
Book Section:
Babbage, F. (2023) "A real actress": Theatre and selfhood in Antonia White's Frost in may quartet. In: Wolfe, G., (ed.) The Routledge Companion to Theatre-Fiction. Routledge Literature Handbooks . Routledge , pp. 214-229. ISBN 9781032069906

https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003204886-21

"A real actress": Theatre and Selfhood in Antonia White's *Frost in May* Quartet

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Antonia White's *Frost in May* (1933) is described by fellow author Elizabeth Bowen as both a "school story" and "a work of art" (Bowen 7). The novel was widely admired, a success that eased White's introduction into the literary and artistic circles of the day (Hutton 123). Yet *Frost in May*'s positive reception in the 1930s proved something of an impediment for its author: critics compared later novels unfavourably with the first, and White struggled all her life with crippling writer's block, tinged with bitterness that she had not achieved the recognition she longed for. Her books fell out of fashion as the century progressed: the arguably self-absorbed anxieties of the privileged, and the predominantly realist frame through which these were explored, seemed to belong to another era and one that felt significantly less relevant after the passage of two world wars. However, White found a new audience and lease of life when *Frost in May* was selected by feminist publishing house Virago to launch their hugely important Modern Classics list, in 1978; *The Lost Traveller*, *The Sugar House* and *Beyond the Glass*, continuing the heroine's story, were reissued the following year. Virago's intervention decisively asserted White's importance as a writer, yet her work has still received relatively little critical attention. This disregard is partly explained by the degree to which the novels track the author's life: their frequent designation as "autobiographical fiction" valuably signals qualities of fluidity and indeterminacy sometimes associated with women's writing, but is a label that correspondingly risks undermining the status of her books as art.[1] Scholarly analyses of White to date focus primarily on this autobiographical dimension, pursuing questions of sexual trauma, psychosis and religious doubt across life and work (see for example Newton, Campbell, Moran, Valentine). No critical consideration has yet been given to the figure of theatre, prominent in the novels and deeply compelling for White herself. At the age of nineteen, and at this point still using her birth name of Eirene Botting, she entered London's Academy of Dramatic Art (founded in 1904, later to become RADA) to train as an actress.[2] White acted professionally in 1920, taking the ingénue part in a short-lived touring production of Charles Hawtrey's farce *The Private Secretary*, but readily admitted she was a poor performer, "feeble of voice and constrained of gesture" (Dunn 59). Nonetheless, the theatre continued to fascinate her: "The stage was my first love and I believe will be my last"; "it is odd how always I come back to

hanging about the theatre…"; "[t]o write a play would satisfy all my ambitions" (White, *Diaries* 62-3, 109, 159).

Theatre as a thread runs variously through White's quartet. Formal productions are mounted in two novels: in *Frost in May*, where the child protagonist, Nanda, participates in the convent school staging of *The Vision of Dante*; and in *The Sugar House*, by which point the heroine—renamed Clara—is employed as an actress, her experience closely based on White's own (White, 'The First Time I Went on Tour'). Both encounters are shown as profoundly unsettling: the first, in the apparent conflict between individual expression and the constraints of religious orthodoxy; the second, in the way that Clara's immersion in theatre as institution crystallises and exacerbates the jolting impressions of unreality and fakery by which she is persistently disturbed. Beyond these examples of theatre production, tropes of theatre recur in all four novels as a language that voices the protagonist's troubled sense of herself as an inauthentic player in her own life. The daughter of a convert, Nanda becomes keenly aware that however much she is "washed and combed and baptised and confirmed", her faith is perceivably, and in the end punishably, not "in the blood" (White, *Frost in May* 97). In *The Lost Traveller,* the teenage Clara's confidence is consistently compromised by fear that she cannot "rise to" the role her father demands of her and will "disappoint him once again" (White, *The Lost Traveller* 281). Her unhappy and unconsummated marriage to Archie in *The Sugar House* requires a different order of enactment, in the imperative to convince the world and each other that they are "a care-free modern couple" (White, *The Sugar House* 155). Repeatedly, the novels adopt motifs of role play and costuming, a script plausibly or jarringly delivered, as well as a "spectatorial" assessment of one's performance, sometimes metaphoric but frequently actualised as reflections in a mirror: in such moments, the layering of selves that theatre formalises is perceived as a terrifying fragmentation, leading ultimately to mental breakdown in *Beyond the Glass*.

This chapter demonstrates that theatre provides a particularly suggestive framework for re-examining White's writing. First, close attention to the novels reveals it as a trope figuring powerfully in the narrative, not limited to specific episodes but implicitly shaping the protagonist's entire journey. Second, since theatre both as metaphor and as concrete practice invites the flow of personal feeling or experience into the crafted artwork, it offers a useful model through which to revisit and reframe the undeniably autobiographical impulse in her writing. Third, White's fiction (likewise, her diaries) charts an unceasing struggle between

seemingly polarised states which can be mapped with striking closeness onto tropes of anti-theatricality. As White depicts it almost invariably, one is either authentically oneself, or an imposter; either "present" in the moment, or a chilly self-observer; and, as a writer, either spontaneously inspired—ideally, ecstatically transported—or cynically reliant on technique. The theatre inherently engages very similar positions but more positively, and in layered combination, thus troubling their supposed opposition: self and role intertwine in the actor's performance; in theatre, the fictional or pretended coexists concurrently with the real; and while emotional affect may be generated to order, it is none the less "felt". Theatre's enduring fascination for White proves illuminating, therefore, in its capacity to synthesise qualities that she typically experienced as terrifyingly antithetical. Finally, while the principal aim of this chapter is to explore the potency of theatre in White's writing, we will see that a reverse gaze is also constructive. White's encounters with the stage reflect the changing face of British theatre in the early twentieth century: from conservatism to experiment, influenced by avant-garde practice on the Continent, and moving towards a more holistic model that strove to join realism and abstraction, creativity and technique, corporeality and the text.

Form and feeling: *Frost in May*

White's first novel is set almost wholly at Lippington, the convent school Nanda attends between the ages of nine and fourteen. The fictional Convent of the Five Wounds was based closely on the Sacred Heart, Roehampton; White maintained that the novel accurately represented her experience as a pupil and that almost every incident was true (Dunn 39). At Lippington, the children's lives are regimented through a demanding timetable of religious observance and the tireless surveillance of the nuns. Every behaviour is noted and evaluated, its assessment publicly marked through an arcane system of coloured ribbons, "Permissions" and "Exemptions", privileges extended or denied: the efficacy of that system is evidenced in the readiness of pupils to submit to mortifications of their own devising, in punishment for "sins" perceived, or simply to the greater glory of God. Nanda begins her career there shakily, overwhelmed by the school's alien formalities. On her first day, she bungles the sign of the cross, not through ignorance but rather the excess of nervous politeness that makes her afraid to withdraw her right hand from the Mother Superior's clasp. The reproof is immediate: "'Come Nanda', she said, 'that's not the way little Catholic children make the sign of the cross. It's not reverent, dear.' Nanda felt hot with shame" (White, *Frost* 17). This incident is characteristic of Nanda's fragile status at Lippington: for her as a relative newcomer to Catholicism, brought to the faith at the age of six concurrently with her father's

conversion, no amount of study or memorised catechism can overcome her feelings of inadequacy; this imposter syndrome is also manifest at the level of class, where, amongst the daughters of predominantly wealthy, titled, old Catholic families, she is guiltily conscious of distorting and glamorising her middle-class origins (White, *Frost* 26).

