



**Maria Sofia Pimentel
Biscaia**

**Leituras Dialógicas do Grotesco:
Textos Contemporâneos do Excesso**

**Dialogical Readings of the Grotesque:
Texts of Contemporary Excess**



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Dissertação apresentada à Universidade de Aveiro para cumprimento dos requisitos necessários à obtenção do grau de Doutor em Literatura, realizada sob a orientação científica do Doutor Kenneth David Callahan, Professor Associado do Departamento de Línguas e Culturas da Universidade de Aveiro e da Doutora Maria Aline Salgueiro Seabra Ferreira, Professora Associada do Departamento de Línguas e Culturas da Universidade de Aveiro

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Resumo

Mikhail Bakhtin tornou-se para os recentes estudos linguísticos e literários uma referência fundamental e o seu aclamado *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* representa actualmente uma obra obrigatória do dialogismo e da polifonia. Além de *Das Groteske: Seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung* de Wolfgang Kayser, deve considerar-se *Rabelais and His World* como uma das análises mais significativas na área do grotesco. O presente estudo baseia-se fundamentalmente numa fundamentação bakhtiniana do grotesco que é complementada por perspectivas que se tornam particularmente pertinentes nas áreas literárias em questão, o pós-colonialismo e a literatura feminista / feminina. Entre outros contributos de índole ensaística, encontramos os estudos de Mary Russo, Martha Reineke, Julia Kristeva e René Girard. Lendo dialogicamente as marcas dos textos de obras seleccionadas de Githa Hariharan, Salman Rushdie, Robert Coover, Ben Okri e Angela Carter demonstra-se que o grotesco é não só uma filosofia e estética abundante na literatura pós-colonial e feminista mas também um instrumento político e uma força interventiva na mudança de mentalidades.

Abstract

Mikhail Bakhtin is unquestionably a fundamental reference in contemporary linguistic and literary studies where his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* has become a landmark in the specific fields of dialogism and polyphony. Critics regard *Rabelais and His World* as a ground-breaking study of the grotesque, only equated with Wolfgang Kayser's *Das Grotteske: Seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung*. My analysis is based mainly on a Bakhtinian view of the grotesque which is complemented by perspectives more directly related with the fields in question, postcolonialism and women's literature. Among these are counted Mary Russo, Martha Reineke, Julia Kristeva and René Girard's studies. The dialogical readings of the selected texts by Githa Hariharan, Salman Rushdie, Robert Coover, Ben Okri and Angela Carter reveal that the grotesque is not only a philosophy and aesthetic abounding in postcolonial and women's literature but also that it is a political tool and a powerful intervention force in the ongoing process of changing mentalities.



Dialogical Readings of the Grotesque: Texts of Contemporary Excess

Jury

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1. Introduction

“And if you want to know what impresses me it is to see how you contrive to give over humanity into the clutches of the Impossible and yet manage to keep it down (or up) to its humanity, to its flesh, blood, sorrow, folly. *That is the achievement!*”

Joseph Conrad, letter to H. G. Wells on *The Invisible Man*. Intr. to *The Invisible Man: A Grotesque Romance*. Italics in the text



The Hollow Man came out in 2000 inserted in the revival of monster-based films which has been taking place in recent years. Its principal filmic intertext is the classical *The Invisible Man* (James Whale, 1933) in relation to which it does not, however, try to constitute a remake. The most singular feature of Paul Verhoeven's film resides in its manifest investment in visual horror, which constitutes a paradox considering its simultaneous investment in the resonances of invisibility. Visual horror is firstly presented in the form of animal experiments, put forward specifically through an almost human gorilla. The formula to make oneself invisible is, apparently, not too difficult to attain, unlike the reverse process which had led to the excruciating and visceral deaths of numerous guinea pigs. The underground laboratory is full of disconcerting animal noises, preparing us for the moment the gorilla is going to be submitted to the eagerly awaited for success: before our eyes the skeleton emerges and the organs, tissues and veins become visible as the blood rushes through the body but, before the process is completed, the animal nearly succumbs to the extreme pain and lies incomplete, helplessly open. Another scene putting forward the grotesque/animal link portrays the now invisible Dr Sebastian Caine (Kevin Bacon) gruesomely slaying with his bare hands a friendly dog, an animal the audience is likely to empathise with. This killing previews the cruel and systematic elimination of his research team who refuse to co-operate in his megalomaniac schemes. Particularly gory is the scene in which the team veterinarian, Sarah (Kim Dickens), spreads out blood sacs all over the floor to see the scientist's footprints. This sort of grotesqueness, inspired by and excelling films such as *The Fly* (David Cronenberg, 1986) and *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980) evolves mainly from sickening or abominable images that

shatter any notion of a neat, safe body; instead, the materiality of bodily structures, organic components and viscosity are emphasised¹.

However, in *The Hollow Man*, as in *The Shining*, elements of horror of a distinct nature, but albeit linked in terms of the disturbance caused, were introduced. I refer to the unexpected murdering madness, in Dr Sebastian's case, by reason of an already existing over-egocentric personality which parallels Jack Nicholson's character in *The Shining* (in the latter film madness is accompanied by the supernatural, in itself already a terrifying element). In view of the possibility of acting with impunity, Dr Sebastian begins by satisfying his voyeuristic desires which ultimately evolve to raping inconsequentially and murdering with no remorse². This sort of grotesqueness is characterised by the alienating perception of a once familiar situation, place or person (in this case ex-boyfriend/husband), the expression of a world gone estranged which is suddenly presented as incomprehensible, powerful and even absurd. It represents a reality in transformation where not only social norms but even the laws of the universe do not conform to our knowledge of them and in these contexts it activates the potential of the grotesque in the technological era.

The alienating grotesque has been theorised by Wolfgang Kayser in *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (1957) where he states: “[it is a] fusion of realms which we know to be separated, the abolition of the law of statics, the loss of identity, the distortion of ‘natural’ size and shape, the suspension of the category of objects, the destruction of personality, and the fragmentation of the historical order”³. It belongs to the psychological realm that makes life even more fearful than death. The grotesque is the inexplicable and sinister “it”. The advantage of invoking grotesque art, according to Kayser, is that by doing so the world can be at least imaginatively exorcised of its evilness. Accordingly *The Hollow Man* is not limited to echoing nineteenth century apprehensions in relation to scientific research which then

¹ I am thinking in the first instance of the baboon explosion and of the insect metamorphosis and in the second of the threat of dismemberment and hallucination of the blood wave.

² Besides the resonance of the masterpiece *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) - consider the motifs of the mad murderer, the blonde he craves but wants to kill, and most notably the voyeuristic libidinousness - other connections can be established with the *Alien* series: when Dr Sebastian assumes the position of one of his lab animals he involuntarily condemns himself to confinement and loses control over his life. To regain it he becomes a monster that after escaping those who were involved in his turning into a freak, hides and proceeds to eliminate his enemies one by one. In turn, the medical staff judge their only chance to survive in that secluded, artificial but also dark place (particularly the long corridors), to hunt down the doctor turned predator.

³ Wolfgang Johannes Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (New York and Toronto: McGraw-Hill/Indiana UP, [1957] 1963) 185. Further quotations will be included in the body of the text parenthetically with the abbreviation *GAL* and page reference.

originated the masterpiece *Frankenstein*. It displays science in its evil glory only to have it defeated; Dr Sebastian will be forfeited by the reasonability, resilience *and* love for one another of his fiercest enemies, Linda (Elizabeth Shue) and Matt (Josh Brolin).

In Kayser's opinion all animals are potentially grotesque: "Even in animals that are familiar to him, modern man may experience the strangeness of something totally different from himself and suggestive of abysmal ominousness" (*GAL*, 182). For Dr Sebastian, it is the mutation into that difference, the turning into an animal (in the sense that he volunteers for the experiment), that triggers violence. Moreover it is allied to technical development and whenever a fusion between the organic and mechanical occurs there is the possibility for the grotesque to issue: "[t]he mechanical object is alienated by being brought to life, the human being by being deprived of it" (*GAL*, 183). Dr Sebastian does not actually turn into a humanised mechanism, he turns into an absence, a new kind of monstrosity. Covered in a material designed to imitate skin, he scares two children by removing his sunglasses and by opening his mouth. The horror consists not in what hides behind the mask but in the fact that there is nothing there, only insanity, a primary grotesque experience, "as if an impersonal force, an alien and inhuman spirit, had entered the soul" (*GAL*, 184).

There are three basic ideas which substantiate the grotesque according to Kayser: "The Grotesque is the estranged world", a world suddenly assaulted by unknown forces which erase its reliability and replace it with terror (*GAL*, 184). Our orientation within it becomes impossible: the "it", the Other, dwells amongst us but remains inexplicable, refusing any fixed category of meaning. This leads to the second point, "The Grotesque is a play with the absurd", perhaps arising in mocking or satanic laughter but inevitably degenerating into the loss of gaiety and even of the subject's freedom as s/he is taken over by dark forces (*GAL*, 187). Finally, the grotesque represents "an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world" which was felt more poignantly, Kayser claims, in the sixteenth century, from the *Sturm und Drang* to Romanticism and throughout the twentieth century, ages marked by rupture, in terms of belief and Order, from the preceding periods (*GAL*, 188).

The physical grotesque, however, does not comply with Kayser's devising. Its theoretical ground has been most influentially put forward in Mikhail Bakhtin's study *Rabelais and His World* ([1965]1984), an analysis of the sixteenth century writer's works *Gargantua and Pantagruel* upon which Bakhtin built theories of the carnival body and grotesque realism. He places an idealised form of carnival at the centre of his thought. The purest form of carnival can be found in medieval carnival and festivals, regarded as surviving manifestations of the

Saturnalian golden age from which people gradually grew apart as a result of a repressive official culture. However, a glimpse of the lost perfect state can still be caught in medieval festivals such as the Feast of Fools or the Feast of the Ass on account of the widespread participation of members of all classes, occasions when the fool is a king and the king a clown. In sum, even if it were temporarily, in the participation of the carnival body, seen as living experience and not merely as spectacle, the extremely fragmented medieval social organisation allowed everyone to evade rules, conventions and established truths. It is not difficult to read in this view that the new world arising from the abolition of the restrictions of daily life is deeply engaged in a democratic principle which liberates carnival participants from class, age and (it could be argued) gender status. In this respect, turning the world upside down in favour of a topsy turvy world is a revolution invested with deep optimism:

[E]veryone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part.⁴

Gargantua and Pantagruel's contribution to carnival theory lies in their being loud, lewd and gluttonous giants of excess. Bakhtin draws attention to the fact that Rabelais's obsessive writing of bodily processes and orifices is more than mere play at being bawdy. Scatological and sexual activities of all sorts, from eating, vomiting, sucking, having intercourse, defecating and urinating, level all individuals. Moreover, these activities are celebrations of life that comes in and out through the mouth, eyes, nose, ears, vagina, penis, anus, all channels that release the body of its individuality and link it to the circumambient world. Again, the construction of a grotesque body overcomes any barriers of aesthetics, purity and education and thus of class or of any other marker of difference. Its arch-enemy has been the finished, closed classical body ever since the grotesque axiom came into being when Nero's *Domus Aurea* was excavated in the early sixteenth century bringing to light ornamented grottoes of intertwining plants, flowers topped with figures and animalised humans. The grotesque body in Bakhtinian thought is revitalised, directed away from its inferiority with respect to the spirit, and aims at wholeness, a oneness achieved in the

reaffirmation of its relation with the earth, the place of death but also of equality and union with nature, hence of birth as well. These images which Bakhtin postulates as the premises of the material bodily principle of medieval folk culture are united in a single concept, that of grotesque realism:

The material bodily principle in grotesque realism is offered in its all-popular and utopian aspect [...] as an indivisible whole.

In grotesque realism, therefore, the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earth and the body. [...] The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable. (RW, 19)

In this context, the prime images of grotesque realism are “fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance” (RW, 19) and its vital force “degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity”, the sort of degradation fused with laughter directed at Christian rituals, elitist literature in Latin and the whole class structure (RW, 19-20).

Bakhtin has been criticised for building a utopia and imagining a carnival, that, as he describes, never existed. In other words, a mythology has been created in order to meet his purposes. His theory, as he himself admits, cannot strictly be used in relation to twentieth century artistic and social manifestations (in his view these have been emptied of their folk heritage) and a positive view of the world of grotesque realism is certainly difficult to discern in *The Hollow Man* for instance, except that, unoriginally, love conquers all. But it should not be disregarded altogether by reason of its inestimable interpretative potential. In Verhoeven’s film, the psychological grotesque is not dissociated from images of grotesque realism such as those mentioned at the beginning of this study and, in fact, it can be said to arise from them. Our vision of the world is displaced and our orientation alienated *vis-à-vis* the spectacle of our

⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, [1965] 1984) 7. Further quotations will be included in the body of the text parenthetically with the abbreviation RW and page reference.

fragile corporeality. In this view, the film title is doubly grotesque: Dr Sebastian is hollow in the sense he has no substantiality *and*, in more Kayserian terms, he is dispossessed of his soul; Bakhtin would say the deprivation of bodily materiality does not allow the scientist to participate in the body of the community.

The recurrence of the image of metamorphosis in contemporary cinema and literature is linked to the way it negotiates with both philosophies of the grotesque in an effective manner, as well as to its flexibility at being able to incorporate postmodernist impulses, particularly those related to postcolonial and feminist issues. For Bakhtin, the background of grotesque realism, that of being ambivalent because it is in constant becoming, is intimately related to metamorphosis: “The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming. [...] [An] indispensable trait is ambivalence. For in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of metamorphosis” (RW, 24). Consider this passage from *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie describing Saladin Chamcha’s mutation, the Indian citizen who miraculously survives the explosion of the plane he was travelling on and falls down onto British soil:

[W]hen he saw what lay beneath his borrowed pyjamas, he could not prevent that disbelieving giggle from escaping past his teeth.

His thighs had grown uncommonly wide and powerful, as well as hairy. Below the knee the hairiness came to a halt, and his legs narrowed into tough, bony, almost fleshless calves, terminating in a pair of shiny, cloven hoofs, such as one might find on a billy-goat. [...]

What puzzled Chamcha was that a circumstance that struck him as utterly bewildering and unprecedented - that is, his metamorphosis into this supernatural imp - was being treated by others as if it were the most banal and familiar matter they could imagine. ‘This isn’t England,’ he thought not for the first or last time. How could it be, after all; where in all that moderate and common-sensical land was there room for such a police van in whose interior such events as these might plausibly transpire?⁵

A giggling devil in pyjamas is not a creature for a “moderate” and “common-sensical” country. Or is it? The scene has convincingly been discussed as a metaphor for animalisation, a sort of objectification to which immigrants from former colonies are submitted on their

⁵ Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (Delaware, Dover: The Consortium, 1988) 157-158.

arrival to England⁶. Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, the two Indians who contend throughout *The Satanic Verses*, go through manifest physical changes *after* treading on English ground: Gibreel exhibits a halo and Saladin metamorphoses into a bleating goat. The latter is directed to a sanatorium where he encounters all sorts of zoological humans: a manticore, a water-buffalo woman, Nigerian men with sturdy tails, Senegalese snake-men, a wolf-man, giraffe-necked women, rhinoceros-men and *individuals* partially plant, giant insect, brick and stone, and even glass-skinned. It could be argued that these metamorphoses make visible the type of strangeness and sense of estrangement caused by foreignness and particularly by immigration. They are marks of their difference. However, when goatish Saladin enquires about all these spontaneous mutations the Foucauldian answer he gets is “they describe us [...]. That’s all”⁷. This perspective directs us to a completely different interpretation, that is, that difference is not like a virus waiting to manifest itself but rather an external mapping of bodies. In this view, English moderation and common-sense are mere cultural masquerades so the answer to the question Saladin asks himself had to be that precisely because it is England there is room for this van and its unusual passengers. Therefore, it is not surprising that anglicised and anglophile Saladin refuses to accept the circumstances; it had been to avoid such indistinction and relativism that Saladin had departed from India.

In *The Satanic Verses* Gibreel is more than the good guy and Saladin the bad guy, or actually the other way around as well (the reader seems to be permanently at a loss). Both make up the whole: the opening image - two individuals attached by their navels - is the answer to the vortex-question of the book, “Who am I?”⁸. This realisation possesses resonances in terms of the formulations of postmodernism as devised by Brian McHale who sees its dominant (the Jakobsonian concept of the focusing component of a work of art) as problems of modes of being, in other words, as essentially raising ontological, post-cognitive questions in opposition and consequentially to the epistemological ones of modernism. To illustrate the predicament of the transition from modernism to postmodernism, McHale uses a simple metaphor but one material to our discussion:

The logic of literary history brought writers in various cities - cities in Europe and Latin America as well as in North America - to a crosswalk; when the stoplights changed, they

⁶ See Mark Davies, “Aspects of the Grotesque in Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*”, ed. Alice Mills, *Seriously Weird: Papers on the Grotesque* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), pp. 51-61.

⁷ Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, 168.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

had one of two options, either to remain on this side and continue to practice a modernist poetics of the epistemological dominant (as many of them have done, of course) or to cross to a postmodernist poetics of the ontological dominant. The streets were different, but the *crossing* was the same.⁹

There are three aspects to highlight here. Firstly, the metaphor of the crosswalk implies that the modernist author is the one who stays put, who plays on the safe side by not daring to cross the street. Secondly, that the risk is there either in the form of not being successful among critics or in terms of sales or even in terms of his/her physical integrity. Sadly many are the writers who are forced to change their lives radically because of the provocative content of their writing; Gao Xiangjing, Salman Rushdie, Wole Soyinka and Taslima Nasreem are only some of them. Contrary to the static fictionist, this other type goes beyond, actually makes the crossing and transgresses the discursive limits of her/his work. In this way, the ontological dominant of postmodernism offers a potentially much more hazardous but also fruitful line of work. The third aspect is that the streets being different they lead to different places. One of the points that I suggest in this study is that the grotesque and magical realism are not found separate, each in a distinct place of destination, but rather that *they meet in the crossing*. Therefore, it can be inferred that there undoubtedly is an intangible but irrevocable line between Latin American, North American and European literatures that can manifest itself in grotesque imagery and magical realist discourse, a line that traverses geographical and time barriers.

Stephen Slemon takes advantage of the lack of genre specificity of magical realism, which frequently leads it to be confused with fabulation, metafiction, the fantastic, the uncanny, the baroque or the marvellous, and rather addresses it as a postcolonial mode (engaged specifically in the English-Canadian literary context). He argues that

the concept of magical realism can provide us with a way of effecting important comparative analyses between separate postcolonial literatures, and the belief that magical realism can enable us to recognize continuities within literary cultures that the established

⁹ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987) 11. Italics in the text.

genre systems might blind us to: continuities, that is between present-day magic realist texts and apparently very different texts written at earlier stages of a culture's literary history.¹⁰

In his discussion of the ontological dominant of the fantastic, McHale puts into question Tzvetan Todorov's view of it as a state of texts either of the genre of the uncanny, in which supernatural instances are eventually explained through Reason, or of the genre of the marvellous which accepts the supernatural as such. McHale, as Todorov before him, indicates hesitation as a prime motif of the fantastic, translated in the uncertainty arising out of the existence of two orders of explanation. In terms of Todorov's formulations, the fantastic "essence" is affiliated to the epistemological dominant though that substance is previewed to disappear as eventually, in his view, it disseminates in most contemporary fiction. Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is regarded as the chronicle of a death foretold for the fantastic since, on the one hand, it adopts a tone of banality and, on the other, the sense of hesitation is not felt either by Gregor Samsa or by any other character. But unlike Todorov, McHale asserts the fantastic to be central to the ontological dominant of postmodernism by transferring the hesitation to the reader (it is now up to the latter to make the choice between rationality and the marvellous) and by noting that the characters' lack of shock at the presence of a prowling tiger in a family home, as happens in Julio Cortázar's short story "Bestiario", actually heightens the reader's sense of amazement: "this 'banalization' of the fantastic actually sharpens and intensifies the confrontation between the normal and paranormal"¹¹. Before a situation which is "exaggeratedly normal, normal to the point of boredom [...] any encroachment of the fantastic upon it will be felt as supremely disruptive, provoking the sharpest dialogue between the normal and paranormal"¹². The mutual invasions of worlds or of their representatives give way to a confrontation or zone of hesitation that McHale theorises as the fantastic. Thus, the title of the chapter "A World Next Door".

What seems noteworthy to me is that McHale's numerous examples are frequently taken from postcolonial texts and from generally considered magical realist ones. For instance, to substantiate his point, McHale gives the example of *Midnight's Children* and *Cien años de soledad* whose worlds are invaded by a torrent of supernatural events and beings. Unlike

¹⁰ Stephen Slemon, "Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse", ed. Lois Zamora and Wendy Faris *Magical Realism: Theory, History Community* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995) 409. Italics in the text.

¹¹ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 76-77.

¹² *Ibid.*, 77. Italics in the text.

Todorov who presages the dissolving of the fantastic, McHale formulates the notion of the displaced fantastic, no longer fastened to the genres of the uncanny and the marvellous. Thus, in theoretical terms, the discourses of postmodernism, the fantastic and magical realism can be brought close. Moreover, these discourses may incorporate some of the substance of the academic body of the grotesque. Bakhtin, for instance, refers to Friedrich Schlegel's *Gespräch über die Poesie* (1800) where the latter formulates the grotesque – most often using the term “arabesque” – as the primordial human fantasy characterised by a fantastic combination of dissimilar elements, a complete freedom in the construction of imagetic sets and (in terms similar with Kayser) in the abolition of the established Order.

It was particularly since the 1950s boom of the Latin American novel that postmodernism was systematically associated with notions of magical realism in the sense that the hesitation before a writing not surprised by its own magic resides in the reader. Can one really sublimate love by only consuming tea and soup so that one ultimately dies as does the Platonic lover of Horacio Quiroga's “Dieta de Amor”? Can there be a dirty, bearded angel with broken wings in our own house who offers, as a compensation for taking him in and in response to a request for financial help, death in the love of god (“El Ángel Pobre”, Joaquín Pasos)? Did Remedios really rise up to heaven? (*Cien años de soledad*, Gabriel García Márquez)? Is the reader to laugh or to be appalled? Isabel Allende describes her grandfather Augustin Llonca Cueva as a talented storyteller with a perfidious sense of humour who told flesh creeping stories in bursts of laughter¹³. Another Latin American, Gabriel García Márquez, affirms, centrally to this discussion, that his vocation was found after reading *The Metamorphosis* at the age of seventeen where he found the same way of telling a story of his grandmother, Doña Tranquilina, who “[m]e contaba las cosas más atroces sin conmoverse, como si fuera una cosa qui acabara de ver. Descubrí que esa manera imperturbable y esa riqueza de imágenes era lo que más contribuía a la verosimilitud de sus historias”¹⁴. Though Gabriel García Márquez hesitates with respect to the epithet “magical realist” he readily affirms that “[l]a vida cotidiana en América Latina nos demuestra que la realidad está llena de cosas extraordinarias”¹⁵. Therefore, like the fantastic, magical realism evolves to a great extent from

¹³ See Célia Correa Zapata, *Isabel Allende: Vida y Espíritu* (Madrid: Plaza y Janés, 1998). Even after becoming a married woman she kept on visiting him every single afternoon for he provided all the material she needed to write.

¹⁴ Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza and Gabriel García Márquez, *El olor de la guayaba* (Barcelona: Mondadori, 1994) 40.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

the extraordinary banality and from a mysterious lurking world next door. Julio Ortega has said that in recent Latin American short stories

one senses a more acute perception of an uncertain present, a fluid time in which people blindly search for each other in the context of general breakdown, recreating their histories out of dialogue. [...] Now [the story] seems to call into question the very powers of reading, suggesting that the spaces between the words are as important as the words themselves. The most recent form of Latin American short story renews its radical tradition of rewriting and questioning; it strives for pertinence. Most recently the short story has been mapping the poetry of daily life, trying not only the exceptional but also the beauty and texture of immediacy.¹⁶

In very similar terms, Linda Hutcheon defines postmodernism as a “questioning beast” which less than repudiating concepts such as closure, authority, universalisation, uniqueness, origin and centre prefers to question them¹⁷. In sum, it distances itself from any sort of *certainty*, which is also the necessary premise for McHale’s hesitation and Ortega’s slippery present. It is precisely the notion of centre that Hutcheon regards as being “in the centre” of postmodernist deconstruction. Again in tune with McHale, Hutcheon argues that from a de-centered point of view, acknowledging the existence of one world is to grant the existence of any other. Moreover, moving away from centralisation means problematising the margin: “The local, the regional, the non-totalizing [Foucault’s term] are reasserted as the center becomes a fiction - necessary, desired, but a fiction nonetheless”¹⁸. On unveiling the contradictions ensuing from notions of permanence, universality and homogenisation, postmodernism does not propose any fixed subjectivity but rather a culture that is “a flux of contextualized identities: contextualized by gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual preference, education and social role” and which can be qualified by any of these adjectives: hybrid, heterogeneous, discontinuous, anti-totalising, uncertain, hesitant¹⁹.

However, the process of decentering depends inevitably on certain central categories, a paradox postmodernist philosophy is willing to concede as it allows the “assertion of identity

¹⁶ Carlos Fuentes and Julio Ortega ed., *The Picador Book of Latin American Stories* (London and Basingstoke: Picador, 1998) xvii. The introduction by Ortega was translated by Matt Jameson-Evans and each short story by a different translator.

¹⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988) 57.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

through difference and specificity”²⁰. It is in this view that the critic formulates the notion of the ex-centric, or the off-center, which though inexorably linked with the centre by contesting it, does not replace it with any of the categories of the margin. It rather engages itself in a process of valuing the local, the peripheral, as does Angela Carter in making the circus the world of her novel *Nights at the Circus* and its protagonist a trapeze bird-woman, a freak. This has become a trademark of postmodernist writing: not only *The Satanic Verses* but also *Midnight's Children* have a freak heading the narrative show and the same happens in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, and *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* where the most anti-totalising, discontinuous world is depicted. In fact, that is precisely the driving force of the narrative: to fictionalise a war between imagination and totalitarianism as they are more or less materialised in “actual” entities. This “making real” of the world next door is also a fundamental strategy in *The Famished Road* by the Nigerian Ben Okri where the protagonist is *abiku*, a spirit-child that sooner or later should rejoin his spirit peers in death though they dwell in the material world with him daily. In *Pinocchio in Venice* by Robert Coover an assembly of subverted/subversive characters abuse and celebrate the Fall, which is the inversion of the making-human process Pinocchio is undergoing when already an old man he turns into a wooden puppet again. These examples illustrate how by surpassing hierarchies, postmodernist fiction emphasises difference for in it lies multiplicity and plurality, thus shunning any possibility of exclusion or exclusivity. Furthermore, it must be recognised that issues such as feminism, blackness, ethnicity, postcoloniality and gayness promote difference also within the sphere of their postmodern culture. This is another aspect of postmodern multiplicity: it operates both from inside and outside. Therefore, parody has become the paradigmatic form of postmodernist writing, for its adjustment lies in the paradox of being “an authorized transgression” (as it shall be demonstrated, this definition overlaps that of carnival)²¹. In this way, ex-centricity adds invaluable perspectives to postmodernist discourse: those of gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity.

It is precisely the concept of ex-centricity that Theo D'haen holds as the distinctive feature of postmodernism that came to be known as magical realism. Its ex-centricity is drawn from the fact that it speaks from the geographical margins and moreover, that it has an inherent corrective function. He argues that the reason why Beckett, Robbe-Grillet or

¹⁹ Ibid., 59.

²⁰ Loc. cit.

²¹ Ibid., 66.

Ricardou's writing is deemed postmodernist but not magical realist is linked to the fact it emerged from the literary centre thus seriously undermining its subversive intentions and making it untrustworthy in the eyes of the geopolitical, economical and culturally marginal to the centre. To overcome this problem, D'haen concludes that a change needs to take place:

To write ex-centrally, then, or from the margin, implies displacing this [privileged societies'] discourse. My argument is that magic realist writing achieves this end by first appropriating the techniques of the 'centr'-al line and then using these, not as in the case of these central movements, 'realistically,' that is, to duplicate existing reality as perceived by the theoretical or philosophical tenets underlying said movements, but rather to create an alternative world *correcting* so-called existing reality, and thus to right the wrongs this 'reality' depends upon. Magic realism thus reveals itself as a *ruse* to invade and take over dominant discourse(s). It is a way of access to the main body of 'western' literature for authors not sharing in, or not writing from the perspective of, the privileged centers of this literature for reasons of language, class, race, or gender, and yet avoiding epigonism by avoiding the adoption of views of the hegemonic forces together with their discourse.²²

This view also allows writers from central positions to dissociate themselves from their own colonising discourses by making use of the geographies, economic situations, genders or sexual orientations of those from the margins, that is to say, women, non-western peoples, gays, indigents, non-whites. Writers that can be both outside and inside might provide a particularly perceptive view of matters but they are submitted to suspicious criticism. Salman Rushdie, for instance, was born in Bombay and lived in India until the age of fourteen when he left for Rugby School in England never to reside in his home country again, or in Pakistan where his family moved to after the Partition. Though his descriptions of Bombay have been considered vivid and compelling, the author overlaps with the narrator's voice in *Shame* with this lament²³:

²² Theo D'haen, "Magic Realism and Postmodernism", ed. Lois Zamora and Wendy Faris, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, 195. Italics in the text.

²³ Anurandha Dingwaney, in "Author(iz)ing *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*: Salman Rushdie's Constructions of Authority", argues for the use of the conformity of Saleem's voice with the author's as an effective technique of the migrant writer. Rushdie himself, in the article "*Midnight's Children* and *Shame*", acknowledges this correspondence and draws attention to the fact that the names Saleem and Salman share the same etymological source. See respectively Anurandha Dingwaney, "Author(iz)ing *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*: Salman Rushdie's Constructions of Authority", ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson *Reworlding: The Literature of the Indian Diaspora* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992) 157-168 and Salman Rushdie, "*Midnight's Children* and *Shame*", *Kunapipi* 7:1 (1985) 1-18.

Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject!... I know: nobody ever arrested me. Nor are they ever likely to. Poacher! Pirate! We reject your authority. We know you, with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell us but lies? I reply with more questions: is history to be considered the property of the participants solely? In what courts are such claims staked, what boundary commissions map out the territories?²⁴

The postcolonial writer is in fact an epitome of the ex-centric for s/he, whether a migrant or not, is always a writer whose world is necessarily plural, illuminated or threatened by worlds next door and indoors. They can represent a grotesque vein which “discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, of another way of life [and that is why] [t]he existing world becomes alien, [...] precisely because there is potentiality of a friendly world” (RW, 48) or, on the contrary, it may be a grotesque that “opens the view into a chaos that is both horrible and ridiculous” (GAL, 53). Borrowing McHale’s metaphor, the postcolonial fictionist takes advantage of both sides of the road. Moreover, postcolonial writing distinguishes itself by its corrective motivations either of denouncing violence, giving voice to the silenced, valuing the local or attempting to reconcile the individual with his/her various fragmentary selves. The notion of the decentered subject lies, thus, as a fundamental principle in the construction of postcolonial theory and practice but it is a principle which is, among others, borrowed from postmodernism.

With respect to the term “postmodernism” it seems almost a postmodernist irony that it has continually escaped any satisfactory definition. Though that can be said of most if not all cultural or literary tendencies, postmodernism has gradually become the object of its own ambitious intentions of multidisciplinary. The choice of not referring to it as a movement is, of course, not innocent for it has become transformed into a leaky term used initially in reference to architecture and then not only to literary debates but, given the fact that it has overflowed its own borders to incorporate discussions which range from psychoanalysis to social theory, it has given way to a more general conception of a postmodern culture and to the “creation” of postmodernity, the experience of postmodern times.

²⁴ Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (London: Vintage, 1983) 28. Italics in the text. Further quotations will be included in the body of the text parenthetically with the abbreviation *S* and page reference. Notice how this excerpt already addresses some of the major issues involving *The Satanic Verses* to be published five years later.

The idea of a revolutionary cultural change by which Western millennial thought moves away from its pedestal and stands aside to give way to other forms of thought has, in spite of its rather pretentious (arguably utopian and even dangerously totalising) intentions, presented itself with irresistible allure. It led, first of all, to a re-positioning in terms of aesthetics. Liberated from preestablished rules the postmodern space of late capitalism has for the first time released culture from the tension exerted between “low” and “high forms” of art and considered them equally worthy. The cultural debate was thus open to the representations of the mass-media which characterised postmodernity. The interest in these forms of culture brought theorists to value artifice, spectacle and kitsch as extremely pertinent even in the context of a putatively “high” art; Andy Warhol made soup cans irremediably famous, Marcel Duchamp turned a urinal into a fountain and Salvador Dalí used his art to sell ladies stockings and toothpaste. Paul Maltby refers to postmodern features such as these as marks of a “debased”, commercial mass culture and debasement (with no inverted commas) is what lies at the heart of Bakhtin’s philosophy of the grotesque²⁵.

In the sense that postmodernism revitalises a preoccupation with innovation it affirms itself as a successor to modernism but it distances itself from its predecessor as it refuses any aspirations to elitism and to an exclusive, transcendental perspective on reality. In fact, it assumes reality to be a signifying discourse constructed time and time again with each new writing and reading practices. In this sense, art and literature are removed from their position of signifiers and producers of meaning and become objects which gain meaning only when it is attributed to them. Thus, the godly existence of the author is eliminated and the relation of the subject to the text is de-privatised or decentered (in relation to meaning). Here lies another postmodernist criticism of modernism: the fact that it is based upon structural principles, mainly that of an organising centre.

Deprived of the authority to produce individual meanings the subject is given by discourses of different constructions of reality and order perspectives of the world. The rejection of the primacy of a private mind, that is to say, of a humanist Cartesian approach, makes possible the emergence of postmodernist anti-essentialising discourses or fictions of history, literature, identity and body. It is in this view that Jacques Derrida formulates the concept of “différance” to refer to meaning as an effect of *differences* and to the inability of linguistic systems to achieve a conclusive signified, which is to say that meaning is irremediably

²⁵ Paul Maltby, *Dissident Postmodernists: Barthelme, Coover, Pynchon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press) 1991, 4.

deferred. Thus, interpretation of texts (written, filmed, bodily) is no more than a game of illusions, often of very serious dimension, since behind the word there is no immutable, definite meaning waiting to be disclosed. The structuralist theory of an ubiquitous, transcendental idea of meaning, existing beyond languages themselves and differences, is referred to as logocentrism by Derrida. Hence postmodernist philosophy is oppositional both to the humanist ground of a rational, basically narcissistic because personal, production of meaning as formulated by Descartes (“I think therefore I am”)²⁶ and to the mathematical translation of nature by Kant, thus, of a determinist view of the world. Marxist interpretations of a society divided into classes which will rise in a liberating revolution are also cast off by postmodernist theorists on the grounds that society cannot be represented as a unified formation. Rather, postmodernism appeals to democratic political approaches whose concerns should not be limited by class restrictions or, as a matter of fact, limited to issues of working relations and practices but extended to/re-organised around matters such as gender, sex and ethnic identification.

Critics such as Jürgen Habermas and Richard Gott however do not interpret these postmodernist postulations to be original and, in fact, they see them as neo-conservative, for the Enlightenment tradition had already been attacked by modernism. If it is true that postmodern art thrives on its own construction of an autonomous identity it must also be recognised that such an account does no more than reflect the very spirit of capitalist societies, that is, postmodernism gives away its integration in the very society it encourages struggle against. This logic-of-capital which celebrates the pleasure of commodity has been most clearly discussed by Fredric Jameson in “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”. He argues that in view of a decentering politics which does away with the individualism of the author and of the inclusion of various discourses to the detriment of a single linguistic norm, pastiche stands out as the epitome for postmodern art. Thus the postmodern artist proceeds to a “random cannibalization of all the styles of the past” in which pastiche does not offer the same possibilities of parody²⁷:

²⁶ Bakhtin notes that the decadence of the power of laughter and with it of the grotesque began in the seventeenth century and it was directly related with Descartes’s rationalist philosophy as it points to a loss of ambivalent space and to “the stability and completion of being, toward one single meaning, one single tone of seriousness” (*RW*, 101). See pages 115 and 116 as well.

²⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991) 18. The original article was published in the *New Left Review* 146 (July-August 1984): 59-92.

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists.²⁸

This corrosive criticism misinterprets the use of pastiche altogether. De Chirico, for instance, uses the same technique and materials as the seventeenth century painter in *Faeton's Fall* (according to Rubens, 1954) but introduces a certain distorting distance that clearly serves the Surrealists' needs of prompting more in the mind of the viewer than the mere representation of a mythological scene²⁹. Taking the example of the Gothic it cannot be said that its contemporary forms imitate neutrally, randomly, the motifs of earlier architectural and literary manifestations but rather that a new form of gothicism has been revitalised by the emergence of stimulating new means such as cinema and of a befitting social conjuncture, namely of a collective ontological crisis caused by millennial hysterics allied to the rapid technological developments which re-map our world and our bodies. The same applies to postmodernism; pastiche does not use past styles uncritically nor does it speak in a "dead language" but quite the opposite: it cuts up from within and reads both in relation to modernism and postmodernity³⁰. In this sense, pastiche occupies the middle ground between the centre and the decentered; almost but not quite, as Homi Bhabha would put it.

²⁸ Ibid., 17.

²⁹ Pastiche was a technique widely employed by De Chirico. Other examples include *Young Sleeping Woman* (according to Watteau), 1947, *Portrait of a Man* (according to Tiziano), 1945, *Nymph and Triton* (according to Rubens), 1960, *Mythological Scene* (according to Rubens), 1960, and *Old Man's Head* (according to Fragonard), 1964. Salvador Dalí painted pastiches based on François Millet's *Angelus* (1857-59): *Atavism at Twilight* (1933-34), *Archaeological Reminiscence of Millet's Angelus* (1933-35) and *The Railway Station at Perpignan* (1965). Max Ernst worked on a pastiche of the famous *Pietà*, to which he called *Pietà, or the Night Revolution* (1923), and Marcel Duchamp's pastiche of bearded Mona Lisa, *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) has made millions smile. By making pastiches of masters such as Michelangelo and Da Vinci, Surrealists and Dadaists made signs of rebellion, rejected and mirrored tradition at the same time that they encouraged the abandonment of established social and aesthetic values. Among the most interesting grotesque pastiches is the recent work of the American Joel Peter-Witkin. See more on this subject in Richard W. Sheppard's "Tricksters, Carnival and the Magical Figures of Dada Poetry", *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 19:2 (1983): 116-125. Sheppard takes the Jungian archetype of the Schelmenfigur or trickster as an emblem of the chaotic force threatening the signs of civilisation as a point of departure for the parallel discussion of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque-grotesque.

³⁰ For instance, in the 1960s, when the term achieved literary credibility, critics such as Susan Sontag, Ihab Hassan and Leslie Fiedler enhanced the subversive quality of postmodernism in their intense attack on (the believed to be dying) bourgeois culture, on delimited social classes, on the fallacious discourses of history and science in the name of anarchy and deconstruction of codified systems of

This leads us to the second criticism of Jameson's remark which refers to the notion of mimicry. As discussed previously, postmodernism does not comprehend in its framework the concept of mimesis insofar as it is antagonistic to the concepts of poesis and deconstruction; the world cannot be imitated, it can only be constructed by each fiction, by each subject, so that narratives constitute investigations of reality/ies, which is to say that postmodern texts are metafictional layers of possible meanings to an extent that seems to be beyond what other aesthetic tendencies have achieved. It is a form of contestation of normative and hegemonic discourses, an objective which also lies at the heart of the grotesque. Mimicry also allows other possibilities of integration of the grotesque within the postmodern project through the postcolonial door. Taking off from Edward Said's description of colonial discourse as the tension between the synchronic panoptical vision of domination in the form of supposedly ascertainable identity and the diachrony of history through change and difference, Bhabha describes mimicry as an essentially ironic compromise; he defines colonial mimicry as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference which is almost the same, but not quite*", which is to say that mimicry depends on a fundamental ambivalence³¹. As a specifically colonial mode, mimicry can only be effectual as long as it produces "its slippage, its excess, its difference"³². McHale's uncertainty is not far from what Bhabha denominates indeterminacy which characterises mimicry for at the same time that it produces difference it is disavowing the Other. Therefore, mimicry also represents the site of inappropriateness which justifies surveillance in order to preserve the dominant knowledge from the lurking threat of otherness (notice the grotesque undertones):

It is from this area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double, that my instances of colonial imitation come. What they all share is a discursive process by which the excess or slippage produced by the *ambivalence* of mimicry (almost the same, *but not quite*) does not merely 'rupture' the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a 'partial' presence. By 'partial' I mean both 'incomplete' and 'virtual'. It is as if the very emergence of the 'colonial' is dependent for its representation upon some strategic limitation or prohibition *within* the authoritative discourse itself. The success of

meaning. The critics' discourses were invested with an apocalyptic tone which was not unrelated to contemporary social revolutions crying out for an explosive counterculture.

³¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 86. Italics in the text.

³² Loc. cit.

colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace.³³

Thus mimicry constitutes a fundamental reading perspective on the part of the character Saladin Chamcha: on perverting his father's name, Chamchawala, in an attempt to make it sound less Indian, it becomes a mockery (Chamcha means "bootlicker", a metaphor for his reverential attitude towards Englishness), he dresses and goes to great pains to look English, and even his marriage is to some extent a form of bond to the beloved country. However, as Bhabha draws attention to, "to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English"³⁴. Saladin also illustrates the concept of mimicry as effect of metonymical camouflage, an image Bhabha borrows from Jacques Lacan. As such, mimicry does not contribute to "a harmonization of repression of difference, but [is instead] a form of resemblance, that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically"³⁵. In this sense it represents a threat to what Bhabha calls identity effects which are slippery and discriminatory, enacting a game of power which is at its core insubstantial. This point is also illustrated in *The Satanic Verses* by Saladin's job which defines him as a shadow person: he is the voice for the animated series purposively named *Aliens*. The metamorphosis and the ensuing violence can thus also be manifestations of a realisation of powerlessness and the necessary filling of a void: again nothingness is taken over by evilness.

Bhabha's formulation of mimicry does not coincide with that present in *Black Skins, White Masks* by Franz Fanon. For Fanon the non-white is incapable of self-representation and relies instead on the white *man's* faculty to represent her/him. Fanon's ideas do not coincide with Aimé Césaire's either who regards "colonization-thingification" as a mask for the "essence" of the *présence Africaine*. Bhabha formulates a non-presence which constitutes a menace in its repetition and doubling of a colonial model whose authority is disrupted by the promotion of "authorized versions of otherness", partial representations, partial recognition of the Other as is, for instance, a voice-actor³⁶. On constructing inappropriate objects, colonial discourse opens up for the *alienation* of the "normal"/normative *white* dominant texts: the look of surveillance backfires as a displacing gaze. Drawing on Freudian notions of interdicted desire (of colonial identity) he goes on to formulate the theory of metonymy of presence by

³³ Loc. cit. Italics in the text.

³⁴ Ibid., 87. Italics in the text.

³⁵ Ibid., 90.

³⁶ Ibid., 88.

which should be understood the forbidden and impossible (because always only partially attained) desire for a presence (to replace an absence). The emergence of stereotypes are such manifestations; at the expense of repetition difference is created, difference which emphasises some believed-to-exist particular trait. However the fetishisation of a castrating colonial culture does not go by without retaliation: “Under cover of camouflage, mimicry, like the fetish, is a part-object that radically revalues the normative knowledges of the priority of race, writing, history. For the fetish mimes the forms of authority at the point at which it deauthorizes them”³⁷. And such is the purpose of carnival as well.

