

Patrick White and the agency of literary masks

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Abstract

Prominent in the final works of Patrick White, the Australian 1973 Nobel Prize laureate, is a vital admission of one's inevitable dependence on one's community. Yet how can a writer not only convey this message but also rally his readers towards a recognition of this notion? Moreover, how can a writer reach out of the pages to promote a change of mores in a society generally devoted to the pursuit of glorified, romantic individualism? A close reading of White's last works points to his use of literary mask-narratives, and particularly mask-characters that embody and reflect social values while being debunked themselves at the same time. By activating these characters, the readers become responsible participants of the outcome of these characters' actions, and may perhaps view them differently, enough to lead to an eventual alteration of the values they exhibit.

Keywords Literary masks · Patrick white · Community · Mores · Ethics

Two kinds of literary masks

Masks are familiar artefacts found in various contexts. They have many pragmatic uses, whether as trappings in children parties or as accessories in a criminal plan. Most recently surgical masks have become a necessary tool in the protection of human life around the globe. Other kinds of masks come to mind, such as playful carnival masks that provide a temporary, cunning cover for one's civil identity and permit extraordinary behaviour; theatre masks that help convince both actors and spectators of a fictional reality in which the mask denotes actors' alternative identities; or masks used in ritual societies as part of particular ceremonies.

I would like to suggest a differentiation between masks, based on their usages (Melcer-Padon, 2018, pp. 13–17, 35–57). The main function of what I have termed 'impersonation masks' is the concealment of one identity behind another, fabricated identify, and this group therefore includes masks used for playful, artistic or deceitful purposes. 'Personification masks,' on the other hand, function as vessels of collective values and reflect community beliefs.

Used in ritual communities, personification masks are performative tools that must be activated by their community to divulge the collective, transcendental contents embodied in them and reflected by them. In turn, the activation of ritual masks enables the members of the community access to contents personified by the masks. As Johan Huizinga explains, a ritual is a "mystic repetition or *re-presentation* of the event. The rite produces the effect which is then not so much *shown figuratively* as *actually reproduced* in the action. The function of the rite, therefore, is far from being merely imitative; it causes the worshippers to participate in the sacred happening itself" (Huizinga, 1950, p. 15). Thus, the representation brought about by the ritual creates the necessary conditions for the appearance of a real presence supported by the

worshippers who personally share in the ritual act and their very presence is crucial to its success. Huizinga specifies that the way ritual societies conceive of an identity between “two things of a different order, say a human being and an animal” is particular, since “the essential oneness of the two goes far deeper than the correspondence between a substance and its symbolic image. It is a mystic unity. The one has become the other. In his magic dance the savage is the kangaroo” (Huizinga, 1950, p. 25). As Peter and Roberta Markman further elucidate, “The mask delineates the oppositional relationship between matter and spirit but in the very process of that delineation allows man simultaneously to be both [...] the lifeless mask must be animated by the wearer in order to ‘live’ in ritual, thus demonstrating the integral relationship of spirit and matter” (Markman and Markman, 1989, pp. xx, 191). When the ritual personification mask dances, it enables not only the dancer but also the worshippers to invoke the essence of the transcendental spirit and partake in its materialization for the duration of the dance. As soon as the ritual is over and the mask ends its act, it becomes a mere piece of carved wood.

Literary masks are similar to their wooden counterparts in historical reality since they too must be put in motion to become alive and fulfil the parts for which they were conceived, even when texts no longer carry religious and ritualistic intentions in more modern, secularized times. Belonging to a fictive reality, literary masks are inexorably apparent by their functions. Having been de-pragmatized when introduced into fiction, to follow Wolfgang Iser’s definition of fictive reality (Iser, 1993a, pp. 12–13, 158–163), literary masks, unlike their counterparts in historical reality, are no longer three-dimensional nor visible once they are part of fiction. However, their functions remain ostensibly analogous to those of masks in historical reality as they are created by, reflect and affect the society in the midst of which they perform. The agency of literary masks, as their historical predecessors’, the ritual and theatrical masks, is derived from the collective subject, modelled by the collective imaginary. In rites of reading, the personification mask is recomposed by each member of the implied reader-community, a community that is being defined by the piecing together and co-production of the personification mask in the act of reading. Iser aptly considers a literary text as one that cannot be viewed as mimesis of a historical reality, but comprises instructions for the imagination to picture the reality intended. Metaphorically speaking,

the text is a musical score whose notes are given, and have to be brought to life by the audience’s imagination called upon to play the score (Iser, 1993b, p. 176).

Personification masks function as vessels of collective unconscious matter, permitting this content to become accessible. Carl Jung’s and Eric Neumann’s analytical research of collective elements in dreams, myths, and cultural manifestations are thus particularly important for the understanding of the nature and functioning of personification masks in fiction. Jung and his followers seek an ontological foundation for the

force of the archetypes and their outer expressions, and one of these expressions is the mask, postulated on the existence of a universal, collective unconscious, existing within the self. The archetype most naturally associated to masks is the Persona archetype. Although the Persona is commonly connected to one's public character, to the identity of the self as perceived by the self and by society, and thus to impersonation masks, it is important to stress that Jung considered the Persona to be rooted in something greater than the personal. The persona has a-priori, universal and unconscious aspects, since it is "an arbitrary segment of collective psyche," protecting the individual from collective powers outside the self, but also from the dangerous collective archetypal contents of his or her psyche within the self (Jung, 1972. pp. 157–158).¹ Encountering a personification mask in a text allows readers to come into contact with their own collective matter as they engage in reconstructing the mask while reading. The mask, in turn, defines its community of active participants and relies on it for its existence and functioning as the readers are those who effectuate it.