Despite her anxieties and self-recriminations, Nanda is swiftly absorbed into the rarefied world of Lippington, within which, very largely, she finds it easy to be good: "there seemed so little time to be anything else" (White, *Frost* 40). She is passionately committed to Catholicism, moved by its mysteries but equally fascinated by its ceremonial performance. That these qualities—inner truth and outward show—operate in potentially fraught tension comes into sharp focus at Nanda's First Communion, at the age of eleven. This event is registered by the children and nuns alike as a momentous rite of passage. Nanda prepares with fervour, eagerly anticipating not just the occasion but the epiphany she believes must accompany it. When the great day comes, the mass is framed as even more than usually theatrical: the communicants are costumed, veiled and wreathed, each item "new and white"; they process slowly "like twelve brides" into the candlelit chapel, accompanied by "soft, lacy music"; everything is in place; all lines are learned (White, *Frost* 67). Yet as the ritual progresses, Nanda is appalled to find herself becoming increasingly detached, "numb and stupid", mechanically going through the motions devoid of the impulse that should inspire this. A dismal sense of failure leads to the conclusion that "[w]ith all her efforts, all her devotion, there was something wrong with her. Perhaps a convert could never quite ring true" (68). Nanda's account articulates a problem of faith that is simultaneously a problem of performance. Here, the protagonist's theoretical belief founders as it cannot be experienced at the level of feeling when this is most needed; correspondingly, the material embellishments of the ceremony are reduced to theatrical trappings, superficial and distasteful almost, because profoundly unearned. Moreover, while the convert could in principle be judged especially sincere precisely because their path is intentionally chosen, Nanda views it otherwise: her uneasy suspicion is that the convert is at some level always acting, a masquerader amidst authentic others who have no need to perform.

Nanda's conviction of her own insufficiency may be better understood by examining her relationship with religion and the wider educative framing of the school. In an effort to unpick religion as an operational category, ritual studies scholar Ronald Grimes proposes that we recognise it as a complex system composed of interacting processes. These he

differentiates as ritualistic-performative; experiential-personal; mythical-historical, or narrative-temporal; doctrinal-cosmological; ethical-legal; social-cultural; and physical-spatial. As *Frost in May* shows, life at Lippington formalises almost all these processes, through its intricate blending of rites and observances, behavioural codes and coercion, surveillance and literal no-go areas, rote-learned texts and homiletic stories. But the process that cannot be constructed institutionally is the experiential-personal, which Grimes exemplifies as "feeling, encountering, praying, being healed, being possessed, undergoing a revelation" (Grimes 28). Presenting these strands as a system, Grimes does not distinguish them hierarchically; Nanda's problem, however, is that in her eyes "feeling and revelation" are the culmination of and justification for the others. That apprehension is reinforced not only by the depiction of her faith as a "secret, delicious joy" (White, *Frost* 17), a fervid state that sees her catapulted between devotion and dread, but also by the nuns, who are fond of reminding their pupils that neither book-learning nor the kind of "namby-pamby goodness" that seeks praise or privilege is what God ultimately wants from them (White, *Frost* 41). In this way, Nanda's First Communion exhibits every formal component of the system—above all, the ritualistic-performative—except the one which matters most and makes sense of all the rest.

If this episode presents Nanda as reluctant actor, disguising the indifference whose opposite would make "performance" unnecessary, a later incident brings the friction between theatrical and spiritual imperatives still more forcibly into view. On this occasion, almost the reverse problem occurs: now, ecstatic feeling is overwhelmingly in the ascendant, while doctrine, conduct and governance are dangerously destabilised. Plays and pageants are identified in *Frost in May* as a regular part of Lippington life, universally popular despite their appropriation for edification and admonishment: "parts which called for an attractive appearance were usually played by the most meek and mortified children of the school, while anyone suspected of thinking herself pretty was fairly sure to be cast for a hermit with prodigious wrinkles and a long beard" (White, *Frost* 128). No surprise, then, that the pupils eagerly anticipate how roles will be distributed for *The Vision of Dante*, a particularly ambitious production planned to mark the visit of a cardinal. Since Mother Castello, Lippington's "star producer", is said to have "risen magnificently to the occasion" even before rehearsals are underway, it may be inferred that the script is her own edit of Alighieri's fourteenth-century poem for performance; indeed, that the nuns are ready to adapt Catholic works where considered necessary is clear from one girl's remark that the canto in

The Divine Comedy featuring the adulterous couple Paolo and Francesca has "been cut out of [the] books" of the Upper First (126-28).

Mother Castello's production centres on the poem's *Inferno* episode and is to be spoken in the original Italian. Nanda, now thirteen, is delighted with the minor part of Matilda of Tuscany; but in this passage of the novel her perspective is essentially spectatorial, watching two of her close friends as Dante and Beatrice. Their casting is in some ways unexpected, with the handsome but "unfeminine, unchildish" Léonie de Wesseldorf allotted Beatrice, opposite the strikingly beautiful Rosario de Palencia, both names pointing to the "very old, very wealthy" Catholic heritage Nanda lacks and longs for (White, *Frost* 64). However, the rehearsal process appears to engender a kind of magic whereby each girl mysteriously acquires qualities of the other:

> All [Rosario's] softness dropped from her; she was grave, stern and passionate. Léonie, on the other hand, seemed to have borrowed all Rosario's former grace. No one had ever supposed that Léo, with her untidiness, her slouch, her masculine gestures and her bitter tongue, could be so delicate and moving a Beatrice (White, *Frost* 128).

The power and poetic feeling in their scenes is apparent to all, with the play's director, Mother Castello, "in raptures" (128). Here, theatrical exigency appears to overtake the spiritual, since the brilliance and charisma of the two girls' daily selves is not used to check their prominence on stage. Indeed, the transformative force of theatre is consciously harnessed by Mother Castello, who calls for all rehearsals to be held in costume, on the newly erected stage "equipped with machinery [Nanda] had never dreamed of; there were trap-doors and spotlights, and even wires from which nervous but complacent angels could be suspended." With such apparatus in place, the "dresses of spangles and sateen glistened magically under the coloured lights, and the dullest people looked suddenly beautiful" (129). In this way, while the play is undertaken to serve religious ends, the theatre's inherent potency is acknowledged and exploited.

