

## T. H. WHITE: MASTER OF TRANSFORMATION

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### Abstract

This essay gives attention to three novels that can be read as exercises in fictional transformation: T. H. White's *The Master*, an ironic version of Shakespeare's *Tempest*; *Mistress Masham's Repose*, a retelling turned *Bildungsroman* of Jonathan Swift's Lilliput story; and *The Elephant and the Kangaroo*, a new, Irish version of the Old Testament story of the Flood. Though *Mistress Masham's Repose* was chosen by the Book of the Month Club in 1946, not one of the three approached the immense popular success of White's Arthurian tetralogy. All three novels can, nevertheless, be read as demonstrations of narrative skills White learned to use as he lived and wrote and came to terms, at least to some degree, with life in the mid-twentieth century.

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As a reader and re-reader of T. H. White's *Once and Future King*, I no longer find it amazing that Wart, the boy who will be king, can be transformed into a fish, an ant, a wild goose, and a badger. Nor do I find it particularly remarkable that in White's *Book of Merlyn*, published in 1977, almost twenty years after the best-seller days of *The Once and Future King*, a character like Archimedes can be brought back to life to restore the spirits of a despondent king. The way Merlyn is able to live backwards in time *would*, however, seem amazing if the skill with which White transforms the Malory record into a new fictional sequence had not already become familiar.

My purpose here, however, is not to focus on T. H. White's well known retelling of stories from Arthurian legend. It is to give attention to three less familiar works in which he demonstrates a comparable mastery of the art of fictional transformation. The three, based on sources drawn from different levels of the past, are *The Master*, *Mistress Masham's Repose*, and *The Elephant and the Kangaroo*.

*The Master: An Adventure Story* is the complete title of the first transformation to which I will give attention. This title, along with White's dedication "To the happy memory of R̄," with the linked letters representing the initials of Robert Louis Stevenson, suggests that the novel will be a transformation of *Treasure Island*, or at least that it will be a rather happy tale, perhaps intended to appeal to children. As Sylvia Townsend Warner points out, however, this is not the case. Considering



the dedication, the sub-title, and White's reference to his book as "My Treasure Island," Warner says *The Master* could not have been a story intended to please a young extrovert ready for a story of high-spirited adventure. Quoting White, she says it was written for "'a highly strung introvert, ill-read, insecure . . . and combating his fears by inventing terrors'" (*T. H. White: A Biography*, p. 258). What the Gonzalo-Sebastian-Antonio exchange that immediately follows *The Master's* Table of Contents suggests, however, is that the work to which White gives renewed life in *The Master* is not Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, but Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. White's island will be a transformed Prospero's island, and his Prospero, the single man who controls all the other characters involved in the action, will be an imagined Alpha, an antithesis of his kindly, if sometimes distracted Merlyn, the mentor of his Arthur series.

Warner observes that in the years between 1942 and 1945, when he needed an alter-Merlyn, "Alpha" appeared to White as a "tweed-cloaked figure standing motionless in the spray of Rockall, propped on the cliff against the storm," ready to serve his darker narrative purposes. Retired to the island of Rockall, Alpha (who becomes the Master) "intends to destroy the outer world by scientific means in order to preserve the human race" (*T. H. White*, p. 190), a clearly sinister intention even if it is presented in preserve-the-species terms.

Rockall, the island on which, or perhaps I should say on and *in* which, the action of *The Master* takes place, is "all rock," an environment apparently unsuited to sustain animal or vegetable life. Advanced technology, however, renders White's island setting habitable. As a cut-away diagram inside the novel's cover reveals, the island secretly houses a helicopter hangar on its top level, and then, on descending levels, a reception room, men's quarters, offices, engines, and a water tank. Rockall *can* sustain life, but unlike Prospero's island, which abounds with living creatures, it must do so by relying completely on supplies brought in from outside.