It is no coincidence that Michel Foucault’s studies are relevant to Bhabha’s deconstructive readings of colonial discourse, a system of representation engaged in making colonised peoples overtly knowable and distinctly marked as racially different and culturally inferior. Colonialism thus exemplifies how a discourse of power, that is, one that authorises a rule in the name of civilising normality, asserts effectively the power of discourse. The vast epistemological possibilities proclaimed by Cartesian philosophy also upheld the liberation of the mighty human mind from the influence of the objects of the external world. This deeply anthropocentric approach made use of the power of rationality to reduce the natural world and all in it to knowable objects, capable of being translated into a mathematical equation deprived of any sort of unquantifiable feature. The Cartesian *mathesis* opens way for a Kantian universalism; the exhaustive regulation of the world through mathematical concepts inevitably catches all (wo)men in a web of knowledge. The notion of an epistemological subjectivity drawn from a self-defining, all-knowing, empowered subject presents problems to Foucault. Assuming that the same method is used and supposing all subjects can be “known”, then the necessary conclusion is that those very subjects are essentially alike. The refutation of what Foucault calls the History of the Same, a network of histories of universal knowledge and self-identical subjectivity, is at the basis of Bhabha’s postcolonial criticism insofar as he theorises colonial subjectification not so much in terms of binarisms (colonised/coloniser, black/white, oppressed/oppressor, slave/master) but through the fetishisation of colonial desire and the conceptualisation of the stereotype allied to a violent even neurotic historical relationship of imperfect identification. Friedrich Nietzsche also devised violence and malice to taint the humanist view of a pure myth of origins instigated by a resolute teleological progress and in that he is accredited by Derrida who prefigures Genesis not as a time and *locus* of truth but of a tense battle between morality and its peer, immorality. Therefore, Descartes’s *cogito*

³⁷ Ibid., 91.

mythologises a lack which eventually leads to its failure, which instead of emancipation foretells deterioration.

Leela Gandhi regards the integration in the poststructuralist theoretical *corpus* of Nietzsche's interpretation of polluted origins as determinant to postmodernist diatribes on Western humanism. The first problem, as conceived by Foucault and Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard and Martin Heidegger, refers to the philosophy of identity in Western humanism, viewed as "an ethically unsustainable omission of the Other"³⁸. For Heidegger, in Gandhi's words,

the all-knowing and self-sufficient Cartesian subject violently negates material and historical alterity/Otherness in its narcissistic desire to always see the world in its own self-image. This anthropocentric world view is ultimately deficient on account of its indifference to difference, and consequent refusal to accommodate that which is not human.³⁹

In other words, Heidegger sees an error at the core of modern scientific thought: its dependence upon purely formal, quantitative mathematicism ignores the inappropriateness of its application to the fields of the social sciences. Heidegger insists on an existentialist approach to being in the world which is quite distinct for the human being and for worldly objects. In fact, objects are denied as existential forms insofar as Cartesian premises cannot think out that which cannot think itself, that is, animals, plants and stones. These Heidegger denominates "the unthought", a notion extended by Foucault to accommodate other forms of alterity: disease, criminality, femaleness, homosexuality, insanity, and the stranger/foreigner. Derrida sagaciously names them "the remainder" and Lyotard refers to their unassailable specificity as "the event". Hence, postmodernism deems the world to be infinite in comparison with human thinking. Gandhi concludes: "[e]xamined in this way, the presence of the Cartesian subject is simultaneously revealed as the locus of absence, omission, exclusion and silence"⁴⁰.

The second major criticism derives from the first: not only does Western humanism perpetuate an omission of the Other but it does so in a violent, coercive manner. The one who escapes the power of definition, that is, who cannot be "known" or refuses to be so, falls

³⁸ Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998) 39.

³⁹ Loc. cit.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 40.

under the category of anomaly. Her/his independent will or otherwise motivated categorisation as deviant threatens modernist integrity and accordingly all forms of cultural alterity should be overpowered. It can be argued that imperialist discourse (as well as patriarchal) evolves on the basis of a similar reasoning. Moreover, viewed from this perspective, the basic objections of postmodernism to the humanist tradition have very direct implications for postcolonialist theory and for magic realism as a specific postcolonial strain of “uniqueness or difference from mainstream culture”⁴¹. Magical realism is intimately linked with literatures from the margins which is not to imply that texts produced in liminal cultures necessarily articulate magical realism or that it cannot be present in the productions of the Western canon. But, as Slemon points out, it “carries a residuum of *resistance* toward the imperial center and to its totalizing systems of generic classification” which, in my view, constitutes both a material engagement of the postcolonial project and, through the criticism which I have outlined, also of postmodernism⁴². Accordingly, Sylvia Kelso in “Monster marks: sliding significations of the grotesque in popular fiction” states that “in traditional treatments the grotesque operates as the lesser term in a binary hierarchy. It is then both constructive of the norm, or *centre*, and dependent upon it. That is, it is perceived, not as a norm in itself, but either in complicity or *resistance* to the centre’s view”⁴³.

Resistance is a key-concept in Alejo Carpentier’s essay “On the Marvelous Real in America” where, in an inflamed tone, he distances the authentic Latin American reality from European abstract fabrication. Unlike European art which needed to resort to a subversion of reality, in Latin America such subversion is always already latent, the outcome of a unique demographic, geographic and cultural history. He recalls how in 1943 his encounter with Pauline Bonaparte in Haiti led to his first realisation of *lo real maravilloso*, so opposedly different from that “tiresome pretension” of European creation⁴⁴. Carpentier vehemently assaults the Gothic and is particularly passionate in his criticism of Surrealism, a movement he himself had belonged to during its heroic years:

⁴¹ Stephen Slemon, “Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse”, 407.

⁴² Ibid., 408. Italics added.

⁴³ Sylvia Kelso, “Monster marks: sliding significations of the grotesque in popular fiction”, ed. Alice Mills, *Seriously Weird*, 114. Italics added.

⁴⁴ Alejo Carpentier, “On the Marvelous Real in America”, ed. Lois Zamora and Wendy Faris, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, 84. This article is a translation of an essay from 1967 included in Carpentier’s *Tientos y diferencias*, which, in its turn, represents an extension of the preface to *El reino de este mundo*, the author’s 1949 debut novel.

The marvelous, manufactured by tricks of prestidigitation, by juxtaposing objects unlikely ever to be found together: that old deceitful story of the fortuitous encounter of the umbrella and the sewing machine on the dissecting table that led to ermine spoons, the snail in a rainy taxi, the lion's head on the pelvis of a widow, the Surrealist exhibitions. Or even now, the literary marvelous: the king in Sade's *Julieta*, Jarry's supermacho, Lewis' monk, the horrifying machinery of the English Gothic novel: ghosts, immured priests, lycanthropes, hands nailed to a castle door.⁴⁵

Unlike the Surrealists, “dream technicians [turned into] bureaucrats”, no more than cheap magicians who willed the marvellous, Latin American artists bear with them centuries of experience⁴⁶; and he insists on emphasising: “We must recognize that *our style* is reaffirmed throughout *our history*, even though at times this style can beget veritable monsters”⁴⁷. This quality of verity comes associated with the element of uniqueness which, by being absent, transforms the Surrealist imagination into no more than a literary folly. Later he would say that “if Surrealism pursued the marvelous, one would have to say that it very rarely looked for it in reality [...] but more often their fabrication of the marvelous was premeditated [...] to produce a sensation of strangeness”⁴⁸. The Latin American specificity is faith, a very actively engaged faith that demands that the artist practise what s/he preaches. One cannot speak marvellously of the supernatural if one does not believe in ghosts. Carpentier remains a resolute believer that only in the marvellous is there beauty but he diverges from André Breton on where that beauty can be found. It abounds not as manufactured but in a “real” state in Haiti and in Latin America. It is present in the relative undefilement of the land, in the history of violence, rebels and heroes, and native mythologies and in the *mestizaje* of the Indian with black and white blood. Latin America's whole history is permeated with the marvellous:

it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality (the miracle), from a privileged revelation of reality, an unaccustomed insight that is singularly favored by the unexpected richness of reality or an amplification of the scale and categories of reality, perceived with particular intensity by virtue of an exaltation of the spirit that leads it to a kind of extreme state (*estado límite*).⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Ibid., 84-85.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 85.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 83. Italics in the text.

⁴⁸ Alejo Carpentier, “The Baroque and the Marvelous Real”, 103. Essay originally published in 1975.

⁴⁹ Alejo Carpentier, “On the Marvelous Real in America”, 86. Italics in the text.

As early as 1949, Carpentier had already devised the main lines for what is currently known as magical realism. Magic, or *lo real maravilloso*, is deeply rooted in reality but constitutes a privilege of beholding, an invigorating approach to the natural and human worlds reserved solely for the sensitive, ardent participant for, as in Bakhtin's carnival, people are much more than mere spectators. Nonetheless Carpentier, on focusing so vigorously on the specificity of Latin America, fails to see he is establishing a basically postcolonial argument at least in spirit. Other geopolitical agencies, from Africa and Asia to Canada⁵⁰ claim their natural landscapes to be as magical and that their local traditions, expressed in music, dance and oral narrative, are as authentic, that their particular view of life draws from the mixed heritage of native culture and the experience of colonialism which resulted in a potentially marvellous view. In sum, the marvellous Carpentier so avariciously reserves for himself is not exclusively his but *can* also be shared by other postcolonial cultures and even by metropolitan literatures to whom cannot be denied some sort of specific conflicting history coloured by varied cultures which over time have blended into each other. "Richness of reality", as Carpentier puts it, surely cannot be exclusive of any place and one can only argue that perhaps Western writers and artists in general have not been so attentive or able to construct the magic from it. My argument is that postmodernism has provided the appropriate philosophical and spiritual channel for magic to emerge in the West and that writers, specifically from the second half of the twentieth century, have enabled it to do so successfully.

"On the Marvelous Real in America" also serves my purposes insofar as it opens the way for the discussion of the grotesque in the context of the marvellous. That is done through the concept of *mestizaje*, a term I would like to explore more extensively though Carpentier has in fact used it not only to refer to race but also to historical culture and aesthetics. However, the article that directly discusses this issue was published only in 1975, following a lecture given in the Caracas Athenaeum in May that year when he presented the baroque as the idiosyncratic Latin American spirit. Looking for a definition for the words "barroco" and "barroquismo" Carpentier found himself confronted with imprecision and elusiveness. The

⁵⁰ I am assuming Canada was not in Carpentier's mind in view of the examples scattered throughout the article, namely, the African inspired Corpus festival in Venezuela, the Cuban dance *santería*, the Martinican jungle and probably Haitian voodoo ceremonies.

possible meanings range from “Churrigueresque”⁵¹ to “extravagance”, “bad taste”, “overladen”, “mannerist”, “conceptualist”, “Gongorist”⁵², and notably “decadent”. From the beginning the link with the grotesque was thereby established. Moreover, he, as Bakhtin in relation to grotesque realism, can see through the negativism of decadence, an epithet that is applied to artistic manifestations which “far from representing decadence, represent cultural summits”⁵³. This confusion is due to the character of the baroque, one that is very similar to that of the grotesque: “multiple, diverse, and enormous”⁵⁴. *Lo Barroco*, by Eugenio d’Ors, offers a reliable interpretation; paraphrasing him, Carpentier defines the baroque as “a creative impulse that recurs cyclically throughout history in artistic forms”⁵⁵. It can be said that there is a baroque spirit *as there is an imperial spirit* that manifests itself at certain points in history.

Identified as the paradigm of the baroque writer is, quite significantly to the discussion of the grotesque, François Rabelais, comparable in excellence only to Cervantes, Dante and Shakespeare. Consequently, the baroque cannot be regarded as a seventeenth century “invention” but rather as a human constant. The depreciation of the baroque style occurred by contrast with classicism which Carpentier describes as if by contrast with the grotesque mode: “Classicism is academic, and all that is academic is conservative, vigilant, obedient, and therefore the declared enemy of innovation, of anything that breaks rules and norms”⁵⁶. On the other hand, the characterisation of the baroque is postmodern in intention and grotesque in expression:

a horror of the vacuum, the naked surface, the harmony of linear geometry, a style where the central axis, which is not always manifest or apparent [...], is surrounded by what one might call ‘proliferating nuclei,’ that is, decorative elements that completely fill the space of the construction, the walls, all architecturally available space: motifs that contain their own expansive energy, that launch or project forms centrifugally. It is art in motion, a pulsating art,

⁵¹ The churrigueresque refers to the late eighteenth century ornamental style which represented the most exuberant form in Spanish architectural design. Its most prominent representatives are the Churriguera family and hence the name. They worked mainly in Salamanca.

⁵² Reference to Luís de Góngora, a Spanish priest and poet who lived between 1561 and 1627. His poetic style, *culteranismo*, earned him great popularity but sour criticism on the part of some of the most distinguished writers of his time, among them Lope de Vega and Quevedo. His writing is characterised by a witty and satirical view of his universe but always immersed in a festive popular mood.

⁵³ Alejo Carpentier, “The Baroque and the Marvelous Real”, 90. Debussy, Manet, Cézanne and Beethoven are listed among the Decadent artists.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

*an art that moves outward and away from the center, that somehow breaks through its own borders.*⁵⁷

The parallelism between Carpentier and Bakhtin is evident even in their sources and illustrative examples. Bakhtin considers “The Indian Wonders” fundamental in the evolving of the concept of the baroque⁵⁸ and Carpentier sees Indian culture as a prototype of the baroque:

in the distant temples and grottoes of India there are meters and meters, if not kilometers, of more or less erotic bas-reliefs that are formally baroque and erotically baroque because of the imbrication of figures, the constant arabesques, the presence of what we called a moment ago a series of proliferating foci - in groups and individually, dancing and always united, interlocked like plants - foci that extend to infinity.⁵⁹

The baroque, which unlike academism does away with any certainty, tends to sprout whenever transformation or innovation beckon. In this spirit were produced *The Book of Kings* by the Iranian Firdousé, *Los sueños* by Quevedo, Calderón’s *Autos Sacramentales*, Góngora’s and Gracián’s works, Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, the literary productions of the Romantic and *Sturm und Drang* periods, which distinguished artists such as Delacroix, Wagner and Byron. Carpentier goes on to include Novalis, Goethe and his *Faust*, Rimbaud’s *Illuminations*, Lautréamont (whose expression “the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table” was used by André Breton to define surrealism and which Carpentier had satirised) and Marcel Proust, particularly the latter’s *La Prisonnière*.

Neither the Gothic nor the Romanesque reached Latin American lands (or so Carpentier argues) precisely because they are mere historical styles. In addition, “America, a continent of symbiosis, mutations, vibrations, *mestizaje*, has always been baroque” from Aztec mythologies to Nahuatl poetry⁶⁰. The arrival of the conquering wave allowed the union of the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 93. Italics added.

⁵⁸ See *Rabelais and His World*, 344-347. Bakhtin points out how these works were significant intertexts in medieval fantasy fiction though the fascination with Indian treasures, animals, plants, and “extraordinary” natives dates at least from the fifth century B.C. when Ctesias collected the first tales.

⁵⁹ Alejo Carpentier, “The Baroque and the Marvelous Real”, 94. This description refers us back to the *Domus Aurea* and to its monstrous imbrication of animals, humans and plants. Notice that the arabesque became a specific grotesque scrollwork style developed in sixteenth century France which made use of perspective to draw attention to certain details of plants and animals. It represents a more elaborated grotesque form than the moresque, a two-dimensional fashion to delineate plants over a black and white background.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 98. Italics in the text.

Spanish plateresque (Carpentier evasively describes it as a more elegant baroque) to the original baroque imagination of the New World expressed in botanical and zoological motifs. The result in Mexico was the church in Tepotzotlán, the façade of San Francisco de Ecatepec (Cholula), the chapel in Puebla, the tree of life in Santo Domingo (Oaxaca) which stand as the most marvelous representations of the baroque. The reason why the baroque flourishes in Latin America, and this is the point I want to stress, lies in the fact that it breeds on symbiosis, that, in fact, “all *mestizaje*, engenders the baroque”⁶¹. In a manner at the same time postcolonial and grotesque, Carpentier refers to the Latin American, either of white European, Black African or Indian origin, as someone with “the awareness of being Other, of being new, of being symbiotic, of being a *criollo*; and the *criollo* spirit is itself a baroque spirit”⁶².

The spirit of the baroque intersects with that of the marvellous through the latter’s disposition towards the extraordinary. Using the discourse of Surrealism and the characteristics of the baroque and the grotesque, Carpentier demarcates the extraordinary: “[I]t is not necessarily lovely or beautiful. It is neither beautiful nor ugly; rather it is amazing because it is strange. Everything strange, everything amazing, everything that eludes established norms is marvelous”⁶³. Therefore, the Gorgon, the deformed Vulcan, the fallen Icarus and Prometheus being eaten away by the vulture (notice the grotesque realist element) as well as the stories of incest and rape by Charles Perrault are as marvellous as Venus or Apollo. It is in the sense that Latin America articulates and relishes certain natural elements and historical events that Carpentier deems it marvellously real, something quite different from Franz Roh’s magical realism. When in 1925, in his essay on post-Expressionism, he coined the expression “magical realism” to refer to an *artistic expression*, painting, it characterised objects realistically depicted but unrealistically combined⁶⁴. In the untamed force of the vegetation, in the commonplace strangeness of the Latin American land, the marvellous is grotesquely devised not so much as in the *Domus Aurea* but alive. Thus the jungle stands out as the emblem of the baroque. The boom of Latin American writing known as the New Novel is nothing more than *spontaneous* baroque literature, the work of novelists who “translate the scope of America from its cities to its jungles and fields in a wholly baroque fashion”⁶⁵.

⁶¹ Ibid., 100. Italics in the text.

⁶² Loc. cit. Italics in the text.

⁶³ Ibid., 101.

⁶⁴ See Franz Roh, “Post-Expressionism”, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, pp. 15-31.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 107.

Thus is established a justifiable standpoint from which to study the grotesque in relation to magical realism via the sentiment and judgement of grotesque philosophy and the baroque, given the shared participation in the realm of the marvellous of the grotesque as well as of magical realism, the literary trend of the baroque. Moreover the baroque is a human constant as is the grotesque, manifesting itself periodically in the arts. But it seems they can fulfil the same purposes: to represent or uphold resistance to established rules and norms and to embark on a mission of recuperating a form of original authenticity. Julio Ortega, *apropos* of the Latin American tradition of determination, declares that “on raising up a sort of cultural map as a source of belonging and futurity, a state of nomadic identity beyond borders is uncovered by recent writers, expanding lines of cultural resistance, openness and reappropriation”⁶⁶. The same can be said of Ben Okri, Salman Rushdie, Githa Hariharan, Angela Carter and Robert Coover. In the final part of his lecture, Carpentier refers to Rómulo Gallego’s *Canaima* and to a particular passage where the river water is described as “*perpetually becoming*, constantly furious, bursting, rising, destructive”⁶⁷. My assumption, quite contrary to Carpentier’s, is that that uncompelled force is not exclusive to Latin American history, culture and landscape. A similar attitude is, for instance, also behind Viacheslav V. Ivanov’s association of what he terms Dostoevsky’s “fantastic realism” with Vargas Llosa and Gabriel García Márquez’s magic realism⁶⁸.

It has been established that magical realism takes part in a symbiotic relationship with postcolonialism and, by affinity, with postmodernism, so that a flux of influence running bilaterally can carry the baroque and *lo real maravilloso* away from Latin America and allows in the contamination of grotesque aesthetics. Put simply, the grotesque can express itself in magical realist writing (Latin American or otherwise), or, seen in another way, magical realism can be gargantuan or alienating (though grotesque possibilities are by no means so neatly discernible). It is thus now necessary to demonstrate the terms upon which the relationship evolves and the degree of its effectiveness.

⁶⁶ Carlos Fuentes and Julio Ortega ed., *The Picador Book of Latin American Stories*, xv.

⁶⁷ Alejo Carpentier, “The Baroque and the Marvelous Real”, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris, 107. Italics added.

⁶⁸ See Viacheslav V. Ivanov, “The Dominant of Bakhtin’s Philosophy”, ed. David Shepherd, *Bakhtin: Carnival and Other Subjects* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1993), p. 6.

2. Dialogism and the Poetics of Carnival

Only equals may laugh.

A.I. Herzen, *On Art*, 223



Fyodor Dostoevsky and Mikhail Bakhtin's lives have met beyond any customary author/researcher relationship. Bakhtin's profound understanding of the Muscovite's work is connected with a similitude of personal stories. In 1849, just starting off his career as a writer, Dostoevsky was arrested because of his association with a socialist organisation, the Petrashevsky group, whose young members often talked against censorship, administrative abuses, religion and even Nicholas I himself. The court sentenced him to execution by a firing-squad. When Dostoevsky and three of his fellow prisoners were already tied to the posts, a messenger from the tsar arrived at the public square announcing the tsar's pardon and the sentence's commutation to hard labour in Siberia. He spent four years in prison in Omsk before the opportunity arose to serve his time in the army. In addition, he was forbidden to live either in Moscow or St Petersburg. It is not difficult to imagine the contribution to Dostoevsky's bitter outlook on life made by eight months of solitary confinement before being tried, the theatrical move by the tsar to commute the death sentence when the prisoners were already on the scaffold and the daily experience with common criminals in Omsk. Moreover, his health was at risk through the fits of epilepsy that thenceforth seriously conditioned his existence.

Bakhtin's life bears similarities with Dostoevsky's. In 1929 *Problemy tvorchestva Dostoieskogo*, literally translated as "Problems of Dostoevsky's Art", was first published in Leningrad and it was received favourably amongst Mikhail Bakhtin's literary peers, including by Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Minister of Education and Commissar of Enlightenment, with whom Bakhtin shared some professional interests (at the time of his death Lunacharsky was working on a book entitled *The Social Role of Laughter*). Nonetheless, amid an environment of great political unrest, Bakhtin was arrested by the Stalinist authorities that very year and sentenced to death. Fortunately he was not without friends who were able to get the sentence

commuted to exile in Kazakhstan largely on the grounds of the osteomyelitis that would eventually cost him a leg as well as on account of Lunacharsky's favourable review of Bakhtin's book. Michael Holquist in the Prologue to *Rabelais and His World* sarcastically observes that the Russian Revolution and the regime it imposed denied everyone the privilege of being a spectator, clearly referring to Bakhtin's premise that everyone is a participant when carnival rules and for a period Bakhtin was an involuntary pawn in a carnival of oppression. Until a group of scholars rediscovered the book in the 1950s Bakhtin remained in relative literary anonymity in Kazakhstan, Moscow and Saransk. Even then, it was not without some resistance that he re-emerged from the Department of Russian and World Literature of the University of Saransk to prepare a second edition of his book renamed *Problemy poetiki Dostoievskogo* to be published in 1963. Since the original version over thirty years had passed and it would take another twenty for the first English translation to appear in 1984 with Caryl Emerson's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.

Simon Dentith reads *Rabelais and His World* as a veiled polemic against Stalinist cultural politics but wisely warns against favouring this view to the point of ignoring the scholarly context of the book. Bakhtin set carnival rigidly in a particular historical context but he also theorised that though there was a link between the carnival spirit of popular festive forms and the anti-authoritarian drive they were not dependent on one another⁶⁹. Nevertheless, in view of Bakhtin and Dostoevsky's life experiences and of the history of Bakhtin's book it is clear that the issue of authority affected them directly as did the chaotic aspect of the spirit of carnival, making it no coincidence that right on the opening pages Bakhtin compares Dostoevsky to Goethe's Prometheus, creator of free people who will rise to their creator's level and disagree with him⁷⁰.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Fyodor Dostoevsky is regarded by Bakhtin as creator of a whole new way of artistic thinking based on freedom and equality. The characters in Dostoevskian novels are deemed not to obey the single consciousness of the author, refusing to exist in a single objectively constructed world. In fact, each character stands for the right to

⁶⁹ See Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995). See particularly the chapter "Bakhtin's carnival".

⁷⁰ Conveniently Bakhtin fails to comment on Dostoevsky's profound change of character after serving his sentence. It is known that the writer evolved a deep Christian faith which came to mark many of his books, for instance by using repeatedly the *leitmotif* of redemption through anguished suffering, and that dictated his attitude towards life from then on. The revolutionary impulse died in him and he no longer felt the urge to fight authorities, either civil or religious, convinced as he was of his Christian duty of humility and subservience.

have her/his voice recognised as valid and to build a world for itself: “*A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky’s novels*”⁷¹. Insofar as characters are “*not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse*” their function as carriers of the author’s ideological purposes is reduced in Bakhtin’s view (*PDP*, 7. Italics in the text). Far from being a shortcoming of the novelistic genre initiated by Dostoevsky, the polyphonic novel, it presents characters-subjects, not mere literary objects and therefore their consciousnesses, freed from authorial determinism, can never be closed:

A character’s word about himself and his world is just as fully weighted as the author’s word usually is; it is not subordinated to the character’s objectified image as merely one of his characteristics, nor does it serve as a mouthpiece for the author’s voice. It possesses extraordinary independence in the structure of the work; it sounds, as it were, *alongside* the author’s word and in a special way combines both with it and with the full and equally valid voices of other characters. (Loc. cit. Italics in the text)

The complexity of the essence of the polyphonic novel is apparent in this example taken from *Notes from the Underground* where the narrator shares with the reader his life story and also feelings, thoughts and, most of all, his insecurities:

I used to be in government service, but I’m not anymore. I was a nasty official. I was rude and enjoyed being rude [...].

I was lying just now when I said I used to be a nasty official. And I lied out of spite. I was having fun at the expense of the petitioners and that officer [an officer he loathed], but deep down, I could never be really nasty. I was always aware of the many elements in me that were just the opposite of wicked. [...] Ah, how fed up I was with them! Doesn’t it seem to you as if I were trying to justify myself, to ask for your forgiveness? I’m sure you must think that... well, believe me, I don’t care if you do think so.⁷²

⁷¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1963] 1984) 6. Italics in the text. Henceforth indicated parenthetically with the abbreviation *PDP* and the due page reference.

⁷² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground, White Nights, The Dream of a Ridiculous Man and selection from The House of the Dead*, trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew (London: Signet Classic/Penguin, [1961] 1980) 91-92.

The narrator and only character in the story (apart from those he mentions when recalling some past event) has built for himself a wholly isolated existence, separated from social contact, and has retreated to his “mousehole”. As such his writing reflects the very mental precariousness deriving from his uncommon life style. He draws pleasure from the realisation of his degradation but is permanently assaulted by the acknowledgement of his awkwardness: his self could not be changed; if it could be changed, he would not want to; if he wanted to, he would not have anything to turn into. This sort of spiral *dialogue* he has with himself is often transposed to the reader, an absent interlocutor as in the quoted passage. He begins by asserting who he is but later he confesses that to be untrue, leaving us uncertain about both claims. This ambivalence reflects his own (he had always been aware of his contradictory nature). His hesitation leaves the reader bewildered: he asks what we think, guesses at it and then dismisses its relevance. Dostoevsky’s character is released from a definitive construction made by the author who prefers to let him express his ramblings, typically human (often so different from the literary), of a consciousness or subjecthood in the process of formation.

The polyphonic element which I have briefly looked into by referring to *Notes from Underground* has since Dostoevsky experienced tremendous growth and, in fact, it could be argued that polyphony has become a central trait of the twentieth century novel and presumably the tendency will continue in the twenty first. The argument can be supported by two examples: the first is Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* (1981), chosen for its accentuated use of polyphony, and Gabriel García Márquez’s *El otoño del patriarca* (1975) which I have selected not only for its polyphonic quality but also for its magical realist and grotesque features which I will consider in more detail later on.

In the introduction to Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* Peter Washington declares that “[p]erhaps the single most striking development in twentieth-century culture is the rediscovery of polyphony, and with it the realization that all literary texts are to some degree anthologies of tone, style and genre”⁷³. Washington identifies polyphony with the anthological which, in some form, he sees pervading all literature but that finds fulcral exponents in 1922 with the modernist texts *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*. *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* becomes a notable literary achievement in its exceptional sense of awareness of polyphony in a postmodern world. The novel is, in fact, the succession of ten books, by ten

⁷³ Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, intr. Peter Washington and trans. William Weaver (London: Everyman’s Library, [1981] 1993) ix.

different character-writers, interlinked by a fragile plot line where the main characters are the Reader and the Other Reader. The books remain unfinished, stimulating and frustrating the Reader and the readers of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. Polyphony becomes a labyrinthic game: it is a metafictional narrative reflecting on the processes of creating and writing, on the physical and emotional conditions of reading, on the traditional formulas of stories (beginnings, interruptions, and continuity), on paranoid changes of identities, on the public and private spheres, on issues of body and intellect, and on its intertexts (the *Koran*, *The Arabian Nights*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Gilgamesh*). Each writer develops its own style, adopts one or more tones, uses a different literary genre so that in a single book Calvino succeeds in joining the love story, the mystery, the detective novel, the spy story, reflections on the publishing industry, the transformation of the writer into a character or, as he puts it, “authors who had the same reality as their characters”⁷⁴, the battles of his imagination, a political satire, a parody of intellectuals and so forth.

In the eighth chapter, where a long comment on authorship is elaborated and by extension on polyphony and multi-voicedness, Calvino writes: “I, too, would like to erase myself and find for each book another I, another voice, another name, to be reborn; but my aim is to capture in the book the illegible world, without center, without ego, without I. [...] I could have multiplied my I's, assumed other people's selves, enacted the selves most different from me and from one another”⁷⁵. The intended irony is that that is exactly what Calvino is doing in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. The “I” of the present is the “he” of later chapters, the same happening to the main female characters: Lotaria is also Corinna, Ingrid, Gertrud, Alfonsina, Sheila and Alexandra.

The intermingling of people's voices works with exceptional effect in *El otoño del patriarca* where the nameless dictator's utterances mutate to become those of others. The sense of continuity in this change is maintained by the reduction of full stops to a minimum, as well as of other punctuation marks indicating pauses, allowing the magical freedom of the voices to flow from one character to the next. The following passage refers to the comical courtship the dictator made of Manuela Sánchez, a beauty queen, who reappears as a ghost:

[Él] se preguntaba perplejo dónde estarás Manuela Sánchez de mi infortunio que te vengo a buscar y no te encuentro en esta casa de mendigos, dónde estará tu olor de regaliz en

⁷⁴ Ibid., 98.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 176.

esta peste de sobras de almuerzo, dónde estará tu rosa, dónde tu amor, sácame del calabozo de estas dudas de perro, suspiraba, cuando la vio aparecer en la puerta interior como la imagen de un sueño [...], una visión tan deslumbrante que él apenas si tuvo dominio para inclinarse cuando ella lo saludó con la cabeza levantada Dios guarde a su excelencia, y se sentó en el sofá, enfrente de él, donde no la alcanzaron los efluvios de su grajo fétido, y entonces me atreví a mirarlo de frente por primera vez haciendo girar con dos dedos la brasa de la rosa para que no se me notara el terror.⁷⁶

The dialogical quality of the text prevents the perspective from being fixed. García Márquez himself does not speak of dialogism but of a “monólogo múltiple [que] permite que intervengan numerosas voces sin identificarse, como sucede en realidad con la historia y con esas conspiraciones masivas del Caribe que están llenas de infinitos secretos a voces. De todos mis libros éste es el más experimental, y el que más me interesa como aventura poética”⁷⁷. The dialogical premise is thus related with reality and its various dimensions as well as with the matter of history which is particularly relevant to postcolonial studies. Philip Swanson, for whom *El otoño del patriarca* is “un monólogo polifacético en un estado permanente de metamorfosis”, has this idea in mind when he writes⁷⁸:

La confusión narrativa refleja la confusión nacional de un país sumergido en una sarta de mentiras y mitos, mientras que la falta de argumento o la estructura en espiral indica la ausencia de ideología o de cualquier sentido de dirección en la dictadura. En efecto, las dificultades narrativas pueden llevar a una mayor comprensión de la realidad. Al exponer la tendencia a confundir, la tendencia a mitificar la realidad, García Márquez hace que el lector quiera buscar la verdad que haya detrás del mito.⁷⁹

Multivoicedness and dialogicality can therefore be allied to an investigation of the complexities constituting “reality” which is one of the principles of magical realism and to actual socio-political reflection which is a postcolonial concern. Moreover, the purpose of demythologising is a deconstructivist strategy widely used not only by magical realists and postcolonial writers but also by writers around the world, as well as by Angela Carter.

⁷⁶Gabriel García Márquez, *El otoño del patriarca* (Madrid: Editorial Espasa Calpe, [1975] 1992) 72.

⁷⁷ Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza and Gabriel García Márquez, *El olor de la guayaba*, 109.

⁷⁸ Philip Swanson, *Cómo leer a Gabriel García Márquez* (Madrid: Júcar, 1991) 137.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 138.



Research on the polyphonic novel did not start with Bakhtin as his formulations represent the culmination of the research carried out by others. Bakhtin recognises that Vyacheslav Ivanov had detected in Dostoevsky this new approach to characterhood. Ivanov saw the affirmation of the “I” not as an object but as another subject but falls short of proving it to be a specific artistic principle and not a mere perspective on the world. Sergei Askoldov, who perceives Dostoevsky’s characters as personalities, very much along the same lines, seems to Bakhtin to reduce his theory to an idiosyncratic theme, that is, he considers personality as if the characters were living, breathing entities and ignores “the means for artistically visualizing and representing personality under the conditions of a specific artistic construction, the novel” (*PDP*, 12). If Dostoevsky was hardly the first writer to value personality he was certainly the creator of the *artistic image* of others’ personalities, Bakhtin argues. The images of his personalities remain dissociated but form a whole in the unity of the novel, the only genre that gives characters the necessary independence from the author. Ivanov’s abstractness and Askoldov’s enhancing of one’s own private personality basically put forward monologic formulae directly contradicting Dostoevsky’s dialogic approach.

Bakhtin considers the first scholar to come close to a fair understanding of Dostoevsky’s artistic achievements in terms of polyphony to be Leonid Grossman who recognises Dostoevsky’s radical defiance of the traditional canon in his daring to juxtapose usually incompatible elements within the uniting construction that is the novel. I quote the extract from Grossman’s book *Poetika Dostojevskogo* (“Dostoevsky’s Poetics”) that Bakhtin himself uses for in fact it already manifests, though embryonically, the intimate link dialogism establishes with the grotesque:

Such is the basic principle of his [Dostoevsky’s] novelistic composition: to subordinate polar-opposite narrative elements to the unity of a philosophical design and to the whirlwind movement of events. To link together in one artistic creation philosophical confessions and criminal adventures, to incorporate religious drama into the story-line of a boulevard novel, to lead the reader through all the peripeteia of an adventure narrative only to arrive at the

revelation of a new mystery - such are the artistic tasks Dostoevsky set for himself, and which inspired him to such complex creative work.⁸⁰

According to Grossman, in an approach Bakhtin acquiesces with, Dostoevsky does away with the traditional novelistic homogeneity that dictates that there should be a levelled correspondence between the material at hand and its treatment:

Dostoevsky merges opposites. [...] His task: to overcome the greatest difficulty that an artist can face, to create out of heterogeneous and profoundly disparate materials of varying worth a unified and integral artistic creation. Thus the Book of Job, the Revelation of St. John, the Gospel texts, the discourses of St. Simeon the New Theologian, everything that feeds the pages of his novels and contributes to one or another of his chapters, is combined here in a most original way with the newspaper, the anecdote, the parody, the street scene, with the grotesque, even with the pamphlet. He boldly casts into his crucible ever newer elements, knowing and believing that in the blaze of his creative work these raw chunks of everyday life, the sensations of boulevard novels and the divinely inspired pages of Holy Writ, will melt down and fuse in a new compound. (*PDP*, 14-15)⁸¹

Bakhtin finds this accurate as a description but finds the justification wanting: whirlwind movement and unity of philosophical design are unsatisfactory *vis-à-vis* the highly demanding task. More importantly, the description that can be generically regarded as antonymic combination, defines, according to Grossman, the unmistakable Dostoevskian style. Bakhtin is radically opposed to this monologic understanding of the Russian novelist: Dostoevsky is situated above tone and style. Perceived any other way, Dostoevsky is styleless and contradictory which could not be further from the truth. The incompatible elements are in fact divided among separate worlds and consciousnesses which provide unique individual fields of vision combined in the unity of the polyphonic novel. Though recognising the importance of the multi-voicedness aspect, Grossman cannot actually formulate a dialogic principle able to overcome simple contradiction. Heterogeneity and incompatibility do not rise to a plurality of consciousnesses freed from the ideological common authorial rule. Bakhtin's

⁸⁰ Bakhtin gives as reference pages 174-175. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* page 14. These polyphonic elements can be found in works pre-dating Dostoevsky, for instance in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851). My purpose here is, however, to follow Bakhtin's evolution towards his formulation of the polyphonic novel and, in his view, Dostoevsky was its true master. My analysis focuses therefore on Dostoevsky's writings.

own characterisation of Dostoevsky's work includes, it is inferred, the carnivalistic aspect of universal participation:

Dostoevsky's novel is dialogic. It is constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other; this interaction provides no support for the viewer who would objectify an entire event according to some ordinary monologic category (thematically, lyrically or cognitively) - and this consequently *makes the viewer also a participant.* (PDP, 18. Italics added)

Nonetheless, the perceptiveness of reading the tension emanating between the sublime and the grotesque or the ordinary and the extraordinary as a crucial conceptual and thematic concept within the framework of Dostoevskian creation, should be credited to Grossman, tensions I believe are crucial for the set of authors I contemplate in this study. With respect to Dostoevsky's adventure plot, Grossman considered its use fundamental in Dostoevsky's artistic work. Grossman describes that plot with characteristics familiar to the grotesque and to magical realism: "the *impulse to introduce the extraordinary into the very thick of the commonplace*, to fuse into one, according to Romantic principles, the *sublime with the grotesque*, and by an imperceptible process of conversion to push images and phenomena of *everyday reality to the limits of the fantastic*" (PDP, 103. Italics added)⁸². Dostoevsky's purposes cannot reasonably be said to be limited to Romantic goals and Bakhtin's denomination of social-psychological novels is possibly more becoming but the ascertainment itself of oxymoronic constructions is, in fact, insightful.

Another scholar, V. Komarovich, suggests that a feeble story line is, at first glance, the only link between the different plots in *The Adolescent* but that seems incompatible with Dostoevsky's literary mastery. Komarovich's position ascribes Dostoevsky identical aims to those of magical realists and writers of the extraordinary: by ripping off chunks of reality, by cutting the predictable cords that tie those chunks to reality, Dostoevsky is denying the reader *the bliss of recognising reality and one's part in it*. It must be noticed this is far from being a fantastic

⁸¹ In *Poetika Dostoevskogo* the reference given is pages 174-175.

⁸² In *Poetika Dostoevskogo* the reference given is pages 61-62.

strategy for everything takes place in the reality plane⁸³. I am not implying Dostoevsky did not make use of the fantastic for he did, for instance in writing *Bobok* and *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*. However my arguments here, in discussing Komarovich, are limited to the realm of reality. The impact of losing touch with familiarity gives way to an original experience of reality permeated with fear that, it can be added, led to the extreme, is nothing else but the Kayserian grotesque of a world gone estranged. Bakhtin is favourable to Komarovich's premise and, in view of his own reasoning on the polyphonic novel, he disputes solely the search for a *direct* link between disparate elements in the unity of the novel. Bakhtin argues that, instead, the snatched pieces of reality are combined by each specific consciousness and character of the novel which means that various links are established.

B. M. Engelhardt also perceived Dostoevsky's work as multi-levelled in terms of realities arising from the distinct ontological spheres of the characters, often leading to the disintegration of their ordinary lives. Moreover the hero, as Engelhardt puts it, establishes with reality an ideological relationship, that is, the idea possesses the character and becomes an object of representation: the "idea leads an independent life in the hero's consciousness: in fact it is not he but the idea that lives, and the novelist describes not the life of the hero but the life of the idea in him" (*PDP*, 22). To discuss the profound consequences of this approach is not within the limits of my discussion; suffice to say that Bakhtin, though acknowledging that the idea as a subject of novelistic study and object of representation played a prominent part in Dostoevsky's work, cannot agree that it becomes the hero. The hero is the person, tested, *put on the threshold of experience*, by the representation of an idea. What is of interest in Engelhardt's theory is his formulation of three planes representing the dialectical development of the spirit, or existential affirmation, that he observes in Dostoevsky. The first, environment, conditions one's choices, no more than mere effects of external circumstances: "Here, mechanical necessity reigns; here there is no freedom; every act of the will in life is the natural product of external conditions" (*PDP*, 23). The second, soil, can already be said to carry the carnivalistic element; in Bakhtinian phraseology it is the always becoming body of the people. The highest plane of reality is that of absolute freedom, happiness and love: the earth. In it all nature and creatures are contained. Bakhtin rejects the existence of any evolution culminating in the unity of an evolving spirit; what he sees is a dialectical opposition of consciousnesses

⁸³ In order to simplify the discussion, the relativisation of "reality", particularly as problematised in postmodern parameters (for instance through the deconstruction and hyperreality principles) will be for the time being not taken into account.

whose dialogical potential is never completely exhausted⁸⁴. Viewed in Engelhardt's perspective the dialectical spirit can be translated into nothing more than an idealistic, philosophical monologue. But, on the contrary:

Dostoevsky found and was capable of perceiving multi-leveledness and contradictoriness not in the spirit, but in the objective social world. In this social world, planes were not stages but *opposing camps*, and the contradictory relationships among them were not the rising or descending course of an individual personality, but the *condition of society*. (PDP, 27. Italics in the text)

In fact, the characteristics Bakhtin considers unique in the Dostoevskian vision are coexistence and interaction. Therefore, his artistic visualising cannot be formulated in terms of evolution, that is, in time, but rather in space: “Dostoevsky attempted to perceive the very stages themselves in their *simultaneity*, to *juxtapose* and *counterpose* them dramatically, and not stretch them out into an evolving sequence” (PDP, 28. Italics in the text). Thus, the author can depict or represent *at the same time* the very contradictions co-existing in a single character as well as to display on the same plane the diverse stages covered by the same person. In this emerges one of Dostoevsky's chief strategies: the creation of paired characters embodying inner contradictions. No one is without her/his devil, abuser or alter ego⁸⁵.

It is only with A. V. Lunacharsky that Dostoevsky's multi-voicedness is critically recognised. Shakespeare, Cervantes and Rabelais had already created subjects whose voices were fully independent and valid or at least, as Bakhtin argues for he cannot agree to this degree of polyphonism in these writers, already revealed its seed. V. Kirpotin also emphasised the socially realistic character of Dostoevsky's writing and already in the late fifties Viktor Schklovsky, taking off from Grossman's view, advances that it is in the ideological conflict of the novel's voices that Dostoevsky's artistic form and uniqueness reside. Moreover, by having characters in permanent dialogue, by constructing multi-layers of consciousnesses and signification, the text would not present itself resolved but rather offer polyphonic open-

⁸⁴ It is rather peculiar that neither when discussing Engelhardt nor in chapter four, “Characteristics of Genre and Plot Composition in Dostoevsky's Work”, when Bakhtin is directly concerned with carnival, does he refer again to soil as the eternal evolving spirit of the people. I am convinced that Engelhardt uses “spirit” as synonym of “soul” and Bakhtin as meaning “essence” or “energy”. Nevertheless, it would have been relevant and advantageous for Bakhtin to clarify the issue.

⁸⁵ I will be taking up many of the issues now being presented and particularly later in this chapter when addressing Bakhtin's formulations of carnival. Pairing characters, a typical carnivalistic strategy, is a strategy often resorted to by Salman Rushdie, for instance.

endedness. Bakhtin goes further: the polyphonic novel is dialogical not merely at the level of the confrontation of the characters but in decoding facts differently and in presenting their self-contradictory nature. He concludes:

Thus all relationships among external and internal parts and elements of his novel are dialogic in character, and he [Dostoevsky] structured the novel as a whole as a 'great dialogue'. Within this 'great dialogue' could be heard, illuminating it and thickening its texture, the compositionally expressed dialogues of the heroes; ultimately dialogue penetrates within, into every word of the novel, making it double-voiced, into every gesture, every mimic movement on the hero's face, making it convulsive and anguished; this is already the '*microdialogue*' that determines the peculiar character of Dostoevsky's verbal style. (*PDP*, 40. *Italics in the text*)

In this selective overview of the literary history of the polyphonic novel I have attempted to introduce a satisfactory notion of dialogism that would allow the insertion of the grotesque within a wider theoretical system, revealing simultaneously the nature of the connections established between them. Ever since the very first studies on what Bakhtin came to denominate dialogism could be seen, sometimes rudimentarily, the embryonic potential of certain aspects connected with carnival and even the grotesque. It seems important to stress these aspects since they consist of evidence of the intimate link joining together dialogism, polyphony, carnival and the grotesque. Grossman stands out as the first to apprehend the incompatibility principle, a chief feature of the formation of dialogism and of any theory of the grotesque; Komarovich saw in Dostoevsky a new means to survey reality unravelling the extraordinary, sometimes the fearful extraordinary; Engelhardt conceived the tripartite plan of environment, soil and earth; Lunacharsky's multi-voiced approach points to the multi-levelledness at the base of any grotesqueness; Shklovsky recognised the importance of conflict arising among the different voices. Taking off from these studies Bakhtin anticipates some of what he would identify as carnivalistic traits: duality and paired characters, coexistence and interaction of contraries.