The most natural habitat of contemporary, secularized masks is the theatre, where masks deploy their agency through their activation by the actors as well as by the entire theatrical community that takes part in the performance of the play, the playwright, the stagehands, the director and the audience. The function of masks in theatrical productions is readily discerned and embraced. Although literary masks are related to the dramatic elements in literary texts, they operate in many genres and not necessarily in theatrical ones, and therefore it is not the drama that produces the essence of the mask but rather the mask's function. The activation of personification masks by readers as they are engaged in the act of reading is no less effective when these masks are used in prose rather than in plays. Although they are not tangible, literary masks are not mere metaphors but rather exhibit distinct agency and function in the texts in similar ways to their three-dimensional counterparts.

One writer, whose use of literary masks is especially arresting, is Patrick White, Australian 1973 Nobel Prize laureate. White's writing is remarkable since he used both kinds of masks in his plays as well as in his short stories and novels. Considering principally his use of personification masks in some of his major works, may provide a particularly rich reading.

Patrick White's mask-characters

White uses personification mask-characters to embody and reflect those cultural and political values that he targets as the social ills we need to extricate from our midst if we want to better our society and our shared experiences. In *Big Toys* (1977) for example, collective fantasies are expressed in social practices upheld by society and epitomised by its typical, representative characters. Through the behaviour of stereotypical characters, group values are brought to light on the stage, inviting the viewers' critical scrutiny. Three such characters take part in this play: Ritchie Bosanquet, a rich

lawyer, his wife Mag, and a socialist leader named Terry. Ritchie embodies the cynical members of high society whose power and money are the fruits of constant manipulation of the public and of its interests for their own benefit. He is a “toy master” (White, 1994, p. 47) clad in a “toy suit” (White, 1994, p. 31) who has no qualms in promoting devastating nuclear projects to advance his goals. Mag brings Terry home to her bed, where his principles and qualms are shed long enough to be caught naked by Ritchie. Conveniently, Terry can now be manipulated into perjuring himself on the witness stand, serving as a mere pawn in Ritchie’s game. As to Mag, she embodies nihilistic pessimism, the current fashionable philosophical trend, as stylish as her outfits.

White uses these characters to attack the abuse of the ruling classes, who do not take major threats such as nuclear power more seriously than their latest drink, at everyone’s expense. White reminds us that “we are all in it together, all classes, all colours” (White, 1989, p. 101) and advocates to use the “positive side of the nuclear threat” as the “greatest opportunity for unity” (White, 1989, p. 125), since by rallying we may be able to act against the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

The political aspect of spiritual pursuits is at the core of many of White’s works. Though one would be hard-put trying to pin down White’s own aspirations to spirituality to a specific creed, a spiritual quest is present in one form or another in many of his works. For White, spirituality is an inextricable part of one’s responsibility towards all others in one’s community, a responsibility that rests on strong notions of inclusion, as well as on the protection of national and collective interests.

One refined example can be found in *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), in which ‘black’ society, for all its primitive rites, is subtly equated to ‘white’ society, no less brutal in its norms and practices. The main protagonist, Ellen Roxburgh, née Gluyas, a shipwreck survivor, is forcefully subdued to the natives’ harsh welcome into their midst. Yet the readers are reminded that she “had not encountered a more unlikely situation since forced as a bride to face the drawing-rooms at Cheltenham” (White, 1997, p. 243). Spirituality seems more tangible when she is closer to the land and “unhooked” (White, 1997, p. 244) of all her articles of clothing among the natives than in the midst of the crinoline-clad British set. “Ellen Roxburgh, [was disposed] naked and battered though she was [...] to share with these innocent savages an unexpectedly spiritual experience” (White, 1997, p. 271). Later, “the exquisite innocence of this forest morning, its quiet broken by a single flute-note endlessly repeated, tempted her to believe that she had partaken of a sacrament” (White, 1997, p. 273) though what she ate was a piece of human flesh rather than a symbolic wafer at church. “She could not explain how tasting from the human thigh-bone [...] had nourished not only her animal body but some darker need of the hungry spirit” (White, 1997, p. 274). Those who are shocked, like Ellen herself, by cannibalism, must equally be shocked by the inhuman treatment of convicts in a land the whites have turned into a vast, cruel and hopeless prison. Ellen is saddened “to think that she might never become acceptable to either of the two incompatible worlds” (White, 1997, p. 371) when she is back among the whites, and perhaps bridging the two cultures is impossible. Nonetheless, White’s message is clear:

the country would do well to recognize and embrace both its first black inhabitants, and its later white ones, ex-convicts and ex-guardians alike.

Notions of various kinds of social exclusion prevail in other novels by White, in which mentally challenged characters (*The Solid Mandala*, 1966), gender-different (*The Twyborn Affair*, 1979) or artistic outsiders (*The Vivisector*, 1970) are central to the work. Particularly noteworthy is the novel *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) that embraces four dissimilar protagonists whose paths are physically and spiritually interwoven. These are an eccentric heiress, a Jewish Holocaust refugee, a secretive Aboriginal painter and a poor and abused washerwoman, all of whom pay a high personal price for failing to don the proper impersonation masks expected of them by society, and are consequently relegated to marginal parts of society. These protagonists provide White an opportunity to examine human nature in depth, and the spirit that drives its endeavours. Considered together, they also provide insight into a very different segment of an otherwise conformist Australian society, whose members are united by prejudice and social judgments and mocked by White for their admiration of perfect Pavlovas, the “masterpiece of the Country Woman’s craft” (White, 1986, p. 135). Social inclusion, according to White, can only be achieved by embracing all the land’s inhabitants, however eccentric, and should be undertaken in everyone’s interest.