This almost spell-like state is broken a week before the performance, following the attendance of Mother Radcliffe at a dress rehearsal. Nervously rising to the occasion, everyone acts better than they had before and each special effect goes off without a hitch. At

the heart of it are the performances of Dante and Beatrice: "Rosario and Léonie shone like the sun and moon in some element of their own. They were no longer young girls, Nanda thought, […] but the very spirits of poetry" (White, *Frost* 130-31). Yet immediately after this, to the shock of all, Léonie is removed from the play, her part given to the understudy, the terminally stolid and unpoetic Marjorie Appleyard. This high-handed decision is taken, Léonie reports to Nanda sardonically, since in the Mother Radcliffe's estimation she had been seen to take "wilful and sensuous pleasure in the performance" irreconcilable with its spiritual purpose (133). The reasons behind the Mother Superior's intervention are only partially decoded by the novel, however. Reflecting on the historically fraught relationship between religious rite and dramatic play, Bruce Wilshire asserts that despite their close organisational and symbolic correspondence, the theatre pursues "a siren call to freedom [that] disturbs the rootedness of sacred symbols in natural periodicity and place" (Wilshire 239). As he describes it: "In the theatre, every correspondence between things of the earth and the sky, and between gods and men, is focused like a burning glass in the relations between individuals before us here and now on the stage" (Wilshire 240). Watching Rosario and Léonie, Mother Radcliffe recognises that the "strange electricity" the girls generate through performance tips the balance of attention firmly towards the "burning glass" of human relations rather than the edifying theme of the play. Indeed, Léonie is told that as Beatrice she had "emphasised the earthly side a *lee*tle too much" (White, *Frost* 134). Beneath this perceived threat from the human realm to the divine, the corporeal to the metaphysical, lies an additional, unspoken fear of same-sex desire: regardless of the characterisation that frames this as love between man and woman, in the personae of the young actors and in the febrile atmosphere fostered by the convent, the pretended passion of this Dante and Beatrice disturbingly blurs the line between male and female, children and adults and even between the two as distinct individuals. While Rosario is implicitly as much "at fault" in this performance as her fellow, it is seemingly sufficient to remove Léonie alone; this suggests that, far more than admonishing vanity or self-indulgence, the intervention seeks to extinguish a flame that is significantly more dangerous.

Nanda's perpetual struggle at Lippington, crystallised in the episode of the *Vision of Dante,* lies in the apparent impossibility of reconciling spiritual and artistic realms. So moved is she by watching her friends animating Dante's poetry that she submits to a prolonged bout of tears in a side chapel, her "attitude […] that of a penitent" but the emotion not divinely

inspired (White, *Frost* 131). And in response to the aesthetic desecration vested on the production, she explodes:

> Why can't we for once do something for its own sake, instead of tacking everything on to our eternal salvation. […] I don't want poetry and pictures and things to be messages from God. I don't mind their being that as well, if you like, but not only that. Oh, I can't explain. I want them to be complete in themselves (134).

Her frustration speaks to wider and indeed, age-old arguments about the purpose of art, and within this, to the compatibility or otherwise of theatre and religion. While the Church for centuries distrusted the theatre for its impiety and worldliness, hubristic ambitions, seductive imitations and debauched associations, performance's ability to inspire and arouse has never been in doubt (Barish).[3] By the fin-de-siècle the louder strains of religious antitheatricalism had largely subsided, with moderate voices such as that of theatre manager and playwright Henry Spicer, close friend of Dickens, arguing that a "cleanly" theatre which offered "the treasures of wit and wisdom unalloyed with even a suggestion of evil" should be wholly countenanced by the Church (Spicer 31).[4] In *Frost in May*, the episode of the stage production may catalyse Nanda's explicit outburst, but the artistic-religious impasse ultimately drives the novel's plot: the nuns' discovery of the notebook containing her half-penned novel, peopled with glamorous figures made "wicked […] in order that their conversion might be the more spectacular", brings about her forceful expulsion from the school (White, *Frost* 159). The Mother Superior "very kindly" explains to the distraught Nanda that unfortunately no second chance is possible:

> For one thing, in some ways, we have no more to teach you. For another, I have a hundred other children to consider. There are some people, harmless in themselves, who can be a source of danger to others, as there are people healthy in themselves, who are what doctors call "germ carriers". But I want you always to think of yourself as one of us, as a child of the Five Wounds (173).

The nun's dismissal not only damns Nanda for book learning and quietly assassinates the deepest parts of her character; her words underline that Lippington *is* home even as the girl is cast out of it. But this devastating banishment only confirms what Nanda fears from the

outset, as did her author: that as a Catholic, writer-artist, or simply as a human being, she will always be "false and shallow and incomplete" (White, *Diaries* 94).

"Trying to look like an actress"

In the three novels that continue the protagonist's story, Nanda Grey is rechristened Clara Batchelor but remains recognisably the same figure. Like *Frost in May*, *The Lost Traveller* employs themes of performance, for example in Clara's efforts to "pass" at the high school (modelled on St Paul's School for Girls, which White attended) whose bracing and secular environment contrasts brutally with Lippington. Later in this second novel, Clara, now seventeen and employed as a governess, is drawn irresistibly into extended fantasy scenarios with Charles Cressett, her young charge, together with the awkward, troubled Archie Hughes-Follett. Their role-plays, all thematised as forms of battle, grow all-consuming to a point where Clara, like Charles, comes "to resent ordinary life as an interruption", prompting the boy's mother to remark in amusement: "Either you're a wonderful actress or some part of you really is ten" (White, *Lost Traveller* 416-17). Lady Cressett's first speculation proves inaccurate, as I demonstrate in what follows with reference to the third novel, *The Sugar House*. Her suggested alternative is broadly accepted by Clara, who admits she was "rather elderly and precocious when I really was ten. I suppose it's all coming out now" (417). Since the freedoms of the child Clara/Nanda are shown as fundamentally stifled by the regulatory system of the convent, any such "precocity" or inhibition would seem unsurprising, rather than being, as Clara implies, effectively a character fault. At the same time, Lady Cressett's observation implicitly calls attention to the ability of dramatic play to break down "psycho-physical tension" and release creative energy: this potentiality is articulated more than once across the quartet and was also a phenomenon experienced by the author herself, as I discuss late (Barker 91).

The Lost Traveller concludes with Clara breaking off her engagement to Archie, finally brought to her senses by her mother to recognise that the rash marriage will make neither of them happy, nor compensate for the death of Charles by a tragic accident for which Clara blames herself. *The Sugar House* begins a few years later: Clara has been to drama school, but when the first chapter opens she has already quit her course to take a minor role in a touring farce. Clara has trained at the fictional Garrick School of Drama, based on the Academy of Dramatic Art (ADA) on Gower Street where White was briefly a student. Attending stage school was predictably opposed by Antonia's father, Cecil Botting, who

"absolutely *abhorred*" the idea of his daughter exhibiting herself in public, but since she was by this time an adult and had paid for the course herself with fees earned from writing advertising copy, he could hardly prevent her (*Diaries* 220). The metamorphosis from convent schoolgirl, to governess, to actress might seem inconsonant, but it was a period that saw an influx of middle- and upper-class young women to the theatrical profession: perception of the stage had altered such that it was becoming an acceptable interim career for women, for some a "finishing school" prior to marriage (Davis 73, Sutherland 102). Historically, the theatre had attracted women from the poorer classes, for whom the stage, albeit a precarious living, might still have appeared preferable to the alternatives (for example, factory work). But that was beginning to change in the early decades of the twentieth century, for as the content of drama shifted to focus on the lives of the middle-classes, the theatres in turn became increasingly interested in these bourgeois newcomers who already had nice speaking voices and usually the money to pay for their own costumes (Davis, 72-3).

