

The Decorative Voice of Hidden, Secret Flesh: Corporeal Dynamics in Patrick White's Fiction

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Summary

With reference to Roland Barthes's and Julia Kristeva's observations on the bodily origins of language, this article argues that physicality is an important aspect, both thematically and stylistically, of the fiction of Australian Nobel prizewinner, Patrick White. Kristeva's theory of the "symbolic" and "semiotic" aspects of signification, developed in her book *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), informs the argument that White's writing emphasises a dualism of rationality and physicality at work within language and literature. Taking Kristeva's observation that the "semiotic" or bodily aspect of language – evident in asymbolic poetic effects such as rhythm and rhyme – is comparable to music, the article explores White's interest in music as expressed within his fiction. It argues, accordingly, that White's frequent descriptions of music function as metatextual elements within his writing that draw attention to the materiality of language, the poetic dimension of his prose, and his association of representation with corporeality. Finally, in a reading of the short story "Five-Twenty", from the collection *The Cockatoos* ([1974]1979), White's interest in corporeal markings – which emphasise signification as bodily and corporeality as a language – is explored.

Opsomming

Met verwysing na Roland Barthes en Julia Kristeva se beskouings oor die lyflike oorsprong van taal, voer hierdie artikel aan dat liggaamlikheid sowel tematies as stilisties gesproke 'n belangrike aspek uitmaak van die Australiese Nobelpryswenner Patrick White se fiksie. Kristeva se teorie oor die "simboliese" en "semiotiese" aspekte van betekening in haar boek *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984) staaf die argument dat White se werk aandui dat daar in taal en literatuur 'n dualisme van rasionaliteit en liggaamlikheid teenwoordig is. Op grond van Kristeva se beskouing dat die "semiotiese" of lyflike aspek van taal – soos blyk uit asimboliese poëtiese effekte soos ritme en rym – met musiek vergelyk kan word, verken die artikel White se belangstelling in musiek wat uit sy fiksie blyk. Daar word gevolglik aangevoer dat die veelvuldige musiekbeskrywings optree as metatekstuele elemente wat die aandag vestig op die stoflikheid van taal, die poëtiese dimensie van sy prosa, en sy vereenselwiging van voorstelling met lyflikheid. Ten slotte word White se belangstelling in liggaamsmerke verken aan die hand van die kortverhaal "Five-Twenty" uit die bundel *The Cockatoos* ([1974]1979) waarin nadruk gelê word op betekening as lyflik en liggaamlikheid as 'n taal.

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Locating Corporeality in Language

[I]magery, delivery, vocabulary spring from the body and the past of the writer and gradually become the very reflexes of his art. Thus under the name of style a self-sufficient language is evolved which has its roots only in the depths of the author's personal and secret mythology, that subnature of expression where the first coition of words and things takes place, where once and for all the great verbal themes of his existence come to be installed. Whatever its sophistication, style has always something crude about it Its frame of reference is biological or biographical, not historical It is the decorative voice of hidden, secret flesh

(Barthes 1968: 10-11)

Describing avant-garde or modernist writing, Roland Barthes draws attention to the primitive origin of a writer's style, locating it within his or her body and individual psychology. Style, he argues, is an unconscious "reflex" deriving from the pre-symbolic "subnature of expression" – the "decorative voice of hidden, secret flesh".

This article seeks to account for this voice of flesh in the fiction of Australian Nobel prizewinner and modernist author Patrick White. White's expressionist style, the topic of much critical commentary, strongly foregrounds physicality. Not only does it self-reflexively reveal language itself as physical, emphasising it as composed of material signs and presenting literary techniques (imagery, metaphor, symbol, rhythm, and onomatopoeia, for example) as emphasising this materiality, it also draws an emphatic connection between language and corporeality. Frequent metaphors in White's fiction associate words with physical objects and link them to the body: characters may, for example, "disgorge out of [the] throat chunks of words" (White [1957]1994: 167), and language and art are often described as or associated with bodily products. In *The Solid Mandala* (1966), during a moment of high emotion, "it all came out of Waldo, not in vomit, but in words" (p. 148). In *Riders in the Chariot* ([1961]2002) and *The Vivisector* ([1970]1985), "blood, or paint" (2002: 565) is indistinguishable. Moreover, Alf Dubbo and Hurtle Duffield's paintings are described in both novels as sexual releases. For Dubbo, art amounts to the expulsion of "the sensation in his stomach, the throbbing of his blood, in surge upon surge of thick, and ever-accumulating colour" (p. 420), and for Duffield painting is a "drawn-out orgasm" (1985: 204). Repeatedly, White intimates that "the body [is] an instrument" (p. 209) of expression, emptying itself into signification.

