

LOSING THE PLOT: MODERNISM AND THE SCHIZOPHRENIC WOMAN IN *THE AUNT'S STORY*

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AUSTRALIAN detractors of the European modernist movements in art and literature during the Great War and the 1920s, understood its formal and thematic departures from Realism as, paradoxically, both the cause and effect of European degeneracy. Lionel Lindsay, J.S. MacDonald and Vance Palmer contended that Modernism instantiated the feminine, the lethargic and the mentally deranged. When *The Aunt's Story* was published in 1948, these attitudes towards Modernism remained potent in Australia, despite the fact that the previous decade had seen the inauguration and collapse of the Contemporary Art Society, as well as the publication of 'experimental' novels by Christina Stead, M. Barnard Eldershaw and Kenneth Mackenzie. This paper argues, however, that White's construction of an androgynous protagonist in Theodora Goodman actually subverts and re-negotiates the misogynous connections made by the likes of Lindsay, between Modernism, femininity and madness.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first is a general section which deals with White's concept of androgyny and the anti-modernist rhetoric which circulated in Australia during the early decades of this century. Section two gives a close-reading of the Jack Frost murders in part one of the novel and suggests some points of connection between Frost's crime and Australian anti-Modernism, and the final section focuses on Theo's androgyny as a means of re-negotiating the paradigm of Modernism, femininity and madness.

1

Theodora Goodman is a spinster. She has a tall, thin frame, sallow complexion and a dark moustache. As a child she is considered to be markedly 'unfeminine': she doesn't talk much, plays the piano poorly and shows remarkable prowess with a gun. Unlike her sister who is pretty and talkative, Theo is regarded by members of both her family and community as something of an anomaly—namely, 'a bloke in skirts' (67). Indeed, her very name, 'Theo Good-Man', signifies her affinity with the 'masculine' in a way that her sister's name, Fanny, clearly does not.

After her mother's death, Theo leaves her family's property, Meroë, and travels to Europe and America where her masculine traits and eccentricities become more apparent. In part two of the novel, Theo becomes the characters of her imagination. Moreover, she cuts her hair short (203), spits in corners (149) and takes snuff (149).

At the Hôtel du Midi, it becomes obvious that Theo is suffering from what Mark Williams refers to as 'incipient schizophrenia' (44). She hallucinates, experiences a feeling of detachment from her body and obfuscates the distinction between interior and exterior reality. Once she reaches middle America in Part Three of the text, she tears up her return tickets to Australia in an attempt to destroy her subjectivity. After this, she

meets the Johnson family who, on suspecting her sanity, arrange for her entry to a mental asylum. In the closing pages, Theo departs from the house where she had been conversing with the illusory Holstius and makes her way towards Doctor Rafferty's car.

However contemptuous Theo's community may have been toward her indifference to gender stereotypes, her androgyny – or, 'ambivalence' – is for Patrick White, accessible and desirable in everybody. Veronica Brady writes that for him:

the distinction between the sexes is neither absolute nor biologically determined: rather, every human being is by definition androgynous, with a masculine and feminine aspect . . . (178)

Androgyny, along with other aberrations from the conventions of conservative society, such as racial, economic or intellectual difference, is integral to the protagonist's pursuit of the 'core of reality'. This quest – which informs all of White's novels – has significant connections with the concepts of Modernism and schizophrenia. Indeed, Frederic Jameson argues that one of the "most revealing and authentic" of modernist strategies "is surely the emergence of schizophrenic literature, or the attempt to come to terms with the pure primordial flux itself" (qtd. in Eysteinson 208). Like modernist endeavours to articulate this 'pure primordial flux', White's 'core of reality' can be pursued adequately only within liminal or unconventional social spaces. Furthermore, the formal and thematic experimentation of *The Aunt's Story* corresponds to the modernist idea that the schizophrenic person is a *positive* embodiment of the 'irrational' (Showalter 204).

Detractors of Modernism, however, often regarded the modernist 'schizophrenic' urge to disorder as an undesirable aspect of *modernity*. (As an aside I would want to argue that 'Modernism' and 'modernity' were often conflated by their detractors in Australia.) The association (between schizophrenia and modernity) is understandable given that schizophrenia is arguably a condition specific to modern western societies. The earliest clinical descriptions of the illness were made in 1809 and the term 'schizophrenia' itself was coined in 1908 (Sass 365, 14). The reaction against Modernism in Australia stems largely from its investment in the notion that truth lies somewhere within irrationality and flux rather than in logic and form.

