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*The White Hotel and *AVA*: Death, Discourse, and Narrative Breakdown*

*The White Hotel* is a narrative made up of six other discrete narratives, several of which call the assertions made by preceding narratives into question. The book begins with a poem (itself written into another text: the main character of *The White Hotel*, an opera singer, authors the poem in the empty spaces on her libretto of *Don Giovanni*), followed by a surreal narrativization of the poem (also authored by *White Hotel*’s main character, Lisa), followed by a case-study of Lisa written by another character in the book, Lisa’s therapist, Sigmund Freud. From poem, to narrativization, to case-study, the same events are considered only to precipitate a score of mutually exclusive conclusions, each asserted with equal force and sureness. The poem and its narrativization detail adventures that Freud and Lisa both later say never happened. The poem narrativization – “The Gastein Journal” – takes on an authoritative third-person narration, even though Lisa is supposedly reporting only her own subjective experiences. Lisa insists that her lover in the poem is Freud’s son, though Freud declares with the same confidence that his son is a man “with whom, I need scarcely add, she was unacquainted” (114). Each of these two characters is revealed in the book to be compromised, unreliable to some degree, and so the one we choose to believe and why tells us not which character the book has invested with greater authority, but which criteria we as readers are using to judge truthfulness – and thereby shape the texts we read in ways that authors can only imperfectly anticipate and control not at all. What Mark Currie (reporting on Althusser) calls the “fracturing of the readership into irreducible difference” (29), ensures an environment where each single text is also innumerable texts, each unrealized until encountered by the particular reader necessary to engender it.

And just so do Michel Foucault and Judith Butler complicate and question Freud’s narratives of femininity and sexuality. For example, Freud’s assertions, in his lecture *Femininity*, that women display “a larger amount of narcissism” than men, as well as more “physical vanity” (596) strike us as not only anachronistic but entirely meaningless if we subscribe to Judith Butler’s proposal that “the very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms….In other words, the qualifications for [women] being a subject must first be met…” (2). Where Freud saw women as a cohesive subject, an undifferentiated Other whose motives and very selves could be exhaustively predicted and explained by his particular brand of science, for Butler “woman” is not even a meaningful word, and “the assumption that the term *women* denotes a common identity” is a falsehood (4, emphasis in original). Butler, then, does not just question Freud’s particular narrative of femininity – she calls into question the very idea that there can be a narrative of femininity at all, much less a definitive one. In fact, “once we dispense with the priority of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ as abiding substances” (33), Freud’s early claim
in *Femininity* that “when you meet a human being, the first distinction you make is ‘male or female?’” (577), becomes not just debatable, but entirely irrelevant.

In *The White Hotel*, Freud-the-character’s repeated insistence that Lisa share with him even the most intimate minutia of her sexual desires and experiences is a fine literary illustration of what Michel Foucault calls “the incitement to discourse” (17) – that is, the insistence from medical, theological, and juridical authorities that people confess fully and endlessly every sexual motive and act. Such confessions are demanded at the points of violence (physical or emotional, threatened or actual) and surveillance coming both from agents of power themselves (police, doctors, priests) and fellow citizens compelled to report on their neighbors’ sexual aberrations. By demanding that people confess even the most amorphous and least articulable minutia of their sexual practices and desires – and simultaneously demanding that people make these confessions only in the language and methods approved or sanctioned by power – power constitutes sex-as-discourse as a potent commodity for its own control and enrichment, even on pain of death: “One might say that the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death (Foucault 138, emphasis in the original).

The circumstances under which Lisa makes her sexual confessions deftly illustrate what Butler (paraphrasing Foucault) means when she describes how agents of authority (like Freud) “*produce* the subjects they subsequently come to represent (2, emphasis in the original). Lisa’s elaborate and rich sexual narratives would not exist were not Freud there to call them into being; once manifest, these narratives become the measures by which Freud defines her, the yardsticks by which he both establishes and then measures her supposed neurosis. Such psychic intrusions from power are inescapable during our lifetime. Or, as Foucault himself says, “Now, it is over life, throughout its unfolding, that power establishes its dominion; death is power’s limit…the most secret aspect of existence, the most ‘private’” (138).

