

The Chinese Box in D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*

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One of the important revelations in "The Camp," the last chapter of D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*,¹ is the final version/vision of the summer house story—the central mystery in this novel. The summer house story is an embedded narrative of *mise en abyme*—a subtle form of the Chinese box strategy. Throughout the novel, we are told this story at least five times: once by Anna G.; once by Magda, Lisa's aunt; then by Lisa; and, finally, by Lisa's mother, Marya; upon a second reading of the novel, we find that this story is also indirectly presented in the fantastical poem and the Gastein journal. In other words, this is a story viewed from at least five different perspectives, and there are five contradictory versions/visions of the same incident. This amplification of points of view and multiplication of versions/visions have generated not only a curiosity as to who is telling the truth, but also a doubt about the ineluctable fictivity of all versions/visions. Thomas's Chinese box strategy first puts into question the unity of human perceptive experience; then it allows us to comprehend that every single vision intrinsically dissimulates the nature of that incident. The summer house story seems to embody the mystery of Lisa's psyche that "is like a child who has a secret, which no one must know, but everyone must guess."²

This story is "originally" revealed in Freud's case history of Frau Anna G., who says she believes the lovers she comes upon in the summer house to be her Aunt Magda, her mother's twin, and her Uncle Franz. We learn this after Freud interprets a dream that brings to Anna's consciousness a childhood memory. Freud interprets the dream as "the young woman's yearning to free herself from the sad constraints of her present life and to reclaim the lost paradise of years with her mother: that is, in effect, to be naked in the 'summer-house' or house of blissfully hot summers."³ But during the course of Freud's analysis, Lisa "revises" the incident and reveals that it was not her aunt and uncle she had seen in the summer house but her mother and uncle. For Freud this re-vision is a clarification that leads him to an explanation of Anna's hysteria: her own repressed delight in heterosexual passion when she herself could only imaginatively enjoy relations with other women. But in the last exchange of letters between Lisa and Freud that includes the third version/vision of the summer house story, we get hints of Freud's own possibly adulterous relationship with his sister-in-law, with whom he had

¹ Published in 1981, with expectation of attracting only an elite audience, *The White Hotel* became a surprise best-seller, winning enthusiastic response and excellent reviews, and receiving the 1981 Cheltenham Prize and the PEN Silver Pen Award. Its author, D.M. Thomas, a British poet and novelist, has published seven novels and five volumes of verse. For works on Thomas and *The White Hotel* see Linda Hutcheson, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1988); David Cowart, *History and the Contemporary Novel* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989); and Robert D. Newman, "D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*: Mirror, Triangle, and Sublime Repression," *Modern Fiction Studies* 35 (1989): 193-209.

² Michele Slung, "A Freudian Journey," *The New Republic* 28 March 1981: 35.

³ D.M. Thomas, *The White Hotel* (London: Penguin, 1981) 99; subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

visited Bad Gastein. This information, and Freud's paternal attitude toward his patient, make us suspicious of his deflection of the question of adultery onto the question of female homosexuality. Thomas's Freud reveals a limited vision of Lisa in his diagnosis of Anna's hysteria; rather than exploring the question of adultery raised by her revision of the identities in the summer house, Freud quickly establishes her contradictory feelings of shame for and idealization of the mother, making these the cause of her unacceptable homosexual feelings.

The third version/vision of the summer house story is Magda's, from which we assemble new "facts." Magda reveals that the "love duet" Freud believed as the central narcissistic love affair in Lisa's life was, in fact, a trio (166). Magda tells Lisa that to please her husband, she and Franz were sometimes joined by Marya, whose "white" marriage had left her lonely. Because of Magda's version of the summer house incident, Lisa is able, years later, to "revise" again for Freud the case study of Frau Anna G. Magda's version brings the summer house incident and Lisa mother's death logically together; but Magda illuminates the past for Lisa only to black it out again—all the versions/visions are now contradictory to one another. Moreover, when Marya tells the final version of the summer house in "The Camp," it is clear that Magda's confession to Lisa years before was false. According to Marry, because Magma's "desires ran in an entirely different direction," Magda was relieved by her sister's affair with her husband (234). The mother's revelation to the daughter here is another re-vision or re-creation of the same story, which indicates an endless hermeneutical recursion. The tension between these versions/visions produces a rebounding circularity, a hall-of-mirrors effect. All findings seem to be refindings; all presentations re-presentations. The summer house story suggests a central concern of *The White Hotel*—the function and implication of re-re-visionism.

By directing the reader through various re-revisions in the multi-layered Chinese box strategy, the novel seems to function as palimpsest where we read backward as we move forward. Through repetition or recreation of the same story, we experience no erasure; instead, we have memory and revisions of memory, clarification and re-clarification of the previous clarification. The multiple visions and revisions create a shrinking-in-replication horizon for the novel. With the exuberant Dallenbachian *mise en abyme*, Thomas deranges the usual certainty of expressive art in order to unburden and unfalsify the nature of human vision, reducing everything extratextual to a purely textual positionality. The reader is led to many tentative visions and hypostatization, but the novel never comes down completely in endorsement of any side of the multiplicity. At the heart of *The White Hotel* is a Chinese box of (re)versions/(re)visions of the summer house story in a relation both of discontinuity and of continuity so that the reader is required to perform successive acts of resignification and recontextualization of previously established meanings. In *The White Hotel*, the visual multiplicity reflects the instability of the fictional world as viewed from several different perspectives as well as from various levels of spiraling recursion. Images and stories constantly recur in confused regression of re-re-vision; the contradictory and incomplete presentation and re-presentation reduce almost everything rendered or rerendered merely to a viewing positionality in (con)text.