This reversal of physical setting is just the first of a series. The storm of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, for example, comes not at the beginning but at the end of *The Master*. Prospero deliberately brings his former enemies to his magic island, but Nicky and Judy, the child heroes of White's novel, are left by mistake on an island that St. Brendan (Alpha may have been born in 1841, the same year as Darwin, but White's medieval perspective is seldom completely lost) may have been the only person to have set foot on before. Miranda, Prospero's daughter, is an obedient child, ready to accept the rules of behavior that have been laid down for her to follow; but her counterpart, Judy, asserts her right to the same kind of education her brother Nicky receives. Judy boldly says at one point, "I am not a Plaything To Be Cast Aside, but a Person to Be Reckoned

With, who has Made Discoveries, so there'” (*Master*, p. 89). Frinton, the Master's Ariel, serves as a helicopter pilot who does his bidding and brings what he needs to extend his one hundred and fifty-seven year life span and sustain his small corps of underlings. Unlike Ariel, however, Frinton has never been promised an eventual release, once he has served his term. Caliban? Shakespeare's Caliban is basically a complainer, whose “here you sty me in this hard rock” (*Tempest*, I, ii, 418–419) can hardly be considered a positive response to the way Prospero forces him to live, but White nevertheless gives Caliban credit for saying in *The Tempest* that “the isle is full of noises, sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not” (*Master*, p. 125).

White's mastery of transformation goes beyond taking advantage of onomastic opportunities like the Rockall-all rock connection, assigning a female character a speech that enables her to assert her right to be taken seriously, and providing transformed characters from *The Tempest* with opportunities to speak their lines again in a new setting. He also makes use of communication that does not depend on the spoken language. It could be difficult to prove a definite indebtedness here, but when Pinkie, the Master's cook, opens his tongueless mouth to show the children why he cannot answer their questions we may be able to hear a faint echo from the *Tempest*. Shakespeare's Alonso commented on the “excellent dumb discourse” of a group of players who “want[ed] the use of tongue” (*Tempest*, III, iii, 47–50), and Pinkie's gesture inaudibly communicates his message: he cannot tell Nicky and Judy what they need to know because he has been deprived of the power of speech.

As the Chinaman, another character (who is not, White says, out of Sax Rohmer) later explains, Pinkie was dangerous to the plan of the Master as long as he had the ability to speak. He has an exceptional endowment, a mind that cannot be controlled, and the Master's pursuit of his objectives depends on controlling everyone on the island. The Chinaman himself has been useful because his category-free language (he describes it as having no nouns or verbs) helps the Master move from his own rule-governed English to a language that can be used to control his servants directly, without the use of words. Yet another member of the Master's staff, Dr. McTurk, is employed to keep the Master sane. His guiding principle is the simple and sensible one of mind affects body, body affects mind; but in the case of the strong-minded Master it is difficult to keep the balance. And here again a reversal of *Tempest* norms occurs. As could be expected, Shakespeare's Stephano and Trinculo become less adept in their use of language when they are drunk, but the Master, having progressed so far in his studies of language that he can not only read minds but also control them through uttering words, *needs* to be a little drunk to be able to communicate in the ordinary way.

Political implications multiply as Eisenhower, Anthony Eden, and Krushchev are all said to be armed with atomic bombs, and there seems to be little hope of defense against the movement toward destruction. Independent thought, the product of minds that cannot be controlled, expressed in language that can be understood would seem to be the natural defense of thinking human beings, but Mr. Frinton, who takes on Caliban's rebel role as the novel progresses, says that "most politicians can barely sign their names or read a comic strip" (*Master*, p. 142). But once again, this time with a reference to the tongueless Pinkie's portrait of Ghandi, White repeats his recurrent theme of the human hope for peace.

When the storm of White's *Tempest* transformation begins, the responsibility for opposing the Master falls to Nicky. At this point Nicky takes on the role first played by Frinton, the helicopter pilot, that of Ariel. Nicky, however, is "a rebellious Ariel seeking a dreadful Prospero" (*Master*, p. 245). The Master, a man intent on destruction, is now opposed by a boy hero qualified for his role by a mind that cannot be controlled. As the storm rages and the climax of the power struggle approaches, Nicky raises the revolver with which Frinton has armed him to shoot the Master – and then he drops the weapon, his resistance to the Master's mind having been overcome at last.

It would seem at this point that the overwhelming threat of the twentieth century is about to be carried out; but in "Full Fathom Five," the novel's penultimate chapter, an unplanned, unheroic, seemingly haphazard sequence unfolds. The Master, stepping backwards, pushes the children's frightened dog Jokey into action. She bites him. He falls and, like an ordinary old man, breaks his *hip*. But, like the extraordinary old man who served White as inspiration for his transformation of a man in control of an island, the Master begins his farewell speech with the words, "'Now my charms are all o'erthrown . . .'" At this point, his young would-be assassin returns to his ordinary, polite, boy self by asking "'Are you hurt? Can I help?'" and this remarkable book for children – which seems as surely intended as a plea for peace – ends with the reunion of Nicky and Judy and their parents.

