Killing the Inner Boy: Ghosts of Transmasculinity in Mary Renault and Antonia White

I'll be talking today about two novels, Mary Renault's *The Friendly Young Ladies* (1944) and Antonia White's *The Lost Traveller* (1950). I don't have time to situate them in the writers' careers but if you are curious please do ask a question.

> 1.Archie was crouching over the boy, hiding the top part of his body from her. All that she could see was Charles' bare legs and brown shoes sticking out wide apart on one side and on the other the open umbrella rocking very slightly to and fro on the bush.

This vividly cinematic image forms the traumatic climax to Antonia White's second novel, *The Lost Traveller* (1950). The protagonist, Clara Batchelor, employed as a governess to a family of Catholic county gentry, has just witnessed her charge break his neck in a freak accident. It is remarkable not just for the drama of the situation and the economy of White's prose, but because it is one of only a handful of incidents in White's sequence of four autobiographical novels, and the only one of such moment, that did not actually happen. Like Clara, White was, aged seventeen, a governess to a landed Catholic family; like her, she was devoted to the little boy she looked after, and more of a playmate than a teacher to him. But unlike the fictional Charles Cresset, Henry James Cumming Lattey lived to have a distinguished military career, and died at the age of 74 in 1981.

White came to regret this uncharacteristic invention, believing, according to her biographer Jane Dunn, that it 'skewed the novel and threw the following one off course,' This may reflect more about White's inhibitions surrounding imaginative creation than the artistic success or otherwise of the books, but the episode also stands out amid White's usual subtleties as an obvious, even clamorous symbol of the end of childhood.

That the symbolic dead child should be a boy is perhaps to be expected, since Clara's childhood is frequently cast as a boyhood. Experimenting tentatively with femininity under the influence of her friend Patsy Cohen, and Patsy's vivacious family, she looks back upon herself as a 'stolid, glowering child, whose only trouble had been that she could never be a colonel of hussars', and who took 'a cavalry sabre to bed instead of a teddy-bear.'

The outbreak of the First World War also diminishes Clara's standing as a tomboy 'military authority':

> 2. Her old friends […] regarded themselves as seasoned men of the world as soon as they got into uniform. […] they behaved as if they were giving a 'kid sister' a treat when they occasionally took her to theatres. […] Up to 1914 she had been a recognized military authority; boys had deferred to her […] But the war she was living through bore no relation to her wars. There were no more scarlet and pipeclay, no more plumes and cuirasses, no pitched battles and, worst of all, no charges.

Mature, cisgender masculinity is defined by participation in modern warfare; cross-gender identification becomes also an expression of belatedness: the only war available to Clara is that of hussars, plumes and cavalry charges, and so she loses interest in all of it.

But after taking the job as governess to Charles, Clara becomes boyish again. Belatedness again haunts the identification with masculinity:

> 3. She had thought it would be the beginning of being grown up; instead, week by week, she found herself slipping further back into childhood. She became so completely absorbed in Charles that she entered into his world as if she had been ten years old herself.
>
> Her real life with Charles began when lessons were over. […] She learnt far more from him than he from her. He forced her to master the internal mechanism of submarines and locomotives.

Charles's death will propel her towards marriage with Archie Hughes-Follett, the other witness to the death. But Archie—based on Reggie Green-Wilkinson, White's first husband—is himself tragically immature, alcoholic and sexually inhibited. In the Chelsea maisonette after which the next novel in the sequence, *The Sugar House,* is named*,* they live as a fraternal pair, Hansel and Gretel playing at house, until Clara's mental health—as White's did—begins to decline.