The final three sections of *The White Hotel* are the most recognizable as literary novelistic narratives: linear, straightforward constructions centered around Lisa and relayed by an unnamed, omniscient third-person narrator; it is thus upon them that I’d like to focus. We get, in these sections, an account of Lisa’s performance in Milan and subsequent second marriage, her death during the Nazi invasion of Babi Yar, and her relocation to a mysterious-but-benevolent afterlife, respectively. Partially because of the authority we, as readers, tend to grant the sort of voice that narrates the final three sections – the objective-seeming presumed ventriloquy of the author – the veracity of the events relayed in these last three segments might appear less questionable than the scenes depicted in the poem, in the narrativization and the case-study. Our judgment of which events are the hallucinatory constructions of suspect narrators and which “really happened” in *The White Hotel* is determined not just by our personal idiosyncrasies but by our degree of acceptance of the implied authority of the third-person omniscient narrator. Currie speaks of entering “the counter-intuitive universe in which a narrative is seen to advance a proposition about its own inability to refer to the outside world” (43) – though he makes the statement in reference to other questions of point of view and narrative distance, Currie here offers a potentially useful stance from which to consider our default acceptance of the third-person omniscient narrator as reliable, authoritative. We have no real-world experience of third-person omniscience – if anything, we’re taught that such a thing is a privilege of deities, not any mere mortal – and any real-world assertion of omniscience is answered with universal eye-rolling, but, when we encounter this voice in fiction, we take its impossible assertion of validity at face value (unless or until its unreliability is announced incontrovertibly and often).
Given the authority we’re tempted to grant that narrative stance, it’s understandable if we read “The Camp,” the final section of *The White Hotel* that tells us about Lisa’s after-life existence, as being “real” or “really happening” within the reality of the novel, but such a reading ignores *The White Hotel*’s many lessons about the illusory nature of the seemingly rock-solid truths that authoritative narratives assert. Both by its persistent refashioning of “reality” via successive disagreeing accounts that each speak with perfect authority, and in its reference to a real-life episode of genocide (perhaps the grimmest real-world consequence of unquestioning acceptance of an authoritative narrative), the book insists that we interrogate narrative authority and that we be willing – even eager – to construct our own meaning from a text.

I propose that Lisa Erdman is, herself, the author of “The Camp,” the sixth book of *The White Hotel*, that it is a narrative she has constructed in the same manner as she did the second book, “The Gastein Journal.” I assert that the afterlife described in “The Camp” is one she has designed, consciously or not. Consider this moment near the book’s end, where Lisa and her mother (both dead) discuss their respective accommodations:

Lisa, to break the painful silence, asked her what conditions were like in her settlement, which was the one at Cana.

Her mother gave her a sad smile. “Well, it’s not the lowest circle, by any means.”

Lisa smiled too, politely, but was puzzled; she remembered her mother’s irritating habit of never answering questions directly. (266)

This cryptic answer becomes much more intelligible if you read “Cana,” as “Caina,” the circle of hell (in Dante’s conception of) reserved for those who were treacherous to family. A low circle, indeed, but not the lowest (and one that Lisa might think her mother – unfaithful in life with her own sister’s husband – had a particular claim to). Believing such a geographical blunder on Lisa’s part might seem a stretch, but it would be an easy mistake for a woman who would read the *Inferno* to “cheer [herself] up” (201) but would have to concentrate because her “Italian was not very good” (204). For a woman who’s “always enjoyed trying [her] hand at poetry” (183) and who likes to “let the rhymes lead her to the correct decision” (205) but considers her own narrative poems “terribly bad” (189). Lisa uses narrative poetry as a means to experience her desires – why would that end after death? As it does throughout *The White Hotel*, a single letter is all it takes to throw the recipient entirely off balance.

The misreadings created by nothing more than a missing I, a misplaced I…the critical puns are innumerable. More important is the function of the afterlife settlements themselves: some hospitals, some prisons, but all places of healing for those who could not be healed in life. Remember what Lisa thought when she first read about Peter Kurten?

