

AIDS and Melancholia in Paris: Edmund White's Textual Incorporation of His Dying Lover

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Edmund White's book *Sketches from memory*, 'a little book', written with accompanying drawings by White's lover Hubert Sorin, is a departure for Edmund White, a pioneer of realist gay literature. Unlike the writing that White is best known for – his autobiographical fiction that makes up the trilogy of *A boy's own story*, *The beautiful room is empty* and *The farewell symphony* – *sketches from memory* is a collection of anecdotal stories of his daily life with his lover Hubert in Paris. In this paper I argue that the dialogic nature of White and Sorin's text is a manifestation of the internalized ambivalence that is a component of melancholia. When Sorin is dying, White (an American) increasingly incorporates the French language and a Parisian lifestyle as a way to work through the anticipated loss of his (French) lover. What distinguishes this effort of incorporation (a psychoanalytic term that refers to the adoption of attributes of the mourned other) is that it is the language and culture of the other that is textually incorporated into a literary text. The internal dialogue that White engages in that he can no longer pursue with his dying and then dead lover, is manifested in White's negotiations in the text with expressing in English a life that he lives with his French lover in a French-speaking world. This internalization is a melancholic gesture that both attempts to work through and refuses to accept the loss of his lover, and also allows White to reconcile his life alone in Paris.

Edmund White and Hubert Sorin's book *Sketches from memory* is a 'funny-sad look around our *quartier* that we finished just a week before [Sorin] died' (White, 1998: 1). It came out in 1994 and is in a very different format and style from the autobiographical fiction that Edmund White is known for, even considering his early more

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abstract novels, such as *Forgetting Elena*, *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* and *Caracole*, his biography of Genet, and his more recent historical novel – a fictionalized nineteenth century memoir – *Fanny: a fiction* (and other ‘departures’, such as his authoring most of the text for the popular *The joy of gay sex*, published in 1977). White is best known for the trilogy of realist gay autobiographical fiction made up of the books *A boy’s own story*, *The beautiful room is empty* and *The farewell symphony* – and his later, more fictional than autobiographical, *The married man*. *A boy’s own story*, particularly, is the most enduring of a genre of pre-AIDS realist gay texts that fall under the rubric of the ‘coming out story’, which is thought of as ‘the gay equivalent of the *Bildungsroman*’ (Woods, 1998: 346). In the book, *Sketches from memory*, simple vignettes by White are accompanied by illustrative drawings by Sorin. The book is made heartrending by the introduction written by White, a week after the book was completed, and just two hours after Sorin’s death from AIDS. Although it has been remarked that ‘*Sketches from memory* is not a book about AIDS but about the success with which two people wrest from the disease their sense of purpose and their prematurely fragile memories’ (Prout, 1995: 38), it seems to me that *Sketches from memory* is very much about AIDS, about the sort of fabrication of one’s daily life that one might struggle to invent and hold to when it is precisely that quotidian life that is unravelling. The fact that they are sketches ‘from memory’ and not from present life suggests that this is not the way life is lived for them anymore, even while the anecdotes are presented as textual incarnations of their current life together.

There is a kind of AIDS text, fragmented and of no particular – or of many – genres (of which *Sketches from memory* is one), in which there is no familiar trajectory of narrative order. White and Sorin’s book most effectively illustrates this in being a somewhat fragmented collection of anecdotes. There is no linearity or apparent order to the short sketches: the first sketch describes a woman singing beneath their window, the next describes shopping for food in the Châtelet district of Paris, the following regards the clothes designer Azzedine Alaïa, and yet the next addresses the concierge of their apartment building. As White’s introduction to the book indicates that the ensuing sketches take place during the time that Sorin is dying, one expects that the following narrative will explain or at least lead up to the moment of his death, perhaps serving as a chronicle of his waning weeks and months. White and Sorin’s book is, however, held together by an understanding that although all the anecdotes are illustrations of their life together, one story does not necessarily follow another. There is no dramatic build up, no wondering what will

happen to any one figure, no denouement into the agonies of illness or the tragedy of death. The light and whimsical nature of the sketches disrupts our sense of narrative order, intention and teleology – and most of all perhaps ‘disappoints’ us that we are not provided with any narrative insight about what happened to Sorin. That he died is tragic; but the reader wants to know what *happened*.

