



Pastiche in T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*: The Liberty of Reprise

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Abstract

The present paper stands as one way of approaching postmodernist fiction in its exploration of the spirit of liberty informing the literary productions that flourished since the 1960s. It focuses on T. H. White's Arthurian novel, *The Once and Future King* (1958) as representative of such a sensibility. Pastiche – the novel's dominant narrative mode – constitutes the main axis for the investigation of the scope of liberty it has bestowed on the writer. The paper is structured around three major sections. In the first, it provides an understanding of the notion of "reprise" and its significance for the practice of pastiche in the novel. Then, it foregrounds the Arthurian legend's main features being responsible for the development of a climate of freedom; facts which have contributed to the writer's particular use of pastiche as a mode of expression in his novel. Finally, the paper aims to emphasize White's achievements through his reprise of the works of his predecessors.

Key words: Pastiche; Postmodernism; Reprise; Music; Liberty; Arthurian; Borrowing; Rewriting; Fluidity

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The relationship between music, literature, and philosophy occupies a prominent position in the Western intellectual debate. Twentieth-century leading thinkers such as Marcel

Proust, Theodor Adorno, Jean-François Lyotard, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Umberto Eco, to name a few, all have written substantially on the topic. For instance, in one of his essays, Lyotard speaks of "words" that "sing" (*Music/ideology: Resisting the Aesthetic*, p.15). In the same vein, Derrida commonly refers to "voices in [the philosophic] text" and "voices in music" (*Points ... Interviews, 1974-1994*, p.394). These voices present in both text and music, indicating the existence of a free give-and-take spirit underlying their inner relationships, contribute to the creation of situations of reprise in either field.

With the rise of the new Postmodern sensibility by the 1960s and its celebration of the idea of plurality, polyphony, and the blurring of boundaries between fields formerly thought to be incompatible, reprise emerges as a possible – and fruitful – field of textual investigation. The reasons behind such an interest lie in the analogies between musicology embodied in the term reprise and postmodern textuality, on the one hand; and the idea of repetition the expression encompasses, on the other hand, which reprise shares with postmodern writing that highly values such a concept.

The association of the term reprise with the world of music is indicated by Liliane Louvel as she maintains that: "'Reprise" in English belongs to the musical lexis" (*Rewriting/Reprising in Literature: The Paradoxes of Intertextuality*, p.2). Interestingly, Louvel places reprise within the framework of "revival and repetition," identifying it as being "characteristic of the twentieth century" (p.3). It is precisely in light of such a framework as well as the significance of its musical affiliation that reprise, as practiced by British writer T. H. White in his novel *The Once and Future King*, will be explored. White's use of reprise in this novel is peculiar in that it displays both repetition and a rhythmic mechanism in the re-appropriation of the incorporated material. Accordingly, and as will be subsequently explained, White blends in his

work a melodious technique with a narrative substance.

The Once and Future King (1958) is a post-War novel in which T. H. White reprises the story of the legendary King Arthur as told by medieval writer, Sir Thomas Malory, in his romance entitled *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485). White's version of the romance is, in fact, a pastiche as the writer both reproduces and re-contextualizes his predecessor's Arthurian tale. The novelist's approach to Malory's account is grounded in a specific attitude to writing that considers textuality as a collective phenomenon. It is an attitude that has come to define postmodern thought leading to the rise of such expressions as the "general text" (Jacques Derrida), the "plural text" (Roland Barthes), the "architext" (Gérard Genette), and the "palimtext" (Michael Davidson). The common denominator, as it were, in this nomenclature consists in an understanding of writing as being devoid of any sense of originality or authority. Simply put, to write means to return to the precursor, dig into the traces left behind, and remake or reprise that which has already been said. In this respect, it is worth recalling Jean-Jacques Chardin's definition of the term reprise as it best illustrates White's practice of the phenomenon in *The Once and Future King*. As the critic puts it in the introduction to *The Déjà-vu and the Authentic*: "Reprise implies consciously deployed strategies of reference, citation, intertextuality or even pastiche working under the assumption that all cultural productions are palimpsests" (p.1).

That T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* qualifies as a literary pastiche is a fact that cannot be denied given the writer's reliance on Malory's work as his chief source. The quotes and references to the medieval predecessor abound in White's version. However, what is interesting to note, in this context, is that White's *The Once and Future King* is a pastiche romance of a special kind. In fact, the writer's strategy does not simply consist in a mere borrowing of characters, themes, and motifs from the predecessor. Nor does the writer limit himself to the incorporation of quotes from the pastiche narrative into the pastiche text. White, indeed, goes beyond such pastiche techniques as he commonly, in a deliberate and explicit manner, sends his reader back to his own medieval precursor.