Clara's adolescence and youth can be seen as a series of false starts at *becoming a woman,* oscillations between not girlhood, but boyhood and womanhood. The boy who represents her

childhood imaginary has been killed, but adult femininity continues to elude her. Drawing on unpublished diaries, Jane Dunn writes that White 'considered herself a mutilated man'; and in a diary from 1937 White expresses a sense of haunted, belated frustration at having somehow missed out on womanhood: 4.'But it is very late, probably too late, for me to have a life as a woman. I was born natural and I will not be anything but natural. I am sick of dreamy platonic friendships.' This follows from a reflection on her second marriage to Eric Earnshaw Smith, which again was sexless—Earnshaw Smith was gay. In the novels he is fictionalised as Clive Heron, with whom Clara recognises an ungendered, degendered kinship in a significant moment in the final novel, *Beyond the Glass.* Clive has just shown her a picture of a handsome man, with whom she will end up having the intoxicating affair that finally precipitates her hospitalisation in Bethlem Royal mental hospital:

> 5. Clara said, not quite truthfully: 'I'm completely neutral.'
>
> He studied her face: 'Man delights not me; no, nor woman neither.'
>
> […]
>
> 'Not in general. But *you* delight me.'
>
> He smiled back rather sadly.
>
> 'Quite. But you see, my dear, I'm not a *man*.' (White 1979a, 115)

Clara's friendship with Clive is a 'dreamy, platonic' one, like its real-life equivalent. The tragedy of it all, perhaps, is that *Clara* is *not a man,* and thus not able to delight Clive, whose homosexuality expresses itself as a sort of non-binary identity—not a man, nor woman neither—as she is delighted by him.

Renault's 1944 novel *The Friendly Young Ladies* is a much more obviously queer text than White's—it features a fairly overt lesbian relationship, and gets a good deal of satirical mileage out of various characters' inability or unwillingness to perceive the obvious. In a dyspeptic Afterword to the novel, written in the year of her death, Renault notes its origin as a riposte to *The Well of Loneliness*:

> 6. I think it was in Boulogne that we picked up a copy of *The Well of Loneliness* […] Every morning, before getting up and starting out for the beach, we used to read it with the coffee and croissants, accompanied by what now strikes me as rather heartless laughter. […] It had been out ten years, which is a long time in terms of the conventions; but it does, I still think, carry an impermissible allowance of self-pity, and its earnest humourlessness invites irreverence.

It is certainly true that Leo and Helen, in Renault's novel, approach their sexuality and relationships with a pragmatism and good cheer unknown to Stephen Gordon. But where gender identity and expression are concerned, *The Friendly Young Ladies* admits a volume of agonised solemnity that is more reminiscent of Hall than Renault might have liked to acknowledge. The focus of these anxieties is Leo—Helen is presented as uncomplicatedly cisgender and in some ways conventionally feminine. At the novel's opening, Helen and Leo have lived together on a houseboat for five years, as committed, but not exclusive partners. The relationship is reminiscent of the early years of Renault's with Julie Mullard. One of Renault's biographers, David Sweetman, summarises their attitude towards their sexuality and partnership at this juncture, in the mid-1930s:

> 7. They did not think of themselves as lesbians […] If asked, they would have said they were bisexual. They often found men attractive, even if they did prefer each other. (Sweetman 1993, 55)

But the only man to whom Leo is attracted is their neighbour on the river, Joe Flint. During a scene illustrating their insouciant intimacy, Joe almost kisses Leo, who violently recoils. Afterwards, Leo thinks:

> 8. With him, and through him only, she had the company of her kind; freely and simply, without the destructive bias of sexual attraction or rejection, he let her be what her mind had made her and her body refused. For the rest, her way of life had always seemed to her natural and uncomplex, an obvious one, since there were too many women, for the more fortunate of the surplus to arrange themselves; to invest it with drama or pathos would have been in her mind a sentimentality and a kind of cowardice. […] no one, except Joe, had given her what she had wanted from men since she had swum and

> climbed with the boys of her Cornish home; a need as deep and as fundamental, to be a man with his friend […] (Renault 1984, 164)

Joe intuits and respects Leo's self-identification. Joe and Leo are of a 'kind': they are men, and although sexual attraction seems to be ruled out here, perhaps that applies only to the 'destructive bias' of heterosexuality, of loving one who is not 'one's kind'. Leo's life as a lesbian is a *faute de mieux*, an attitude that hardly avoids lesbophobia for all that lesbians are seen as the 'fortunate' among 'surplus women.' What Leo wants—*needs*, in fact—from men is 'to be a man with his friend.' The grammar unavoidably places Leo as a man, the profundity of the need suggests Platonic amity with a capital P. It amounts to a glimpse of a world in which modern hierarchies of sexual esteem are inverted, with heterosexuals deviant, destructive, and biased, and the amities of gay men exalted, while lesbians retain a middling position, making do. Leo's disdain for dramatisation of the lesbian condition is, naturally, a little slap at Radclyffe Hall.