Patrick White and Australian society

Although both of Patrick White’s parents were descendants of the same prosperous graziers’ family established in Australia since mid-19th century, Patrick White was born in London and brought back to Australia at the age of six months. Later in life he would claim that “it is not that I am not an Australian, I am an anachronism, something left over from that period when people were no longer English and not yet indigenous” (White, 1996, p. 288). Later still he would admit that “Australia is not mine by naturalisation; it is in my blood—my fate—which is why I have to put up with the hateful place, when at heart I am a Londoner” (White, 1996, p. 419).

White was sent to England for his secondary schooling, where he remained selfconscious of being Australian, and felt he was a foreigner upon his return to Australia five years later. After two years spent as a jackeroo, an experience that was to produce the backdrop for his first novel *Happy Valley* (1939), he left once more and continued his studies at Cambridge University. When WWII broke out, White was in the USA. He decided to return to England, drawn by a sense of duty he could not put in words (White, 1982, p. 75), and served in the Air Force Intelligence rather than conveniently remaining on the other side of the ocean. After the war and a period in Greece, the expat finally settled down in Australia at the age of 36, having “returned sentimentally to a country I had left in my youth,” as he wrote in an article pointedly entitled *The Prodigal Son* (White, 1989, p. 15).

White's continued dual affinity and sense of belonging did not undermine his loyalty to Australia, although he remained somewhat of an eccentric outsider, an intellectual whose writing was considered too demanding by the public, an asthmatic in a country devoted to sports and a homosexual to boot, at a time that was markedly less accepting and inclusive than our days. He was nonetheless immersed in Australia's history and landscape, as vividly attested in his writing, from *The Tree of Man* (1955), to *Voss* (1957), to *A Fringe of Leaves* mentioned earlier. His depictions of the land and its many wonders render the sensation of a potential earthly paradise that must be safeguarded by those who want to call it their own. Above all, he was deeply concerned about the land's inhabitants. He underlined the multifarious makeup of Australian society, including its indigenous citizens alongside recent immigrants, its landed elite and its weirdoes, its underprivileged and its struggling artists.

Despite an innate reluctance to public exposure, White considered involvement in collective issues and responsibility towards others an integral part of his role of artist and writer. He engaged in many environmental debates, rallying to save Centennial and Moore parks in Sydney from an Olympic sports complex project, and opposing the mining of sand and of Uranium. As a republican, he campaigned for a new constitution that would sever Australia's ties with the British monarchy. On a global level, he joined peace demonstrations and spoke against the propagation of nuclear weapons, encouraging people to do what they could to fight them, since "passive resistance can work wonders" (White, 1989, p. 108) and is certainly better than doing nothing. Yet "in this world of hypocrisy and cynicism, hunger and despair" White warned, "you can't do much on your own. We must unite" (White, 1989, p. 152).

A central concern conspicuous in Patrick White's oeuvre, particularly in his later works, stems from the awareness of the collective component that exists in everyone, ingrained in our collective unconscious and shared imaginary. To convey the "WE"² operating in each human being best, White makes ample use of personification mask-characters in his writing. Concomitantly, these masks serve White to direct his criticism of his society towards his invented characters, and through them at his audience and readers, himself included, in the hope of raising our consciousness of our responsibility to each other and to our wider social circles, and of promoting a possible, future alteration of mores.

In what follows I shall briefly trace the use of personification mask-characters in Patrick White's last published play, *Shepherd on the Rocks* (1987), and in his last novel, *Memoirs of Many in One by Alex Xenophon Demirjian Gray, edited by Patrick White* (1986), whose main protagonist is an aspiring theatre artist. White's reliance on personification masks in his last pieces of writing, to which one must add his last published short stories, *Three Uneasy Pieces* (1987), can be considered to be part of his particular 'late style,' which liberated him from any constraints he may have experienced in his earlier writing. White's last writings may seem to fit Edward Said's contention, as "a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness *going against*" (Said,

2005, p. 25), especially his last novel, *Memoirs of Many in One* discussed here. Yet despite its manifest, chaotic appearance, this novel is White's tour de force, a proof of his mastery of structure and orchestration of characters, themes, symbols, ideas and details, amazingly rich in its brevity.

If White seems to be going against his readers, and "leave the audience more perplexed and unsettled than before" (Said, 2005, p. 25), it is part of his tactic that aims at rallying his audience and readers into a new recognition of their social values and shared history, rather than a mere "comic indulgence [...] a flight of fancy that White allowed himself at the end of his career" (Beston, 2010, pp. 359, 362). His poignant criticism of himself and his society certainly grew more accessible through his use of mask-characters, while his concern for his society and its future became as artistically apparent as his social activism and public speeches. White was both aware of and impervious to his audiences' resentment of the criticism he directed at them, and resigned himself to the fact that more time would be necessary for the wider public to become perturbed by his criticism (White, 1982, p. 247), to the point of taking action towards an alteration of the values he targeted. The readers are recruited as they read and partake in the mission laid out by the writer, though they remain mostly unaware of being manipulated. Readers are especially impervious to the fact that what they are actually setting out against are values they support themselves, and it is their own set of beliefs they are coerced into criticising. Moreover, their very act of reading is activating the literary masks, thereby implicating them and making them responsible for the contents divulged by the masks.