White's invocation of his predecessor takes different forms. At certain stages of the narrative, and feeling the necessity of interrupting, though in a suspenseful way, an ongoing description, White has recourse to Malory. This occurs, for instance, in the case of a tournament description when White intervenes in the narrative stating: "There is no need to give a long description of the tourney. *Malory gives it*" (p.349; emphasis mine). Similarly, White quite often refers to Malory under the guise of providing a piece of advice as when, for instance, raising the mystery of the Holy Grail and its related topics, he would write: "If you want to read about the beginning of the Quest for the Grail, about the wonders of Galahad's arrival ... and of

the last supper at court ... if you want to read about these, you must *seek them in Malory*" (p.436; emphasis mine). White's citation of Malory can also occur in the form of an embedded narrative that corroborates his own account. This is exactly what he does when telling about Morgan le Fay's attempts to seduce Lancelot as he was held captive. Explaining this particular incident, White narrates how "[s] he was sitting shyly in the bath looking at him, a charming little lady, who was – *as Malory puts it* – as naked as a needle" (p.371; emphasis mine).

Such overt shifts from the course of the main narrative to the source material contribute to the development of considerable observations. As a matter of fact, not only are those twists significant in terms of the rhythmic dimension they confer on the narrative; but they also help shed light on T. H. White's dialogic conception of writing and textuality. Through such deviations, White can be said to be flipping as if he were playing music; producing his own remix. This practice, as it were, is commonly used in the musical world. As Chris Philpott puts it: "Most musicians of all types (will) have experienced 'flipping'" (*Debates in Music Teaching*, p.164).

The dialogic relationship that White's recontextualized material from Malory in particular, is reminiscent of the act of improvisation proper to jazz musicians, embodied in their interaction, listening to, and response to bandmates. Commenting on this dialogue between jazz musicians as they perform, Tracey Nicholls refers to what she calls the "dialogicality" of jazz" which she describes as "the extent to which, as an artistic practice, jazz represents a conversation (dialogue) among jazz musicians" (*Michel Foucault and Power Today*, p.57). Admittedly, this is what T. H. White also aims at achieving, namely, engaging in a dialogue with other writers and texts in a performative way. By making his source text move in and out of his own, White, indeed, turns the space of the narrative into a stage on which voices from different sources meet and interact as if they were "jazz musicians" as they "speak back and forth to one another, each balancing the other's voice across bass strings, piano, and saxophone," as Babette Babich notes (p.19).

While Thomas Malory can be distinguished as White's essential source in *The Once and Future King*, the writer also makes of other leading writers of the Arthurian legend as significant sources of reference in his narrative. Among these, feature such names as Geoffrey Chaucer (p.245) and Alfred Lord Tennyson (p.320). Admittedly, White's determination to bring as many authors of the legend into his work and to openly refer to them in a somewhat boastful manner, is indicative of a mindset that is keen on positioning his own narrative as part of the musical Arthurian band; a gesture that brings his work close to what Babich refers to as "concinny." In fact, discussing the impact of music on Nietzsche's both life and writing style, the critic provides a telling description of the term. As she puts it:

Concinnity is derived from the Latin, *concinnitas* ... *Concino*, the etymologically ... associated verb, means "to sing in chorus." And in this sense ... concinnity corresponds to its current technical, musical functionality, that is, the sounding, smooth (ordered, fitted, protentionally, or constitutionally architectonic) harmony of *disparate* or *dissonant* or answering themes *singing together* in chorus or in a round. (ibid; emphasis mine)

It is, perhaps, no exaggeration to state that White's summoning of the Arthurian precursors and his concocting of various voices can count as an articulation of this kind of singing "in a chorus." Different voices, belonging to different periods of time, responding to various ideologies, are all grouped together in a symphonic realization.

To illustrate the way White succeeds in turning the seemingly "disparate or dissonant" elements are assimilated into a harmonious, tuneful, and concordant dialogue, I will provide two particular examples. Almost by the end of Book II entitled "The Queen of Air and Darkness," White introduces the argument over the mystery of the Questing Beast between as to whom the right of catching her should go, to the Pellionres or the Palomides. Immediately the writer convenes Malory as a way out of the conundrum; functioning as a solution provider. In an exegetic mode, White writes; "This is why, although Malory clearly tells us that only a Pellinore could catch her, we always find her being pursued by Sir Palomides in the later parts of the *Morte d'Arthur*" (p.307). The narrative, then, regains its main subject matter.