Such quotations reveal White's interest in the bodily origins of representation. Barthes suggests, however, that such origins are evident not only in the thematic concerns of a writer but also in the dynamics of style. As O.N. Burgess maintains, "to ask critics not to call White's style into question is to ask them to abdicate one of the tasks of criticism" (Burgess 1961: 50). Barthes's notion of "flesh" appears to have much to do with

White's style, which has been of great interest to many of his critics. John Colmer comments on the "highly personal prose" of White's novels that is "strikingly original in its rhythms and syntax, energetic in its movement, adventurously explorative in every way, full of shocks and surprises" (Colmer 1978: 5). Veronica Brady identifies the "melodramatic pressures" that White places upon language via "lexical and syntactical distortions and violations as well as in the concreteness of description" (Brady 1983: 237). Most recently, J.M. Coetzee attests to White's writing as an admixture of the "complex music of his prose and the mystical bent of his thought" (Coetzee 2009: xiii). The rhythms, energies, pressures, concreteness, music and mysticism of White's prose may all be linked to his treatment of corporeality in language.

In *The Vivisector*, for example, White's *künstlerroman* and his most extensive comment on art or writing itself, representation is emphasised thematically and stylistically as corporeal. Abject because it traverses the boundary of the body separating the "inner self" from the external world, art (like any bodily product) is, according to the novel, produced internally before it is expelled or communicated.¹ *The Vivisector* concludes shortly after the ageing artist, Hurtle Duffield, who has suffered a stroke, finally accedes to the body and its association with an energy tantamount to spiritual ecstasy that infuses art and language. Considering his former desire to "shed his needled flesh" (White [1970]1985: 603), along with all memories of physical existence, he comes to the following conclusion:

[H]ow bloody dishonest! As if he could relinquish his memories of the flesh even when renounced by its pleasures: the human body, unbroken by its own will, ... yellow light licking as voluptuously as tongues; green shade dribbled like saliva on nakedness; all the stickinesses: honey, sap, semen, sweat melting into sweat; the velvets of rose-flesh threatened by teeth; exhausted, ugly, human furniture, bulging with an accumulation of experience acquired in years or by a stroke of lightning.

(White [1970]1985: 603)

In this example the physicality *within* the description is matched by the physicality *of* the description evident in: the rhythmic listing of physical products; synaesthesia ("yellow light licking"; "green shade dribbled"); alliteration ("light licking"; "stickinesses: ... sap, semen, sweat"); and repetition ("sweat melting into sweat"). Such effects emphasise a flow of

1. According to Julia Kristeva, the abject – which includes bodily excretions, hated food, the corpse, and the maternal body – crosses the symbolic borders of the body separating the internal from the external and therefore troubles the image of an enclosed subjectivity implicated with the image of the body. Abject corporeality, as this article will argue, may also enter representation, which, like subjectivity, cannot be definitively shut off from physical existence.

signification matching the fluidity of the body as it is described. According to *The Vivisector*, art itself is bodily, a sublimated emanation of the flesh. White's writing pulsates with corporeal energy, transfusing the body – its sensations, rhythms, affects, desires, music and disorder – into “living words” (White [1957]1994: 123) and hence into the living text.

