The Goal of Writing in Edmund White's *The Farewell Symphony* (1997): Auto-Fiction? (Writer vs. Narrator), Survival Literature, and Melancholia

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Contents

1. Introduction

"We have the advantage of the outsider,
of the foreigner and the pioneer"[1]

Edmund White

This paper responds to my personal interest in Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transsexual, Transgender and Queer (GLBTTQ) studies. Many artists have been struggling to look for that identity that was not available in the market. It is vitally important to go on exploring different cultural manifestations that can throw light on the way in which we understand our gender identities, our sexualities and our desires. For this reason, we will analyse the novel *The Farewell Symphony* (1997), written by the American author Edmund White (1940 -). The first text I read by him was his revealing essay "The Political Vocabulary of Homosexuality" (1980) in which he introduces himself as a privileged witness of the turning point in GLBTTQ history, the Stonewall Riot in the city of New York and the subsequent evolution of a newly established gay *community* in the Western world:

> In June 1969, a group of lesbians and gay men resisted a routine police raid on the Stonewall, a popular dance bar in Greenwich Village. Opposition to police harassment was unusual enough to signal a quickening sense of solidarity. Soon after the Stonewall Resistance gay organization and publications were springing up across the country and, by now, gay liberation has become both a national and an international movement.
> I was present at the original event and can recall how the participants cast about for political and linguistic models. […] Our recognition that we formed an oppressed minority struck us as *humorous* at first; only later did we come to take ourselves seriously. (1980, 69)

[1] Page 36 in "The Joys of Gay Life" by Edmund White.

After reading this essay, in which he advocated for a language of the oppressed, I became increasingly interested in the fiction of this American novelist, essayist, biographer, playwright, journalist and teacher. I continued with his recently published autobiography *My Lives* (2005), but my decision to do research on this writer was made immediately after reading his *The Farewell Symphony* (1997), the third in a series of novels in which a first person narrator remembers his own past.

Like Professor Nicholas F. Radel, we consider White's novels to be concerned with the construction of a gay identity and the ostracising effects that this gay subject can feel in a heterosexist society. Radel sustains that:

> Gay identity is the explicit subject of many of White's works, and White cannot escape the problematic of gay identity in a culture that openly and tacitly assents to the naturalness of heterosexuality. […] White's novels as part of the historical apparatus for revealing a gay subject as it responds to political pressure form the culture at large. Far from being mere aesthetic products, these novels about gay life both confirm and interrogate their historical milieu and its construction of sexual orientation as gender difference. (1994, 175-176)

The main task of this paper is to answer the question: What is the aim of writing in *The Farewell Symphony*? Edmund White has repeatedly stated that this is an autobiographical novel, but in order to establish a clear-cut distinction between the writer, Edmund White, and the narrator – who does not have a name – we will split the question in two.

4.1. The Aim of Writing. Edmund White: Why does he fictionalise?

4.2. The Aim of Writing. Why does the Narrator/ Main Character of *The Farewell Symphony* Write?

Two hypotheses will be provided in order to start exploring these issues:

4.2.1. The Title: Writing as Homage/ Survival Literature.

4.2.2. Is the Narrator Suffering from Melancholia? Writing as Self-Exposure.

4.2.2.1. Why is the Narrator Melancholic?

For our purpose, the character of the narrator is not a mimetic creation of the writer Edmund White, but a fictional creation that needs to be studied independently.

2. *The Farewell Symphony*: Reviews, Discussions, and Readings on Edmund White's Work.

"When someone dies a library burns"[2]

Edmund White

The Farewell Symphony was published in May 1997. Following the line of two of White's previous novels – *A Boy's Own Story* (1982) and *The Beautiful Room is Empty* (1988) –, the main character of this text is, at the same time, the unnamed first person narrator who introduces himself, from the very first line, as the writer of the novel that we are about to read: "I'm beginning this book […]." (1997, 1) As we can see, the borders that separate the real author Edmund White from this fictionalised author are rather blurry. The narrator is resolved to describe his life in the mid 1990s with his recently dead lover, and the text is supposed to deal with their love affair. Nevertheless, instead of doing so, the main character constantly goes back in time to the 70s and 80s. The narration is not always ordered in a conventional chronological way and flashbacks are constant. The gay liberated life of the 70s and early 80s in New York is consciously depicted. The hero works as a journalist or ghost writer, but he is incessantly attempting to be published in order to become an authentic writer.

Sex is an important issue in the text. The main character is always looking for a new encounter and his promiscuity is not just a hedonist trait of his personality, but a consistent way of living. Because White seems to be deliberately showing us a different lifestyle, another option to heterosexuality, gay promiscuity seems to be

[2] In the back cover of Edmund White's *The Burning Library*. For the complete reference, please go to section 6, Works Cited.

presented more as a political act in itself than as a mere way of having a good time. Gay life is radicalised in opposition to conventional heterosexual patterns of behaviour. The promiscuous life of the main character is portrayed in a rather straightforward and clear language, and the highly sophisticated cultural digressions are combined with detailed scatological sexual descriptions.

A large number of secondary characters are introduced, but none of them will be portrayed in depth: since we see all the events and characters from the first person narrator's eyes, there is no possibility of entering those characters' minds. We also follow the narrator when he remembers his year in Rome, his first visit to Paris, and his past life in New York. At the moment of writing the novel, he is living in Paris, in a refined milieu of artists, intellectuals, and sophisticated people. However, the threat of AIDS is felt from the very beginning of the story when the narrator informs us that his lover, Brice, died of AIDS six months ago. And after that initial position in time, the time structure of the novel becomes more and more complex. Even though the voice of the narrator is located in the mid 90s, he is constantly revisiting the past, revealing a liberated bright past in the 70s in contrast to the darkened and AIDS-conscious decade of the 80s. Interestingly enough, the original narration from the present of the mid 90s is diluted, and sometimes its voice seems to be speaking to us from the 80s and not from the 90s. But that digression is interrupted once again in the last chapter, situated in the 90s and in which, progressively, most of the characters we have met along the text will perish to HIV-related illnesses. The narrative of this chapter is breathtaking and its tone absolutely moving.

The main limitation when analysing *The Farewell Symphony* is the still limited research that has been done on it. Unfortunately, *The Farewell Symphony* has not been extendedly studied. Stephen Barber, who has published Edmund White's

only existing biography, *Edmund White: The Burning World. A Biography* (1999) – one of the richest sources that are available for the study of this author – reconstructs Edmund White's personal life, and it also provides an in-depth analysis of all the texts that White had published up to 1999. As for *The Farewell Symphony*, Barber primarily discusses the role of time in the text:

> *The Farewell Symphony* is a book absorbed with the nature of time, and with the power of language and art to make time accelerate or slow down, in order to render the transformation of time by memory and perception. […] The entirety of *The Farewell Symphony* is itself an experiment with time: in the first part of the book, sexual experiences and sensations are ecstatically sustained, minutely probed and explored; but, when the book passes on to depict the coming of AIDS, it accelerates with thunderous immediacy. (1999, 292)

According to Barber, memory and transparency are main axes in the understanding of this novel:

> The novel, like all of White's books, is concerned with the ephemerality of memory, as something which corrodes with age and has to be induced to transmit the past with all the lucidity and precision of a filmic image. The book constantly catches the matter of memory in the form of images, as when the narrator remembers the body of one of his lovers: 'His biceps looked like veined gooseberries packed in snow.' In writing The Farewell Symphony, White was also conscious that, like a kind of subjective ethnographer, he was using elements of memory to re-create a recent but already lost reality – that of the 1970s New York gay culture that had been decimated by AIDS. (1999, 292-293)

Given that grief permeates the story, memories are always melancholic since they bring to our present something that cannot be lived again, and which usually has been modified by the pass of time. The fact that the narrator is at all times looking at the past invites us to think of the concepts of mourning and melancholia. In our opinion, melancholia would be embodied by the character of the narrator, as we will see in the main section of this paper. The idea that nothing remains, that everything is ephemeral and the subsequent desperate need of preservation is what the text is primarily about. We perceive the story as if it were a big and cherished photo album.

The main character / narrator would be turning the pages of this photo album with pictures from his past. The quality of those pictures and the clothes and places of its protagonists would change according to the decade we would be looking at. Every time he stares at a picture a new story comes up to his mind, a new memory. As Barber says, *The Farewell Symphony* is a text that is constantly working with memory. And we believe this memory works on pictures rather than on sequence of scenes. As a matter of fact, there is no much movement in the text, as far as the plot is concerned. That is why every time the narrator introduces a new sexual conquest, the events do not seem to be moving. Nothing remains after sex, and nothing changes. Those characters are frozen, most of the time flat, like photographs.