But even more unimaginably horrible, if she had been born Peter Kurten…To have to spend every moment of your life, the only life you were given, as Kurten…But then again, the very thought that someone had to be…Peter Kurten made it impossible to feel any happiness in being Lisa Erdman…. (178)

And here’s Kurten in “The Camp”:

They were showing the prison hospital, which claimed a lot of success in curing hardened prisoners. Among the patients seen and interviewed was a man Lisa thought she recognized….He was seen playing with children in the recreation area, and even there the armed guards watched him closely. The commentator spoke his name, Kurten, as though the audience would know it well…. (262-3)

Why would Lisa’s afterlife contain such a notoriously brutal serial killer at all, much less in a place to be healed and made whole, not punished relentlessly, as Dante and so many of Lisa’s friends would have it? In all the mentions of Kurten’s crimes in *The White Hotel*, who is the only
person who cares about Kurten’s pain and suffering? Only Lisa, who tells Freud, “I have always found it difficult to enjoy myself properly, knowing there were people suffering ‘just on the other side of the hill’” (191). Who is made happy by the alleviation of that suffering? Lisa. So, who is most likely orchestrating that alleviation?

But, why would Lisa not simply imagine him healed, then? Why not imagine all of them – her mother, Lyons, Freud, etc. – all healed instantly and perfectly?

Is that how you would write it?

Of course not – an instant solution is no narrative. But, that seems a bit like arguing that the final narrative is Lisa’s narrative because it is so obviously a narrative, and that seems a bit tautological. Of greater persuasive power are the many stylistic and thematic similarities between “The Camp” and “The Gastein Journal.” The narrative stance, the repeated characters, the breastfeeding, the sex during menstruation, the flowers, the miraculous black cat… all speak to a connection of significance between these two books. The Gastein Journal she wrote “in the third person to see if that would help [her] make more sense of it” (183) – why wouldn’t we think that “The Camp” is another of Lisa’s “journals,” likewise written? While no reader can claim with any credibility to know in what form “The Camp” exists – as a literal journal like the Gas, ink on bound paper, or as a dream, or a hallucination in Lisa’s head as she dies at Babi Yar, or something else – such a determination is irrelevant to a consideration of the camp’s meaning. While our perception of its value might change palpably depending on whether we imagine it to be something Lisa encounters outside herself or something she constructs for herself, locating where the narrative exists in the real world is just cartography.

Of course, Bad Gastein is a real place, in the real world and in the reality of the novel, even if “The Gastein Journal” is largely a fantasy. Would a similar reading of “The Camp” require us to believe that the afterlife is a real place, even if “The Camp” is a fantasy? I don’t think so. Yes, Bad Gastein is a real place, but Lisa didn’t write “The Gastein Journal” in order to better understand Bad Gastein, but to better understand her experiences, to better understand herself. She writes (or imagines, or in whatever way crafts) “The Camp” for the same reasons.

By the end of his life as portrayed in The White Hotel even Freud is convinced of Lisa’s clairvoyance, saying “My experience of psychoanalysis has convinced me that telepathy exists….It is clear that you are especially sensitive” (196). Lisa foresees Freud’s daughter’s and grandson’s deaths, her dreams include genuine prophecy, her body’s mysterious pains and attacks of breathlessness anticipate the real suffering she will endure at Babi Yar many years later. We are directed to see Lisa as a character who can see the “truth” even when other characters (like Freud, and even Lisa herself) insist on fitting her premonitions into a more suitably rational, familiar, and false narrative. With that view in mind, it can feel like The White Hotel is directing us to read “The Camp” as some sort of objective truth, some kind of reality that the rest of us would explain away with our own narratives but that Lisa can see and experience at face value. We might think that the similarities between “The Gastein Journal” and “The Camp” can be explained by Lisa psychically “seeing” the reality of “The Camp” and trying to understand that vision of a real place by sublimating it into the more rational and familiar narrative of hysteria. We might accept that we construct narratives – poetry, psychoanalysis, dream analysis, fantasy – as a means to understand and explain away the weirdness of the world, to control and contain the aberrant, but maybe the narratives are only weird because they are objective reports of the weird, the aberrant, the surreal, that is, in fact, the truth. As Peter Brooks says, “the true plot will be the most deviant” (516).