Barthes's ideas on the biological origins of style had a strong influence on Julia Kristeva's early writing. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), she too posited the entrance of the body into symbolisation. Her opening remarks decry previous theories of language in which the body has been dismissed: “Our philosophies of language ... are nothing more than the thoughts of archivists, archaeologists and necrophiliacs” (Kristeva 1984: 13). Kristeva maintains, then, that preceding and contemporary language theories have killed off the body: they may have denied its constitutive importance within the dynamics of representation or argued that language fails to represent the physical world it purports to replicate. In response, Kristeva proffers a theory that describes language as the *living* product of dynamic bodily investments:

Instead of lamenting what is lost, absent, or impossible in language, Kristeva marvels at this other realm [bodily experience] that makes its way into language. The force of language is [a] living driving force transferred into language. Signification is like a transfusion of the living body into language.
(Oliver 2000: 8)

Kristeva is interested in the ways in which literary texts consolidate and undermine their own seemingly stable “subjectivity”, much as the speaking subject acquires a tentative identity via the simultaneously formative and threatening process of abjection.² In both subjectivity and textuality, Kristeva maintains, conflicting tensions work to produce and destabilise rationality and coherence. Kristeva's terms the “symbolic” and the “semiotic” represent these tensions respectively, referring to the interlocking yet contradictory aspects of the signifying process. The semiotic (which should not be confused with Saussure's term for the study of the system of signs) refers to the various amorphous and unstable corporeal drives and impulses that traverse the infant's body prior to its induction into the symbolic order. Traces of this energy remain and return throughout life. The

2. Kristeva describes abjection as the psychogenic process whereby subjectivity is constructed and maintained. It is a stage of development in infancy that persists throughout life and involves the consolidation of a “clean and proper” (Kristeva 1982: 8) self upon the repudiation of corporeal or material aspects (or objects) considered disorderly, anti-social, or unclean. This self, which Kristeva names the “speaking subject”, is tenuous, however, for its objects cannot be definitively repudiated. They remain at the borders of subjectivity (much as they cross the borders of the body), ongoingly threatening its cohesion.

semiotic therefore comprises the *bodily*, abject component of the signifying process, which bears traces of the infant's primordial relation to the mother's body prior to the development of the ego and the acquisition of language. Kristeva contends that the "music" of poetry and modern, avant-garde prose harnesses the "instinctual rhythm" (Kristeva 1984: 100) of the semiotic, which disorders and punctuates meaning. As John Lechte explains, the semiotic inheres in the "dynamic and unrepresentable poetic dimension of language: its rhymes, rhythms, intonations, alliterations – melody, the music of language" (Lechte 1990: 5).

In contrast to the semiotic, Kristeva argues, the symbolic amounts to the socially constructed and rule-bound operations of signification. Unlike the libidinal, disordering (and therefore death-drive associated) semiotic, the symbolic produces the laws of grammar and syntax, thereby promoting the unambiguous and rational expression of meaning and the coherence of the "speaking subject". Kristeva describes the symbolic as a "sacrificial order" (Grosz 1989: 49) because it organises and represses the corporeal impulses of the semiotic, holding the latter in check in order to produce coherent meaning and rational, unambiguous expression. Importantly, however, the symbolic is in constant dialectic with the semiotic, and its hierarchical dominance over the latter is by no means guaranteed. Like the abject, the semiotic cannot be definitively jettisoned and it continues to exist as a disruptive threat to coherence and meaning. It transgresses the limits of the symbolic in representations where the "relationships between words and concepts privileged by the symbolic are significantly disrupted" (Robbins 2000: 129), in signification that draws attention to its materiality rather than transparently evoking its referents. White's fiction favours "living words" over "dry communications which [do] not really convey" (White [1957] 1994: 123). It presents the semiotic, or the physical aspect and capacity of language, as ultimately more communicative than the bloodless, transparent transmission of meaning associated with the symbolic. Noel MacAinsh observes, therefore, that White's prose "sways over the borderline between 'talk' and pre-verbal 'communication'" (MacAinsh 1982: 439), attempting to access the affective, abject dimension of the latter within his literary language. Thus it explores the "irruption of drives" into the "language which binds together the social unit" (Kristeva 1984: 62).