Understandably, carnivalised literature is deeply impregnated with carnivalistic folklore. Ancient and medieval texts of the serio-comical such as Menippean satire and the Socratic dialogue are permeated with a carnival sense of the world. Taking into consideration that in these texts serio-comical boundaries are nearly indiscernible, the ancients had, nonetheless, a clear recognition of their specificity and of their distance from the serious genres of the epic, the tragedy and the classical rhetoric. Moreover the genres of the serio-comical determine an alternative approach to reality by reducing “one-sided rhetorical seriousness”, “rationality”, “singular meaning” and “dogmatism” through joyful relativity (*PDP*, 107). Genres enlivened with the carnival sense possess “a mighty life-creating and transforming power, an indestructible vitality” (*loc. cit.*). The carnivalistic influence largely determines the basic traits of the serio-comical realm. Assuming a new relationship to reality it makes of the present and of daily events its chief concern, only relating to the mythical past and legendary heroes of classical culture critically and opening the way to personal experience and imagination. As a result serio-comical genres are inherently multi-styled and multi-voiced. A typical carnivalistic feature that passes on to the grotesque mode is the combination of different literary genres that *bestow equal value on the comic and the serious*:

They [serio-comical genres] reject the stylistic unity (or better, the single-styled nature) of the epic, the tragedy, high rhetoric, the lyric. Characteristic of these genres are a multi-toned narration, the mixing of *high and low, serious and comic*; they make wide use of inserted genres - letters, found manuscripts, retold dialogues, *parodies* on the high genres, parodically reinterpreted citations; in some of them we observe a mixing of prosaic and poetic speech, living dialects and jargons. (*PDP*, 108. Italics added)

The Socratic dialogue, understood not as the mere registration of conversations with the Greek philosopher but as their handed-down genre and method of dialogically extracting the truth, poses a clear opposition to official by-products or monologic ready-made truths. The obstetric method assumed the truth was not owned by any individual but that it could only be born from *the dialogical encounter between people*, that it could only emerge from a *collective endeavour* assisted by the midwife-philosopher. His instruments were the syncrisis, defined as the converging of dissimilar points of view on a given object, and anacrisis, the process whereby one is induced, even compelled, to voice one’s opinion (words provoke words). Because words are induced to engage originally with reality they have to be stripped of their familiar value which permits the creation of a dialogue on the threshold: the individual is

found on the limit of experience (crime, homicide, trial, impending death) and, by living in extraordinary circumstances, the word is freed of the chain of “automatism and object-ness” as to expose the most intimate contours of thought and being (*PDP*, 111).

The Socratic dialogue soon starts to degenerate and already with Plato the form cracks under the weight of the content. From its ashes and from the original carnival tradition at least one new influential genre is born: the Menippean satire. The term itself was first used in the first century BC by the Roman scholar Varro who referred to his own satires as “*saturae menippeae*” clearly referencing the philosopher Menippus of Gadara (third century BC), responsible for the shaping of the genre’s classical form though the earliest manifestations date back to the late fifth or early fourth century BC. Several combinations of the Socratic dialogue, some satires by Seneca, the *Satyricon* by Petronius and *The Metamorphoses* (also known as *The Golden Ass*) by Apuleius are counted among the myriad examples in ancient literature. The most precise and still intact set was supplied by the Greek satirist Lucian.

Broadly speaking, the menippea, as is also named the Menippean satire, accentuated the comic already existing in the Socratic dialogue and, unlike the latter, it is completely freed from any obligation to history and the memoir genre. “The menippea is characterised by an *extraordinary freedom of plot and philosophical invention*” which sets it apart from any realistic condition and permits an unbound resort to the fantastic (*PDP*, 114. Italics in the text). It should be noticed the creation of the fantastic does not constitute a goal in itself; *being on the threshold*, living an *extraordinary situation* aims to test a given idea or truth useful to all in a way the universalism of the Bakhtinian grotesque is similar to (to participate in the carnival world as variedly and as differently as possible). But it also precludes the postmodernist spirit; Bakhtin refers to the menippea as the genre of “ultimate questions” (*PDP*, 115). Yet one characteristic that was already present in the menippea and that will be fully expanded with grotesque *realism* is what Bakhtin denominates crude slum naturalism:

The adventures of truth on earth take place on the high road, in brothels, in the dens of thieves, in taverns, *marketplaces*, prisons, in the erotic orgies of secret cults, and so forth. The idea here fears no slum, is not afraid of any of life’s filth. The man of the idea - the wise man - collides with worldly evil, depravity, baseness, and vulgarity in their most extreme expression. (Loc. cit. Italics added)

However, the journey in the service of the idea does not limit itself to the earthly in the world of the menippea. It often implies the sort of dialogic syncrisis that directs the idea both to the thresholds of heaven (Olympus) and of the nether world. This three-levelled structure was very much alive in the late Middle Ages, particularly in mystery plays (consider the *autos* of Gil Vicente⁸⁶). In painting the triptych gained popularity that survives well into the present. Three examples are Lucas van Leyden's *The Last Judgement* which represented the *entrance* to hell as the mouth of a giant mythical monster (a symbolic strategy also used in the theatre); Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (in Bosch's triptych, also named *The Last Judgement*, the juxtaposition is organised not just between the panels but also within each panel so that the whole can be read both horizontally and vertically); the third example is the altarpiece of the Convent of San Agustín, presently at the Museo de Bellas Artes of Seville, a triptych displaying San Francisco to the left and San Agustín to the right, that also represents in the central panel a picture of the Judgement Day arranged according to the three planes of interpretation. By the Reformation the menippea had fluctuated into the "literature of heavenly gates" with the typical comical pageant at the gates of heaven, and particularly in the Renaissance and centuries to follow in the "dialogues of the dead".

The menippea has proved indeed to be a fruitful means for experimentation. On the one hand it dared observe life from revolutionary points of view (from the air, for instance). The impact is probably related to that which occurred when cinematographic planes were transmuted into and within works of literature (a strategy appreciated both by Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie). But experimental fantasticality, to use Bakhtin's term, is far from exhausting the investigative aspirations of the genre. Much more importantly, it supposedly presented for the first time moral-psychological enquiring currently indispensable in any piece of novelistic work, particularly that ostensibly grotesque: "the unusual, abnormal moral and psychic states of man - insanity of all sorts (the theme of the maniac), split personality, unrestrained daydreaming, unusual dreams, passions bordering on madness, suicides" (*PDP*, 116). The consequence is an *estrangement* effect; on discovering the possibility of a different life, the individual brings together in himself/herself the potential of multiple meanings and opens a fissure in the shell of closedness. Once the pillars of wholeness are brought down the path is opened up for an internal dialogue with one's consciousness, with one's double.

⁸⁶ For more details on the carnivalesque and Gil Vicente's work see José I. Suarez, *The Carnival Stage: Vicentine Comedy within the Serio-Comic Mode* (London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1993).

Another liberatory characteristic regards established norms of behaving, dressing and speaking. The menippea promotes scandal, eccentric behaviour, inadequate speech at the same time that it assaults any form of enduring stability. Taking into account that the menippea is also grounded on oxymoronic coalition it cannot be denied that the grotesque has its roots in the menippean tradition through its carnivalistic traits: “The menippea loves to play with abrupt transitions and shifts, ups and downs, rises and falls, unexpected comings together of distant and disunited things, *mésalliances* of all sorts” (*PDP*, 118). Furthermore the element of utopia, put forward in dreams and impossible journeys, is linked to the crumbling of a social system where values of appropriateness and beauty, underlying the serious genres of the classics, lose ground. The menippean yearning to experiment, test and question is deeply concerned with the dismantling of an undoubting social organisation now stirred by the conflicts between religious and philosophical movements and the increasing disbelief in legendary forces. The grotesque, as the menippea, arises more often in troubled times, assuming a mirroring role that displaces one’s image of the world and of oneself. The postmodern grotesque has, in addition, preserved the menippean plasticity which allowed the latter to incorporate disparate genres and the former to erupt or to install itself surreptitiously in all sorts of texts. Both thrive on an internal dialogicality. Nonetheless the menippea never developed its potential to the fullest; Dostoevsky does it through polyphony (which the ancient menippea ignored) and postmodern writers materialise it in the grotesque. Pondering on the genre Bakhtin holds that a

literary genre, by its very nature, reflects the most stable, ‘eternal’ tendencies in literature’s development. Always preserved in a genre are undying elements of the *archaic*. True, these archaic elements are preserved in it only thanks to their constant *renewal*, which is to say, their contemporization. A genre is always the same and yet not the same, always old and new simultaneously. [...] A genre lives in the present, but always *remembers* its past, its beginning. Genre is a representative of creative memory in the process of literary development. Precisely for this reason genre is capable of guaranteeing the *unity* and *uninterrupted continuity* of this development. (*PDP*, 106. Italics in the text)

The menippean satire has indeed survived to the present day and the archaic elements it filtered through belong to the carnival world, some even to that of the grotesque. In fact, the particular sense carnival gives to the world has been *historically constant* and cannot reasonably be said to be idiosyncratic of any period. Carnival images are *always* dualistic and

open: death nestles up to birth. Its origins are lost in time and probably refer back to humanity's primordial societies where Bakhtin perceived a liberating, joyful spirit had the possibility to settle. Rituals and festivities eventually embodied the spirit and even literature became carnivalised, that is, the specific language of literature found a meeting place for its own symbolic imagery and carnival's sensuousness.

Three basic forms of popular folk culture can be identified in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: comic oral and written compositions in Latin and vernacular, various sorts of ritual spectacles (comic shows and carnival festivities) and of manifestations of *billingsgate* (profanities, curses, oaths or *jurons* and blazons). Frequently they made their appearance intermingled since parodical literature was usually composed for a given feast day. Perhaps one of the oldest texts written under the carnivalistic inclination that generated *parodia sacra* (humorous doublets in Latin parodying Christian texts and rites) is *coena Cypriani* or *Cyprian's Supper* whose anonymous author already in the fifth or sixth century reworked the Old Testament in fantastic and comic terms filling it with gastronomic imagery. Particularly in the eleventh and twelfth centuries no text presented itself as too holy for the parodical manuscripts and oral compositions of *parodia sacra*: from the hymns, liturgies (The Liturgy of the Drunkards, The Liturgy of the Gamblers, The Money Liturgy), to holy prayers (The Lord's Prayer, Hail Mary, the creed), litanies, psalms, sermons, epitaphs, ecclesiastical decrees, papal bulls, encyclicals and Gospels (The Money Gospel of the Mark of Silver, The Money Gospel of the Paris student, The Gambler Gospel, The Drunkard's Gospel). Under the sanction of paschal laughter (*risus paschalis*) particularly insidious creations came to light. In Easter season jokes and comical stories were allowed even within the walls of sacred places. The priest himself would produce them and encourage his congregation to do the same so that spiritual regeneration could take place. Parodies of Christmas carols (in the spirit of Christmas laughter), of sermons (French *sermons joyeux*) and of various holy prayers and lives of saints were composed in vernacular. The Law and other civil documents were also used as working material: decrees, wills, and chronicles could not escape the laughter of carnival. But the most patent form of secular carnivalistic parody, directly exposing the farcical side of feudal existence, is the medieval epic with its travestied heroes, the enchanting *fabliaux*⁸⁷ and the mock rhetoric of the carnivalesque debates, comic dialogues and *eulogues*⁸⁸. Both the ecclesiastic and judicial authorities tolerated these manifestations of carnival for they alleviated

⁸⁷ The fabliau was a verse tale, usually burlesque in style, from the early period of French poetry.

⁸⁸ The eulogues was an oral or written praise of a person commonly produced posthumously.

the official tacit and enforced restrictions of everyday life, as well as the general impoverishment, labour hardships, precarious health and housing. Otherwise popular dissatisfaction might result in protest and even rebellion, inconvenient at least from the point of view of the privileged classes. Moreover, these works presumed a high level of institutional education which tells us that carnival was being produced by scholars and university students as well as in monastic cells. In accordance with carnival's utopianism, laughter did not exclude anyone as the upper classes contributed to it and laughed at themselves.

In many of these aspects Bakhtin has been contested by more recent critics. Richard M. Berrong is deeply convinced of major mistakes on Bakhtin's part as far as historical correctness regarding the life of Rabelais and the production of his works are concerned. Berrong claims that popular and "high" cultures were not as monolithic as Bakhtin described them. In fact, they existed but given that popular culture was equivalent to everybody's culture, the erudite and noble people participated in it and by no means scorned it, participating in instances of popular rituals in pre-established carnivalistic occasions. The reverse was, obviously, not true, that is, the folk did not have access to learned culture. Moreover, a shift occurred in this respect that dictated that the taste of the educated should indeed be kept separate from that of the people, a shift that took place in the early sixteenth century and that, for reasons Berrong provides, is noticeable from *Pantagruel* to *Gargantua*, the latter having been written in 1535, only three years after *Pantagruel*. Moreover, Berrong claims that popular culture is not predominant in *Pantagruel* where learned culture is represented in myriad instances: in Latin phrases and in invoking written texts or making references to works or great names of the classical world (Plato, Galen, Homer, Plutarch, Heraclides Ponticus, Ovid, Horace, Demosthenes and Hippocrates, to mention only a few). In *Gargantua*, the impact is even more evident as in it "a systematic and radical exclusion of popular culture" is carried out⁸⁹.

⁸⁹ Richard M. Berrong, *Rabelais and Bakhtin: Popular Culture in Gargantua and Pantagruel* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986) 21. See this well-argued book for more details on Bakhtin's (arguably biased) knowledge of Rabelais's world and on its effect on the critical treatment *Gargantua and Pantagruel* received and that can be succinctly put in the following quotation: "Rather than seeking to demonstrate the presence of a plurality of voices in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Bakhtin concerns himself with asserting the existence of only two: 'official' culture and 'popular' culture. Never does he allow for the possibility that Rabelais, like Dostoevsky, might be permitting these two points of view to exist in a state of 'dialogism' [...]. Unlike his treatment of Dostoevsky's novels, Bakhtin promptly reduces the narrative world of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* to monologism", *ibid.*, 111. For details on medieval grotesque see as well Aron Gurevich's *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, trans. János M. Bak and Paul A. Hollingsworth (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988) especially the chapter "'High' and 'Low': The Medieval Grotesque". Gurevich, like Berrong, finds inaccurate

Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in their turn have considered Bakhtin's folkloric reading of medieval and Renaissance life based on carnival too limited an approach, leaving unresolved the debate of whether carnival is progressive and liberating or instead conservative and supportive of Order. Bakhtin's joyful view of carnival does, in fact, pose a set of problems which the theory is unable to overcome: "its nostalgia; its uncritical populism (carnival often violently abuses and demonizes *weaker*, not stronger, social groups – women, ethnic and religious minorities, those who 'don't belong' – in a process of *displaced abjection*); its failure to do away with the official dominant culture, its licensed complicity"⁹⁰. The grotesque itself, they argue, though appearing to be a radical form of carnivalistic disarray, is subject to its own set of rules: "impurity (both in the sense of dirt and mixed categories), heterogeneity, masking, protuberant distension, disproportion, exorbitancy, clamour, *decentred* or *eccentric* arrangements, a focus upon gaps, orifices and symbolic filth (what Mary Douglas calls 'matter out of place'), physical needs and pleasures of the 'lower bodily stratum', materiality and parody"⁹¹. When carnival is considered instead as *an* instance of transgression in a class society the debate is repositioned in a wider context of social dialectics with its rules of class and bodily classification.

The second type of folk culture Bakhtin identifies is ritual spectacle. Besides carnival pageants and processions properly speaking, there was a myriad of festivities imbued in spirit of carnival. The Feast of Fools (*festu stultorum*) was celebrated throughout the year. On New Year's Day, on the feast of St Stephen, of the Holy Innocents, of the Epiphany and of St John, schoolmen and clerics engaged in degrading church rites and symbols. All spirituality was made bodily and even banquets and orgies were carried out on the altar table. After their banning from the church, around the fifteenth century, the feasts remained alive in taverns and in the streets. The *fête des fous* in France, with its masquerading and indecent dancing, was one of the latest to disappear. There was also the Feast of the Ass parodying the Holy Family's flight to Egypt; the highest point of the celebrations was the asinine mass which the congregation accompanied throughout braying. In the Feast of Lazarus in Marseille there were processions with asses, mules, horses and cows whilst people would masquerade and dance in

the construction Bakhtin made of medieval culture and specifically of popular and official cultures which are presented as monolithic forms. Other problems refer to Bakhtin's concentration on the late Middle Ages which are presented as epitomising the whole period and not taking into consideration, for instance, the distinct cultural behaviours of the same classes in rural and city environments.

⁹⁰ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1986) 19. Italics in the text.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 23. Italics added.

the streets. Numerous parish feasts in honour of the local patron saint were complemented with fairs where already human oddities such as dwarfs and giants could be watched. Most agricultural events were charged with carnival but the *vendange* (harvesting of grapes) was particularly impregnated with carnivalistic animation for not only did it reinstall the human link to the land but it did so drunkenly. The feast of Saint Martin and Saint Michael, patrons of winemaking, took place in autumn and the festivities were invested with a bacchanalian character. Carnival maintained a close relation with the change of the seasons, the phases of the moon and the sun, and with the never ending cycle of agricultural plantations. This positive element of renewal

expresses the people's hopes of a happier future, of a more just social and economic order, of a new truth. The gay aspect of the feast presented this happier future of a general material affluence, equality and freedom, just as the Roman Saturnalia announced the return of the Golden Age. Thus, the medieval feast had, as it were, the two faces of Janus. Its official, ecclesiastical face was turned to the past and sanctioned the existing order, but the face of the people of the marketplace looked into the future and laughed, attending the funeral of the past and present. The marketplace feast opposed the protective, timeless stability, the unchanging established order and ideology, and stressed the element of change and renewal. (RW, 81)

Other official ceremonies such as the crowning of a monarch or the initiation of a knight were subject to carnival's rule so that fools and clowns invariably made their appearance and eventually became indispensable in this sort of social occasion.

Carnivalistic life demands everyone joining in. This communion generates its own life and rules distinct from any customary living experience so that it can be said to present the *monde à l'envers*. Laws, restrictions, etiquette and all forms of social hierarchism are disdained so that all "*distance* between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: *free and familiar contact among people*" (PDP, 123. Italics in the text). Familiarity opens the way for "*a new mode of interrelationship between individuals*" in essence contrary to that strict social differentiation of non-carnival life (loc. cit. Italics in the text). When a certain degree of familiarity is achieved the formality of their discourse is abandoned and they may abuse or mock each other affectionately and even indulge in some indecent language. The fundamental difference from modern insult lies in that *billingsgate*, the abusive speech of the marketplace, is isolated from context and, like a proverb, represents a complete unit with a specific character. Likewise, profanities and oaths, once expelled from the official speech that cannot convey

their transgressive expression, gained carnival's festive ambivalence. Eccentricity, evolving from familiarity, reveals the unseen side of our nature, usually repressed but in carnival sensuously expressed: "[t]he behaviour, gesture, and discourse of a person are freed from authority of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property) defining them totally in noncarnival life, and thus from the vantage point of noncarnival life become eccentric and inappropriate" (loc. cit.). Once values and thoughts are no longer socially contained all sorts of *mésalliances* take place: low and high are combined, the sacred and the profane wed, the wise and the dumb are brought together. Necessarily, a process of debasing permeates the unlikely unifications translated in the supreme carnivalistic act: mock crowning and uncrowning of the carnival king of the *saturnalia* (the chief carnivalistic Roman festival) and medieval feasts.

Crowning/decrowning is a dualistic ambivalent ritual, expressing the inevitability and at the same time the creative power of the shift-and-renewal, the *joyful relativity* of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position. Crowning already contains the idea of immanent decrowning: it is ambivalent from the very start. And he who is crowned is the antipode of a real king, a slave or a jester; this act, as it were, opens and sanctifies the inside-out world of carnival. In the ritual of crowning all aspects of the actual ceremony - the symbols of authority that are handed over to the newly crowned king and the clothing in which he is dressed - all become ambivalent and acquire a veneer of joyful relativity. (*PDP*, 124. Italics in the text)

Celebration underlies the whole carnivalistic universe, but there is no object to be celebrated apart from replaceability itself. People and things are transitional: now invested with power and glory, later verbally abused, publicly humiliated even beaten. There is, above all, the rejection of any form of absolutism; positiveness goes hand in hand with negation in a pathos of shift and renewals through the image of constructive death.

The whole structure of carnival is based on ambivalence and should it disappear it would be reduced to a form of social criticism, no more than monologic denouncement:

All the images of carnival are dualistic; they unite within themselves both poles of change and crisis: birth and death (the image of pregnant death), blessing and curse (benedictory carnival curses which call simultaneously for death and rebirth), praise and abuse, youth and old age, top and bottom, face and backside, stupidity and wisdom. Very characteristic for carnival thinking is paired images, chosen for their contrast (high/low,

fat/thin, etc.) or for their similarity (doubles/twins). Also characteristic is the utilization of things in reverse: putting clothes on inside out (or wrong side out), trousers on the head, dishes in place of headgear, the use of household utensils as weapons, and so forth. (*PDP*, 126)

The ambivalence of ritual laughter, another paradigmatic carnivalistic trait, was linked to images of death and to reproductive images as well. Ancient gods such as the sun were confronted with laughter which forced them, through public humiliation, to proceed to an invigorating renewal. Laughter's alliance with generative forces issued an incredible strength allowing it to survive from the earliest times of funeral laughter (when the ultimate crisis, death, is marked by both shame and joy) to varied medieval manifestations. Besides festivals such as the Feast of Fools and the Feast of the Ass, laughter was at the basis of the creation of *parodia sacra* itself. The tradition of laughing at a hierarchic superior is maintained and while parodying crisis itself, that is, transition, it assumes its universal nature; in crisis the two involved poles can reach each other, as one makes its leave and the other its entrance:

It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore, it is not an individual reaction to some isolated 'comic' event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. (*RW*, 11-12)

Thus, all laughter establishes a close relation with freedom, universalism and the people, or rather, the truth people stand for. Alongside officialdom, laughter assumes a *corrective* function (bringing to mind Theo D'haen's words on the corrective function of magical realism), far from trying to eradicate rules and the order of the world: "True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it. Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified" (*RW*, 123) and "must liberate the gay truth of the world from the veils of gloomy lies spun by the seriousness of fear, suffering and violence" (*RW*, 174).

All ancient carnivalised rituals and texts, including the menippea, resorted to parodying devices, a prime expression of laughter, which would accentuate the carnivalistic approach to the world. Its ambivalence lay in the creation of dualistic counterparts: the de-crowned double,

the world inside out and so forth. Everything laughable was able to be parodied and everything was subject to the mighty power of laughter. Unlike modern approaches, or so Bakhtin says, that who/which is parodied is not unredeemably rejected and parody even gained a permanent place in Roman funerals. Parody was fundamental to carnival's aspirations of eccentricity, "it was like an entire system of crooked mirrors, elongating, diminishing, distorting in various directions and to various degrees" (*PDP*, 127).

In view of its universalistic pretensions, the carnivalistic spaces *par excellence* are the marketplace and the public square. Here all can participate, be invested with social equability while myriad voices intermingle. Any place that favours contact among different people enacts carnivalistic designs. These are often the sites of the crude slum naturalism which so attracts the grotesque: besides roads and fairs, brothels, taverns and public transports fill the purpose. In the Middle Ages, harvesting and the days of the performance of miracle plays, mystery plays, *diableries* and *soties*⁹² saw the people gather together. In the nineteenth century the same will happen with itinerant freak shows but a fundamental difference distanced medieval performances from public exhibitions such as the famed P. T. Barnum's Museum. Regardless of the authenticity of the Colorado Man as a prehistoric man or of Joice Heth's one hundred and sixty one years their exposure and that of like "aberrations" transformed the public square into a space of disjunction and *not* of coming together. No more than a mere stage, the public square raises questions utterly outside the carnival range, that of entertainment-consumption, representation, selfhood (by comparison with the "abnormal" - the physiologically, ethnically, culturally different - that is subsequently rejected), and of the power of the violating gaze. But in the largest medieval European cities *communal* festivals added up to three months of the year so in reality the medieval person lived divided between a serious, socially strict, dogmatic and pious existence and its double: the theatre full of carnivalistic attires, the parodied rituals and texts, the free ambivalent and often sacrilegious laughter.

Building on the Middle Ages, carnival culminates in the Renaissance, invading all literary areas, abolishing social status temporarily, and actually creating a second life for the people, as real and more vigorous than extracarnival life. Carnival life was even more independent and prominent than it had been in ancient Greece and Rome. However, from the seventeenth century onwards, carnival ceases to be its own source of energy and instead lives from the carnivalised by-products it had generated, particularly carnivalised literature. Though content is preserved it loses genre-shaping significance, that is, an understanding of its own

folk foundations leading to the emergence of a specific carnivalistic genre as was once the menippea. The public square is gradually abandoned and the organic communal experience radically declines. Retreating into their private chambers people reduce carnivalization almost exclusively to its literary expression. The miscellaneous elements that were at the very heart of the menippea combined effortlessly, guided by the same principle that was carnival: philosophical dialogue, utopia, experimental fantasticality, moral-psychological content, insanity, and slum naturalism were faithful to the same carnivalistic spirit. Already the Socratic dialogue had exhibited the same desire: debates on current affairs and on philosophical matters were directed by the axiom of joyful relativity but the menippea, by incorporating other genres, took further carnival's ultimate goal of bringing together that which is apart, that which has become closed and isolated. In the seventeenth century, as carnival is dismantled from inside, the sense of communion is defrauded. Therefore, though the menippean quality can still be found, strictly speaking the menippea has faded away as a genre. However, carnivalization itself, by means of its extraordinary plastic nature, has lived through genres and even literary movements, moulding itself to the specific structures it encountered and to the style of each author. Speaking of Voltaire, Balzac, Tieck and Ponson du Terrail, Bakhtin befittingly makes this very point: "At the same time the presence of carnivalization defines them as belonging to one and the same *generic* tradition and creates, from the point of view of a poetics, a very *fundamental common ground* between them" (*PDP*, 160. Italics in the text).

This point is patently crucial for the very *raison d'être* of this study. If Dostoevsky revived carnivalization, bringing it to a whole new level through polyphony, several postmodern writers, including those in this study, have in their own way contributed to the renewal process carnivalised literature constantly finds itself in, namely by resorting to the grotesque. Most non-literary forms of carnival however have largely disappeared, excepting the degenerated manifestations that some theatrical pieces, spectacle performances, the circus and the bullfight represent (in the two latter cases reminiscences of the all-participating element can still be observed) but in literature the impact has been prodigious. Bakhtin described the thematic and structural principle in Dostoevsky's work thus: "Everything in his world lives on the border of its opposite" (*PDP*, 176); the deeply carnivalistic quality of this thought, taken to its most prolific and imaginative extremes, in postmodernism discloses the grotesque.

⁹² French satirical farces where fools parodied current affairs and etiquette.



Bakhtin claimed that a genre is always the same and not the same by reason of its internal need for renewal though never in detriment of the “undying elements of the archaic”. The same reasoning can be made in relation to carnival: some of it has been lost but its primordial energy is very much alive in postmodernist literature. By questioning cultural history and unbinding aesthetics from the monologic tradition that circumscribed its dominion to “high” culture, Bakhtin previews some of the premises of postmodernism. The principle of dialogism, of multiple thinking about literature and language in general, is articulated through the ancient satiric writings, the medieval and Renaissance tradition of carnivalesque popular culture, the polyphonic novel and postmodernist philosophy. Dialogism as a theoretical precept and carnival as the collective urge and constant human drive towards freedom, overruling domination in favour of the celebration of difference, represent the most revolutionary democratic and humanistic aspirations of postmodernism and the grotesque. “[M]edieval laughter [which] became at the Renaissance stage of its development the expression of a new free and critical *historical* consciousness” now finds a second wind (RW, 73. Italics in the text). Michael Holquist poses that *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* “argued against the hegemony of absolute authorial control” and, along with *Rabelais and His World*, that it was directed against the official doctrine of Socialist Realism⁹³. With dialogism and the grotesque, though deeply dependent on their specific historical circumstances, Bakhtin was able to act out a politically meaningful comment on the events of his own time and still make an outstanding contribution to the advancement of literary and cultural studies.

⁹³ Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990) 8. In 1934 Socialist Realism was officially promulgated as the only admissible aesthetic for the novelistic genre.

3. The Iconography of the Bakhtinian Grotesque and its Application in the Postmodern

Context

Where there is sex, then there is death. They are the dark coordinates of one straight line. Grief is death eroticized.

Jim Crace, *Being Dead*, 149



If all objects, feelings and thoughts exist on the verge of becoming their opposite, then undoubtedly their utmost illustrative image is the completed, polished body of classical aesthetics counterpointed to the Kerch terracotta figurines of senile pregnant hags. These hags, epitomes of Bakhtinian grotesque thought and exemplary bodies of becoming, embody the notion of ambivalence itself. Though old, from the decaying flesh life can still be generated. Their bodies remain fertile, bustling, incomplete and inside them other bodies, as yet incomplete themselves, are begetting and waiting their turn to come into being. Moreover, the figurines are represented laughing, laughing at their own changeability, celebrating the increasing somatic abasement that brings closer the moment the progeny is brought to being. The idea of pregnant death is thus the very expression of the grotesque and the double body its ideal symbol.

In representations of the body and of biological renovation present in nature the interminable cycle of time discloses the broader existence of historic change. Thus, the importance of the ugly and deformed body as well as of the biological processes within the framework of the grotesque in a Bakhtinian view. The genitals play the prime role as *loci* of potential reproduction and the anus, as an orifice through which the body enters the world and can also be accessed to, is grotesquely functional. In reality, all apertures reserve the potential for the grotesque. This is especially true of the mouth, the gaping mouth that vomits and swallows the world; through the mouth the body is fed and grows, even outgrows which is to say it transgresses its limits. In our time obesity is often classified as socially unacceptable, as a demonstration of indiscipline in one's eating habits (regardless of the truthfulness of the

assertion). The fat person is deemed unruly, monstrous and grotesque, but deprived of the positive element Bakhtin saw in this sort of body.

The underlying connection of the mouth with the vagina is not acknowledged by Bakhtin for whom the genitals are always invested with a positive content⁹⁴. The insight of the female genitalia as the *vagina dentata* that chews and consumes is not considered by Bakhtin for it endows femaleness and sexual intercourse with non-regenerative dismemberment (it should be considered that *Rabelais and His World* was published in 1965 and that it came out of roughly a twenty-year period of research, meaning Bakhtin was probably not attuned to the issue which had only fairly recently been taken up by European and North American feminists). The utopian universalism of the concept of the grotesque will inevitably need to be set out in view of the significant difference in terms of cultural and literary studies which has occurred and that to some extent explain Bakhtin's failure to perceive the problems such a theory poses for women. The issues of fatness and ageing, for instance, have in the past decades acquired a specific *and* demeaning expression. As producers of meanings and identities, bodies are means to establish a woman's degree of acceptance. At some point in *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin criticises Schneegans for reading the caricature of Napoleon and of his huge nose as a mere reduction of the grotesque to hyperbolic disproportion. In fact, Bakhtin argues, the grotesqueness of the nose lies in its symbolising the phallus, thus its generative ability. What he failed to see is that, in a similar way, a woman's mouth always symbolises her vagina but *only by extension* does it relate to the womb and reproduction. In this perspective, women's sexuality is, unlike men's, separated from procreation, endowing their bodies with a form of independence from men even in intercourse and that the latter do not have.

As such it can be argued that the fear of the *vagina dentata*, and taking into account the fact that Western societies have been mainly patriarchally oriented, is the fear of losing control over women's bodies which have the ability to indulge in pleasure *per se*. "[T]he door of orgasm slams on his [any man's] face", comments Evelyn of Mother's body⁹⁵. Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject thus becomes a necessary approach to reading women's bodies, particularly mothers' ones. However, at this point, what should be stressed is the functionality of orifices within the Bakhtinian framework. Through them the body is able to escape its

⁹⁴ Bakhtin recognises the intimate relation of the mouth and the womb. This perspective points to the element of reproducibility and not to the genitalia as such. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 337.

⁹⁵ Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve* (London: Virago, [1977] 1996) 59.

boundaries and makes connections with the world; eating, drinking, defecating and copulating happen when the body meets the exterior. The ears are manifestly less inclined to grotesque disposition and the eyes, orifices as well, often betray, in Bakhtin's view, the inconvenience of individuality. However, if the eyes can be the mirror of the soul, an idea inconsistent with universalism, they should not so bluntly be rebuffed. After all, Oedipus's and Samson's blindness stands for a symbolic castration and the plausibility of the association of the eyes with sexual power(lessness) is reiterated as it persistently erupts from our collective unconscious through literature. In *Aurora Leigh*, Romney's blindness can arguably be said a strategy that disempowers masculinity in order to allow Elizabeth Barrett Browning's heroine to succeed as a writer, an occupation the strict Victorian mentality accounted as an exclusively masculine capacity and solely dignifying men; Jane Eyre can only rise above the stigma of being a governess and stand as an equal to her former employer, Mr Rochester, when he becomes handicapped and blind in the house fire. In both cases, blindness seems to represent the disavowing of patriarchal supremacy, that is, a metaphorical castration.

In the new bodily canon, Bakhtin affirms, the body is closed and individualised; that "which protrudes, bulges, sprouts, or branches off (when a body transgresses its limits a new one begins) is eliminated, hidden, or moderated" (*RW*, 320). Bakhtin's criticism is open and direct:

In the modern image of the individual body, sexual life, eating, drinking, and defecation have radically changed their meaning: they have been transferred to the private and psychological level where their connotation becomes narrow and specific, torn away from the direct relation to the life of society and to the cosmic whole. In this new connotation they can no longer carry on their former philosophical functions. (*RW*, 321)

His judgement cannot apply however to a great number of postmodernist texts. Take the example of *Being Dead*, by Jim Crace, where a couple of middle-aged scholars have their skulls crushed by a common thief interested in nothing else but their wallets and car keys:

Joseph brought his hands to his chest to shield himself against the granite. His knuckles spit. Bare bone and blood. [...] Unlike his wife - who though still bucking from the blows, could feel no pain - he was loudly conscious. There was taste of vomit in his throat; an orchestra was tuning up between his ears. His gut was punctured by a broken rib. [...] [The

granite wielder] struck him with the rock on the right side of his skull. Unable to resist the obvious, he kicked the soft and naked testicles.⁹⁶

In the anatomic text Crace constructs there is no room for hiding anything related with the body. The universalism present is that of death, a biological and grotesque death: “This was an ugly scene. They had been shamed. They were undignified. They were dishonoured by the sudden vileness of their deaths. [...] Their characters had bled out on the grass. *The universe could not care less*”⁹⁷. The sort of equality Bakhtin sees in decay is certainly present and people are devoid of the individualism which deprives them of universalistic aspirations but where is *the joyful relativity*? Crace’s book points to that “cosmic whole” in the characters’ fusion with the earth⁹⁸ which is not, as Bakhtin suggests, depleted of a psychological content though in fact it is not based on popular culture. The survival of love to marriage and old age, the danger of trying to relive the past⁹⁹, the growing distance with their grown-up child, all these elements in *Being Dead* contain a philosophical meaning perhaps even particularly pertinent for our historic time.

But the grotesque is concerned also with the interior of the body (*RW*, 318) and Crace sees in biological knowledge also a way to aim at universalism. In the detailed description of the half hour Joseph took to die we feel our own body running:

His [Joseph’s] grey matter could metabolize only half the glucose that it needed. But he was functioning. His stomach still digested what was left of the mango and the cheese brioche he’d eaten for his breakfast, and the humiliating sandwich that he’d had for lunch, twenty minutes earlier. His blood supplied his tissues with their nutrients and sent its white corpuscles to construct their canopies of scars across his wounds. His bone marrow continued to add new cells to the trillions that had already passed their dark, unknowing time as part of him. His pupils dilated in the sunlight. His bladder processed all his waste, although he was incontinent already. [...] He urinated down his thigh.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Jim Crace, *Being Dead* (London: Penguin, 1999) 33.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11. Italics added.

⁹⁸ Throughout the novel the author consolidates this connection by describing minutely, metabolically even, the decomposition of the bodies.

⁹⁹ The community will judge their murders as a punishment for it seemed “inappropriate” for an old couple to make love on the beach, not to mention naked. Joseph was, nonetheless, trying to awake a sleeping relationship by taking back Celice to the place where they had first made love.

¹⁰⁰ Jim Crace, *Being Dead*, 8.

Furthermore, due to the paroxysms of the muscles, he is erect. It is an utterly humiliating death. As the body operates to survive we are recalled to eating and copulating and to how close they stand to dying (there is also a detailed and lively description of their bodies housing and being eaten away by the small animals of the beach). The futility of the bodily processes is as authentic at this moment of unavoidable death as at any moment in life when we are becoming death. The paramount philosophical issue of *Being Dead* arises from its relevance to every reader: the matter of one's mortality. We are always becoming dead. We are nature itself: "Celine and Joseph were soft fruit. They lived in tender bodies. They were vulnerable. They did not have the power not to die. They were, *we* are, all flesh, and then *we* are all meat"¹⁰¹. Again notice the relation established between the body and eating/being eaten.

Corpses - meat - feed the earth's womb; blood inseminates it (recall the passage of *Being Dead*, page 11) giving way to the creation of erotic death and birth. Rabelais recounts how Abel's blood generated an extraordinary year for the production of medlars (an apple-like fruit) giving way to a series of hyperbolic descriptions. However, the medlars caused men and women to grow disproportionately; some grew in the belly, others grew hunchbacks. The Jambus, as the name suggests, had long legs and those with colossal ears could make a Spanish cloak with one and with the other a doublet, a pair of breeches and a jacket. Three men whose "ballocks" (testicles) were so enormous they would hang down their breeches could fill a sack intended for five quarters of wheat. Others saw their noses overgrowing and others still had their "puffes" (phalli) so greatly swollen they were called Labourers of nature. These "strouting champions" were so "marvellous long, fat, great, lustic, stirring and Crest-risen" that they had to be wound five or six times around the waist¹⁰². Rabelais adds humorously that according to the women's testimonies that he gathered, this specific variant has, however, become extinct. Giants are simply those whose prodigious development has occurred throughout the full length of their bodies. Among them are Gargantua and Pantagruel, his son, who by his abnormal dimension killed his mother in child-birth (another image of pregnant death).

When Pantagruel was born a terrible drought had been devastating the country; for thirty six months, three weeks, four days, thirteen hours and some unspecified minutes more,

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 12. Italics added.

¹⁰² François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. Sir Thomas Urquhart and Pierre Le Motteux, intr. Terence Cave (1994) (London: Everyman's Library, [1532-35] 1929, 1994) book 2, ch. I, 170.

rain had not made its appearance. It was so overwhelming people hid in cow's bellies to be in the shade. The first time Pantagruel is mentioned is in a fifteenth century *diablerie*, *The Acts of the Apostles*, by Simon Gréban. Fathered by Lucifer himself, he and his three devil brothers represent the four elements. Water comes to be associated with Pantagruel who by flying over the sea is saturated with salt. In the play he throws salt into the open mouths of drunkards who feel an increasing urge to drink. The context of drought and of salty water are consistent with Pantagruel's relation with thirst though not necessarily with water (his name means literally "all thirsty one"). Gargantua's ravenous yearning is present from the beginning. The episode of the cattle-slaughter precedes Gargantua's birth and it describes a feast for which three hundred sixty seven thousand and fourteen cows are killed. The tripe was so delicious everybody licked the fingers and Gargamelle herself (Gargantua's would-be-mother) ate about sixteen quarters (448 pounds) and two bushels (16 gallons) of them, making her swell with the "shitten stuff"¹⁰³. In chapter XXXVIII is described how he eats six pilgrims, hidden in the giant's lettuce. His gross and exaggerated eating habits are well evinced in his name as the giant is invariably depicted in banquet scenes eating, chewing up, swallowing and drinking. The above mentioned banquet culminates in the discourse of the drinkers when Grangousier jokingly claims never to drink without thirst, either present or future, and that by drinking he is partaking in eternity. His eulogistic view is founded on the belief that the soul cannot survive in a dried body and, by drinking, Grangousier's fear of dying is appeased. Gargantua himself, as soon as he is born, shouts aloud and repeatedly for some drink. Thus, his being named Gargantua (from the French "gousier"). To feed this famished child, the milk of seventeen thousand nine hundred and thirteen cows was required daily. On the other hand, Pantagruel has traditionally been set among drunken delights which, more often than not, are also accompanied by stupendous feasts. The gaping mouth, after all, is both for eating and drinking and, as Gargamelle's example shows, is intimately, enjoyably even, linked to scatology and death; "the fair fecality" says the narrator of Gargamelle's tripe¹⁰⁴.

The instance of Badebec's delivery and subsequent death leaves Gargantua hesitant whether to cry for his wife or to laugh for his son. The fertility of death is as ambivalent as the banquet image already foreboding the terrible drought: from Badebec's womb come out sixty eight salt-sellers, each with a mule loaded with salt, nine dromedaries carrying bacon, seven camels overweighed with hogs pudding and sausages, and thirty five horses pulling great

¹⁰³ Ibid., book 1, ch. IV, 33.

¹⁰⁴ Loc. cit.

wagons of leeks, garlic, and onions. Only then is Pantagruel delivered. Thus, both Gargantua's and Pantagruel's adventures provide exemplary elements substantiating Bakhtin's stressing the universalism of banquet imagery:

Eating and drinking are one of the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body. The distinctive character of this body is its open unfinished nature, its interaction with the world. These traits are most fully and concretely revealed in the act of eating; the body transgresses here its own limits: it swallows, devours, renders the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world's expense. The encounter of man with the world, which takes place inside the open, biting, rending, chewing mouth, is one of the most ancient, and most important objects of human thought and imagery. Here man tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it part of himself. [...] [H]e triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself. The limits between man and the world are erased, to man's advantage. (RW, 281)

Banquet scenes naturally provide a befitting atmosphere for laughter as well as speech. From the *coena Cypriani* to the medieval *symposium* a whole tradition of festive speech and table talk was developed, freely playing with the sacred, with academic debates and more often simply delighting in the pleasures of conversation. The awareness of a purely bodily existence underlies grotesque feasting in which one is disburdened of the fear of the world: "Man is not afraid of the world, he has defeated it and eats of it" (RW, 296) or, in Grangousier's version, drinks of it. Overwhelmed by a terror of cosmic dimensions humanity was able to fight it by discovering in itself the same cosmic power manifested in the elements (hence the myth of Pantagruel's birth). In Bakhtin's interpretation of the approach of the Renaissance to the universe, bodily acts and excretions - from eating to drinking to defecating and sweating - turned people into microcosms mimicking a broader system. They became aware of the manifestations of earth, water, air and fire within them. The images of the material bodily lower stratum devised by Bakhtin are hence suffused with a penetrating cosmic significance:

In the fear of imagery cosmic fear (as any other fear) is defeated by laughter. Therefore dung and urine, as cosmic matter that can be interpreted bodily, play an important part in those images. They appear in hyperbolic quantities and cosmic dimensions. Cosmic catastrophe represented in the material bodily lower stratum is degraded, humanized, and transformed into grotesque monsters. Terror is conquered by laughter. (RW, 336)

In the previous chapter the fact that the cosmic system of the Renaissance represented a decided evolution in relation to the Aristotelian one pervading in the Middle Ages was brought up. According to the latter the elements are organised around an imagined centre. An object that falls from earth moves downwards to this centre. At the opposite pole is fire. The natural laws of creation and destruction dictate that in this upward movement an earthly object to reach fire first becomes water, then air and only eventually fire. Celestial bodies are not subject to these laws as they already represent perfection, *quinata essentia*. As such they only perform the most ideal movement, the circle, eternally revolving around the centre of the earth. The humanistic perspective differed profoundly. The relativization of the world into high(er) and low(er) spheres was abandoned in favour of a view positioning the human body at the centre of the cosmos that moves in *time*. Hence, the emphasis of the notions of historic evolution and of continual becoming. Consequently, space was democratised and liberated to some extent of Christian dispositions. Though this liberation might not have been as radical as Bakhtin claims, still evolving from this *decentralisation* the underworld was no longer the place of hell nor did it stand diametrically opposed to heaven. Reversals, inversions, beatings and abusing, in a word, debasement, directly depend on such a movement, either literally or metaphorically. This view is fundamental in the transfer of all that is abundant and fertile to the underground and the lower stratum. The centre of the universe moves from heaven to anywhere, everywhere, even to the underworld¹⁰⁵. In book 2, chapter XXX of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* is described how Epistemon, who had his head cut off, after a miraculous resurrection tells of his adventures in hell. In an utterly carnivalistic account, Epistemon claims to have engaged in a friendly conversation with Lucifer and that the devils had struck him to be merry fellows. But the inhabitants of the place seem to have had their status deeply changed; Ulysses was a hay-maker, Hannibal a kettle-maker and a seller of egg shells, Pope Alexander a rat-catcher and Cleopatra a mere crier of onions.