The second example in this smooth embedding of the seemingly discordant texts is taken from the closing section of the above mentioned Book. Actually, it deals with the issue concerning the conception of King Arthur's illegitimate son, Mordred, begotten from an incestuous relation with his sister Morgan le Fay. Characteristically, in White's *The once and Future King*, qualifying as an Arthurian pastiche, the question of Arthur's tragic end at the hands of his own descendant can by no means be subordinated. Accordingly, writing in a metafictional mode, White shifts to Malory directly addressing the implied reader as follows:

Even if you have to read it twice, like something in a history lesson, this pedigree is a vital part of the tragedy of King Arthur. It is why Sir Thomas Mallory called his very long book the *Death* of Arthur. Although nine tenths of the story seems to be about knights jousting and quests for the Holy Grail and things of that sort, the narrative is a whole, and it deals with the reasons why the young man came to grief at the end. (p.312; emphasis in original)

White's practice of reprise in *The Once and Future King* Stands as a metaphor through which the writer presents his text as one pitch among others played on a harp. The easiness and fluidity with which the alternation of discourse and the passage from one text to another is conducted gives the impression that origins, beginnings, and endings are facts that pertain to the order of myth. Texts simply echo or resonate in one another. In this

respect, it is worth referring to Jean-Luc Nancy as he observes that:

What I hear when music "begins" has already begun. What ceases being heard when the music stops still resounds ... Music does not just mobilize the actual resonance of sounds that it amplifies, intensifies, works on, and modulates. It mobilizes their anterior and posteria resonance, the *incompletion* and *no beginning* that belong in essence to resonance" (*Speaking of Music*, p.253; emphasis added)

Indeed, incompleteness and non-beginning constitute White's free access to the Arthurian legend. This is actually reflected in the title of his novel which is derived from Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, itself a reworking of previous French and English Arthurian tales. In fact, Malory concludes on the death of Arthur that the King is fabled to have an inscription on his tomb which reads: "Rex Quondam Rexque Futurus" (II.xxi, p.519) which translates as 'The Once and Future King'.

It is important to note that, to allow for the perpetuation of this spirit of reprise, White, in his turn, paves the path for his successors; thus supplying the non-beginning as well as exemplifying the noncompletion of the tale. At the close of the concluding section of his narrative entitled "The Candle in the Wind," the writer introduces a thirteen-year-old boy serving as a page to the ageing King to whom is entrusted the task of telling of Arthur's life; following the latter's instructions. Addressing himself to the boy, the dying King's request is as follows: "Listen ... I will tell you a story. I am a very old man ... and you are young. When you are old, you will be able to tell what I have told tonight. ... Put it like this. There was a king once, called Arthur" (p.636). Furthermore, White figuratively consolidates the idea of reprise by making a burning candle the king's legacy which the boy promises that: "It will burn" (p.637).

The implications of such a promise, occurring at the very ending of the novel, are highly significant. Not only does it confirm the belief in the circularity of storytelling as a literary phenomenon, but more importantly it marks a standpoint that is a combination of determination and dissent. Positioned within the parameters of postmodern thought, this spirit of subversiveness is a rule rather than an exception. Subversiveness is essentially directed at the already established rules, conventions, and hegemonic texts that dominated the previous Enlightenment as well as Modernist philosophies. Thus, the postmodern spirit is one of freedom and liberation, *par excellence*. As the father of postmodern theory, Jean-François Lyotard, quoting Pierre Schaeffer, maintains: "When there are no more rules at all, the time of atonalism has come" ("The Inaudible: Music and Postmodernity", p.4). Hence, the rise of innumerable possibilities for writers to take advantage of the novel thought orientation.

That postmodern literature has come to enjoy a wide scope of freedom is a fact that cannot be denied; but that it is a peculiar type of freedom is also an irrefutable

observation. Indeed, this peculiarity consists in a sort of “linguistic freedom – a freedom of speech, one might say – a freedom to be able to say or write anything and everything, in any possible way,” as Raymond Federman puts it, adding that it is a “linguistic freedom to explore the impossible,” (*Critifiction*, p.14).

Such is the enterprise which post-War British writer T. H. White is determined to implement through his major Arthurian novel *The Once and Future King* at a time before even the Postmodern sensibility was even popularized. In this work, pastiche stands as the most notable mode of writing allowing White to embark on his liberating project which touches upon both form and content. The range of liberty that White, as well as many twentieth- and twenty-first century fiction writers turning to the Arthurian legend for inspiration, stems from the nature of the medieval lore itself.