White's reflections on writing and the writing process suggest that the abject, semiotic dimension of signification was of vital importance to him. In Freudian terms, he claimed that his fiction rose "up out of [his] unconscious" (White 1992: 21): "Practically everything I have done of any worth", he wrote, "I feel I have done through my intuition, not my mind – which the intellectuals disapprove of" (p. 21). Like the quasi-autobiographical protagonist, Alex Gray, of his last published novel, *Memoirs of Many in One*, White recognised the value of the "therapy of revolutionary violence" (White 1986: 72) – the potential "revolution in poetic language",

to borrow Kristeva's formulation – evinced in his favoured theme of transgression and seemingly correlating with the release of psychic desire into language. In *Voss*, Frank Turner describes the poet-seer Le Mesurier's scribblings: "Mad things ... to blow the world up, anyhow, the world that you and me knows. Poems and things" (White [1957]1994b: 255). For White, the unconscious processes invested in writing are destructive because they tear apart the rational assignment of signified to signifier, disorder meaning, and allow for the engulfment of reason within the corporeal.

In fact, White associated his creative impulse with destruction. As he explained in an interview, "everything I write has to be dredged up from the unconscious, which is what makes it such an exhausting and perhaps finally, destructive, process" (Herring & Wilkes 1973: 139). Moreover, as his letters attest, he linked his writing to his sexuality: "I feel more and more that creative activity in the arts is very closely connected with sexual activity" (White 1994: 339); "If I am anything of a writer it is through my homosexuality, which has given me additional insights, and through a *very strong vein of vulgarity*" (p. 537; italics in original). Thus White suggests that not only are sexuality and abjection important to the workings of his fiction, but that desire shapes and enters the creative process. Moreover, it invests language with a rhythm and drive that threaten to disfigure logic and meaning. In *The Living and the Dead*, Elyot Standish fears the "drunken, disorderly passions of existence that created but at the same time consumed" ([1941]1977: 305). These "drunken, disorderly passions" enter White's language through his transgressive and scatological impulse – that "vein of vulgarity" pulsing strongly throughout his work – and through his consistent association of representation and corporeality.

Rationality and Corporeality: A Necessary Coupling

Importantly, Kristeva's symbolic and semiotic modes exist together in a relationship of interdependence. When it comes to language, she insists, "never the one without the other" (Moi 1986: 156):

These two modalities [the symbolic and the semiotic] are inseparable within the *signifying process* that constitutes language, and the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse ... involved [T]here are nonverbal signifying systems that are constructed exclusively on the basis of the semiotic (music, for example). But ... this exclusivity is relative, precisely because of the necessary dialectic between the two modalities of the signifying process, which is constitutive of the subject. Because the subject is always *both* symbolic and semiotic, no signifying system he produces can be either "exclusively" semiotic or "exclusively" symbolic, and is instead marked by an indebtedness to both.

(Kristeva 1984; italics in original: 24)

As it is with the speaking subject, so it is with the text. Subjectivity emerges into symbolisation out of the semiotic, against which it continues to build a sense of itself as rational and coherent, and with which it continues to be invested via the pulsations of drives and desire. Like Kristeva, White emphasises the interconnection of rationality and bodiliness, never allowing the two to be radically separated. Despite his concern with the body, he is aware that the creative bodily component of language requires the control of rationality to make sense; the two must necessarily be in constant dialectic. Thus White describes the significance of the relationship between sensuality and reason to his writing process: “What drives me is sensual, emotional, instinctive. At the same time I like to think creative reason reins me in as I reach the edge of disaster” (White 1981: 89).

The characters of White’s novels sometimes appear to embody the conflicting yet interrelated modalities of the symbolic and the semiotic. In *The Solid Mandala*, the twins Arthur and Waldo Brown seem carefully depicted not only as interlocking, contrasting halves of a single self but also as the antithetical forces contributing to the novel’s representation. For Anne McCulloch, “Waldo is potentially the provider of Apollonian form; Arthur is the source, the wild, inebriated Dionysian force that requires form” (McCulloch 1983: 28). Thus she points to the twins as personifying antithetical artistic or signifiatory elements that together contribute to White’s unified yet tensely dynamic style. Other critics have similarly noted that the twin brothers respectively embody humanity’s “flesh and spirit, reason and will” and, together, the “interdependence ... of these attributes” (Morley 1972: 185).