Institutionalized religion and the theatre

An incident that occurred during the difficult years in which White lived with his partner, Manoly Lascaris, on a farm on Castle Hill, became profoundly meaningful. White recalls carrying a load of dog food in the pouring rain, when he slipped and fell on his back, dog dishes shooting in all directions. I lay where I had fallen, half-blinded by rain ... cursing ... a God in whom I did not believe. I began laughing finally ... it was a turning point. My disbelief appeared as farcical as my fall. At that moment I was truly humbled (White, 1982, p. 144).

White's adherence thereafter to what he termed "organised humility" in a variety of churches eventually ended in a retreat into "private faith" (White, 1982, pp. 144–145), yet his quest for a Divine Presence, though erratic and often unconscious, continued (Marr, 1992, p. 511). Indeed, he considered his writing to be "an offering in the absence of other gifts" (White, 1982, p. 143). Raised as a Protestant, and by no means one who considered conversion, White nevertheless felt "most Australian artists of Protestant upbringing would admit ... that they had missed something by not experiencing a Catholic childhood" (White, 1982, p. 244), which he deemed more spectacular and theatrical. White equates his fascination for the theatre, to which his mother had

introduced him at an early age, to the emotional upbringing provided by faith. His suggestion that belief, passion, and the theatre are interconnected explains his choice of the main mask-characters of his last play and of his last novel. In the play, the main character is a cleric with strong affinities to the theatre. Similarly, the protagonist of his last novel uses various theatrical performances as the scenes of her quest for enlightenment, forgiveness and absolution as she nears her death.

Contrary to several characters of his earlier writings, White denies these last mask-characters the understanding his epiphany provided him. To the extent that White felt a divine presence in his own life, this sensation was connected to other people, which he recognised as predominantly “interwoven with my love for the one human being who never fails me,” referring to Manoly (White, 1982, p. 243). White admits that rejecting God was part of the egotism of his younger years, whereas he later discovered the need not only for some form of spirituality but also for the presence of other people in his life. He concedes he was vain to think he could get along on his own and realizes one must resign oneself to being modestly “collected” by others rather than assume one can choose one’s friends or community (White, 1982, p. 243).

Artistically, White is experimenting with similar techniques in his later works, whether theatrical pieces, novels or autobiographies, comprised of *The Twyborn Affair* (1979), *Flaws in the Glass* (1981) and *Memoirs of Many in One* (1986). White relies in his use of literary masks on the Christian tradition of embodiment and personification, in which the figure has a tangible role. In both works studied here, White introduces fragments of traditional rituals intertwined with modern ritual practices, fragmented as well, staging two competing traditions of unmasking. The modern, cynical tradition claims nothing is real, and all masks are merely easily disposable impersonation masks, while the older tradition recognizes the power of personification masks, their collective contents, and the pragmatic effect they have on those using them as well as on their community. White allows his mask-characters to exaggerate their conduct in order to draw our attention to the modern values according to which they act, that we would otherwise disregard or condone. He is letting his characters perform to the point at which their egotistic megalomania leads to the spilling over of their collective contents, and he sacrifices them to their folly precisely to rally us all *against* what they represent. Both works invite an antithetical reading that would overcome an easy dismissal of the mask-characters as simply crazy, and allow us to discern White’s essential agenda.

The shepherd, the whale, and the lion

Based on the true story of an “extraordinary scandal,”³ White’s play *Shepherd on the Rocks* (1987) is about a failed religious shepherd involved in several “varieties of religious experience” (Marr, 1992, p. 631), staged in a double ritual frame, of theatre and circus, and of a traditional, though disjointed, Christian ritual. Danny Shepherd, a small town priest, regularly abandons his parish, his wife and five children, to seek

more followers for his flock in the backwaters of Sydney. Reminiscent of the early, all-encompassing church, Danny's ideas turn him into a self-appointed Christ, who disregards his own ordainment and the institution of the Church. Yet his actions are driven by unquenchable sexual desire that he barely veils as part of his so-called concern for the souls of the prostitutes he sets out to 'save'. Defrocked, Danny's disloyalty to his cassock goes further, when he proposes to continue his Christ-like mission by performing vaudeville acts, and ultimately commits suicide by stepping into a lion's cage, having saved no one, not even himself.

John Colmer already pointed out the importance of staging to two of White's previous plays (Colmer, 1984, pp. 58–59), and indeed, since a play usually provides less space and time than a novel in which to deploy a mask-character's actions, the staging, the lighting and sound effects, the costumes and the gestures are of primordial importance. White's stage directions in *Shepherd on the Rocks* are thus meticulously aimed at involving the audience already at the sensory level. The audience is further agglomerated into the play when newly acquired members of the shepherd's congregation walk onto the stage through the theatre hall, as well as when the various shows-within-the-play allow these shows' spectators on stage to voice their remarks in the manner of an ancient chorus, vocally expressing feelings members of the audience share. Some members of the audience may even admire and identify with a character such as Danny Shepherd who boldly follows his dream and disregards suffocating rules that were born in a different era, and dictated by a somewhat antiquated Church, whose official representatives White exposes as wanting in integrity, fairness and moral action. The audience partakes in the demise of the mask-character, as both viewers and active participants, one painful step at a time, until Danny's brutal suicide. In this participatory process, the audience is taking part in producing the theatrical imaginary reality and unwittingly in activating the maskcharacter, thereby becoming responsible for allowing his excesses as well as for his unnecessary and tragic end.