Thus, *The White Hotel* is not a novel of regular spatial presentation whose contradictory visions will eventually be re-ordered and re-apprehended as a coherent vision. Here the summer house story is presented as broken visions; the reader, encouraged by a few clues to hope coherence will emerge, will retain in his memory the cross-referents of the incident in vain—any attempt to connect the contradictory versions/visions and reversions/revisions leads to paradox and fragmentation. The contradictory nature of (re)visions of key events and characters in the novel conveys the presence of a recursive hermeneutic puzzle evoked by the Chinese box strategy. In Brian McHale's words, "The consequence of all these disquieting puzzles and paradoxes is to foreground the ontological dimensions of the Chinese box of fiction."⁴ There is a sense that we cannot totally apprehend an "ontological" coherence in the novel because even the visions of a simple event are presented in recursion by narrative voices whose perspective is moving: all versions/visions seem to exist recursively in our consciousness, coming into focus in the persistently repetitive manner of memory, which records events spatially and in their interaction with other events. The importance of the versions/visions, therefore, is no longer related to their place or truth-value in a real world out there but only to their prominence in the inner world of a vision.

The recurring re-visions in the novel achieve a plurality of meanings through the presentations that are counterpoised in the text. Some of the motifs and relationships, such as the train trips, create a plurality made up of all these parts as the reader compares them, considering them all together simultaneously, not just one after the other. In other words, of the several perspectives from which we see the summer house incident, no one of them negates any of the others: they all contain part of the truth. Each version/vision provides a new context for our interpretation of what has happened in the summer house, and as a result, enlarges our sense of the possibilities in re-interpreting the novel as a whole. In fact, the process of constant re-vising the summer house incident metafictionally reflects the process of our reading and interpreting Lisa and the novel: we begin by trying to interpret the poem, then the journal, then the conditions of Lisa's past and present that have led her to write the first two, then Freud's interpretation in the light of her revised account of her childhood. Finally, we re-interpret Lisa's life in terms of the manner of her death and her afterlife. At the same time, we are interpreting Thomas's novel: what is its vision or re-vision of the human soul, of twentieth-century history, of love and death? Our interpretation is actually a re-vising process, which takes into account both the pattern in which each vision forces a re-evaluation of the previous one, and the pattern in which every vision and re-vision provide an equally valid perspective on Lisa's life.

The reader may notice that by continually blurring the distinctions between true visions and false visions, between reality and dream, fantasy and hallucination, *The White Hotel* renders the ontological status of what it depicts uncertain. Because of being relativistic and partial, one vision or perspective, however intriguing and important, may leave crucial elements out of the picture from the perspective of a different angle. A mono-vision work simply accepts things that appear to us from whatever standpoint we happen to inherit or find ourselves in, and assumes that the resulting reality is absolutely trustworthy, since "seeing is

⁴ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York Methuen, 1987) 114.

believing." But in Thomas's multi-vision novel, we discover that our eyes can deceive us, and that things do look different to different people. Through the rendering of numerous contradictory perspectives, the traditional Jamesian "point of view," as a facet of a text, becomes only an inescapable avoidance in Thomas's novel. By stressing what it is, or value-saturated interpretive set, the "point of view" calls itself into question as a limited view of anything. It becomes, in short, a view with no point. The endless re-visioning in search of a ceaselessly retreating and metamorphosing truth in the summer house incident helps the reader gain a degree of sophistication that the Jamesian concept of point of view cannot afford. And it amounts to a further achievement in decentering to realize that, outside all the vantage points of all the individual visions, there may be a constantly and asymptotically approachable framework of reality; but we cannot always see it directly—perhaps never.

What Thomas's Chinese box strategy has been leading up to is the idea that for a literary work aspiring to be comprehensive and true, it is necessary to entertain multiple critical perspectives—a synthesis of visions—of the entire literary process. Schematically speaking, the literary process can be understood to include all meaning and functioning appertaining to the text and context of that particular work. Thomas's synthesis of visions can be explained by Gilles Deleuze's theory of writing as an "assemblage."⁵ Deleuze defines an assemblage as a multiplicity made up of many heterogeneous terms and relations that somehow function together, as in a symbiosis or sympathy. In contrast to a mono-vision work, which define a clear relation among homogeneous elements and functions, *The White Hotel* is formed of multiple relations, liaisons, and affiliations among and across an array of elements and processes which are completely different in kind. This novel, therefore, may not possess a unified vision, but it can achieve a kind of visional totality. Structured as a large Chinese box—a symbol that may be said to have formed a multi-faceted reality of the world, which always looks different in different contexts—*The White Hotel* suggests a reflexive mirror space, a "logosphere" where meaning occurs as a function of the constant interplay among the versions/visions and reversions/revisions in a restless flux of discursive striations.

⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) 69.