As we have mentioned above, transparency is the other key element in Barber's analysis of the text:

> *The Farewell Symphony* confronts the desire for a revealing transparency about the presences in the novel of its own writer and narrator, its reader, and about the story being told. […] For White, achieving an ultimate candidness would be an authentic way of exploring the creative process of art – unveiling the writer's means of representing memory and experience, and, at the same time, resulting in a complete revelation of the writer's own self. This idea of transparency also had another meaning – it referred too to the ghostly transparency White felt in being a writer who was HIV-Positive. […] And, finally, the idea of transparency is conceived by White in *The Farewell Symphony* as the necessity to transform life through language, although the creation of a kind of beautiful emptiness or void – a void which is then a to be filled by the reader. […]
> But, even with the desire for all the layers of the book and the self to be peeled off, there can be no final transparency in language or the image or the self for a living writer. There remains the ongoing search for that ultimate transparency in the art of writing, and for the next book. (1999, 295-296)

Another critic who sustains the idea that this novel has autobiographical elements and is presented as a sequence of pictures is Michael Arditti in his "Archaeologist of Gossip:" "The autobiographical impulse has become increasingly urgent now that the

cycle of gay life moves at the speed of time-lapse photography." (05/1997)[3] Moreover, that is a crucial point in his reading of the text: "The central issue in assessing the book is the extent to which the narrator declares himself to be 'an autobiographical novelist' and, although details differ – he publishes various novels for which there is no actual model –, the arc of his experience corresponds closely to White's." (05/1997)

The emphasis on the main character's self-description as somebody corrupt and Arditti's Freudian reading on the incest taboo are elements that will be considered in my own reading of the novel:

> Nevertheless, the attitude of the narrator to his promiscuity is confused. He insists that anonymous sex is not meaningless and that great intimacy is possible. Later, however, he suggests that it has brought him no happiness, and that he has been 'corrupted by a life of pleasure-seeking coarsened by an anarchic indifference to other people's welfare'. In his saddest insight, he implies that the 'incest taboo' at work within homosexuality prevents a successful union of the romantic and sexual bond, and that passion depends on a degree of inequality. (05/1997)

In a review for *The Herald Tribune*, the journalist and critic Katherine Knorr paid special attention to the role of AIDS in the novel as well as to the implication of the character's relatives:

> White manages to make AIDS both a fact and a metaphor, and in so doing to paint his own portrait as a complex and uneasy man and that of a generation of troubled, complicated men who felt they were living a glorious revolution until they started falling one by one. […] If mega-death, in the form of AIDS, overshadows the whole book, it is more ordinary deaths that bring the narrator freedom that ironically comes too late, and bring to a close his tortuous and shame-filled relations with his parents. This family goes to great pains to be "normal" in some cliché way, and yet nobody is. (30/04/1997)

[3] Works quoted from the Internet will have the date of publication since no pages were found in the texts consulted. For the complete reference, please go to Works Cited.

In her review, Knorr relevantly mentions the uneasiness the narrator feels towards his family, and that, in a way, is connected to the idea of not belonging to a group or a community, as we have mentioned in the introduction to this paper.

Life writing seems, thus, to be a topic that most critics highlight when approaching to White's novel. The novelist Gary Zebrun explores the biographical connections between the narrator and Edmund White by means of the characters depicted in the novel:

> The third novel in the trilogy, *The Farewell Symphony*, moves in an almost vortex-like spinning movement. It's crowded with characters, some who pop in quickly and disappear, some thinly disguised literary or artistic friends of renown. It's here that White plays mischief with the Nabokovian view that art is not autobiographical in the simple photographic sense. On the surface it's a roman à clef, and White doesn't hesitate to offer up his friends acquaintances, notably: Eddie, a famous poet (James Merrill); Joshua, a literary scholar (David Kalstone); Max Richards (Richard Howard), another influential poet who helps the narrator in his obsessive drive to get his first novel published; Kevin (Keith McDermott), the actor who shares an apartment on the Upper West Side with the narrator and is the object of his unrequited love; Gabriel (Keith Fleming), the 15-year-old nephew who is saved from a long stay in a psychiatric institution. There are old friends like Maria, his mother and sister, and encounters, through memory or abrupt appearances, with Sean, Dr. O'Really, and others from the past [the previous two novels in the trilogy]. There is the muted presence of his French lover Brice (Hubert Sorin), who reappears as Austin[4], the architect and the focus of White's next novel, *The Married Man*. With this torrent of real people one might wonder where the fiction lies. (2004, 29)

As we can see in the first line of this passage, Zebrun treats *The Farewell Symphony* as the third and last part of a trilogy, whereas in White's official website[5], *The Married Man* (2000) is considered to be the last part of a tetralogy. We think that it is safer to understand *A Boy's Own Story*, *The Beautiful Room is Empty* and *The Farewell Symphony* as a trilogy, since *The Married Man* does not bear the same unnamed narrator as the main character, but Austin. Furthermore, an omniscient – and not a first person – narrator is in charge of fictionalising the story. However, the

[4] The name of this character is mistaken here, the protagonist is called Austin but Sorin's "incarnation" is Julien.
[5] http://www.edmundwhite.com/

resemblances between this new main character and White's relationship with Hubert Sorin are astonishing. Zebrun concludes his discussion on *The Farewell Symphony* – and the other novels in the trilogy – assigning to it a very illustrative metaphor:

> White's creative process in the trilogy is the equivalent of Venice's fluid ambiguity. A novel is both stone and water. The facts of experience are the stones of the city and White's attempt to revisit and reinvent them with all the photographic and manipulative tools possessed by a writer is the water shaping, but never wholly dissolving, the solid. (2004, 30)

"The Dead" is the title of the article that Christopher Benfey wrote in 1997 where he put emphasis on the tragic element of the novel: "By the final pages, as the characters we have met die off one by one, White's unnamed narrator is like Melville's Ishmael, the sole survivor of a cataclysmic wreck." (14/09/1997) As many other critics, such as Gary Zebrun, Benfey is not indifferent to the auto-fictional elements that are scattered all along the text. He finds parallelisms between some of the fictional characters and their real life counterparts:

> White makes no attempt to disguise his characters beyond changing their names, and even the pseudonyms are frequently clues, as when the composer and music critic Virgil Thomson is renamed Homer. Lest we have any doubts that we have misidentified the poet and poetry editor called Tom, White quotes a line ("old, inadequate and flourishing") from one of his poems, which turns out to be Howard Moss's "Menage a Trois." […]
> Two of White's most extended and interesting portraits are of a millionaire poet called Eddie and of the narrator's close friend Joshua […]. Again, White makes no attempt to disguise James (Jimmie to his friends) Merrill or the distinguished scholar David Kalstone. (14/09/1997)

Professor and novelist David Bergman is one of the scholars that has more closely studied Edmund White's works. We owe to him part of a fantastic volume of "The Review of Contemporary Fiction" in which scholars and writers were invited to discuss all of White's fiction and part of his non-fictional works. Unfortunately, that volume was commissioned in 1996, a year before *The Farewell Symphony* was published. Although *The Farewell Symphony* was not present, Bergman has been

studying White's corpus for years. His main concern on White's oeuvre is the auto-fictional side of his writings:

> […] for White, the line between fiction and nonfiction has always been thin. His novels from the very beginning are marked by the same anthropological examination of cultural performance as his nonfiction, and his nonfiction has been treated with the linguistic flair for the resonant metaphor and the baroque turn of phrase one finds in his fiction. (22/09/1996)

Bergman connects in an interesting fashion Foucaultian ideas of power and knowledge with the concept of innocence:

> White, who was a student and friend of Foucault, often plays around with the Foucaultian (and Baconian) equation of knowledge-power. The outsider often has more knowledge than the insider, who, because of his privileged position, is blinded to the workings of his own power.
> Innocence is, consequently, a much more problematic concept for White than for others. He has said that all his works are about initiation, those rites of passage that are said to bring boys into the circle of manhood, and its attendant power and hidden knowledge. But because privilege creates a kind of amnesia […] initiation is for White a kind of unknowing, a kind of acquired innocence. […] This portrait of innocence – with all its loss of power – is purchased at the expense of his alien knowledge. The aim of White's characters is to secure enough power through knowledge that they can afford to become innocent. The homosexual yearns for what he believes is, or is told is, the lost innocence of youth, when such innocence is in fact the privileged unknowing of the powerful. […]
> In White's inequality of power and knowledge the reader is placed at a strange and precarious angle that is part of White's elaborate seduction. As readers, we are both innocent insiders and worldy outsiders […]. (22/09/1996)

This has been a quick review of a selection of the most prominent works by scholars that have analysed *The Farewell Symphony*. We have selected these essays due to the importance the already mentioned topics have for our purposes. Most critics and scholars have stressed the ideas of memory, time, auto-fiction, subjectivity or power relations. In this paper, we will continue studying themes such as the idea of memory, auto-fiction and subjectivity and explore other topics such as the aim of writing, survivor literature, melancholia and gender.

3. Methodology: Gay & Queer Studies, Melancholia & Gender.

"Et sé present, / a prop o en la distància, / precís mirall.
Amb infinit / reflex emmirallat / en si mateix,
fins a l'abisme, / la llum ara et travessa / i em diu qui sóc.
Vers l'indosable, / multipliques l'espai / i el temps. / I el jo."[6]

Emili Trapero Torrente

In this section, our main aim is to discuss the theories on which we position ourselves in the way we understand homosexuality. From that general framework, we will proceed to use Sigmund Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) for our analysis of *The Farewell Symphony*. After that, we will introduce an essay by the acclaimed American scholar Judith Butler, "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification" (1997) that will be used in the last part of our analysis of *The Farewell Symphony*.