The training that White, and thus Clara, received was distinctive in being framed by a curriculum; previously actors had learned their craft in more haphazard and unsystematic ways. ADA was one of the first drama academies in the UK, founded by Herbert Beerbohm-Tree, who acknowledged that while in his opinion "acting cannot be taught", the school would "supply the equipment" that liberates inspiration. ADA would thus "train the student to pluck out the dangerous weeds of trickery that beset him, to lop off the superfluous branches of convention, so that in due time the nature within him may blossom forth and come to fruition" (Anon, 'Mr Tree's School'). Yet despite these ambitions and the inspirational example of the Paris Conservatoire, which Tree hoped to emulate, the curriculum in ADA/RADA's early decades was old-fashioned even for the era, consisting of elocution, fencing, dancing, deportment, pantomime and gesture, alongside the rehearsal of plays. A number of the older tutors, venerable theatre professionals, favoured a mode of instruction whereby students were required to mimic their master's emphasis and intonation line-by-line.[5] Such methods might not have helped aspiring actors understand, in Tree's words, "how to penetrate into the psychology of a personage and of a part" ('Mr Tree's School'). Women students were additionally disadvantaged, since although they were in the majority at ADA the plays put on had more male characters, meaning that female roles had to be shared: "It seemed very unfair to Antonia that some male student could swagger about on stage throughout the whole performance, being Hamlet, for instance, from beginning to

deathly end, while she and the other women were having to slip in and out of the character of Ophelia, or Gertrude" (Dunn 61). These conditions made it difficult to enter deeply into character psychology, as well as contributing to the impression that actresses, in particular, were effectively an exchangeable group. This was certainly White's experience, not least on being cast in *The Private Secretary* principally because she fit the costume of the actress who had departed, and could prove—by lifting her skirt—that she was not bow-legged or knock-kneed (Dunn 61).

Although drama school is thus seen to have had its compromises, Clara's encounter with the professional stage in *The Sugar House* brings a much ruder awakening. She is shocked by the rough manner of rehearsals where she is routinely shouted and sworn at—"*Walk* to that chair, damn you. Don't teeter as if you thought your drawers were coming down"—and the sheer exhaustion of touring and "never feeling properly washed or groomed" (White, *Sugar* 15, 28). She is nicknamed "Vere" by seasoned actress and chorus girl Maidie, a reference to Tennyson's "Lady Clara Vere de Vere" (1842), a poem that rebukes aristocratic pride: the soubriquet carries Maidie's imputation that, by joining the profession, Clara is "taking the bread out of other girls' mouths"; but more broadly, it catches her air of dreamy detachment, which, as shown, comes not from hauteur but rather an enduring sense of alienation (White, *Sugar* 23). She observes with bafflement, and over time a growing fondness, the motley make-up of the company: among them, the outrageous and coarse-tongued yet devout Catholic Maidie; Brett Wilding, given to "squeezing" any girl he finds on her own; stage-manager Lister, "like a racing-tout"; and to Clara most confusing of all, Peter and Trevor, two men always together who "criticised each other's clothes in minute detail" and would sit "manicuring each other's nails" (White, *Sugar* 15-16). Yet these disparate, vividly drawn and occasionally absurd figures are united and transformed through performance, just as the "stale, creaking old farce" they are touring comes to life before an audience (White, *Sugar* 27). At first, a bout of stage fright on opening night paralyses Clara altogether: but the ingrained lessons of rehearsal take over, carrying her automatically through dialogue and movement until she recovers her composure. And when she does, the confidence she finds onstage contrasts sharply with her benumbed and depthless performance as First Communicant: now, disciplined practice supports the spark of spontaneity; now, she is not isolated but instinctively "playing up" to her fellows in the cast (White, *Sugar* 27).

Despite the intoxication that performing brings, Clara does not convince as an actress. At one after-show party, Lister drunkenly advises her: "You're quite promising and not bad-looking when you take a bit of trouble. But I don't see you going far unless you get a bit of a push" (White, *Sugar* 87). He adds, breathing whisky fumes, that she does not help her chances by being "a ruddy little icicle" (87): it is a moment that connects pointedly with twenty-first century disclosures of the abuse and exploitation of women in and beyond the industry (Fox-Martens). Yet regardless of the patriarchal power-play in evidence, Clara's judgement is essentially in line with Lister's. By her own estimation, she is "a mediocre actress", lacking the aptitude and even the desire to be anything more: she had "gone to the Garrick […] simply because someone else had suggested it", and in the theatre, just as at school, she senses she does not belong. Indeed, "[she] was beginning to wonder if there were any place where she did perfectly fit in; any life to which she could wholly commit herself" (White, *Sugar* 79, 15, 28.) Clara's uncertain status as performer is mirrored in the ambivalent appeal that theatre held for her creator; as Dunn sees it, White "was driven by the romantic desire just to *be* an actress, legitimately centre stage, holding everyone's attention, with the power to affect the minds and hearts of others, to win people's notice, perhaps even their love" (Dunn 59-60). Certainly, the thrill Clara enjoys in the theatre is tied as firmly to the heady endorsement of applause, and the dislocating yet delightful sensation of seeing her name in print, as to acting itself. Clara's most profound experiences of creativity, as for White, are always associated with writing; and when true inspiration strikes, she is "carried into that other realm where everything had a significance beyond itself" (White, *Sugar* 32). These occasions are rare indeed: all four novels are riven through with the protagonist's impulse to write, but only once does the reader see desire crystallised into decisive action. This moment comes in *The Sugar House*, when one Sunday Clara urgently excuses herself from Maidie and the rest, compelled by the mental forming of a story she must immediately commit to paper. That this should be read as an instance of authentic artistry is signalled, first, by the way Clara's story weaves together "loose threads which had been floating in her mind for weeks"; second, by its absolute unlikeness from the writing she does for money, work she scathingly dismisses as "slick" along with herself as a "hack with a certain trite facility" (White, *Sugar* 33). However, while she must extract herself from the group to write, it is perhaps not coincidental that theatrical practice contextualises and even stimulates the scene of inspiration. Clara characteristically perceives writing as either shallowly mechanical *or* as proceeding from some unaccountable illumination: but the theatre proffers a different model of creativity, whereby repetition, routine and technique are not surface accomplishments but

appreciated as the building blocks that make expressivity possible. In this light, the experience of making theatre—in training and on the professional stage—in its own way lets Clara's "nature […] blossom forth and come to fruition" ('Mr Tree's School').

