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Performance and Sensation in Part II of Patrick White’s *The Aunt’s Story; the Jardin Exotique*.

*by Natalie Day*

Theodora Goodman travels abroad after the death of her mother. She intends to explore her newfound freedom. She swiftly departs for Europe. However, her time at a hotel in Paris helps her to discover that her most important journey will be psychological. Theodora’s time in the *Jardin Exotique* is marked by performance and dramatisation. Her direction is fluid and open, guided by character and sensation:

> Hence forward we walk split into myriad fragments, like an insect with a hundred feet, a centipede with soft stirring feet that drinks in the atmosphere; we walk with sensitive filaments that drink avidly of the past and future, and all things melt into music and sorrow; we walk against a united world, asserting our dividedness. All things, as we walk, splitting with us into a myriad iridescent fragments. The great fragmentation of maturity (Miller, 1969 p9).

This prologue to part II gives us clues not only about Theodora’s altering state of mind, but also how we might be able to understand it. Patrick White uses this quote from Miller to illuminate multiplicity, atmosphere and body.
The second part of *The Aunt’s Story* illustrates Theodora’s transition into otherness. It takes place in the *Jardin Exotique*. As the middle section of the novel it serves as the in-between stage and is the most unrestricted performative space of desire and affect. White once referred to his experiences early in life as a “synthesis of living sensuality” (1998 p27). In this performative context, character and sensation are the major aspects of his synthesis. White notes: “I chose fiction, or more likely it was chosen for me, as the means of introducing to a disbelieving audience the cast of contradictory characters of which I am composed” (1998, p20).

Theodora’s performative experience is due to her transitory state of in-betweenness. Coming to terms with her newfound freedom requires space. That space represents a possibility for new clarity. While she literally travels across borders, she inevitable deals with the figurative space – the uninhibited recesses of her mind. This exploration is undertaken in the form of journeying down passages and hallways of a hotel; being consumed by sensations offered up in an exotic garden; and meeting curious characters who are the patrons of various rooms. In this way, she is producing affect. "Affect can be understood as a gradient of bodily capacity [...] that rises and falls not only along various rhythms and modalities of encounter but also through the troughs and sieves of sensation and sensibility" (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, p2). All of these aspects are a metaphor for a journey of self-discovery. Assumed via the labyrinthine quality of the setting, which enables the fragmentation of Theodora’s psyche, the compartmentalisation of her emotional history, and the discovery of multiple selves. “Often enough Theodora wondered whether it was time for her to go [...]"
she waited for some act that was yet to be performed” (White 2008, p269).

Theodora’s task is to deal with her emotions in this performative, expressive state, so that she may be able to move beyond the preoccupations of her past.

We meet numerous characters: Les demoiselles Bloch, elderly twins who question the boundaries of their duplicated selves (2008, p168); Wetherby, a poet-cum-remittance man, and the decadent Liesolotte, deserted by a husband who is perhaps a German count, both of whom live at each others mercy (Burrows, 1970, p89). Mrs. Rapallo, “an American adventuress [...] of great ugliness, and great cunning” (White 2008, p176) –

Her pomp was the pomp of cathedrals and of circuses. She was put together painfully, rashly, ritually, crimson over purple. Her eye glittered, but her breath was grey. Under her great hat, on which a bird had settled years before, spreading its meteoric tail in a landscape of pansies, mignonette, butterflies, and shells, her face shrieked with the inspired clowns (2008, p177).

Young Katina Pavlou: abandoned by her parents and accompanied by an English maid, Katina is looking for life experience. And Alyosha Sergei Sokolnikov, the ludicrous exiled Russian general whose influence is thoughtful but borders on the ridiculous.

The demoiselles Bloch represent duality and an increasing multiplicity. “It was a leisurely but melancholy ping-pong that the demoiselles Bloch had begun to
play” (2008, p167). They act out playful oppositions. But their existence is increasingly tempestuous. Their bodies are distorted grotesquely; their conversation is heard in hallways as though their tongues are rolling along the ground. Their relationship as twins is exaggerated: their thoughts and expressions intertwine like the wool with which they knit “Their consolation lay in worrying wool and cotton into deeper tangles. String reticules, safety-pinned about the level of the navel, spilled trailers of crochetwork or tatting. Under their flat hats cotton repeated itself in thick skeins, wound, and wound, and wound” (2008, p168). Not dissimilar to Theodora’s experience, the twins express bodies in distress and the sensations of recurrence and multiplicity.