Although homosexuality is not a new phenomenon in the history of humanity, the way we understand it today – and the way we categorise homosexual subjects in the West – has nothing to do with the way it was or is understood in other historical moments or other contemporary cultures and societies.

There are at least two main reasons that produced a change both in the late 19th century in the manner homosexuality was understood. The first reason was developed by the French historian Michel Foucault. In his celebrated *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction* (1976), he sustained that we can speak about homosexual subjects after the publication of Westphal's article in 1870 when he uses this word for the very first time:

[6] "Identitats" in http://emili-trapero.blogspot.com/

> We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized – Westphal's famous article of 1870 on 'contrary sexual sensations' can stand as its date of birth – less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and the feminine in oneself. (43)

In Foucaultian terms, we should understand that homosexuality is a modern concept, that the homosexual subject or the homosexual identity had been created in the late 19th century. Before that, it would be more accurate to speak of homosexual acts, or same-sex relationships. He argues that sexual acts did not define the subjectivity of a person. Foucault has worked with the idea that a subject is defined when there are discourses that categorise and shape him or her. If we read homosexuality from this perspective, we will contemplate a new kind of subject when the homosexual is considered to be a patient by psychiatry, a criminal by civil law, and a sinner by religion. White comments on this account in reference to his childhood in the 50s American mid-west and his youth in the 60s: "At that time [pre-Stonewall] we perceived ourselves as separate individuals at odd with society because we were 'sick' (the medical model), 'sinful' (the religious model), 'deviant' (the sociological model) or 'criminal' (the legal model)" (1980, 70)

The second reason that produced a change in the understanding of homosexuality took place towards the end of the 19th century. The scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her "Epystemology of the Closet" (1990) emphasises the privacy and mutability that had surrounded anything related to same-sex sex up to the second half of the 19th century. As far as Sedgwick is concerned, this comes to an end when Lord Alfred Douglas publicly sustained at Oscar Wilde's trial for indecency in London in 1894 that "he himself was the Love that dare not speak its name" (1990, 49). In some other words, before that turning point sexual acts had not been discussed aloud and they were treated as taboo topics.

Decades have passed and, progressively, the homosexual person has won agency in the way s/he is defined. The Stonewall riots in June 1969 were a landmark for the homosexual subject. At that point, gays and lesbians, who had seen themselves as part of a minority, realised they could also be part of a community. (White 1980, 69)

Another interesting idea that we would like to emphasise is the historical conflation of sex with sexuality and with gender. Traditionally a heterosexual sexuality was assumed to be the only possibility for the two given sexes, neglecting other sexualities – bisexual or homosexual.

Judith Butler revolutionised the academic world when she published *Gender Trouble* (1990), a text that is considered to be one of the touchstones in Queer Theory. Even though our paper deals mainly with gay representations and therefore with the presentation of identities, we cannot omit the great contribution that the rise of Queer Theory has represented with its questioning and even deconstruction of those very same identities. The Australian scholar Annamarie Jagose defines Queer Theory as follows:

> Broadly speaking, queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability – which claims heterosexuality[7] as its origin, when it is more properly its effect – queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. Institutionally, queer has been associated most prominently with lesbian and gay subjects, but its analytic framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery. (1997, 3)

This paper responds to the philosophy of Gay Studies, but these studies have been very much influenced by the contributions of Queer Theory. Judith Butler questions

[7] However, we cannot forget that heterosexuality was created as a response to the 19th century newly coined homosexuality. (Katz 1983, 147-150)

the equation sex=gender=desire by distinguishing sex from gender. Sex has traditionally been defined in biological terms, representing the biological difference between a male body and a female body, whereas gender is a cultural construction. Gender should therefore not be understood as a fixed concept or as a direct result of sex: "If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way. Taken to its logical limit, the sex / gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders." (1990, 9) There is no reason to think that the two sexes lead to one type of sexuality, heterosexuality, so we think of sexuality beyond heteronormativity.

This line of argumentation by Foucault, Butler, Sedgwick and other critics, constructionism, differs from essentalism:

> Whereas essentialists regard (homosexual) identity as natural, fixed and innate, constructionists assume identity is fluid, the effect of social conditioning and available cultural models for understanding oneself. […]
> Essentialists assume that homosexuality exists across time as a universal phenomenon which has a marginalised but continuous and coherent history of its own. Constructionists by contrast, assume that because same-sex sex acts have different cultural meanings in different historical contexts, they are not identical across time and space. (1997, 8-9)

Edmund White's range of homosexual male characters is varied – we find arty gays, muscled gays, blue-collar gays … –, those characters do not seem to move in the wide range of possible gender representations. Most of these characters, even though their appearance may be different, are alike in the sense that all are masculine, which seems to be an essential characteristic in the representation of gay characters in White's novels. There are no transsexuals or transgenders in White's works. They all seem to be masculine men in constant struggle to change their condition of homosexual or at least trying to accept themselves. The narrators of the three auto-

fictional novels feel uneasy with their homosexuality and have internalised homophobia. On the problem of coming into terms with homosexuality, White writes in one of his early essays "The Gay Philosopher" (1971):

> Of course we've all heard of extravagant claims of psychiatrists who've 'cured' scores of homosexuals. But I've never met one.
> But I repeat, almost all people I know feel that they never chose to be either homosexual or heterosexual, and many gay men have chosen to be straight, but to no avail. I myself came out when I was twelve, but I was horrified at myself and I regarded this boy who laid elaborate traps to snare men as a stranger, a sleep-walker, someone else. (4)

This kind of understanding homosexuality is a constant in White's work. On the one hand, his characters have not chosen to be gays and live with a big burden, a sense of isolation. They are characters who would have preferred to be heterosexuals and in many cases they are looking for a 'cure.' The characters' relation with their own sexuality is never comfortable.

Up to this part of this section, we have primarily dealt with contemporary critics that have helped us to define concepts such as homosexuality and gender. Their theories are the framework that we use to position ourselves when discussing gay subjectivity. But from these general theoretical considerations, let us move to the discussion of the essays that we will use in order to analyse *The Farewell Symphony*: on the one hand Sigmund Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" and, on the other hand, Judith Butler's "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification."

Even though we will not discuss the way Freud understood homosexuality – that is the reason why we have not started with Freud in this section –, we will use one of his essays for the analysis of the main character / narrator of *The Farewell Symphony*. "Mourning and Melancholia" is a very absorbing essay that attempts to define and diagnose a melancholic subject. Even though we will not take the text as an ultimate truth or in a strictly clinical way, it is one of the aims of our paper to see if

the main character and narrator of *The Farewell Symphony* can be defined as melancholic – or as a mourning person – following Freud's lines of argumentation. We will discuss this essay in more depth in the following section.

I was very much surprised to learn that Freud did not understand homosexuality in negative terms. In some other words, he did not consider it to be an pathology. On the contrary, he saw homosexuality as another possible behaviour within the sexual aberrations (Abelove 1986, 382). Interestingly enough – a bit in the line of Queer Theory, even though that would be an anachronism –, Freud believed that people were born bisexual and by means of different psychological developments within the family subjects, finally fell into a heterosexual category or a homosexual one (Freud 1905, 7).

Going back to our analysis of White's novel, if the character happens to be melancholic in a Freudian sense, then we will try to find the reasons why that is the case. Again, we will make use of Butler's work, in this case an essay entitled "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification" (1997). Butler explores the melancholic relations that are produced in gender formation, basing her analysis on Frued's "Mourning and Melancholia" and *The Ego and the Id*. She starts her essay by introducing these relations:

> It may at first seem strange to think of gender as a kind of melancholy, or as one of melancholy's effects. But let us remember that in *The Ego and the Id* Freud himself acknowledged that melancholy, the unfinished process of grieving, is central to the formation of the identifications that form the ego. Indeed, identifications formed from unfinished grief are the modes in which the lost object is incorporated and phantasmatically preserved in and as the ego. (132)

Butler explains this relation of identification with the lost object, following Freud's line of thought:

> Insofar as identification is the psychic preserve of the object and such identifications come to form the ego, the lost object continues to haunt and inhabit the ego as one of its constitutive identifications. The lost object is, in that sense, made coextensive with the ego itself. Indeed, one might conclude that melancholic identification permits the loss of the object in the external world precisely because it provides a way to preserve the object as part of the ego and, hence, to avert the loss as a complete loss. […] Giving up the object becomes possible only on the condition of a melancholic internalization or, what might for our purposes turn out to be even more important, a melancholic *incorporation*. (134)

Her analysis primarily focuses on heterosexual gender formation. For instance, for a girl to become feminine, she has to follow a process of internalisations and refusals. First of all, she is to refuse the homosexual love of her mother. In Freud's line of argumentation that rejection would paradoxically lead to the incorporation of that object of desire. A melancholic identification is produced in the subconscious when the object of desire is disavowed.

> Consider that gender is acquired at least in part through the repudiation of homosexual attachments; the girl becomes a girl through being subject to a prohibition which bars the mother as an object of desire and installs that barred object as part of the ego, indeed, as a melancholic identification. Thus the identification contains within it both the prohibition and the desire, and so embodies the ungrieved loss of the homosexual cathexis. If one is a girl to the extent that one does not want a girl, then wanting a girl will bring being a girl into question, within this matrix, homosexual desire thus panics gender. (136)

After the process that goes from homosexual attachment, to refusal and simultaneous internalisation, the girl will turn to the father as the object of desire. The "normal" process would be completed when she is able to abandon that one masculine object and transfer the desire onto another man, becoming a feminine heterosexual woman.