If Clara is an unexceptional performer sustained by "vivacious freshness" (White, *Sugar* 28), her fellows are practised players whose actorly personae reflect the legacy, in the early twentieth century, of the old stock system intertwined with an emergent regional touring model that the advent of the railways had enabled (Donohue 22). The stock company depended on having actors resident at a theatre, each specialising in a particular role type; that structure was inevitably destabilised by touring, but the concept of role types survived well beyond this, fostered by genres like farce which relied on absurd interplay of stereotypes rather than character-based drama. Thus, in the farcical comedy *The Clerical Error,* Maidie and Clara are first and second ingénue respectively, with Brett Wilding the romantic male lead, aided by hair dye to disguise his years; the others similarly know their place, as autocratic guardian, elderly chaperone, low comedian, and more. But *The Sugar House* includes another, recognisably more modern approach to performance in Stephen Tye, the aspiring actor with whom Clara is hopelessly in love through the first half of the novel. Clara encounters Stephen at the Garrick, first seeing him reflected in the mirror of a darkening rehearsal-room: she watches in fascination as his ghostlike figure endlessly repeats a series of movements, with minute variations. Stephen is evidently a talented actor, obsessively committed to his craft. Clara venerates above all such dedication and vocational certainty, just as, in a later chapter, she envies the "expert handling" of charcoal and paintbrush by the experimental modern artist Marcus Gundry (White, *Sugar* 227).

Stephen explains to Clara that when she first saw him he was rehearsing Lord Biron (or Berowne) in *Love's Labour's Lost*, a character described by Harold Bloom as "a highly conscious male narcissist who seeks his own reflection in the eyes of women" (Bloom 121). Bloom's insight proves telling, since Stephen's feelings for Clara are fatally intermixed with vanity and egoistic ambition. While she is on tour with her company, he with his, they meet just once in a reunion that, for Clara, is almost unbearably loaded with anticipation: yet in these snatched few hours, he chooses to read to her when she would rather talk, and to detail his interpretation of Richard III, appreciatively telling her that "No one listens as intelligently as you do" (White, *Sugar* 43). Stephen teases Clara for, in his words, "[t]rying to look like an actress", sipping gin "like a schoolgirl drinking a particularly filthy cough-mixture"; meekly,

she accepts his assumption that she can have "no idea what hell it is being an artist" (White, *Sugar* 47, 60). Infatuated as she is, Clara is not blind to the self-regard that in Stephen blurs the line between true emotion and its imitation. Bitterly remembering his experience as a young soldier in the First World War, he adds: "I've seen things you *couldn't* imagine." As he gulps down whisky, eyes "hard and glazed", Clara cannot "stop herself from noticing that his voice and gesture would have registered well on the stage" (White, *Sugar* 47). That Stephen, too, is no longer sure of the difference between "real" and performed is hinted at obliquely: "'I suppose I'm too old to have such violent emotions any more,' he said slowly. 'Perhaps I never did *feel* them. Only imagine them when I'm playing a part'" (White, *Sugar* 58). His admission recalls the old puritanical prejudices against actors that viewed them as inherent feigners, treacherously mutable, unable or refusing to maintain a "proper identity" (Barish 102). Clara is thus chilled but unsurprised when she hears of Stephen's career-advancing engagement to Eliza Lane, his elder and an established actor-manager: the betrayal propels her violently away from the theatre and into marriage with Archie, who has reappeared in her life, a move that further erodes her dangerously fragile sense of self.

Theatre as metaphor: "I often feel like a kind of ghost"

Throughout the quartet, White's protagonist is plagued by guilty conviction of inauthenticity. As shown, this applies in the context of religion through her status as convert to the faith: at Lippington Nanda is always wary of giving herself away, through small slips that reveal her outsiderness, and thus unworthiness. Yet, at Lippington and at the high school, she wants acceptance but simultaneously kicks against the system: at St Marks she "performs" Catholicism, ostentatiously dating her essays by the Feasts of Saints; conversely, visiting the Mother Superior as an ex-pupil, she is moved to "defiantly [powder] her face on the very threshold of the convent" (White, *Lost Traveller* 393). The need to fit in, coupled with resistance to conformity, is a human impulse fundamental to identity formation, itself a lifelong process that becomes especially urgent in adolescence (Crocetti 148). Equally, negotiating social terrain demands a measure of performance that, at certain moments, becomes self-conscious; as Wilshire puts it, we will occasionally "catch ourselves in these self-castings as *personae* or 'characters'" (Wilshire 210). Yet for Nanda/Clara, her every "act"—which is to say, every deliberate self-fashioning—is regarded by her as a shaming marker of hollowness and duplicity. Her short-lived career in the theatre provides a respite of sorts, since acting embraces and legitimises the self's potentiality for mimicry and change. When this avenue closes, she is thrust back into the anxiety of purely social performance, this

time exacerbated by the need to convince family, friends and above all herself in the role of wife.

Clara and Archie's relationship mirrors White's own ill-fated marriage, in 1921, to Reggie Green-Wilkinson. Despite genuine fondness for one another, the couple's real-life wedding was oddly unmotivated, except by "mutual despair": for White, born of romantic disappointment; for Green-Wilkinson, rooted in alcoholism and "his aimless existence" (Dunn 62).[6] In *The Sugar House*, the ceremony recalls the anticlimactic and alienating scene of First Communion, likewise the stage fright of the *Clerical Error* opening night, as Clara moves in "a trance" towards a "tall red-headed man" she cannot initially recognise. The echo of convent schooldays is explicit in the description of the two "muttering" their vows, "like children who have forgotten the answers in catechism class, while the old priest patiently prompted them" (White, *Sugar* 119-20). Once again, therefore, Clara is conscious of deficiency in fulfilling her part in a performance: here, a sacred, ritual one. That failure is immediately succeeded by another, this time at the corporeal level. The couple are obliged to honeymoon at the "superbly inappropriate" house of Archie's aunt, attended by an excess of servants "slyly smiling" at the naïve newly-weds. On the wedding night, Archie finally stumbles into the bedroom, mumbling apologies in a voice thick with whisky, before collapsing first in an attitude of prayer, and then to sleep (White, *Sugar* 122-26). Their marriage is never consummated and the novel's title, *The Sugar House*, hints at a relationship of brother and sister, rather than husband and wife: it is because of this that Clara is able, subsequently, to initiate the proceedings which lead to annulment.[7] But while Archie's impotence is the cited cause, Clara as ever feels herself implicated: she "dreaded" intercourse whilst also wanting it, not through erotic feeling but in the hope that this "unknown, violent contact with another person would break down some barrier in herself" (White, *Sugar* 129). The phrasing articulates the author's own troubled relationship with sexuality and more simply, physicality. White notes in a diary entry that she had "never yet learnt the language of the body", an acknowledgement prompted by her extraordinarily intense, and reciprocated, desire for Robert Legg (Richard Crayshaw, in the final novel): "I was not ready for it and the shock drove me out of my mind" (*Diaries* 94). While White embarked on a series of unsettled and unsettling relationships over the course of her life, and had two daughters, Clara remains a virgin throughout the quartet; the author made numerous attempts to continue her story into adulthood, all of which were discarded.[8]

