PsyArt

Blurring the Lines of Reality and Fiction: A Crisis of Authenticity, Memory, and Identity in Antonia White's Autobiographical Fiction

Marcia A. Newton

University at Albany

Abstract

British writer Antonia White sought to find a balance between writing a personal testimony of traumatic experiences she had suffered in her life and appealing to literary aesthetic values. From a literary scholar's perspective, this is a challenging undertaking. How much stock can readers place in autobiographical novels being true reflections of lived traumatic experiences? This paper is driven by three primary intertwining threads of inquiry with regard to White's life and autobiographical fiction: 1) the relationship between author and protagonist; 2) questions of ambiguity and how to resolve these questions in metaphorical descriptions of psychotic episodes; and 3) how to gain some kind of agency within the confines of a Freudian (pre)Oedipal narrative that led to mental illness. I explore the knotted areas of authenticity, memory, and identity, including a discussion of Phillipe Lejeune's ideas on form and theory of the autobiographical novel and psychoanalytic interpretations of creative writing through a Freudian lens.

Keywords: Antonia White, autobiographical novel, ambiguity, authenticity, memory, identity, (pre)Oedipal desires, psychosis, agency

To cite as: Newton, MarciaA. 2024, "Blurring the Lines of Reality and Fiction: A Crisis of Authenticity, Memory, and Identity in Antonia White's Autobiographical Fiction," *PsyArt* 28, pp. 1-27.

In Antonia White's series of autobiographical novels, she attempts to find a balance between writing a personal testimony of her traumatic experiences and appealing to literary aesthetic values. While readers are presented with vivid snapshots of White's relationships with others and her experiences with madness, to what extent can her creative texts be perceived as true reflections of actual traumatic experiences in her history? Given the genre in which White was writing, which blends fiction with non-fiction, questions of ambiguity will also naturally arise. Ambiguity is created by a reader's uncertainty about those aspects of the novel that have been introduced by the author out of a desire to appeal to aesthetic values and those aspects related to complex underlying issues of authenticity that may stem from an author's potentially confused memories or sense of identity; this is particularly true for White, who suffered from mental illness and experienced psychotic episodes. In an examination of the limitations and possibilities of authenticating narratives of trauma through literary and psychoanalytic lenses, I argue for a space to be carved for White's autobiographical fiction to be taken seriously as creative works that aspire to both an authentic expression of traumatic personal experiences and aesthetic values.

I

Following the publications of White's short stories "The House of Clouds" (1928) and "The Saint" in *Life and Letters* in the late 1920s, Antonia White's eldest daughter, Susan Chitty (1985), remarks, "Two stories written from personal experience had been taken by a prestigious review. It was hardly surprising that she started to favor autobiographical fiction…. A letter from Desmond McCarthy still exists, asking permission to say that the writer is describing an actual experience" (25). Similarly, reviews on *Frost in May* indicate how critics related to the novel in connection to real life. For example, the portrayal of Nanda's father in such a damning light

horrified reviewers: “All refused to believe in his terrible verdict” (25). One critic who was particularly disturbed by how the nuns treated Nanda vowed that he would never send “any child of *his* to a convent” (25; emphasis in original).

While White bathed in the wonderful reception of her early work in the 1920s and 1930s, by the 1950s, reviews had also become more critical. In a diary entry dated 21 August, 1954, White paints a less vibrant picture of the reviews she’s receiving:

> Once again the same contradictions in the reviews. I’m too emotional or too cold and detached. The stories are straight from life or they “creak mechanically.” I need to “go into training” or I have “brilliant technique.” I am constantly accused of inventing graphic reports of experience. I am said to have a “hard, bright talent,” a “creepy” one, to be “entertaining,” to leave an indescribably nasty taste in the mouth. One critic dismisses “The House of Clouds” as “fantasy” having no relation to clinical madness! … What always hurts me is when I am accused of “faking.” (281)

As illustrated, reviews of White’s work have shifted from a mere appreciation of her testimonial experiences in her autobiographical novels to reviews that also include skeptical responses with regard to aesthetic values and authenticity of experience. While White is evidently upset by the later reviews, she has already acknowledged the difficulty of writing a testimony of her life as a work of art. In a diary entry dated 30 December, 1940, White describes her authorial intention: “My job in life is to be able to give a form of writing to certain experiences…. It’s a kind of testimony, if you like, and difficult to make both honest and at the same time a work of art, something consistent with itself and complete and not just ‘reporting’ or ‘a slice of life”’ (*The Hound and the Falcon*, 1983, 38).

Given the genre in which White was writing, the words autobiographical fiction presents the reader with an oxymoron. How can readers identify aspects of White’s autobiographical novels that are testimonial in nature and aspects that are fictional? When White was publishing her autobiographical fiction, predominantly between the 1920s and 1950s, the term

"autobiographical novel" had not yet been invented. In the introduction to *The Sugar House* (1952), Elizabeth Bowen (1982) refers to White's work as "personal novels" (qtd. in Callil, Introduction).