*Mistress Masham's Repose*, again, is a book that heavily depends for the development of its basic plot on the actions of a child character. White introduces the principal characters of *Mistress Masham's Repose* – Maria, a ten-year-old orphan; a Vicar named Mr. Hater (with Dickensian significance); and a governess named Miss Brown who was "cruel in a complicated way" (11) – as residents of a once grand, but now decayed eighteenth-century house called Malplaquet. The house and spacious grounds which provide the setting here are based on the architecture and landscape of Stowe, a school for boys where White served as head of the English department from 1932 to 1936; and one of Maria's two

friends (the other is a sensible, good-hearted cook), a Professor who can write only in twelfth-century hand, is clearly a figure of self-representation. During the time that he was writing his transformation of *Gulliver's Travels*, White was engaged not just with his eighteenth-century studies, but also with his translation of the Roxburgh Bestiary.<sup>1</sup>

White's social concerns, like those of his great predecessor Jonathan Swift, help give form and life to his novel.<sup>2</sup> Picking up the details of a war that follows the departure of the Man Mountain Gulliver, he provides an extended account of the exploitation of the little people by Captain Biddel, who, in White's transformation, returns to Lilliput and seizes both cattle and human cargo. As he has one of his characters, a Lilliputian Schoolmaster, report the events that led to the establishment of a Lilliputian community in exile, White's source takes on new form, even as it is told with eighteenth-century capitalization and syntax; and we hear how Captain Biddel exploits his captives and how Lilliputian musicians and artists are forced to dance on the Strait Rope before the vulgar masses, with hope for nothing more than freedom from punishment. As the Schoolmaster tells Maria, to Captain Biddel "our broken and distracted People were Creatures not possessed of human Rights, nor shelter'd by the Laws of Nations. Our Cattle were for his Profit, because we could not defend them; our very Persons were an Object of Cupidity, for he had determined to show us in his native Land, as Puppet Shews and Mimes" (*Repose*, pp. 58–59).

The little people escape as White's Schoolmaster tells their continued story and, carried by a jackdaw, a living airplane they have raised from infancy, are guided by Flimnap, a character drawn directly from Swift's narrative, to Malplaquet. Once settled in exile, they establish an ideal society in which there is no revealed religion (the Big Endian controversy is a thing of the past), there are no wars (because there are no enemies to fight), mothers are heads of families, and everyone believes that "the most important thing in the world [is] to find out what one like[s] to do, and then do it" (*Repose*, p. 70).

It is not surprising, considering White's own teaching methods, that Lilliputian children are expected to find something that *they* want to learn. His writing assignments could be as open as "Write an essay on anything you like," with an understanding that his students had to know what something *meant* to know whether they liked it or not (*T. H. White*, p. 65). Nor is it surprising, considering White's own interests, that two things considered to be worth pursuing are hunting and fishing,<sup>3</sup> or, when we consider the letters of White's students included in Sylvia Townsend Warner's biography (pp. 62–68), that the ideal educational system of the Lilliputians in exile in White's transformation of the story he finds in *Gulliver's Travels* focuses on helping children learn "Natural History . . . their own History . . . Oeconomy [the capitalization and spelling

are the Schoolmaster's] and anything else which dealt with being alive" (*Repose*, p. 70).

*Mistress Masham's Repose* becomes a true *Bildungsroman* as Maria, having discovered the Lilliputians, determines that she will "help" them. Maria's desire to control, White says, having now taken control of his own story back from the Lilliputian Schoolmaster, leads her to lose her grip on herself as she traverses a road to ruin "with the speed of a Rake's progress" (*Repose*, p. 83). Maria decides to make an aviator of a favorite fisherman, and as the story continues allusions to Eisenhower and the Wright brothers create a sense of double, or perhaps triple time. Adding to the sense of layered time in a way that, reading White, seems perfectly natural, is the re-assertion of yet another connection when White links his friend Sydney Cockerell<sup>4</sup> to the ancient texts studied by the Professor, who is too concerned at first with the possible occurrence of the word *Trivialis* to hear Maria's cry for help. (Here of course White is mocking his own *Trivial Pursuits* before the game of the name was invented.)