White’s introduction to *Sketches from memory* gives us some of this ‘story’ when White expounds on the provenance of their joint work and the development of their collaborative sketches as Sorin’s illness progressed: ‘He did the cover and I completed all the texts just before we set off on a last trip to Morocco’ (White and Sorin, 1994: 4). In his text accompanying Sorin’s drawings, Edmund White’s sense of his life with Sorin is constituted by the sketches he creates of their life in Paris. The reality he evidently most wants – one in which Sorin is not ill – is conjured throughout his writing and Sorin’s illustrations. For example, White admits in the introduction to their sketches that:

[d]uring the last three months we had to give Fred our basset hound to Hubert’s brother in Nice because Hubert could no longer go down the five flights and I couldn’t take care of both Hubert and Fred; but in our book we remain an eternal trio, our silhouettes against the Tour St-Jacques.

(White and Sorin, 1994: 8)

Their sketches imagine and project (and remember) a Parisian life for them in which Sorin is not ill.

In the introduction, White exposes the ways that White and Sorin agreed to, had trouble with, and finally succeeded in working together in tandem, thus emphasizing the nature of their collaboration as an ongoing discussion between them of sorts, rather than as a unitary vision that they both shared. White writes that Sorin ‘always wanted us to work on a book together, but I’ve never liked collaborations. Nor did I think I would find a tone that would go with his drawings’ (White and Sorin, 1994: 3). Though eventually White finds a way to work with Sorin, sometimes trailing behind him before he can find the ‘right tone’: ‘At first he worked far ahead of me, although in the last two months I caught up with him’ (White and Sorin, 1994: 4).

This interaction – this involvement in a kind of ‘dialogue’ in writing and illustrating the text of *Sketches from memory*, as well as a sustained projection of a life in which Sorin is alive and well – can be understood, in its anticipation of – and, I will argue, resistance to – loss, as a melancholic strategy to sustain, or keep present, the lost other. Melancholia, unlike mourning, which is the process of working

through loss, is a psychic resistance to working through loss. Melancholia is signalled by a number of gestures or symptoms, one of which, in the theories of psychoanalysts Maria Torok and Nicolas Abraham, following Freud, is the incorporation of the lost other.

DIALOGUE AS INTERNALIZATION OF THE OTHER

White and Sorin's text is dialogic – both in the planning of the book, its pages and its 'story' – in a way that suggests a 'running start' to the dialogue that is in effect, the internalization of the other that melancholia mandates will follow the death of an other whom one cannot bear to lose, and which is an indication of the ambivalence one feels toward the other and toward the loss of the other. The internalized dialogue, as Freud characterizes it, is usually characteristic of an altercation or dispute. When the object is ultimately lost, comments Judith Butler in her account of melancholia, 'the object is "brought inside" the ego where the quarrel magically resumes as an interior dialogue between two parts of the psyche' (Butler, 1990: 61). However, although there is ambivalence detectable in the nature of the dialogue in White and Sorin's book, I do not think here that dialogue manifests itself necessarily as a quarrel, but rather as a way of sustaining the lost other by carrying on a conversation with him that was begun before the other was gone, a way to refuse the loss of the other. Freud remarks that the 'conflict within the ego' is what melancholia 'substitutes for the struggle over the object' (Freud, 1991 [1917]: 268). It is as if the internalized dialogue is another kind of totem standing in the place of the other who can no longer speak because he is dead: a signifier of, but also a substitute for, absence. The internalized dialogue is a way both to sustain the lost other and to deny that he is gone.

Internalizing the lost object happens in the form of a sustained dialogue with that object: 'The melancholic ... begins to mime and incorporate the lost one, refusing the loss through that incorporative strategy, "continuing the quarrel" with the other' (Butler, 1997: 161). The dialogic nature of White and Sorin's book allows the refusal of the other's potential loss or demise; that is, White is able to sustain his lover – the 'other' – not within his own corporeal body, as Abraham and Torok specify (see Abraham and Torok, 1986), but within the corpus of the text.