The logic of this heterosexual outcome is derived from a melancholic relation with homosexuality:

> If we accept the notion that heterosexuality naturalizes itself by insisting on the radical otherness of homosexuality, then heterosexual identity is purchased through a melancholic incorporation of the love that it disavows: the man who insists upon the coherence of his heterosexuality will claim that he never loved another man, and hence never lost another man. That love, that attachment becomes subject, as it were;

> it is an identity based upon the refusal to avow attachment and, hence, the refusal to grieve. […] What ensues is a culture of gender melancholy in which masculinity and femininity emerge as the traces of an ungrieved and ungrievable love; indeed, where masculinity and femininity within the heterosexual matrix are strengthened through the repudiations that they perform. In opposition to a conception of sexuality which is said to "express" a gender, gender itself is here understood to be composed of precisely what remains inarticulate in sexuality. (139-140)

Although Butler focuses on heterosexual gender formation, she also works on the formation of a gay identity and the melancholic relation that is produced when the gay or lesbian subject rejects heterosexuality:

> Within the formation of gay and lesbian identity, there may be an effort to disavow a constitutive relationship to heterosexuality. When this disavowal is understood as a political necessity in order to *specify* gay and lesbian identity over and against its ostensible opposite, heterosexuality, that cultural practice paradoxically culminates in a weakening of the very constituency it is meant to unite. […] Moreover, a full-scale denial of the interrelationship can constitute a rejection of heterosexuality that is to some degree an identification *with* a rejected heterosexuality. Important to this economy, however, is the refusal to recognize this identification that is, as it were, already made, a refusal which absently designates the domain of a specifically gay melancholia, a loss which cannot be recognized and, hence, cannot be mourned. For a gay or lesbian identity position to sustain its appearance as coherent, heterosexuality must remain in that rejected and repudiated place. Paradoxically, its heterosexual *remains* must be *sustained* precisely through insisting on the seamless coherence of a specifically gay identity. (148-149)

The question that arises from this reasoning is what happens when we have a gay masculine subject as the narrator of *The Farewell Symphony*. The most interesting aspect of Butler's argumentation is the idea of melancholy as part of the process of gender formation. The goal of analysing Butler's study is to check if we can see traits of this gay melancholia formation in the narrator / main character of White's novel.

That would make us shift the direction of our question on the origins of the melancholic state of the narrator, since those origins may not necessarily be found in the horror of the effects of AIDS on his friends, lovers, and himself, but in the formation of his subjectivity as a gay man.

4. The Aim of Writing:

4.1. Edmund White: Why does he Fictionalise?

Edmund White has declared on several occasions that *The Farewell Symphony* is the third part of a trilogy of auto-fictional novels[8]. If we look for the correspondences between his life and his first person narrators' life[9], we will understand why he repeatedly sustains that those novels are autobiographical. The line that distinguishes White from that unnamed narrator is quite narrow at times. In the state of the art section we have seen examples on this account. Now, let us start this new part of this paper posing the following questions: What is the aim of writing for Edmund White? What does he want to convey in his work?

Whereas in this part we want to focus on the author of *The Farewell Symphony*, Edmund White – a prolific essayist who has also given numerous interviews, – the following section will attempt to answer those questions analysing the narrator's voice.

By doing this, the slippery border between what the author of *The Farewell Symphony* and the fictional writer *in* the novel will be remarked. White himself clarifies the auto-fictional issue in a short introductory note to the novel:

> *The Farewell Symphony* is an autobiographical novel. Although its action parallels many of the events in my life, it is not a literal transcription of my experience. The characters are stylized versions, often composites, of people I knew in those years. Sometimes I have used Proust's method of merging or mitosis, i.e. condensing two people into one or distributing the traits of one person over two or more characters.

[8] For further information on auto-fiction or life writing go to:
JOLLY, Margaretta (ed.) (2001). *Encyclopedia of Life Writing. Autobiographical and Biographical Forms. Volume 1. A-K.* Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers. And, *JOLLY, Margaretta (ed.) (2001). Encyclopedia of Life Writing. Autobiographical and Biographical Forms. Volume 2. L-Z.* Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers.

[9] In my opinion, the narrator of the three auto-fictional novels, *A Boy's Own Story* (1982), *The Beautiful Room is Empty* (1988) and *The Farewell Symphony* (1997), correspond to the same persona.

> These changes have been made to protect the privacy of people living – and mostly dead – but also to give a coherent shape to so many destinies. (1997: unnumbered page)

The Farewell Symphony is introduced by a 15th century poem written by the Catalan-language poet Ausiàs March "Qui no és trist, de mos dictats no cur (o en algun temps que sia trist estat)[10]" (1997: unnumbered page). This introductory poem addresses the readers: those who are sad or have been sad will be able to decode the message encoded in this text. As we can see, an element of great importance is introduced: the author is seeking empathy from the reader. But because at this point the narrator has not introduced himself yet, the quote can be read as introduced by Edmund White rather than by his character.

As for the target readership of this novel, Edmund White stated in his essay "The Personal is Political:" "If previously I'd written for an older European heterosexual woman, an ideal reader who helped me to screen out in-jokes and preaching to the converted, I now pictured my reader as another gay man." (1994, 372) In the 2007 edition of his autobiography, *My Lives* (2005), he repeats this shift of target readers. The reasons for it are to be found after he was diagnosed HIV-positive and all his friends started to die of AIDS: "Later, when the AIDS epidemic made me feel isolated from everyone, I began to write to my fellow gay men, obviously an endangered species. I wanted to reach from my isolation into theirs, express my grief and hope that sharing it would ease someone else's burden and bring comfort back to me." (2007, 6) After reading these passages, March's poem becomes all the more poignant. At the time those losses were taking place, White confessed in an essay entitled "Esthetics and Loss" (1987): "I feel very alone with the disease. My friends are dying." (217) From these two sentences, we can read that the fact of being gay

[10] "Only those who are sad or else have been sad at some time need bother with my work." Translated by Edmund White in *The Farewell Symphony* (1997).

was not the only cause of alienation in White's life. AIDS had a big impact in his way of perceiving the world and his relation to it, not to mention his literary production. Some years later, in his essay "Out of the Closet, on to the Bookshelf" (1991) he commented on the effect AIDS had on the cultural milieu: "For me these losses were definitive. The witnesses to my life, the people who had shared the references and sense of humor, were gone. The loss of all the books they might have written remains incalculable." (277) From these quotations we can perceive the ostracising effect AIDS had on White's life. The poem by Ausiàs March is the clue to think that he wrote this novel in order to share his suffering, not to feel so lonely with his pain. We have to bear in mind that at the time of writing *The Farewell Symphony*, White had lost his lover Hubert Sorin (Barber 1999, 237), probably, one of the most important persons in his entire life (Barber 1999, 186).

Deborah Lee Ames has written on the relation between survival and life writing – or auto-fiction[11] –. The fact that a person undergoes a traumatic experience and survives can be one of the reasons why that individual is compelled to write in an autobiographical way:

> To have survived an event may imply that others did not; consequently, many survivors' life writings memorialize or commemorate friends and loved ones. Survivors' life writing may offer testimony concerning the event survived and may express the desire to spare others what they themselves have suffered. […] Autobiographers[12] frequently express their anguish that they are alive while others are not, and, because of the losses incurred through the trauma and its long-term aftershocks, their writings are often characterized by conflict, anger, guilt, painful memories, and unfinished mourning. (2001, 855)

In my opinion, and following Lee Ames's argumentation, White can be seen as a clear example of survivor life-writing. All these considerations made me come to the

[11] In this paper, both concepts, auto-fiction and life writing, will be used as synonyms.
[12] From my viewpoint, this can also be said of novelists writing auto-fictional works, as in the case of White.

conclusion that Edmund White writes, apart from worldly needs such as earning his living, as a therapeutic exercise. In an interview with Jordan Elgrably in 1988, White declared about the fact of using an adult narrator's voice to explain that narrator's childhood in *A Boy's Own Story*:

> There is something crucial about the relationship in that book, for me, between the narrator and the younger self. I call it the pederasty of autobiography; the older self actually loves the younger self in a way the younger self never could have felt or accepted at the time. There is a kind of lapse in time in self-approval. One is filled with self-loathing at sixteen but when one is forty one can look back with this kind of retrospective affection at the younger self – which is very curative. (64)

The way in which I understand curative is in quite a therapeutic manner. That is to say, "curative" as an exercise that can make that adult self come to terms with his child self by means of fiction. However, if we closely analyse White's work and if we pay special attention to his own statements along the years, he does not seem to consider writing as a therapeutic exercise. What is more, he does not believe in psychoanalysis as a kind of therapy, even though he has been psychoanalysed for decades. In the same interview White sustains that fiction and therapy such as psychoanalysis belong to total different realms: "I would say that writing, in its own way, is a rival to therapy. You should recognize that literature is a separate province. It has its own rules. It cannot be simply an embodiment of Freud's notions on human nature, for otherwise it will soon seem hopelessly dated and hollow." (1988, 67) White seems to be quite sure that writing as therapy and fiction are absolutely separate realities. So, why does he write in an auto-fictional way?