It is obvious how easily the construct of femininity can be linked to Modernism. The old adage that women are not only genitally de-formed but 'naturally' irrational as well, readily parallels the defectiveness attributed to Modernism by advocates of 'rational' Realism.

In addition to these general observations as to why femininity, madness and Modernism have been so readily assimilated, I want to suggest two further reasons for their connection which are historically specific to Australia. The first of these is that Modernism in art was introduced to Australia by *women* in the early decades of the twentieth century. Jeanette Hoorn cites Norah Simpson's *Studio Portrait, Chelsea* (1915) and Grace Cossington-Smith's *The Sock Knitter* (1915) as the two earliest examples of Australian modernist painting. Furthermore, Hoorn maintains that women not only introduced and dominated the field of modernist Australian art until the Second World War, but also that their paintings were 'quite gendered'. That is to say, Australian Modernism re-presented events and objects which were pertinent to the lives of women. Hoorn writes that artists such as Simpson and Cossington-Smith '... appropriated a discourse with identifiably masculine concerns and recast it into one which was distinctly feminine' (Hoorn 9; Jordan 202).

The second point draws on the work of David Walker. Walker argues that, particularly during the 1920s, the vehemence directed at Modernism by its detractors largely resulted from the assumption that the cultural manifestations of a nation accurately reflected the state of its health (1992, 4). The pastoral and realist traditions (in art and literature respectively) indicated, for example, that Australians were young, healthy and virile (1987, 50-51). Modernism, by contrast, was regarded as an 'imported disease' of which the symptoms included 'tiredness, exhaustion and enfeeblement' (1992, 3). These assumptions continued—though with less force—into the 1940s and beyond. Walker cites part of a letter written by Lionel Lindsay to Harold Wright in 1940 which illustrates the persistence of these attitudes. Lindsay writes:

I intend to point out . . . that the spirit of this soulless, empty modernist art was a symptom of France's decay. That the attempt to destroy humanity in art is unsocial and helps to disrupt the state and that the want of direction in all modernist stuff is a sign of chaos unashamed. (1992, 5)

What is particularly interesting about this letter is Lindsay's inference that discourse is not only capable of describing a nation's qualities but that it can produce them as well. In short, what the work of Hoorn and Walker suggests is that Modernism presented a direct affront to the authority of a male-centred tradition. The representation of Modernism as unhealthy, imported and irrational was sustained by the fact that this cultural movement was introduced to Australia by women who engaged with it in distinctly 'feminine' ways. It is thus arguably the gendering of Modernism and madness as 'female' which constitutes their undesirability.

Given this background, it is hardly surprising that White's early fiction, which is informed by the work of Joyce, Woolf, Lawrence and Stein (among others), generally received short shrift from the Australian intelligentsia when it was first published. The publication of *The Aunt's Story* in 1948 was poorly timed for favourable reviews (Collier 8; Marr 254, 258). During the 1940s various literary establishments had not only actively encouraged a return to the formal devices of the 1890s novel, but they had also castigated the publication of 'new' verse in journals such as *Meanjin* (McKernan 167; Strahan 63). Indeed, White regarded *The Aunt's Story* as one of his favourite works because 'for so long nobody would pay any attention to it, and even those who did take notice didn't read it' (1990, 21-22).

2

With this anti-modernist context in mind, I want to turn to a crime narrative in *The Aunt's Story* which explores some of the issues I have been discussing.

One afternoon in the Goodman's drawing-room, Theo listens to a conversation between her mother and her mother's friends. Their discussion centres on the tragedy of the local pastrycook, Jack Frost, who had slit the throats of his wife and three daughters soon after his return from the Great War. The narrator says:

When the Jack Frost tragedy occurred, people were reminded of themselves in the shop, buying the murderer's cakes, and passing the time of day. But it was horrible. Always so decent and polite, under it all Frost was mad, to kill his wife and three little girls. Unhinged by the war, of course. He had served, the papers said, in France. And *Truth*, which people began to buy, not from their newsagents, but

over the garden fence, *Truth* had a full account, with photographs. It had a letter which Jack Frost wrote in his madness before he did the deed. . . . It was terrible, they said, and indecent, to print madness for the public to read. People were moved far more deeply than they were by the bodies of lumpy girls, which appear so monotonously and anonymously on wasteland in the suburbs. The Frost case was worse, they said. They felt his cakes in their stomachs. They saw the dark hairs on his wrist as he handed back the change. The Frost case was very close, and for that reason they felt sick, and could not understand. (97)

What is of particular interest to me in this passage is both the representation of Jack Frost and the community's reaction to the information published about the murders. I want to suggest that this crime narrative belongs to the same rhetoric which devalued both the introduction and emergence of Modernism in Australia. The first point I want to consider is that of Jack Frost's 'femininity'.