Although I am suggesting that the interlocution in *Sketches from memory* is between White and Sorin in the way that text and illustration interplay with each other, there is already an indication in the book that the dialogue has moved from being one between the

two men to one that exists within the text of White alone. This exemplifies the dialogue with the other that has been internalized to form an interior dialogue in anticipation of the loss of the other.

White's text is written in conjunction with Sorin's drawings. In fact, as I have mentioned, White's writing initially lags behind Sorin's drawings, so White writes in response to Sorin's drawings; he indicates in the introduction that he 'pitched the book to vibrate to the tautness of [Hubert's] sensibility' (White and Sorin, 1994: 7). Although the text and drawings are meant to go together – to accompany each other – the text at times departs from the illusion that Hubert is always well, while the drawings do not. White comments on this in the introduction, that the 'slightly childlike, perhaps *faux-naïf*, certainly styled quality of words and images' contributed to a collusion between them, '[a]lthough we never talked about it', that they would not refer to Hubert's illness:

... this tone conjoined us to silence about AIDS; it was our undoubtedly absurd notion of gallantry that made us pretend (in his drawings) that his body was not aging and wasting away or (in my chapters) that we had nothing more serious to do than loaf in the streets and give dinner parties. All bluff, since towards the end we seldom saw anyone or went anywhere. Hubert came to despise his emaciated body, but in his drawings he remains as dapper and handsome and *élancé* as he was the day I met him, five years ago.

(White and Sorin, 1994: 7–8)

However, White does not keep up his part completely in the collusion, because even outside the introduction, in the words he writes to accompany Sorin's drawings, he cannot help but mention the illness occasionally, and the daily life that illness has actually become for them. Even the opening vignette suggests that although it is unusual for them to be in bed in the daytime, it does not establish *why* they are. The opening sketch shows Hubert in bed and White standing on the balcony overlooking the street below. It is their dog Fred who 'was wondering why we were already in bed when he hadn't had his late-night walk and it was still light out' (White and Sorin, 1994: 11). There is no suggestion that being in bed is about sex or about illness, two obvious reasons why people might take to their bed out of the regular order of the day, but there is still the intimation (through the dog's imagined bewilderment) that it is unusual. Another example of White's inability not to mention the illness is in a chapter on their concierge (who is herself frail and practically immobile; yet Hubert, who depicts himself throughout the book as healthy, even when he is deteriorating, draws a series of sketches of

their concierge dancing), White writes, offhandedly, that she 'knows Hubert is ill and when he's in a bad way she'll offer to shop or cook for us' (White and Sorin, 1994: 34). Further, in a chapter that accompanies a drawing that shows Sorin and White, both looking robust, if only a little unbalanced by the antics of their basset hound Fred and entangled in his leash, White admits that as 'Hubert becomes frailer and frailer and Fred even heftier, we keep worrying that one day Fred will spot an alluring dog in the distance, go ballistic and drag a hundred-and-twenty-pound Hubert along behind him' (White and Sorin, 1994: 70). And finally at the end of the book, concluding a chapter on the decorations in their apartment, White comments that 'Hubert has said from the beginning that he's decorating it for me so I'll have a place to live after he's gone, though I can scarcely imagine rattling around it alone' (White and Sorin, 1994: 118). It is only in this final chapter that the drawing bears no obvious relation to the content of the chapter, that is all about their apartment's *objets d'art*, though the drawing shows them both in silhouette with Fred between them, gazing in the distance at the Tour St-Jacques. It is at the end of the text that White cannot sustain the dialogue with the living Hubert, and departs into his own reminiscence of the artifacts he and Hubert have accumulated over the years that ends with him anticipating 'rattling around . . . alone'.