Phillipe Lejeune (1989) suggests that clear parameters should be established to distinguish between the autobiographical novel and the autobiography proper. According to Lejeune, the autobiographical novel differentiates itself from the purely autobiographical by not being a "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (4). Lejeune suggests that the autobiographical novel does not fulfil the requirements of the autobiographical pact because the "I" cannot be established literally between author, narrator, and protagonist. An autobiographical novel functions by "*degrees*" (13; emphasis in original). In other words, there may be some slight resemblance between the author and the main protagonist, or there could be what appears to be a much closer resemblance that would make readers suspect that the author and main protagonist are one and the same person, but neither scenario can be proven. The key word here is *suspect* because without the author using his or her name directly in the autobiographical novel, the reader cannot reasonably claim that the two personalities are the same person. The author can choose to deny the similarities in personality and experiences. Lejeune clearly states, "Autobiography does not include degrees: it is all or nothing…. The hero can resemble the author as much as he wants; as long as he does not have his name, there is in effect nothing" (13). For Lejeune, the autobiographical novel generates a "*fictional pact*" between author and reader in a mutual understanding that readers do not expect to hear the truth (16).[1]

When writing *The Lost Traveller* (1951), White felt ill at ease writing a novel that had more fictional elements than *Frost*. Indeed, she lamented that she had not made *The Lost Traveller* "a proper sequel to *Frost*" (235). She writes, "Everything that happened to Clara in *The Lost Traveller* is the sort of thing that happened to me, though many things are changed, many invented. I wanted *The Lost Traveller* to be a real novel – *Frost in May* was so much my own life. So I changed her name …" (qtd. in Callil, Introduction).

Where to situate the locus of the author's name is a controversial feature of the autobiographical novel. According to Lejeune, "We must not confuse *pseudonym*, defined in this way as the name of *an author* (*noted on the cover of the book*), with the *name* attributed to a fictional person *within the book* (even if this person has the status of narrator and assumes the whole of the text production), because this person is himself designated as fictitious by the simple fact that he is incapable of being the *author* of the *book*" (12; emphasis in original). It seems to me that this statement provides a concrete application of the word "pseudonym" that ignores any abstract notions of personality on a psychological level. Although White changed her name, with regard to the psychological impact of her relationships with others, this is essentially the only intentional change she made. In an unpublished diary entry dated 10 June, 1955, White states, "I long for something fresh, something unconnected with my wretched self. Yet I seem quite incapable of invention" (Dunn, 2000, 48).

Frost in May (1933) is a narrative that, in many ways, encompasses the full weight of White's troubled (pre)Oedipal relationships with her parents, with Catholicism, and with how she perceives herself as a writer writing as a sexual woman. In *Frost in May*, White depicts a young and romantic convert called Nanda Grey who resides and is educated at Lippington Convent between the ages of nine and fourteen. During her time at Lippington, Nanda tries to

behave in a way a good Catholic should, but she feels subjected to a series of seemingly hypocritical rules and futile punishments from both the nuns at the convent and her father, Mr. Grey. In rebellion, Nanda describes a highly provocative scene between her heroine and admirers at a dance in her novel, coming to a climax with a moment when "the heroine's other admirer, after having 'swooned with her in the languid ecstasies of a waltz' took her out on the balcony and 'pressed a kiss of burning passion on her scarlet mouth, a kiss which had some of the reckless intoxication of the music that throbbed out from the Hungarian band they could hear in the distance"' (202). Nanda's creation of a salacious novel, which mirrors White's own experiences at the Convent of the Sacred Heart where White's own partially completed novel is perceived by the nuns and, unforgivably so, by her father as an act of spiritual treachery against the Catholic Church, results in her dismissal from the convent.[2]

How can readers navigate an autobiographical novel like *Frost in May* that seems to paradoxically testify to and against the suppression of female sexuality? White was not just a woman compelled to document her troubled relationships and traumatic experiences. She was also a writer who was well aware of the need to write according to literary aesthetic values. Developing literary trends on the relationship between author, narrator, and protagonist or author and reader in the twentieth century is part of a larger literary discussion on how literature best represents the social milieu. The modernist movement, for example, created a rupture in the socio-cultural framework by asserting the body in literature through transgressive modes of sexual expression in defiance of oppressive patriarchal authorities. This movement had a profound influence on White.

On the one hand, White aspired toward a literary modernist mindset advocating for female sexual liberation as a war waged on suppressed sexuality in a dominant Catholic culture.

Modernism emerged in defiance of what David Seelow (2005) describes as a period in which Victorian moralistic ideals on sexuality equated to a sexual perversion[3] and a time where "women are the objects of massive sexual repression and are exiled from sexual pleasure" (19). During the modernist sexual rebellion, dancers disrobed themselves of traditional forms of expression found in ballet and vaudeville for more experimental forms in less-clad attire;[4] and flappers enlightened society to what legs looked like below the knee, and the allure of wearing an abundance of make-up and having casual sex after a night of consuming alcohol. Writers, too, like James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence, inserted the body into literature using sexually provocative language in defiance of legal authorities.[5] In Wyndham Lewis's study of sexuality in *Time and Western Man* (1927), he remarks how "every license where 'sex' is concerned has been invested with the halo of an awful and thrilling lawlessness" (27). It is a sentiment that aptly describes this revelatory modernist movement to which White aspires.

White makes a modernist gesture in her deliberate denouncement of silencing sexual expression that doubles as an attempt at female sexual liberation in her longing to find a balance between art and religion, thus breaking through the boundaries of a Catholic patriarchal discourse on sexuality. In a letter to Peter Thorpe dated 18 April, 1941, in the *Hound and the Falcon*, White states: "I can in my heart renounce neither religion nor art: I can only try and combine the two in some mixture that suits a mixed nature" (118). White found herself torn between being an aspiring modernist artist and a devout Catholic in the 1930s, a time when to be both seemed incompatible. *Frost in May* illustrates this tension between White's modernist aspirations and yet her own need to fit into the religious culture that brings her sense of self into creative and psychological conflict, which is projected into her protagonist.