Like a good number of both modern and postmodern writers, White’s appeal to the legend is grounded in the open nature of the Arthurian matter itself. Encompassing an elusive character (King Arthur) whose death is even portrayed in terms of a passing and a hoped-for return, dealing with eternal themes such as love and betrayal, illusion and reality, certainty and uncertainty, peace and war, loyalty and treason, to name but a few examples, the medieval Arthurian legend has furnished imaginative minds with innumerable avenues for a free handling of the saga throughout the ages. As Elizabeth Sklar puts it:

The Arthurian legend’s inherent generic mélange of historical verisimilitude, romantic idealism and tragic realism, along with its generous and infinitely expandable cast of characters endows it with extraordinary adaptability. (“Marketing Arthur”, p.9).

A consideration of Arthurian fiction from the twelfth century up to the present time, leads to the realization that it is thanks to the fluidity of the Arthurian text that stories continue to be weaved; resulting in an orchestration of different voices in one whole body. Actually, it is such fluidity which accounts for the reprise; for the re-writing of the legend, briefly, for pastiche.

Pastiche is commonly identified as one of the most distinguished characteristics of the postmodern age. As Fredric Jameson puts it: “One of the most significant features or practices in postmodernism is pastiche” (*The Cultural Turn*, p.4). As a concept, pastiche is deeply rooted in imitative writing and unambiguously considered as one form of intertextuality. Despite the continuous efforts to give a definition to the concept, pastiche has resisted the various attempts to be reduced to one definite statement; and as such, has remained elusive as well as malleable. Designating the imitation of a copy when it was first adopted by early Renaissance painters in Italy and later in France, the concept came to mean the imitation of the style of a predecessor when it migrated to the literary world of seventeenth-century France before getting popularized mainly by French novelist Marcel Proust at the turn of the twentieth century. Reaching the

contemporary postmodern time, pastiche has come to embrace a wide range of meanings. For instance, Richard Dyer –one of the leading critics of the concept– notes that: “[P]astiche is part of the study of reference, allusion and intertextuality, of palimpsests and doubly voiced discourses and of repetition and influence” (*Pastiche*, p.22).

Pastiche as practiced by T. H. White in his Arthurian novel *The Once and Future King*, can be recognized as a kind of liberation from the terror of representational art; no longer appealing to (post) modern intellect. With his turn to past Arthurian works to construct his own tale, White deliberately opts for a free textual operation that enables him to move across time, space, conventions, and texts. In addition, this textual displacement which the writer displays in his narrative, is a willed act of dissociation from the immediate reality and its constraints. Indeed, written a little more than a decade after the end of World War II, the work still bears the traces of the horror of the war. White’s recourse to pastiche, then, becomes a form of liberation from the presentness of the present; alienation, as it were, that celebrates the heavy absence of presence. It is the medium that allows for a certain liberation from time and its perceived linearity

Inclined to experiment with writing, White’s focus lies on a challenge of what is there. This is reflected in his experimental novel in which he uses and abuses the pastiche mode. Indeed, to consider *The Once and Future King* as an experimental work is more than simply possible. The definition of the genre the editors provide in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* as a ‘free invention and obsessively faithful duplication’ (1) leaves no doubt about the affiliation of White’s novel with such category.

As a matter of fact, even though Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* constitutes the backbone of his narrative, White summons writers, integrates quotes, and incorporates passages creating such a polyphony which confers on the narrative a lively and dynamic scope. White’s imported selected material is marked by a huge variety of sources ranging from the medieval remote past, the Victorian near past, to the writer’s contemporary time. In fact, the writer draws heavily on and borrows from Sir Thomas Malory; evokes Sir Geoffrey Chaucer; alludes to Chrétien de Troyes; cites William of Malmesbury; refers to William Shakespeare and Alfred Lord Tennyson; quotes from such poets as Rudyard Kipling and Alfred Edward Housman; mentions works such as Dante’s *Inferno* and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* etc. and the list is far from being exhausted. Added to this plethora of works and writers, White also integrates words and expression in Latin and French as well as a few middle English lines. Such mixture of different elements is in itself a subversive strategy that articulates the writer’s challenge of received ideas of harmony and propriety. The textual space becomes for T. H. White that magical “Combination

Room" (p.189) referred to early in the narrative as being Merlyn's dwelling; the site of his own experiments. It simply conforms to what Lubomir Dolezel describes as a "wonderland where each thing can morph into another, a ludic world free of conventions, rules, and traditions" (*Possible Worlds of fiction and History*, p.4).