The humanist philosophy predominant in the Renaissance, with its change of the focus of attention to the human body and formation of the idea of sameness, presented the ideal context, already being prepared in the Middle Ages, for carnivalistic freedom to install its ascendancy and for its grotesque prodigies to branch off. Such is, at least, Bakhtin's premise. But the history of the grotesque, as part of what is called nowadays cultural studies, had witnessed several works which had prepared the ground not only for *Rabelais and His World* but also *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* and that, understandably, differed in disposition and

¹⁰⁵ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 369.

postulation. It is thus important to consider that history to read *Rabelais His World* to understand the relevance those studies might represent within the sphere of postmodern fiction.

4. Historical Overview of Grotesque Art, Literature, and Criticism

Le grotesque est un jeu de création libre, d'une fantaisie inépuisable. Le charme de ce style vient de ce qu'il communiquera le sentiment de la joie de vivre par la grâce ailée du décor, l'aisance de l'invention, la façon de traiter le réel, incorporé à la chimère, comme un élément de rêverie.

Germain Bazin, *Le Language des Styles*, 161



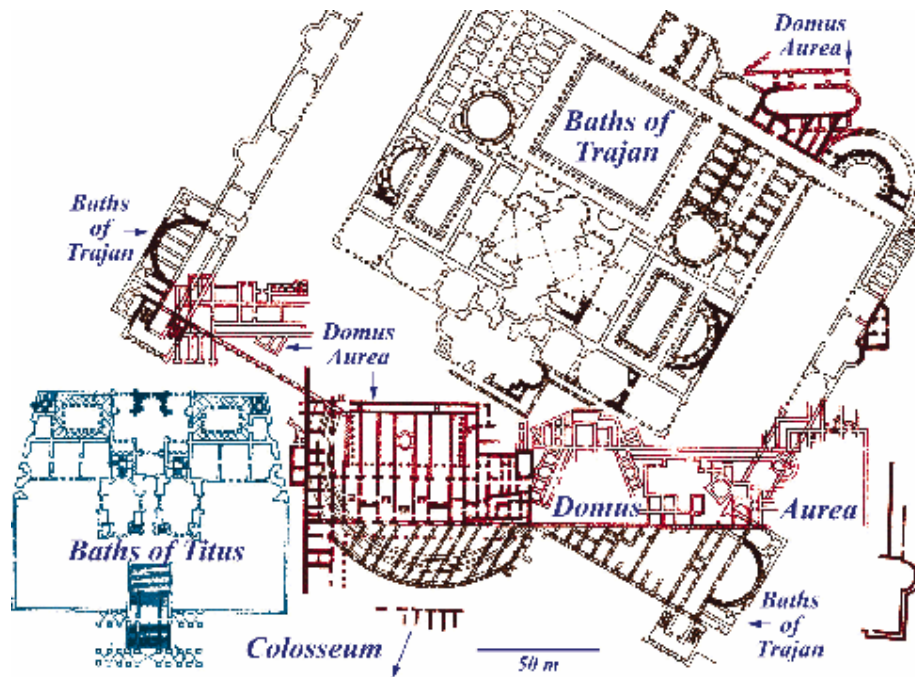
When Nero was only sixteen years old he was declared emperor, following the poisoning of his stepfather, Claudius, probably at the hands of his own wife, Nero's mother, Agrippina. His reign, even at a time of notorious imperial excess, stood out in terms of costly public entertainment, incompetent government, debauchery in private life and capricious assassinations. Nephew of mad Caligula, Nero proceeded to have murdered his brother Britannicus and Agrippina, had his wife Octavia executed on false grounds of adultery and beat to death his second wife, Poppaea, while she was pregnant, on arriving from the circus. Though Seneca had been his tutor and Petronius, author of *Satyricon*, could be counted among his court friends, his artistic arrogance and obsession with grand spectacles quickly became his chief interest. Already in 57 AD, he had a wooden amphitheatre built with the sole purpose of organising fights with gladiators and wild beast shows. Performance in general was much to his liking and he supported financially the dramatic representations of mythological legends, mock naval battles and, ironically or not, the actual starting of fires on stage. Extending the number of days dedicated to public games further contributed to gain the people's support. Their favour was brief though, given insignificant military achievements, Nero's uninterest in management and increasing political instability that caused many a rival to be summarily eliminated. Taking himself to be an outstanding artist and athlete, he spent most of his time composing songs and poems that he presented, subsequently, much to their dislike, to his subjects. To celebrate the first shaving of his beard, he reinstated the religious festivities of the Iuvenalia where, to everybody's shock, Nero decided to enter the competition as a singer

and actor. In 66 AD Nero left for Greece to compete at the Olympic Games winning a staggering 1808 prizes in artistic and chariot racing competitions.

On the 19th of July 64 AD, the Great Fire of Rome broke out. Fires were a fairly common event in Rome; the city was overcrowded, timber was one of the main construction materials and its fire-fighting means were extremely limited. This one, however, raised suspicion almost from the start. The outbreak was in the shops to the south of the Palatine around the Circus Maximus and for six days the fire ravaged northwards along the east side of the Palatine, through the Coliseum Valley, to the lower areas of the Esquiline. For reasons still unknown, when it was finally subsiding, a second outbreak started to the north of the Capitoline Hill. When the fire started Nero was in Antium, but not even that, or the fact that he fed and took into in his numerous buildings the homeless, avoided the rumour that the fire had been the emperor's deed. Shortly after, Nero's agents acquired at a very low price the devastated area (at least ten of the fourteen Augustan regions were affected). Nero, who outspokenly had admitted hating the look of Rome, had finally the necessary space for the Domus Aurea, an enterprise that occupied one hundred and twenty five acres at the very heart of Rome. Thousands of Romans were moved to Veji, twelve miles north, since Nero's plans for the reconstruction of the city left no room for them. But most of all, comments circulated about Nero's having used the burning city as a backdrop to his composition inspired in the fall of Troy. The fact remained that the fire's destructive power created the opportunity for the great city to be re-invented. Following the demise of Nero's own residence, the Domus Transitoria, the architects Severius and Celer were charged with building the most grandiose palace of the ancient world. The project covered a quarter of the city including the Esquiline, Oppius, Coelian and Palatine hills, which is to say, the present day valley of the Coliseum. Its underlying philosophy was the *rus in urbe* ideal, the countryside in the city, and it became known as Nero's Domus Aurea, the golden house. The material investment clearly aimed at endowing imperial power with divine connotation. In the end, Nero's megalomania transformed the building from a mere private residence into the actual seat of imperial power.

The area held an amphitheatre, a market, a bath-gymnasium complex, and buildings inspired by great cities of the world. Upon the Coelian Hill garden, lavish plants and flowers were tilled. The Domus Aurea was conceived as a complex of buildings, parks, gardens, meadows, vineyards, even with an artificial lake big enough for ships to navigate. The project was carried out by prisoners brought from every part of the empire and by convicts of capital crimes whose sentences were converted into raising the city literally from the ashes. The main

residence had two asymmetrical wings, the west and east wings. Behind a hexagonal courtyard was situated the Hall of the Golden Vault which led back to a long corridor running the whole length of the building. The back of the building was located upon the rising stone of the Coelian Hill from which the corridor insulated it in order to provide protection from landslides. The largest hydraulic organ of its time was the main focus of attention of the music room but its most astounding achievement was the round banqueting hall, revolving night and day, to resemble the movement of the heavens. This room is usually identified as the octagon hall. The west wing was Nero's residence and his rooms as well as Poppaea's were located there. These rooms looked out on to the open air at the back and to a courtyard in the front. The east wing, though smaller, was used for public receptions. An impressive octagonal chamber stood at its axis.



Pl. 1. The plan for the Domus Aurea, baths of Titus and Trajan, etching by M. Carloni, 1776

The famous octagonal dining room is topped by a dome with an oculus, a hole. The crossing axes of the floor plan led to side chambers, widening the notion of space and allowing light, fresh air and even flowing water to enter the room. The three southern openings of the octagon led to a park, four others, two on either side, led out into vaulted rooms (two cross-shaped and two squared). The eighth opening was, in reality, a flight of stairs over which ran water springing from the centre of the hall.



Pl. 2. The octagonal hall, Domus Aurea, I A.D.



Pl. 3. Vaulted service corridors in the Esquiline wing, Domus Aurea, I A.D.

The ceilings of the dining rooms were covered with movable ivory tiles equipped with small holes through which perfume and flowers could be sprinkled over the guests. Columns, pavements and coverings of all sorts were ornamented with marble. The halls, rooms and corridors were covered in gold, plate and precious stones. Seashells, vitreous paste, ivory ceilings and painting adorned the buildings. Over a surface of one hundred hectares emerged porches, palaces, pavilions, baths both fed by sea water and springs, fountains, huge gardens,

parks, pastures, vineyards, orchards and forests occupied by grazing herds and wild animals. Huge buildings and hundreds of statues, with the Colossus-Neronis being the most impressive of them all, surrounded the central pond. Over thirty meters high, the bronze statue of Nero eventually lent its name to the Coliseum when emperor Hadrian moved it to the amphitheatre area. As the works approached an end, Nero reportedly exclaimed: “At last, I am able to live like a human being should”. But to live “like a human being should” had a price and it was the widespread resentment against the project. Under Vespasian’s rule, the Temple of Peace, containing all of the artistic loot of Nero’s military enterprises in Greece, became the largest public museum of its time. After Nero’s death the constructions came to a halt and though emperor Otho, who rose to power in 69 AD, engaged in further efforts, the project, so boastfully ostentatious and exaggerated, viewed by some of Nero’s contemporaries even as a deranged fantasy, remained unfinished. Its splendour quickly made it a myth; the poet Martial (circa 40 to 104 AD) describes the House in a satirical but bitter tone:

**Here where the heavenly colossus has a close view of the stars
And high structures rise on the lofty road,
There once shone the hated hall of the cruel king
And one house took up the whole of Rome.
Here where rises the huge mass of the awesome amphitheatre
In sight of all was Nero’s pool.
Here where we admire the baths built so quickly for our benefit
A proud park deprived the poor of their houses.¹⁰⁶**

The construction of extensive baths by Trajan on the ground of the Domus Aurea demanded massive foundations. As a consequence most rooms disappeared and those that survived went underground. The rediscovery of the Domus Aurea took place, accidentally, in the late Quattrocento, by artists driven by their fascination for Antiquity. Though the caves remained covered with earth, they immediately started to copy the motifs of wall and ceiling paintings, giving way, in the century to follow, to the success of the grotesque style. Renowned painters like Pinturicchio, Raphael, Ghirlandaio and Giovanni da Udine, visited the Domus and were inspired by the Neronian ruins to paint the homes and palaces of Roman aristocrats and clergy. The rediscovery of the Domus was absolutely material at the onset of the

Renaissance to the promotion of classical art. Pietro Santi Bartoli, who also published sketches of the interior paintings, carried out the second major excavations in the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth, between 1758 and 1769, Pope Clement XIII financed further excavations on the site and in 1774 Mirri, who in the meantime had uncovered another sixteen rooms, published yet another album of designs. The next noteworthy success was headed by Antonio De Romanis who unearthed another fifty rooms, organised a planimetry and established a relation between the discoveries. The excavations were resumed in the early twentieth century by Antonio Munoz, chairman of the Regia Soprintendenza ai Monumenti del Lazio e degli Abruzzi. Still under the management of the Soprintendenza more excavations were undertaken in 1939 and from 1954 to 1957. In 1969 the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma financed more explorations of the upper level. In the beginning of the 1980s the Domus Aurea was closed given the urgent need for repair and preservation work both of its structure and of the frescoes. Only in 2001 did the Domus reopen to the public. To this day the site has revealed one hundred and fifty rooms, all of them belonging to the public area since Nero's private rooms, situated on an upper level, gave way to Trajan's baths, known until the nineteenth century as the Baths of Titus¹⁰⁷. Its most famous item is perhaps the statue of Laocoon fighting the serpents that, along with the Titus fountains and other statues, were moved to the Vatican garden.



Pl. 4. *Laocoon and His Sons*, early first century (?)

¹⁰⁶ In *Liber de spectaculis* 2. Quoted in Miriam T. Griffin's *Nero: The End of a Dynasty* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) 142.

¹⁰⁷ There is a reproduction in Thomas Wright's *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co, [1865] 1968) xxiv. Frances Barasch indicates that the earliest descriptions of the Baths appeared in 1772 in Charles Cameron's *Bains des Romains enrichie des Plans des Palladio*. In 1786 M. Ponce wrote and illustrated *Descriptions des Bains de Titus*. See Frances K. Barasch, *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1971).

It is in this context of exaggerated luxury that the walls and ceilings painted *al fresco* and *al stucco*, later known as grotesque, were produced. The term, as is by now widely known, has its origins in the site of the discoveries, the *grotta*, that is, caves, related with the Greek “to hide” and “vault” and the Latin meaning “crypt”. From the beginning, the grotesque paintings were involved in a carnivalistic atmosphere that involved gross exaggeration and luxury, massive destruction, and a combination of two opposites: the comfort and refinement of the city with the energy of the country. It is also a historical context that gives way to ambiguity for, in an ironic carnivalistic way, the golden house was never finished but allowed another architectonic enterprise to be realised. From early on, by emerging from underground, the grotesque established its marginal tendency, or, in John Ruskin’s words, it is the art of the wayside. The *grottesche*, as these early designs were called, were invariably geometrically arranged: in the ceilings circles, squares or oblongs framed the major paintings that would normally be a landscape or pastoral scene. All space that remained empty was decorated with fantastical characters such as satyrs and nymphs in the midst of luxuriant fruit and foliage.



Pl. 5. Achilles and Skyros Room (figures at the centre), Domus Aurea, I A.D.



Pl. 6. Hector and Andromache (bottom right), Domus Aurea, I A.D.

The walls shared the rigorous geometrical inspiration: three horizontal planes could be distinguished; the upper plane was painted with landscape fantasies similar to those on the ceilings to which were added small pillars, architraves and diverse mythological figures. The main panel was the second, itself divided in five smaller, gracefully painted, panels. The third panel was covered in marble veneer. The wall frescoes with a creamy white background, subdivided by ornate gold trim, are referred to as the IVth Pompeian style and began to be developed about one hundred years before the destruction of Pompeii in 79 A.D.



Pl. 7. IVth style wall fresco, Esquiline wing, Domus Aurea, I A.D. Each subdivision features a small land or cityscape. View of the three panels and of the fantastical *grottesche*.

The paintings were supervised and executed by Famulus (also called Fabullus). Famulus's personal style is known as *floridus umidus* by reason of the painter's use of intense but expensive pigments: gold, purple, blue and red. Though the overall style is the IVth Pompeian, art historians argue that Famulus's technique was more sophisticated than that of the artists of Pompeii themselves.



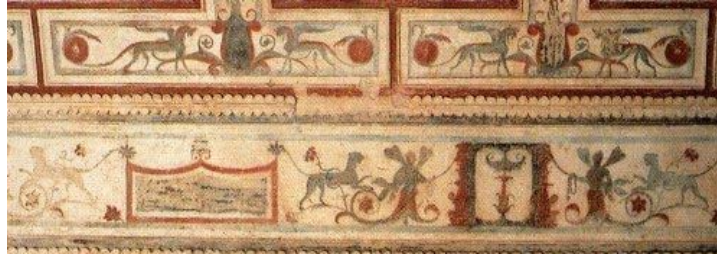
Pl. 8. Mural in Pompeii, I BC



Pl. 9. Mural in Pompeii, I BC



Pl. 10. Frescoes with discernible layouts painted with yellow and red pigments, Domus Aurea, I AD



Pl. 11. Border *al stucco* featuring human hybrids and animals, Domus Aurea, I A.D.

The imitative style inspired in these *grotesche* quickly gained popularity in Italy and eventually borrowed its denomination. The oldest document where the word *grotesche* is mentioned is a contract hiring Pinturicchio to paint some designs of fantastic inspiration for the Siena Library, dated 1502. The *grotesche* are located, for instance, on the borders of *Aeneas Piccolomini Arrives to Ancona*; to the left were painted reddish vegetable scrolls on a yellow background and next to it, matching the column on the right, is a vertical sequence of grotesque human heads, bovine skulls, ornate sea-horses, birds and angels. In *Pope Aeneas Piccolomini Canonises Catherine of Siena* the pattern is very similar but this painting also includes a paradigmatic grotesque design: a two-faced head. The designs are very similar on the borders of *Piccolomini Receives the Cardinal Hat*, *Aeneas Piccolomini Leaves for the Council of Basle* and *Aeneas Piccolomini Crowned as a Pope*, all produced between the years of 1502 and 1508.



Pl. 12. Bernardino Pinturicchio, *Aeneas Piccolomini Arrives to Ancona*, Library of the Duomo, Siena Cathedral, 1502-1508

Sebastiano Serlio in *Architettura* (1551) and Giorgio Vasari in *Le vite de più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori* (1550, translated as *Lives Of the Most Eminent Painters*), made the first written records of the *grotesche* style with a connection to the ruins. Vasari worked in the studios of Michelangelo and Andrea del Sarto and participated in the painting of the Vatican Library where some of the earliest and most remarkable examples of the imitative grotesque style can be found. But he is best known for *Le vite de più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori*, which remains the most valuable source of information on the lives and works of the painters of Vasari's time. When describing Perino del Vaga's art Vasari refers to his use of the *grotesche* in clearly positive terms:

Perino dunque, come si vede per [le] cose dette e molte che si potrebbero dire, è stato uno de' più universali pittori de' tempi nostri, avendo aiutato gli artefici a fare eccellentemente gli stucchi, e lavorato grotesche, paesi, animali e tutte l'altre cose che può sapere un pittore, e colorito in fresco, a olio et a tempera: onde si può dire che sia stato il padre di queste nobilissime arti, vivendo le virtù di lui in coloro che le vanno imitando in ogni effetto onorato dell'arte.¹⁰⁸

Vasari even refers to the *grotesche* in the Domus Aurea and to how much they pleased and influenced Perino: “E così continuando a le cose antiche di marmo, e sottoterra a le grotte per la novità delle grotesche, imparò i modi del lavorare di stucco, e mendicando il pane con ogni stento, sopportò ogni miseria per venir eccellente in questa professione”¹⁰⁹. In sub-chapter xxvii, called “Come si lavorino le grotesche su lo stucco”, he presents a definition of his own:

Le grotesche sono una spezie di pittura licenziose e ridicole molto, fatte dagl'antichi per ornamenti di vani, dove in alcuni luoghi non stava bene altro che cose in aria; per il che facevano in quelle tutte sconciature di monstri per strattezza della natura e per gricciolo e ghiribizzo degli artefici, i quali fanno in quelle cose senza alcuna regola, apiccando a un sottilissimo filo un peso che non si può reggere, a un cavallo le gambe di foglie, a un uomo le

¹⁰⁸ Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de piu eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori*, Firenze, 1586, the Giuntina edition. *Cribeccu: Centro Ricerche Informatiche Per I Beni Culturali*, 1999. 30 July 2004 <<http://picasso.cribeccu.sns.it/~frecco/cgi-bin/Vasari>>. Ch. V, 161.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. V, 112.

gambe di gru, et infiniti sciarpelloni e passerotti; e chi più stranamente se gli immaginava, quello era tenuto più valente.¹¹⁰

Vasari describes the motto for his century and for the next to come: suspended forms in strings that could never sustain the supposed weight, deformed monsters created either out of the caprice of nature or of the artist's extravagant imagination, horses with leafy legs, half-bird humans or, in reality, any other hybrid creature. The two prime characteristics can be said to be the negation of space (translated into a combination of rigour and inconsistency or a tendency towards a suspended vertigo) and the forms forged out of sheer imagination, as are the semi-vegetable or semi-animal beings. The latter frequently point towards drollery and laughter.

Throughout *Le vite de più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori* Vasari referred to the *grotesche* style in relation to Filippino Lippi, Pinturicchio, Raphael, Giovanni da Udine, Taddeo Zuccheri and even Michelangelo. According to Vasari, Filippino Lippi was in fact the first artist to imitate the paintings of the ruins and his excellence made his art even superior to the originals. At this stage the *grotesche* was purely an ornamental style that Filippino Lippi used in *The Torture of St John* in the Strozzi Chapel in Florence and Pinturicchio in the Castello di S. Angelo.



Pl. 13.

Pl. 13. Filippino Lippi, *The Torture of St John*. The *grotesche*, imitating *stucco* framing, presented oddly shaped curves and leafy-bearded heads. Strozzi Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence, 1502

¹¹⁰ Ibid., ch. I, 143-144.

In 1515 Raphael was inspired by the style to design the stuccowork and paintings to be carried out at the Vatican Loggie and to be realised by Giovanni da Udine. Later Giovanni da Udine was also in charge of the decoration of San Pietro on the occasion of Clement VII's coronation. To help him with this task he was assisted by Perino del Vaga. The latter will produce *grottesche* profusely: at the Chapel of Trinita, at the Palace of Prince Doria in Genoa and on his death Daniello Ricciarelli and Taddeo Zuccheri will complete his work at the Vatican. Giovanni da Udine's work at the Vatican Library reveals the same taste for a creamy background but the grotesque ornaments now occupy a larger extension and have become more complex. More intricate patterns are preferred over simple elegance. The inscrolled grotesques by Udine remain peripheral; in the case of the examples presented, they are painted on the ceiling, exhibiting combinations of mythological figures and animals considered exotic like the lion.



Pl. 14. Raphael, fragment of engraving of a painting for the Vatican Loggie, early sixteenth century



Pl. 15. The Raphael Loggie, Vatican, early sixteenth century



Pl. 16. Giovanni da Udine, The Sistine Hall of the Vatican Library, early sixteenth century



Pl. 17. Vatican ceiling, early sixteenth century

When the grotesques left wall painting and started to be applied in engraved works, a change occurred which reveals the importance the grotesque style had so quickly gained in the field of the arts: from the borders it moved to the centre giving way to the realisation of more elaborate and fanciful productions. Among the most prolific artists to apply the style are Andrea Zoan (late fifteenth, early sixteenth century), Nicoletto da Modena (1490?-1569?) and Agostino dei Musi Veneziano (1490?-1536?) but the style was also used by other renowned Italian artists.



Pl. 18. Perino del Vaga (?), engraving of grotesques, Italy, sixteenth century



Pl. 19.



Pl. 20.

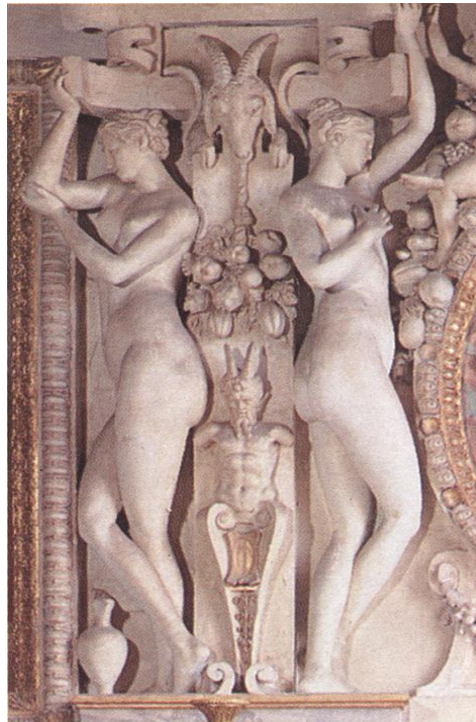
Pl. 19. Andrea Zoan, engraving of ornamental pattern, Italy, circa 1500
 Pl. 20. Agostino Veneziano, engraving of ornamental pattern, Italy, circa 1520

The *grottesche* style was quick to spread in Italy and it became, in Tatiana Kossourova's words, "the most characteristic ornament of the Renaissance era"¹¹¹. As early as 1530 it was ready to cross the borders towards France. The first major work took place at the Palace of Fontainebleau where the technique was primarily Raphaelesque but where the paintings and stucco were refashioned to give way to a new kind of scrollwork under the responsibility of Il Rosso. The introduction of children as subjects of this kind of painting was also his. Primaticcio reproduced these innovations, namely the inscrolled grotesques, throughout the palace and Jacopo Barozzi came to collaborate in the project as well. Barozzi, a disciple of the Vitruvian School, which strongly disapproved of grotesque art, adopted the ambivalent but common attitude of his time of rejecting all grotesque architectural enterprises and simultaneously adopting its ornamental influence in painting.



Pl. 21. Primaticcio, fresco with grotesques *al stucco* at Fontainebleau, first half of the sixteenth century

¹¹¹ Tatiana Kossourova, *The Magic World of the Grotesque: Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century Grotesques in the Applied Art of Western Europe*, Catalogue of the Hermitage Collection (St Petersburg: Hermitage, 2000) 33.



Pl. 22. Primaticcio, royal staircase *al stucco*, Apartments of the Duchesse d'Étampes, Fontainebleau, 1530s

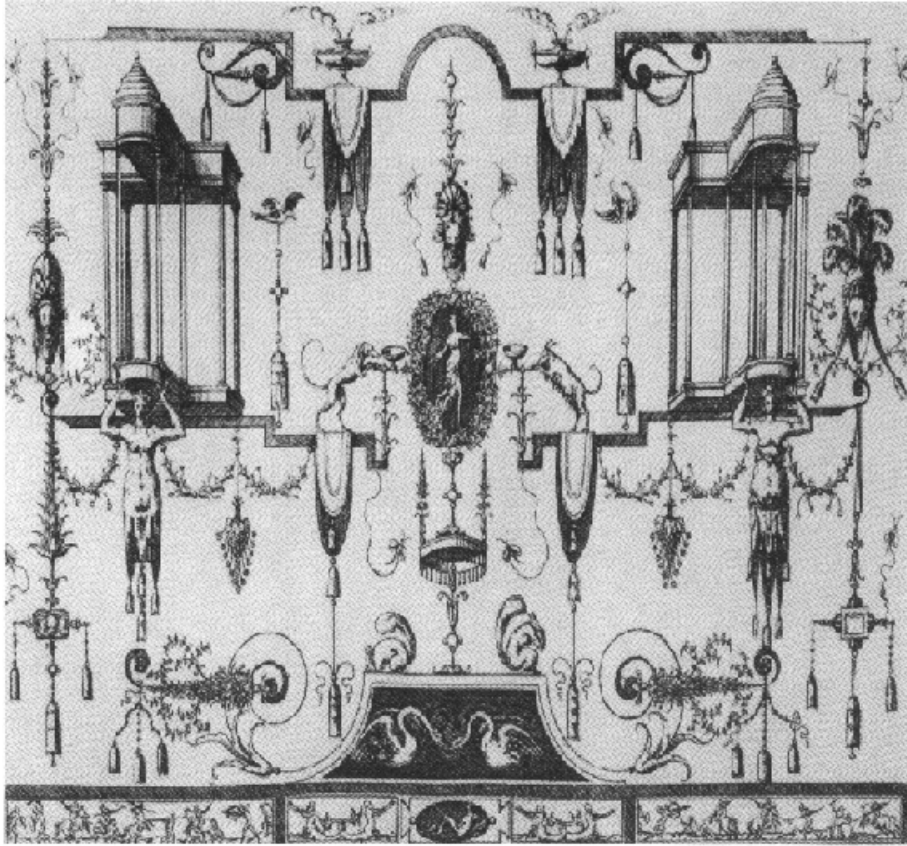


Pl. 23. Jacopo Barozzi, Palazzo Farnese, Caprarola, mid sixteenth century

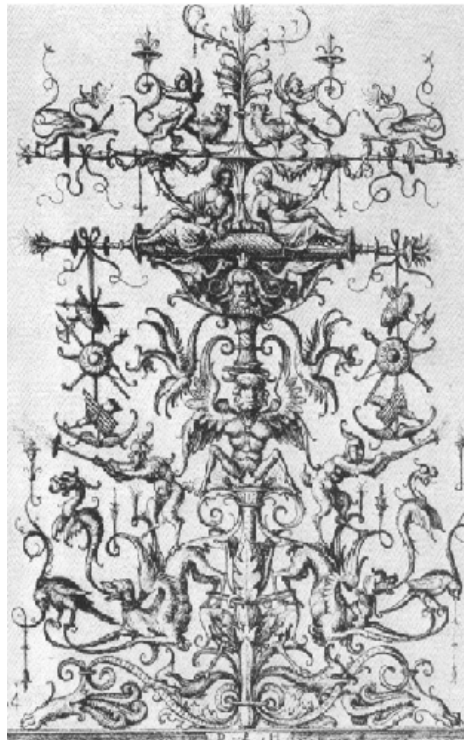


Pl. 24. Jacopo Barozzi, Palazzo Farnese, Caprarola, mid sixteenth century

In the example of the staircase at Fontainebleau, Primaticcio positioned two female nudes and between them the Roman god Pan, whose goat legs were replaced by curved endings. Above them, fruits are topped with a ram's head, a symbol frequently associated with Pan. At Fontainebleau, as in the Vatican, the grotesque developed literally on the borders of larger paintings of ancient gods and heroes. Even in its earliest days the grotesque occupied a liminal place in the spatial arrangement of the paintings where it often developed by resorting to fantastical elements. Barozzi's frescoes at Caprarola show a simple, graceful style, closer to that in the Domus Aurea. Plate 23 presents on a light background framed by strict geometrical lines fantastical animals, human heads generating scrolling plants and hanging flowers. The bottom panel shown in plate 24 is of clear IVth style inspiration. The middle level shows, to the rear, the same decorative inspiration and, between the fake columns, other grotesques are combined vertically (also superimposing three panels). The ceiling is more elaborate and the panels display grotesque details as well as unicorns and half-vegetable humans. Similarly to what had taken place in Italy, the Raphaelesque was picked up by engravers in France and soon by other European artists.



Pl. 25. Jacques Androuet I Ducerceau, engraving of ornamental pattern, 1566



Pl. 26. Daniel Hopfer, engraving of ornamental pattern, circa 1530



Pl. 27. Lucas Van Leyden, grotesque engraving, 1528



Pl. 28. Aldegrevier, grotesque engraving, circa 1540

When the new Italian style moved to France the word defining it naturally went too. The Italian *la grottesca*, *grottesco* and *grottesche*, occasionally appearing with initial “c” or single “t”, become *crottesque* in France in the early 1530s but the form with a single “t” is the widely used orthography until the seventeenth century when the form *grotesque* is finally established. The word *grottesche* was used, still in Italian therefore, for instance, between Primaticcio and the painter Nicolas de l’Abbeÿ who decorated the Palace at Meudon. But already in 1532 the Inventory of Florimond Robertet listed a tapestry of Vulcan in the *crottesque* style. As Italian-based Renaissance art expanded until it reached the Iberian Peninsula and Northern Europe the grotesque established itself as a style that stood for fantastic and hybrid beings ornamented with carefully studied symmetric and charming designs. But it was Vasari himself who applied

the word to a field other than painting. Describing Michelangelo's New Sacristy of San Lorenzo in the Medici Tombs Vasari comments that it was

vi fece dentro un ornamento composito nel più vario e più nuovo modo che per tempo alcuno gli antichi e i moderni maestri abbino potuto operare: perché nella novità di sì belle cornici, capitegli e base, porte, tabernacoli e sepolture fece assai diverso da quello che di misura, ordine e regola facevano gli uomini secondo il comune uso e secondo Vitruvio e le antichità, per non volere a quello agiugnere. La quale licenzia ha dato grande animo, a quelli che àno veduto il far suo, di mettersi a imitarlo, e nuove fantasie si sono vedute poi, alla grottesca più tosto che a ragione o regola, a' loro ornamenti; onde gli artefici gli hanno infinito e perpetuo obbligo, avendo egli rotti i lacci e le catene delle cose che per via d'una strada comune eglino di continuo operavano.¹¹²



Pl. 29.



Pl. 30.

Pl. 29. Michelangelo, Tomb of Lorenzo di Medici, Sagrestia Nuova, San Lorenzo, Florence, 1524-31
Pl. 30. Michelangelo, Tomb of Giuliano di Medici, "Night" (detail), Sagrestia Nuova, San Lorenzo, Florence, 1524-31

Appreciating Michelangelo's daring approach to sculpture and architecture Vasari refers to it as grotesque, taking the first step in a long and often contentious debate that will cleave the grotesque into two distinct areas: on the one hand, painting and interior decoration where it is admired and, on the other, sculpture and architecture where it is rejected altogether.

In fact, it is to the late period of the Renaissance and to its architectural and sculptural productions that John Ruskin, in a tone of utter contempt, calls the Grotesque Renaissance. Moreover, Michelangelo's style has been referred to as mannerist and, more importantly given the discussion at the beginning of this study, baroque. Barasch herself notices that what the art historian Robert J. Clements denominates baroque, Vasari called grotesque. In addition, Clements comments that it was after seeing the Laocoon statue that Michelangelo found the authority to go further than the traditional, that is, Vitruvian, parameters thought proper¹¹³. Historically therefore, the grotesque is linked to creative audacity insofar as it questions classical rules and their limited values of harmony and symmetry.

In spite of the rapid expanding of the grotesque, Vitruvian thought was dominant. Marcus Vitruvius Pollio's *De Architectura* (circa 27 BC) remains to this day a fundamental text in that field of study. An engineer and architect, he wrote the ten books of *De Architectura* to supply the emperor Augustus with the necessary knowledge to judge buildings. Advanced in age, impoverished, and in precarious health, he considered it more valuable to record the philosophical and structural principles of architecture than to concentrate his efforts on securing his financial stability. His theoretical and technical discussions demonstrate his awareness of the complexity of the architect's work, who needs, in addition, to be learned in climate, geography, optics, perspective, acoustics, mechanics, geometry and even in astronomy. His obvious wide experience generated an academic but also practical encyclopaedic work that made Vitruvius's book the most influential architectural treatise for centuries to come, largely due to its combining of complicated mathematical principles with simple understanding of people's needs. His ideas found renewed strength in the fifteenth century with Leon Batista Alberti's *De re aedificatoria* which interpreted the universe as a mathematical composition where everything, from the human being to the smallest organism in nature, obeyed the most perfect of all geometric forms, the circle. This perspective was adopted in all humanist fronts: in the arts but also in astronomy, philosophy and theology.

Alberti and his followers aspired to perfection in art, to the absolute beauty that, in their eyes, the ancient Romans had been able to achieve. However, since Vitruvius had paid little attention to painting, Alberti felt free to see it his own way, a way that valued a subjective approach over a purely mathematical reproduction. Resorting to strategies of light, colours

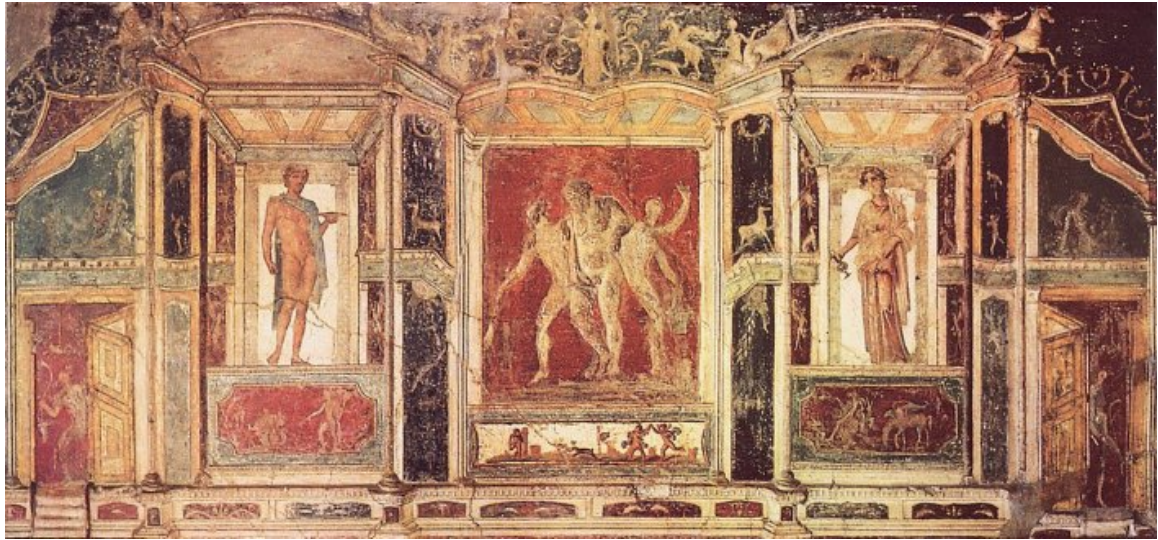
¹¹² Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de piu eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori*, Firenze, 1586, the Giuntina edition. *Cribecu: Centro Ricerche Informatiche Per I Beni Culturali*, 1999. 30 July 2004 <<http://picasso.cribecu.sns.it/~frecco/cgi-bin/Vasari>>. Ch. VI, 55-56.

¹¹³ See Frances K. Barasch, *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*, 24-25, n. 12.

and perspective, the artist could paint as s/he saw the object and not according to its actual characteristics. His ideas on painting were recorded in *Della Pittura*, a manuscript that was available in manuscript before it was first published in 1540 (which is to say ten years before *Le vite de più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori*). Moreover, as his views were not widely available early in the sixteenth century some of his opinions, which would have clashed with the ornamental style of the grotesque, such as his opposition to *horror vacui*, did not have the opportunity to establish themselves firmly. But in the end, Alberti, like Vasari after him, combined his aesthetic needs with his personal beliefs in a rather ambivalent solution. Perhaps given this ambivalence, when later humanists studied Alberti's work as well as Vitruvius's, they became aware that the grotesques that had been so highly regarded referred to a style and to a period the masters did not favour. Artists of the Augustan era ignored Vitruvius and proceeded to elaborate further and further a style that from ornate moved on to be fantastic. The Baths of Titus, the humanists realised, belonged to this overdone stage; the surviving pieces of wall painting at the towns of Herculaneum and Pompeii as well as other Roman villas around Vesuvius and even at the city of Ostia supply evidence of the Roman desire to reproduce Greek art that, by the first century BC, was responsible for the importation of masters to paint framed replicas of actual Greek panel paintings. This decorative fashion marked a turn:

Beginning with simple patterns, imitating stone and plaster veneers and derived from Hellenistic models of the third and second centuries BC, roman interior designers soon developed an 'architectural style'. This fashion of interior decoration suggested complex illusions of depth, as if the wall surface itself were transparent and opened out upon attractive prospects of porticoes or landscapes. In the early Empire these architectural designs became more and more fantastic or irrational, with complicated passages interlocking richly coloured forms.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Ed. Denise Hooker, *Art of the Western World* (London, New York, Sydney and Toronto: Guild Publishing, 1989) 47.



Pl. 31. Fresco with small grotesque figures topping the panels, Pompeii, I B.C.

The grotesque that at one point had been regarded as the expression of classical good taste began to stand for the exact opposite. Its success did not diminish though, even if it slowly became a synonym not only of fantastic art but, already in 1524, also as simple anti-Vitruvianism. *Grottesche* meant more than bizarre creatures; its disregard for a naturalistic reproduction of the world and its norms of proportion and containment implied a disdain for the moral and philosophical standards of the time. It was in all senses a deviation. That had clearly been Vitruvius's very point on criticising the anti-mimetic style of the grotesques:

[O]ur contemporary artists desecrate the walls with monstrous forms rather than reproducing clear images of the familiar world. Instead of columns they paint fluted stems with oddly shaped leaves and volutes, and instead of pediments arabesques; the same with candelabra and painted edifices, on the pediments of which grow dainty flowers unrolling out of robes and topped, without rhyme or reason, by little figures. The little stems, finally, support half-figures crowned by human or animal heads. Such things, however, never existed, do not now exist, and shall never come into being.¹¹⁵

The sense of the grotesque referring to the architecture of Michelangelo evolved to a term referring to a more subjective production of art that later on was invested with a pejorative connotation related to immorality, bad taste, disrespect and irrationality. But since Michelangelo himself had clearly contested the school which vouched for Reason, Order and harmony, the world of art continued to produce *grottesche*. The Vasarian party, the unruliness,

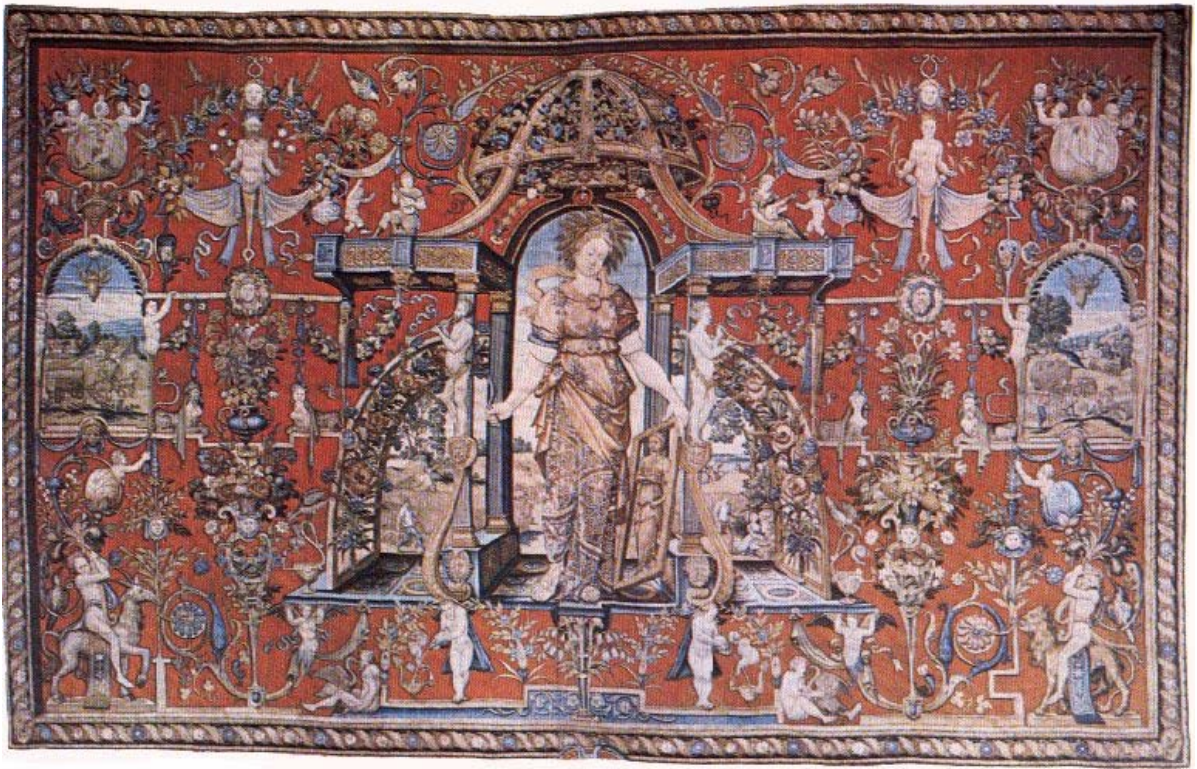
rebelliousness, and imagination they stood for, managed to put pressure on and even to some extension to influence Vitruvians and for two centuries classical principles were neglected in favour of the grotesque.