On the other hand, as a lapsed Catholic, White desperately wanted to be received back into the arms of the church. As a result of this dilemma, White's sense of self-as-artist is lurched into creative and psychological conflict. White's experience at The Convent of the Sacred Heart was so traumatizing, it led to a long stretch of writer's block following its publication. Utilizing Kleinian theory, Sandra Jeffery (2005) turns to the dialogue between Kolodny and Maria Bergmann to illustrate how "the aggressive feelings we originally had toward important others, but felt we had to protect them from in order to preserve our relationship to them, may 'get displaced or projected … leading to work paralysis or destruction of the product"' (82). Jeffery concludes that White, under pressure not to defile her father's good name, which would necessarily be exposed in her writing, leads her to writer's block (82). These sentiments echo Jeanne Flood's (1983) observation that "Nanda in a work of the imagination has revealed herself to [Mr. Grey] as corrupted by sexuality" (135). Similarly, Ellen Cronan Rose (1991) makes a striking connection between a scribbling incident, her writing a lewd novel, and how her father reacted by spanking her. In response to Nanda's reaction to the novel, "If he had stripped her naked and beaten her, she would not have felt more utterly humiliated," Cronan Rose observes that both writing and writer's block are connected with "defiance, compounded by incestuous desire and Oedipal seduction" (247). As if in response to these observations, Sandra Chait (2005) claims that White's "sexuality offended [her father], and he attempted to control her every action, her every thought, even to the point of causing her mental breakdown under the stress to express herself honestly, and therefore sexually too, in writing" (156).

It is certainly true that writing that fateful novel at the Convent of the Sacred Heart and her father's reaction to it scarred White, which would explain why she did not write other than in the private domain of her diaries for nearly twenty years. When she returns to writing, she is, I

argue, haunted by her father in such a potent way that her experience with writing is associated with one of the most private acts. In an *Analysis diary* entry dated 1 June 1936, just three years after *Frost in May* is published and another 15-month stint in psychoanalytic treatment, White writes,

> Am no longer interested in face cream … almost indifferent to clothes. Have become greedy again…. Hate my fat; do nothing about it. Hate wholesome food … Carroll says … That I will not write a masterpiece because other people would "devour" it…. I am just as anxious and embarrassed when anyone asks "are you writing anything now?" (75)

In "The Psychological Principles of Early Analysis" (1926), Klein observes, "At a very early age children become acquainted with reality through the deprivation which it imposes on them. They defend themselves against reality by repudiating it" (129). It is at this point in which the Oedipus complex sets in. Later, in "Early Stages of the Oedipus Conflict" (1928), Klein observes that at the onset of the Oedipus complex (after the weaning from the mother's breast), the little girl's desire to "possess" her father stems from the anger and jealousy she feels for her mother, which have to be addressed so as not to interfere with healthy relations later in life with men and her future children (193-194). In a healthy Oedipal situation, what ensues is a conflict between wanting to take revenge and feeling guilty about it that arises and leads in successful circumstances to the development of the super-ego.[6] However, even in a healthy Oedipal situation, Klein stresses that the unconscious anxiety that accompanies conscious negative emotions is ultimately the fear of the little girl losing or being forsaken by her mother. In "Infantile Anxiety-Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse" (1929), Klein writes,

> The little girl has a sadistic desire, originating in the early stages of the Oedipus conflict, to rob the mother's body of its content, namely, the father's penis, faeces, children, and to destroy the mother herself. This desire gives rise to anxiety lest the mother should in her turn rob the little girl herself of the contents of her body (especially of children) and lest her body should be destroyed or mutilated. In my view, this anxiety, which I have found

> in the analyses of girls and women to be the deepest anxiety of all, represents the little girl's earliest danger-situation. I have come to see that the dread of being alone, of the loss of love and loss of the love-object, which Freud holds to be the basic infantile danger-situation in girls, is a modification of the anxiety-situation I have just described. When the little girl who fears the mother's assault upon her body cannot see her mother, this intensifies the anxiety. The presence of a real, loving mother diminishes the dread of a terrifying mother, whose introjected image is in the child's mind. At a later stage of development the content of the dread changes from that of an attacking mother to the dread that the real, loving mother may be lost and that the girl will be left solitary and forsaken. (217)

In this scenario, there are some possible outcomes for the girl entering adolescence. It may be that these unconscious feelings of loneliness and of being forsaken by the mother are revived in the girl and lead her towards her father, in order to free herself from the pre-Oedipal attachments to the mother with the onset of all her frustrations, conflicts, and disappointments rearing their ugly heads. But, for Klein, the turning towards the father is the unconscious demand for punishment. In "Early Stages of the Oedipus Conflict," Klein writes, "In consequence of the need for punishment and the repetition-compulsion, these experiences often cause the child to subject [her]self to sexual traumata" (197).

At this juncture, an important question needs to be raised: what is the little girl's punishment for? Is it for the girl exacting revenge on the mother, or in Nanda's case the nuns and, by association her mother, or for having Oedipal desires? Klein does not provide a satisfactory answer to this question. However, she does shift from Freud's theory on the castration complex deriving solely from the little girl's fears of her mother having taken her penis to emphasis on the mother's breast. This redirection of attention shifts focus away from a patriarchal power symbol (the penis)—albeit momentarily—to a matriarchal one (the breast) at a key moment in the girl's psycho-sexual developmental process. However, what if this fear has real substance?