On the relation between autobiography and fiction, White sustains that when writing fiction – even though, he defines this novel as autobiographical –, he has all the freedom to write as he pleases, whereas, when he was writing his autobiography he had felt compelled to write in a truthful fashion. In a public conversation at the

New York Public Library with his friend the novelist Joyce Carol Oates, White mentions:

> […] I guess I felt that when I wrote something called an autobiography [*My Lives* (2005)], I'd try to be as truthful as possible, and I would call people up and try to check dates and facts and things. Whereas when I wrote my autobiographical novels, I felt like I had all the freedom in the world. […] It seems to me there's something generic about fiction, that in fiction you really do try to find characters who are somehow representative of a time or of a moment in history, and people review in that way, too. I mean, people say, "White obviously embraces the Freudian theory of homosexuality, because he has in this book an oppressive mother and absent father." Well, that never entered in my mind. But that is the way people review, and it's the way people read fiction, because fiction is supposed to somehow be representative or generic, whereas in an autobiography you let a person be just as eccentric as they really are. (Edmund White & Joyce Carol Oates 2007)

Once more, he rejects any possible relation between Freud and fiction, though he allows readers to do as many readings as they please. Our initial hypothesis that, in spite of denying it, White writes in an exercise of therapy is strengthened when we read what he stated in the 2007 edition of *My Lives.* About the motive for writing the chapter "My Master" (2005, 221-261), we believe that the aim of writing that chapter could be applied to his whole auto-fictional work:

> If someone else's prose isn't always surprising me and destabilizing me I quickly tire of it; I like even the simplest sentences to go off in at least two directions and to emit a spark.
> Why? Part of the urge must be literary exhibitionism (in real life I'm much more staid, but on the page I like to be daring). Another aspect of the urge is that all my life I've been trying to normalize subjects (like being gay in the 1950s) – subjects that at the time seemed outrageous but that in the long run have come to be widely accepted. But perhaps the main reason I wrote that chapter was as therapy – a way of staying afloat after a painful breakup when I feared I was losing my mind or at least sinking into deep depression. […] I felt that if I wrote as fast as I could I might stay sane. […] so once again I started writing and writing. […] Now with "My Master" once again I was writing to stay sane.
> Of course people make fun of therapy as a motive for writing, and many creative writing teachers will wince and roll their eyes if a student mentions maintaining sanity as a reason to work on a story. But why not? I suppose that loss of artistic control is usually cited as a reason not to purge on the page, or the critic fears that the suffering writer will be guilty of a loss of objectivity or self-indulgence. We're told that we shouldn't write in the heat of passion or too close to the event. We must let our feelings settle and take shape. Why?
> I would suggest that most autobiographical writing runs the risk of seeming over-the-top in just such ways. I figured that my own work had always been almost icily under

> control and that testing my balance in this one chapter might produce interesting results. (2007, 7-8)

In my opinion and in spite of White's evidence in his statements about his own writing, therapy is one of the main reasons why Edmund White fictionalises. The idea that he can "remain sane" is one of the premises for his writing. He has been trying all his life to come to terms with his own homosexuality. What is more, he has been attempting to establish a dialogue with his parents that, maybe, he could not maintain in real life. When all his friends and lovers were dying he used the art of writing as a way of sharing his pain with others. For this latter reason, he is not a writer who keeps his manuscripts to himself, but one who wants to share what he feels with other people, "total strangers." White is considered to be one of the leading gay contemporary writers. This important role gives him another reason to write, as the spokesperson of a community. As has been mentioned above, he has been writing for years on the normalisation of the homosexual subject and is now one of the most important voices that the Post-Stonewall generation has produced. What is more, his work is the testimony of a time and it has helped shape the contemporary gay subject.

4.2. Why does the Narrator/Main Character Write?

4.2.1. The Title: Writing as Homage/ Survivor Literature

What is the narrator's goal for writing? The first page of the book – which is not part of the main text – reads as follows: "*The Farewell Symphony*, named after the work by Haydn in which the instrumentalists leave the stage one after another until just a single violin is still playing, is the story of a gay man who has outlived most of his friends." (White 1997, unnumbered page). This can be read as an external guideline to the way the novel should be understood. At the end of the paragraph, there is no signature, and we cannot be sure whether White himself, an editor or White's fictional persona is the author of those lines. In any case, the reader is led to understand the title as a metaphor of art as a poignant witness to the disappearance of a collective.

The Farewell Symphony was composed by Joseph Haydn in 1772. The original name of this piece was Symphony No. 45 in F-sharp minor, and it was written to be played by two oboes, a bassoon, two horns, and strings – violins divided into two violas, cellos and double basses –.[13] Haydn wrote this piece for his patron, Prince Nikolaus Esterházy, from Eisenstedt. The composer was part of his court and belonged to the orchestra that played at the Prince's summer residence in Eszterhaza – Hungary. Towards the end of one summer, the Prince announced that they would stay longer in that residence than expected. Most of the members of the orchestra had left their wives in Eisenstadt, and they wanted to go back with them to their homes. For this reason, Haydn thought about writing this piece, in order to hint at the Prince that what the orchestra and himself wanted to do was to go back home. He did that in the

[13] For more information about Haydn's The Farewell Symphony see MORDENN, Ethan. (1980) *A Guide to Orchestral Music: The Handbook for Non-Musicians*. New York: Oxford University Press.

final adagio, when one by one, each musician stopped playing. They would blow out the candle that was placed in the music stand, would stand up and leave the stage one at a time. At the end, there were only three musicians left on stage – one of the musicians was Haydn himself and the third person, the concertmaster –. The subtle message was understood by Prince Esterházy. As a consequence, the following day after the performance, he and his court returned to Eisenstadt. (Mordenn 1980, 81-82)

Edmund White adopted this anecdote to reflect the tragedy of a generation of gay men. In both the text and the composition, there is a group of people who will be drastically diminished. Finally, we have just two violinists left in the case of the symphony and one person in the case of the novel, one single survivor. Consequently, the narrator becomes that "gay man who has outlived most of his friends," after losing all his queer friends and acquaintances, and he will be the one to remain at the end. The narrator becomes one of the violinists who are left on stage, playing on their own. Presumably, for dramatic reasons, White speaks of just one violinist that is left on stage, as Christopher Benfey points out (14/09/1997). In my opinion, the solemnity, the elegiac tone, and the refined atmosphere that classical music transmits is another element that White might have thought about when giving such a resonant title to his novel.

Coming back to the narrator, he becomes the witness to that generation of artists, friends and lovers, who will succumb to AIDS. Although the main character announces that his status is HIV-positive, he does not undergo the same fate as his contemporaries, becoming instead the survivor whose aim it to tell the story of those who have died so that those losses are not forgotten. By means of this text, the narrator tries to explain and justify his own survival. By the end of the novel, the title

is justified in the voice of the main character / narrator when he himself establishes the already mentioned parallelism between Haydn's symphony and his own story:

> I was silently horrified that things had gone so far and that, in the few weeks since I'd stopped phoning, Joshua had become blessed out and demented, bedridden and diapered, and that this preference for freesias was now referred to in the past tense. I kept on thinking of Haydn's The Farewell Symphony. In the last movement more and more of the musicians get up to leave the stage, blowing out their candles as they go. In the end just one violinist is still playing. (White 1998, 494)

On the first part of this paragraph, the narrator mentions his beloved friend Joshua. The fact that most of these people were still young makes all those losses even more tragic to the eyes of the reader.

Up to a certain point, that is the light in which this text should be considered. The cultural loss that has been produced due to AIDS is tremendous. As a matter of fact, most of those who die in the text were important poets, scholars, writers, painters, photographers, actors, dancers, etc. Both White and the narrator speak of those losses using a nostalgic tone. One of the aims of the text is to make the reader aware of the fatal consequences that AIDS has had not only on the gay community, but also in the world of art and culture in general.

As we have already mentioned, the main character / narrator introduces himself as a writer from the very first line. "I'm beginning this book on All Saints' Day in Paris, six months after Brice's death." (White 1997, 1) As we can see, the fact that the novel begins to be written on that precise day reinforces the idea of the aim of writing this novel as a kind of homage to the lost generation that will be introduced later on in the text. However, we are not told anything yet of any lost generation. Firstly, we are told about a character named Brice and who was the narrator's partner: "The day Brice was interred, there were only four other niches occupied along this whole wall. Now it's filling up quickly – at least two hundred newcomers have

arrived in the last six months […] I imagine they died of AIDS, too." (White 1997, 1-2). Brice died due to AIDS as all those other young men were dying. Although the aim of the writer is to pay homage to all his friends and lovers who are dying, the narrator has another aim in mind and that is to write about his dead lover, Brice. He would like to make him live in those pages he writes, to give him immortality by means of literature.