The way the Professor tends to singlemindedly focus his attention on his own research interests may prevent any sense of resolute movement forward in the development of a sequence of events, but he *does*, when insistently called upon, come to terms with his immediate teaching responsibility. Leaving his medieval studies behind for the moment, the Professor sharpens his young friend's awareness of what it is like to be defenseless and possessed through reference to Swift's account of Gulliver's experience in Brobdingnag. In doing so, he states his point directly, in the manner White encouraged his own students to learn to use. He tells Maria that "The trouble about loving things is that one wants to possess them" (*Repose*, pp. 94–95). White may have introduced his Professor as a man too detached from reality to heed a genuine call for help (Maria is truly distressed by the fate of the fisherman she tries to turn into an aviator) and he may get his proverbs confused, but all in all White presents an appealing picture of his fictionally extended self as a man who helps a ten-year-old on her way to moral maturity. When Maria needs help with her philosophy of helping others less fortunate – and much smaller – than herself, he advises her to remember what it was like for Gulliver when he was in the care of Glumdalclitch in the land of the giants. He spells out the way Maria should treat the re-discovered Lilliputians with these words:

"You must never, never force them to do anything. You must be as polite to them as you are polite to any other person of your own size, and then, when they see your magnanimity in not exerting brute force, they will admire you, and give you love."

"I know it is difficult," he added gently, "because the trouble about loving things is that one wants to possess them. But you must keep hold of your emotions and always be guarding against meanness. It will be very difficult indeed." (*Repose*, pp. 94–95)

The Professor's language here has a simplicity and directness worthy of Merlyn at his best, and, after a short period of haughty reaction, Maria heeds his good advice.

When Maria herself is in danger, however, the Professor himself needs to be rudely shaken out of his etymological wandering. Unfortunately (or fortunately, if we consider the opportunity for comedy it provides), Mrs. Noakes, the cook's, lack of a capability to be rude slows down the necessary preparations to rescue Maria from the prison in which the cruel Mr. Hater and Miss Brown, determined to get control of the Lilliputians, whom they see as a potential opportunity for gaining great wealth, have imprisoned her. Attempting to get the Professor's focused attention, Mrs. Noakes very hesitantly says, "I only come, Sir, if you please, on account of what I was desirous . . .," and then her request breaks off. She has been doing her best to find out where Maria is by "a-bicycling along the corridors and ringing of my bell" through more rooms than "mortal man has counted" (*Repose*, p. 163), but the child for whose safety both friends are genuinely concerned cannot be found.<sup>5</sup> But, alerted at last to the need to take action, the Professor, with the help of Mrs. Noakes, rescues Maria from the domination and the actual imprisonment (in a medieval prison!) she suffers at the hands of the hateful Vicar and the cruel governess, and all ends well with the banishment of the terrible two – together, a punishment in itself.

Finally, stepping forward to speak in his own voice to Amaryllis Garnett, the daughter of dear friends to whom his Lilliput transformation is dedicated, White assures her that it is still possible to see the place where the people of the story once lived, and where, it could be added, he, the man who chose to cast himself in the Professor's role, taught.

*The Elephant and the Kangaroo*, like *Mistress Masham's Repose*, involves transformation of a physical setting that was part of White's own personal experience. Here White chooses Doolistown, a farmhouse in Ireland, where he lived from 1939 to 1945, as a place to begin his retelling of a story drawn from the Old Testament – the story of the great Flood.<sup>6</sup> Four "what if" questions seem to lie behind this transformation: what if the Archangel Michael, or a somewhat reasonable facsimile, were to come with a message that there would be a terrible flood? what if the angel brought the message, not to Noah, but to the O'Callaghans, a devout but neither very industrious nor intelligent Irish Catholic couple? what if there wasn't time to build a proper ark and collect all the animals? and what if the narrator is not a solemn Old Testament narrator, but T. H. White?