II

In her recent essay on Dorothy Allison's autobiographical novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, in which Ruth Anne's sexual abuse by her stepfather, Glen, parallels Allison's own experience of sexual abuse by her stepfather, Leigh Gilmore (2001) asks a very important question: "Where does autobiography end and fiction begin in an autobiographical novel?" (45). With regard to trauma narratives in particular, a larger question is posed by Gilmore: "What is real and what is imagined in the representation of self and trauma" (46). Writing with autobiographical elements creates a lot of obstacles, not just in terms of self-representation but how the reader should judge the success of the work and on what terms. For White, this is a difficult task, given her history of mental illness and psychotic episodes where her accuracy of account is subject to scrutiny. It is a tricky situation because the nature of autobiographical fiction is, I suggest, the literary counterpart to psychological trauma: it is a recreated narrative that will have many truths but also many distortions in it because that is also the nature of trauma and how one is able to respond consciously to it.

Judith Herman (1997) makes a poignant observation that speaks to inherent barriers to authenticating traumatic narratives:

> The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma. People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy. When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery. But far too often secrecy prevails, and the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom. (1)

While there may be confused memories and, hence, problems of authenticating those memories, I suggest that White's autobiographical novels function as narratives that speak to this dialectic as a woman who spent time in a mental institution following psychotic episodes.

Images of death are dominant features in White's descriptions of psychosis. In "The House of Clouds," Helen's mind becomes foggy, and she soon descends deeper into an alternate reality where her dreams become reality. Perhaps months or years into the future, she oscillates between the loss and return of her identity as a human being. It is an experience she expresses with clarity:

> For years she was not even a human being; she was a horse. Ridden almost to death, beaten till she fell, she lay at last on the straw in her stable and waited for death. They buried her as she lay on her side, with outstretched head and legs. A child came and sowed turquoises round the outline of her body in the ground, and she rose up again as a horse of magic with a golden mane, and galloped across the sky. Again she woke on the mattress in her cell. (52)

Helen's perception of herself is unsettling. The metaphorical content described in the aforementioned passages convey a preoccupation with flight and death that corresponds to White's suicidal tendencies during times of despair. And yet, in this particular description, death also seems romanticized in a glorious flight of gold and speed shattered by the mundane description of being awoken within a drab and confined space. Presented with a poignant demonstration of White's suffering alter ego, she relives the same horrors from one text to another. On the one hand, although a connection between psychosis and sexual trauma cannot be proven conclusively, there is the possibility of real sexual trauma as a result of sexual abuse made secret within the confines of an Oedipal narrative.[7] On the other hand, White's autobiographical novels provide a testimony to White's traumatic experiences. Following deeply traumatic experiences that are difficult to address personally, writing in the third person functions to distance White to a certain extent from the authorial "I."

In "Creative Writers and Daydreaming" (1908), Freud suggests that creative writers' creations are not only products of fantasy but can be distinctly distinguished from reality and are now a substitute for their play in childhood (421). The difference between children at play and

adults who fantasize, however, is that adults are ashamed of their fantasies and attempt to hide them. (422). Most importantly, it is only unhappy persons who fantasize as a result of unsatisfied wishes (423). The fantasy itself is "the fulfillment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality" (423). Freud describes how these wishes are either related to ambition (primarily related to younger men) and eroticism (primarily related to younger women). "If phantasies become over-luxuriant and over-powerful, the conditions are laid for an onset of neurosis or psychosis…. Phantasies, moreover, are the immediate mental precursor of … distressing symptoms" (424). According to Freud, the ego, moreover, is divided between three time consortiums: the past, present, and future, in which the wish, analogous to the memory of an experience in childhood, "finds its fulfillment in the creative work" (427). One cannot fail to notice that Freud's modifications of wish-fulfilment are gender-biased, which, I might add, is what drives little boys and girls on their respective Oedipal journeys.

Freud asserts that because a creative writer feels ashamed of his innermost fantasies and feels we may become repulsed by them, he hides his fantasies in technique, in what Freud refers to as "ars poetica" (428). Effectively, "the writer softens the character of his egoistic daydreams by altering and disguising it, and he bribes us by the purely formal—that is, aesthetic—yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his phantasies" (428). In other words, readers can become seduced by the aesthetic nature of a work that conceals the artist's true intentions, albeit unconscious ones, for the most part.

While I applaud the connection that Freud makes between author and protagonist, the reader is led down a particular path of interpretation that reveals anxiety-ridden Oedipal desires. As illustrated, in Freudian terms, White's Oedipal desires would be hidden behind a veneer of

fear that symbolizes her anxiety. Interestingly, at face value, there does appear to be a strong analogy between the creative work and White's sublimation of ambivalent erotic desires.

What is particularly intriguing about White's descriptive passages in her autobiographical fiction is that they combine both the visual and the text in which the tension between love and hate, recognition and non-recognition seem to be driving forces. However, if we were to analyze these dramatic descriptive passages purely based on the authenticity of recollection, we may meet with some resistance, particularly given the psychotic nature of the content. On a superficial level, readers are presented with a scenario in which White is writing about a traumatic experience in a language that is evidently poetic that serves to help her relate to her experience and, indeed, for readers to visualize her experience. Writing creatively, however, is an issue that Paul de Man and Lejeune address in relation to the unreliability of capturing a past experience.