Katina Pavlou alerts us to Theodora’s earlier experiences with imagination and emotion. As opposed to the matured, determined imagination of Mrs. Rapallo, for whom an illusory existence is simply a question of will. However, it is when the multiple characters come together in a scene that an overwhelming display of sensation and expression is produced.

The characters and the space intertwine, thus suggesting multiple aspects of the one mind. “So that there was no break in the continuity of being. The landscape was a state of interminable being, hope and despair devouring and disgorging endlessly, and the faces, whether Katina Pavlou, or Sokolnikov, or Mrs. Rapallo, or Wetherby, only slightly different aspects of the same state” (2008, p207).

Their connection is amplified “This oneness made the moment of collision far more desperate, when Sokolnikov, gripping the rail, heaving like the sea,
shouted, 'Look!'" (2008, p210). Before we know what he has seen, we recognise that he is at once, like Theodora, gripping the hand rail, or holding on to the tangible, whilst heaving like the sea, maintaining a fluidity. Theodora, too, is capturing his vision: "Theodora peered out of their common emotion" (2008, p210). How appropriate then that what he should be seeing is a bird-like Mrs. Rapallo, who is also experiencing the infinite atmosphere of the air. "They began to see, commanding the distance, a flashing, dashing, crimson cape" (2008, p210). They watch Mrs. Rapallo and see in her image a bird in flight. Theodora likens Mrs. Rapallo’s movements in the distance to that of a great bird.

The same great nesting bird which had presided over lunch now flew through the evening, ruffling the pansies and the mignonette with its enormous wings. With beautiful glissando the crimson was advancing, flurrying, slashing, flirting with the wind. It moved outside the rigid Mrs. Rapallo. The cloak was leading a life of its own. Sometimes it toppled, not so much from weakness as from pleasure. To test the strength of the wind, to toy, to flatter (2008, p211).

The rhythm of the movement emulates the feelings the image inspires. The effect is overwhelming. So much so that they are drawn together, engrossed, mesmerised by this act of relinquishment to the air "They were all caught up, the three of them, in Mrs. Rapallo's cape" (2008, p211). In this moment, Theodora is submitting to a sensory abundance. When necessary, as in this moment, the characters play the part of multiplying her emotion instead of reducing it. Each character assists a scene of euphoria by surrendering to its drama, composed by
Theodora. How long it lasts is uncertain, but the lure of flight and freedom experienced in moments of emotional intensity is certainly emphasised.

In his essay ‘Jardin Exotique’: The central phase of The Aunt’s Story’ J.F. Burrows evaluates character in part two as a “cumulative illustration of the flexibility of White’s fugal mode” (1970, p92). This is significant because the “fugue” description can be misconstrued. Not least because it implies a kind of madness. I argue that White takes his expression of this mode much further. As Burrows rightly says, it is flexible. A fugal mode connotes a dissociative state. Theodora however is never disconnected from her reality. She is in control of her imagination by trusting her emotions and the sensations in her environment. They are a guide to those elements of her personality that require examination and consideration. Theodora’s dissociation is in her ability to separate parts of her self. To compartmentalise her emotions in order to deal with them more closely. She prefers this mode because it allows for momentous and episodic scenes to illuminate thought. In doing so she moves through her real experience into a more textured, more nuanced understanding of self. The self made multifaceted. Theodora embeds and imbues her reality with reflection and projection. Her reflections are embodied by real experiences and real surroundings. The projections that ensue are amalgamations of existing sensations and characters from her past. Understanding White’s middle section as implementing a fugal mode is useful, but it is important to make the distinction between a disconnection from reality and a disconnect or separatism of the self. Theodora is experiencing the latter. The characters of the demoiselles
Bloch and other dualities and multiplicities in the disjointed narrative all allude to that experience.

Many critics imply that while White does give madness and modernity a “positive value” (MacDonnell, 1994, p205), this text is ultimately a narrative of solipsism. Brian Kiernan suggests that the reader can “only accept or reject the novel” (1980, p32) based on Theodora’s egocentric journey: “The Aunt’s Story ends in solipsism” (1980, p32). Kiernan argues that if we were to “accept” her perception of life as inauthentic, her transcendence of that inauthenticity may amount to little more than a refusal of human connections (1980, p32). I would argue that Theodora’s narrative is expressing an internal journey in relation to her outside world. Her ability to be affected and produce affects in her external world illustrates her connectedness: her sensual connection to her environment due to a developed emotional intelligence.