*The Elephant and the Kangaroo* begins with attention to the last "what if." White, referring to himself in the third person as "Mr. White," describes himself "standing in his workshop, or playroom, with his

spectacles on the end of his nose and a small oilcan in his hand . . . a tall, middle-aged man, with gray hair and a straggling beard” (*Elephant*, p. 9), which is exactly what he was when he lived with the McDonaghs in Doolistown.<sup>7</sup> White returns to his self description with a rather heavy handed “Before we return to [the problem of constructing the ark], it seems necessary to make a few remarks about our hero’s character” (p. 32). The character-defining features then enumerated include a certain childishness, a willingness to confide, and a general willingness to tell the truth – the result of a certain laziness that led to a preference for being swindled if the alternative was going to the trouble of telling lies convincing enough to swindle other people. Here he also presents his theory about warfare – a simple, but seriously held belief concerning territoriality also set forth in the manuscript for his *Book of Merlyn*, and comedy arises from his experiments with bottles of colored ink and with ants, who, like human beings, are a species willing to join together and fight for territory. And, as if this were not enough to establish his personal identification with his central character, his comic qualifications are extended to his beloved Brownie, “an animal who suffered from crazes, like her master,” and sits in a corner, “eating the latest glue” (*Elephant*, p. 61). Finally, White attributes a list of accomplishments to the supposedly fictional Mr. White that are undeniably part of his own experience. That list includes flying, hawking, a biography of Admiral Byng (which appears as one of the essays in his *Age of Scandal*), an arrest, painting, translating a bestiary, acting as master of harriers, *trying* to learn Irish (as if just trying to learn a language could be considered an accomplishment), and surviving an appendectomy.

The improbability of a second Flood (the fact that the Old Testament God promised Noah there would never be another is conveniently forgotten) is introduced with remarkable dexterity. Mr. White first challenges the ability of Pat Geraghty (who tends to be sceptical about other people’s veracity) to believe that there could be a second Flood, then challenges his ability to build an ark. Geraghty, who consistently acts in a way opposite to what other people indicate they expect of him, asserts both his belief in the message of the Archangel and his confidence in his own ability to build the ark required for survival. The credulous O’Callaghans, once it is explained to them in detail, have no difficulty with Mr. White’s interpretation of the apparition that comes down the chimney (which, thanks to David Garnett’s critical intervention is the Archangel Michael, not the Holy Ghost Himself), nor with his message. Nor does Mrs. O’Callaghan have undue difficulty with the question of how they will sustain themselves when the flood is over. If they must live on grass for a time – and Mr. White assures her that members of her species have lived on grass before – then she can do it. She has, after all, consumed nettles (“nittles,” she calls them) when she needed



them as a natural remedy. She does not, however, see how she and her husband Mikey can be expected to repopulate the earth. The up to now childless couple are well past the age when they could reasonably be expected to accept this responsibility.

There is not, it turns out, time to build a proper ark from scratch, though there is time to turn the O'Callaghans' barn upside down. Nor is there time to collect all the animals, though there is time to describe – not the animals but the *books* that describe the animals – before the barn turned ark, “like an elephant getting on its hind legs,” poises itself for a moment in position, then turns upside down and finds itself afloat, ready to crash into bridges and float down the River Liffey. There is also time for White to launch a tremendous flood of Irish rhetoric worthy of floating the great vessel down past Anna Livia Plurabelle (White acknowledges his debt to James Joyce with an in-the-text footnote) and all the way to Dublin. The ark, alas, does not make it, but with his last sentence, “It was a perfect rainbow,” White pays proper tribute to his primary source, and *The Elephant and the Kangaroo*, Warner reports, is received with a variety of strong responses.

Mrs. Donaghan stops all communication with White, not surprisingly, if we note what she could well have considered ridicule of her faith, her marriage, and the work of her daily life in speeches White assigns to her fictional counterpart, Mrs. O'Callaghan. For example, Mrs. O'Callaghan, sure that the end is nigh, “spews” out this prayer, and, the care with which White presents her variety of the English language notwithstanding, Mrs. Donaghan could well have taken offense at what might have seemed a deliberate parody of her speech patterns.

Hail Houly Queen, motherav mercy – like the time we wint to the Isle of Man for me honeymoon – hail, Our Life, Our Sweetness, and Our Hope – we had the red lobster for breakfas and I thought it were part of me stomach come up – to Thee do we cry, poor banish chillern offeve – oh, Jesus Mary, and Joseph, here's the cup o'tea – to Thee do we send up our sighs – them's the rashers – mourning an weeping – oh, Lamb of God, will I live to go troo wid it? – in the valleyotears. Turn then Most Gracious Advocate – the man in the ship said to swally a ball of malt – Thine eyes of mercy tordsus, an after this our exile – an they give me some odycolone abov in the hotel – show unto us the Blessed Fruit of Thywomb – sure, there's nothing left to come but the lining – Jaysus. O clement, O loving – an in the heel of the hunt Mikey didn' know how to do it – O sweet Virgin Mary. Never will I forget me honeymoon, or this day either.