Paul de Man (1979) suggests that writing autobiography is an impossible achievement because "the specular moment is not primarily a situation or event that can be located in history, but that it is the manifestation, on the level of a referent, of a linguistic structure" (922). This linguistic structure, according to De Man, replaces lived experience as something belonging to the past that is now dead but has been revived in language through the mechanisms of prosopopeia, what De Man describes as "the trope of autobiography, by which one's name … is made as intelligible and memorable as a face" (926). For De Man, moreover,

> As soon as we understand the rhetorical function of prosopopeia as positing voice or face by means of language, we also understand that what we are deprived of is not life but the shape and the sense of a world accessible only in the privative way of understanding. Death is a misplaced name for a linguistic predicament, and the restoration of mortality by autobiography (the prosopopeia of the voice and the name) deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores. Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause. (930)

Indeed, ideas of perception are challenged on a literal level, and it is true that the viewer cannot secure the resemblance between the painter and his portrait, but this is also a problem with a concrete interpretation. Lejeune observes that the problem of authenticity is knotted together with memory and identity. In his chapter "Autobiography in the Third Person" in *On Autobiography* (1989), to demonstrate how autobiographers can be actors, too, Lejeune makes reference to an exercise that Bertolt Brecht required of his actors. Brecht would have them invert their roles from the first person to the third person and act from a retrospective perspective. The aim of this exercise was to "encourage distancing" and help his actors "express their problems of identity and at the same time to captivate their readers" (31). In a discussion on how to interpret the "I" when an author refers to himself or herself in the third person, "the erasing of enunciation" becomes "a fact of enunciation" (32). In terms of autobiographical fiction, however, "utterance itself would be taken in the perspective of a phantasmatic pact ('this has meaning in relation to me, but is not I')" (32-33). This form invites what Lejeune calls "ambiguous reading" (32) that can cause problems of identity for the reader (33).

Similarly, in an attempt to engage with his own autobiographical writing, Lejeune states that he can tolerate "indetermination" but not "ambiguity," which he illustrates with the *Triple Self-Portrait* by Norman Rockwell (134). The problem that concerns Lejeune is how Rockwell is able to paint a portrait that shows him painting a portrait of himself with his back to the audience. He describes this moment as a "pedagogical and humorous exercise on the theme of the self-portrait … the self-portrait and the 'painter's studio.' And what we see here is both exactly what the painter cannot see and what the onlooker of the self-portrait *imagines*" (112; emphasis in original). Lejeune concludes that Rockwell's self-portrait is only an impression because we see him seeing himself as artist and painter.

Indeed, ideas of perception are challenged on a literal level, and it is true that the viewer cannot secure the resemblance between the painter and his portrait, but this is also a problem with a concrete interpretation. Both De Man and Lejeune speak to an age-old Platonic view on mimesis[8] and in so doing miss the point about self-representation on a deeper psychological level. Whether or not perception is a distortion of the truth as perceived by others, this should not negate the truth of perception as White perceives it. As in Rockwell's self-portrait, White is asking the reader to go beyond the superficial gaze to how she perceives herself through a conversation between author and protagonist or alter ego through the language of psychosis in which her experiences are translated into visual images. After all, memory itself is revived in our capturing images of the past, whether they are snapshots or scenes replayed in our minds. These are images that White attempts to capture in metaphorical language in her autobiographical fiction; this act, moreover, invites the reader to witness a recasting of White's personality in her alter egos in an attempt to form some cohesion of identity against the backdrop of a psychotic traumatic experience. As Olney (1981) eloquently describes, by focusing on emotional experiences, "Metaphor is essentially a way of knowing … through which we stamp our own image on the face of nature" (31). The problem for literary thinkers and psychoanalysts alike, however, is to determine the image that is being stamped.

What does it mean to write about a fractured personality in a way that speaks truth to experience? How does the reader, in turn, interpret a fractured personality that makes its presence felt in an alter ego? The relationship between the authorial and narrative "I" is a complex one. With regard to White's autobiographical fiction, which has its limitations, i.e., the risk of ambiguity in the reader's attempt to make sense of the author-protagonist relationship, making connections between the author's representation of self through traumatic experiences

seems to rupture in the very act of cohesion. This is due to the reader's inability to fix an absolute linguistic meaning to the experience.

Brendan Stone (2004) draws attention to the limitations and possibilities of reading madness in autobiographical narratives. Taking the question of ambiguity a step further, he asks, how does one describe pain in plain language, particularly when this pain is situated in a memory of a past event that may have become distorted in consciousness? Stone argues how one cannot recodify a narrative of chaos, i.e., madness into a "coherent plot" because it is essentially unspeakable (49). According to Stone, the question that is the foundation upon which many questions rest is this: How unspeakable is trauma? If it is speakable, is it then only fiction? Furthermore, Stone asks the following questions: "If we do narrate the limit-experience, won't this narration transform trauma into something which it was, and is, not—something governed by order, sense, reason, and progression? Would not such a narrative be a false story, a story which is dissonant with the self's distress?" (50). In answer to these questions, Stone sees the possibilities in narrating the self's distress as a way to foster "an *openness* to the unforeseen, and … emergent and anarchic energies" (52; emphasis in original).

Stone makes an important observation himself that writing one's distress dispenses with the need to reproduce faithfully an experience based on a rationalized depiction of truth to experience in a recognizable language because the act of writing is in itself a path towards "selfhood" (54).