I think we are, in fact, quite carefully directed to read “The Camp” in just that way – which is exactly why we should immediately be suspicious of that reading, which is, of course,
just another familiar narrative, that of the seeming lunatic who is ultimately revealed to be the only sane character, or of the prophet whose words are dismissed by the world but who is, in fact, correct. But Lisa is no Cassandra. We are shown proof of her clairvoyance, but we’re also shown its limits. When Freud writes, years after their last session, to ask her permission to publish his case-study of her – “Frau Anna G.,” the novel’s third section – Lisa not only sees his narrative projections, she offers her own:

She remembered the dream – all except that part of it which Freud had separated from the rest, as though to underline it for her. She didn’t at all remember being present herself at the wedding tragedy, a “misty” figure giving comfort. Wasn’t this Freud’s way of asking for her help and support in his old age and infirmity? ... He was appealing to her for friendship…. (198)

No, he wasn’t.

When she first meets Victor and Vera, she thinks they are having a tastelessly public affair, even though she has already read that they are married. “Why had she jumped to the wrong conclusion?” (165). Because the relationship between the grey-haired Victor and the beautiful, younger Vera didn’t fit Lisa’s inner narrative of marriage:

She was aghast that Serebryakova, with her flawless oval face, slanting green eyes, and long blond hair (as silver as her name), should have chosen to fall in love with a man so much older and so unprepossessing. There was no accounting for tastes…. [S]he knew Serebryakova was married, and Berenstein showed all the signs of marriage also. (155)

Lisa can see both that Victor and Vera are romantically involved and that they are each married. But she can’t see that they are married to each other, even though she has personally encountered ample evidence that they are! But it is a testament to the power of the narratives about the world that we each hold that we sometimes do not even see the evidence that contradicts those narratives when that evidence is right in our faces.

We can shake our heads at the conclusions Freud draws in his analysis of Lisa, but are those conclusions ridiculous, or the result of unconscious narrative editing? He comes to her symptoms with the narrative of hysteria already in mind. Evidence that suits that narrative is retained (or invented, as in the case of Lisa’s “homosexuality”) and evidence that doesn’t suit that narrative is ignored or unremarked upon (Lisa’s horrific and clearly traumatizing treatment at the hands of the sailors).

If we are looking at a novel like *The White Hotel* that continually presents narratives that seem rock-solid and then shows those narratives to be shockingly false, why would we expect it to subscribe to the idea that there even is one true narrative out there, much less to end with it?

So what is the point of “The Camp”? If it isn’t an objective reality, if it’s just another of Lisa’s narratives, what is its function? What does it show? What the entirety of *The White Hotel* shows: the power of narratives. Narratives can keep us from seeing evidence that is there, can show us evidence that isn’t there, can lead us to conclusions that are rational, logical, and wrong.

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1 One of the minor shocks I experienced in reading *The White Hotel* came because I witnessed an eerily similar occurrence at UT: a smart and generous classmate was entirely convinced that an older male professor and a younger female professor were having a shockingly public affair, even though everyone knew they were both married. “He even dedicated his book to her, to ‘My dear ______!’” my classmate said, and pulled out the book to show me. When I looked at the dedication, I pointed out that it was made out to ‘My dear wife ______’,” and that many married couples nowadays have different last names. The briefest of investigations found more proof of the two professors’ marriage on my classmate’s own bookshelf. My classmate was both mortified and mystified by her mistake – she liked both professors immensely and had only told me of their “affair” so that I would be up to speed on all the department drama.
The anti-Semitic narrative of the Nazis was used to justify the mass murder at Babi Yar; the
shocking narrative of Peter Kurten’s life was used to justify his execution.

But narratives, of course, are not intrinsically evil. When they are understood to simply
be narratives – when they are understood to be individual and personal, not objective, means of
understanding experiences that are, themselves, highly subjective – then the truths they reveal
are understood to be truths not about the world, but about ourselves. Truths that we construct,
truths we cannot dare assume to be applicable to any but ourselves, but truths no less true for
that.