What White is straining to keep out of his whimsical representations of their daily life together, shopping in the neighbourhood for their groceries, lingering in his favourite local cafe, perusing the nearby bookshops, consorting with Claude and Paloma Picasso (White and Sorin, 1994: 55–57), attending fashion shows with Julian Barnes (1994: 25), meeting Tina Turner (1994: 26), is that his time is actually consumed with taking care of Hubert, 'waking up five times a night, holding his hand while he's vomiting or shitting, plugging in the catheter, and . . . [l]eading a very, very reduced life', in which they actually 'don't see anyone . . . don't go out . . . don't do anything' (White, 1994: 223). In *Sketches from memory* White only comments delicately that 'I'm sometimes worried he won't have enough time left to do the pictures' (White and Sorin, 1994: 113). Although White's and Sorin's respective 'sketches' are meant to act as comments and rejoinders to each other, in fact Sorin's sketches are maintaining a fiction of their former life together, while White's essays are unable to sustain that fiction absolutely, admitting into his text the 'reality' of Sorin's imminent demise.

However, although some of these examples of White's inability to sustain the illusion of a healthy Sorin suggest that he is in fact coping with the loss rather than refusing it, there are other more profoundly

indicative ways that White's writing exhibits an engagement with melancholia rather than mourning. One is his 'internalization' of Sorin's language; literally, his internalization of the French language.

HIS LOVER'S TONGUE

The internal dialogue that White engages in that he can no longer pursue with his dying and then dead lover, is manifested in White's negotiations in the text with expressing in English a life that he lives with his French lover in a French-speaking world. Throughout the book's stories White points out the subtle difference that the French word brings, or he slips in a phrase in French without remarking on it, giving it a better context for an anecdote or utterance. This occurs in the first chapter in which White is describing what he and Hubert hear outside the windows of their apartment in Paris: when he describes the pigeons as 'cooing' he immediately adds, parenthetically, that '*roucoulement*, the French word, gives a better sense of the deep-throated, glottal contentment of the sound' (White and Sorin, 1994: 11). In another chapter on the concierge of their apartment building White comments on how 'the French protect their privacy with a sacred fury and prefer the permissiveness of sophisticated silence to the pleasure of spicy gossip', and again adds parenthetically the alternative, more resonant, French word: 'or "crusty" as the French say – *croustillant*' (White and Sorin, 1994: 27). He also comments in a chapter describing the food shopping he does everyday at the local neighbourhood 'fish man' and the 'lovely expressions' he uses to convey fish recipes to White: "a tear of wine" (*une larme de vin*), "a suspicion of ginger" (*un soupçon de gingembre*), or "a cloud of milk" (*un nuage de lait*) or "a nut of butter" (*une noix de buerre*)' (White and Sorin, 1994: 15). White's text is so inflected with Sorin's language, I am suggesting, as a way of internalizing the most obvious aspect of differentiation between White and Sorin.

While it is natural since Hubert Sorin is French and Edmund White American that there is bound to be some negotiation between and among languages, I would like to suggest that this negotiation in the text is representative of the running start to the interior dialogue that is an indication of melancholia. An anecdote in Chapter 3 of *Sketches from memory* concerns an amusing misunderstanding between 'the famous couturier Azzedine Alaïa and the American painter Julian Schnabel', whereby each man tells 'conflicting versions' of their first encounter, in response to White's query of how they had met, 'each happily insulated in his own language'. 'Each man', White

reports, 'finished his answer with a big smile, sure he'd just confirmed what the other had said' (White and Sorin, 1994: 20–21). This anecdote reveals not only White's mastery of both languages, but is also an indication that at times he is the sole master of both languages, that while others cannot communicate successfully, he has all the communication within him. It is a chapter that contains no mention of Sorin, already a suggestion that any possible communication between French and English is within him alone. In other words, White is exhibiting in this text a conversation that he is having with himself in two languages: his own native language and that of his dying lover.