In the first weeks and months of marriage, Clara and Archie strive effortfully to play the part of the happy couple. Costuming proves essential and transformative, just as it did in *The Clerical Error* and, before that, for the Lippington *Vision of Dante*; in preparation for lunch with her parents, Clara dons "dress and make up with as much care as if she were dressing for a stage part" (White, *Sugar* 155). These credible public personae temporarily disguise the unhappiness and, for Clara, the "paralysed drifting" which characterises this time. The novel vividly conveys her directionless days in Tithe Place, the gimcrack rented house that initially charmed but ultimately appals her (White, *Sugar* 155). Chelsea attracts Clara as a locus for artists: living amongst painters, actors and writers will, she hopes, dynamise her own creativity. Instead, the reverse is true: perceiving these others as authentically productive intensifies her conviction of inadequacy. Weakly attempting to "play house", she quickly discovers that the cramped, awkward rooms have been artificially enlarged by the owner's "ingenious arrangement of mirrors" (White, *Sugar* 139). Mirrors, glass and reflection operate as a recurrent metaphor in White's work, but the sequences in Tithe Place literalise this. Clara is deeply disturbed to find her own image fragmented and multiplied: "Three different angles of her head and shoulders and one full length figure sprang towards her. The little room […] seemed to close in on her" (White, *Sugar* 142). The impression of disintegration and its accompanying alienation colours her view of Archie as well as herself. At one point, alone at night and driven to near hysteria, she first switches on every light, then dashes out into the street: finding the courage to return a few minutes later she is shocked to see "a man […] now standing where she herself had stood in the window. Unable to make out his face against the light, she had another rush of terror till she realised that it could be no one but Archie" (White, *Sugar* 147).

This moment, where figures materialise and multiply, or morph alarmingly into one another, is framed as uncanny: it recalls *The Turn of the Screw*, when the governess at Bly sees the mysterious Peter Quint on the other side of a window; but that order is reversed, since where Archie unknowingly assumes the position vacated by Clara, in James's novella the governess deliberately takes Quint's place, producing an impression that in turn unnerves the housekeeper (James 32-3). This implicit intertextuality draws attention to ambiguity in the mental state of both protagonists. James's governess is notoriously a literary enigma, equally readable as victim supernaturally tormented or as hysteric for whom repressed emotion manifests as deadly violence (Felman).[9] Clara's portrayal is less clouded, as she edges ever closer to the mental disintegration that will engulf her in *Beyond the Glass*: but while in

James the source of horror is usually identified as *either* within the governess *or* her surrounding environment, in White the protagonist's confused projections and instabilities are tightly intertwined with external forces that are genuinely nightmarish. Clara's breakdown comes in the final novel, but it looms almost from the outset: the narrative which begins with *Frost in May* and continues through *The Lost Traveller* and *The Sugar House* is marked by repeated and severe crises—Nanda's expulsion, the death of Charles, a disastrous love affair, a sexless marriage—none of which are perceived by the protagonist with any measure of objectivity, but are instead absorbed and internalised as deserved punishment for some fundamental deficiency of the self.

Thus, while the second half of *The Sugar House* takes Clara away from the formal theatre, her brief married life can be viewed as a stage of a different kind. In public she must dress, make up and act, in a bid to save face; in private she splits into a plurality of selves, who both perform and are each other's audience, who are sometimes familiar and elsewhere hideously transformed. Clara lurches between being excessively "present" through kaleidoscopic reflection, or insubstantial and ghostlike. When letters arrive, she stares at her name on the envelope in puzzlement; when Archie worries she is "not the same person" she was before her betrayal by Stephen, she retorts: "I'm not *any* person. That's the point. I never was and I never will be" (White, *Sugar* 176-77). White had the same feelings of discontinuity or non-existence, and was startled to discover echoes of this in her father, as she perused letters after his death: "So many things like me—depression—torment of conflicting opinions—feeling of being all bits and pieces and having no personality"; to a friend, the writer Emily Holmes Coleman, she confided: "I often feel like a kind of ghost" (Dunn 13, 129). A perception of oneself as oddly absent, drifting or splitting could be termed "dissociative", in other words as constituting a break in the typical interplay and flow of mental processes and behaviours. While such experiences are common at the level of daydreams, or deep absorption, in extreme form they may be symptomatic of identity disorder. In White's case, dissociative episodes of this sort contributed to her being (mis)diagnosed schizophrenic at the age of thirty five (Moran 3-4, 207-8).

Although outside the space of formal performance, this uneasy and fractured sense of self nonetheless returns us again to the figure of the actor. This has been personified previously in Stephen, who turns daily speaking into delivered lines, counterfeits emotion he can no longer feel, and—distinct from the "poet or painter [who] creates his own material"—is, inherently

and humiliatingly, "nothing without a part" (White, *Sugar* 60). Stephen's words suggest that only through the framing apparatus of play and production can the actor gain substance; but beyond this, his acknowledgement of lack, or absence, can be read in terms of performance itself. Fundamental to the actor's art is the ability to enter imaginatively into the minds and bodies of others; this is achieved through the cultivated practice of "dissociation", as contrasted with unconscious or "normative" dissociation in ordinary life (Panero, Michaels & Winner 89-90). This conscious process is illustrated in the moment where Stephen, alone before the mirror, strives to "disappear" his daily self in order to inhabit the character of Biron. The idea of shapeshifting, central to acting's appeal, has also been viewed as its inherent danger. Jonas Barish, mapping a history of prejudice against the theatre, notes the periodically resurfacing philosophical complaint that "the player lives wrapped in an unreality that drains all truth from his life. His joys, his sufferings, even his death, are cheapened and dishonoured by the falsity to which his profession commits him" (Barish 341).[10] The practice of acting is in this light a dangerous seduction, made addictive by the recognition and adulation it draws: the more one acts, it is implied, the less one "is", as mind and body slide unpredictably and frighteningly into a succession of engulfing "others". By this argument, Stephen is indeed "nothing" without a part. Correspondingly for Clara, "acting" both in the theatre *and* outside it is fraught with fear of her own hollowness; fakery becomes an awful imperative for one who is "not *any* person".

However, the instability of identity Clara recurrently experiences has the capacity to liberate as well as terrify. The fourth book, *Beyond the Glass*, sees her, at first, numbed by the ordeal of marriage annulment, a process which requires verbal interrogation and invasive physical examination. The torpor that consumes her as the legal case sluggishly proceeds is abruptly shattered when she encounters Richard, midway through the novel, the two falling spontaneously and profoundly in love. This relationship is literally a meeting of minds, as they encounter one another telepathically across the room at a party; thereafter they communicate psychically as often as they do in words.[11] Clara's ecstatic affair with Richard provides further illustration of the disturbing—but this time, exhilarating and electrifying—potential for one identity to merge with another. She is plunged into a state of utterly unfamiliar, manic happiness that gratifies and then increasingly alarms everyone around her: and indeed, since she becomes convinced that eating is "hardly necessary" and sleep "a sheer waste of time if one were really alive", it is not long before an ever "lighter body" and overset mind collapse under the emotional weight (White, *Beyond the Glass* 142-44).