In discussing The White Hotel as a text that presents one woman’s afterlife as a “reality”
whose validity to us is largely dependent upon who we believe its author to be, I can’t help but
think of Carole Maso’s AVA, a novel whose dozens of narrative bits – divorced of attribution and
context – might each be as fairly deemed essential as extraneous, depending largely on who we
think actually said them. As I think Lisa does in “The Camp,” Ava Klein constructs for herself a
narrative of her self and her life’s meaning. Interestingly, we, as readers, never gain intelligible
access to Ava’s self-authored life story – that is, while we get the images and bits of memory that
flash through Ava’s head on the last day of her life, the meaning she attaches to each and the
narrative she constructs with them are never made explicit in the book. With no sense of how
Ava or Maso herself values each of Ava’s thoughts, each reader must rely on his or her own
authority to tell Ava’s story. This means that we are forced to acknowledge that the narrative of
Ava’s life that we take from the book is also one we’ve authored, constructing it by choosing
which of Ava’s thoughts to value and which to discard.

AVA announces its concerns with self-authorship and self-knowledge on the title page.
Not only is it a palindrome, but the choice to print it in all-caps turns the title into a sharp visual
metaphor for action in the book: a dying woman looking back over her own life. Time and
experience both separates the dying Ava from her younger self and links the two Avas
inextricably. As the older self considering the meaning and merits of the younger, A regards A
across a valley of language and memory.

We get Ava’s thoughts without any firm sense of order or origin, so that a thought like “I
was the same age as Christ that year” – which seems to be a self-regarding appraisal in the first-
person – and “Ava Klein, your chances are slim” – which seems to be a remembered bit of
speech spoken by someone else – sit side by side with nothing to mark the transition in form and
perspective (100). Thus, while each thought’s presence in the novel itself implies that it has
importance to Ava, the nature and degree of that importance for each cannot be determined via
any appeal to tradition or outside authority – you cannot argue that, say, a thought like “I want
you never to die, Ava Klein” (209) means something to Ava because of who spoke it, since it
could have been spoken by anyone (including Ava herself). We also get remembered bits of real-
world texts – “The ideal, or the dream, would be to arrive at a language that heals as much as it
separates” (163) – whose applicability to or resonance with Ava’s present moment of dying are
always implied but never stated outright, so that their precise value to Ava is always a mystery.
This carefully positions us as performing the very same action as Ava herself, constructing a life-
story from the information at hand, and guides us to, at once, authorize ourselves and Ava as
storytellers. Such a narrative stance might be thought to “heal” as much as it separates, to
acknowledge the distinct narratives created by various “authors” of a text – the reader, the
character, the narrator… - but to celebrate the validity and necessity of each, rather than demand
acceptance of only a few, or one.

Just as Lisa constructs an after-life where she can reclaim the agency denied her in life by
Freud’s narratives of femininity and sexuality, not to seek vengeance on Freud but to create for

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him (and other sufferers) a compassionate site of healing, so too does Ava Klein, conjuring a
heaven not just for herself but other neglected dead: victims of AIDS, poor children lost to
starvation and violence. Just as Lisa borrows features from Dante to construct an after-life that
she can find recognizable and emotionally relevant, rather than to get an inside view of the
Inferno, so too does Ava Klein use the various texts she’s encountered over a lifetime to
understand better not those texts but herself. Foucault writes:

> That death is so carefully evaded is linked less to a new anxiety which makes
dead unbearable for our societies than to the fact that the procedures of power
have not ceased to turn away from death. In the passage from this world to the
other, death was the manner in which a terrestrial sovereignty was relieved by
another, singularly more powerful sovereignty...(138)

In a discussion of the power and limits of narrative, that singularly more powerful sovereignty is
not death or God, but the reader. The narratives of Lisa’s and Ava’s lives that we construct from
their unreliable and scattered thoughts tells us less about who they are and what they value than
they do about who we are, what we value. As it is with both *The White Hotel* and *AVA* – as it is,
indeed, with all texts, with all people – in reading, we look across a valley of language and
memory and encounter, finally, only ourselves.

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