(*Elephant*, pp. 234–235)

*The Elephant and the Kangaroo* was condemned in Irish newspapers, again not surprisingly, if we consider Mr. White's diatribe on life in Ireland, his narration of the behavior of the spectators who watch the passing of the ark, or the adjective-laden way he dismisses a “third layer” of spectators that “seemed to be human, but roared like the great cats at feeding time. And wounding, hurting, blood-dripping, savage,

gory, sharp-edged, strong-grasping, red-faced, swift-smiting, vast, wild” engaged in futile combat. Mrs. O’Callaghan responds to the threat this mob presents as a woman of conscience. There may be a reason for the people who line the banks of the Liffey to be shooting at the passengers on the ark. “Perhaps . . . we done wrong,” she says. Mr. White’s callous response is “They must have been shooting at each other. Perhaps there is a revolution. They generally have one . . . about Easter” (*Elephant*, pp. 250–251).

Judged by a standard that includes sensitivity to the feelings of the people with whom he lived for six years as a criterion, *The Elephant and the Kangaroo* is, of course, a failure, and this is true despite the fact that, as John H. Crane points out, White takes advantage of his own distance from “Mr. White,” a character in his transformation, to make fun of his own lack of reasoned judgment and down-to-earth common sense. Crane concludes that, in any case, “the book is good fun if one is not an Irishman without a sense of humor” (*T. H. White*, p. 140). But the question we must ask when attempting to judge the success of a fictional transformation, it seems to me, is this: does the transformation writer succeed in his effort to bring an old story to new life? Does *The Elephant and the Kangaroo* give new life to the Old Testament story of the Flood? If this is the question, I have to answer Yes. Mr. White may not have been a good carpenter (the hand drawn illustrations of L-shaped girders and angle brackets and vertical edges and temporary living accommodations do not convince me that he was), but I could *see* that boat float.

Is this a reasonable reader response? I do not think my willingness to believe I can see what White’s narrative skill has made visible is the result of an extension of the power to live backwards in time that White gave to Merlyn. At least I do not find myself magically transported back from the narrative time in which this barn-turned-boat floats down the River Liffey to the time of the Old Testament story of Noah’s acceptance of a challenge of survival. Nor does my recognition that White is drawing very cleverly on the language of a more recent past when he constructs sentences in Joycean style – sentences that would sprawl across too many pages to print if one were to attempt illustration of a kind made familiar by almost a half-century of transformational grammar – explain his success. The more important linguistic understanding here, it seems, is related to the listening skills White draws upon to enable his new Noah and Noah’s wife to speak their own variety of English. Even now, in the early days of the twenty-first century, when a peace accord between Irish nationalists and the British government has been reached, we can see why readers of *The Elephant and the Kangaroo* were deeply offended by his characterization of the O’Callaghans, while at the same time we are obligated to acknowledge that it is White’s ability to

represent their spoken language that gives the people with whom he lived for six years their extended fictional life.

The speech of the good-hearted Mrs. Noakes of *Mistress Masham's Repose* who goes "a-bicycling" in search of Maria is drawn from the same rich source, White's perceptive ability to listen to the speech patterns of people with whom he lived. *Mistress Masham's Repose* also succeeds, I think, because White is able to present an extension of his research-oriented self in contrast to the simple, kind and helpful Mrs. Noakes, and to provide a fictional illustration of his own emotional growth as he shows the absent-minded, basically self-centered Professor patiently advising Maria on the need to transcend her own delight in power over others. Here too it becomes apparent that the language of White's Professor is *not* the language of the eighteenth-century academician who plays a role in his transformation of *Gulliver's Travels*, and the contrast serves to heighten the effect of the Professor's direct simplicity when he becomes aware, at last, that he has down-to-earth messages to communicate and important human lessons to teach.