Moments emphasising the interconnection of reason and the body recur, perhaps most notably in the image of the brothers Brown bound hand in hand as they wander the streets of Barranugli: “as they trudged, or tottered, they were holding each other by the hand. It was difficult to decide which was leading and which was led” (White 1966: 19). A similar relationship occurs in *The Twyborn Affair* ([1979]1995). Here Eudoxia Vatatzes (Eddie Twyborn’s first feminine persona) strains against the entrapping masculinity of her “husband” Angelos, a character importantly (and ironically, given his love for the transsexual E.) obsessed with (religious) orthodoxy. The two enjoy playing piano duets together in performances that emphasise Angelos’s identification with rule-bound law and Eudoxia’s need for the fluid play of desire in music. It is helpful to recall Kristeva’s description of music as a form of signification more reliant on the semiotic than the symbolic, but still dependent, nonetheless, to some degree upon the latter. The music the couple perform is “reckless and at the same time controlled” (White [1979]1995: 17); it is a “delirious collusion between two ... united in their incongruity” (p. 17). In her journal Eudoxia describes the frustration arising for her during their performances of Chabrier’s waltzes:

I would like to appear less tentative, less receptive of the ruler and the rules. I would like to *splash* music around me, while A. is determined to control my least impulse for extravagance Chabrier's oxydised streamers stream out behind us, in my case never freeing themselves because knotted to my wrists, and because the old bastard won't allow me the freedom of music.

(White [1979]1995: 39; italics in original)

Here, E. expresses her sense of confinement within the relationship. However, the passage also articulates a dialectic of freedom and restraint. Interestingly, E. perceives the "streamers" of Chabrier's waltz tying her wrists like cords. Yet the metaphoric description of ribbons of sound knotted to her wrists – and indeed "streaming" from them – underscores the sense of music billowing forth from E.'s very body. The "freedom of music" is the essence of E.'s desire for liberation – from the restraints of social relationships, from her identity, and into a mode of signification that expresses her dissolution.

Burning up the Guts: White's Linguistic Music

White's fiction emphasises its semiotic dimension through the many descriptions of music that permeate his prose. In a letter to Ben Huebsch, White draws a connection between literature and music: "music has taught me a lot about writing. That may sound pretentious, and I would not know how to go into it *rationally*, but I feel that listening constantly to music helps one to develop a book more logically" (White 1994: 110). Again, writing to Peggy Garland, he alludes to the inspiration that he finds in music: "I get quite drunk with music, and play it a lot to lead me up to my work" (p. 159). It appears from these quotations that White is aware of a kind of irrational "music" of language – Kristeva's semiotic – that propels it into being and that is harnessed and shaped by the "logic" of the symbolic, but that nonetheless constitutes the "omnium gatherum of instinctual colour which illuminates the more often than not irrational behaviour of sensual man" (White 1981: 38). This irrational, instinctual "music" may threaten sense and rationality with their deformation. Thus Noel MacAinsh argues that the aesthetic principle of White's novels can be seen "as that of a complex interrelationship of parts in the service of the destruction of meaning; it is a 'music' of destruction" (MacAinsh 1982: 441).

White not only acknowledges the inspiration of music; he also emphasises his mode of writing as analogous to other art forms such as music and painting. His intention, for example, to imbue *Voss* ([1957]1994) with the "textures of music, the sensuousness of paint" (White 1992: 16), and his belief, even as a writer, that more can be done "with paint and music; I am hobbled by words" (Herring & Wilkes 1973: 138) is evinced in each of his novels. His suggestion, moreover, that the "texture" and "sensuousness" of

other arts may be transferred to literature indicates his emphasis upon the rich materiality of language. Indeed, within White's writing we find the "music in letters" that Kristeva ascribes to James Joyce (Kristeva 1982: 23). For White, as for Kristeva, language and music harness corporeality in a movement toward signification that both creates and consumes. This is evident in the following reference to jazz in *The Living and the Dead*:

There was nothing like the deep bass notes of the sax, or the higher, climbing, shining ones for burning up the guts. The nightly burning of the guts was the *raison d'être* of Wally Collins, a brief, orgasmic, almost death under the glare of chromium, more important this than sex, though appreciated too, the pursuit of skin through lingerie. But nightly the bowels rose in the sad surge of saxophones, the skin eroded by a white light, the mouth grown round and moist on a persistent note. He could feel his whole body shaped by a chord in music. His whole body writhed to burst its casing of black tailor's cloth. It drained the sockets of his eyes.