Jack bakes cakes, tarts and cream puffs. His off-spring are all female and his very name infers his artificiality – after all, the signifier 'Jack Frost' is a personification of Winter. His name is a kind of pathetic fallacy, or, in this particular case, a sign of his pathetic phallus. His name also links him with Europe. Indeed, the papers documenting the tragedy attribute his becoming 'unhinged by war' not to his involvement in the killing of fellow human beings but, rather, to the fact that he had apparently served in France – that vile cesspit where Modernism was arguably conceived (Lodge 6). Moreover, the dark hairs on his wrist suggest that this deranged pastry cook is most certainly not the typical fair Australian lad. It may be useful to contrast Jack with Fanny's husband, Frank Parrott, who talks about sheep, bulges slightly at the crotch and displays that Whitean marker of sexual virility: red hairs on his hands.

I am not implying that Jack Frost's madness is consciously 'feminised' or 'Europeanised' by his community. Rather, I want to suggest that the narrative re-presents the reception of the tragedy as a site wherein anti-modernist agendas circulate. Discussions about Jack's madness subtextually attempt to isolate its cause within the available discourses on insanity. His madness, however, is not quite contained by these discursive frames. The Jack Frost murders were something that people 'could not understand'. Their dis-ease about the murders is exacerbated by the fact that their information about them is circumspect. The statement that Jack Frost served in France is qualified by the phrase 'the papers said', as if it is by no means certain that he actually went there. Indeed, that the paper with the most to say about the murders runs its stories with photographs and calls itself *Truth*, suggests that the 'facts' about this case are rather dubious.

Another issue that this passage highlights concerns the community's reaction to *Truth*'s printing of Jack's letter which indicates his murderous intentions.

The publication of the letter is regarded as 'terrible' and 'indecent'. The letter itself is described as 'madness'. It seems quite bizarre that the general public views the letter as more disconcerting than their regular sightings of dead female bodies dumped 'on wasteland in the suburbs'. The community's reaction to the letter, however, entails more than just a prurient desire to know the details of the crime. Their description of it as 'madness' reflects a growing suspicion that the madness of both modernity and Modernism, far from being confined to the suburbs or to France, is contaminating their very homes. Indeed, Jack's letter, like Lionel Lindsay's to Harold Wright, actually suggests that the language of modernity and madness does not so much reflect society as construct it. The last sentence reads: 'Dear All, you will forgive me, yes I know, because it is already done, and now, my dears, we shall see'. The line 'it is already done' suggests that the visual or written description of killing somehow instantiates the very act. Indeed, Theo's desire

to murder her mother, supports this view. Not only does she imagine taking a knife to Julia Goodman shortly after discussing the Frost case (as if the discussion motivated her desire to kill) but she also contends that there is little difference between wanting to murder and actually doing it. Theo affirms the contents of Jack's letter by conflating imagined and actual experience. Reflecting on her decision to keep Julia alive, she says: 'I am guilty of a murder that has not been done . . . it is the same thing, blood is only an accompaniment' (123).

The narratives of Theo and Jack resemble each other in some detail. Theodora, for example, becomes 'unhinged' in France and writes 'mad' letters to Fanny concerning her travel plans. However, Theo's androgyny marks her as different to Jack. Not only does it hinder (but by no means rule out) the feminisation of her madness, it also invests her madness and its modernist representation in this novel with a positive value.

3

In the following section of this paper, I want to suggest that it is precisely because the concepts of androgyny, Modernism and madness transgress traditional forms of knowledge and representation that *The Aunt's Story* affirms them.