More recently, scholars are open to distinguishing between a memory that is true and one that is authentic. For example, Dings et al. (2021) write, "a memory is true when it represents the original event accurately; a memory is authentic when it represents one's experience of the original event accurately" (2). Dings et al. propose the term "situational authenticity" that takes

into consideration "the fundamental ambiguity inherent in the idea of an 'event'" and the functionality of an episodic memory. In other words, they consider what the aim to which a memory that recalls a particular event in our personal past and our experience of that event is supposed to serve. (3). If one is writing for the purpose of developing a narrative of self for the purpose of comparison or enhancement, he or she may be selective about the memories chosen: "the rememberer is selective in which memories are recollected and also how they are recalled, thus illustrating that accuracy and authenticity are not the main norms at play in these practices," practices that may be "automatic and unconscious" (5). In a recounting of trauma memories in particular, the rememberer "may first have a directive function (to prevent future harm), then a social function (to foster recovery from the traumatic event), and finally a self-function (to incorporate the event into one's self-narrative)" (6). What matters most is context in terms of "meaning-making, i.e., of the extent to which these memories enabled the person to 'take a step back from the event' and to clarify why something had happened" (10) in "retelling" an event, as opposed to "recalling" it for the purpose of meaning-making to describe an experience of importance (13).

Writing autobiographically, I suggest that White transforms her psychotic experiences from a purely external perception by others to a description of her inner psyche and the horrors of experience contained therein that provides a sense of self. In so doing, White seeks to strike a balance between conveying a conceptual based psychologically traumatic experience and doing so through literary means. However, for White, there is constant tugging between identities and self-representation in an attempt to make meaning from madness and the mental angst it creates.

Similar to Helen's experience in "The House of Clouds," when Clara declines into madness in *Beyond the Glass*, it is an episode that White claims to be an exact documentary of

her experiences in an asylum. As this particular autobiographical novel comes to a close, Richard, a possible suitor for Clara, finds out from Clara's father that Clara is not likely to make a recovery for many years, so he moves on but not before leaving a precious gift, a little red purse that contains a rosary. After Nell gives Clara the purse, Clara finds herself back in the same courtyard before her descent into psychosis with a pulling tension between life and death weighing on her mind:

> She stood for a while, clenching her wet eyelids together and clutching the little red purse. Then she became conscious of the faint sluck, sluck of the river. She remembered the narrow stone passage. A quiet, urgent impulse came over her to walk down it; to walk on and on with her eyes shut until it would be impossible to return. But, even more urgently, she felt the small weight pressing against her palm like a detaining hand. She forced herself to open her eyes. For a moment, she was no longer alone in the courtyard. She whispered, knowing that he heard: "Richard … I'll hold on…. Go in peace." (285)

In this final scene, what seems to bring Clara back from the brink of disappearance is the one thing that haunted her waking and sleeping states of mind. She lets Richard go and returns to the love she knows, her father. In a diary entry dated 28 July, 1954, White herself was to confess that the idea of having an uncomplicated sexual relationship with a man is what drove her to madness. It is a fusion of sexuality with a combined attraction-repulsion relationship to death, which is symbolized in White's writing and then distorted in recollection. These distortions, or metaphorical descriptions, illustrate how her traumatic experiences straddle a fine line between selfhood and writing within the confines of a larger patriarchal narrative through the mechanisms of the Oedipus complex. Nonetheless, it cannot be ignored that a problematic self-representation of traumatic experiences through an alter ego, regardless of whether that testimony is written in the first or third person or from a conscious or unconscious perspective, is still a concern today, particularly if that testimony deviates from a plain language into a more creative metaphorical one.

Sherah Wells (2009) suggests that through writing, White's protagonist Clara can "reconstruct her subjectivity by (re)learning her identity and how to read and write. Her recovery [from psychosis] is indicated by her ability to write a letter to her father" (46). In the example given here, the focus is on White's ability to craft a subjective space in her writing that is projected onto her protagonist. However, for me, the situation is a bit more tenuous. For White, writing illustrates a struggle she has relating to her traumatic experiences that I argue ultimately signifies a tension between aspiring to a selfhood described by Stone and being enveloped in a complex Oedipal narrative that evidences her ambivalent feelings for her father. Ever since White's father reprimands her for writing what he considered to be such a baleful novel—an experience reproduced in *Frost in May*—writing creatively was a problem for White until after his death.

Conclusion

Lejeune's description of what autobiography should be is restrictive. Emphasizing problems of ambiguity is valid; however, Lejeune makes no attempt to reference complex underlying psychological issues that may contribute to, for example, an ambiguous author-protagonist relationship, which is imperative in an examination of trauma narratives. As a reader, I give White the right to engage in the act of self-exploration but to do so through the agency of her alter egos and not the authorial "I." Against the backdrop of her diaries and biographers' writings, my function as reader is to listen to two voices in conversation—the one that comes from the author, and the one that comes from the protagonist—that attempt to make sense of deeply traumatic experiences in the author's life, for example, White's relationship with authoritative figures in her life. Not to do so would be doing a disservice to White and effectively silence her voice.