(White [1941]1977: 249)

Music here is represented as a visceral emanation, a "burning of the guts". As "brief, orgasmic, almost death" it is related to sex, death and the loss of subjectivity that both entail. Moreover, it recalls the association of the subject-deforming semiotic with the death drive. Music sounds the entrance of desire into signification, but also sings the tune of corporeal affect: Wally's "bowels [rise] in the sad surge of saxophones", indicating the transfusion of gut emotion into music and, simultaneously, into the language describing it. Language itself becomes musical, contrasting the rhythm of the repeated stressed syllables of "deep bass notes" against the trochaic rhythm of the treble clef with its "higher, climbing, shining ones". Alliteration, in conjunction with the stressed syllables *sad*, *surge* and *saxophone*, attributes a rhythmic sensuality to the writing, emphasising perhaps the beat of Wally's music, but more importantly the sensuousness of the prose itself. Music and physicality are conflated, each determining the other, and Wally can "feel his whole body shaped by a chord in music". As it rises up from inside him, he feels his "body writhe ... to burst its casing of black tailor's cloth". Thus, in a description of music and the body that forcefully attests to the way in which corporeal desire (metaphorised as music) exceeds the bounds of subjectivity and pulsates in the rhythms of the text, Wally empties his body into music, which becomes the music of the prose itself.

Wally Collins's "burning of the guts" exemplifies White's concern with drawing non-verbal art into his writing. As Bill Ashcroft observes, White's fiction presents language as "inferior to art or music in capturing the inexpressible" (Ashcroft 2010: 96). However, by harnessing a rhythmic, musical power within the workings of language itself, White articulates a sense of the uncapturable. In other words, a power of suggestion resides in the performative rhythms, images, excess and sheer sensuality of his prose.

This, of course, does not only occur during episodes in which music is thematised. Nonetheless, it is certainly emphasised in such descriptions, which may be interpreted as metatextual references to the poetic dimension of the prose itself.

Her Mouth Exploded into a Purple Flower: Marking the Body with the Sign of Its Desire

While music is one way in which White's fiction emphasises the physicality of language, another is its correlation of the sign system of language with corporeal markings. Lurid make-up, for example, may signify the dynamics of affect and desire in White's writing. The bodily sign described in language renders language corporeal, just as it emphasises corporeality as a language in itself. Peter Brooks argues that marks on the body in literature play a special role in emphasising the connection between the body and the linguistic signifier:

The sign imprints the body, making it part of the signifying process. Signing or marking the body signifies its passage into writing, its becoming a literary body, and generally also a narrative body, in that the inscription of the sign depends on and produces a story. The signing of the body is an allegory of the body become a subject for literary narrative – a body entered into writing.
(Brooks 1993: 3)

Garish and distorted lipstick often functions as a mark of physical desire, indicating the merging of sign and body (*sema* and *soma*) occurring so often in White's writing. In *Riders in the Chariot*, the young Ruth Godbold's mouth grows "distorted and fleshy" ([1961]2002: 338) in her early encounters with her husband-to-be and her burgeoning lust has, quite literally, a marked effect upon her wealthy and flighty employer, Mrs Chalmers-Robinson:

[W]hen her maid was all arrayed, the mistress appeared somewhat feverish, her eyes more brilliant than ever before. She had done her mouth. There it was, blooming like a big crimson flower, with a little, careful, mauve line, apparently to keep it within bounds.

(White ([1961]2002: 338))

This image of excess and control, and its suggestion that the "little, careful, mauve line" will fail miserably in its attempts to restrain the blaring desire of the "big crimson flower", is an effective metaphor for the inevitable entrance of transgressive desire into the signification of the text and hence for the fluctuating balance between the semiotic and the symbolic. Moreover, Mrs Chalmers-Robinson's lipstick signs her body, marking it as

the site of desire, but also indicating the spillage of this desire into the sign itself. Similarly, Elizabeth Hunter in *The Eye of the Storm* miscalculates “the explosive force of her lust, she had felt its first tremor that evening when misdrawing her mouth in lipstick” (White ([1973]1987: 93).

