autobiographical work (but also, as we have seen, in his not-specifically-autobiographical fiction), White endeavours to (re)create the authorial self, but with "the likeness of an invention." This passage also argues that the reader "allow[s the author] to exist yet again," which provides a crucial conflation of the "real" author and the "fictional" narrator. Insofar as writing, and, even, every single reading, allows a new existence, the distinction between "real" and "fictional" is eliminated; the original self is always already a fiction. As I have argued, therefore, fantasy belies realism, even in White's "realistic" fiction. More

than this, however, this passage provides a link between the Foucaultian and the Kristevan components of my theoretical frame. The technology of the self, the self with “the likeness of an invention” reveals a “new face never glimpsed before,” that of a stranger. Thus, White undertakes the constant re-invention of the a self “never glimpsed before,” a dedication, as we have seen, to meetings with strangers: different versions of the self.

If the critical response to White has often taken a “gay liberationist” approach to the retrograde self-hatred evinced in his novels, I have endeavoured to demonstrate that this self-hatred cannot be approached so unequivocally. It must be considered, on the one hand, as a result of the time and place in which Edmund White grew up, but also as the invaluable origin of White’s dedication to self-regeneration. The self-hatred is result of an apprehension of the uncanny strangenesses of the self. “To worry or to smile,” Kristeva notes, “such is the choice when we are assailed by the strange; our decision depends on how familiar we are with our own ghosts” (191). And, of course, White’s strangeness has caused him great worry, but it is as he gradually abandons the quest for “identity” and “human nature,” and lets himself be “enchant[ed by the] unknown.” that he finds more reason to smile.

What White therefore endeavours to show throughout his writings is that the problem is not the inherent strangeness of the self, but rather the societal interdiction of difference, the injunction to despoil oneself of that uncanny strangeness, to embrace the “freedom to be normal.” As a resistance to normality, White’s work becomes an exercise in familiarization, with the ghosts that haunt him, as Kristeva suggests, but also with the fantasies he envisions and the queerness of the self. As we have noted, therefore, White’s approach to queerness does not “jibe completely with the smaller realm of gay community self-description -- healthy, moral, natural” (Gluck, 58). Instead of defining queerness as a “thing,” a coherent, unified phenomenon, open to analysis and definition,

he describes it as a process, a mode of action rather a state of being. In short, queerness is not an identity, but a deferral of identity.

In conclusion, therefore, I would like to turn to *Marcel Proust*, White's latest (and perhaps final) work, to compare White's own significance to his commentary on Proust:

Proust may be more available to readers today than in the past because as his life recedes in time and the history of his period goes out of focus, *he is read more as a fabulist than a chronicler, as a maker of myths rather the valedictorian of the Belle Époque*. Under this dispensation, Proust emerges as the supreme symphonist of the spirit. (153-54, emphasis added)

Thus, as the era of gay "liberation," that forms the context in which much of White's work was performed, recedes in time, Edmund White becomes less a chronicler or a "representative" of that era. Instead, his work continues to be significant insofar as it has proposed new ways of thinking about queer subjectivity. The element of fantasy is so crucial to the technologies of the self because, like Proust, White is vital as a fabulist, as a mythographer of queer subjectivity, and therefore as a theorist and philosopher. It is thus that, writing becomes, for White, in a truly Foucaultian sense, a mode of resistance and a practice of freedom.

Any closing word on White, however, cannot be a final word. In ending this project, therefore, I would like reiterate the open-endedness of White's own project. Even a fairly complete reading of White's novels, such as this one, must open doors through which it cannot pass. My detour into a discussion of White's late work as "AIDS" literature, for example, is only that, a mere detour; a full length study could (and should) be dedicated to this topic alone. White's work also deserves consideration in the broader context of gay literature, both contemporary and not. My brief mentions of the influence of Genet and Proust on White were tips of the hat in this direction. Moreover, it seems that White also demands some attention as an American (or "un-American,"

even “anti-American”) writer. My purpose, then, at this final stage, is to preserve a vision of White’s project, as well as any critical reading of White’s work, as “endless, complex, self-revising” -- of White himself as a novelist, journalist, critic, biographer, memoirist, theorist and philosopher whose work, in a wide variety of contexts, presents, in the words of Berlant and Warner, “a challenge and a hope.”