White uses the main mask-character of Danny Shepherd, at one time a Vaudeville actor and at present the Rector of Budgiwank, to conduct a multiple criticism, of society, of the Church, and of the mask itself. Married to Elisabeth, and the father of five children, Danny has greater ambitions than just providing guidance to his flock. Danny takes his somewhat anachronistic vocation as a priest to Christ-like measures: he tries throughout the play to gather as many social groups into his single flock as he can, a reminder of the first, idyllic Christian community, in which everyone knew everyone else. Aside from his own family and his parishioners, he tries to embrace into his community several prostitutes, circus actors and a film star, all of whom he collects on his trips to the city slums. The shepherd thus strives to create a community of believers on stage, in addition to the community comprised of the audience off stage, a reminder that in both church ritual and theatre, the 'we' is experienced by literally being together in one performance community site. Yet however praiseworthy Danny's vision of social inclusion, he is also addicted to sex, and his particular interest in rallying prostitutes to his flock as part of their spiritual salvation is thus less

laudable and lamely disguised as his ideology. He tries to convince Rainbow, one of the prostitutes he brings back from Sydney, to produce “a whole new breed of believers” with him. It is Rainbow who must remind him that “we’d look silly, Dan, if we started breeding without a ring” (White, 1994, p. 202), as should have been clear to Danny not merely as a married man but especially as a priest officiating marriages who supposedly believes in sacraments. His easily and repeatedly discarded cassock is the visual expression of Danny’s treatment of Church values as mere impersonation masks, interchangeable with any others that serve him better at different moments. Danny’s mask encompasses extravagant narcissism, post-modern individualism and anarchism, alongside the traditional role of a priest. His disproportionate aspirations, his literal understanding of this mask’s function and his over-identification with this mask, result in an inflation of the character to the point of an overflowing of the mask by its own collective content, and of the destruction of the character. Erich Neumann explains the necessary process individuals must undergo on their way to adulthood, which is the result of experiencing the transpersonal outside the self by projecting this content upon gods or mythological figures. The subsequent and necessary phase is the breaking up of the transpersonal content into small pieces the individual can “digest” to safely incorporate the collective materials into the personal psyche (Neumann, 1993, pp. 336, 388–389), a process the immature and irresponsible Danny Shepherd did not fully undergo.

After Danny’s defrocking, his ensuing failed acting endeavors and economic ruin, he is compared to beached whales. Symbolic archetypal creatures, from Jonah’s biblical fish and Job’s mythic Leviathan to Melville’s *Moby Dick*, whales and sea-dragons represent the individual’s unconscious and the necessity for the individual to win the inner struggle against the whale, and emerge victorious, like the new morning sun, having conquered darkness (Neumann, 1993, pp. 154–155). In this play, whales are used by White to allude to the underlying, traditional narrative of Jonah. The reluctant prophet, who was never disconnected from his community and became the most effective redeemer when the entire community of Nineveh turned to God, is an inescapable antithesis to Danny, a self-appointed prophet, who loses his flock on the road to his own destruction. In the end, Danny has become the whale, an image suitable in size to his megalomaniac aspirations to gain dominion over all of God’s creations. However, Danny is exhausted and confused. “Like the whales when they lose their way,” whose blood fills the sea, “savaged by the rocks” (White, 1994, pp. 291, 221), Danny has been savaged by the rock of the Church. At the end of the play, “a mix of faith music soars through the theatre: Salvo tambourines, whale song, Kol Nidre, ‘O for the Wings of A Dove’ [...] Hindu, Greek Orthodox Liturgy [...]” and Danny appears once more, “*dressed in a cross between a medieval monk’s robe and a contemporary cassock. He is wearing a thin grey wig, varlets’ cut, face grey, drawn, ascetic*” (White, 1994, p. 229). Set against a potpourri of religions, his dress a mixture of traditional and modern registers, supposedly allowing everyone to rally behind him, Danny delivers his final speech:

Are you for magic? I am. Inadmissible when we are taught to believe in science or nothing. Nothing is better, science may explode in our faces. So I am for magic. For dream. For love ... I refuse to believe – what certain scientists, academics, and a variety of non-human beings try to persuade me – I should say US – because you are part of ME – and we are all part of one another (White, 1994, p. 229).

Magic appeals to the imagination, and belongs to the realm of unscientific, transcendental powers, with which one can come into contact more safely, White suggests, by using mediating personification masks such as that of a priest. Yet Danny has failed his flock, doing his utmost to rid himself of his official mask whenever it was inconvenient. As a leader, Danny should have been able to control his urges, respect and sustain his community in carrying out his duties rather than succumb to his personal desires.

Ultimately, what White wishes the leaders as well as members of an enlightened society would do, is be responsible for their followers and for one another through a recognition of community-components in our psyche, a recognition he grants his failed clergyman only a moment before his death. An ethical individual, according to Neumann, is one who has “become conscious of both the positive and the negative forces in the human organism” thereby providing the “ego its solidarity with the whole human species ... a *sine qua non* of a genuinely tolerant attitude towards other people” (Neumann, 1969, pp. 94, 96–97). By the same token, Danny is indeed part of us, whether we care to admit it or not, and it is we who have not stopped him and have even encouraged him to carry on as he did in the name of pseudoadvanced-liberal values.