Lipstick is an important image in “Five-Twenty” from *The Cockatoos* ([1974]1979), White’s most anthologised short story. The story exemplifies White’s interest in “another language” (p. 174), a language of materiality that seemingly discharges the physical drives and affects of his characters. Here White’s somatic semantics are strongly evinced. The story describes the lives of Ella and Royal Natwick who live in misery in a house adjacent to a busy highway. They set their transient moments of happiness according to the regular appearance of a pink Holden that drives past, identifiable in the stream of traffic, every evening at five-twenty. The story explores White’s favoured themes of confinement, repression and the eventual liberation of corporeal desire, its expression initially trapped within a patriarchally controlled conjugality. The driver of the Holden becomes for Ella the object of her yearning for a life outside the entrapment of her unhappy marriage. To her delight, after Royal’s death, the man appears in her garden, to become the target of her increasingly unrestrained desire. The garden is a setting that has previously been developed as the externalisation of her repressed yet forceful lust:

She had never seen such cinerarias; some of the spired ones reached almost as high as her chin, the solid heads of others waited in the tunnel of dark light to club you with their colours, of purple and drenching blue, and what they called “wine”. She couldn’t believe wine would have made her drunker.
(White [1974]1979: 171)

White’s characters are often “made drunk by life” ([1957]1994: 116), and sensory drunkenness is foregrounded in descriptions wherein desire overtakes rationality, entering the prose via saturated colour imagery or rhythmic effect. Synaesthesia, imagery and metaphor remind the reader of the physical world and foreground its potentially overmastering effects upon rationality. In the quotation above, Ella, combined with the reader via the second-person “you”, is assaulted with the colour of her cinerarias, “of purple and drenching blue”. As rational perception yields to corporeal sensation, she and the prose are rendered “drunk”. Simultaneously, White’s writing intensifies in sensuality in its description of a vivid colour correlating with the protagonist’s *jouissance*.³ Flowers often symbolise corporeality in White’s writing: the rose recurs as an image of the flesh and Eudoxia Vatatzes’s *carnation* gown signals her *carnality* in *The Twyborn*

3. *Jouissance*, according to Lacan, refers to the engulfment of the subject by the body: it is “the sense in which the body experiences itself” (in Braunstein 2003: 103).

Affair. In “Five-Twenty”, cinerarias display “the colours of flesh with blood pulsing beneath the skin” (Beston 1975: 524).

Ella Natwick’s Holden driving stranger stumbles into this setting of desire when he appears in the garden after his car has broken down. Agreeing to his request to use the telephone, Ella realises that “her voice sound[s] muzzy” and wonders if he will “think she [is] drunk” (White [1974]1979: 172). Already, the story has associated drunkenness with the potent sensuality of the flowers, objective correlatives of Ella’s sexuality, and increasingly her desire transforms the narrative. In the garden she begins to describe her cinerarias to the stranger. The “muzzy” sensuality of her speech, enacting the disorder of her desire, becomes the drunkenness of the prose itself:

As she was about to explain *she got switched to another language*. Her throat became a long palpitating funnel through which the words she expected to use were poured out in a stream of almost formless agonized sound.

“What is it?” he asked, touching her

And for answer, *in the new language*, she was holding him. They were holding each other, his hard body against her eiderdowny one. As the silence closed round them again, inside the tunnel of light, his face, to which she was very close, seemed to be unlocking, the wound of his mouth, which should have been more horrible, struggling to open. She could see he had recognized her.

(White [1974]1979: 174; my italics)

Ella is “switched to another language”. This is a semiotically inflected, expressionistic “language” of physicality: empathy in touch, the channelling of raw emotion, and, beyond this, the language of a literary text interested in the performative representation of raw corporeal affect.