WORKS CITED:

Works by Edmund White:

The Beautiful Room is Empty. 1988. New York: Vintage, 1994.

A Boy's Own Story. 1982. New York: Plume, 1983.

Caracole. 1985. New York: Vintage, 1996.

"Cinnamon Skin." *Skinned Alive*. 1995. New York: Vintage, 1996. 255-273.

"Edmund White Speaks with Edmund White." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. 16.3 (1996): 13-20.

"Esthetics and Loss." *The Burning Library: Essays*. 1994. Ed. David Bergman. New York: Vintage, 1995. 211-217.

The Farewell Symphony. New York: Knopf, 1997.

Forgetting Elena. 1973. New York: Vintage, 1994.

"The Gay Philosopher." *The Burning Library: Essays*. 1994. Ed. David Bergman. New York: Vintage, 1995. 3-19.

Genet. 1993. New York: Vintage, 1994.

"The Hermaphrodite." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. 16.3 (1996): 27-30.

"Introduction: 'On the Line.'" 1994. *A Boy's Own Story*. New York: Plume, 1983. ix-xix.

"The Joys of Gay Life." *The Burning Library: Essays*. 1994. New York: Vintage, 1995. 31-37.

"A Letter to Ann and Alfred Corn." *The Violet Quill Reader*. Ed. David Bergman. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994. 1-4.

Marcel Proust. New York: Penguin, 1999.

"Nabokov: Beyond Parody." *The Burning Library: Essays*. 1994. Ed. David Bergman. New York: Vintage, 1995. 168-187.

Nocturnes for the King of Naples. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978.

"On Reading: An Exaltation of Dreams." *The Burning Library: Essays*. 1994. Ed. David Bergman. New York: Vintage, 1995. xxiii-xxviii.

"An Oracle." *Skinned Alive*. 1995. New York: Vintage, 1996. 112-155.

"Out of the Closet, on to the Bookshelf." *The Burning Library: Essays*. 1994. Ed. David Bergman. New York: Vintage, 1995. 275-283.

"Paradise Found." *The Burning Library: Essays*. 1994. Ed. David Bergman. New York: Vintage, 1995. 145-156.

"The *Paris Review* Interview." *The Burning Library: Essays*. 1994. Ed. David Bergman. New York: Vintage, 1995. 240-267.

"The Photograph." *Brick: a Literary Journal*. 51 (1995): 70-71.

"The Personal Is Political: Queer Fiction and Criticism." *The Burning Library: Essays*. 1994. Ed. David Bergman. New York: Vintage, 1995. 367-377.

"The Political Vocabulary of Homosexuality." *The Burning Library: Essays*. 1994. Ed. David Bergman. New York: Vintage, 1995. 69-81.

"The Politics of Gender: Michel Foucault." *The Burning Library: Essays*. 1994. Ed. David Bergman. New York: Vintage, 1995. 89-94.

"Querelle." *The Selected Writings of Jean Genet*. Ed. Edmund White. Hopewell, NJ: Ecco, 1993. 157-158.

"Sado Machismo." *The Burning Library: Essays*. 1994. Ed. David Bergman. New York: Vintage, 1995. 56-66.

States of Desire: Travels in Gay America. New York: Dutton, 1980.

"Straight Women, Gay Men." *The Burning Library: Essays*. 1994. Ed. David Bergman. New York: Vintage, 1995. 310-316.

"This Is Not a Mammal: A Visit with William Burroughs." *The Burning Library: Essays*. 1994. Ed. David Bergman. New York: Vintage, 1995. 107-114.

With Hubert Sorin. *Our Paris: Sketches from Memory*. 1994. New York: Knopf, 1995.

Theoretical Works:

Berlant, Lauren and Michael Warner. "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?" *PMLA*. 110.3 (1995): 343-49.