However, in the second to last chapter there is no illustration and Sorin does not figure at all. There are no French words. This chapter anticipates the very last vignette where, as I mentioned, Hubert is included but principally as someone who is connected to the artifacts of the apartment that will serve as memorials to the dead Hubert and as someone who is preparing the apartment for White to live in after Hubert's death. The last vignette has an illustration – the silhouette of Edmund, Hubert and Fred against the image of the Tour St-Jacques – though it does not, for the first time, match the story. The penultimate vignette, however, has no illustration and no mention of Sorin. White mentions their dog Fred, but not Sorin. White, in a gesture here perhaps more characteristic of mourning than of melancholia, is already here preparing to let Sorin go, give him up. It is a rehearsal for life without him.

Like the first vignette, where Edmund and Hubert, 'lying in bed one evening after dinner' (White and Sorin, 1994: 11), hear 'a street singer's strong, even strident voice' (1994: 12), the penultimate story has White and a companion hearing 'a young woman's voice, penetrating and perfectly pitched' (1994: 112) from the street outside and below the window to his flat. However, it is not Hubert with him in this story but a friend of White's, 'Peter Kurth, the American biographer' (1994: 111). In fact, the singer at the start of the book is accompanied by street musicians, 'sketchy chords on an accordion and the half-hearted strumming on a sadly-out-of-tune guitar' (1994: 12), while the singer near the end of the book sings 'free of all accompaniment' (1994: 112). 'The instruments may have been feeble' (1994: 12), writes White of the accompanists to the first street singer, 'but her voice rang off the old walls in the narrow rue des Lombards with a sharp, ricocheting force' (1994: 12). White also is accompanied at first by a frail, 'feeble' Hubert, though White's writing voice is sharp and ricochets – returns and reverberates – it might be said, into print. Later in the book Hubert no longer accompanies

White, yet White is alive still and writing, having sustained Hubert in the book's pages. While 'mourning impels the ego to give up the object by declaring the object to be dead and offering the ego an inducement of continuing to live' (Freud, 1991 [1917]: 267), in melancholia, when 'the object can no longer exist in the external world, it will then exist internally, and that internalization will be a way to disavow the loss, to keep it at bay, to stay or postpone the recognition and suffering of loss' (Butler, 1997: 134). 'In our book', White writes, he, Hubert and their basset hound Fred 'remain an eternal trio' (White and Sorin, 1994: 8).

In losing the other, the melancholic, rather than withdrawing 'the libido from this object' and displacing it 'on to a new one', internalizes the lost object; in other words, in melancholia, writes Freud, 'the free libido was not displaced onto another object; it was withdrawn into the ego' (Freud, 1991 [1917]: 257–58). Investment in the other is internalized rather than sundered by separation. This dynamic is what is expressed in White's negotiated articulation in two languages: he writes in English but the text is riven with commentary in and slippages into the language of his dying lover. Melancholia here is exposed by sutures in the language of the text.

CONCLUSION

Although I have argued here for the melancholic mechanisms at work in Edmund White's writing in White and Sorin's book *Sketches from memory*, I also believe, as I have briefly mentioned, that the mechanism of mourning is functioning here as well. Although I do not mean to suggest that melancholia, in literature, is necessarily a dismal thing – indeed, it gives us these delightful and sometimes anomalous texts – I do think that it is not the only mechanism of coping with loss that can be detected within these sketches. White's literal acknowledgement of Sorin's imminent demise between and in the lines of the text, and his eloquent, if stunned, acknowledgement of Sorin's very recent demise in the book's introduction, does suggest the real possibility, for White, of mourning his beloved. Melancholia, therefore – particularly in a literary text – is not incompatible with mourning. Indeed, melancholia expressed in this way might precisely be the work that gives way to mourning, and perhaps not only for the writer, but also for the similarly afflicted reader.

Perhaps it is literature's purpose to deny loss; to sustain in print what one cannot bear to lose in life. There is a fine legacy of it: Dante, Shakespeare, Keats. It is the hope, after all, of many writers to live beyond their mortal lives in their written words, and often to keep

the beloved other alive as well ('so long lives this, and this gives life to thee', ends Shakespeare's sonnet number 18). White rightly joins this pantheon of agonized scribes, and in so doing enjoins us to find in literature both solace for our grief and as well a constructive model for resisting loss greater than we can imagine or endure.

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