In Nazareth Royal Hospital, the fictional equivalent of Bethlem Royal Hospital where White was incarcerated for ten months between 1922 and 1923, Clara's delirium sees her assume a series of personae, experiencing the world from radically distinct perspectives for hazily uncertain periods of time. For "months" she is convinced she is a horse, "[r]idden almost to death, beaten till she fell"; later, a salmon that lies "wriggling and gasping" for water; and in dizzying succession, an imp, a dog and a flower, in which last embodiment she sings "all day a little monotonous song, 'Kulalla, kulalla, kullala, ripitalla, kulalla, kulalla, kulalla, kulla'" (White, *Beyond* 211-16). Interspersed with animal and vegetal identities are human ones, some of which are fantastical or folkloric: a girl on her wedding day who becomes a betrayed, Miss Havisham-like figure in dusty dress and wreath; a magician who can control everything except herself and cannot sleep. At other times, she becomes someone recognisably from her former life, often a soldier whose "name was Richard", searching for her, or coming close and then violently pulled away; this last can be interpreted as a fevered recasting of the telepathic bond, where instinctive knowledge of the other's thoughts now dissolves, for Clara, into wholesale exchange of bodies and minds (White, *Beyond* 213-16). Vividly depicting this period of psychosis, *Beyond the Glass* simultaneously displays the treatment meted out to inmates, both medically prescribed and roughly workaday: bundled into coarse gowns, or baths of boiling then freezing water, restrained beneath heavy sailcloth or in a straitjacket, agonisingly force-fed, mocked and intimidated by the nurses. Once again, the fictional narrative closely reflects the biographical one, with White's letters and diaries recording the sense of being trapped in "Looking-Glass Land" while detachedly observing that experience (White, *Beyond* 233). White conceived of madness as "the beast in my jungle", a creature that frightened yet also drew her, but which eluded her if she tried to hunt it down (*Diaries* 109).

Whether aided by or despite this treatment, and notwithstanding the prognosis that full recovery is unlikely before middle-age, Clara regains her sanity in under a year. There is an identified turning point where mania recedes and self and surroundings settle: "Gradually she became aware of certain changes. The most remarkable was that, whenever she was fully awake, she was always the same person. This person was called Clara" (White, *Beyond* 229). Accompanying this discovery, the expanded consciousness that had distorted her sense of time now contracts—by her own forced effort—into a quotidian ordering of separable days. In this way, where Clara's madness is experienced as a multiplication and fragmenting of

identities that are temporarily and spatially dispersed, her return to sanity is formally signalled through a singular and consistent "self", stabilised in place and time. It is notable that although recovery is ardently desired by Clara and her unhappy parents, recognising herself as "sane" amongst the "mad" is seen as oddly dreary, as well as isolating. This new phase diverges sharply from the delirium that is vertiginous and radically unstable but also sees Clara viscerally present in the body, alert, impulsive and even periodically "happy" (White, *Beyond* 216). In addition, mania is shown to release capacities that are unexpectedly creative: Clara learns that, in her delirium, she would sing beautifully and without self-consciousness, "like a lark", something she had never been able to do before (White, *Beyond* 276-77). In this way, Clara's insanity appears to unleash corporeal, imaginative and artistic potentialities that were previously inaccessible or frustratingly constricted.[12]

A state marked by creative expression, dynamic energy and shifting personae that are inhabited physically and psychologically, recalls once more the condition of the actor. Wilshire reflects on the development of the self in everyday life, a process in which the limitless possibilities for "transformations of personality" are 'usually curbed or masked from view […], for our potentialities for change, dimly apprehended, frighten us" (Wilshire 232). For Wilshire, that fear may be understood and even welcomed if we can "rise to the occasion through imagination and communal memorialization": such a process is exemplified by theatre, he suggests, above all in the figure of the actor who, like "an advance guard", engages explicitly with the challenges of identity and authenticity that tacitly concern us all (Wilshire 234). White came to understand that exploration of the self could mean liberating discovery and release, even if she struggled to achieve this with any regularity: "It is a great art to let oneself go in the right place; does not mean disintegration as I always feel. And part of me just pants to let go. *What* am I frightened of?" (Moran 72) In implicit endorsement of Wilshire's claims for the theatre, White was to encounter at least one more striking experience of the artistic, embodied and imaginative expressivity that she craved. In 1935, long after her hospitalisation and having given birth to two daughters, she became involved with the avant-garde Group Theatre, headed up by Rupert Doone and Robert Medley, a dancer and an artist, and accepted the invitation to join their summer school in Suffolk as guest writer. The model of theatrical education practised here proved to be a world away from the formalities of ADA some fifteen years earlier. White describes in pleasurable shock the "cheerfully disorderly" communal living, a shared bedroom, and even the absence of a lock on the bathroom door (*Diaries* 52). While part of the time is spent rehearsing *The Dog*

Beneath the Skin, written by W.H. Auden for the Group, the work of participants is more broadly exploratory, as her diary shows:

> The Group Theatre and its adherents are mainly very young with a sprinkling of my contemporaries and a few earnest older women whom Rupert forces to attend his strenuous dance and exercise classes as a method of breaking down their psychological "adhesions". The atmosphere is feverishly progressive. Revolution in politics; revolution in art; revolution in one's way of life (*Diaries* 53; see also Sidnell).

This alternative model of theatre, as a practice not limited to play production but viewed as individually and collectively developmental in its own right, made an immediate and powerful impact on White: the experience evidently broke her creative "jam", since she wrote four chapters of her new book within a week later that month (*Diaries* 54).

Conclusion

My reading of White's novels has not pursued in detail the threads of psychological and sexual trauma, or religious doubt, that undoubtedly run through them, as through their author's life; nor have I been especially invested in their potential recuperation, albeit conflicted, as feminist writing. Nonetheless, analysing her work from the perspective of theatre-fiction has generated insights that talk back usefully to these concerns while simultaneously opening new critical avenues for consideration. This investigative frame has illuminated the ways in which formal and informal conceptions of the stage structure the narrative journey of White's protagonist, operating as source of fascination and repulsion in almost equal measure. Importantly, it has revealed that theatre as a practised art can be a space of liberating possibility: whether in *The Vision of Dante* or "creaky" touring farce, and in players who could be schoolgirls, awkward students, rising stars or aging hams, the act of performance is seen to generate a kind of metamorphosis, conjuring semi-miraculous effects from simple means. At the same time, the work of theatrical production proves to be alive with risk. This takes the form of unnerving destabilisation for the actor, who must test the boundaries between role and performer, between the drama and "real life", and, through the intimacy of rehearsal, between themselves and their fellow players. Troubling these distinctions brings additional pitfalls, both for the actor and those with whom they engage:

and while historical charges of immorality, blasphemous imitation, mutability and deceit may not surface explicitly within the novels, "acting" is still periodically conjoined with treachery and emotional faking. Yet, despite such disappointments and dangers, the theatre evidently remained for White a peculiarly beguiling art form, stirring writerly creativity even when she was merely "*hanging about*" the margins of the stage (White, *Diaries* 109).