To understand Leo as transmasculine might be one way of making sense of an ending that otherwise seems to lack emotional and causational logic, in which Joe and Leo make the otherwise baffling decision to end their happiness by introducing that 'destructive bias' of sexual attraction.

They both speak about the possibility of having sex in destructive terms as an ending, a 'bonfire'. '"We were good together, weren't we?"' Joe says '"And now there's nothing, I suppose."' After this decision is made, however, Leo makes a desperate attempt to escape it, and jumps into the river to swim for the houseboat. They struggle in the water, but Joe subdues Leo with a blow to the chin and surely the most implausible line of dialogue ever committed in a live-saving scene '"Give in, Amphitrite" '. At this point, the reader is surely screaming *Don't do it!* but after some coffee, cigarettes and agonised dialogue, they do it. The morning after, Leo wakes and thinks this:

> 9. Her first choice had been true, she thought; they were only possible to one another, ultimately, in the relationship of man to man. […] The ghost of their old companionship seemed to be lying here beside them, with a face of its own like the face of a dead boy struck down quickly in a smile. He was smiling now, with a boy's cheerful unpitying scorn, at the woman holding the man who looked out beyond her, the silly fool in love, for whom nothing would be enough.

Joe makes an offer of a more permanent relationship and emigration to the United States, first verbally, to which Leo's response is haunted by another vision of the ghost boy, and then in a doom-laden letter:

> There are two people in you. One of them I have known much longer than the other. […] But you know, now, how much he counted for when he came between my woman and me. I sacrificed him; I even made use of him. […] At last, we might wake up one morning to find that I had killed him. (Renault 1984, 274-5)

At this, Leo weeps, at first 'painful and ashamed and resisted, like the crying of a beaten boy,' but after seemingly making a decision to leave Helen and follow Joe, '[h]er tears […] changed; their flow and rhythm were different, release without humiliation, the tears of a woman.' (Renault 1984, 278-9)

Writing from the perspective of 1983, Renault claimed that 'what struck me most was the silliness of the ending' and the reader is tempted to concur. It seems homophobic and patriarchal in a seeming belief in the magical power of the phallus to cure lesbianism, a touch of which conveys heterosexual 'maturity' upon Leo. This reading scarcely seems consistent, however, with the attitudes demonstrated in the rest of the novel, in which another character is fairly mercilessly satirised for his belief that he can make 'real' women out of Helen and Leo through sex with them.

However, if we regard Leo as a trans man, or, if that term is too anachronistic, as an 'invert' in whom homosexuality and transsexuality are not to be easily differentiated—that is, a character rather like Hall's Stephen Gordon—then the incoherence recedes somewhat, even if the melodrama does not. Leo loves Joe as a man who loves men, and wants sex with him on that basis. Joe can only accept Leo sexually as a woman, and is prepared to 'sacrifice' Leo's masculinity to gratify his sexual desires. It is particularly painful because Joe is the only person in Leo's life who understands and perceives that masculinity, and he is prepared to kill it, rather than suffer the slightest of self-examinations to uncover why he was attracted to someone he essentially understood to be a boy in the first place.

The evolution of cultural attitudes between 1944 and 1983—the decoupling of gender identity from sexuality, which works to reinforce and reify cisgender identity in defining homosexuality—makes *The Friendly Young Ladies* less comprehensible, even to its author, at the later date.

But in fact the lived experience of gender is rarely as separable from sexuality as our culture's horrified reaction to the idea of homosexuality as gender 'inversion' might suggest. For the transgender subject, who may be seen by the world as one sex while experiencing life as the other, they are particularly entangled. I'm not sure if *The Friendly Young Ladies* is a novel that ultimately repays better understanding, but the growing visibility of trans people and issues certainly offers one way in which to obtain it.

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