Danny steps into a lions’ cage, and rather than being saved, as his name suggests, the biblical allusion is reversed, and he is eaten alive by the beasts. To the more obvious, traditional layer of the biblical Daniel that of Samson is added. Danny has replaced the Strong Man in the circus when he entered the lions’ cage, a poor comparison to Samson who could kill a lion with his bare hands when God was with him. While the heroic Samson was blinded, Danny’s blindness is self-induced, as the dark glasses he wears toward the end of the play imply. Danny failed in his selfinterested attempt to create a substitute institution for the Church for the advancement of his own agenda. Although White does not spare the Church leaders the criticism he finds they deserve, he also presents their upholding priesthood personification masks as preferable to Danny’s total misunderstanding of the responsibility his office demands of him. The clerical mask he took upon himself when he was ordained was not his to toy with; though the Church rituals may often resemble an extravagant show, there is still a difference between these extravaganzas and Danny’s Vaudeville clowning. Moments before stepping into the cage, Danny’s ‘sermon for magic’ turns against his audience that he blames will continue pursuing false dreams, worshipping sun, yachts, monuments, money, and beaches – that’s where the votes are to be caught (all you need is a shrimping net and

a fair measure of hypocrisy). I pray for grace – for the deceived shrimps – the monsters of power – and the least deserving creature – myself (White, 1994, p. 229).

Although Danny does not admit to being one of the hypocrite, shrimp-fishing-monsters, nor does he beg forgiveness from his deceived followers, he is on point in his admonition: so long as our aspirations are reduced to “sun, yachts, monuments, money, and beaches,” we deserve the “monsters of power” that cater to these ideals and take advantage of us. If we want better and more responsible leaders, the necessary transformation starts with the set of values upheld by each of us.

White considers “megalomaniac politicians, dictators, mafia millionaires, greedy landlords, rapists, murderers, self-obsessed spouses” to be part of ‘the same scheme which embraces the “Therasas, St John of the Cross, Thomas Merton” along with “humble everyday saints” (White, 1989, p. 197), all of whom owe their existence to us. Even if a Divine Presence, manifested through “Jesus, the Jewish prophets, the Buddha, Mahatma Gandhi and Co.” controls us, it does so “only to a certain degree: life is what we, its components, make it” (White, 1989, p. 197).

The many communities of the mask

The title of White’s last novel is as indicative as that of his last play and evokes the many authors responsible for creating the mask-character of Alex, clarifying that in fiction too, a mask-character is fashioned as the result of a collective creation, and represents its implied community as an embodied composite congregation in one complex character.

When the novel opens, Alex is already dead, and her mask, embedded in a confetti-like narrative must be reconstructed backwards. Upon her daughter’s request, a close friend of the deceased by the name of Patrick White agrees to try to make sense of Alex’s many jumbled papers that overflow every corner of her house, indicative of the state of her psyche, contextualized by his own recollections as well as those of her children. The text the readers are presented with is thus a co-production from the start, yet one that remains quite cryptic despite the alleged intervention of its editor. The readers are tasked with deciphering a multitude of clues dispersed in the text, a mission that turns each of them into a detective, an archeologist, a genealogist, an anthropologist of twentieth century ideals, an Australian sociologist but above all a member of the mask-community, whose operation activates the mask as the readers disclose the collective values and beliefs of its embodied contents. Concurrently to the activation of the mask-character, the reading community of the mask is created, stimulated by the mask, similarly to the role a ritual mask plays in the creation and rallying of a belief community encircling the rite in which it is used.

The readers are therefore not as solitary as they believe themselves to be since each of them participates in piecing and activating the mask in the act of reading.

A series of theatrical allusions make up the most apt background for the collaborative construction of the mask in this novel, as Alex waltzes in and out of the different social settings forming her society, unconsciously collecting her community along the way, reminiscent of Danny Shepherd's deliberate mission. This character's heterogeneity echoes that of her creator. As Guy Davidson points out, White's "conception of the self as a kind of theatre in which various identities are tried on and performed is [...] arrestingly insightful" (Davidson, 2010, p. 7). White's attraction to the theatre was evidently carried over to his construction of the novel's characters, whose roles he would act out as he was writing them, since as White attests, "I only have confidence in myself when I am another character" (White, 1989, p. 23). One less expected identity Alex's mask embodies—and at the same time disparages—is the literary trend of her time. Adhering to post-modern exigencies, the author disappears, whereas the character, alienated from the world and from itself crumbles, displaying its many authoring elements. The disintegration of the character, as well as the admission that it is composed by many, in all of its phases, is visually apparent on the page in the form of an 'I I,' eventually further shattered into 'I I I,' and graphically ending in an eloquent, graphically over-sized full stop. Together with "a deep bloody trench from top to bottom of the innocent sheet" (White, 1986, p. 174) administered by Alex's pen, these are the character's final imprinted expressions. As to Patrick, her editor, he picks up where she left, confessing that "I I—the great creative ego—had possessed myself of Alex Gray's life [...] and created from it the many images I needed to develop my own obsessions, both literary and real" (White, 1986, p. 192).

Alex pursues what is ostensibly very modern and fashionable ideals of individualistic self-fulfillment and her actions can therefore elicit understanding and even admiration. Nonetheless, the respect one has for stamina and strength of spirit in a young woman, who could even be pardoned for the often-dubious means she chooses to reach her admirable goals, is sarcastically undercut when embodied by an elderly woman who uses these ideals as an excuse for a self-serving, pathetic pursuit of redemption for her egotistic life. Her children, her best friend and by extension her society, condone her actions, as irresponsible and harmful as they are, because they are all part of an immature quest for self-realization. In this sense, she embodies the epitome of "kidult" values, exposing by her actions a society willing to allow her misbehaviour because it caters to the conceited 'me-me-me' needs each member of this society seems to appreciate.