Clum, John M. "'And Once I Had It All': AIDS Narratives and Memories of an American Dream." *Writing AIDS*. Eds. Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. 200-224.

de Lauretis, Teresa. "The Stubborn Drive." *Critical Inquiry*. 24 (Summer 1998). 851-877.

Edelman, Lee. "The Mirror and the Tank: 'AIDS,' Subjectivity, and the Rhetoric of Activism." *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 93-117.

———. "The Plague of Discourse: Politics, Literary Theory, and 'AIDS.'" *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 79-92.

Foucault, Michel. "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom: An Interview with Michel Foucault on January 20, 1984." *The Final Foucault*. Eds. James Bernauer and David Rasmussen. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987. 1-20.

———. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. 1978. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1990.

———. "Technologies of the Self." *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. Ed. Huck Gutman, et al. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988. 16-49.

———. "Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault October 25, 1982." *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. Ed. Huck Gutman, et al. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988. 9-15.

- Grosz, Elizabeth. *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Gutman, Huck. "Rousseau's *Confessions*: A Technology of the Self." *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. Ed. Huck Gutman, et al. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988. 99-120.
- Halperin, David M. *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. New York: Oxford UP, 1995.
- Hutton, Patrick H. "Foucault, Freud and the Technologies of the Self." *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. Ed. Huck Gutman, et al. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988. 121-144.
- Jarraway, David R. "Montage of an Otherness Deferred: Dreaming Subjectivity in Langston Hughes." *American Literature*. 68.4 (1996): 819-847.
- . "'O Canada!': The Spectral Lesbian Poetics of Elizabeth Bishop." *PMLA*. March 1998: 243-257.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Strangers to Ourselves*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1991.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Ecrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1977.
- Racevskis, Karlis. "Michel Foucault, *Rameau's Nephew*, and the Question of Identity." *The Final Foucault*. Eds. James Bernauer and David Rasmussen. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987. 21-33.
- Rothwell, Kenneth S. "Hamlet's 'Glass of Fashion': Power, Self, and the Reformation." *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. Ed. Huck Gutman, et al. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988. 80-98.
- Silverman, Kaja. *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Warner, Micheal. Introduction. *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. vii-xxxi.

Commentaries and Criticism:

Bartlett, Neil. "Caracole." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. 16.3 (1996): 61-68.

Benfey, Christopher. "The Dead." *The New York Times Book Review*. September 14, 1997. 11-12.

Bergman, David. "Edmund White (1940-)." *Contemporary Gay American Novelists: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*. Eds. Gregory Brebeck and Emmanuel S. Nelson. Westport CT: Greenwood, 1993. 386-394.

_____. "Introduction." *The Burning Library: Essays*. 1994. New York: Vintage, 1995. ix-xx.

_____. "Introduction." *The Violet Quill Reader*. New York: St. Martin's, 1994. xi-xix.

_____. "Introduction: Native Innocence, Alien Knowledge." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. 16.3 (1996): 7-12.

Gluck, Robert. "A Boy's Own Story." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. 16.3 (1996): 56-60.

Koponen, Wilfrid R. *Embracing a Gay Identity: Gay Novels as Guides*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1993.

Matthews, Harry. "A Valentine for Elena." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. 16.3 (1996): 31-42.

Picano, Felice. "Rough Cuts from a Journal." *The Violet Quill Reader*. Ed. David Bergman. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994. 28-74..

Radel, Nicholas. "Self as Other: The Politics of Identity in the Works of Edmund White." *Queer Words, Queer Images*. Ed. R. Jeffrey Ringer. New York: New York UP, 1994.

Summers, Claude J., ed. *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage*. New York: Henry Holt, 1995.

Miscellaneous Works:

Doty, Mark. *Heaven's Coast*. New York: HarperCollins, 1996.

Kafka, Franz. "Conversation with the Suppliant." *The Metamorphosis, The Penal Colony, and Other Stories*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken, 1975.

O'Hara, Frank. *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*. 1971. Ed. Donald Allen. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Confessions*. New York: Penguin, 1953