It was in the field of ornamentation that the grotesques made their most extravagant appearance. In tapestry, for instance, the contribution of the grotesque was crucial to the creation of exquisite works particularly in sixteenth century Italy but in the later part of the century Flemish and French workshops rivalled the Italian pieces. As with mural, pictorial and engraved motifs, the grotesque designs were either organised in horizontal or vertical lines or they occupied the borders of the tapestry. Tapestry and embroideries of Italian influence, at times directly inspired by the works of Giulio Romano, Perino del Vaga and Agostino Veneziano, tended to be ornamented with classical mythological figures and floral designs whereas the impact of the artists from the North like Cornelis Bos and Cornelis Floris was manifested in the use of animal and human hybrids with a stronger sense of the personal fantastical inspiration of the artist's imagination. The aesthetic richness of the grotesques was therefore a fitting counterpart to the elaborate technique developed at the time and which permitted the combination of different fabrics and textures such as wool, silk, velvet, satin, gold and silver.



Pl. 32. White rep facings with depiction of animals, tritons and masks, Italy, sixteenth century, silk with gilt and silver thread

¹¹⁵ Quoted in Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, 20.



Pl. 33. Tapestry, representation of the month August, sixteenth century, origin unknown



Pl. 34. Jean Roost, grottesques on a yellow background, circa 1546-1560, taffeta

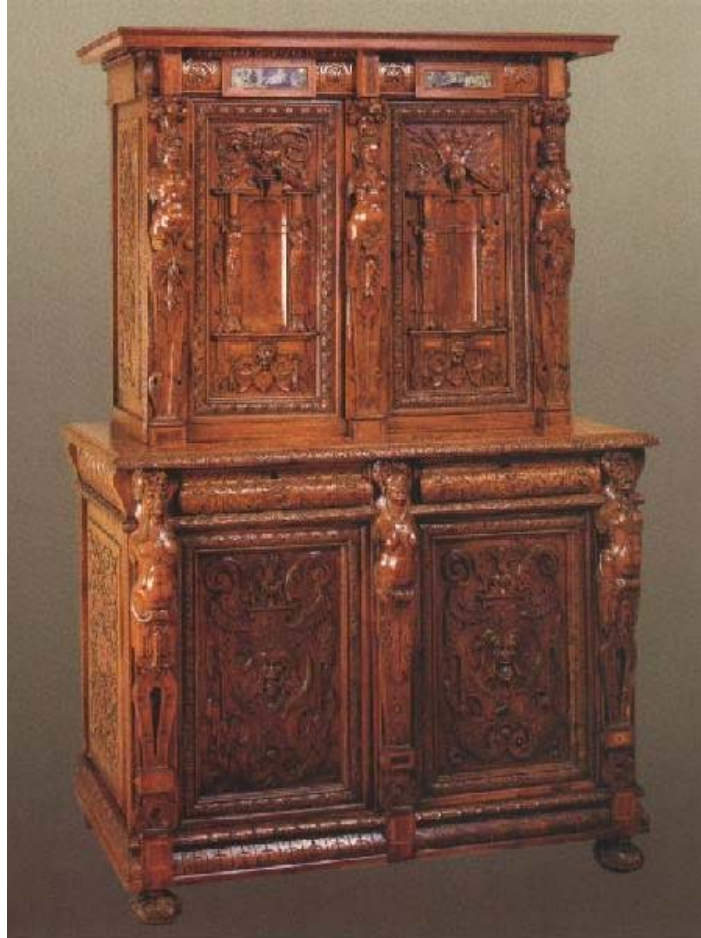
Wood showed itself to be a malleable material for the production of the grotesque. From wall friezes, pilasters, portals and doors, artists proceeded to carve grotesque compositions which can still be seen at Fontainebleau. These sites, however, were only suitable for rather simple designs so it is not surprising that it is in furniture that the most extravagant creations can be found. Carved or inset (usually of a contrasting colour) or through intarsia (wood veneer inlaid flatly on a darker background) cupboards, chairs, tables, beds, closets and *cassoni* (marriage chests) reveal animal feet, winged and leafy animals and monstrous heads. Following a tendency verified in other arts, Italian furniture displays multiple flowery arrangements but other European works, particularly French, made wider use of the advantages of carving to provide the impression of volume and shadowing to the detailed parts of the piece.



Pl. 35. Chest with feet in the shape of lion's paws, Florence, late sixteenth century, carved walnut



Pl. 36. Chest with feet in the shape of lion's paws, Florence, second half of the sixteenth century, carved walnut, inlaid with ivory



Pl. 37. Dresser with carved mascarons and herms, South of France, second half of the sixteenth century, carved walnut, inlaid with marble

The influence of the grotesque was felt in other areas of the decorative arts, particularly in metal, silver and gold pieces. Initially the grotesques observed the positions verified in the decorations of the Domus Aurea, either appearing isolated or in friezes. However, by the late sixteenth century, they had already taken over the surface of the whole object, thus creating much more complicated compositions. The evolution of the grotesque in the sixteenth century accompanied therefore a change from the Renaissance mood to Mannerism which fundamentally accentuated and even exaggerated the visual details introduced by the great masters of the Renaissance. With the establishment of Northern cities, especially in Germany, as centres of production of gold- and silverwork towards the end of the sixteenth century the objects started to depict designs which characterised the Northern European grotesque such as the fantastical hybrids.



Pl. 38.



Pl. 39.

Pl. 38. Heinrich Jones, nautilus-shell cup, Nuremberg, circa 1600, silver and gilt
 Pl. 39. Ludwig Hochenauer, tankard with a lion on the lid, Augsburg, 1630s, silver and gilt

With respect to jewellery, the impact of the grotesque was considerable particularly in Italy and France where designs by Etienne Delaune and Jacques Androuet I Ducerceau were borrowed to ornament jewels. The Northern European taste marked its pieces with the figures of its preference: monsters, strange animals, and hybrids frequently of maritime inspiration. Using in their composition pearls and enamel, pendants, necklaces, bracelets, earrings, buckles, buttons, watches, frames and even prayer-book covers were adorned with grotesque motifs. Arms and armours were also grotesquely decorated and though at first sea subjects were amply produced by the Venetian school, the Milanese preferred mythological and fantastical motifs alluding to aggressive human instincts such as the gryphon as well as warriors depicted with details elevating their skills to mythical quality (wings, for instance). But it was in Nuremberg and Augsburg that the most spectacular pieces were made as they borrowed designs from such renowned engravers such as Heinrich Aldegrever.



Pl. 40.



Pl. 41.

Pl. 40. Medallion-pendant with blue enamel and white enamel flowers, France, sixteenth century, copper, silver and enamel
 Pl. 41. Hunting whistle in the form of a siren, Master NI, Nuremberg, sixteenth century, silver



Pl. 42.



Pl. 43.

Pl. 42. Book cover with depictions of the Baptism of Christ, The Last Supper and the Crucifixion, Germany (?), seventeenth century, silver

Pl. 43. Vase with two handles, Germany or Prague, circa 1600, almandine



Pl. 44.



Pl. 45.

Pl. 44. Door-knocker depicting triton, nereid, herm and mascaron, Italy, sixteenth century, bronze

Pl. 45. Helmet, Milan (?), circa 1580-90, steel

Despite the ability of the grotesque to be expressed in such wide-ranging areas it was in ceramics that its imprint was so strongly felt that from around the onset of the sixteenth century it completely took over the maiolica (or majolica) pieces from Urbino, Siena and Faenza¹¹⁶. The workshops in Faenza were distinguished by the dark blue ground of their relatively small plates bordered by scrolled grotesques. The Sienese school was characterised by the more varied use of colours and complexity of the aesthetic designs which imprinted in the piece a certain sense of ostentation absent in works produced in Faenza. The most well-known craftsmen, however, developed their art in the workshops of Urbino. Over a creamy white ground the masters created grotesques which were typical of other maiolica centres such as dolphins and winged heads but the disposition in the piece itself was able to create a sensation of suspension and elegance which conferred a unique beauty to Urbino works and which were also more akin to the designs found in the Domus Aurea. The other trait that was specific to Urbino maiolica pieces is the use of the *en camaïen* technique, basically the use of cameos on a light grey background. The maiolica from Urbino was by no means limited to plates so that the grotesques served to embellish a wide range of objects such as vases, jugs, vessels, writing sets, candlesticks, salt-cellars and bowls. The success of this type of grotesques was much due to the inspiration drawn from engraving. Recently the study of the depth of this connection has led to astonishing discoveries such as that made by Christopher Poke who has established that the wine cooler made for Cosimo I de Medici by the workshop of Flaminio Fontana in Urbino and presently part of the Wallace collection drew its designs from the etchings by Jacques Androuet Ducerceau entitled *Petites Grotesques* (1562). The particular influence of the maiolica of Urbino was felt by the great ceramic school and industry of Limoges. In France, however, the tendency was to privilege other patterns such as mascarons and masks and on the whole it cannot be said that the grotesques were as vastly produced or as significant in this field as they were in Italy. Nevertheless, French ceramics made a contribution of its own: enamel.

¹¹⁶ The *Illustrated History of Antiques* indicates “majolica” to be a nineteenth century corruption of the word “maiolica” which is the basis of my preference of the latter term. See Mallalieu Huon, *Illustrated History of Antiques* (London: Quantum Books, 1993) 627.



Pl. 46.



Pl. 47.

Pl. 46. Plate with a seated bacchante, Casa Pirota workshop, Faenza, 1520s-30s, maiolica
Pl. 47. Plate with Narcissus gazing at his own reflection, Siena, 1510-20, maiolica



Pl. 48.



Pl. 49.

Pl. 48. Plate with large grotesques, Gubbio, 1533, maiolica
Pl. 49. Scudella, Orazio Fontana workshop, Urbino, 1560s-70s, maiolica



Pl. 50. Quatrefoil dish depicting Minerva, Orazio Fontana's workshop, Urbino, 1565-70, maiolica



Pl. 51.



Pl. 52.

Pl. 51. Salt cellar with three sculpted chimeras, Urbino, late sixteenth century, maiolica
 Pl. 52. Cosimo I de Medici's wine cooler, Flaminio Fontana's workshop, Urbino, 1574, maiolica



Pl. 53.



Pl. 54.

Pl. 53. Faience on a yellow background. Floor tile with grotesques, Petrucci Palace, Sienna, 1509
 Pl. 54. Caryatid of grotesques in a tiling panel from a pilaster at the entrance hall of the Museo de Bellas Artes, Sevilla, circa 1600



Pl. 55. Hall of Battles, El Escorial, Spain, Nicolas Granelle, Fabricio Castello, Lázaro Tavarone and Orazio Cambiaso, 1584-1585



Pl. 56. Dish with scenes from the Apocalypse, Limoges, 1555-85, enamel painting on copper



Pl. 57.

Pl. 57. Detail of dish depicted in plate 56



Pl. 58.

Pl. 58. Pierre Reymond, detail of dish depicting Apollo and the Muses, Limoges, 1572, enamel painting on copper

In seventeenth century France its success was enormous: tapestries, wallpapers, jewellery, glassware, plates and vases were being decorated at the same time that walls continued to be painted. Eventually, grotesque expression in ornamental art was mainly French and to distinguish it from other forms of the genre it was renamed “arabesque”. It was at this stage that the word “grotesque” started to be associated with medieval sculptures and architecture of religious importance and with illuminated manuscripts. A similar development took place in Germany. The grotesque that referred to the imitative Italian painting entered German borders in the first half of the sixteenth century but soon *grotteschische* carried the idea of monstrous fantasy, much more akin to sculpting of medieval religious art.



Pl. 59.



Pl. 60.

Pl. 59. Capital, San Michele, Pavia, twelfth century
 Pl. 60. Capital of San Giovanni in Borgo, Pavia, twelfth century



Pl. 61.



Pl. 62.

Pl. 61. Initial D. The temptation of Christ by the demon at the temple. Liège, thirteenth century
 Pl. 62. The hyena, Aberdeen Bestiary, circa 1200. It should not be eaten because it is dirty and has two natures: male and female as shown in the plate. The hyena dwells in the tombs and devours human bodies.

The style that developed in France and Germany by Italian artists made use of the technique commonly referred to as scrollwork that could be applied to three distinct types of designs: the ornamental art of the mauresque (a two-dimensional style displaying plants over a black and white background), the arabesque (a more realistic form of decoration which makes use of perspective and more varied themes such as detailed parts of a plant or animal)¹¹⁷ and the grotesque. As in France, the styles were not easily distinguishable and therefore the word grotesque was used to refer to all three.

¹¹⁷ Vitruvius himself used “arabesques” to define some sort of scrolled or curved motif as opposed to the usual straight lines of pediments. The confusion re-emerges with frequency: *The Oxford Companion to Art* identifies the arabesque with the mauresque (or moresque) from the sixteenth century onwards, when Islamic art started to attract attention in Europe. Though there is no doubt that the pattern itself is already present in Hellenistic art, the Islamic artist was able to develop the plant design into sophisticated forms, always respecting a strictly symmetrical rule, to the point of its losing its realistic features. Nevertheless, the dictionary acknowledges that the term “arabesque” has been used also in relation to medieval illustrations and to designs including flowers, fruits and fanciful creatures produced in the Renaissance. See Harold Osborne ed., *The Oxford Companion to Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1970] 1999) 63.



Pl. 63.



Pl. 64.

Pl. 63. François Pellerin, mauresque, sixteenth century

Pl. 64. Initial A with an arabesque decoration, sixteenth century



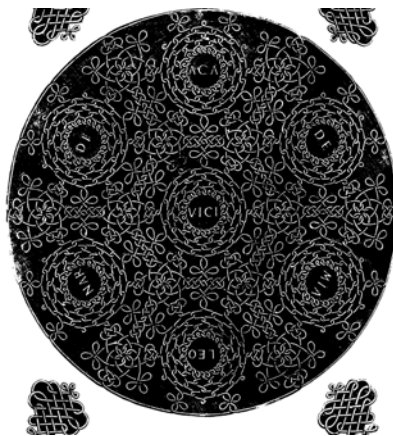
Pl. 65.



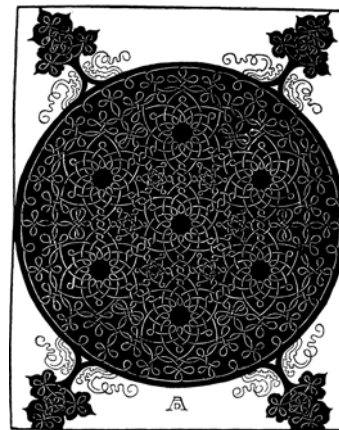
Pl. 66.

Pl. 65. Virgile Solis, mauresque and arabesque, mid sixteenth century

Pl. 66. Pierre Flötner, mauresque, early sixteenth century



Pl. 67.



Pl. 68.

Pl. 67. Leonardo da Vinci, mauresque, circa 1500

Pl. 68. Albert Dürer, mauresque, circa 1506

Groteske quickly became both a noun and an adjective conveying the idea of animal-humans¹¹⁸. Its most noticeable feature was the appearance of the *Traumwerk*, a style of painting of Northern inspiration: Teutonic mythology provided demons and goblins to replace the Roman hybrids. In England both the Italian and Germanic grotesques were being called *antickes* or *anticks*. The style travelled not only to England but also to Italy and France where, in its turn, it generated the school of *diablerie*. The legend of St Anthony, the saint self-exiled in the desert and tempted by devilish animals, whose popularity in the pictorial arts was already considerable, was a cherished theme for Martin Schongauer, Lucas Cranach and Israel van Mechen. Not surprisingly, when Surrealism reinstated the taste for the fantastic and the monstrous, Salvador Dalí and Max Ernst picked up the theme once more. But in the sixteenth century the great painter of *diablerie* was Pieter Brueghel, the Elder, who unmasked and criticised vices resorting to all sorts of fantasies, including the mixing of animals and humans. His predecessor was Hieronymus Bosch whose astounding prodigies share of the darker spirit of the grotesque. The northern tradition of the grotesque thus contrasted with the Italian but, in spite of the conflict, which is based on the emphasis each attributes to the darker or lighter pole, they are the same. Mikhail Piotrovsky says that the “absurdity of the [sixteenth and seventeenth centuries] grotesque was joyful, pleasing to the eye. It counterbalanced the sombre or menacing absurdity inherent in the European artistic outlook. The grotesque seemed to oppose the tradition of Hieronymus Bosch”¹¹⁹. In other words, the Italian grotesque emerged not only as an opposition to classical forms but also as a reaction to other forms of the grotesque. Piotrovsky’s assertion is not, however, exact. Though it seemed to have evinced an emphasis on the joyful, already in the mid sixteenth century when the Italian grotesque style travelled North to France, the Netherlands and Germany, the style was combined with a sense of the terrible or the monstrous.

¹¹⁸ Wolfgang Kayser and Frances Barasch do not agree on the degree of the influence of the grotesque in Renaissance Germany. The former claims a more consequential presence than the latter.

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Tatiana Kossourova’s *The Magic World of the Grotesque: Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century Grotesques in the Applied Art of Western Europe*, 5.

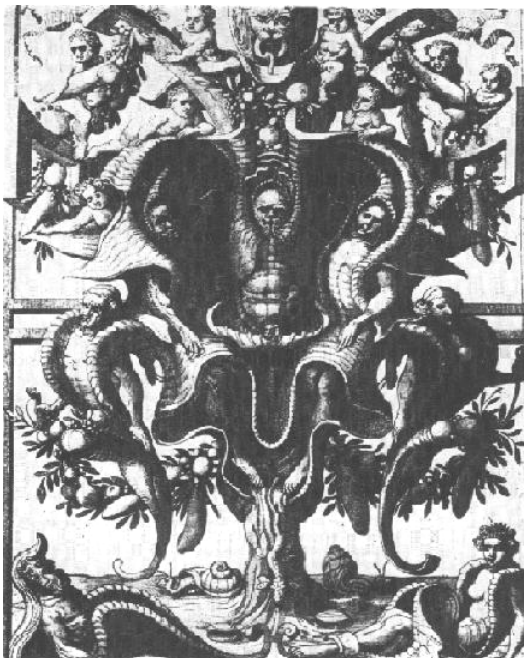


Pl. 69.



Pl. 70.

Pl. 69. Erasmus Hornick, drawing of a ewer, Germany, 1560
Pl. 70. Hans Collaert, engraving for pendant, Netherlands, 1580s



Pl. 71.



Pl. 72.

Pl. 71. Cornelis Floris, grotesque engraving, 1556
Pl. 72. Martin Schongauer, *St Anthony Tormented by Demons*, 1480-90



Pl. 73. Hieronymus Bosch, *Temptation of St Anthony*, 1500



Pl. 74. Lucas Cranach, *The Temptation of St Anthony*, 1506



Pl. 75. Pieter Bruegel, *The Temptation of St Anthony*, 1555-8



Pl. 76. Max Ernst, *The Temptation of St Anthony*, 1945

Some prints of the temptations of St Anthony made it to England but the diabolic was represented most remarkably by Hans Holbein's creations of *The Folly*, *The Monk* and especially the *Dance of Death*. The *antickes* already included the figures of the fool, demons and chimeras and from the sixteenth century onwards Holbein's motifs were added to that list.



Pl. 77. Hans Holbein, *The Dance of Death*, plate XVIII, 1538. The judge decides a cause between a rich and a poor man with a bribe while Death behind him snatches his staff of office



Pl. 78. Heinrich Knoblochzer, “Death and the Gentleman”, *Der Doten Dantz*, Heidelberg, 1490

When in the 1640s the word *grotesque* was adopted, thus establishing the word in English earlier than in French, it acquired the meanings previously attributed to *antickes*¹²⁰. It is at this time that the sense of the ridiculous and ludicrous begins to be associated with *antick* or grotesque figures. Not only was death turned into a foolish character but demons themselves were turned into gleeful creatures. Puck, Robin Goodfellow and Marcolf are among the many good-humoured demons of the mystery plays and farces produced at the time. In Portugal, for instance, Gil Vicente peopled his numerous *autos* with witty devils that in addition to being the means through which the vices of the other characters were exposed also play the comic roles in the plays.

¹²⁰ The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives *crotesque* as the first recorded English form in 1561.



Pl. 79. Geoffrey de Latour Landry, “The demon of Vanity and the Coquette”, *Ritter von Turn*, Basle, 1493

In France, before the word had established itself, the genre, particularly in connection with decorative art, was already popular. Its common designation was *antiquailles*, *anticks* in English. *Anticks* is used in Book I, chapter 8, of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (published in 1534) and *Grotesque* in Book V, chapter 41 (published in 1564) to refer to the same style which clearly indicates the evolution of the word¹²¹. While in England “grotesque” is used strictly to the style of art until the late seventeenth century, in France in the mid sixteenth century it is already used in a literary context. Rabelais’s words are complimentary: the Lamp, made of gold and crystal displayed “a lively and pleasant Battel of naked Boys mounted on little Hobby-horses, with little whirlligig - Lances and shields, that seem’d made of vine-branches with Grapes on them”¹²²; their motions were ingeniously expressed “in *Relief*, or at least, like *Grotesque*, which by the Artist’s Skill has the appearance of the roundness of the Object it represents; this was partly the effect of the various and most charming Light”¹²³.

At this time, the grotesque, the imitative Renaissance style of frescoes, had expanded to include French scrollwork and from there it had become a term to define decorative arts which, with time, branched into several specific styles: *Belgique*, *damasque*, *mauresque*, and even *d’Indies*. Its expansion is such that soon literature itself incorporated not just the word but some of its meaning too. In the 1570s Montaigne belittled his own writing, full of strange

¹²¹ The Books were written respectively before 1532 and 1553 and the pages in the Everyman’s edition are 41 and 791. The books of *Gargantua* came out separately between 1534/5 and 1564. Barasch indicates chapter 40 as the one where the word “*Grotesque*” makes its appearance but the chapter does not in fact refer to the Wonderful Lamp chapter but rather to the mosaics representing the battle in which Bacchus overthrew the Indians. See Barasch, *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*, 34, n. 6.

¹²² François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Book V, ch. 41, 791.

¹²³ Loc. cit. Italics in the text.

monsters and fantastic disorder, of *crotesques* as he called them: “Considerant le conduite de la besongne d’un peintre que j’ay, il m’a pris envie de l’ensuivre. Il choisit le plus bel endroit et milieu de chaque paroiy, pour y loger un tableau élaboré de toute sa suffisance; et, le vuide tout a tour, il le remplit de crotesques, qui son peintures fantastiques n’ayant grâce qu’en la variété et estrangeté. Que sont-cet icy aussi, à la verité, que crotesques et corps monstrueux, rappiecez de divers members, sans certaine figure n’ayants ordre, suite ny proportion que fortuite?”¹²⁴. The term was thus applied to an area other than ornamental art, that of literary style. The fact that his writing was populated by the unruliness of fantasy amused Montaigne who only allowed the monsters to exist in order to reveal their ludicrous nature. The characteristics Montaigne appreciated were the variety and, more importantly, the strangeness the grotesque provoked and thus he anticipated some of the fundamental traits of the psychological grotesque.

In England, even the word itself was, at first, difficult to integrate. In the sixteenth century, the Italian-inspired style, either in tapestry, sculpture, architecture or in related forms, was less in favour than work of Flemish influence. Consequently, the word “anticke” prevailed and assimilated innuendoes shared at the time by the Italian word. For the most part, examples of “antickes” were monstrous, fanciful, and vicious. The Elizabethan society viewed Italian art as a shameful expression of an admiration for paganism and superfluity incompatible with the morality of the time, an attitude that only began to be surpassed in the late sixteenth century. This point is made by Sylvie Debevec Henning who writes:

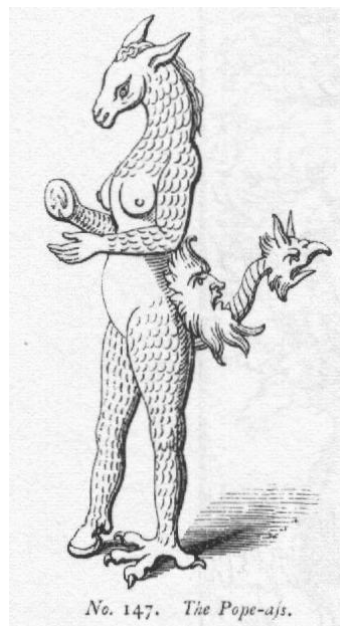
Many Reformation commentators, for example, associated a sense of fear, sin or shame with the grotesque. Sir John Davies, the Calvinist poet, considers grotesque figures representations of man’s fallen state. The imperfect human mind, incapable of grasping the order and harmony of the sublime, can perceive only grotesque disorder. Milton’s position is similar although he gives the grotesque objective reality; it is part of irregular nature, symbolizing the chaos of the natural world. The Protestant ideal, like the classical, is simple, pure, solemn and harmonious; it purports to express “Truth unadorned,” shorn of all Catholic complications and paradoxes. This attitude manifests itself in the writings of Protestant clergymen, like Bishop Joseph Hall, who attack the grotesque as visibly indecorous and immoral, dedicated to false principles, lust and Papism, and, in general, conveying ideas of spiritual impotence and imposture.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Michel de Montaigne, *Essais* (Paris : Société Les Belles Lettres, [1580] 1946) I, XXVIII, 61.

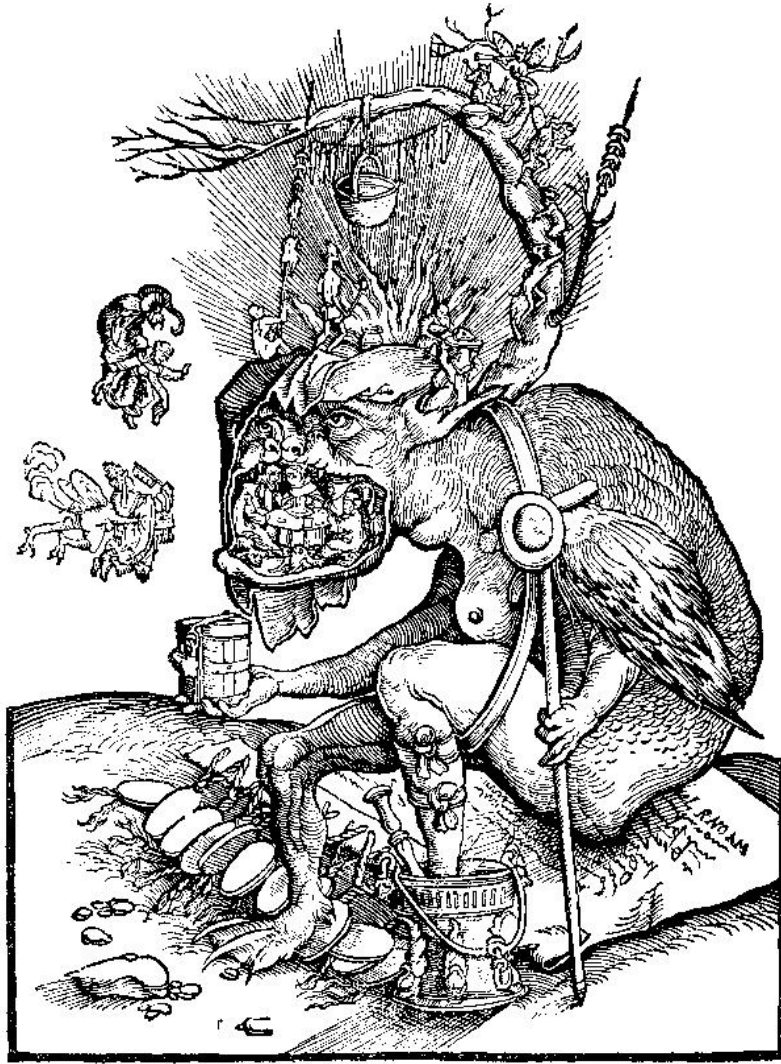
¹²⁵ Sylvie Debevec Henning, “*La Forme In-Formante: The Grotesque Reconsidered*”, *Mosaic* XIV:4, 110.



Pl. 80. The papist devil, "I am the Pope", from a Reformation handbill against Pope Alexander VI, Paris, late fifteenth century



Pl. 81. The Pope-Ass, Germany, early sixteenth century



Pl. 82. Papist indulgence peddlers in the jaws of hell, from a satirical reformation handbill, Germany, late sixteenth century

As Calvinist hostility against Catholic Italy declined and English artists slowly gained confidence in their abilities, the grotesque started to gain ground. But as the previous examples demonstrate the connection of the grotesque with religion was not exclusive to England. It is undeniable that the grotesque had a very meaningful expression in anti-papist and anti-reformist pamphlets and that it was able to flourish parallel to the Italian Renaissance style. Engravings such as the ones reproduced here were extremely popular among German artists, many of whom at some time or another travelled to England. Plate 80 is a satirical version of the image Pope Alexander VI, Roderic Borgia, enjoyed in some circles, of his being the perpetrator of ghastly crimes, of indulging in unspeakable vices and even of having achieved papacy through a pact with the devil. In fact, it is assumed he passed away on

drinking poisoned wine that he intended to give to one of his rivals. One of the most well-known pamphlets was the pope-ass, whose monstrous body incorporated a complex net of innuendoes. The ass head stood for the pope himself and it was given a female body since women were assumed to have a vicious and weak nature; its/her body is naked because the church is not ashamed to display publicly its eating and drinking excesses; the scales that protected it stood for the supporting aristocrats; the head on its backside is that of an old man whose death is near (or so the reformists hoped of the papacy) and the dragon's head, with its burning flames, signified the pope's terrible revenge against his religious opponents; its right hand was an elephant's foot and represented the crushing weight of the papist doctrines over people's consciences; its right hand was human and was related to the worldly power of the institution; the right foot, resembling that of an ox, represented the pope's clergy, from the highest minister to the lowest monk, in sum, all the agents that were involved in the process of oppressing people's lives; the left foot was drawn to look like a griffin's, a mythical animal that, once it catches its prey, does not let go, making it a metaphor for the greed of the papacy in its theft of valuable possessions and properties¹²⁶.

In 1606 Henry Peacham described the whole range of "anticke" art in England. In *Art of Drawing* he described examples that included naked boys upon eagles and dolphins or playing with windmills, tritons and satyrs, a ram's head with ribbons, intertwining vines and fruits among others. Its clearly fantastical inspiration, deprived of Reason, harmony, Order and "naturality", is present in the reproductions of fauna and wild flora, apparently produced for sheer delight.

During the first half of the seventeenth century Protestants connoted "anticke" with deceit and sin and, therefore, favoured the Vitruvian reasoning of purity and a mimetic approach to nature. Moreover, since "anticke" also described the mimer of Italian masquerades it easily became associated with folly, frivolous entertainment, imposture and untruthfulness. But if the clerical attitude was firmly opposed, in Court, ever since the reign of Henry VIII, grotesque art could be appreciated in "anticke" engravings, paintings and embroideries¹²⁷. Throughout the seventeenth century the words "anticke" and "grotesque"

¹²⁶ My analysis is mostly based on the views of Thomas Wright, that seem to me insightful and well documented. For more examples, both of engravings and of explanatory notes see his *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art*, chapter XV. For a complementary analysis of the image of the Pope-Ass and other examples of pictorial satire see E. H. Gombrich, *The Uses of Images: Studies in the Social Function of Art and Visual Communication* (London: Chaidon, 1999).

¹²⁷ Suffice to recall that Hans Holbein, the creator of the popular *The Dance of Death* (issued in 1538 though realised several years before), was Henry VIII's court painter. He distinguished himself as a

coexisted but by the turn of the century the latter was no longer being translated as “anticke” and, in fact, overcame its predecessor and was in general use in English.

It is also noticeable that already in the seventeenth century one of the most striking qualities given to the “antickes” was that of hybridism, reinscribing Horace’s connotation of monstrosity when in *Ars Poetica* he disdained the licentious imagination of the painter or writer who chose “to set a human head on the neck and shoulders of a horse, to gather limbs from every animal and clothe them with feathers from every kind of bird, and make what at the top was a beautiful woman have ugly ending in a black fish’s tail”¹²⁸. “Chimera” was initially used to refer to all the spoils of the Domus Aurea until some artists started to use it (often unaware of the existence of the word “grotesque”) to describe hybrid animals. William d’Avenant, author of masques¹²⁹, in order to describe one of his scenes in *Coelum Britannicum, A Masque* (1634) made use of anticke imagery. A set of intricate foliage presented at the centre harpies and a lion whose front claws contrasted with its leafy hind members. By the middle of the century, Roger Boyle was still using grotesque iconography to suggest the Orient: sphinxes, harpies and exotic felines. The fantastical and the chimerical were, in reality, central to the construction of the grotesque ideal. On the one hand, English translations of Italian art

portraitist (his paintings of the king himself, of Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves and even of Sir Thomas More are still well-known) but his fame originated in his illustrations of Erasmus of Rotterdam’s *Encomium Moriae (In Praise of Folly)* and in Martin Luther’s German translation of the Old and New Testaments. It was with a letter of recommendation from Erasmus that Hans Holbein presented himself to Sir Thomas More, in London, in 1526. Another outstanding engraver and satirist to have dwelled in Henry VIII’s court was Thomas Murner, also a German, who, inspired by the very popular work of Sebastian Brandt *The Ship of Fools*, published *The Conspiracy of Fools*. His anti-Reformist feelings were put forward in many an engraving. Thomas Wright reproduces some of Murner’s drawings in his *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art*, chapter XV and refers to some extent to Brandt in chapter XIII though he does not include any engraving of *The Ship of Fools* collection. Here I present an example from the 1501 Parisian edition.



¹²⁸ Horace, *Ars Poetica*, quoted in Alton Kim Robertson, *The Grotesque Interface: Deformity, Debasement, Dissolution* (Frankfurt and Madrid: Vervuert/Iberoamericana, 1996) 11.

manuals which favoured the Vasarian view, that is, that considered admirable and noble this conjugation of flowers, plants, fish, birds, mammals, and humans, finally begin to overcome the barrier that kept the English ignorant of the grotesque imitative style as well as of the actual historical circumstances that had caused the grotesque to emerge in the early sixteenth century. On the other, the Vitruvian disapproval was strengthened, in particular with the translation of Roland Fréart's studies on painting and architecture. The Frenchman's reproach of English architecture was harsh for it showed appreciation of Gothic constructions and motifs, considered so low they were called apish. But John Evelyn's translation of *A Parallel of the Antient Architecture with the Modern* (1664) reflected the duality common to other thinkers of the time; when it came to architecture, the Vitruvian view was carefully respected but in relation to painting it followed Vasarian principles. Thus, Alberti's neo-classical beliefs survived well into the seventeenth century but there was still enough flexibility to accommodate clearly discordant views, namely those referring to the ornamental style in painting of Italian origin or inspired by Asian wall carvings, known as primitive art, and also referring to the technique to fill surfaces left void in mythological or historical paintings.

The grotesque began to be applied to literature precisely through art, and through engraving in particular. Jacques Callot (1592-1635), having studied both the Germanic *diablèrie* and the Italian *caricatura*, produced in the early seventeenth century sketches and plates that achieved great popularity in France. Callot's work also asserted the frequently undefined and multifarious nature of the grotesque resulting in the at times confusing association with popular feasts, the burlesque, the demonic, the fantastic and the *commedia dell'arte*. Callot's plates of the temptations of St Anthony¹³⁰, following the tradition of Lucas Cranach, Pieter Brueghel and even Hieronymous Bosch, display dragon-like monsters but Callot's "diabolic" figures reveal a burlesque disposition. The Flemish influence is also present in Callot's account of everyday Italian life and characters. The 1616 *Capricci* portray cripples, beggars and grotesque maskers in festivals, ceremonies and a fair whose inspiration is clearly related to some of Brueghel's works such as *The Cripples* (1568), *The Peasant Dance*, *The Peasant Wedding* (1559-60), and most notably, *The Fight between Carnival and Lent* (1559)¹³¹. On his return to France, Callot continued to mediate the Italian influence. The *Balli*, the dancers, represent

¹²⁹ A masque is a poetic drama with pageantry (pantomime, dance and song).

¹³⁰ See Thomas Wright, plates 160 and 161, page 297, and plate 162, page 299. Plate 162 represents an engraving of St Anthony's temptations other than the one I present here.

scenes from the *commedia dell'arte* whose figures became known, through Callot's engravings, by a large number of people throughout Europe. The *Gobbi*, or hunchbacks, and new compositions of beggars complete the set that were generally denominated the grotesques. Thus, Callot's widespread success contributed greatly to the extension of the adjective "grotesque" to ideas of drollery, ridicule, burlesque and fantasy. Any texts written under the influence of Rabelais and Cervantes, or which were simply comic, were referred to as grotesque. In fact, *commedia* types and deformed people had for a long time been popular in Italy and France and, eventually, even in England where they were known as grotesques owing to Callot's grotesques.



Pl. 83. Jacques Callot, *The Temptation of St Anthony*, 1635

¹³¹ I have no evidence that Callot had actually contemplated all of these paintings but it is a fact he had studied within the Germanic school of *diablerie* not only in France but also in Italy where Callot spent several years.



Pl. 84.



Pl. 85.

Pl. 84. Pieter Bruegel, *The Cripples*, 1568
Pl. 85. Jacques Callot, "The Crippled Beggar", *Beggars*, 1616



Pl. 86.



Pl. 87.

Pl. 86. Jacques Callot, "Two Pantaloons dancing face to face", *Balli*, 1616
Pl. 87. Jacques Callot, "Gobbo with wooden leg and crutch", *Gobbi*, 1616



Pl. 88. Jacques Callot, frontispiece of *Capricci* with goatish-men and a fanciful monster, 1616

William D’Avenant is reported to be the first English writer to use the adjective in a literary context. Though initially he only used “grotesque” to describe his chimerical inventions, eventually the term was also being used in relation to non-fantastical creations that one could say belonged to the world of freakery: low characters such as country people and drunkards, vicious or deformed types, that is, the moral or physical Other that had previously been known as “antimasques” (“antick-masques”) were now grotesque as well. The purpose of the grotesques, fantastical or otherwise, was to entertain and generate laughter which was achieved through terrifying products. The conceptualisation of the grotesques as chimerical and fantastical representations was maintained by Sir Thomas Browne in 1643 when he categorically affirmed “There are no Grotesques in Nature”¹³². He condemned those pictorial creations insofar as they found no correspondence in nature, and therefore, he argued, were based on obscure and outdated beliefs. About the same time, John Hall, a Puritan and an educator, put forward a similar reproof: grotesque monstrosities accredited superstition and immorality. In spite of their hostility, Browne and Hall, being men of science and of the art of the satire themselves, contributed to the enlargement of the scope of the word “grotesque” that, though still firmly rooted in art, was thenceforth used in other fields. The only clearly distinct meaning attributed to the word grotesque appears in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* where it appears in the context of a wild and savage nature, representative of the arduous ascent to Paradise and of the strenuous and often disordered ways of the world.

It was in the eighteenth century that the grotesque underwent a sudden change. In England, comedy established itself as the most popular mode and writers made a turn towards the burlesque, particularly the ridiculous and the deformed. The element of the horrific subsided and that of the fool was animated. Popular spectacles grew in number: the streets were quickened with cockfights, masquerades and harlequinades. Along with poems and plays of fantastic and unreal fabrication, other creations put into action characters, viewed as “naturalistic”, inspired by types of the lower classes. This taste, also called gothic at the time, referred to the arts in general where there was an increasing interest in all that was not “natural”, or that originated in exotic places. Thus, though they were considered vulgar, Japanese furniture or *Chinoiserie* as well as Italian operas and farces became extremely popular. A similar tendency to fancy was observed in literature but it was judged unsuitable for members of upper classes, as it showed no will to be truthful to nature. Grotesque taste could thus be beneficial only to the lower classes who would, hopefully, be made aware of their own

¹³² Quoted in Arthur Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1965) 3.

obscene behaviour when exposed to grotesque poetry or theatre plays. In 1748 William Horsley published a series of essays on the Fool to defend him as the epitome of the taste of the ape and, by permeating his writings with political references, particularly exulting nationalism and anti-French sentiments, indicated the expansion of the grotesque to yet another field of thought.

The main manifestation of the grotesque was, however, the caricature. Following Callot and the development in Holland where it had been used to denounce the vices of despised groups (beggars and gypsies) and of the lower classes, the caricature was invested with political sentiment and anti-papist animosity. Romain de Hooghe became a leading artist who, resorting to distortion and exaggeration, gained notoriety in religious caricature. Royal figures were often represented in these caricatures such as that in which Queen Mary was depicted with her confessor, a wolf. The caricature became a crucial Protestant tool to attack Catholicism. The semantics of the grotesque remained elusive though, and grotesque, burlesque and caricature were sometimes used interchangeably and referring both to the visual arts and to literature. Moreover, Italian-inspired art of neo-classical expression was re-interpreted according to Protestant principles. Owing to its Catholic origin the nudes and, generally speaking all Roman-inspired works of the Renaissance, assumed a connotation of infamy and obscenity known as “grotesque art”. Critics once again discussed gothic architecture. Oblivious of the mordant mockery of Gothic sculpture of the Middle Ages, whose object was commonly the clergy and even the pope, in the eighteenth century the Gothic is regarded as a licentious form of art. But Horace Walpole, who was directly associated with the Gothic revival in the 1760s, admired its monstrous creations that he considered not to be deprived of taste and even propriety.



Pl. 89. Capital, Parma, twelfth century. This carving represents a satirical view of erudite knowledge, clearly imbued with that good-humoured spirit Bakhtin referred to

In terms of the grotesque imitative style *per se*, the approach did not differ substantially from that of the previous century. It was still based on the teachings of Andrea Palladio, the Renaissance architect whose publications in the second half of the sixteenth century, such as *I quattro libri dell' architettura* (1570), reinstated a style characterised by restraint, simplicity and symmetrical harmony, a type of architecture profoundly committed to Reason. The disciples of Palladio continued to favour the Vitruvian point of view but ornaments on the interior of the buildings often displayed grotesque designs. Structures of the edifices adopting a Vasarian propensity or Gothic inspiration were fiercely rejected. The publication in 1715 of Giacomo Leoni's *The Architecture of Palladio* definitely reinstated the strictly Vitruvian philosophy. Palladio himself however had approved of the painter's greater liberty when compared to the architect even when indulging in fanciful grotesque designs. In any architectural effect the grotesques remained inadmissible and continued to be tainted with a sense of the non-sensical, the superfluous and weak. Therefore buildings were often a *mélange* that Barasch considered, along with the art critics of the time, as absurdities¹³³.

The event that turned the grotesque into the chief decorative indoor style was the reopening of the Baths of Titus, closed since the sixteenth century. Copies of the paintings started to circulate in Europe exposing artists not only to grotesque designs of Raphaelesque art but also to the original paintings. The already confusing universe of the grotesque began to be linked with the Italian-generated style in painting, the *pittoresco*. Initially *pittoresco* referred to a style that expressed itself in more perceptual rather than realistic impressions carried by rough brush strokes and shaded masses, avoiding the minute attention to every element of the painting that was typical of the Dutch school. The etymologic evolution to "picturesque" was accompanied by a pictorial change: it became the expression of a manner of painting that was not mimetic and that privileged the painter's interpretation. The picturesque technique eventually evolved to define the quality of a given painted object. Painters of the northern landscape school cherished the style particularly. Rubens, Ruysdael, Van Goyen, Ostade and Rembrandt painted nostalgic, rustic or decaying objects of winter landscape as well as people of low condition: gypsies, beggars and peasants. The rising interest in the Gothic directed the English towards their northern European roots and thus the picturesque configurations of the landscape school were confronted with the Gothic's inherent affinity with the grotesque that in this context concerned itself with irregular and rough nature. The widespread appreciation

¹³³ Frances Barasch, *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*, 110.

of the picturesque and grotesque variableness that took place late in the century was, in fact, in clear contrast with the theoretical precepts.