The readers of this novel are burdened with assembling not only the mask-character but also the fragmented, double strands of the mask-narrative. The novel is meticulously constructed despite its disparate episodes and wide collection of seemingly unrelated details, whose accumulation "throw[s] light on things in a longer sense: in the long run it all adds up" (White, 1989, p. 23). Indeed, *Memoirs of Many in One* relies on two antithetical narrative strands, in which every fragment dispersed along the reading has its designated place. The main disjointed plot traces Alex's declared efforts of detachment in the name of a romantic, artistic quest of personal enlightenment

and self-glorification. This plot is undercut by an underlying sub-plot that advocates a recognition of one's shortcomings in a process of change that could lead to a new perception and reconciliation with the necessity of human relationships in one's life, which follows Patrick's path (Melcer-Padon, 2015).

Alex is the embodiment of failure: a failed wife and mother, she is also a failed friend, a failed believer, and a self-proclaimed failed artist. This makes her quite human and easy to identify with, and even to admire, since her many shortcomings do not diminish her aspirations, convinced as she is that she merely needs to detach herself from everyone, ignoring any responsibility she has towards others, starting with those closest to her, as Danny does, to reach dramatic stardom and enlightenment. She tries her hand at appropriating a classical piece, Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, which she reduces to a farce; she continues to an Avant-Garde production where she tries both anarchism and nihilism for size. Alex's literal grasp of these concepts is met with Patrick's dismissal, and he points to the lack of originality of modern artists' efforts to strip everything away, in Beckett's case as far as an unsaying of language, in the name of a search for authenticity and of the 'naked' truth.

As to revolution by means of theatrical activity, it is neither as novel nor as anarchistic as its proponents wish to believe, as Wolfgang Iser points out, since although they negate the traditional structure of drama, which is based on a representative function ... the revolutionaries are still descended from the aesthetic idealists ... but it is a fallacy to believe that by negating something, you have already grasped its otherness ... With pure negation, the revolution remains dependent upon that which it negates (Iser, 1989, pp. 199–200).

Revolutions cannot be conducted on one's own, certainly not at the theater, postulated as it is on the cooperation of the very public Alex abhors and believes she revolts against by acting before it, all the while ironically aspiring to receive its recognition. It is precisely the communal element, which endows the mask its validity, and without the sustenance of a community, the mask-character cannot function. Carl Jung explains that the persona, usually treated as the individual's protection from society, has an additional function, namely to protect the individual from internal collective unconscious elements within the private psyche. "When we analyse the persona we strip off the mask, and discover that what seemed individual is at bottom collective; in other words, that the persona was only a mask for the collective psyche" (Jung, 1972, pp. 157–158). Similarly to Danny Shepherd, Alex's overinflated ego that has not been reined in by her community finally overflows her mask at her last performance. Having disrobed, she not only shocks her audience by exposing her nudity but also shoots at them, using a revolver White armed her with earlier, in Chekov-like fashion.

Though the bullets are blanks, the audience has no way of knowing that, and one of them has a heart attack. This performance earns Alex an internment in an asylum, yet a responsible community ought to have critically stopped her derailment much earlier, not by interning the likes of her for being different, inventive or original, but by dis-

avowing the megalomaniac aspirations and discouraging the total lack of accountability in the name of purported artistic freedom that she epitomizes.

Parallel to her theatrical endeavors, Alex sets on a spiritual journey. As in the theatre, she tries a bit of everything, hoping that she can concoct some rites to her convenience that would provide her with absolution for her life's sins along with divine forgiveness. As nonsensical and futile as her attempt to perform the motions of a washerwoman to launder her sins on stage, is Alex's irreverent effort to wash off the lipstick she stole in a store with holy water from a stoup. Like Danny Shepherd, she experiments with any creed she comes across, be it Greek orthodoxy, mysticism, Judaism, Hinduism, or Catholicism, yet is no closer to her goal since rites cannot be made up and are only efficient when they result from long-lived traditions, known and upheld by their respective belief community. The scene this protagonist believes to be that her 'last judgement,' is one she braves alone in an empty theatre, unaware that her choice of venue is indicative of the impossibility of evading one's community. Even an empty theatre is a public space, a point driven by White in the shape of a rat, whose critical consciousness is enough to "outstare" her (White, 1986, p. 162). Neumann reminds us that rites, such as rites of passage, constitute the "transformation that is induced by the cultural collectivity and prepares the individual for life in the collectivity" (Neumann, 1974, p. 155). He goes on to link between spirituality and art, pointing out that since the symbol-creating collective forces of myth and religion, rites and festivals, have lost most of their efficacy as cultural phenomena binding upon the collectivity, the creative principle in art has achieved a unique prominence in our time (Neumann, 1974, p. 166).

White has thus aptly sent his mask-character on a quest that is both spiritual and artistic, yet she misses out completely on the benefits of this endeavor because she rejects the role collectivity holds on her psyche and in her life, though she recognizes that "we are all, ringed" (White, 1986, p. 176). The wedding ring, Alex complained fit too tightly on her finger in her lifetime, is still shining at the end of her "darkened arms like writhing mangrove branches ending on twig claws" (White, 1986, p. 182) after her death. Especially this particular ring constitutes a constant reminder of the community's cardinal and indispensable task in the production and upholding of rites and in recognition of their meaning and centrality,⁴ even in a secular society.

Through Alex's many episodes, in and out of the theater, White exposes Australian societal values as those of an immature "kidult" society that condones egocentric behaviour for the venerated notion of prized individuality and self-fulfillment. White exposes to our scrutiny the actions of an unlikely character such as Alex, hardly qualifying as a heroic character nor as an ideal of youth and beauty, in the hope that we should realize the ludicrous aspect of her behaviour and judge her harshly enough to recognize a change of values is in order.