A unique feature in White's autobiographical novels is that there are multiple voices at play. There is, at times, an alter ego within an alter ego, evidenced in Nanda's heroine in *Frost in May*, and the presence of her psychotic content in "The House of Clouds" and *Beyond the Glass*, two texts that capture how elusive White's sense of identity was. Nonetheless, this content does complicate the problematic construction of identity and authenticity of experience, which raises larger issues about how we should read retrospective autobiographical narratives by writers who suffered from mental illness following traumatic experiences. I sought to place a spotlight on how White's experiences—and my willingness as a reader to listen to those experiences as she relates to them—shape her personality and sense of being. White's testimony of psychosis in her autobiographical fiction, in particular, is complicated by a tension between attempts to secure some kind of agency through her writing within the confines of a patriarchal Oedipal narrative; it is this collision that shapes her testimony in its raw portrayal of an identity in crisis.

More significantly, I suggest that White's autobiographical fiction about a protagonist in crisis is a recasting of a fractured personality who offers testimony to a traumatic experience that had a profound impact on White's personality and life. This testimony should be respected as a viable mode of self-expression that should not be subject to scrutiny that over-emphasizes the problems of ambiguity and objectivity, which pervade literary theories and criticism.

Against the backdrop of literary rules and regulations about how to read and interpret genres like autobiographical fiction—a criticism that has its growth in twentieth century literary criticism and theories that seek to eradicate the notion, it seems, of ambiguity—the loss is felt perhaps most strongly by the reader. The reader's ability to make a connection with writers like White grappling with how to express creatively their traumatic experiences in the face of what they often perceive to be the threat of real mental, emotional, and spiritual annihilation becomes

severely restricted. Readers must embrace the ambiguous nature of psychotic narratives as evidence of both a safe haven in which some authors like White find themselves and as a place that is symptomatic of traumatic struggles with equally traumatic experiences in their histories.

Notes

1. In "The Autobiographical Pact (bis)" published eleven years after the original essay in 1975, Lejeune reflects upon his earlier statements, oscillating between self-criticism and justification. For example, with regard to his dogmatic definition of autobiography as it should be—a prose narrative written about the self's history by the self—Lejeune confesses that he is guilty of blending "theoretical hypothesis" with "normative assertion" (120). He had not intended his theories to become, as they have done, rules to follow, but rather points of discussion. That being said, he has no regrets because he justifies his "authority" on the subject of the autobiographical genre as one that "corresponds to a need" (121). He was the man who cut the "Gordian knot"[l] of autobiographical definition (121).

2. Refer to my article, "'I Love You; I 'ate You": Oral Aggression, Consumed Subjects, and the Creative Impulse in Antonia White's Autobiographical Novel, *Frost in May*'. *PsyArt*. 6 Oct. 2013 for an in-depth analysis of this topic from a Kleinian perspective.

3. Refer to David Seelow's book, *Radical Modernism and Sexuality: Freud/Reich/D. H. Lawrence and Beyond,* for an in-depth socio-medical historical analysis of the shift from Victorian to Modernist ideals on sexuality. His larger focus is on how sexuality was disseminated from the perspective of a Victorian biological paradigm as a scientific extension of abstract religious fears of sexuality to the modernists' detachment of biological sexuality from its moral context in a radical move towards sexual liberation.

4. An interesting background account that informs my assertion here is in "The History of Modern Dance" by Ballet Austin.

5. As a result of containing what were perceived as obscenities, *Ulysses* (1922) was banned in the UK until 1930. D. H. Lawrence, with his publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), which was banned in the UK until 1960 is, in my opinion, a novel that embraces the spiritual side of sexuality more keenly than any other novel of its type in the English-speaking language. One need only turn to the love scenes between Mellors and Constance to be swept up in a torrent of passion, one in which the very beauty of language itself is also elevated: "She did not understand the beauty he found in her, through touch upon her living secret body, almost the ecstasy of beauty" (Lawrence 131).

6. In "The Psychological Principles of Early Analysis" (1926), Klein observes the potential danger of entering the Oedipus complex too soon in the case of Rita who, throughout the first few years of life, oscillated between a fixed attachment to her mother and father, and by the third year, showed mixed feelings towards them both, shown in inhibitory behavior in play, an insufficient means of enduring deprivations, oversensitivity to pain, and proneness to moods. Klein learned that Rita had slept in her parents' bed for the first two years of her life and had witnessed the "primal scene," which may have led to Rita's neurotic symptoms. Klein comments that "There can be no doubt that there is a close connection between neurosis and such profound effects of the Oedipus complex experienced at so early an age. I cannot determine whether it is neurotic children whom the early working of the Oedipus complex affects so intensely, or if children become neurotic when this complex sets in too soon" (130).

7. Refer to my article, "'Sailing in Paper Boats': Sexual Trauma, Psychosis, and a Critical Examination of the Freudian Metaphor in Antonia White's Autobiographical Fiction" (2016) for a more in-depth analysis of this topic.

8. The debate on mimesis goes back to Book X of Plato's *Republic* and the artist's moral obligation to produce works that aspire to impart justice and virtue into the hearts of men. In his debate with Glaucon, the speaker Socrates explains that the poet imitates the appearance of an imitation of an object, which is inferior to cognition of the object itself as a source of understanding. The imitated object, therefore, is not to be taken as a bearer of truth. What the reader needs to guard against is the potential corrupting influence of art, particularly with regard to virtue. The flaw, according to Socrates, lies not in art itself but in man's mistaken responses to it: "Poetry, such as we have described, is not to be regarded seriously as attaining to the truth; and he who listens to her, fearing for the safety of the city which is within him, should be on his guard against her seductions and make our words his law" (Richter, 1998, 29).

References

Bowen, Elizabeth. 1982. “Introduction.” *Frost in May*. New York: The Dial.