The sensations she is attuned to are felt on a deeper level. As David Tacey argues “disintegration is, however, part of the process that leads to real life-disintegration, that is, of the false ego-bound self” (1978, p36). I intend to take that argument even further and suggest that in the openness and endlessness of her internal space, Theodora is moving beyond the self into otherness. It is not that she is rejecting or misunderstanding all that is outside her “self”, but that she no longer exists as a “self”. Theodora has fragmented any cohesive sense of self. She exists as multiple identities; she is composed, like her narrative, of multiple sensations. As explored by Gregg and Seigworth in The Affect Theory Reader: “Cast forward by its open-ended in-between-ness, affect is integral to a
body’s perpetual becoming (always becoming otherwise, however subtly, than what it already is), pulled beyond its seeming surface-boundedness by way of its relation to, indeed its composition through, the forces of encounter. With affect, a body is as much outside itself as in itself – webbed in its relations- until ultimately such firm distinction cease to matter” (2010, p3). Theodora’s existence is reliant on this tension. She lives for moments of intensity and encounter.

One of the ways in which affect is achieved in the Jardin Exotique is via the setting – and the way in which it enhances the space and atmosphere. And therefore accommodates a place of multiple sensations. Roland Barthes’ notes: “hyperconsciousness of the affective minimum, of the microscopic fragment of emotion […] implies an extreme changeability of affective moments, a rapid modification, into shimmer” (as cited in Gregg and Seigworth, 2010 p10). This “shimmer” is a useful description for the sensory atmosphere of the garden. White ensures that place and body become dependent on one another. That a person’s mood can affect the atmosphere and vice versa. Lehnert and Siewert, in their text Spaces of Desire- Spaces of Transition, argue that

Places can be superceded by more and less imaginary spaces, which are dependent on the – often ephemeral – use people make of them. They may for example use a sitting room as a theatre of a private drama or, on the contrary, a magical celebration. This transformation does not necessarily take place by the change of the material structure, but rather
by a re-decoration, a change of perception or, more generally, in the re-organization of the emotional use-value of these spaces (2011, p8).

I suggest that Theodora utilises the labyrinthine qualities of the hotel and connects with the atmosphere of the garden, in order to theatricalise her emotional other.

As Theodora waits in the foyer of the Hôtel du Midi, she senses the garden’s existence. She imagines it just out of sight, and smiles at the thought of it.

“Somewhere at the back, unsuspected, without the assistance of the management’s brochure, fantastic forms were aping the gestures of tree and flower. Theodora listened to the silence, to hear it sawn at by the teeth of the jardin exotique” (White 2008, p154). The reader is alerted to otherworldliness.

The garden is personified. It is described as not simply a garden, but an imitation of one. It is fantastical, not actual. Or at least that is Theodora’s sense of it.

Without having entered it, Theodora senses the garden’s presence. She accesses this garden on another level. Theodora operates via that which is un-heard.

Theodora can “listen to silences”. If she is in tune with this alternate sound, and then imagines an animated garden figuratively infiltrating that silence, she is developing illusions of an acute kind.

This garden is more than a garden, it begins to evolve. Like the “walking” of the opening quote, a progression is alluded to: Theodora’s journey into a definitive ‘otherness’. In all of its naturalism, there is something uncanny. Theodora whilst familiarising herself with it, is actually drawn in by it. This is perhaps because it
is so tempting for Theodora to escape within it. She is captivated by its allure. But she cultivates that way. It is a space imagined and designed to seduce her.

This garden is transformative. Its power lies in its ability to animate and manipulate. The atmosphere entices. Theodora is able to blend into it. Her characteristics are actually mimicked by the garden and vise versa. The garden has the same angular distortion of Theodora’s emotions. And when it is described via the analogy of bodily disfigurement, the exertion and distress is humanised. Theodora’s presence involves a focalisation of the body. Now in the garden, it’s gnawing teeth and her sensuality are exposed and most importantly, compatible. “Theodora put up her hand to disentangle the big velvety moth whose feet had caught in her hair” (2008, p204). Her emotions have developed as intertwined with sensation and body. “In the jardin exotique, in spite of its impervious forms, of sword, and bulb, and the scarlet sucking mouths, time continued to disintegrate into a painful, personal music, of which the themes were intertwined”. There are numerous illusory qualities emerging in part II, and their interplay adds to the ambiance.