Pl. 90. Adriaen van Ostade, *Pig Killing*, 1642



Pl. 91. Pieter Paul Rubens, *Stone Carters*, 1620

The use of the word “grotesque” in the eighteenth century was initially depreciative and followed André Dacier’s criticism. A classicist, he viewed the grotesque as a specific category of poetry that was particularly common in Italian operas which, unlike the strict regularity of ancient tragedies, did not enjoy an orderly balance. However, in strictly literary terms, the adjective “grotesque” was since the mid seventeenth century being used as a synonym of low burlesque and ridiculing wit. That occurred mainly due to Boileau’s *L’Art Poétique* (1674) where he used it in the sense of parody and the mocking poem that were worthy literary practices since laughter could, and often was, considered morally dignifying and didactic. Henceforth in France the grotesque began to acquire a specifically literary meaning whereas burlesque was used in relation to the arts in general. Gothic, on the other hand, clearly bore insinuations of barbarity, disorder and irrationality. When Boileau referred to the burlesque he distinguished two types (the burlesque, as the grotesque, seems to be prone to ambiguity). The burlesque *nouveau* or high burlesque presented low characters treated in an elevated manner by the poet. Boileau himself practised this sort of mock-poetry which resorted to grotesques, that is, they were parodies meant to downgrade the Gothic or low poetry. Meaningfully denominated *l’autre burlesque*, the low burlesque or travesty treated elevated subjects light-heartedly in addition to making use of extravagant, clumsy and foolish verse. But this sort of low comedy was not used by the burlesque genre alone. Gothic grotesque poetry shared these unrefined qualities: pompous rhetoric, excessively long verses, wearisome language, contemptible reasoning, crooked figures and lewd humour. It was largely due to Boileau that the grotesque in literature was identified with low burlesque. In addition, Boileau was also the first to establish a relation in literature between the grotesque and the Gothic though in negative terms: through impropriety and exaggeration.

Late in the seventeenth century John Dennis followed suit and criticised the low burlesque of grotesque inspiration but praised the new burlesque that, in a specific English form, combined frolic and praise. However, John Dryden first evinced that intimate connection between the Italian decorative style and the farces that under the influence of the *commedia* had invaded the streets. In his view it was necessary to distinguish two types of comedy; the naturalistic or of Aristotelian ascendancy was based on some representation of a person viewed as an element of one of the low classes. It aimed to amuse and educate those very people and in painting its parallel was the clown, the festival or the Dutch kermis (open-

air fair). The second type, the fantastic, was represented in farce that bore no relation with nature. It is worth considering Dryden's words at some length:

There is yet a lower sort of poetry and painting which is out of nature; for the farce is that in poetry, which grotesque is in picture. The persons and action of a farce are all unnatural, and the manners false, that is, inconsisting (*sic*) with the characters of mankind. Grotesque painting is the just resemblance of this; and Horace begins his *Art of Poetry* by describing such a figure, with a man's (humano) head, a horse's neck, the wings of a bird, and a fish's tail; parts of different pieces jumbled together, according to the mad imagination of the dauber; and the end of all this, as he tells you afterward, to cause laughter: a very monster in a Bartholomew Fair, for the mob to gape at for their two-pence. Laughter is indeed the propriety of a man, but just enough to distinguish him from his elder brother with four legs. 'Tis a kind of bastard pleasure too, taken in at the eyes of vulgar gazers, and at the ears of the beastly audience.¹³⁴

Dryden's words made an intelligible analysis of the evolution of the concept of the grotesque. He was aware of its pictorial origins so he distinguished it, as an art term, from that of farce, a literary notion. However, Dryden recognised it as expression of the fantastic by generating characters not from the real world, such as those of *commedia*, or products of wild imagination. In addition, he supported his argument through Horace's derisive remarks in *Arx Poetica*. Like Montaigne before him, Dryden asserted the frivolity of the grotesque but at the same time he recognised its ability to generate laughter, which in itself was beneficial. However, by evoking the Bartholomew Fair and the exhibition of monstrosities, the whole environment of carnival that is, one must regard the view of the grotesque as a superficial phenomenon at least as debatable. Chimerical creations might be more than non-sensical caprice and, as we will see, actually embody a complex net of signification.

John Hughes in 1715 reasoned in a similar fashion when he perceived two types of allegory: one that concerns itself with a likelihood of real people and the probability of events, the parallel allegory, and a second type, the grotesque invention. The latter sort produced surprising action and fictitious beings engendered by the licence allowed to the poet's imagination. However, Hughes is conscious of its potential for more than the spectacular. Though he did not direct his argument in the carnivalistic terms Bakhtin did, he nevertheless

¹³⁴ John Dryden, *A Parallel of Painting and Poetry*, 1695. Quoted in Frances Barasch, *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*, 125.

made it converge with the sublime by referring to its wonder, astonishment and, most of all, its ability to apprehend greatness even if at the expenses of Gothic techniques. In this light, John Hughes elaborated a defence of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. But what probably marked a change in the critics' discourse and brought it closer to the popular taste was the recognition of the Gothic-grotesque elements in Shakespearian tragicomedies.

Having all these attitudes in mind, the reaction of the eighteenth century towards the grotesque is rightly summarised by Frances Barasch thus:

Grotesque were chimeras and shadowy beings in Romance literature; they were one of the impossible conventions used in the "Gothic manner of writing" where many barbarous ornaments of this sort were employed. If allegorical, the fantastic creatures of the poet's imagination were acceptable; if not, they were judged immoral. Conversely, immoral figures were grotesques, whether they were thoroughly chimerical or only slightly exaggerated. This was the eighteenth-century rationale which extended the term 'grotesque' to the caricatures or ridiculous figures in the comic writing of the period.¹³⁵

The issue of morality was central to the production of caricatures and of comedy in general so that, for instance, the grotesque pantomime, regardless of its huge success, had continuously to be attributed an instructive function. With the emergence of accessible translations of *Don Quixote*, and the publication of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), the impact of caricature can no longer be ignored. The neo-classicist concept of nature, that is, the ideal form based on realistic principles, could not conform to caricature, its hyperbolic features and distortion. The necessary theoretical adjustments implied the arrangement of a system where caricature occupied the middle ground between the sublime and the grotesque. This interpretation elicited a re-evaluation of the grotesque itself and of the genre most commonly associated with it: the low burlesque (Boileau's *l'autre burlesque* and synonym of farce late in the century). Obviously, by making use of distorted or fantastic characters, and far from dealing with elevated subjects, it was strongly believed it lacked the moral depth that would allow it to be instructive. But in 1761 a study was published that displaced the whole discussion and its subject-theme was the Harlequin.

The movement in defence of grotesque-comedy began with Jüstus Möser's *Harlekin oder Vertheidigung des Groteske-Komischen* (translated in 1766 by J. A. F. Warnecke as *Harlequin: or*

¹³⁵ Frances Barasch, *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*, 135.

a Defence of Grotesque Comic Performances). Möser's argument was founded on the fact that ancient tragedies and comedies resorted to a grotesque that expressed itself in the subjects of a fantastic nature and even in the actors' masks. Therefore comedy did not manifest itself in the pure genre ("natural" characters served educational purposes by having their vices ridiculed) and burlesque alone (the high burlesque used human figures of low condition treated in a morally dignifying manner but the low burlesque was merely mocking). Comedy could also exist in heroic pieces and romances. Möser further argued that the criterion of "nature" was simply a synonym of realistic effect, a parameter that was always slippery. Moreover, he anticipated my discussion of the extraordinary when he referred to opera as the portrayal of a possible world which the talented author made believable. Furthermore, exaggeration did not have to contribute to the degrading of the grotesque; in fact, exaggeration could serve the moral purpose of the piece. The baroque emerged once again in the same context as the grotesque insofar as Möser considered that only the expression of the *gout baroc*, by the masterful hand of painters such as Michelangelo and engravers such as Callot, could produce splendid distortions. *Chinoiserie* and harlequinades enfolded the baroque taste as well and were clearly distinguishable from mere indecorous grotesque works. Möser's foremost accomplishment was the recognition of a human tendency to the twofold grotesque: a psychological effect related with a moral function and a physical one resulting from the simple pleasure of laughing.

Christoph Martin Wieland also contributed to demonstrating the inadequacy of classical precepts and to acknowledging the natural propensity towards the grotesque. Though he set out to analyse caricature alone, his *Unterredungen mit dem Pfarrer von xxx* ("Conversations with the Parson from xxx"), along with Möser's *Harlekin*, became central to the theoretical development of the grotesque. As Wieland saw it, the caricature could progress in three ways. The naturalistic did not resort to any distorting technique as it merely reproduced objects in the real world that were already marked by irregularity. On producing the exaggerated caricature, the artist must be careful to maintain a necessary resemblance with the original. Finally the grotesque caricature (also known as fantastic) is freed from any constraints linked with creating believable paintings. Equally important was Wieland's defence of monstrous beings and supernatural elements, thus of wild imagination and of the inexplicable mystery. Another crucial consideration was the recognition of an equivocal feeling caused in the perceiver: the ambiguity of being simultaneously pleased and disgusted. Frances Barasch, who reads Wieland through Kayser, draws attention to the psychological effect of grotesque

caricature and, using Kayser's own terminology, claims that "the grotesque creates an irrational anxiety or depression because the world has moved out of its natural order and Reason, and the perceiver can no longer find a hold on it"¹³⁶.

Wieland's points of view found great resistance among the academics of his time but the idea of the grotesque being something inherently human gained ground and gave the issue weight enough for Karl Flögel to write the first history of the grotesque in 1788, *Geschichte des groteskekommischen* ("History of the Grotesque-Comic"). To Flögel, grotesque remained a synonym for farce, low burlesque and caricature. His analysis of grotesque-comedy addresses issues such as the bacchanalia, the masks of Greek and Roman plays, the *commedia dell'arte* (the Renaissance and modern progeny of ancient comic satire), parody and mock-tragedy, marionette plays and *Opera des Bamboches* (marionette opera with the singers' voices projected onto stage) and, in particular, the French mystery play with its folk devils. Flögel, like Bakhtin after him, considered of utmost importance the medieval feasts of religious inspiration that along with profane festivals and comic societies made the Middle Ages a time of abundant popular entertainment and of grotesque behaviour. Flögel did consider these manifestations of a Gothic taste for grotesque-comedy as vulgar, menial and lascivious but its heterogeneity of genres, styles and topics was for the first time appreciated by a critic. Anticipating the Bakhtinian notion of carnival he claimed that these forms of grotesque-comedy played a necessary relieving function in terms of social and work pressures.

With the advent of the nineteenth century the grotesque was being used as a style in art (the antique, the Raphaelesque, arabesque, scrollwork and others) and as specific art subjects (from the several types of caricature to landscape painting). The term could also be used in a literary context that demonstrated those qualities (the Italian *commedia*, the low comedy, medieval plays). Coleridge contributed to the dispute in 1818 with "On the Distinction of the Witty, the Droll, the Odd, and the Humorous; the Nature and Constituents of Humour; Rabelais, Swift and Sterne" where he claimed that the grotesque occurred "[w]hen words or images are placed in unusual juxta-position rather than connection, and are so placed merely because the juxta-position is unusual"¹³⁷. Thus reduced to a mere oddity, his view determined the grotesque to be a descendent of comedy, which, by being trivial, sensual and false contrasted with the transcendental type - metaphysical and of universal reference.

¹³⁶ Frances Barasch, *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*, 148.

¹³⁷ Samuel T. Coleridge, *Lectures on Shakespeare, Etc.*, ed. Ernest Rhys (London: Everyman's Library, [1907] 1937) 260. The actual lecture was delivered in February 1818.

The strengthening in the 1820s of Romanticism was material in asserting a new interest in Gothic and medieval motifs accompanied by the favouring of macabre and sordid subjects in poetry and literature in general. In this context two works stand out: in France Victor Hugo wrote a defence of the grotesque much in the tone set by Coleridge, a dichotomy of beauty and deformity, while John Ruskin's position later in the century already moved away from Coleridge's point of view of the grotesques as mere eccentricities as he attributed to them a much more firmly determined moral value. Ruskin conceived the grotesque as a comic type definable for its unusual combination of the ludicrous and the fearful.

In the years preceding the writing of *Cromwell* (1827), Victor Hugo got to know Shakespearean theatre, a fact clearly related to his resolve to choose an episode of the history of England for his next work. Its preface is the result of an evolution both of Victor Hugo as a writer and of the spirit of the French literary community as well. In Paris, English companies played Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies extensively with great success among the people and causing intellectuals of the time to debate the role of foreign literature in France. In the *Préface* Hugo defended the reasons behind *Cromwell* but he went further insofar as in the process he discussed issues of great concern to his peers such as the defence of Romanticism *vis-à-vis* classicism. He began by establishing three ages of humankind, each revealing a form of poetry that gained prominence. The first, the primitive age, refers back to a time humanity had a nomadic and bucolic life. Supposedly people contemplated natural wonders and thus their disposition was essentially lyric. The poetic form that best suited it was the ode. As societies evolved and presupposed more and more complex systems of organisation, concepts such as history and war found their way into people's lives and a noticeable role in poetry. Homer was the distinguished poet of these ancient times and the epic poem thrived on Greek stages. The event that marked the advent of the modern age was the emergence of Christianity. The new and revolutionary poetry that accompanied it was whole because it rested on a harmony of doubles: the grotesque and the sublime, the body and the soul. Hugo presented the new religion through a metaphor which in Bakhtinian discourse could be deemed carnivalistic. The image of pregnant death and of revivifying energy is evident:

Une religion spiritualiste, supplantant le paganisme matériel et extérieur, se glisse au cœur de la société antique, la tue, et, dans le cadavre d'une civilisation décrépète, dépose le germe de la civilisation moderne. Cette religion est complète parce qu'elle est vrai; entre son dogme et son culte, elle scelle profondément la morale. Et d'abord, pour premières vérités, elle

enseigne à l'homme qu'il a deux vies à vivre, l'une passagère, l'autre immortelle: l'une de la terre, l'autre du ciel. Elle lui montre qu'il est double comme sa destinée, qu'il y a en lui un animal et une intelligence, une âme et un corps;¹³⁸

Echoing Hugo, who in 1827 was a confirmed Catholic, John Ruskin viewed art, and architecture in particular, through a profoundly Christian perspective, stressing aspects such as morality, truth and respect for God. To Hugo, the grotesque was a synonym of the bizarre, comic, and ugly both in the physical as well as in the moral sense. The modern muse, Hugo averred, benefited from a higher and larger perspective that made her realise that “tout dans la création n'est pas humainement beau, que le laid y exist à côté du beau, le difforme près le gracieux, le grotesque au revers du sublime, le mal avec le bien, l'ombre avec le lumière”¹³⁹. Thus, all things can be recognisable in nature without being confused. The third type of poetry Hugo called grotesque and the form that accompanied it comedy.¹⁴⁰ Not only was it the element of the grotesque that marked the difference between ancient and modern literature but it was also the prevailing characteristic of the modern mind:

Il y est partout; d'une part il crée le difforme et l'horrible, de l'autre le comique et le bouffon. Il attaché autour de la religion mille superstitions originales, autour de la poésie milles imaginations pittoresques. C'est lui qui sème à pleines mains dans l'air, dans l'eau, dans la terre, dans le feu, ces myriades d'êtres intermédiaires que nous retrouvons tout vivants dans les traditions populaires du moyen âge; [...] Et comme il est libre et franc dans son allure! Comme il fait hardiment saillir toutes ces formes bizarres que l'âge précédent avait si timidement enveloppées de langes!¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Victor Hugo, *Préface de 'Cromwell' suivie d'extraits d'autres préfaces dramatiques* (Paris: Larousse, [1827] 1949) 24.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁴⁰ There are obvious shortcomings in Victor Hugo's point of view. Among the most serious ones is clearly that the grotesque, as a type and human idea, existed prior to the modern age as there is little argument as to its being present as far back as the drawings of primitive caves. Moreover one cannot credibly admit that comedy came into being in the modern age. He admits that in ancient times comedy was not totally absent but it was very timid and it is only in the modern times that the grotesque blossoms. It is also noteworthy that Hugo offers no explanation about the connection between the grotesque and comedy. As Pierre Grosclaude, author of the bibliographic and explanatory notes of the Larousse edition, also points out, he does not refer either to the origin of the grotesque as an artistic phenomenon dating to the early sixteenth century.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

The grotesque takes in multiple and simultaneously opposed elements: the deformed and the comic, the horrible and the buffoon, associations that can be taken as far as the *picturesque* imagination can carry it. Its influence is felt everywhere (notice the importance of the metaphor of the elements to establish its relation with nature); its intermediary, bizarre creations stand out for their sheer free spirit in medieval traditions but it is also, Ruskin added, behind the fearful but changing shadow of the witches' Sabbath, the hooves and horns of the devil figure, the wings of scaring bats, at the same time that it inspired the hideous beings of Dante and Milton's infernos, the ridiculous characters created by Callot, and the *burlesque* spirit of Michelangelo's painting. It is able to transcend the world of imagination towards reality because it elaborates parodies of human characters. Such is the case of Scaramouche, Crispin, Harlequin and all other *commedia* figures as well as Sganarelle and Mephistopheles without whom Don Juan and Faust would not be complete. Unlike Vulcan, for instance, whose only distinction was that he was a deformed giant, modern creations, through the grotesque, are able to transform Cyclopes into gnomes and giants into dwarfs. This ability, Ruskin argued, has only emerged in modern times. Thus, the link with Christianity through the recognition of a double nature: a perishable and an immortal one. Using the same reasoning, Ruskin conceived an idea of reality that is intimately associated with drama:

La poésie née du christianisme, le poésie de notre temps, est donc le drame; le caractère du drame est le réel; le réel résulte de la combinaison toute naturelle de deux types, le sublime et le grotesque, qui se croisent dans le drame, comme ils se croisent dans la vie et dans l'harmonie des contraires.¹⁴²

The attitude assumed by John Ruskin in the third volume of *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53), the study of the city's Renaissance architecture, is quite different as the subtitle itself shows: "The Fall". More than once, John Ruskin refers to the pains of writing about this period, particularly concerning those artistic expressions produced in the Grotesque Renaissance style. Dwelling on it was not included in the original form Ruskin intended to give the book but, realising it was necessary for a comprehensive view of the subject, he reconsidered though he dared not "pollute [the] volume by any illustration of its worst

¹⁴² John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice, Volume the Third: the Fall* (New York: John W. Lovell Co, no date) 33.

forms”¹⁴³. His analysis evolved from a strict set of aesthetic values and moral principles, directly connected with Christian values that justify the emotional involvement implied in his words. In fact, in his view it was the moral feebleness of the Venetians, expressed in pride, infidelity and the pursuit of pleasure *per se*, that lay behind the artless architecture of their time:

The architecture raised at Venice during this period is amongst the worst and basest ever built by the hands of men, being especially distinguished by a spirit of brutal mockery and insolent jest, which, exhausting itself in deformed and monstrous sculpture, can sometimes be hardly otherwise defined than as the perpetuation in stone of the ribaldries of drunkenness.¹⁴⁴

The fact that there is such a despicable sort of grotesque in Ruskin’s eyes does not rule out the existence of another form that indeed is dignifying for art. He distinguished a true or noble grotesque from a false or ignoble grotesque. The latter, Ruskin argued, delights in “the contemplation of bestial vice, and the expression of low sarcasm”¹⁴⁵, and is therefore devoid of the moralising spirit of any honourable soul. Moreover: “This spirit of idiotic mockery is, as I have said, the most striking characteristic of the last period of the Renaissance, which, in consequence of the *character* thus imparted to its sculpture, I have called grotesque”¹⁴⁶. Ruskin’s position depended wholly on an abstract principle, that of character, that conferred on the Venetian architecture of the latter part of the sixteenth century an impression of degradation. Degradation, as understood by Ruskin, conveys the idea of the human spirit lost from itself and therefore partaking both in a bestial disposition and ungodly ways. The façade of the Church of Santa Maria Formosa, displaying a monstrous head, too foul to be either pictured or even beheld, is the earliest example of the base grotesque on account of its failing to have any religious symbol or inscription. Thus, Ruskin’s evaluation of art is intimately related with a Christian set of values that established as the most abhorrent sins those of forgetfulness of God and the attribution of humanity’s glorious achievements to its ingenuity alone.

According to Ruskin’s own reasoning, the concept of the noble grotesque should be an impossibility given the ideological incompatibility it implies: eminence and imbecility. But Ruskin overlooked this paradox and proposed that the true grotesque, that which

¹⁴³ Ibid., 126.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 113.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 122.

¹⁴⁶ Loc. cit. Italics added.

acknowledged the existence of a divine power, is composed of an element of the ludicrous and another of the fearful. Depending on the condition of mind prevailing, two branches can be discerned: the sportive grotesque and the terrible grotesque. Each can be either noble or ignoble according to its moral quality, which Ruskin proceeds to analyse, in methodical Victorian fashion, by means of intricate parameters. He distinguishes four classes in humankind corresponding to four types of playfulness. Those who play wisely are thinkers who, by the very human necessity of recreation and natural instinct, indulge in playful activity, always imbued with a sense of reverence towards God and a love of truth. Workers play necessarily, that is, as the physical weariness of their daily occupations does not allow their minds to contribute intellectually to serious and high subjects, they satisfy their instincts of imagination with playful matters with no determined purposes. The third class is that of inordinate play enacted by people of frail consciousness, unable to judge certain matters, namely those involving the sacred, which is unsuitable for jest. They are unwise and even dangerous by reason of lacking reverence. Lastly, there are those who do not play at all either owing to want of imagination or excessive work.

Generally speaking the sportive grotesque, even when deriving from wise play, cannot achieve the grandeur of its terrible twin simply because playfulness is a childish drive necessarily imperfect and exhaustible, at least as Ruskin formulates it. Ruskin concludes:

[A]ll the forms of art which result from the comparatively recreative exertion of minds more or less blunted or encumbered by other cares and toils, the art we may call generally art of the wayside, as opposed to that which is the business of men's lives is, in the best of the word, Grotesque.¹⁴⁷

Ruskin's condescension attributes the enjoyment of grotesque art to the imperfections that pervade it and it arouses sympathy for if the artfulness is doubtful, the pleasure of creating noble grotesque forms is meritorious. It is extremely interesting to notice that Ruskin defines the grotesque as the art of the wayside, confirming its off-centre tendency present since the excavations of the Roman caves. Moreover, he insists that even in its less excellent presence, from the Egyptian, Norman, Arabian and most Gothic art to the scroll-work and steps of the Flemish street and to the hewing of the timbers of the Swiss cottage, there is a

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 132-3.

spirit he calls “rejoicing” or “joyful energy”¹⁴⁸. It is therefore plausible to suggest that this notion of energy, certainly more than notions of transcendent godliness and morality, has been Ruskin’s contribution to Bakhtin’s thinking. Without this energy, Ruskin argues, the grotesque is reduced to gross exaggeration and absurd monstrosities. This sort of disgusting nonsense finds its most abhorrent case in Raphael’s arabesques in the Vatican. At this point Ruskin is very close to Vitruvius’s censorious appreciation. The success this pictorial style achieved during the Renaissance is due, in Ruskin’s grieving opinion, to the Raphaelite “poisonous root”¹⁴⁹. Raphael’s work, demeaningly referred to as artistic pottage, represents nymphs, cupids, satyrs, fragments of human heads, members of wild beasts and unrecognisable vegetation:

If we can draw the human head perfectly, and are masters of its expression and its beauty, we have no business to cut it off, and hang it up by the hair at the end of a garland. If we can draw the human body in the perfection of its grace and movement, we have no business to take away its limbs, and terminate it with a bunch of leaves. Or rather our doing so will imply that there is something wrong with us.¹⁵⁰

The terrible grotesque evolves directly from human fear either of death or of our sinful disposition. Ruskin stipulates three tempers to express fear in art: involuntary apathy, mockery and ungovernable imaginativeness. In the first instance the artist forces himself¹⁵¹ to experience or accidentally experiences apathy in order to arouse horror (no explanation is given to clarify what kind of relation apathy establishes with horror). Questionable as this argument might be (for how can one activate apathy in oneself?), Ruskin claims that the artist’s fear is true and the terribleness of his art authentic. Raphael’s blemish lies in that his attempt at terribleness was manufactured; it was not borne out of careless, effortless indulging in apathy. In spite of its technical excellence, Ruskin considers Raphael’s art the product of a frivolous mind that ignores terror’s prime lesson: the value of the human soul and the inexorable fate of the perishable body. Therefore, grotesque ornamentation can only exist honourably through rationality that enables it to convey the truths Ruskin considers dignifying of art. Mockery of the terrible grotesque is distinguishable, at least theoretically, from the

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., respectively pages 134 and 135.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 136.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 144.

playfulness of the sportive grotesque as it is commonly manifested in a satirical form. This strategy allows vices and even the powers of evil to be exposed and ridiculed out. The effectiveness of satire necessarily depends on expressing degraded forms such as foulness and grossness; only when the artist's main motivation lies in the exclusive pleasure in those forms does the ignoble grotesque emerge. The noble grotesque, for instance, often resorts to the depiction of animals as they are said to embody some of the basest human vices such as cruelty and cunning. The third distorting element of the reality of the world and its objects that enables the manifestation of the grotesque is the ungoverned imagination. The mind is liable to err, to be dominated by wild fears or it can simply fail to understand the high values and truths supposed to govern it. The dream, a most common example of the ungovernableness of imagination, can be used by the divine powers to speak to the human soul if the individual is the possessor of an undeviating and rational mind. That not being the case, the dream, just like a broken mirror, enhances distortion but through the cracks, human limitations, an insight into a more sublime universe can be gained. Such is the grotesque dream.

Taking it from a strictly aesthetic point of view, the noble grotesque is interlocked in a dichotomic relation with beauty to which it aspires but that, in order to preserve the requirement of imperfection, it stops short of achieving. The inferior counterpart though does not define itself against any notion of beauty and is therefore only capable of monstrous productions resulting from degenerate morals or contemptible sportiveness. Be it in architecture, painting or literature the achievement of a noble grotesque is a mark of greatness for a given time and people. Homer's *Iliad*, Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* are among the noblest. Shakespeare and Sir Walter Scott have produced equally noteworthy pieces but to Ruskin the most exquisite work is Dante's *Inferno*. The Gothic produced both levels of the grotesque, and there can be found sportive examples of great quality though in the Renaissance the ludicrous was mostly associated with sensuality and superficiality. The caricature, which expanded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, represented to Ruskin a base form of the grotesque that instigated idiotic laughter, but that nevertheless was widely used by authors such as Charles Dickens.

However even when absent in art the grotesque can exist in the mind of a nation. Ruskin goes on to argue that it is present in the minds of workers, their gestures and gibes, or,

¹⁵¹ Given the period Ruskin writes, the artist is always assumed male and humanity is invariably regarded as men.

in Bakhtin's terms, it dwells in a certain spirit of the people. Giving the example of Woldaric, the twelfth century patriarch of Aquileia, Ruskin described his defeat by the patriarch of Grado in deeply carnivalistic terms. Taken prisoner in Venice he is not put to death; instead his sentence will consist of sending the city's doge sixty-two loaves, twelve fat pigs and a bull. The animals, which stood for the defeated patriarch and his clergy, were decapitated and the joints handed out among the senators. A wooden castle was built for the occasion on the grounds of the ducal palace which the doge and the senate proceeded to demolish with clubs. The scene is wholly invested with a carnivalistic temperament: the ritualistic debasement, the celebration of the winner over the vanquished, the festivities, the banquet, the parodic doubleness, and certainly not of minor importance, the fact that the offering had to be realised on Fat Thursday.

In the latter part of *The Stones of Venice* Ruskin clearly comes close to Bakhtin's principle of carnival being the driving spirit of the grotesque. Though it occupies a very small part of the work and Ruskin does not use the word "carnival", for a moment he is able to lose the strict procedures of the academic thinking of his time and hint at the state of mind or rejoicing energy behind the grotesque. Moreover, *The Stones of Venice* represented an unprecedented effort at a systematic analysis of the grotesque as a subject-theme though at times its excessively detailed account becomes redundant and even confusing. Though some of its axiomatic principles have become clearly out-dated, namely the inference of a direct relation between morals or the sacred and art, it still stands as a notable achievement¹⁵².

A few years later, in 1865, Thomas Wright still assumed a close relation between caricature and the grotesque as the title of his book indicates: *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art*, and, in reality, his concern with literary texts is considerably less than that of caricature per se. However in the previous year Walter Bagehot had already considered the grotesque in an exclusively literary context in "Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning; or Pure, Ornate, and Grotesque Art in Poetry" where he focused on the abnormal elements of nature and the treatment they were given by those poets. Heinrich Schneegans finally contested the dependence of the grotesque on caricature in *Geschichte der Grotesken Satire* ("History of Grotesque Satire", 1894) when he introduced the element of satire to re-evaluate

¹⁵² James Diedrick draws attention to the close relationship between Ruskin's ideas on the grotesque and those of Schlegel, who departs from a Neoplatonic philosophy assuming human imagination and creativity to be a manifestation of the divine which nonetheless could accommodate notions of the carnivalesque and the grotesque. Where Ruskin applies Christian morals, however, Schlegel only uses a

the grotesque. Simple caricature and grotesque caricature did indeed lack depth and existed solely on their exaggerative or distorting qualities. Symbolic satire found in animal representations in medieval manuscripts and sculptures a worldly reference (for instance, a given religious leader or monarch) unlike grotesque satire that made that reference redundant. As in the case of Rabelais, grotesque satire took as its moral aim justice as a whole, which only a purely satirical means could comprehend.

The twentieth century witnessed an explosion of the grotesque both in fiction and literary criticism. Lily Campbell used the Ruskinian typology in *The Grotesque in the Poetry of Robert Browning* (1907) where she concluded that the grotesque failed to reach the sort of metaphysical truth literature should aim at. Robert Browning's poetry was labelled grotesque simply because it was non-conventional in terms of subjects and techniques. Lily Campbell claimed that Browning went further and that his works evinced a psychological complexity that works such as H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man: A Grotesque Romance* (1897) did not have because of their self-interested sensationalism. The view that *The Invisible Man* is a book of minor quality or superficial content might seem to the early twenty first century critic debatable but this change of attitude is related to other literary phenomena, the most important of them being the valorization of science fiction. To Lily Campbell the grotesque occupies the space between the comic and the ugly, and whereas caricature emphasises the first element, the grotesque approaches terror.

With the outbreak of World War I the psychological element of the grotesque was favoured and the Grotesque School in Italy was headed by Luigi Pirandello whose plays represented the arbitrariness of events, the mindlessness of violence and the general absurdity that goes with existing. The impact was considerable and was at the heart of the Theatre of the Absurd later developed by Brecht, Genet, Ionesco, Beckett and Martin Esslin who actually coined the term precisely in a book entitled *Theatre of the Absurd* (1961). The tendency verified at the beginning of the century survived in the following years and thrived during the Depression. Then World War II broke out.

Wolfgang Kayser's 1957 *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* was a product of the impact of such events. From the hellish representation of the world by the Brueghels, to Alfred Kubin's horrific bodies and Surrealistic anti-rationalism passing through the *teatro del grottesco*, Kayser's interpretation of the grotesque from the sixteenth century to his lifetime reflects the

metaphysical principle. See James Diedrick, "The Sublimation of Carnival in Ruskin's Theory of the Grotesque", *The Victorian Newsletter* 74 (Fall 1988) 11-16.

pessimism of half a century during which two world scale wars seriously compromised the belief in a fulfilling existence and in human redemption.

Kayser's influential study had its starting point with a visit to the Prado. For Kayser the paintings by Velázquez, Goya, Bosch and Brueghel displayed the sort of "confusing and irritating features" that he subsequently recognised in literary works (*GAL*, 9). Kayser's investigations proved that other critics, sometimes without using the word, had also been aware of the presence of the grotesque. Furthermore, the grotesque could also be detected in other fields of the arts, especially in music and film. Kayser's aim, given the enormous range of the subject, was not to delineate a history of the grotesque but to make an attempt at a more rigorous definition by studying some of its representations from the fifteenth century up to the time when *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* was written, with special emphasis on Spanish and Flemish painting, along with German and German-related works. In this manner he hoped to disclose the background justifying why he regarded the arts of his time to have greater affinity with the grotesque than any other preceding it.

On the outset of his book Kayser quotes Friedrich Dürrenmatt, who sees tragicomedy (that Kayser identifies without argumentation with the grotesque) as the indisputable contemporary genre¹⁵³:

Tragedy presupposes guilt, distress, measure, insight, responsibility. The confusion of our age, the sellout of the white race, leaves no room for guilt and responsibility. Nobody is to blame or can be charged with complicity. Things just happen. Everybody is carried away and gets stuck somewhere. We are too collectively guilty, too collectively steeped in the sins of our

¹⁵³ In this respect Thomas Mann's words come to mind: "I feel that, broadly and essentially, the striking feature of modern art is that it has ceased to recognize the categories of tragic and comic, or the dramatic classifications, tragedy and comedy. It sees life as tragicomedy, with the result that the grotesque is its most genuine style", quoted in John R. Clark, *The Modern Satiric Grotesque and its Traditions* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1991) 13. Karl Guthke recognised the proximity of tragicomedy and the grotesque but he separated the concepts on the assumption that tragicomedy operated within logic and grotesque did not as it frequently transgressed the boundaries of what is considered "reality". Moreover, Guthke gave a stronger emphasis to the comic pole: "The grotesque is the vision of an absurdity, usually of cosmic dimension, which defies all intellectual efforts to clarify and elucidate its possible meanings in terms of human understanding. One of the charms of the tragi-comic, on the other hand, is the possibility to think through, almost *ad infinitum*, the complicated mechanism by which the comic and the tragic are intertwined and indeed identified. Tragicomedy remains within the confines of logic and what is generally accepted as the common characteristics of reality. It refuses to distort the world in such a way that we find it hard to recognize ours. The grotesque play... on the contrary, would be deficient in an essential ingredient if it did not do precisely this". Quoted in Sylvie Debevec Henning, "*La Forme In-Formante: The Grotesque Reconsidered*", 110. Italics in the text.

fathers and forefathers. We are only descents. That is our misfortune, not our guilt. Guilt exists only in the form of a personal achievement or religious deed... Comedy alone is suited for us. Our world led as inevitably to the grotesque as it did to the atom bomb, just as Hieronymus Bosch's apocalyptic paintings are grotesque in nature. The grotesque, however, is only a sensuous expression, a sensuous paradox, the shape of a shapelessness, the face of a faceless world; and just as our thinking seems unable to do without the concept of paradox, so is art, our world, which survives only because there is an atom bomb: in fear of it. (*GAL*, 11-12)¹⁵⁴

Dürrenmatt's words established decisive parameters for Kayser's own thinking. First of all, there is a sense of entrapment, of overwhelming helplessness; we are "inevitably" drawn to a grotesque world. This fatalism is, however, combined with sensuality, once again pointing to its double nature: thanatos and eros, tragedy and comedy, shape and shapelessness. But the predominant feature was that of fear that strangely enough gives form and meaning to the world. This fear is not just any fear; it is that of a total and irrecoverable destruction of the whole world, the fear of mass destruction which the Second World War made believable for the first time in history. Kayser's feeling towards the grotesque has therefore an implicit paradox. Though Kayser focused his view of the grotesque on artists known for their fantastic or monstrous figures, the contemplation of such creatures affects the viewer because it infers something about her/his world and that inference is a psychological, emotional response: "By viewing our surprise as an agonizing fear of the dissolution of our world, we secretly relate the grotesque to our reality and ascribe to it a modicum of 'truth'" (*GAL*, 31). Bosch's work (1450?-1516?) is in this respect a paramount painter. His *The Millennium* triptych (circa 1510) commonly referred to by the motif of the central panel, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, becomes a place where "a frightful mixture of mechanical, vegetable, animal, and human elements is represented as the image of our world, which is breaking apart" (*GAL*, 33). This perspective is in contradiction with that of Walter Bosing who, though rightly associating Bosch's devilish paintings with the Italian *grottesche*, saw entertainment as their prime function¹⁵⁵. Bosch's highly moralistic intentions do not support this perspective. But even assuming that to be the case for the *grottesche* and for Bosch it would still have been a type of entertainment with indelible

¹⁵⁴ Kayser's quote is from Dürrenmatt's *Blätter des Deutschen Schauspielhauses in Hamburg* ("Journal of German Theatre Houses"), 1956-57, vol. 5: *Der Besuch der alten Dame*. Ellipsis as shown in Kayser's quotation. Friedrich Dürrenmatt was born in Switzerland in 1921. As a novelist and playwright writing in Germany he was sensitive to the rise of fascist discourse in other German-speaking European countries. His work reflects the impact of that historical moment.

¹⁵⁵ Walter Bosing, *Bosch*, trans. Casa das Línguas (Lisbon: Taschen, [1973] 1991) 7.

consequences for the history of art and mentalities. However it was with Pieter Brueghel the Elder (1525/30-1569) that a bridge between Boschian nightmares and the “real” world was built. Brueghel’s depiction of a busy life is a frightening sight, a world turned upside down. When terror is associated to daily experience it creates the grotesque which became for Kayser the distinctive Brueghelian characteristic. This type of the grotesque was also cultivated by Brueghel the Younger (1564?-1638) known as Hell Brueghel but the hellish element was considered by Kayser to run in the Brueghel family. Unlike the Christian concept of hell however, the Brueghel paintings are not set in a separate realm, beyond our time and existing as God’s punishment to sinners. Instead, hell is “an absurd nocturnal world of its own which permits of no rational or emotional explanation” and in which we all live (*GAL*, 36). The transition from the other/underworld to our everyday world is thus Kayser’s particular contribution to the studies of the grotesque:

Raphael’s grotesques appeared to constitute a special realm of gay phantasmagorias. Wieland regarded Bruegel’s grotesques as a realm apart, a province of horrible phantasms. We, on the other hand, took it to be characteristic of the grotesque that it does not constitute a fantastic realm of its own (for there is none such). The grotesque world is – and is not – our own world. The ambiguous way in which we are affected by it results from our awareness that the familiar and apparently harmonious world is alienated under the impact of abysmal forces, which break it up and shatter its coherence. (*GAL*, 37)¹⁵⁶

After recognising the influence of the lighter vein of the grotesque from the Italian *commedia dell’arte* and Shakespeare to the rise of the *Sturm und Drang* where the dissolution element was already at work, Kayser considered the grotesque with more detail in German culture. His attention went to German Romanticism, in particular to Goethe and Friedrich Schlegel for their contribution to the discussion of the theme. Both Goethe’s 1789 “Von Arabesken” (“Concerning Arabesques”) and Schlegel’s *Gespräch über die Poesie* (“Conversation about Poetry”) of 1800 and *Brief über den Roman* (“Letter about the Novel”, 1799) used the words grotesque and arabesque synonymously and with the meaning of Raphaelesque. Neither considered the grotesque to be a higher form of art but they still believed it to play a vital role.

¹⁵⁶ Christoph Martin Wieland (1733-1813) was a German poet and novelist whose writing was characterised by the use of playfulness and satire. His subjects could either be inspired by classical antiquity or in popular fairy tales. He also translated Shakespeare and produced political works as well as a novel regarded as an early form of the psychological novel, *Geschichte des Agathon* (“History of Agathon”, 1766).

Goethe viewed the grotesque as a form underlying all great artistic expressions and for Schlegel it had “the task of helping pave the way for an understanding of these great writers or a new epoch” (*GAL*, 51). These writers are Ariosto, Cervantes and Shakespeare, the latter being in Kayser’s words “the master of the grotesque” (*GAL*, 41). Unfortunately, as far as Schlegel could see it, his own epoch was in need of writers with a sensibility for the grotesque. For Kayser, though, Schlegel’s interpretation of the grotesque was lacking in a central feature, terror, which should complement estrangement and the fantastic.

Fear of the destruction of that regarded as reality can be found throughout literature, particularly in Jean Paul Richter. In his writings Kayser disclosed a demoniac laughter. Whereas for Bakhtin the destructive quality of laughter was a necessary step for rebirth, for Kayser it only brought about a painful end. Kayser saw three great Romantic writers of narrative prose using the grotesque. The first was the anonymous 1804 *Die Nachtwachen des Bonaventura* (“Bonaventura’s Nightwatches”) where Jean Paul Richter appeared as the narrator. The action took place in a madhouse which comes to symbolise the world¹⁵⁷. The other two are E.T.A. Hoffmann whose *Der Sandmann* (“The Sandman”) and *Nachtgeschichten* (“The Nocturnal Story”) came out in 1815 and 1817 respectively and Edgar Allan Poe with *Tales of the Grotesque and the Arabesque* (1840)¹⁵⁸. Both authors cultivated styles where alienation and fantastic events are taken to their limit: madness.

Poe displayed in his writing the horrific elements that Kayser deemed should always be present in a grotesque work. It was through Poe that Kayser established a connection with the Gothic for the American author was aware of or familiar with the fiction of Hoffmann, Ann Radcliffe and Horace Walpole and filtered from their work the element of terror. Though Poe also used the terms “arabesque” and “grotesque” interchangeably, like Schlegel forty years before him, he used them in reference to literature. A very significant phenomenon of semantic evolution took place with the arabesque which from the sixteenth century ornamental style changed to acquire in the early nineteenth century a literary dimension overlapping that of the grotesque.

¹⁵⁷ This is, of course, a theme that has been used throughout the history of the arts. In the Middle Ages the legend of the Ship of Fools was widely spread and it was taken up by Bosch himself but even in contemporary Portugal it has been brilliantly used by Manoel de Oliveira in his film *A Divina Comédia* (1991).

¹⁵⁸ For Arthur Clayborough Sir Walter Scott’s 1827 essay on the tales of Hoffmann constitutes the first detailed study of the grotesque in English. See Arthur Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature*, 32-36.

In the field of drama, Kayser mentioned Achim von Arnim and Georg Büchner, particularly the latter's 1837 *Woyzeck*¹⁵⁹. Both in *Woyzeck* and in Büchner's personal letters, Kayser recognised a feeling and a mood which he identified with the grotesque. There was a sense of "man's lack of freedom, his being determined and pushed, and his being afraid of dark, ominous, and mysterious forces that work through us but defy all human explanation" (*GAL*, 91). In *Woyzeck* Büchner presented the world as a puppet play where "an incomprehensible, meaningless, and anonymous force has replaced the God who wrote the parts and played the puppets. [...] The fear engendered by this overbearing impersonal force is increased by the awareness of the vanity of life and the aimlessness not only of man's action but also of his suffering" (*GAL*, 91). Caught in a world where unidentified but overwhelming forces crushed him/her, the individual was overtaken by "abysmal disillusionment and disorientation" that Kayser put at the core of the grotesque (*GAL*, 91).

In the nineteenth century the grotesque started to acquire the meaning that in the twentieth century severed the term from its technical function in describing a given artistic form to refer instead to the bizarre and horrifying. In the early nineteenth century Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* ("Reading Aesthetics", 1818-20) had defined new contours for the grotesque which emphasised the supernatural: the unexplained merge of separate realms or states of being, excess, distortion, and the unnatural. On that he is later contradicted by Friedrich Theodor Vischer who disclosed a humorous vein in grotesque heterogeneity¹⁶⁰. But though Vischer perceived the alienating nature of the grotesque his valuing of the comic worked against the estranging element of the fantastic. The other, alienating world diminished in its frightening abilities. With the passing of the years, aestheticians eventually turned the grotesque into a category within the comic and in 1894 Schneegans, whose perspective was presented in *Geschichte der grotesken Satire* ("History of Grotesque Satire") and whom Bakhtin also criticised, classified it as a type of caricature.