> Everything I'd lived through in the last five years had changed me – whitened my hair, made me a fat, sleepy old man, matured me, finally, but also emptied me out. I met Brice five years before he died – but I wonder whether I'll have the courage to tell his story in this book. The French call a love affair a "story," *une histoire*, and I see getting to it, putting it all down, exploring it, narrating it as a challenge I may well fail. If I do fail, don't blame me. Understand that even writers, those professional exhibitionists, have their moments of reticence. (White 1997, 2)

As we can see, the narrator writes this text in order to tell the story of his lover and their affair, their *histoire*. But, at the same time he doubts whether he will be strong enough to tell it. By the end of the text, we realise that he has not been able to tell Brice's story, given that his dead partner is almost absent from it. In a way, he fails. He is not able to overcome the death of this person, if we understand that "to narrate" is therapeutic when recovering from a loss. In chapter eleven, he describes the way in which Brice died, but he is not able to continue narrating the story. In our opinion, this is one of the high points of the text:

> I can't go on. I can't tell this story, neither its happy beginning nor its tragic end, the all-night ride through the snowy Atlas mountains in a freezing ambulance, Brice's angry hateful words to me, the look of his face, dead when I awakened at dawn, his mouth open, his eyes startled, as though he'd seen something dreadful and I'd not been there, conscious, to share it with him – (White 1997, 502)

As he mentions at the beginning of the novel, he is not courageous enough to tell the whole story. We immediately empathise as readers with that impossibility and understand how painful it might be to lose most of one's friends and one's partner due

to the same cause. In our interpretation, he feels guilty for not being able to do anything to change the destiny of these people. In the passage just quoted we can see how he alienates from his partner. Even though both were HIV-positive, the different stages of their illness opened a big gap between them. Moreover, the suffering is undergone individually.

If we relate the idea of writing with the title of the novel and the idea of tribute, we can understand the text as a kind of tomb where most of these people are buried. Or, if we want to put it in a more positive way, the novel is a "place" where all of them can go on living. The next passage shows how the metaphor of the novel as a memorial is sustained. The narrator humbly questions his own capacity to carry out this delicate enterprise: "I wanted to build a monument of words for Joshua, big and solid, something that would last a century, although I doubted I had the ability." (1997, 499)

Whereas it is true that he cannot make his ex-boyfriend live in his novel, he has managed to re-create Joshua and other characters. The text becomes, thus, a sacred object, a place where all those people survive in the form of letters, refined sentences, evocative and precious passages. These human beings survive in literature:

> Brice died almost ten years after Joshua, and it was only then that I understood this need to believe the dead go on living, somewhere, at least for a while. In medieval churches the lord and his lady are represented by tomb sculptures that show them as they were at age thirty, no matter how old they were when they died. Thirty was considered the ideal age and the resurrection was supposed to find their bodies perfect. Brice was only thirty-three when he died, but a very, very old thirty-three – three times older: ninety-nine. (White 1997, 500)

As we have said in the previous section, even though we want to establish clear-cut differences between the narrator and Edmund White, we cannot omit the fact that sometimes their opinions seem to merge. Some of the narrator's ideas can be said to be White's, because they were uttered in interviews or written in articles by the

writer. As the creator of the narrator, White sometimes expresses his way of thinking through him, although that is not always the case. As far as writing as a therapeutic exercise is concerned, the narrator recommends his mother to writer in order to assimilate all the traumas she has suffered: "I encouraged her to write. 'That will help you to integrate all the traumas you've sustained recently. Writing is a way of re-asserting the mastery of the ego'." (White 1997, 436)

The theory of survival literature can be perfectly applied to the main character / narrator in the novel, which echoes what we concluded about the figure of the actual author, Edmund White. Furthermore, the narrator as a writer has changed his target reader as White has done in real life. Both of them coincide in the readership they are looking for:

> In the past I'd written for an imaginary European heterosexual woman who knew English but didn't live in America, because she functioned for me as a filter, a corrective. I was afraid of preaching to the converted, of establishing character through brand names, of nudging ribs exactly like my own to provoke predictable laughter, of playfully alluding to shared moments of recent history and of ruing attitudes I could count on other gay men to condemn just as readily as I did.
> Now, the sadness and isolation I felt – as an expatriate, as the survivor of a dead generation, as someone middle-aged in a gay youth culture – made me turn to other gay men, young and old, as my readers. I wanted to belong to a movement that I scarcely understood, for Larry Kramer had called for anger and activism, but I had nothing to offer but grief and helplessness. More exactly, I wanted to see if the old ambition of fiction, to say the most private, uncoded, previously unformulated things, might still work, might once again collar a stranger, look him in the eye, might demand sympathy from this unknown person but also give him sympathy in return. These secret meetings – unpredictable, subversive – of the reader and writer were all I lived for.
> The project seemed hopeless. Gay men of my generation, especially those who'd shared my experiences, were dead or dying. The younger ones, with their shaved skulls, pierced noses, tattoos and combat boots, appeared to belong to another race, militant, even military, too brusque and strident to be receptive to my elegies. (White 1997, 495)

As a conclusion to this section, it can be sustained that the main aim of the narrator is to pay homage to the generation that has succumbed to the outbreak of AIDS in the

80s and 90s. Apart from that, he wants all those people to continue living in the form of literature in the pages of his text.

The aim of this section was to explore the similarities and differences that can be obtained from the study of the actual writer, Edmund White and his fictional persona, the unnamed narrator of *The Farewell Symphony*. Interestingly enough, we have reached to the conclusion that both, the real writer and the narrator, write for rather similar reasons. Their goal of writing coincides when the objective is to pay tribute to a lost generation of gay men – real and fictional. Both of them are survivors of traumatic experiences. Thus, writing becomes the means that help them to remain "sane."

This paper could have concluded in this section, but we wanted to continue analysing the character / narrator of *The Farewell Symphony*. We have considered that studying the narrator is safer than venturing to work with Edmund White, since the former is a fictional persona and the latter is a real person. This gave us the freedom that we needed to suggest that the narrator may be undergoing a state of melancholia, without implying that Edmund White is a melancholic writer. For this reason, the following section will exclusively deal with another possible analysis of the narrator of White's novel.

4.2.2. Is the Narrator Suffering from Melancholia? Writing as Self-Exposure.

In this section, we will attempt another hypothesis that can help us understand why the narrator has set himself the task of writing this text. As we have seen in the previous section, the narrator outlives most of the people he got to know in New York in the 70s when the Gay Liberation movement was taking place. What is more, his lover Brice died six months before he started writing his text. He became an expatriate in some parts of the story, spends a year in Rome and, at the moment of writing the text, is living in France. In all those cases we are speaking about deep losses. Although I am not implying that to lose a lover can be equated to the fact of grieving one's homeland, we would still be dealing with losses.

As we have studied, losses are an essential part of the text. At this point of analysis, we would like to refer to Sigmund Freud's, "Mourning and Melancholia." (1905) In an early reading of *The Farewell Symphony*, we thought that the main character was going trough a period of deep mourning due to all the deaths he had witnessed. The aim of this section will be to see whether the main character is undergoing a mourning process and whether he is melancholic in the Freudian sense of the concept.

Freud thoroughly discussed in his essay the definitions and differences between mourning and melancholia. According to him, mourning can be defined in the following terms:

> Mourning is commonly the reaction to the loss of a beloved person or an abstraction taking the place of the person, such as fatherland, freedom, an ideal and so on. […] It is also most remarkable that it never occurs to us to consider mourning as a pathological condition and present it to the doctor for treatment, despite the fact that it produces severe deviations from normal behaviour. We rely on it being overcome

> after a certain period of time, and consider interfering with it to be pointless, or even damaging. (Freud 1917, 310-311)

However, Freud informs us that subjects do not always overcome this phase. In some cases, instead of the "natural" process of mourning after a loss, some people seem to be predisposed to suffer from a pathological kind of mourning that is denominated melancholia:

> In some people, whom we for this reason suspect of having a pathological disposition, melancholia appears in place of mourning. […] Melancholia is mentally characterized by a profoundly painful depression, a loss of interest in the outside world, the loss of the ability to love, the inhibition of any kind of performance and a reduction in the sense of self, expressed in self-recrimination and self-directed insults, intensifying into the delusory expectation of punishment. (Freud 1917, 310-311)

Having established the difference between mourning and melancholia, Freud presents the reasons that produce them. As for mourning, he theorises:

> […] reality-testing has revealed that the beloved object no longer exists, and demands that the libido as a whole sever its bonds with that object. An understandable tendency arises to counter this – it may be generally observed that people are reluctant to abandon a libido position, even if a substitute is already beckoning. This tendency can become so intense that it leads to a person turning away from reality and holding on to the object through a hallucinatory wish-psychosis […]. Normally, respect for reality carries the day. But its task cannot be accomplished immediately. It is now carried out piecemeal at great expenditure of time and investment of energy, and the lost object is adjusted and hyper-invested, leading to its detachment from the libido. […] In fact, the ego is left free and uninhibited once again the mourning-work is completed. (1905, 311-312)

As for melancholia, Freud expands the above explanation as follows:

> […] In a large number of cases it is clear that it too may be a reaction to the loss of a beloved object […]. The object may not really have died, for example, but may instead have been lost as a love-object […]. In yet other cases we think that we should cling to our assumption of such a loss, but it is difficult to see what has been lost, so we may rather assume that the patient cannot consciously grasp what he has lost. Indeed, this might also be the case when the loss that is the cause of the melancholia is known to the subject, when he knows *who* it is, but not *what* it is about that person that he has lost. So the obvious thing is for us somehow to relate melancholia to the loss of an object that is withdrawn from consciousness, unlike mourning, in which no aspect of the loss is unconscious. (1905, 312)

In this second quotation, we learn that when the lost object is withdrawn from consciousness, that is to say when the loss is unconscious melancholia takes place. Whereas, when the loss is conscious it is mourned in a healthier manner.