Walking slowly, in her large and unfashionable hat, she began to be afraid she had returned to where she had begun, the paths of the garden were the same labyrinth, the cactus limbs the same aching stone. Only in the jardin exotique, because silence had been intensified, and extraneous objects considerably reduced, thoughts would fall more loudly, and the soul, left with little to hide behind, must forsake its queer opaque manner of life and come out into the open (2008, p159).
Significantly, the line that follows reads: “If, of course, the soul ventured in”. This is crucial, because it infers that in order for the garden to grasp its power, Theodora must motivate it. Her infiltration, embrace and indulgence of the garden’s transformative possibilities enable its influence. The garden and Theodora are interchangeable.

The Hôtel du Midi represents the in-between. Theodora’s stay there is temporary, assisting the fluidity of her existence. White is particularly interested in the labyrinthine qualities of the hotel. It holds hallways, compartments, walls, mirrors, and windows. “Paradigmatic for the mélange of space and emotion in modern texts are spaces of transition, sometimes bound to the happiness of freedom, sometimes to indifference, but often to a deeply-grounded existential uncertainty, anxiety or solitude” (Lehnert and Siewert 2011, p8). Theodora is contained and restricted by the hotel. However, as the story progresses we notice that the structure of the hotel is dilapidating. It is in the early stages of full disintegration.

What stands between Theodora and the other side of these walls, outside the windows, the reflections in the mirror, is about to dissolve; “walls yawned” (White 2008, p162), “Sleep stretched before the thin grey passages of the Hôtel du Midi, or rounded them into grottoes, of which the walls lapped elastically. Skin is after all no protection from communicating bedrooms” (2008, p285). Theodora’s emotional exploration merges with the hotel’s transitory environment and labyrinthine qualities. “It [affect] makes easy
Compartmentalisms give way to thresholds and tensions, blends and blurs (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, p4). Theodora goes so far as to include her own skin as a barrier to a full experience. As the walls of the hotel assume elasticity, Theodora’s own skin feels insufficient for protecting her from the others, or possibly her self. “The act of darkness demolished personality” (White 2008, p225), she experiences cynicism and sinister moods in the hotel rooms. Her emotions are embodied in this place. “In the Hôtel du Midi the night slowly solidified” (2008, p222).

While the hotel walls doze, so too do the patrons occupying the various rooms, “people were apparently reviving themselves, shaking off dreams, sprinkling their faces with water, breaking wind, and putting back their teeth” (2008, p192). This is an unromantic picture of the patrons and their private habits. The image is humanising. The sensations are striking in their simplicity and honesty. The reader feels not intrusive, but close to the people in these quarters. Their behaviours are recognisable yet underwhelming. And have a natural quality like that of the garden. The fact that Theodora senses them in the passages and hallways of the hotel strengthens the notion that the hotel and garden are a metaphor for the recesses of her mind. If so, then the characters within are characters of her own making.

Several characters are introduced in part II of *The Aunt’s Story*. The curious aspect of their presence is whether they are real or imaginary. Are we seeing multiple people or the multiple identities of Theodora Goodman? Both scenarios are useful to Theodora’s expression of emotion. They are useful as performers of
her emotional sensibility. In order to understand her past, she must have it re-enacted in her present. Having new eccentrics to communicate with assists her understanding of the world, and seeing her self fragmented separates her emotions and gives clues to their origins. Before we meet the characters it is important to note that Theodora was expecting them. “Even though she had not yet seen them, Theodora could feel that the hotel was full of people, and she waited to touch their hands” (2008, p160). This expectation suggests that Theodora has a sensory intelligence that she trusts. Her emotional state remains at odds with illusion and reality, yet in that confusion she creates the ability to be in the moment. This is important because much emphasis is placed on momentary experience. Episodes, certainly significant interactions with people, have been the most valuable to her. And she greedily replays and redevelops them, in this transitory state of mind.
Citations:


Kiernan, B 1980, Patrick White, St Martin’s Press, New York.