This chapter has also explored the ways in which theatricality functions as metaphor in White's writing for social performance and construction of self. Here, its associations are darker and, typically, more directly damning. To act is to be an imposter, to feign emotion one cannot feel; clothing and make-up likewise become calculated disguise, an absolute necessity to conceal something repulsive, or to lend solidity and colour to one who is otherwise as insubstantial as a ghost. As the reader moves through the novel sequence, it is almost actively painful to follow Nanda/Clara's desperate longings and continual missteps, her fleeting periods of elation always cut short by catastrophe and repetitive, unsparing self-blame. Patricia Moran has argued that White's own psychotic breakdown, near-constant depression and erratic compulsions indicate that she was suffering from bipolar disorder, then called manic depression, never accurately diagnosed during her lifetime: Moran's study proposes that better informed medical understanding could have spared White years of fruitless and even damaging therapy, as she sought a psychoanalytic explanation for her relentlessly unstable and conflicting moods (Moran 2-7). Within the *Frost in May* quartet, theatre, both as formal art and as framework for contemplation of perilously fluid identities, is notably revealed as summoning and synthesising what might seem similarly antithetical attitudes and behaviours. For White, when her writing flowed effortlessly—hardly ever the case—it could be judged authentic, effectively justifying her very existence; anything else was hack work that condemned her as a worthless sham. By contrast, she saw that, in the theatre, self-conscious routine and repetition made spontaneity possible: further, through theatre, she and her heroine could begin to access that elusive "language of the body", if only temporarily, in dynamic fusion with the poetry of a text. Finally, alongside her troubled career as an author, White's encounters with the stage track its development, in Britain, from its nineteenth-century inheritance into a recognisably modern, less stilted, more holistic practice: in its contemporary incarnations, performance is more likely to embrace and pursue a blurring of art/life boundaries than strive to reinforce such dividing lines. And while theatre is certainly not offered here as any resolution for the many-sided and deep-rooted conflict that beset White and her protagonist, my analysis has demonstrated that it valuably

formalises, supports and celebrates the human potential for transformation, self-making, fluidity and change.

Notes

1. The ways in which autobiographical fiction by women has been critically undervalued, while "male-authored autofiction is praised more highly and widely […], and more commonly recognised as literary rather than 'mere' autobiography", is a phenomenon considered further in Chloe Green's chapter within this volume, "'Does it have to be a play?' Autofiction as Theatrical Failure in Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be*?" [Add pp. later]

2. Founded in 1904, ADA moved to Gower Street in 1905. The school was granted the Royal Charter in 1920, at which point it was renamed the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, or RADA. A new theatre was added in 1925, on Malet Street, behind the original building.

3. Jonas Barish provides a thorough examination of the historical antipathy towards the theatre (founded above all on religious and moralistic grounds) in his seminal study, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*. Barish includes historical moments where values of Church and theatre were not perceived as antipathetic: the Middle Ages is a marked example, when dramatic forms including morality plays, mimetic processions and scriptural cycle plays were privileged by the clergy as a means of communicating the central tenets of religion. These activities were still occasionally attacked, charged with "blasphemous mockery" in depicting holy figures, an overbalance of "playfulness and frolic", or the claim that the susceptibility of players to their parts means that actors will be "themselves guilty of the vices of the personage portrayed" (Barish 68, 73, 67). Although Lippington's *Vision of Dante* is not suspected of the first charge, and certainly not the second, the disruption of the Dante-Beatrice dynamic is partly fuelled by anxiety about the slippages between actor and character.

4. While religious objections to performance declined significantly in the nineteenth century, fiery protests against the theatre did persist: for example, in an 1883 pamphlet titled *Theatres and Christians: the revived question viewed in the most brilliant lights*, the Scottish Presbyterian minister James Moir Porteous produces a mass of supposed evidence to argue that theatre can neither be defended nor virtuously "remoddled" (Porteous 13).

5. Rosina Filippi describes the methods of her mentor Herman Vezin, a renowned American actor who taught at ADA in its early years, as very much in this mode: "Mr Vezin's teaching consisted in his sitting in an arm-chair, his pupil in another. He first read a scene, and his pupil read it afterwards. […] I sat in my chair opposite Mr Herman Vezin for three years, and then he said I was ready to act, and I acted" (Filippi 40). Filippi herself taught at the School, promoting a more modern and body-centred approach. That ADA combined the traditional with the more progressive is also evident in Filippi's campaign, in the 1910s, to democratise the stage by establishing theatres affordable to all (Anon "A Fourpenny Theatre").

6. Green-Wilkinson, like Archie Hughes-Follett in White's novels, is an ex-soldier; where Stephen Tye identifies as mentally scarred by that experience, Archie "[thanks] God for the jolly old war" that saves him having to think about his future (White, *Lost Traveller* 430). The boy Charles is happiest playing battle games, and when Clara falls in love again, in *Beyond the Glass*, it is with another ex-soldier, Richard Crayshaw. While this haunting of the novels by war is on one level simply indicative of the era and reflective of White's circle, it has been argued that Clara's breakdown can be read politically as prompted by and commenting on women's positioning within wider, traumatising violence. Kylie Valentine assesses the basis and limitations of this interpretation in "Mad and Modern: A Reading of Emily Holmes Colman and Antonia White" (126-127).

7. The title evokes the gingerbread house in "Hansel and Gretel", a story collected by the Brothers Grimm, in which brother and sister are imprisoned by a witch. While in White's novel the entrapment is arguably of the couple's own doing, Tithe Place, like the cottage of the fairy tale, is strangely ersatz: Archie complains that "[e]verything in it's so damn flimsy that it breaks off in your hand like barley sugar" (White, *Sugar* 252).

8. White's relationships are too numerous and fraught to be covered in this article, but are considered closely by Dunn in her biography. While Clara's experiences significantly mirror the author's life up to her early twenties, where the fourth novel ends, the protagonist is spared at least one grimly abusive episode, where, six months after being discharged from Bethlem Royal Hospital, she was raped in the family home by a friend of her father's. The resulting pregnancy was later terminated. In the context of shock and trauma, it is unsurprising that, in the moment of rape, she "neither protested nor resisted"; nonetheless,

her experience of the encounter as peculiarly dreamlike reflects the propensity in White (and Clara) to detach mind from body (Dunn 89-90).

9. Shoshana Felman's seminal 1977 essay "Turning the Screw of Interpretation" examines James's novella, arguing ultimately that its sophisticated "trap" is precisely the way in which the text anticipates and refutes both of these dominant readings.

10. Here Barish references the views of Octave Mirbeau, published in *Le Figaro* (1882), attacking the Comédie Française; however, Barish's study demonstrates that charges levelled at the profession of falsity, immorality and hypocrisy are historically longstanding and tenacious.

11. White insisted that the telepathic connection was not invented but had really existed between herself and Robert Legg. In 1954, she writes to Emily Coleman: "that odd second-sight business… All that is true… but it *was* odd" (Dunn 76).

12. To highlight loosening of inhibition and indeed, decisive abandonment of Clara's bourgeois "good girl" persona, is not to argue that mania—in the fiction or in the life of its author—can be interpreted as unambiguously freeing. Valentine assesses the tensions that come with reading literary constructions of "madness" through a feminist or otherwise radical lens, emphasising that "appropriating the script of psychoanalysis is fraught with dangers, positioning the text as it does within a framework that associates femininity with madness" (Valentine 128).

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