Freud emphasises that the main difference that can be found between these two states has to do with self-esteem: "We have a better understanding of this when we bear in mind that mourning displays the same traits, apart from one: the disorder of self-esteem." (Freud 1917, 311)

Our aim is to analyse the characteristics and behaviour of the character / narrator in order to discover whether his characteristics are those of a mourning or of a melancholic subject. As has been introduced above, melancholia is characterised by the diminishing of self-esteem. In our opinion, that is one of the main features that we find in the narrator. According to Freud, that reduction of self-esteem is not only produced in the perception that the affected person has of his / her image, but it is also related to the moral perception that he or she has of him / herself. As a matter of fact, if one of the main features of the main character was his low self-esteem, that would imply that he may be melancholic but not in a state of mourning. Freud sustains on this account:

> The clinical picture of melancholia stresses moral disapproval of the patient's own ego over other manifestations: the subject will far more rarely judge himself in terms of physical affliction, ugliness, weakness and social inferiority; only impoverishment assumes a privileged position among the patient's anxiety. (Freud 1917, 315)

Here we have some examples of how the narrator sees himself in a negative manner, in a combination of both moral and physical disapproval. Let us begin with the way in which he used to understand his homosexuality in his youth. In this quotation, a negative, moralist perception of his homosexual self is given:

> But the homosexual in me, that lone wolf who'd been kept away from the campfire by boys throwing stones, who considered his needs to be perversions and his love to

> be a variety of shame – that homosexual, isolated, thick-skinned, self-mocking, fur torn and muzzle bloody, could only sneer at the incompetence of these heterosexuals in maneuvering their way through disaster. (1997, 106-107)

This revealing passage evidences the "moral disapproval" of the character, one of the main features of melancholia. He depicts himself as a pervert and a shameful, laughable man.

Freud's melancholic subject does not feel worthy of others' esteem because s/he is rather insignificant:

> The patient describes his ego to us as being worthless, incapable of functioning and morally reprehensible, he is filled with self-reproach, he levels insults against himself and expects ostracism and punishment. He abases himself before everyone else, he feels sorry for those close to him for being connected to such an unworthy person. (Freud 1905, 313)

White narrator confesses: "I feared being unworthy of this young man beside me – my cock too small, my breath *corrupt*, my skin clammy with too much experience."[14] (White 1997, 20) In this previous quotation, the narrator describes his breath as "corrupt", and he is unworthy of the love of this other person. Self-hatred becomes part of this melancholic pattern: "I'd felt I was a worm, a sex fiend, someone too ugly and effeminate and fat ever to know love. Then, surprisingly, Sean had fancied me for a moment, without realizing that he wasn't just dating me but rather raising me form one species to another." (White 1997, 34) Again the character does not feel worthy of the love of other people. And if he benefits from that love, as a result, he feels as if he were elevated. Nevertheless, as the narrator recognizes, it is difficult to love others if we, firstly, cannot love ourselves. According to him, the difficulty a gay man found in loving other men was somehow lessened when the Stonewall Uprising took place. After this socio-historical event, gay men realized that they could love other gay men,

[14] The italics are mine.

because they accepted themselves beforehand: “It may seem strange that a three-day riot could affect something so subjective as love, but of course what the Stonewall uprising changed was not love so much as self-esteem, on which mutual love depends.” (White 1997, 34) However, we can see how the narrator’s self-conception has not changed that much along the years:

> I was wounded that he was so desultory in making love. As we’d wanked off he’d continued to look around, I feared, for someone better. Now that I’m fat and in my fifties I go to bed only with men I pay or men who love me or fans and all three categories are usually handsome and are ardent or obliging or at least put on a good show, whereas when I was young and handsome myself, I might occasionally awaken a profound, anonymous desire but more often than not I was treated all too casually, as just one more interchangeable insect milling around the entrance to the average hive. (White 1997, 99)

The character does not seem to be comfortable with the way he looks in any place. If the ideal of masculine beauty is to be built up, he happens to be skinny. However, if the ideal of beauty is supposed to be represented by skinny-muscled men, then, he feels grotesquely built up. When he was not a published writer, he was not handsome enough, but when he became a celebrated writer and the literary milieu in which he moves bears rather low beauty standards, he does not feel handsome anymore.

> When an older guy I’d tricked with a few times before my Roman holiday saw me at the gym, he said, “But you’ve lost your looks. What have you been doing? You’re skinny and puffy, not such a great combination.” My father was right – I was unsavory. (White 1997, 151)

> And then for other writers I had a physical glamor with my drooping mustache, shoulder-length brown hair, huge eyes, slender, muscled body that set me apart, although my looks would have counted as beauty only in a literary milieu, where the standards were so low. Since I’d published nothing I was permitted to be handsome; by the time I became a known writer, ten years later, I was conveniently beginning to lose my looks. (White 1997, 180)

> There’s something much simpler that needs to be said as well: I had no confidence in my looks, in my body, in my sexuality, and I longed for a demi-god to confer desirability on me. Most people who are timid or unsure of themselves probably set their sights low, but bizarrely I courted men far above me. Just as I hoped the publication of a novel would redeem all that I’d suffered and worked for and in one stroke elevate me out of ignominy, in the same way I believed that a great love, magically reciprocated against all odds, would prove to other people, even to me, that

> I was worthy of such distinction. The milieu I lived in of actors and writers, who were used to miraculous changes in status, only encouraged my fantastic ambition in love and art. (White 1997, 273)

It is true that the narrator does not always present himself as someone ugly, but when he represents himself as handsome he does not find that reassuring to his self-esteem. There is always a point in his self-portraits in which he loathes himself:

> I had no wrinkles, no grey hairs, nothing sagged, my hairline was receding only slightly. I was proud of my youth, which had been extended ten years longer than I'd ever expected, but I also saw it as an empty honor, a sign that I was like wax that had not yet been sealed, that had, perhaps, become too cold and hard to take an impression. (White 1997, 392)

Self-exposure is another important characteristic in the melancholic subject and it is crucial for us to understand why he writes. Freud explains this characteristic as follows:

> Finally, we must be struck by the fact that the melancholic does not behave just as someone contrite with remorse and self-reproach would normally do. The shame before others that characterizes the latter state is missing, or at least not conspicuously present. In the melancholic one might almost stress the opposite trait of an insistent talkativeness, satisfaction from self-exposure. (1905, 314)

These "talkativeness" and "satisfaction from self-exposure" are present in the narrator's personality. The narrator is desperately craving to be published because he wants to be read by the greatest number of readers. However, he does not want to be famous, he just wants to expose himself by means of literature. On this account we have several quotations that support this argumentation. In the first fragment, the low self-esteem is linked to that necessity of being published, and the last part is a clear case of self-exposure when using a sexual image to speak about the sources for his fiction:

> I wanted to die. I'd wagered that my life – humiliated, obscured, frustrated – would be redeemed through art, but now I could see that my novel would be despised or ignored, even by other queers, if it were published. […]
> The writer's vanity holds that everything that happens to him is "material." He views everything form a distance and even when the cops arrest him for sucking a cock through a glory hole he smiles faintly and thinks, "Idea for Story." (257)

In the following paragraph, the narrator positions himself as an opponent to his father. A way of doing so is by means of this self-exposing writing that we interpret as a trait of melancholia:

> I wanted to define myself as my father's opposite. Where he was tight-fisted, I'd be generous. Where he was cunning, I'd be guileless. Where he was cautious, I'd be reckless. Where he was intent on preserving his reputation as an upstanding citizen and moral paragon among people to whom he was entirely indifferent, I would lay myself bare in full public view through my exhibitionist writing. (306)

Up to this point we can conclude that the narrator of *The Farewell Symphony* is going through a melancholic stage. The most outstanding traits that Freud introduces in his essay coincide with the behaviour and self-depiction of the main character. As we have seen, the state of the character is maintained all along the novel. So, here we face a problem. If the character is melancholic because he has lost his contemporaries, then his past representation of himself is not supposed to have melancholic features. As we have studied, the character's mood is almost invariable in the text. There are two possible explanations for this inconsistence. In the first place, the narrator is in the present, so taking that into account his tone cannot be that of a non-melancholic person. What is more, he might have a distorted vision of himself in the past because he looks at his past self with melancholic eyes. Melancholy permeates his voice when narrating the past. Secondly, we can find a more complex explanation for his melancholic state and that has to do with his gender construction and it will be dealt with in the next section.

4.2.2.1. Why is the Narrator Melancholic?

In the previous section we came to the conclusion that the narrator of *The Farewell Symphony* is suffering from melancholia – understood in Freudian terms –. As we have suggested, the most evident cause of his state could be found in the series of losses the narrator has had to endure. If that were the case, then we should have two types of characters in the text, a non-melancholic one, before the losses have taken place, and a melancholic character, once the losses have occurred.