Alex final hour at St. Damien's Hospital arrives and her "black skull fell against the pillows, a trickle of garnet-coloured blood escaping from one corner of the mouth"

(White, 1986, p. 183). One cannot help but notice, a few pages later, the similarity of this description to that of the mummified skull of St. Chiara in Assisi (White, 1986, p. 189), at one of the stops along the pilgrimage Patrick and Hilda, Alex's daughter, undertake after Alex's death, along the stations of her life. This dual vision of the two masks, albeit Santa Chiara's is "a fake [...] the mask—the head—they were manufactured by the nuns" (White, 1986, p. 188) as the guide in Assisi clarifies, underlines two points: first, the objective authenticity of the mask is irrelevant as long as it is upheld by a belief community for which it is effective. Second, the trickle of blood on both masks points to the persisting life force contained in the masks, to their archetypal contents, that continue to play a part in our private psyche as well as in our society's collective imaginary, whether we acknowledge them or not. As Patrick admits, he and Alex "were [...] never quit of each other" (White, 1986, p. 192), indeed none of us can be rid of Alex, not even after her death, unless we alter the values embodied by this disturbing mask once we realize these values should no longer be sustained.

Alex's failure is Patrick's, the editor's, triumph. Patrick understands Alex, his own gender-opposite, for he too, like Alex, is a performer and an explorer "in search of the unanswerable, the unattainable" (White, 1986, p. 88), yet he embraces the collective in him and outside of himself. He ultimately takes Alex's place in her bed and besides her daughter and they manage to share their lives in much greater harmony than Hilda and her mother ever could.

Collective responsibility

White lays before his readers a challenge that is far from trivial and has discouraged many. No one likes to be the recipient of criticism, and deciphering White's text inevitably unlocks substantial condemnation of the mores of our era. The easiest reaction is to put the book down and dismiss Alex as a crazy, Alzheimer-ridden character that has little to do with us. Yet those who plod on and manage to laugh at themselves the way White does at himself in the depiction and targeting of his avowed female counterpart, would be amply rewarded. Such readers would not only be able to appreciate a literary gem, but also obtain an outlook that is most relevant in these days of pandemic, that have forced us to practice social distancing and even estranging behavior. White's texts remind us that our connections to other people can and should be upheld at all costs, through methods that although often imperceptible and remote, are nonetheless quite effective. Above all, White urges that we recognize our commitment and responsibility towards each other, as he claimed in a 1984 speech. Only rallying together can give us the means to overcome major common threats, such as nuclear weapons, overinflated and irresponsible leaders, or more current global health catastrophes, global environmental and economic issues, affected by the behavior of each of the planet's inhabitants and that in turn influences each of us (White, 1989, pp. 151–158).

George Watt points to White's role as a prophet, though "[h]e sometimes confuses being critical with his role as inspired teacher and shower of the way" (Watt, 1996, p. 273). Nonetheless, a dedicated writer can assist his readers' contact with their historical heritage by means of the imagination and active participation in piecing the text together. An author can facilitate the readers' contact with their heritage by encouraging them to use their imagination in filling the gaps of a bare chronicle, thereby making history become alive again, and meaningful for each once it is integrated into their private psyche. Forgotten historical occurrences are brought to the fore and become meaningful once again, by the activation of the mask-narrative and its proxies, the mask-characters, in a process that can be considered as an appropriation or a 'second personalization of the narrative.' Similarly to Jung and Neumann's concepts regarding processes of secondary personalization and centroverson of transpersonal contents, necessary for the adult psyche's sane solidifying of the ego (Neumann, 1993, p. 320), the content embodied and reflected by mask-characters allows the readers to encounter the various social groups that constitute a particular people, its shared history and collective values. In the case of *Memoirs of Many in One*, Alex's bedeviled excursions incorporate several communities that constitute Australian society and encompasses historical occurrences that determined the nature of this society. White singled out WWII as both most recently influential and threatening in the possible recurrence of its horrors, even on the 'other side' of the earth, if we are not on our guards and allow the likes of Hitler, or even "'Cowboy Reagan' and 'Führerin Thatcher' to control our lives" (White, 1989, p. 102).

The character of Alex is not modelled on despised political figures. Yet her aspirations are just as grand, allowing White to use a compatible measure of ridicule towards this character, to better infiltrate our reluctant awareness of the misconceptions that lead an avowed diva, bossy, egotistic old woman to believe she may aspire if not to God then at least to "one of his understudies" (White, 1986, p. 87). Having exposed hubris as the artist's original sin, White's use of Patrick White the editor as the one responsible for the text reverberates the humility he felt when he fell in the mud on Castle Hill. White exposes his contention that a creative artist is inescapably involved in his community and can only hope to cocreate his art. Nonetheless, a writer must assume responsibility for his creation, for the mask-character he has let loose in his text. The duty of the creative artist, as part of society's élite, is to 'find' ethics, live ethically and educate others in society to follow suit (Neumann, 1969, p. 62). As a Great Individual, one of the transmitters of the collective canon (Neumann, 1993, pp. 371, 377, 428), it is the writer's role to make the archetypal patterns that influence history accessible to our conscious remedying by allowing mask-characters to trouble "the spirit, the conscience, the dormant imagination of the average man" (White, 1989, p. 69). At the same time, readers become morally accountable for the mask that they have assisted in activating and must strive to alter those of its offensive and reprehensible aspects.

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