Ella invites the stranger back for coffee the following day and prepares for his visit with a trip to the cosmetics counter. After “investing in a lipstick” (White [1974]1979: 176) and rouge, she is somewhat alarmed by the virulence of their colour. After leaving the shop, she goes home to try out her new purchase. While David Myers describes this scene as “silly farce” (Myers 1978: 120), it in fact cements the link between the imagery of the garden and Ella’s body, thereby indicating the importance of imagery to the depiction of a corporeal desire that eludes rational description. The effect of the make-up is startling, not only on Ella’s face as she silently applies it, but also within the imagery of the text itself:

She wasn’t quiet, though, not a bit, booming and clanging in front of the toilet mirror. She tried to make a thin line, but her mouth exploded into a purple flower. She dabbed the dry-feeling pad on either cheek, and thick mauve-scented shadows fell. She could hear and feel her heart behaving like a squeezed, rubber ball as she stood looking. Then she got at the lipstick again, still unsheathed. Her mouth was becoming enormous, so thick with

grease she could hardly close her own lips underneath. A visible dew was gathering round the purple shadows on her cheeks.

She began to retch like, but dry, and rub, over the basin, scrubbing with the nailbrush. More than likely some would stay behind in the pores and be seen. Though you didn't have to see, to see.

(White [1974]1979: 176-177)

Synaesthesia and onomatopoeia evoke Ella's overwhelming horror when confronted with the image of her body marked by the sign of its unspeakable, abject desire. This, again, is "another language" – a "body language" of physicality evident in her corporeality but also manifesting in the poetic sensuality of White's writing. Physicality becomes pronounced as Ella feels her heart constricting like a "squeezed, rubber ball" and as her mouth becomes "enormous, so thick with grease she could hardly close her own lips underneath". Although desire is not only present in the visible appearance of the body – "you didn't have to see, to see" – the story's hyperbolic imagery ensures that readers do in fact envision the manifestations of desire and hence register the body as a site of *marked* narrative importance. The body thus transforms into a meaningful signifier when it is literally "signed" by the mark of its desire, one of the ways in which White's bodies "enter ... into writing" (Brooks 1993: 3), transforming it into "another language" (White [1974]1979: 174) of corporeality and sensation. Specifically, the excess of desire is emphasised: a "thin line" of lipstick becomes an "explosion" of colour. Moreover, Ella's lips, in White's metaphoric language, transform into a cineraria, the story's dominant image of desire, as "her mouth explode[s] into a purple flower".

Abrams defines metaphor as occurring when a "word or expression that in literal usage denotes one kind of thing is applied to a distinctly different kind of thing, without asserting a comparison" (Abrams 2005: 102). White's use of metaphor in the preceding example is distinctive because it describes a moment of transformation rather than simply linking "flower" and "mouth" in a static image. No comparison is asserted but we are presented with language *in its moment of comparison* as a commonplace signifier ("mouth") transformed into the unexpected ("flower"). "[H]er mouth exploded into a purple flower" is thus an instance of the fluctuating balance between the symbolic and the semiotic in White's language – the flux and flooding of desire into representation and the performative depiction thereof occurring in the emphasis upon a metaphor of blossoming, a metaphor for the entrance of corporeality into language.

White's attunement to the physical has a pronounced effect upon the reader, who approaches the corporeality of the character via the materiality of White's prose. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes discusses the role of the body within the text and in the reading of it:

Apparently Arab scholars, when speaking of the text, use this admirable expression: *the certain body*: What body? We have several of them; the body of anatomists and physiologists, the one science sees or discusses But we also have a body of bliss consisting solely of erotic relations, utterly distinct from the first body; it is another contour, another nomination; thus with the text: it is no more than the open list of the fires of language (those living fires, intermittent lights, wandering features strewn in the text like seeds Does the text have a human form, is it a figure, an anagram of the body? Yes, but of our erotic body The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas – for my body does not have the same ideas I [have].

(Barthes 1975: 16-17)

Barthes distinguishes between the body as an object and the body as a source and site of pleasure and affect. The text maps on to this second notion of the body – the “body of bliss” – and the joy of both body and text is evident within the latter as “living fires, intermittent lights, wandering features”. These are the specificities and plurality of the text – its imagery, rhythms and stylistic features – which replicate “our erotic body” with its multiple sites of pleasure, foregrounding the semiotic dimension of signification. Indeed the joy of reading White resides within the access of affect, rhythm and sensation. White knows that the body exceeds rationality, that it overreaches the limitations of the bounded “I”: his fiction seeks to describe and perform the unreasoned moments of desire and feeling that dissolve subjectivity and enter representation and to both revel and struggle in materiality and corporeal sensation.

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