Though Kayser's concern was primarily with the German grotesque he did not see it as an isolated phenomenon. In England the tendency of the nineteenth century for the

¹⁵⁹ Büchner's *Danton's Death* (1835) is, incidentally, an intertext for Rushdie's *Shame*. See more details in my chapter "The grotesque in a religious context and in an authoritarian regime: *Del amor y otros demonios* and *Shame*". Achim von Arnim was born in 1781 and died in 1831, having in his lifetime established himself as an influential Romantic writer. His concern with German folklore is linked to the use of the fantastic and supernatural in his work. Büchner was a dramatist who produced three pieces which critics have acclaimed despite his untimely death at the age of twenty-four. In 1837 when he died he was already a well-known political activist.

grotesque lay also in inhibiting the supernatural or fantastical elements as the comic grew in importance. Only Charles Dickens and Lewis Carroll experimented with the grotesque at the time. In Russia Nikolai Gogol's extraordinary *Diary of a Madman* in 1834, *The Nose* in 1836 (whose plot appears to have inspired Salman Rushdie in "The Prophet's Hair" as well as to have had a direct impact on *Midnight's Children*) and *Dead Souls* in 1842 assured the survival of the grotesque. Kayser is particularly impressed by *The Nose* and his comments on the latter are interesting insofar as Kayser associated the genuineness of the grotesque to bodily issues. In his overall reasoning they are implicit and not explicitly theorised as central but here Kayser opened a breach:

This is a genuine grotesque. The central motif of a part of the body that makes itself independent is familiar enough from Bosch and Morgenstern. Baffling overtones, such as the barber's vain efforts to get rid of the embarrassing object, and the protagonist's exclusion from society, are by no means lacking. However, the manner of presentation (the action does not result in a catastrophe but ends where it began) indicates that the grotesque elements are treated in a humorous and innocuous manner. (GAL, 125)¹⁶¹

If the grotesque withered in the nineteenth century in the twentieth it revived. The merit of the change Kayser attributed to W. Busch's *Eduards Traum* ("Eduard's Dream") and Wedekind's *Frühlings Erwachen* ("Spring Awakening"), both published in 1891, and because of them and Büchner, there was also a recuperation of the *commedia dell'arte* tradition¹⁶². The self-conscious use of the grotesque in the arts was not in fact German but Italian with the 1916-1925 movement of the *teatro del grottesco*. This moment in the history of drama is rarely discussed by theorists of the grotesque despite its obvious relevance to the topic. To Kayser

¹⁶⁰ German writer and philosopher of the arts, F. T. Vischer (1807-1887) wrote between 1846 and 1857 a four volume treatise on art in the Hegelian vein.

¹⁶¹ The reference must be to Christian Morgenstern (1871-1914) whose witty and fantastic verse has been compared to Lewis Carroll's. His connection with British literature was in fact direct for his poetry was influenced by English nonsense rhymes. His scope of interest was wide, ranging from philosophy, to art history and folklore.

¹⁶² Wilhelm Busch (1832-1908), who also has affinities with Carroll, was a poet and satirist but he is renowned for being a caricaturist and an early cartoonist. Max and Moritz, his two most famous characters are still part of the lives of most German children. Frank Wedekind (1864-1918) had a tremendous impact in German literature. He was one of the founders of German Expressionist drama. Early in his literary career he was involved with the Naturalist movement but he gradually distanced himself. *Frühlings Erwachen* deals with the issue of adolescent sexuality in hypocritical *fin-de-siècle* Europe. *Lulu* (1895) is undoubtedly his most (in)famous work, in which Wedekind lent an even more bitter look

though, the *teatro* did not pass unnoticed and indeed became a support for his understanding of the grotesque as tragicomedy. The fashioning of the grotesque by the *teatro* had a crucial psychological vein which one encounters in Kayser himself. The group infused in its plays a sense of alienation that was not restricted to the individual but included the surrounding world. Following Robert Louis Stevenson's *leitmotif* of split personality, in the plays of Luigi Chiarelli, Antonelli, Cavacchioli, Fausto Maria Martini, Nicodemi, Rosso di San Secondo and most notably Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936), characters verged on insanity before a truly dark universe where one's suffering was trivial, one's efforts inconsequential, and chance destroyed lives. Men and women were mere puppets at the mercy of alienating forces. In the early 1920s concomitant variants appeared in Latin America, namely in Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Cuba and Uruguay. In the context of the general crisis experienced in Europe because of the First World War, and of the Italian theatrical experiments the *teatro criollo* translated "la incertidumbre en la búsqueda de nuevas formas de reflejar al hombre y la realidad" and incorporated the element of the irrational and the unconscious in its characters¹⁶³.

The spirit of the grotesque theatre will be seen later on to be part of Robert Coover's reinvention of Pinocchio's life in *Pinocchio in Venice*. The split that characterises it is discernible on various levels, namely those of man/boy and human/puppet. The division, however, is accompanied by a tragicomic tone for if Pinocchio's adventures are agonising for him, they are heavily invested with humour. Though the alienating characteristic is pervasive it is completed with an equally intense bodily component evolving from the direct influence of *commedia*. This aspect distances the novel both from grotesque theatre and from a purely Kayserian approach though the puppet world and the pointlessness of endless pains which Kayser admired in Büchner are definitively present. Finally, it is interesting to notice that Kayser, who based his theory of the grotesque on estrangement and the absurd, that is, on a psychological

to the issues of sexuality and morality. Set in the world of spectacle and the circus, the play addresses some of the themes dear to the grotesque: murder, lesbianism (interpreted as deviation), and freakery.

¹⁶³ Claudia Kaiser-Lenoie, *El grotesco criollo: estilo teatral de una época* (Habana, Cuba: Casa de las Américas, 1977) 26. The author sees the *commedia dell'arte* and the local theatrical tradition of the *sainete criollo* as predecessors of the *grotesco criollo* and tragicomedy as the most suitable structure for the grotesque in theatre. In tragicomedy "encontramos elementos cómicos y dramáticos, pero en este caso, lejos de estar asimilados, estos elementos se alternan manteniendo los respectivos campos perfectamente delineados. La idea que nutre a la tragicomedia es la de que el mundo y la vida no son ni enteramente cómicos ni enteramente trágicos. Lo que hoy es un carnaval mañana es un valle de lágrimas", 34. The *sainete criollo* was a short, light-hearted piece presented at the beginning, between acts or at the end of a play. The form was alive between 1900 and 1930, its demise thus coinciding with the appearance of the *teatro grotesco* which could be considered its successor.

perspective, considered that the dissolution of personality was too weak a platform to guarantee the survival of the *teatro*.

Kayser's valuing of terror justifies his turning to Germany once again where about the same time a group of artists republished the works of Poe and Hoffmann and, inspired by them, produced their own work. Kayser maintained that H. H. Ewers and Alfred Kubin understood the ambiguous nature of the grotesque in its combination of horror and humour¹⁶⁴. Moreover, these and other authors went further than effecting a revival of the Gothic, which in the end tended to provide a rational explanation for the supernatural and re-established the moral and social order. The narrators of the grotesque, as Kayser called them, were also socially committed and hoped to make a statement about their time which was soon to witness the first global conflict.

But Kayser emphasised for their brilliance and sensibility for the grotesque two authors contemporary to the German group of horror narrators. The first was Gustav Meyrink who in his *Der Golem* (1916) used the Jewish legend to personify the dissolution of the self through the technique of the double¹⁶⁵. The other author was Franz Kafka (1883-1924) whose work did not fictionalise the split of personality so much as the alienation of the individual and of the world as s/he saw it. Gregor Samsa remained himself both as man and as an insect but the metamorphosis materialised the growing alienation the individual had from his private and public relations.

In the field of literature Kayser closed his argument with brief remarks on Thomas Mann. The text in question is *Dr. Faustus* but Kayser's allusion to Mann is relevant because of

¹⁶⁴ Hanns Heinz Ewers (1871-1943) cultivated a form of literature which in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries privileged the supernatural element, fantasy, and horror where the sexual vein and violence were recurrent topics.

¹⁶⁵ Gustav Meyrink (1868-1932) was an Austrian storyteller, dramatist and translator known for his sketches, parodies and comedies. *Der Golem* is part of a darker story tale mode which became known for ensuing generations through the filmic adaptation written and directed by, as well as starring by Paul Wegener in 1920. It is unclear whether Wegener influenced Meyrink or the other way around as Wegener had already produced other films with the Golem *leitmotif*, one of them in 1915 with the cooperation of scriptwriter Henrik Galeen. Paul Wegener was also involved in the production of the second version of *Der Student von Prag* (1926), an adaptation of one of H. H. Ewers's texts, and which had been first made by Stellan Rye in 1913 and where Wegener starred in the title role. Taken together the first productions of *Der Student von Prag*, *Der Golem* and the *Homunculus* (Otto Rippert, 1916) set the bases for an exciting period of German cinema following the War. These films in fact paved the way for the impressive use of Expressionist-inspired sets in the making of *Schauerfilme* (films of fantasy and terror), including the versions of the 20s of those films. Meyrink and Ewers were therefore directly involved in this specific moment of the history of cinema when such masterpieces as *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1918), *Nosferatu* (F. W. Murnau, 1922), *Raskolnikov* (Robert Wiene, 1923), and *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1926) were produced.

his definition of the grotesque: “The grotesque is that which is excessively true and excessively real, not that which is arbitrary, false, unreal, and absurd”¹⁶⁶. Kayser’s reading of Mann’s definition seems to be correct in the sense that the grotesque viewed in this manner is used as a technique to enhance a given aspect of reality by means of distortion or exaggeration. It is the kind of grotesque akin to caricature and the grotesquely comic but that is only half of Kayser’s own conception of the grotesque. Like Kayser, I see these interpretations of the grotesque to be lower forms but I do not consider that exaggeration, and particularly distortion, have necessarily to push the grotesque towards the comic. The most relevant inference however, concerns Kayser’s own attitude. Trying to delimit the grotesque Kayser provides two definitions and a function: the grotesque is the estranged world, a play with the absurd and an exorcism against the fearful aspects of that world. However, Kayser leaves utterly uncommented on Thomas Mann’s position whereby the writer unambiguously separates the grotesque from the absurd.

The absurd in fact constitutes one of the factors justifying Kayser’s assertion of Surrealism as one of the most expressive manifestations of the grotesque. Surrealism was, as has often been noted, associated with the birth of psychological studies. Recognising Freud’s influence as well as Jung’s on the movement, Kayser goes on to comment: “Surrealism saw in the unconscious the wellspring of its new art and the new culture in general. Even though the destruction of logic and the temporal-spatial order, the blending of heterogeneous elements, the quest for the absurd, and the regression to the unconscious (especially to the dream as a creative force) approximate the grotesque, the Surrealistic program leads away from it” (*GAL*, 169). For Kayser, the world (or worlds) that the Surrealists envisioned was not one necessarily revealing the darker side of existence but was instead a disclosure of hidden mysteries of the familiar reality. Other realities, in fact, could be discovered. Kayser’s appreciation for Surrealism, for its approximation to the discourse of the grotesque he used, reveals how in his mind Surrealism is close to the grotesque:

[H]ere we have to do with a kind of painting that is not based primarily on a distinct view of man but rather on a new view of the world or, more precisely, of the world of inanimate objects. At the time when the Italian writers of the *teatro del grottesco* were alienating the world through the agency of man, the painters of *pittura metafisica* were alienating it through

¹⁶⁶ Thomas Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (“Reflections of an Unpolitical Man”), quoted in Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, 158.

inanimate objects. The familiar relationships between tangible things were to be abolished in order to reveal their hidden ominousness. The alienation [...] is achieved through the blending of heterogeneous elements, through sharp focus (a super-clarity that makes the world doubly strange), and through the distribution of objects on endless plains. At the same time the chronological order is disturbed by the juxtaposition of ancient and modern objects. This immensely visible world may totally lack the threatening, frightful, and abysmal qualities essential to the grotesque, so long as attention is focused on the magic of the phenomenal world. (*GAL*, 169-170. Italics in the text)

The grotesque ensues from each painter's work in a different manner. In Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978) the human and the mechanical are combined with yet another use of the automaton while the notion of history is dismissed when objects existing in different times are juxtaposed; Salvador Dalí (1904-1989) distorts bodies, dislocates objects and mingles them as in *The Burning Giraffe* (1937) where a woman, following the type of fusion in the mannerist tradition of Arcimboldo, becomes furniture while her destruction is previewed by a burning giraffe on the background. However, since the imposing weight of symbolism, thus of carefully rationalised elements, cannot be discarded, the whole grotesque effect of Surrealism is compromised. "Poorly simulated madness does not deserve taken seriously", Kayser harshly concluded (*GAL*, 172). Eventually the grotesque fails with Surrealism, at least as Kayser could see it, so he turned to the graphic arts instead.

It was from this point onwards that Kayser felt at last secure to theorise his own version of the grotesque. From the survey he carried out (since he rejected the idea of a history of the grotesque), Kayser divided the grotesque in two categories: the fantastic grotesque populated with nightmares, darkness and monstrosity and the grotesque comic. To the first trend Bosch and Brueghel evidently belonged whereas Kayser saw Hogarth as an example of the second. But quickly he added that certain artists participated in both such as Callot and Goya but, more strangely given his own argument, Hogarth as well. The point can very easily be taken further at least in Brueghel's case (assuming he referred to Hell Brueghel) for the caricatural is found in his paintings mainly through the wide use of distortion and exaggeration of features. As Geoffrey Harpham argued and as I will demonstrate further ahead, the presence of the grotesque is easily apprehended but when one tries to translate it into some theory one finds enormous difficulties.

The conceptualisation of a comical grotesque and a fantastic grotesque appears to be theoretically reasonable but when applied to texts it hardly satisfies. That much is proved by

looking into *The Famished Road*. For Kayser satire and war are the mainstream motifs, though his reasoning only makes sense in the strict context of Callot's and Goya's work, of the comically grotesque that is, whereas the temptations of Saint Anthony were responsible for the profusion of the fantastic grotesque. But surely such a distinction does not agree with *The Famished Road* where not only there is a strong influence of the supernatural, the mysterious, and evil but also of the comical and, more importantly, of a regenerative instinct more akin to Bakhtin.

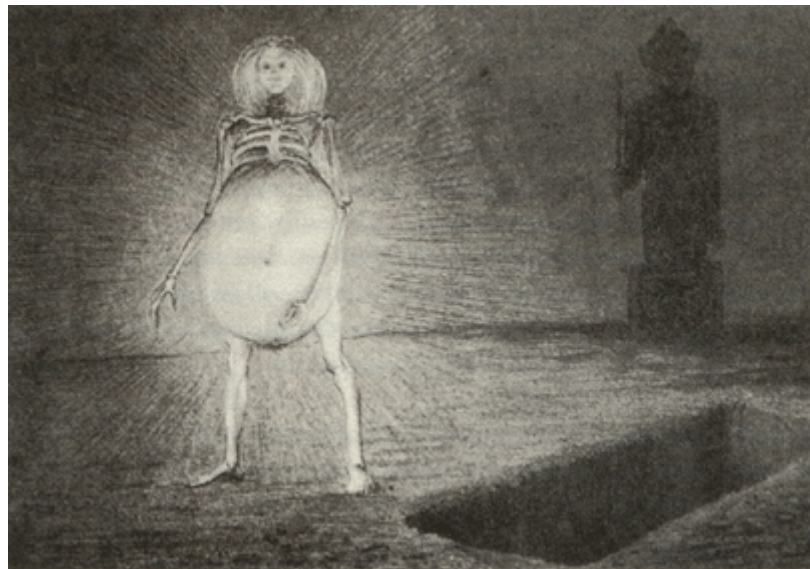
It is because of the shortcomings Kayser attributed to Surrealism that he elected two graphic artists as the prototypes of the grotesque. The phenomenon appears to be connected with the Germanic character as Kayser drew the attention to the fact that Alfred Kubin (1877-1959) was German and James Ensor (1860-1949) who was in fact Flemish, shared such a character¹⁶⁷. Their work can furthermore be considered as forerunning the *teatro del grottesco*, the Surrealists and horror story tellers as it effectively came to light during the late nineteenth century and the turn to the twentieth. Ensor, who is mentioned in Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber", Kayser included in the comically grotesque vein whereas Kubin had for Kayser more affinity with the fantastic type¹⁶⁸. But as Kayser took his view further one detects a flaw which maims his whole theory of the grotesque; one feels a paranoia suggesting that Kayser viewed the grotesque as an artistic and social expression of a dark world that in reality was *his* world. Of Ensor's work, for instance, he claimed that it had the ability "to express the malevolence of the world of objects" as if objects pertained to human morality and personality, as if in Kayser's world objects had come alive to persecute and haunt him (*GAL*, 175). My assumption is confirmed when Kayser compares Ensor's creations not only to

¹⁶⁷ Kayser appears to be misinformed about Kubin's origin. He was in fact born in Leitmeritz, in what was then Austria and is now the Czech Republic. His illustrations were used in many works associated in one way or the other to the grotesque: Thomas Mann's *Tristan* (1903), a German edition of Poe's work (1908), Dostoevsky's *Die Döppelgänger* ("The Double", 1913), and E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Nachtstücke* (1913) and *Märchen* (1947).

¹⁶⁸ Kayser's view is not indisputable. As a way of illustration I give a passage by Dominique Iehl, whose opinion I favour, and who in relation to Ensor's masks writes: "ces masques sont doubles: enlumines, hilarants, dans une carnaval de joie et d'orgie, mais aussi tragiques, fantastiques, tendus entre le rire et l'angoisse. Le recours au masque n'exprime pas chez Ensor, à la différence des caricaturistes, la volonté de fixer seulement des comportements, d'illustrer des passions et des vices, mais traduit son choix d'une nouvelle intensité visionnaire. Le tour de force de Ensor, c'est d'avoir su unir le fantomatique et le vivant, l'hallucination et la truculence", Dominique Iehl, *Le Grotesque* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997) 84. With respect to Alfred Kubin Iehl's opinion does not differ substantially from Kayser's which is the generally accepted view. Kubin is regarded by Dominique Iehl as being influenced by Bosch, Brueghel, Goya, and several of his contemporaries like Munch, Ensor, Redon and Rops.

Signorelli's sixteenth century *grottesche*, which do not strike me but do him as ominous, but also to Callot, Brueghel and Bosch¹⁶⁹.

Kayser's reference to Kubin is one by and large overlooked by critics and one that within the context of the grotesque should certainly be taken into consideration. Again Kayser saw the influence of the great producers of the grotesque Bosch and Brueghel. To this pair can be added the name of Goya given Kubin's production of works evoking the subjectivity of the unconscious not always maintained at the safe distance of a nightmarish vision but threatening, with its familiarity, to become real. Kubin's main source of inspiration is nature itself. A Kayserian approach to his etchings would be that Kubin chose for his subjects menacing animals inducing repulsion and disgust and which when blown out of proportion inspired fear as well. What is not a motive of reflection for Kayser is that the anthropomorphic animals so clearly invoking death are directly associated with female figures. Even when Kubin did not establish that connection with women as in *The Road to Hell* (1900), in his dark version of what could be Bakhtin's pregnant death in *The Egg* (1902), and in *Madness* (1904), they still maintained their function as death carriers. In addition, women embodied a primal instinct of aggression and destruction threatening men and which was appropriate to invoke the horrors of war (see plate 95).



Pl. 92. Alfred Kubin, *The Egg*, 1902

¹⁶⁹ A comprehensive analysis of Signorelli's *grottesche* is made by Geoffrey Harpham and the horrific aspect can hardly be said to be at the centre or even indeed present according to this critic's view. See Geoffrey Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982) 39-41.

It was with Alfred Kubin that Kayser finished his survey of the grotesque. At the end of the journey through the three prime moments he conceived the grotesque to have experienced (the sixteenth century, from the *Sturm und Drang* to Romanticism, and the twentieth century) Kayser's conclusion is unequivocal: the grotesque is nothing but an aesthetic structure. Given Kayser's own fusion of the "real" world with the other world, it is perplexing how he can reduce the grotesque to a mere aesthetic category. His discourse, which obsessively invokes hell and evil and is infused with fear, seems to contradict it too, as it is dependent of certain cosmogonist concepts. As far as Kayser can observe, in its various historical manifestations certain themes have been prominent in the aesthetic category of the grotesque: monstrosity which during the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance gave way to the proliferation of works depicting Saint Anthony's temptations and scenes from the Apocalypse (or even the Raphaelesques); verminous and crawling animals suggestive of the nocturnal world; tangling plants which take in a deadly embrace the rest of the world; mechanical objects, particularly those imitating human vitality like puppets and automata and which are "demonically destructive and overpower their makers" (*GAL*, 183); and insanity, the effect of an alien, overwhelming force taking over the human mind and soul.

The exhaustive investigation carried out on grotesque pieces from those periods permitted the subsequent listing of themes that provided the necessary basis for Kayser to finish his book with a theory of the grotesque emphasising the psychological component. The grotesque is, first of all, the estranged world. Unlike the fairy tale realm, it is our world that is invaded by strangeness, ominousness, and sudden transformation (when fairy tales obliterate the frontier between the realm of fantasy and the "real" world, as Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* does, the evident conclusion is that fairy tales must carry this element of the grotesque)¹⁷⁰:

We are so strongly affected and terrified because it is our world which ceases to be reliable, and we feel that we would be unable to live in this changed world. The grotesque instills fear of life rather than fear of death. Structurally, it presupposes that the categories that apply to our world view become inapplicable. We have observed the progressive dissolution

¹⁷⁰ Suddenness and surprise are intuited throughout *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* as vital characteristics of the grotesque but it is only at the end that Kayser asserts their centrality without a doubt (see page 184). This specific feature has attracted the attention of some critics who have in their

which has occurred since the ornamental art of the Renaissance: the fusion of realms which we know to be separated, the abolition of the law of statics, the loss of identity, the distortion of “natural” size and shape, the suspension of the category of objects, the destruction of personality, and the fragmentation of the historical order. (*GAL*, 184-185)

In this vision of the world controlled by apocalyptic beasts, laughter can only survive marginally, off to the side of horror. Laughter in a Kayserian context can only be bitter, satirical and often even satanic. Moreover, it recalls the interconnection of the grotesque with insanity as the mind is unable to sustain the tension. This logic leads to Kayser’s second definition: the grotesque is a play with the absurd. This play might seem harmless as the Raphaelesques seemed to be but they always have the potential to turn sour and lead to a realm where the soul is imprisoned by leafy arms and animal mouths which fasten and engulf. But at the same time as the grotesque carries forth the idea of the end of freedom and merriment it also presents the possibility of liberation. The grotesque, on invoking those dark spirits, creates the possibility of fighting “the demonic aspects of the world” (*GAL*, 188). However, in the Kayserian frame of thought the prospect of accomplishing the feat of subduing such evil forces is very limited if indeed it can be managed at all. Kayser provides no clues as to how liberation can be achieved and indeed appears to see the mere standing up to opposition as the victory itself. His only words on the subject do not in fact suggest success in the end: “The darkness has been sighted, the ominous powers discovered, the incomprehensible forces challenged” (*GAL*, 188).

Despite its self-defeating message Kayser’s ideas have been picked up by critics and writers to the same extent as those of Bakhtin. Frances Barasch, for instance, writing in the 1970s, demonstrates the influence of Kayser’s studies but for her the grotesque spreads out beyond the world of art: “Today, with the tragicomic novel and drama, the theatre of the absurd, and the startling use of disharmony by many of our modern painters and musicians, we see and begin to understand that the pattern of life is grotesque”¹⁷¹. But it seems to me inadequate to restrict the grotesque, honourably as it may be, to “the highest level of serious comedy”¹⁷². I agree, however, that the grotesque cannot help us control the world and its mutability, particularly at a time when we, as humans, see that strangeness taking hold even of

own analyses extended their importance. See António Manuel Ferreira, “A Narrativa de Branquinho da Fonseca: Os Lugares do Conto”, doutoramento diss., U. of Aveiro, 2000.

¹⁷¹ Frances Barasch, *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*, 163.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 164.

our bodies and minds given the frequently fearsome progress of biotechnology and genetic engineering. But it does provide one “means of identifying and understanding the complex disorder of experience and art”¹⁷³.

The seriousness of the subjects most frequently taken up by postmodern literature evolves from the increasingly complex theme of defining a human being and explains the growing use of the grotesque. On the one hand by reason of the realisation that that attempt to encapsulate the “essence” of the human being is as feeble now as it was in the past despite scientific breakthroughs which have provided massive information on our biology. Definition remains therefore a mirage and humanity continues to escape its restrictions by being unable to settle the borders of its own philosophical meaning and anatomical mapping. On the other hand, the tendency to participate in this discussion and thus to be associated with “elevated” subjects is at the basis of the decline of the burlesque in favour of the grotesque. In fact, the burlesque dismantles the inner tension between the tragic and the comic, reducing the effects or even discarding altogether the former and enhancing the latter by resorting to droll themes¹⁷⁴.

In view of the recognition in recent years of the greater complexity and potential of the grotesque as strategy to read and mediate literature and art, several studies took the grotesque approach not only to gain insight into the concerns of our times but also those of the past. In the 1960s there was a sudden interest in the subject and it was then that Bakhtin’s books and Kayser’s books were translated into English. Additionally, previous studies were republished such as Thomas Wright’s *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art* (1968), the original dating back to 1865. Moreover, several new studies were published on the matter. In 1965 Arthur Clayborough made his contribution with *The Grotesque in English Literature* wherein he considered three major writers in the English language: Jonathan Swift, Charles Dickens and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. According to him there are four stages of the grotesque and of its etymology: the first was the purely technical sense to refer to Nero’s mural painting; the second the imitative style which added the connotation of fanciful decoration to the word; the third phase in the semantic evolution of the grotesque refers to a

¹⁷³ Loc. cit.

¹⁷⁴ Consider Maria Saraiva de Jesus’s words: “Confundido às vezes com o grotesco, mas de significado e amplitude inferiores, o burlesco rejeita a dimensão trágica, buscando sobretudo efeitos cómicos, através da degradação do objecto visado, geralmente obtida pela discrepância entre estilo sublime e assunto trivial, altas expectativas e revelações degradantes”, Maria Saraiva de Jesus, “*O Primo Basílio e Os Maias: da Convergência Satírica à Ambivalência Irónica*”, *Revista de Universidade de Aveiro Letras*, 6-7-8 (1989-90-91) 137.

period, roughly the eighteenth century, when the word conveyed the sense of the ridiculous, the distorted and the unnatural; and the fourth, to which his own study belongs, of its application to literature, one of the earliest examples being Diderot's description of *commedia dell'arte* as grotesque, comparable in the visual arts to Callot's grotesques. The fourth stage was divided inasmuch as it also referred to the application of the word in the description of natural objects and people which for their presentation and manner seem "unnatural", that is, all that which "is not consonant with the orthodox ideas of what is right and proper"¹⁷⁵.

In order to overcome the difficulty contemporary scholars evince in their generalised usage of the grotesque, Clayborough proposes a methodology divided into four branches: the grotesque defined through the attitude of the writer, through the impression caused, through its relationship with analogous categories (for instance the comic, the ugly, and the fantastic) and finally through the extraction of basic characteristics from a representative sample of grotesque works. Clayborough's method is strikingly simple but on the whole it is over-inclusive, making it hard to discard many instances. I identify two other handicaps in Clayborough's classification; the first is that through his examples of the relationship of the grotesque with kindred categories nothing is deduced of the nature either of each category or even of the relationships themselves as they merely appear referred to in the same context. As an example of this tendency I give his uncommented example of Souriau's thoughts on the grotesque: "Dans la littérature, le grotesque est le laid comique"¹⁷⁶. The second weak point in Clayborough's work has to do with the fact that it can be reduced to a mere list of works which may or may not be grotesque as no criterion is provided with respect to the characteristic features of the grotesque. In this view, no scholar can be contradicted if he favours caricature like Wright did, satire like Clark, or the Romantic and twentieth centuries in Kayser's case. Later on, Clayborough wrote: "Grotesqueness may appear in anything which is found to be in sufficiently grave conflict with accepted standards to arouse emotion. In theory, therefore, there is nothing which might not be regarded as grotesque from some standpoint"¹⁷⁷. Critique is directed at Kayser himself who Clayborough sees as "devot[ed] to actual works of art rather than to theories of the grotesque, the latter being briefly described

¹⁷⁵ Arthur Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature*, 8.

¹⁷⁶ Quoted in Arthur Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature*, 23.

¹⁷⁷ Arthur Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature*, 109.

rather than analyzed”¹⁷⁸. In sum, no “systematic attempt is made to define the grotesque or to establish criteria by which it may be identified through simple description”¹⁷⁹.

Nevertheless, Clayborough owed his system of the grotesque to two thinkers: Kayser and Jung. Clayborough’s approach is, in the end, of a psychological nature and departed from Kayser’s concept of an unidentified, impersonal force posing as threat to the world as Kayser conceived it. However, Kayser was unable to name that force which was viewed so threateningly it acquired a material, “real” dimension. Through Jung, Clayborough identifies the unknown force with the unconscious mind. Using a scheme almost as elaborate as Ruskin but of Jungian inspiration, Clayborough claimed that humans reveal two attitudes of the mind: a progressive and a regressive one. Progression is related to the needs of the conscious to its environment, be it of a moral or social nature; the regressive attitude, on the other hand, strives to satisfy the needs of the unconscious which are not antagonistic to the progressive attitude but rather complementary. Each attitude is characterised by distinct modes of thinking: direct thinking, referring to the organised, systematic, rational thought of the progressive attitude, and dream or fantasy thinking which organises thought through distortion and bending of the natural laws of the world. It is chiefly within the scope of fantasy thinking that grotesque art comes to be. However, it should be noted that each type of thinking is not strictly associated with the conscious or the unconscious but whereas the former tends to favour directed thinking, the latter tends to favour fantasy thinking. Moreover, the unconscious, within Jungian philosophy, is not restricted to the individual psyche but to an ancestral psychic body all humans share and which is related to mythological and archetypal imagery.

Based on these reckonings, Clayborough is able to categorise art into four forms. To the progressive/regressive polarisation he added a positive/negative scheme. A work of art is positive if it represents quite satisfactorily the artist’s conception of “reality” (as in myth and in technical studies) and negative if failing to do so the artist feels the need to react to his/her incomplete or unfaithful vision of “reality” with a compensatory leaning on common sense or even self-denigration. Regressive-positive art bears the closest connection with the dream world; it is therefore the type that is mostly used in myth. Its imagery is “highly evocative and symbolic, deriving its significance from something more positive than a mere reaction against

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 63.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 64.

the conditions of the material world”¹⁸⁰. The reaction to the world could therefore be said to be non-Kayserian, not produced by fear and, accordingly, “the artist is more concerned to construct a picture of the ‘greater reality’ which transcends the world of natural phenomena than merely to escape from the dictates of that world”¹⁸¹. Some of the archetypal images that will occupy a place in my study which belong to regressive-positive art are the witch and the vampire, but the witch only insofar as she embodies a certain relationship of the individual with his/her milieu. Regressive-negative art is characterised by a lesser degree of influence of the unconscious resulting not in the production of imagery but of emotion substituting it. The grotesque in this vein is that to do with incongruity and unnaturalness, or, in Geoffrey Harpham’s terms, contradiction. Whereas regressive-positive art is not intentionally grotesque, regressive-negative art “shows a deep awareness of the everyday circumstances with which it is in conflict; so far as specifically grotesque art is concerned, emphasis is laid on the ‘divergence from the natural’ (or the conventional) of the imagery employed”¹⁸². Whereas one reveals a “spontaneous and unforced naturalness” the other is “sophisticated and self-conscious”¹⁸³. By way of illustration Clayborough indicates Dadaism, and supposedly Surrealism by extension, as a regressive-positive form of art as it *deliberately* created artistic chaos to express its non-compliance with the world of its time. Progressive-positive art is deprived almost entirely of any fantastic or dream-related element and the only interference of an artistic nature is drawn from discourse itself. In this category are included scientific and scholarly works. Finally, progressive-negative art is that whose usage of fantasy does not come about through the unconscious but instead it is produced to serve a given purpose: to create an absurdity, a burlesque or a caricature. In conclusion, the grotesque is generated in a pure form in regressive-positive art, deliberately in regressive-positive and progressive-negative arts, and is absent in progressive-positive art.

In the following years a myriad important studies were produced, confirming the impetus: Willard Farnham produced *The Shakespearean Grotesque* (1971), Philip Thomson elaborated a study in the Kayserian vein simply called *The Grotesque* (1972) where he emphasised the satiric component of the grotesque which according to his view was a combination of “the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response” and “the

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 81.

¹⁸¹ Loc. cit.

¹⁸² Ibid., 82.

¹⁸³ Loc. cit.

ambivalently abnormal”¹⁸⁴, Margot Northey presented one of the earliest full-length studies on non-European literature in *The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and the Grotesque in Canadian Fiction* (1976), Neil Rhodes concentrated on the literary satire of the late sixteenth century in *Elizabethan Grotesque* (1980), Nancy K. Hill wrote *A Reformer’s Art: Dickens’ Picturesque and Grotesque Imagery* (1981), Bernard McElroy focused his attention on Franz Kafka, Günter Grass, Thomas Pynchon and James Joyce in *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque* (1989), while Michael Meyer in *Literature and the Grotesque* (1995) edited a compilation of essays reflecting the broad range of the grotesque in literature and other artistic forms: Nathanael West, Peter Schaffer, Samuel Beckett, John Steinbeck, Luigi Pirandello, Katherine Dunn, Jack London, James Joyce, Ivan Albright’s painting and the literary and filmic “profanation of the human form” of Stephen King’s *Thinner*, Thomas Harris’s *The Silence of the Lambs* and Brett Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*¹⁸⁵.

Finally, I would like to mention Dieter Meindler’s *American Fiction and the Metaphysics of the Grotesque* (1996) for his attempt to reconcile the Bakhtinian and Kayserian grotesques based on solidly documented arguments, especially the different historical backgrounds of the material each used as well as their approach: aesthetic for Kayser and existential in terms of the totality of life premise for Bakhtin. Though I do not entirely agree with Meindler’s views he had the additional merit of bringing the grotesque out from its former terms of reference and nearer others which help understand the phenomenon better, particularly Martin Heidegger’s existential philosophy wherein Being precedes apprehension by the mind, by cognition, that is, granting an anti-rationalist openness to the concept of Being concomitant with Bakhtin’s ideas of the totality of life and its interpenetration with the world. In accordance with my own view which I expressed earlier in this chapter, Meindler also sees the inquiries on what defines the individual growing in importance, particularly in the novel. He writes: “Literature, in modern times, has more and more become an individual act defining the

¹⁸⁴ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen and Co, 1972) 27. The Kayserian influence is felt in substance and methodology. Firstly, he regards the grotesque as displaying a set of characteristics which disclose their Kayserian background: disharmony, the comic and the terrifying, extravagance and exaggeration, and abnormality. Secondly, as Kayser, Thomson lists the functions of the grotesque which are close in content to Kayser’s own: aggressiveness and alienation, the psychological effect, and tension and unresolvability. The grotesque can also be unintentional or playful but that variant is considered an inferior form to that of the satiric grotesque.

¹⁸⁵ Greg Metcalf, “The Soul in the Meat Suit: Ivan Albright, Hannibal Lecter and the Body Grotesque”, ed. Michael Meyer, *Literature and the Grotesque* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1995), 161. In the meantime Thomas Harris’s *Red Dragon* has also been adapted to film by Brett Ratner (2002) as has *American Psycho* in 2000 by Mary Harron.

nature of the individual”¹⁸⁶. Admittedly, this focus on the individual appears to contradict the precept of totality as Being (the experience of totality) forcefully engulfs specific individualities. But it is this very paradox that allows the union of the Bakhtinian with the Kayserian grotesques, a marriage of Heaven and Hell. Indeed, it is when the individual is faced with the possibility of his/her existential obliteration that the grotesque emerges as terrible. Referring to the romantic grotesque, therefore to the Kayserian vein, Meindler swiftly concludes that the “shift to horror and anxiety in the romantic grotesque is the very concomitant and consequence of the confrontation between a subjective and individualistic outlook – as cultivated by the romantic hero and artist – and what negates this outlook: all-embracing primordial life as conveyed by the grotesque”¹⁸⁷.

In the pictorial arts the grotesque continued to be studied as well; Howard Daniel plunged into the world of fantasy and myth in *Devils, Monsters and Nightmares* (1964), Ewa Kuryluk contributed to the criticism of the grotesque with an analysis of Aubrey Beardsley’s visual provocation with her *Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex - The Grotesque: Origins, Iconography, Techniques* (1987) and *The Portrait of Eccentricity: Arcimboldo and the Mannerist Grotesque* (1991) by Giancarlo Maiorino came out only four years later¹⁸⁸. The list is, in fact, much longer, so I will comment in some depth only on two works, that by John Clark and, especially, Geoffrey Harpham to establish the directions criticism has taken in more recent years. John R. Clark with *The Modern Satiric Grotesque and its Traditions* (1991) deals with the topics and tactics of what he called dark humour, throughout his study synonymously also referred to as comic-grotesque and almost without debate identified with the grotesque and the gothic, the latter terms being nearly undifferentiated as well. Clark’s prevailing tone is quite pessimistic and satire, in his view, is the literary mirror “to the modern era, in which the self has been recognized as being irrational and unstable and a traumatic parade of dreadful events has helped topple conventional idols of Renaissance *humanitas* and idealism”¹⁸⁹. In this respect he asserts: “every well-managed work of art is an inventive and fruitful construct; hence it renders

¹⁸⁶ Dieter Meindler, *American Fiction and the Metaphysics of the Grotesque* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996) 19.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

¹⁸⁸ With respect to Arcimboldo see Martin M. Winkler’s interesting comparative analysis “Satire and the Grotesque in Juvenal, Arcimboldo, and Goya”, *Antike und Abendland: Beiträge zum Verständnis der Griechen und Römer und ihres Nachlebens*, ed. Albrecht Dihle et al (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1991). Ewa Kuryluk also made brief comments on Arcimboldo in her book. A note should also be made with reference to the studies of the grotesque in Spanish literature for their relative range and depth. Among them are James Iffland’s *Quevedo and the Grotesque* (1978), Henryk Ziomek’s *El grotesco en la literatura española del siglo de oro* (1983) and Eduardo Urbina’s *Principios y fines del Quijote* (1990).

an overt and positive contribution to society and to culture. Satirists, too, must be included in this circle of creators. They dramatize (and explore) weakness, decadence, and denigration”¹⁹⁰. Thus, Clark is in tune with Wolfgang Kayser in two matters: the twentieth century is the most prolific period of grotesque art and that the mood it assumes is fundamentally depressing due to the era being marked by warfare and bloodshed. At times, Clark is even gloomier than Kayser himself: the individual faces “the paralytic horror that some dread cataclysm awaits him together with the equally shattering fear that nothing whatsoever will happen”¹⁹¹. But as the grotesque is seen as a reaction to classicist and neo-classicist sensibility, the dark grotesque and humour of twentieth century literature is a response to the times preceding it:

[O]ptimism prevailed throughout most of the nineteenth century, with the full blossoming of the idea of progress to ripeness. To be sure, many back-benchers of the opposition - Browning, Baudelaire, Hawthorne, Melville, and, later, Dickens, Twain, and Flaubert – expressed their objection to progressive idealism by utilizing features of the gothic vein. But with the twentieth century the ideal of inevitable progress came terribly crashing to the ground, shattered by monumental world wars, revolutions, indeterminacy, atomic energy, the Freudian id, and the Holocaust. In the present century, then, the gothic and the grotesque mate and become the dominant imagery of our era.¹⁹²

The grotesque for John Clark is therefore associated with exaggeration, the unnatural, the absurd and horror where progress is necessarily terribly damaging. His attitude contrasts, for instance, with that of Clayborough, for whom even the idea of an alienated world is not a synonym, as it was for Kayser, of a sinister threat. Despite John Clark’s deficient approach to the grotesque as far as related categories go, his work deserves mention for demonstrating that parallel to the increasing use of the bodily grotesque in modern and contemporary literature, the psychological trait is not effaced and, in fact, the two variants appear as complements of one another for if Clark concentrates on the ominous images of the grotesque in *Cien años de soledad*, other critics have rightfully pointed out the impact of grotesque corporeality in the novel.

Among the contemporary studies on the grotesque Geoffrey Harpham’s *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (1982) stands out for its well-constructed

¹⁸⁹ John R. Clark, *The Modern Satiric Grotesque and its Traditions*, 5. Italics in the text.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 7.

and informed attempt at utilising the grotesque. He presents his own interpretations of Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death", Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* and Joseph Conrad's *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* and *The Heart of Darkness* taking off from the very admittance that no definition can ever be satisfactory. In his view the grotesque is so slippery it cannot be captured. It is "an 'element,' a species of confusion" hiding in "some inconceivable spot where the vectors of [...] artworks intersect"¹⁹³. Insightfully Harpham also said that it is "a single protean idea that is capable of assuming a multitude of forms" or, put in a different manner, that it is "concept without form"¹⁹⁴. Harpham's merit is, in my view, his acceptance of evidence that critics have systematically rejected and in consequence of which they have developed theory after theory. Calling our attention to certain factors observable in any history of the grotesque, Harpham demonstrated why the grotesque cannot ultimately be straitjacketed in definition. Among those factors is that in a work of art the presence of the grotesque is easily sensed but hardly apprehended by the mind, that it is constant in the history of the arts and literature but assumes forms unrelated among themselves, that those forms can exist elsewhere so that they are independent from the grotesque as the grotesque is of them, and interestingly, since no one can estimate where or what the grotesque is, no one can tell where it began so that in terms of an energy it can be located in pre-historic cave paintings but as a self-aware artistic form it took off millennia later during the Italian Renaissance (which, in any case, is another false start as the source of the form dates back to the first century – both related to grottoes – and Roman art, in its turn, received influences from various parts of the empire).

These contradictions explain why the strength of the grotesque remained relatively unchanged before and after the concept was purposefully included in art history. Hence Bosch and Brueghel as well as gothic and illuminated manuscripts are as imbued with the grotesque as Raphael's works or Urbino's maiolica. Hence also that critics of the excellence of Bakhtin and Kayser can so well-documentedly and persuasively argue for the grotesque and yet disagree in almost every point. The situation creates a major discomfort for the critic for having no delimited field to explore how can s/he qualify him/herself to speak of it? His suggestions of readings of literary texts did not intend therefore to apply any theory "but simply to extend the ground of a consistently theoretical inquiry to include literature"¹⁹⁵.

¹⁹² Ibid., 17-18.

¹⁹³ Geoffrey Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, xv.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., xv and page 3 respectively.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., xxi.

Geoffrey Harpham also recognised the existence of a threat in our times to the grotesque, one whose dimension is unparalleled. Though still appearing in more traditional arts, by having gained such notoriety and by spreading its range to such diverse new fields (horror and sci-fi films, hyper-realistic videos that offer to us a reverse view of our internal, biological selves, and photojournalism of armed conflicts come to my mind) the grotesque is in danger of bleeding itself to extinction. It is in danger, in fact, of becoming merely a concept used to accommodate all sort of disorder and contradiction:

[I]n more innocent times it was possible to create a grotesque by mingling human with animal or mechanical elements; but as we learn more about the languages of animals, and teach more and more complex languages to computers, the membranes dividing these realms from that of the human begin to dissolve, and with them go the potentiality for many forms of the grotesque. In short, the grotesque – with the help of technology – is becoming the victim of its own success: having existed for many centuries on the disorderly margins of Western culture and the aesthetic conventions that constitute that culture, it is now faced with a situation where the center cannot, or does not choose to, hold; where nothing is incompatible with anything else; and where the marginal is indistinguishable from the typical. Thus the grotesque, in endlessly diluting forms, is always and everywhere around us – and increasingly invisible.¹⁹⁶

Harpham's book emerged then as a counter-reaction towards this menacing tendency which, while having some truthfulness, overlooks the new possibilities created for the grotesque by technology, which have already conquered their own place in discussion in academia, where Donna Haraway is one of the area's most significant voices¹⁹⁷. But for Harpham the grotesque must be preserved by establishing its "nature"¹⁹⁸. Another benefit is implicit in Harpham's position which is to separate those works making an actual contribution to the arts and the grotesque, as the following plates do, from those which are simply messy¹⁹⁹.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., xx-xxi.

¹⁹⁷ See Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s", ed. Linda J. Nicholson, *Feminism/Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) 149-181.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., xxi.