Brown, Pei-San, ed. 2014. “The History of Modern Dance.” https://artsintegration.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Modern.pdf.

Callil, Carmen. 1979. “Introduction.” *The Sugar House*. New York: The Dial Press.

Chait, Sandra. 2005. “Site Also of Angst and Spiritual Search.” In *Hayford Hall: Hangovers, Erotics, and Modernist Aesthetics*, 150-169. Eds. Elizabeth Podnieks and Sandra Chait. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP.

Chitty, Susan. 1985. *Now To My Mother: A Very Personal Memoir of Antonia White*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Dings, Roy, et al. 2023. “Situated Authenticity in Episodic Memory.” *Synthese (Dordrecht)* 202, no. 86:1-21. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-023-04309-w.

D’Cruz, Doreen. 2002. *Loving Subjects: Narratives of Female Desire / Doreen D’Cruz.* New York: P. Lang.

Dunn, Jane. 2000. *Antonia White: A Life*. London: Virago.

Flood, Jeanne A. 1983. “The Autobiographical Novels of Antonia White.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 24, no. 3: 131–49. doi:10.1080/00111619.1983.9937781.

Freud, Sigmund. 1908. “Creative Writers and Daydreaming.” In *Collected Papers* 9, no. 4: 419-428. Translated under supervision of Joan Riviere 1953. London: Basic Books. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5441df7ee4b02f59465d2869/t/588e9620e6f2e152d3ebcffc/1485739554918/Freud+-+Creative+Writers+and+Day+Dreaming%281%29.pdf.

Gilmore, Leigh. 2001. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. New York: Cornell UP.

Herman, Judith. 1997. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books.

Jeffery, Sandra. 2005. "Antonia White and the Subversion of Literary Impotence at Hayford Hall." In *Hangovers, Erotics, and Modernist Aesthetics*, 70-88. Eds. Elizabeth Podnieks and Sandra Chait. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP.

Klein, Melanie. 1928. "Early Stages of the Oedipus Conflict." In *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945*, 1975: 186-198. New York: The Free Press.

---. 1929. "Infantile Anxiety-Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse." In *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945*, 1975: 210-218. New York: The Free Press.

---. 1926. "The Psychological Principles of Early Analysis." In *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945*, 1975: 128-138. New York: The Free Press.

Lawrence, David Herbert. 1961. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Middlesex: Penguin.

Lejeune, Philippe. 1989. *On Autobiography*. Translated by Katherine Leary. Minnesota: Minnesota UP.

Lewis, Wyndham. 1927. *Time and Western Man. Book One: The Revolutionary Simpleton*. London: Chatto and Windus. https://ia801405.us.archive.org/13/items/WyndhamLewisTimeandWesternManBook1/Wyndham%20Lewis%20-%20TimeandWesternMan-Book1.pdf.

Maitland, Sara. 1983. "Introduction." *The Hound and the Falcon*. London: Virago.

Man, Paul de. "Autobiography as De-facement." *MLN* 94, no. 5: 919–30. https://doi.org/10.2307/2906560.

Newton, Marcia. 2013. '"I Love You; I 'ate You": Oral Aggression, Consumed Subjects, and the Creative Impulse in Antonia White's Autobiographical Novel, *Frost in May*." *PsyArt*.

https://psyartjournal.com/article/show/newton-i_love_you_i_ate_you_oral_aggression_con.

---. 2012. "Paradoxical Notions of Sexual Expression in Antonia White's Autobiographical Novel, *Frost in May*." *Clio's Psyche* 18 no. 4. 396-400, http://cliospsyche.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/cliomarch2012.pdf.

Olney, James. 1981. *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*. Princeton: Princeton UP.

Plato. Ca. 380 B.C.E. "*Republic*, Book X." In *The Critical Tradition,* ed. David Richter 1998: 21-29. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's.

Rose, Ellen Cronan. 1991. "Antonia White: Portrait of the Artist as a Dutiful Daughter." *Literature Interpretation Theory* 2, no. 3: 239–48. doi:10.1080/10436929108580059.

Seelow, David. 2005. *Radical Modernism and Sexuality: Freud/Reich/D. H. Lawrence and Beyond*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Stone, Brendan. 2004. "How Can I Speak of Madness? Narrative and Identity in Memoirs of 'Mental Illness.'" In *Narrative, Memory & Identity: Theoretical and Methodological Issues*. 49-57. Huddersfield: Huddersfield UP.

Wells, Sherah. 2009. "Strand by Strand: Untying the Knots of Mental and Physical Illness in the Correspondence and Diaries of Antonia White and Emily Holmes Coleman." In *The Tapestry of Health, Illness and Disease*, 43-55. Eds. Vera Kalitzkus, and Peter L. Twohig. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401206716_005.

White, Antonia. 1993. *As Once In May: The Early Autobiography of Antonia White and Other Writings*. Ed. Susan Chitty. London: Virago.

---. 1981. *Beyond the Glass*. New York: The Dial Press.

---. 1992. *Diaries 1926-1957, Vol. 1.* Ed. Susan Chitty. New York: Viking Penguin.

---. 1982. *Frost in May*. New York: The Dial Press.

---. 1983. *The Hound and the Falcon*. London: Virago.

---. 1981. "The House of Clouds." In *Strangers*, 45-66. London: Virago.

---. 1980. *The Lost Traveller*. New York: The Dial Press.

---. 1979. *The Sugar House*. New York: The Dial Press.