For Theodora Goodman, convention hinders one's access to a range of experience which may lie beyond the 'normal' or beyond what is known. Her androgyny, as an unconventional marker of self-division, opens her to an array of opportunities which would be otherwise unavailable to her. It allows her, for example, to travel alone in a social space traditionally occupied by men (Rowley). Her disregard for the 'gendering of space' thus enables her to experience the disorder and glamour of modern France. My use of the word 'glamour' here is borrowed from A.P. Riemer. Unlike many critics, who have read the formal and thematic chaos of part two as an embodiment of European degeneracy, Riemer suggests that Theo's European sojourn is a flamboyant experience which contrasts markedly with her dull life in 'pedestrian Australia' (365). In France Theo assumes the shapes and personalities of the people she meets. She finds that walls yawn (143), marble loses its substance (176) and Alyosha Sergei's thoughts drip (168). Moreover, in this section of the novel, the very logic of the narrative fragments in a manner akin to the dissolution of Theo's mind. Riemer's emphasis on European glamour is persuasive and clearly supported by the narrative development of the text. Indeed, in part two of this novel disorder *generates* the narrative.

This urge to disorder is a significant reason why *The Aunt's Story* has elicited such an expanse of contradictory and irreconcilable critical readings. Alan Lawson makes this clear:

The Aunt's Story does not lend itself to any interpretation that explains its unity . . . it is not possible . . . to speak in this instance about the unified single text, the unified central subject, or hence a unifying single reading . . . (9)

It is this last point – that it is not possible to speak of a 'unifying single reading' – that I want to draw upon in conclusion.

I have been arguing that during the early decades of this century, the emergence and introduction of Modernism in Australia was hindered by its representation as both mad and feminine. This anti-modernist rhetoric was enduring and pervasive. It informed the reviews of White's early novels which were described as 'unreadable', 'ambiguous' and,

more famously, 'pretentious and illiterate verbal sludge'.

White's notion of androgyny in *The Aunt's Story*, however, problematises the authority of the connection between Modernism, madness and femininity. And it does this in two particular ways. Firstly, Theodora Goodman's sexual ambiguity interrogates the very idea of an essential femininity. Her madness, therefore, cannot be appropriated for any concept of the feminine. And secondly, White's novel invests Modernism, madness and androgyny with a positive value precisely because in their defiance of convention, they facilitate one's access to different kinds of experience.

But here is a problem: however useful the concept of androgyny may be for re-negotiating the anti-modernist paradigm, it cannot be read as singularly positive. Indeed, the idea of androgyny has its own misogynous agenda.

I would like to draw your attention to the closing pages of the novel. Theo is in America and has eaten dinner with the Johnson family. It is apparent that the delusions she experienced in France have not abated. Clocks stare (270) and tables scream (277). After her meal, she wanders away from the Johnsons' and breaks into a deserted house where she converses with a figure of her imagination named Holstius. The following day, Theo gets down on her hands and knees and washes and scrubs the floorboards of the house: she's preparing for Holstius's return. It is significant that she believes that engaging in such an activity (for the love of a man however imaginary he may be) gives her 'a certain affinity with the women in houses' (279). This is the only moment in the novel – with one exception – where Theo has any kind of affinity with *women* who are not constructs of her imagination. The exception, of course, is her identification with her niece, Lou. And like Theo, Lou doesn't conform to any socially valued model of femininity. Another significant point is the fact that this feminisation of Theo's madness signals the novel's end. In this sense, Theo's narrative parallels that of Jack Frost. When their respective madnesses are feminised, their stories cease: Jack is presumably confined in gaol and Theo in a mental asylum.

I'm not suggesting that domestic space and activity are somehow essentially feminine – although the text draws a connection between domesticity and being female; but rather, that *The Aunt's Story* offers no way of circumventing the limitations domesticity prescribes. Women make cheesecake, they marry, they multiply, they clean houses. By contrast, men in this novel do not have to be androgynous in order to escape the constraints of convention and hence attain some kind of spiritual enlightenment. Thus 'The Man who was Given his Dinner' can travel, Moraitis can bring Theo to orgasm with the thrust of his music, and Holstius can retain his phallic identity as a tree.

The concept of androgyny is useful as a means of re-negotiating the relations between Modernism, madness and femininity, but it also perpetuates an alternate model of misogyny. This is precisely why, in *The Aunt's Story* at least, this concept cannot be appropriated for feminist critical practices. Indeed, for Patrick White, Theodora's madness is 'good value' only when she's acting like a man.

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