White's overuse of sources and references is, indeed, twofold; that is thematic and aesthetic. On the one hand, it points at the writer's aspirations for freedom and openness so as to escape from the claustrophobia marking post-war Britain; on the other hand, it translates his conviction that writing means rewriting. This act of displacement, selection, insertion, borrowing, grafting, re-positioning, re-arrangement of material, etc. entails the wide range of liberty that pastiche has offered to its pasticheur.

White's culling strategy is not meant to transpose old or different material into his narrative, but rather a device that allows for a free movement between texts on the scene of writing. It articulates the search for a de-personalized writing; one that promotes the dissolution of boundaries between texts, genres, styles, modes, and discourses. This idea is reflected in the narrative through what is referred to as "Everyman Library" (p.533); the symbolic locus of all literary works. It derives, then, that White's conception of writing is one that seeks to de-authorize both text and writer. His use of pastiche in *The Once and Future King* is a case in point.

While it is true that pastiche has allowed T. H. White a wide margin of textual and imaginative liberty to reprise an old tale; and given the fact that reprise, defined by Christian Moraru as a "representation of other representations" (p.21), it is possible to argue for the ambivalence of such a liberty. As a matter of fact, the self-reflexive aspect inherent in reprise itself entails a scope of free action within the limits of its own boundaries, namely the text itself. In *The Once and Future King* such limitation is evoked in the situation occurring at the end of the novel where the dying King sets the parameters of the story to be told in posteriority by the young boy, commanding him as follows: "Put it like this" (p. 635). Ironically, White takes the idea of confinement to its limits by conferring on the boy such a name as "Sir Thomas of Warwick" (p.637), which recalls that of Sir Thomas Malory, author of *Le Morte d'Arthur* which T. H. White rewrites.

The picture of dependence is given a final stroke when the writer dresses the little boy with a surcoat "with the Malory bearings, looking absurdly new" (p.637). The statement seems to suggest that despite the scope of novelty, the haunting presence of the forerunner can be neither dismissed nor ignored. This situation of dependence being an indelible condition for novel creation is also symbolically depicted by White. Indeed, in one of his addresses to the boy, King Arthur calls him: "Tom. The light-bringer" (p.637). The importance of

the statement resides in the association it generates with the mythical Prometheus commonly known as "the fire-bringer". Equally symbolic is the analogy between both poles embodied by the idea of trick, deceit and theft. In this respect, it is possible to argue that, T. H. White, who probably read James Joyce's *Finnegans' Wake* and knew about the famous expression, namely, "the last word in stollentelling" (Joyce, 1966, p.424), is simply exposing the unavoidable derivativeness of his own narrative. "Pla(y)giarism,"¹ Federman would assert (himself being one of the admirers of jazz improvisation).

T. H. White's *The Once of Future King* is a work that is firmly rooted in the belief that writing is an act entangled in a mechanism of repetition and re-writing; in other words, it is reprise or pastiche, as it were. Based on the retelling of a major medieval Arthurian book, namely, Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, the work foregrounds the writer's intention to make of his narrative and articulation of the belief in textuality as a self-reflexive, mechanical, polyphonic fabric. This polyphony is already reflected in the selection of Malory among all other Arthurian writers of any time. Indeed, Malory's work – itself being the largest compilation of Arthurian sources – points at both the popularity of rewriting in the remote Middle Ages and the old age belief in the inevitability of reprising in the literary creative world.

White's deliberate allusions to his predecessors as well as use and transposition of quotations from different Arthurian sources (as well as periods) constitutes an aesthetic issue in its own right. What the writer has attempted to create is a textual tune that sings the free contribution to a common, collective music; one that articulates the celebration of re-creation, re-appropriation, and dialogue. In so doing, White is mainly pushing his text to impart that melodic sensation embodied in the harmonious fusion between past and present. In this respect, White can justly be described as a practitioner of contemporary Postmodern art for whom, as Susan Sontag puts it, what matters 'is not the idea, but the analysis of [sic] and extension of sensations" (p.300).

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¹ See Raymond Federman's Critifiction where the idea of writing is viewed as a process through which writers exchange thoughts and language in a playful manner; hence Federman's ironic term "pla(y)giarism. *Critifiction: Postmodern Essays*. New York: SUNY, 1993. p.52.

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