The narrator's negative self-depiction and his self-exposure shown in his exacerbated need to be published are present in his narration of both the 70s and 80s. If we understand that the melancholic state is derived from the losses he suffers, then we might expect to find a non-melancholy character before the AIDS epidemic started. As we have seen, the narrator's mood is rather consistent through the decades narrated. For this reason, the metaphor of the photo album may be part of the explanation for the tone of the character. He would be browsing the book, looking from the present at pictures reflecting times past. Every time he lingers at a picture, he remembers those events, those people with grief. In Freudian words, he has not been able to displace his libido from those lost objects of desire. Expanding the process that the melancholic subject experiments, Freud sustains:

> An object-choice had occurred, a bond had been formed between the libido and a particular person; through the influence of a real slight or disappointment on the part of the beloved person, that object-relation had been subjected to a shock. The result of this was not the normal one of the withdrawal of the libido from his object and its displacement on to a new one […].
> The free libido was not, however, displaced on to another object, but instead drawn back into the ego. But it did not find any application there, but served to produce an identification of the ego with the abandoned object. […] Thus the loss of object had been transformed into a loss of ego, and the conflict between the ego and the beloved person into a dichotomy between ego-criticism and the ego as modified by identification. (1905, 316)

The melancholic subject, in this case the narrator, would not be able to withdraw the libido from those objects – his friends and lover – and displace it into a new object. From this explanation we would understand the reason of his self-hatred. Since he internalises those losses, then he blames and punishes himself by means of the way he sees himself. He feels responsible for them, an idea that could be related to the stigma that he has as a survivor.

In her "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification," Judith Butler appropriates Freud's melancholia and accounts for the process of gender formation and heterosexuality by means of a melancholic relation that is established when the subject rejects the homosexual object of desire:

> Consider that gender is acquired at least in part through the repudiation of homosexual attachments; the girl becomes a girl through being subject to a prohibition which bars the mother as an object of desire and installs that barred object as a part of the ego, indeed, as a melancholic identification. […] She must not transfer that homosexual love onto substitute feminine figure, but renounce the possibility of homosexual attachment itself. Only on this condition does a heterosexual aim become established as what some call a sexual orientation. Only on the condition of this foreclosure of homosexuality can the father and substitutes for him become objects of desire, and the mother become the uneasy site of identification. (1997, 136-137)

Butler also explains the process that a masculine man follows in the acquisition of heterosexuality:

> Becoming a "man" within this logic requires repudiating femininity as a precondition for the heterosexualization of sexual desire and its fundamental ambivalence. If a man becomes heterosexual by repudiating the feminine, where could that repudiation live except in an identification which his heterosexual career seeks to deny? Indeed, the desire for the feminine is marked by that repudiation: he wants the woman he would never be. He wouldn't [sic] be caught dead being her: therefore he wants her. She is his repudiated identification (a repudiation he sustains as at once identification and the object of desire). (1997, 137)

Those explanations focus on the heterosexual subject. However, in the novel we are studying, the narrator is a homosexual man. If we followed the same arguments, then

the protagonist of *The Farewell Symphony* would be supposed to experience that first attachment to the mother. The character, then, would identify with his father disavowing the mother as the primal object of desire. A first melancholic relation is established when the first object of desire is lost, but in the case of men that loss is not homosexual. The narrator is supposed to identify with his father and then attempt to find new feminine objects of desire, since he would be looking for that he would never be.

However, the narrator goes trough a totally different process of identifications, rejections and internalisations. He is able to distance from his mother, a first loss is produced, a heterosexual one. In *The Farewell Symphony* the character desires his father but there is a moment when he realises that he cannot posses him and identification with the masculine figure is not produced. The narrator would like to be possessed by his father taking the place of his mother and, then, of his step-mother, as we will see below. From this process we can conclude that his melancholia has two origins: the first one is the loss of heterosexuality. Butler states on the relation between gay identity and heterosexuality: "Within the formation of gay and lesbian identity, there may be an effort to disavow a constitutive relationship to heterosexuality." (148) The second cause of melancholia is the loss at the awareness of the unavailability of his father as a new object of desire. In fact, the narrator does never overcome those losses. That is why we refer to melancholia as the pathologic evolution of mourning. The main character / narrator is melancholic because he has lost heterosexuality and maintains his father as an object of desire never fulfilling his erotic fantasies. In *The Farewell Symphony* he confesses the incestuous desires he feels for his progenitor:

> Or I said he was like my father, a cold, unfeeling man I longed to seduce. At night when I was thirteen I would sit outside my father's bedroom door in the darkened house, hugging my knees, and imagine entering and taking my step-mother's place beside him, a desire I pictured so clearly that I was afraid I might find myself actually doing it. What if at last I could seduce this sleeping, snoring man, who would wake up to find my legs, not his wife's, wrapped around his waist, his hard sex deep in my butt, the sharp dilation of surprise in his eyes quickly clouding over with pure pleasure? (1997, 39)

> Abe said that from everything I'd told him he thought that I was afraid of dying inside while going on living outside – as my father had obviously done. I no longer thought about my father nor did I have any contact with him. I hadn't exchanged a letter or a phone call with him in two years. When I was boy I'd wanted to be his lover; he'd never come through and now I hated him in a cold, denying hatred. I imagined him wondering why I never phoned and feeling too aggrieved to mention it even to his wife, despite the fact she fed his resentments whenever she could. (1997, 305)

Butler also explains the self-loathing the melancholic subject experiences. One of the most prominent features we could find in the narrator – all along the text – is the negation of homosexuality. A characteristic that was found in the character all along the text, as we have seen in the previous section: "If we understand gender melancholy in this way, then perhaps we can make sense of the peculiar phenomenon whereby homosexual desire becomes a source of guilt." (1997, 140)

We can conclude this section suggesting that one of the reasons that provoke the melancholic state of the character are to be found not in his recent past, but in his childhood. The first reason is the loss of heterosexuality, which is refused and incorporated in the self as part of the ego formation in opposition to homosexuality. Butler considers this as an essential step in the formation of a gay identity "For a gay or lesbian identity position to sustain its appearance as coherent, heterosexuality must remain in that rejected and repudiated place. Paradoxically, its heterosexual remains must be sustained precisely through insisting on the seamless coherence of a specifically gay identity". (149) The second reason that causes the melancholic state of the character is the incestuous love that the character feels for his father. Since he is

not able to possess him, he internalises that loss in a melancholic way. He is never able to overcome those losses. Eventually, the result is a melancholic subject.

5. Conclusions

This paper has analysed Edmund White's *The Farewell Symphony* in order to explore why both its writer and its narrator fictionalise. The first section of this paper – the state of the art – explored the work carried out by scholars, critics and reviewers of Edmund White's oeuvre in general and *The Farewell Symphony* in particular. Unfortunately, there are still very few studies of this novel. Stephen Barber has focused on the aspect of memory, following the image of transparency in the text. We have agreed with Michael Arditti in the use of a photographic metaphor in order to understand the text as a whole. Other critics, such as Gary Zebrun and Katherine Knorr, have focused on the auto-fictional elements of the novel and the possible parallelisms between White and his narrator. Christopher Benfey discussed another relevant element, studying the narrator as a survivor, and we also have taken into account David Bergman's considerations on the relationship between innocence and power in previous works by White.

The second section – the methodology – has contemplated different theoretical frameworks that could be used in order to analyse White's novel. We started with general definitions of homosexuality and gender. For this aim, the works of prominent theorists such as Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Annamarie Jagose and Edmund White himself as an essayist were incorporated into our analysis. We then presented Sigmund Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia" as an essential tool in order to determine whether we could speak of a melancholic narrator. Judith Butler's "Melancholy Gender/ Refused Identification" was also introduced as a powerful tool in the analysis of the possible genesis to the melancholic state of the narrator.

The main body of the paper has been divided into two parts. The first one has dealt with the exploration on the possible reasons why Edmund White was compelled to write. After analysing what White himself declared on this account we concluded that therapy could be seen as one of the reasons why he fictionalises. The second part of the section had a double aim, on the one hand to check if the narrator was melancholic according to Freud's notions in his "Mourning and Melancholia," the second one was to explore the reasons that compelled him to write. The first hypothesis discussed in that section was related to the title, and we have agreed that it was plausible to understand the narrator's writing as a way to pay homage to his dead friends and lovers. The main character is the survivor of a traumatic experience, so we can consider his novel as a case of survivor literature.

We have also verified that the narrator fits into the category of the melancholy subject. Since self-exposure and exhibitionism are aspects paradoxically related to this condition, writing could be considered as a feature of his melancholic state. He does writes in an exhibitionist manner, expecting everybody to read his novel as a consequence of his melancholia.

The last section intended to explore the causes of that melancholia, apart from the most evident reasons, such as the loss of his contemporaries. We have used Judith Butler's "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification" as a tool. We have concluded that the character presents melancholic features because he has not overcome the loss of heterosexuality and he has become aware that he cannot be possessed by his father.

We hope this paper contributes, within the field of GLBTTQ Studies, to ask further questions about the reasons why both Edmund White and the narrator of *The Farewell Symphony* are compelled to communicate with us.

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