The linguistic understanding that gives life to Rockall, the setting for *The Master*, may seem more open to question, but it is, after all, the Chinaman, a character in the novel, not T. H. White, the master of fictional transformation, who claims that the Chinese language has no nouns or verbs. White himself, as letters to his friends indicate, was a student of literature all his life, and his demonstration of a remarkable ability to juxtapose the language of Shakespeare's Prospero to that of a coldly calculating twentieth-century "Master" makes our indebtedness to his, and our, predecessors all the more apparent. Here too it may be observed that when White's girl hero asserts *her* right to an equal education, she does so in a book published in 1957! In this case White may have anticipated claims that had not yet begun to be widely heard.

T. H. White *lived* with the English languages of the past and of the present, and his double existence led to a remarkable record of transformation of earlier-told stories into fictions for readers for his, and our own time. The sequence of publication dates for the series that grew out of White's fascination with Arthurian legend stretches over the twenty years between 1938 and 1958, with the long-delayed *Book of Merlyn* at last appearing in 1977. *The Sword in the Stone* was published in 1938–1939, *The Witch in the Wood* in 1939–1940, *The Ill-Made Knight* in 1940–1941, and then, with the addition of "A Candle in the Wind," *The Once and Future King* was published as a tetralogy in 1958. Turning to the dates of publication of the novels just considered here, we see that all three became available during the years in which White was also giving new life to Arthurian legend. *Mistress Masham's Repose* was published in America in 1946, in Britain in 1947; the *Elephant and the Kangaroo* in 1947 and 1948; and *The Master* in 1957. It would

seem, especially when we consider the evidence of White's dedication to a life of study, that any one of the above works would entitle him to a degree called "Master of the Art of Transformation." Considering them all together might well merit an additional "*cum laude*."

#### Notes

1. White says that translating the twelfth-century bestiary "out of illegible, abbreviated, dog-Latin into English" was "real scholarship" (*Letters to a Friend*, p. 132). When his Bestiary was published in 1954 and 1955 as *The Book of Beasts: Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century Made and Edited by T. H. White*, its notes, drawn from the broad range of thirty years' reading, were as copious as the text.

2. Louis A. Landa says of the reflection of Swift's social concerns in *Gulliver's Travels*: "*Gulliver's Travels* is . . . an exploration of man's social and moral nature in non-theological terms, done in the allegorical mode and embedded in fantasy" (p. xxiii). White's transformation reflects Swift's broader concerns as they relate to the exercise of power over others, and also reveals some of his narrower concerns with practices carried out in British educational systems in which he had been a participant, both as a teacher and a student.

3. See his *Goshawk*, for example, for White's account of his use of methods current in the time of Shakespeare to train a hawk, and *England Have My Bones* or *The White/Garnett Letters* for his observations on the pursuits of hunting, fishing, and shooting.

4. *The Best of Friends: Further Letters to Sydney Carlyle Cockerell* includes letters that provide insight into the intellectual pursuit side of White's personal experience that emerges in his fiction.

5. White's Professor's affectionate concern for the ten-year-old child hero of *Mistress Masham's Repose* can be related to an April 1946 letter in which he tells "Bunny" (David Garnett) that he has "sort of become engaged to a brat not yet 21," a farmer's daughter he had met some years before who, as White now informs his friend, "is Maria" (*White-Garnett Letters*, p. 221). These marriage plans fail, and, writing of women on May 7, 1953, White asks, with what degree of seriousness it is difficult to tell: "Why does one have to mate with one's equals in age? Women are so much tougher, crooked, more grown-up, more unscrupulous and wicked than men that the only hope for our sex that I can see is to marry them when they are about 12. Then there is some faint hope of equality" (p. 259).

6. This, as Warner reports, was the same span of time in which Alpha, who becomes the dominant figure of *The Master*, began to increasingly occupy his creative imagination, *The Book of Merlyn* was being held up, the end of the war began to come into sight, and White's beloved dog Brownie died.

7. The McDonaghs recognized themselves as the O'Callaghans of Burkestown and were deeply hurt by what they perceived to be the mockery and ridicule with which they are portrayed in *The Elephant and The Kangaroo*. In *The Godstone and the Blackymor*, published twelve years after *The Elephant and the Kangaroo*, Mrs. O'Callaghan reappears as a more sympathetic representation of Mrs. McDonagh, but White is not known to have made any form of apology to his Irish hosts.

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