¹⁹⁹ Among the plates I would highlight Jane Alexander's powerful *Butcher Boys* as an extraordinary sculpture on the double quality of apartheid revealed as a brutish system presented through the clean, well-delineated white bodies seated so elegantly and contrasting with the animal, even devilish heads. Miriam Beerman's red-blooded painting also revives human horror of dismemberment, following a motif long before already taken up for instance by Géricault, Paul Klee and Alfred Kubin. The notable



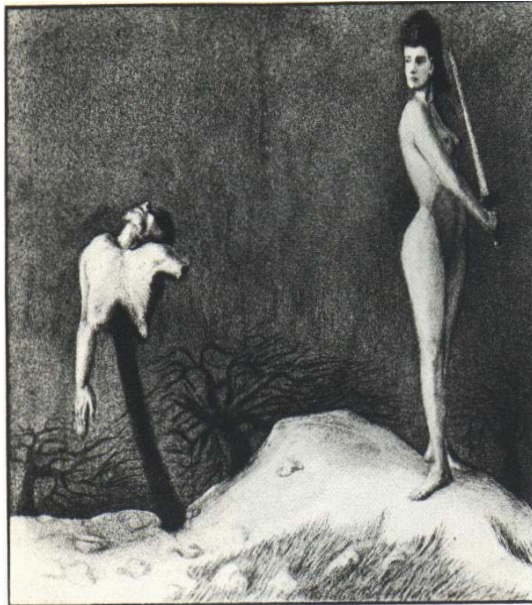
Pl. 93.



Pl. 94.

Pl. 93. Théodore Géricault, *Severed Limbs*, 1818

Pl. 94. Félicien Rops, *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, circa 1878



Pl. 95.

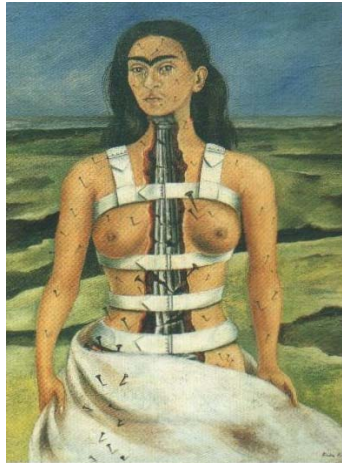


Pl. 96.

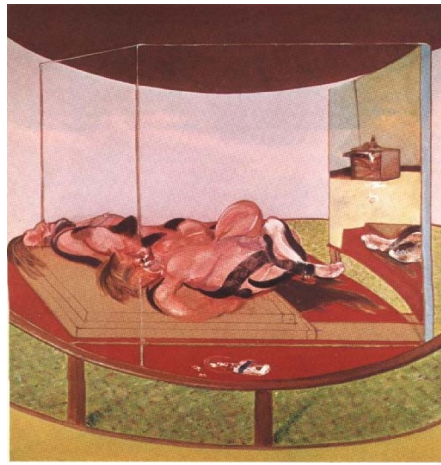
Pl. 95. Alfred Kubin, *Slaughter Festival*, 1900

Pl. 96. Paul Klee, *Outbreak of Fear*, 1939

work of Joel-Peter Witkin in photography, combining humour, elegance, and tradition is responsible for the enthusiasm of critics and public alike though always accompanied by an equal measure of outrage by some viewers repulsed by his using of human corpses and corporeal freaks. In 2003 Witkin illustrated two volumes of new editions of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*. Though Blake was also a connoisseur of the grotesque, especially of the demoniac vein, all the cases here show that the grotesque invariably appears linked to the body.



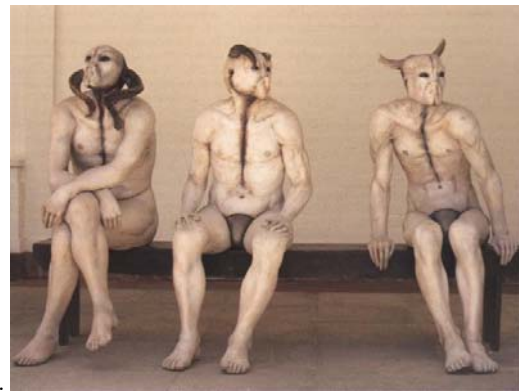
Pl. 97.



Pl. 98.

Pl. 97. Frida Kahlo, *The Broken Column*, 1944Pl. 98. Francis Bacon, *Triptych*, 1967

Pl. 99.



Pl. 100.

Pl. 99. Miriam Beerman, *Untitled*, 1969Pl. 100. Jane Alexander, *Butcher Boys*, 1985-86

Pl. 101.



Pl. 102.

Pl. 101. Joel-Peter Witkin, *Story from a Book*, 1999Pl. 102. John Isaacs, *A Necessary Change of Heart*, 2000

Harpham's noble intentions failed in the end which explains why, having argued against the reasonability of defining the grotesque eventually he presents his own theory, the mythic grotesque, recognising as his precursors Sir Walter Scott, J. A. Symonds, and Baudelaire²⁰⁰.

Putting a stress on the etymology of the word, Harpham dislocated the historical source which is directly linked to the arts with the discovery of the *grottesche* in the grottoes of the Domus Aurea towards an origin when grotto designs incorporated a magical element. In Harpham's view, the characteristic that separates the two types of *grottesche* was that the Roman sort which was directly picked up by the imagination of the artists of the Renaissance was already deprived of a mythic quality which was real for primitive cultures and which allowed them to intervene in the world where humans strived to survive. This presupposition of interaction with the world is not only one concomitant with the Bakhtinian doctrine but it also provides the ground for a distinction between the grotesque and the arabesque, a distinction which has a tendency to fade. There is nonetheless a relative consensus on what one and the other represent; whereas the grotesque describes “[f]antastic ornament or decoration composed of mythical figures (satyrs, centaurs), outlandish vegetation and bizarre faces”, in Western art the arabesque describes “an intricate interwoven design of scrolling foliage and flowers” deriving from the Islamic opposition to the depiction of the human figure²⁰¹.

For Harpham such a differentiation had two major implications: the first is that the arabesque principle thus defined is present in arts far beyond the Western world, as in Asia Minor and pre-Columbian designs. Moreover, that its origin can also be traced to pre-historical art where cave people applied their red-painted hands to the walls prior to beginning painting human and animal forms which are the mark of the grotesque. According to Geoffrey Harpham's thought then, the arabesque preceded the grotesque but as the latter evolved it integrated something of the former. Similarly, when the *grottesche* took over Roman

²⁰⁰ John Addington Symonds (1840-1893) belonged to the politically involved men and women who in the late nineteenth century fought for a revival in the arts and culture. Among them were Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris, Edward Carpenter and John Ruskin. Symonds is best known for his pioneering studies on the history and literature of homosexuality and he became an active defender of gay rights. He distinguished himself as a poet, art historian and translator of works by Sappho, Poliziano and Benvenuto Cellini. Undoubtedly in this specific context Harpham is referring to his *Caricature, the Fantastic, the Grotesque* (1890) where he contended that mockery, and specifically caricature, is a material element of the grotesque and that the latter cannot exist without the other. His starting point, the association of caricature and the grotesque, is shared by Thomas Wright. However, they differ in that for Wright caricature is an expression of respected art whereas for Symonds it is humorous fantasy.

²⁰¹ Mallalieu Huon, *Illustrated History of Antiques*, 626 and 622 respectively.

art and the Renaissance, they incorporated the scrolling designs and strict geometric model of the arabesque. The second implication is inherently related to the issue that so enraged Vitruvius, that is, of faithfulness to the forms of nature. In this respect, the arabesque appears as an elaboration of leafy and floral motifs which are drawn from nature whereas the grotesque, with its monstrous creatures, is born out of human imagination²⁰². This reasoning is of no little importance and enlightens the use of each aesthetic for instance in Edgar Allan Poe's *Tales of the Arabesque and the Grotesque* (1840) insofar as if "the grotesque suggests unnatural partition and the arabesque organic recombination, they may have appeared to him [Poe] as images of the Many and the One, a fracturing that characterizes all of Poe's thought"²⁰³. Though Poe himself lapsed and occasionally used the terms interchangeably, there is a difference at least in theory: "the arabesque, as pure form or non-referential ornament, summons up the kind of wholeness, unity, and loveliness that exists out of time. The grotesque, on the other hand, corresponds with 'multiform combinations' of time, acts of creation straining toward unity and eternity but embedded in partition and decay"²⁰⁴. In the context of "The Masque of the Red Death" the distinction indicates that there is a human aspiration to arabesque wholeness and harmony but our nature being but human, thus liable to illness and inevitably perishable, it assumes a grotesque form.

Grotesque designs of primitive communities served what Harpham identified as a mythic function both in invoking the assistance of deities and in appeasing any demonic spirits so as to guarantee the success of a hunt, for instance. The exorcising function identified by Kayser appears to be part of Harpham's thought but it also recognises the ritualistic side of grotesque manifestations which eventually will lead me to discuss René Girard. In the first century that mythic sense had been lost so that the Roman appropriation of past cultures, especially Greek, and the Roman use of the grotesque (now reduced to a decorative style) were seen by Harpham as an attempt to recover the memory of some myth of origins. This interpretation of the grotesque thus presupposes a severance: it is but "mythology wrenched from its context, drained of its meaning, and shaped into an aesthetically pleasing design" [...], "an invocation of 'some other phase of being,' of a mythological culture that was permanently

²⁰² It is because of this aspect that the grotesque has been associated with monstrous creatures which abounded in travelling manuals and, in a way still quite relevant to our time, with freaks. For more details on the first sense see Philippe Morel, *Les Grotesques: Les figures de l'imaginaire dans la peinture italienne de la fin de la Renaissance* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997) and on the second meaning Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin, 1978).

²⁰³ Geoffrey Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, 110.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

lost" [...], and a "manifest, visible, or unmediated presence of mythic or primitive elements *in* a nonmythic or modern context"²⁰⁵.

But if Harpham was so pessimistic in this respect, he was quick in recuperating the grotesque through the concept of metamorphosis and through what Bakhtin called historical evolution: "Perpetual metamorphosis is the central premise of mythic thought, which operates on the principle of the cosmic continuum. According to this principle, no realm of being, visible or invisible, past or present, is absolutely discontinuous with any other, but all equally accessible and culturally interdependent"²⁰⁶. Furthermore, myth releases the grotesque from being a mere aesthetic expression of contradiction as it ultimately aims to reconcile the natural with the magical. In mythic narratives contradiction is simply absent in circumstances that in other contexts would be impossible such as animal/human intermarriage. In other words, myth provides the necessary background which explains the ongoing tendency of the grotesque towards part *and* whole:

Many of the cave paintings are not only magnificent as works of art, but just as alienated as *grottesche*. And like *grottesche*, the cave paintings invoke, and thereby make ambivalently present and distant, an ancient code: they signify and embody antiquity, the origin. Cave art, despite its naturalizing theology, represents a first step in the articulation of the human personality, the human species. It reflects theology, and the rituals performed in the caves included inter-species intercourse, cannibalism, necrophagy, and sacrifice – all of which were intended to emphasize affinities with the natural world, and none of which is found in nature. If *grottesche* seemed to the Renaissance wholly aesthetic and divorced from nature, cave art is not less so: it is the natural condition even of primitive art to be unnatural.²⁰⁷

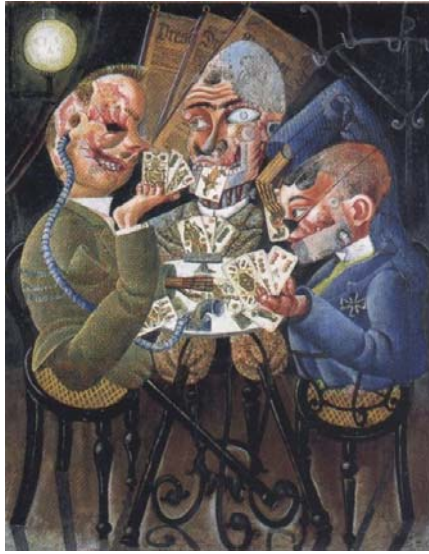
The ambiguous relation with the natural is, in my view, parallel to the ambiguous relation with the "real" so that while some find human hybrids grotesque, the term is as commonly applied to paintings and photos invoking the horrors of war. As Philip Thomson put it, "far from possessing a necessary affinity with the fantastic, the grotesque derives at least some of its effect from being presented within a realistic framework, in a realistic way"²⁰⁸.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 51. Italics in the text.

²⁰⁶ Loc. cit.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 64. Italics in the text.

²⁰⁸ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque*, 8.



Pl. 103.



Pl. 104.

Pl. 103. Otto Dix, *Card-Playing War Cripples*, 1920Pl. 104. George Gittoes, *Rwanda series*, 1995

Following the mythic reasoning he devised for the grotesque, Harpham analysed the two main currents of the grotesque so as to dismiss them in the end. The argument is a simple one: that Kayser's concept lacks a mythic dimension and that Bakhtin is overtaken by an "open-armed enthusiasm"²⁰⁹. The attention paid to Kayser is brief: because Kayser was repulsed by our world which is demonic and horrifying, he was unable to grasp the regenerating quality of that other world where there is no split between humans, plants, animals and objects. Though Kayser was aware of its existence, he was too pessimistic ever to gain access to the world of unity Harpham identifies with the mythic. Harpham puts Bakhtin at the other pole where there is a total denial of human fear. Harpham's main worry was that Bakhtin empties the individual precisely of her/his human specificity: "Bakhtin's Rabelais not only knows nothing of terror, but also nothing of the private soul that experiences it"²¹⁰. Bakhtin was indeed poignantly opposed to a vision of the grotesque reducible to individuality given that in his view the grotesque represented an idea of a universal whole. But to Harpham this view poses a naïve, Rousseau-ist as he calls it, danger:

Reading Bakhtin, we may be encouraged to feel that by embracing the grotesque we can regain fullness of meaning, purity of being, and natural innocence, lying breast to breast with the cosmos and with our fellow creatures. In short, this is another case of using the

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 70.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 71.

grotesque as the tip of the wedge of liberation or breakthrough. But here the grotesque is actually the small end of alienation, a sign that though dualism may be temporarily abolished, it has invaded the structure of thought itself. The apprehension of the grotesque stands like a flaming sword barring any return to Paradise;²¹¹

By ignoring the alienating component of the grotesque Bakhtin formulated a theory where the grotesque was “ever present, but foreign to his subject”²¹². Myth, on the contrary, Harpham saw pervading all of Bakhtin’s discourse, albeit always in a camouflaged manner. Though Harpham was certainly correct in asserting Bakhtin’s overemphasis on the bright side of the grotesque, Bakhtin repeatedly insisted on the tension between two conflicting forces; the dark side *was* present in Bakhtin’s theory making his fault, according to my own perspective, instead the too-easy transition from darkness to optimism. Moreover, Bakhtin’s insight into the issues of the body and bodily functions were not taken into account by Harpham and they stand as crucial elements in any theory of the grotesque. That was Kayser’s handicap as well: the psychological version of the grotesque which at its root has the fear of the disintegration of the world is necessarily the fear of the disintegration of materiality and the foremost human terror in that area is the destruction of one’s own corporeality. Furthermore, though Harpham wished to distance himself from Bakhtin, his mythic theory owed much to him. It can be argued that Harpham’s use of the cave as the locus where the forces of myth were most strongly exerted was explained according to a Bakhtinian logic. It was in the cave that myth was activated through reconciliation between life and death which Bakhtin synthesised in the metaphor of pregnant death. The cave was the place where the group ate, buried its dead and women gave birth; a fertility whole, a *vagina dentata*, a holy ground made sacred through dirt and defilement. As Harpham says at some stage: “The cave, like myth itself, speaks of the oneness of creation, a condition of undifferentiation out of which we emerge, or into which we collapse”²¹³.



²¹¹ Ibid., 72.

²¹² Loc. cit.

²¹³ Ibid., 65.

Harpham's study thus brought the study of the grotesque from a point where Bakhtin had left it to contemporary moulds where Freud made his inevitable appearance along with more recently notable academics like Mary Douglas. My own intentions are not dissimilar from Harpham's in this respect, given that I try to establish connections with other scholars, particularly Julia Kristeva and René Girard, but I find that departing from a different concept, that of the mythic grotesque, Harpham did not in the end propose anything ground-breaking insofar as, regardless of his acknowledging it or not, he was treading the road long ago trodden by Bakhtin. Harpham's formulation of the mythic grotesque has many points of intersection with Bakhtin's carnivalesque-grotesque and a spirit that assumed its climax with the Saturnalia and developed into medieval feasts but which Bakhtin saw originating precisely in primitive cultures. It is no surprise then that both arrived at a similar conclusion: for Harpham the grotesque has lost its mythic function whereas for Bakhtin it lost its regenerating power. Nevertheless, with its emphasis on corporeality, the Bakhtinian grotesque seems to me more suitable for reading the texts selected for my study as they focus heavily on that topic as probably do many of the texts written, filmed and constructed in recent decades, though Harpham's synthesis of the old and the new has undoubtedly its own merit. The following attempt to distinguish the grotesque is evidence of that, while implicitly invoking Bakhtin:

[T]he grotesque phenomenon eludes all its synonyms by impressing us with a remote sense that in some other system than the one in which we normally operate, some system that is primal, prior, or 'lower,' the incongruous elements may be normative, meaningful, even sacred. Grotesques disturb us with the prospect that the trifling fictions which we feel should not be there at all may in fact be another kind of Word, a tolerant kind in terms of which our Word is but one among many. To see that 'myth' is everywhere (and everywhere in chains) is to recognize the omnipresence of this other system, and the constant potential for the grotesque.²¹⁴

The concern Harpham reveals over language in his approach to the grotesque is a mark of the dislocation of the grotesque to a postmodern lieu where the Lacanian imprint is felt. Not only in the passage above but also on other occasions Harpham addresses the issue. In fact, its importance is quickly deduced as it appears as the concern opening the book where it is put at the centre of the discussion: "grotesques have no consistent properties other than

²¹⁴ Ibid., 69.

their own grotesqueness, and that they do not manifest predictable behaviour. The word designates a condition of being just out of focus, just beyond the reach of language. It accommodates the things left over when the categories of language are exhausted; it is a defense against silence when other words have failed”²¹⁵. Jacques Lacan is never openly mentioned but Harpham did make use of his Logos-based logic. Harpham’s preoccupation with language also makes way for a reading along the lines of Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject, defined as that which repulses while it fascinates, situated beyond language as a residue of a lost Semiotic wholeness.

The influence of Geoffrey Harpham’s view is felt in other studies that will follow such as Alton Kim Robertson’s *The Grotesque Interface: Deformity, Debasement, Dissolution* (1996) as is evident from his introductory chapter. But the impact is also registered on the level of Robertson’s direct linking of the grotesque with the theories of Jacques Lacan. Speaking of caricature and relating it to the grotesque through bodily distortion, Robertson comments: “if one accepts Lacan’s theory that the process of making sense of the world is predicated on the recognition of the body as an organic whole with clearly defined features and functions, it is fairly obvious that the disintegration of the order it represents would raise serious questions about the meaning of the world and how (and even if) it can be understood”²¹⁶. This assertion could, in fact, constitute a good departing point for analysing Angela Carter’s “Wolf-Alice”. More than in *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* as well, Alton Kim Robertson’s conception of Order appears to be infused with Lacanian philosophy: “Order is the father of discipline, of routine, of rank, of rule, of habit, and of obedience. It subtends language and culture, rhyme and Reason. It has the force of an imperious mandate, tolerates no departure, and it is the font of all meaning”²¹⁷. Though Julia Kristeva herself is not mentioned, Robertson is, at least through Lacan, aware of the quality of the grotesque that is at the basis of its combination with the notions of the abject: “The grotesque, then, is the locus of conflict between two contradictory principles. More specifically, it is the process that infects order with its own negation. This conflict, which arises in what I shall call the gap of the grotesque, involves a radical subversion, for it opens the gaping chasm of categorical separation. No alternatives are possible: order or anarchy, but either only in absolute. Their only border is the grotesque”²¹⁸. The ideas of gap, border and separation bear a great deal in

²¹⁵ Ibid., 3-4.

²¹⁶ Alton Kim Robertson, *The Grotesque Interface: Deformity, Debasement, Dissolution*, 119.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 4.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 5.

common with Kristeva's concept of the abject and indeed articulate the same paradox: the abject can be situated in the gap *and* in the negatively theorised Semiotic to which the Symbolic stands as the positive pole associated with Order. Similarly with the grotesque it is, as Robertson claims, a border but also one of the contradictory principles, that is, misrule, chaos, irrationality or deformity in opposition precisely to all the categories that stand for Order²¹⁹.

The subjects of language and the abject will be fully explored in my study and I will contradict Harpham with respect to one of his major points. For him narrative is carried through the grotesque in the constant discord the word creates so that the "only escape from transition, or from devices, is to be sought, impossibly, either before the Word or after the End"²²⁰. But as Kayser well demonstrated the grotesque can also be found after the end as it is transported from other realms, including that of death, to our lives, for instance through visions of the apocalypse. As I will also hopefully demonstrate, Julia Kristeva allows an interpretation of the grotesque with a frightening flavour of its own and that is directly related to the pre-existence of the Word.

Though Bakhtin announced the death of the grotesque, writers and critics, in particular Wolfgang Kayser, have insisted on contradicting him. In this sense it is ironic that critics have used Bakhtin to demonstrate that the grotesque lives on and thrives. Like Harpham, I realise that to try to apply a theory, any theory, would prove disastrous. However, Bakhtin provides the most suitable tools to carry out the literary inquiry which is ultimately my goal. Other approaches will not be neglected however, and frequently they will help me to compensate for the difficulties which grotesque realism cannot surpass. Many strategies will therefore come into play while trying not to contradict myself in the contradiction game of the grotesque.

²¹⁹ The conceptualisation of the grotesque in these two distinct variants should not however be attributed to Robertson. It is in Allon White and Peter Stallybrass's well-known *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* that the issue is analysed in depth. For them in fact, they constitute different models: "In the first model, the grotesque is simply the opposite of the classical – it is the Other to the set of values and forms which make up the classical. In the second model, the grotesque is formed through a process of hybridisation or inmixing of binary opposites, particularly of high and low, such that there is a heterodox merging of elements usually perceived as incompatible, and this latter version of the grotesque unsettles any fixed binaryism". See Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 44.

²²⁰ Geoffrey Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, 121.



Leonard Baskin, *Chimera*, 1966

1. Sacrificing the Animal-Woman



Alfred Kubin, *The Ape*, 1903-1906

1.1. *Woman as Spectacle and Martyr in When Dreams Travel*

Martyrdom will be her oasis in this desert of silence.

Githa Hariharan, *When Dreams Travel*, 128

If this seed is watered, even with blood, it may sprout knowledge and power. Does the child hold the seed or not?

Ibid., 174

1.1.1. *Female grotesqueness: a dialogue with Mary Russo*



Over the years the theories of carnival and the grotesque have excited the attention of scholars who have joined the debate to question the implications for minority groups and women. This chapter charts a possible response to Mary Russo's essay "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory" and to her interrogation concerning the relation of the grotesque, namely the Bakhtinian strand, with the politics of feminism, or, to use her terms, how carnival as historical performance relates to carnival as semiotic performance. The question implied is whether the symbolic (also in the Lacanian sense) constructions of femininity coincide with the experience of women, for the theory of carnival might re-produce perilous presumptions both for women and other border groups. In this sense, the ambivalence of carnival lies in its simultaneous reinforcement and de-authorisation of the prevailing social texture, making its

contribution to “a dynamic model of a new social subjectivity” unclear²²¹. As politically engaged novels, *Shame* and *When Dreams Travel*, both emerging from a South Asian context, defined by Salman Rushdie as a “vast, metamorphic, continent-sized culture that feels, to Indians and visitors alike, like a non-stop assault on the senses, the emotions, the imagination and the spirit”, may help respond to the carnival dilemma for women and for other marginalised groups originating out of the imperialist phenomenon²²².

Russo’s essay provides the starting point for this analysis. Russo’s assertion of the (other) woman making a spectacle out of herself, a reproach verbalised by some maternal figure, has gained widespread popularity within the framework of female grotesqueness. She writes:

For a woman, making a spectacle out of herself had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries: the possessors of large, aging, and dimpled thighs displayed at the public beach, of overly rouged cheeks, of a voice shrill in laughter, or of a sliding bra strap - a loose, dingy bra strap especially - were at once caught out by fate and blameworthy. It was my impression that these women had done something wrong, had stepped, as it were, into the limelight out of turn - too young or too old, too early or too late - and yet anyone, any *woman*, could make a spectacle out of herself if she was not careful.²²³

It is precisely by being centre stage not as an object but as a subject and conscious performer that the shortcomings of carnival can start being overcome. One of those faults is certainly the indifference to gender as a prime constituent of given carnivalesque spectacles, making Bakhtinian theory, despite its worth, in this respect unsatisfactory in Mary Russo’s eyes. Women, as agents of carnival, can subvert the very subversion of the mode, and use their gender and sexual specificity to construct other meanings. The female body thus becomes a text conveying semiotic revolution; it appropriates, manipulates and produces its own constructed meaning, that is, it is in control²²⁴. Mother, in *The Passion of New Eve*, is a character

²²¹ Mary Russo, “Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory”, ed. Teresa de Lauretis, *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1986) 214.

²²² Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West ed., *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997*, intr. Salman Rushdie (London: Vintage, 1997) ix.

²²³ Mary Russo, “Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory”, 213. Italics in the text.

²²⁴ Furthermore, an objection that Lisa Gasbarrone poses to Mary Russo’s reading should also be taken into account and which refers to the reaction at the sight of aging bodies of the hags. Gasbarrone is right in pointing out that one’s reaction of disgust should not be so bluntly transferred to Bakhtin. See Lisa Gasbarrone, “The Locus for the Other: Cixous, Bakhtin, and women’s writing”, ed. Karen Hohne

who embodies both the large and old woman of Russo's account and the Bakhtinian hag laughing. She is the sole star of the spectacle and it consists of the displaying of her gigantic manufactured body. Unlike Russo's women, the loss of boundaries is by no means inadvertent but fully intentional. She delights in her own laughter and in the power of her speech. However, in the end, Carter deprives her of her stage - Beulah - and her public - her "daughters". The reason for this irreversible discrowning is, in my view, related to the fact that Mother does not play her own role but that of a myth, that of motherhood. Regardless of the specificity of the myth it still necessarily comprises a certain degree of abstraction. Thus, she does not possess an individual name. The same can actually be said of most other characters whose individuality is crushed under the weight of symbolism: Eve/lyn, Sophia and Lilith/Leilah for instance. Towards the end of the novel it is asserted they cannot do away with symbolism. They are no more than prisoners of the roles they play which, from the Bakhtinian point of view, represents a fatal deficiency in the assumption of their consciousnesses into subjecthood. With the exception of Eve, who in a typical carnivalesque twist stands as the new queen to Mother's reduction to a fool, all other characters are mere parodic puppets of a myth-making machine. Carter, as occasionally carnival itself, runs the risk of reinforcing that which she/it so eagerly tries to overpower. One of her most well-known priorities is her engagement in the demythologising business and yet Mother is overly a product of myth as well as a myth-maker herself. Carnival efficiency, therefore that of the grotesque, lives through a delicate balance between universalism and individuality or between abstraction and limited symbolic signification. This refers us back to the issue of the positioning of those limits which are necessarily subjective but that remain, nevertheless, crucial to the discussion of the carnivalesque-grotesque and only reasonably justified *vis-à-vis* a specific work of art or performance.

But before I turn to the specific work I selected to investigate those limits, I must also raise the issue of dialogism and of its relation with feminism. Wayne C. Booth explores how dialogism has in its background some ideological premise and that all art is unavoidably ideological in some way, justifying his defence of an "ethical and political criticism" even if

under the accusation of opening the way to censorship²²⁵. Booth reminds us of the ultimately social value of dialogism:

[W]hat I call my “self” is essentially social. Each of us is constituted not as an individual, private, atomic self but as a collective of the many selves we have taken in from birth. We encounter these selves as what he [Bakhtin] calls “languages,” the “voices” spoken by others. Languages are of course made not only of words; they are whole systems of meaning, each language constituting an interrelated set of beliefs or norms. “Language” is often thus for him roughly synonymous with “ideology.” [...] We speak *with* our ideology – our collection of languages, of words-laden-with-values. And the speaking is always thus more or less polyglot – it *is* a collection [...] We are constituted in polyphony.²²⁶

However, women have neither in Bakhtin or Rabelais’s works found a voice, that is, their languages and therefore the ideologies of feminism have been disconsidered. However, if, as Wayne Booth argues, Rabelais did not support women during the *querelle des femmes* which debated women’s subjecthood and rights, such an attitude does not invalidate the fact that his laughter was “a healthy counter-ideology”²²⁷. But on recalling that women are frequently at the centre of that laughter, Booth, in tune with Mary Russo, is made to think of who laughs at women in *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*. The answer is evidently men and men were also the defenders of women in the *querelle*²²⁸. Rabelais, as well as Bakhtin, is in the end caught up in this spiral of paradoxes:

[J]ust as the original *querelle des femmes* was conducted largely by men, accusers and champions, this exoneration of carnival laughter is conducted by and for men, ignoring or playing down the evidence that the book itself largely excludes women. A man of great genius

²²⁵ Wayne C. Booth, “Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism”, ed. Gary Saul Morson, *Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogues on his Work* (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1981) 149.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 151. Italics in the text.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.

²²⁸ Similarly Ruth Ginsburg writes: “The privilege of perceiving the world in its laughing aspect and relaxing from pious seriousness is clearly reserved to men of all stations. [...] Carnival, ritual, and spectacle are the material womb in which women have no place. They only provide the necessary equipment”. Ruth Ginsburg, “The Pregnant Text. Bakhtin’s Ur-Chronotope: The Womb”, ed. David Shepherd, *Bakhtin: Carnival and Other Subjects*, 169.

wrote a book offering a rich imaginative experience to men of sensitive and liberal spirit, and a male critic of great genius wrote a defense of that great book, addressed to other men.²²⁹

Rabelais thus left an imprint of sexism on his work and Bakhtin failed to incorporate women's voices in his dialogical enterprise²³⁰. However, no dialogue is ever complete as it would necessarily mean it was closed as well; this argument in the end constitutes the defence of dialogism for feminists. Though women are silenced in Bakhtin, the same can be said of other ideologies, such as those linked with ethnicity. Moreover, if those ideologies were not incorporated even though they were already part of the history of their times (Rabelais is not, for instance, in the least concerned with religious persecution), the dialogical potential offers/offered the possibility of ideologies which are/were still to be. In other words, though in the historical and academic contexts of their formulation some ideologies were inexistent, dialogism retained the possibility for their voices to be integrated as the very dialogical process of becoming evolved. It is thus justifiable and pertinent to speak of feminist dialogics as well as of postcolonial, ecological or animal rights variants.

1.1.2. Freakishness and the mutilated female body

There is a figure, multiplied in myriad forms, that seems to grow in narrative importance and in wisehearted insurrection in the proliferating world of South Asian literature in English. That upsetting figure is that of Woman. She, or rather, they, to avoid inaccurate generalisations, are often represented in a context of (male) aggressiveness for reasons linked with control of power. Their parts in this struggle are characterised by innocuous submission, corrosive passivity and mimetic behaviour. In *Shame*, Naveed Hyder (Good News) is drawn to suicide and her mother, Bilquis, withdraws from any meaningful existence until she becomes shadowy. Her husband's lover, Pinkie Aurangzeb, commits suicide. Iskander Harappa's

²²⁹ Wayne C. Booth, "Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism", 163. Italics in the text.

²³⁰ That is noticeable particularly in the idea of the grotesque carnival body that, if anything, "is degraded into the 'lower bodily stratum' associated with the feminine, and, in the same breath, is elevated into a principle of universal significance as the Material Body, no longer that of woman". Ruth Ginsburg, "The Pregnant Text. Bakhtin's Ur-Chronotope: The Womb", 167. Poignantly she continues and addresses an issue that is central to my discussion of Robert Coover's *Madonna of the Organs*: "what is originally female – the material of pregnancy – becomes, so to speak, 'de-femalised' in the process of being elevated into the central site of carnival, to become part of a non-female (a-sexual? non-gendered? male?) grotesque (pregnant) body. Moreover, the material-maternal is used and

atrocities put his wife, Rani, to a shameful silence but still she manifests some form of resistance in the shawls she embroiders which illustrate terrible scenes of her husband's doing. Arjumand, their daughter, finds the only way to participate in the game of power is by using - and perpetuating - masculine forms of violence and repression which compensate for the frustration of an unfulfilled incestuous love for her father. Even Sufiya's transformation into a homicidal maniac can be read the same way. But if silence, such as Rani Harappa's, can constitute not an element of forbearance but quite on the contrary be a form of counteraction, it nonetheless is incompatible with the designs of carnival. Once in the public square women have to speak.

The epitome of the speaking and political woman is Shahrzad whose symbolism is appropriated and subverted by Githa Hariharan. Her character is withdrawn from the novel but her mysterious absence is invested with a very dynamic force. Other women can now emerge into the limelight to receive and re-produce their stories. In *When Dreams Travel* Shahrzad becomes a fiction to her sister Dunyazad, Dilshad (the slave), and to the latter's friend, Satyasama: "She is now a myth that must be sought in many places, fleshed in different bodies"²³¹. After the deposition of Shahryar, the virgin killer and Shahrzad's husband, by his son Umar, Dunyazad and Dilshad spend seven days and seven nights telling their own stories, writing "*our* texts of gold", says Dilshad (*WDT*, 107. Italics in the text). But their stories are never definite and each tells the same story over and over again, almost but not quite the same:

Two women and their goading jinn wander through the infinite wilderness of stories. Though their travelling dreams run parallel, destined never quite to run on the same track, there is always that one story hanging over both wherever they go. It is a familiar, ragged story, a porous umbrella of a story that barely shades its heirs and bastards, the narrative fragments it has given birth to. (*WDT*, 115)

In Borgesian fashion, the two women travel re-inventing their lives and bodies and, in the process, mirroring and distorting reality as Shahrzad created it so that the past and the future are re-constructed by the sheer determination of wishes, dreams and the memories of those dreams. Dilshad's obsession is Satyasama. The character is presented in Part I and fully

appropriated by Bakhtin in a gesture analogous to Rabelais's positioning of mothers in his texts: they are used as vehicles, killed as persons, abstracted as principles". Ibid., 168.

²³¹ Githa Hariharan, *When Dreams Travel* (London: Picador, 1999) 25. Cited in the text as *WDT*.

developed in the second half of the novel (corresponding to Dunyazad and Dilshad's tales). From the beginning she is presented in a context of freakishness. She is acquired into Shahryar's harem where women are mute sex acrobats, in sum, "freaks who are only half-women" (*WDT*, 90). But Hariharan's female characters do have power and, in fact, it lies in speech and dream: they are talking, dreaming women, says the narrator. The dichotomy of silence and sexual subservience versus speech and dream pervades the novel and is put forward in the ambiguity of women's bodies, namely Satyasama's. Even her name is double: Satya (truth) and Sama (sky). In fact, Satyasama had become known for her almost naïve commitment to truthfulness; Satyasama was born in Eternal City where her parents lived. Soon, though, impelled by feelings of shame, fear and almost obligation, they abandon their child. Her face had become disgustingly furry and acquired a strange simian likeness. Estranged from a family and social group she gains the reputation of a fool: she does things not permitted to any other girl, for instance, running about and climbing up trees. Renamed Monkey-Face by the uncaring population, she dedicates herself to exploring every single tree in the city until she chooses as her home an old peepal. From its top she studies the city and the sky (thus her name) as if to embrace its thorough meaning, a meaning no one else seems to pay attention to. One night, engaged as usual in moon-gazing, her peepal is struck by lightning. No more will the wise men sit under it but Monkey-Face is determined not to leave her home. The event also marks another change in the girl's body and self. As a result, her right eye is blinded. Moreover she develops a reasoning and a set of values different from those of the city:

Her fur was entirely ungroomed on the right side. Her rump was a matted mess of flattened hair and a torn tuft or two. More important, she suspected it didn't matter. In her bones she felt her beauty had nothing to do with fur or face. All she knew was that it was the moon-gazing, the tree she had chosen which lightning would then choose, and the subsequent one-eyedness which had something to do with it. (*WDT*, 139)

She is now a totally alienated being, both physically and intellectually. It is at this point, when the narrator appropriately acknowledges her adulthood (her location and role in a social and spatial sphere), that she takes to singing. At first only the monkeys feel attracted to the spectacle and participate in it: they sit listening to her voice, dance about and collect the money incurious passers-by would leave. Some appreciated the simplicity of her singing;

others regarded her as a monkey-woman heading a public freak show. Still others chose to hear a subversive undertone to the songs. The city, itself fractured and doubled, harboured the *eastwallas* and the *westwallas*, divided in their worshipping respectfully of the rising sun and the setting sun²³². But there were those that believed she was suggesting something utterly unthinkable: that they were one and the same. Ever since a casual encounter with a mysterious rani Satyasama's left eye had gained magical powers and she was able to watch the city no longer from a left-sided viewpoint but as a "huge circular wonder with a million strands and textures and grand designs" (*WDT*, 143). Thenceforth her double vision clasps the city as a whole and the content of her songs is changed. Intimidated, the Departments of Shame, Fear and Loneliness are called to step in.

Satyasama comprehends two intimately related aspects: that of woman as a freak, specifically a beastly personification, and that of woman as poet and entertainer. She embodies the Aristotelian approach that viewed freaks as *lusus naturae* who, by being jokes of nature, were turned into degraded beings fit for providing amusement either in a side show or in the private homes of the affluent. Satyasama comes to know both; at the top of the broken peepal she sings to those whose faces resemble hers and that, paradoxically, seem to be more humanly sensible to her singing than the Eternals. Their impression of her rises to no more than the condescending emotion so well known to freaks throughout the ages: "All the world loves a simple fool, especially a performing simple fool" (*WDT*, 142). Nevertheless, Satyasama never comes to exhibit her body or to be viewed as a frightful hairy beast as if such a beastly appearance struck the Eternals as a mere oddity, not enough to ostracise her into a show business opportunity. On the contrary, it is within opulent walls that her freakishness gains full meaning and comes to be associated with her womanness: she is bought by Shahryar and taken to the freaks' wing of his harem. In both cases, the dichotomy freakishness/performance is not broken. In fact, her being seems only to be alive as long as she acts out some sort of spectacle, for when she is deprived of her public performances and

²³² This conflict brings to mind the war between the Guppees and the Chupwallas in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and the senseless battle between that which belongs together: "Gup" means "gossip" and "nonsense" - referring us to speech - and "Chupwalla" can be translated into "quiet fellow" - referencing us to silence. The confrontation of light and darkness is a pervading theme as well, the former associated with Gup City and the latter with the Land of Chup. There is also some similitude in the tone adopted: the voice of a storyteller apparently telling an innocent story in an easy-going manner which, on the contrary, relates to a serious political message; *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* was written in the aftermath of the *fatwa* and dedicated to Salman Rushdie's son Zafar from whom he was forced to be separated, constructed thus as a story for children. Satyasama's story, in its turn, is a powerful tale of female resistance.

of the sultan's attention (whose interest in her foretelling visions gradually fades away) she slowly withers - her fur falls out - and dies. Thus within the context of *When Dreams Travel* woman as a freak operates exactly contrarily to the principles Mary Russo formulates for "normal" women. For the freak, the condition of freakishness represents home and anima; for the non-freak it carries a sense of indignity. Satyasama was deprived of her final possibility of performing when the eunuch she falls in love with, and who inspires her poetically as nothing or anyone before, is executed. She becomes a silenced woman and extinguished spectacle. It is not, however, the sort of silence Leslie Fiedler refers to in *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, expressed in distant and bored eyes that refuse to look back at those looking at them. In this case, freaks' unmasked hostility is a result of the gaze that peels their outer cover, the awe that envelops them, to reveal their banal reality²³³. Nor is it the silence the freaks seem to have imposed on themselves, leaving us "with no satisfactory clue to what it is like to be a performer of one's own anomalous and inescapable fate"²³⁴. Satyasama's silence is that of someone from whom the power of speech was removed (Fiedler's assumption is that they never had it). Furthermore, that sort of denuding revelation never takes place as Satyasama is not, at any moment, dispossessed of an aura of immateriality, of magical realism even (some said her mother was a jinni).

In the chapter Fiedler dedicates to the eros of ugliness he writes:

All freaks are perceived to one degree or another as erotic. Indeed, abnormality arouses in some 'normal' beholders a temptation to go beyond looking to *knowing* in the full carnal sense the ultimate other. That desire is itself felt as freaky, however, since it implies not only a longing for degradation but a dream of breeching the last taboo against miscegenation.²³⁵

In this sense, Satyasama's attractiveness both for the sultan and for the eunuch is invested with a sexual undertone which remains underdeveloped in the novel as the author seems to be more interested in concentrating on her role in the lives of the other three women, only one of whom she has actually met. Even so, there is a clear suggestion of lesbian love in the encounter with the unnamed rani who the reader never even gets to have a glimpse of. In the unique dialogical style that is the storyteller's the author writes:

²³³ See Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*. See page 283.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 273.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 137. Italics in the text.

Her [Satyasama's] restlessness melted away as the rani took her hand as if she had been waiting for her.

At this point of my story, I usually hear a voice or two hiss from the wings: 'Wait a minute! What does this derelict rani look like? Come on, describe this queen of yours!'

Sorry: our heroine may have only one eye, and she may be a performing monkey, but a stubborn secretiveness cloaks her like a tight-fitting coat of fur. (*WDT*, 142-3)

Noticeably, the freak shuts the door to any prying eyes. Satyasama thus might be read as a double freak: a corporeal one and a social or cultural one, by adopting a non-traditional sexual orientation combining an irretrievable freakishness with a willed one. Moreover, desire in relation to a freak leads to degradation, perhaps not regenerative as a Bakhtinian approach would have it, and more probably directed at abject satisfaction in polluting oneself with the freak body. Miscegenation, the ultimate abject desire, represents the realisation of the communion of the subject with that part of her/himself that threatens her/his selfhood within a recognisable system of values.

Satyasama's furriness contributes to the construction of the image of an animal-woman, thus to her debasing objectification which permits sexual slavery and the murder of numerous virgins before Shahrzad finally wins the sultan over. Another reading points to the sexual maturity that is represented in the appearance of pubic hair. When that is extended to the rest of the body it suggests sexual difference whose allure is described above by Fiedler. Bearded Ladies have represented the sort of sexual ambiguity that was (is?) so attractive to many audiences and particularly to men. Perhaps the most famous of all was Julia Pastrana, also known as "The Ugliest Woman in the World". Like Satyasama she was covered with hair all over her body. She was married to her manager who after her death had her mummified and married a second bearded woman, Marie Bartels, renamed Lenora Pastrana²³⁶. Even if he

²³⁶ Jan Bondeson in *A Cabinet of Medical Curiosities* affirms this second wife was renamed Zenora. There are, in fact, several incongruities between the two scholars' expositions, the most serious one being the gender of Julia Pastrana's child. I am inclined to favour Bondeson for he presents more detailed information, including a 1970s photograph of the mummies of mother and child as well as a reproduction of a 1890s German advertisement where it is clearly stated "Julia Pastrana mit ihrem Sohne". Further disagreements refer to personal views or to lack of definite evidence. Fiedler, for instance, portrays Theodore Lent as a kind husband and reproduces (though not openly supporting) the myth that Julia Pastrana died of a broken heart when she saw her child suffered from the same condition (today identified as congenital hypertrichosis lanuginosa). On the contrary, Bondeson is openly critical of Julia Pastrana's husband whom he calls "macabre" (231) and "abominable" (232) seeking every means to obtain commercial profit while the mother's broken heart, in the version he

died quite insane, that seems irrelevant in view of the fact that most bearded women succeeded in marrying and having children, thus retaining a sexual value. That was the case with Rosine Margaret Müller, Clementine Delait, Annie Jones, Joséphine Boisdechêne, Grace Gilbert and Lady Olga.

Julia Pastrana's hirsutism justifies the frequent simian comparisons ranging from poems (Arthur Munby), references in novels (*A Terrible Temptation* by Charles Reade), "evidence" for American racists of miscegenation between an ape and a black person (based on diagnoses made as early as 1854 by Alexander B. Mott, M.D.²³⁷) as well as numerous slogans to draw spectators to her shows. In 1857 she was known as Baboon Lady and during World War II her mummy was widely exhibited as the Apewoman. Though Bearwoman and Nondescript (an epithet vaguely referring to strange exotic animals) have at times been used, it is as Monkey-woman that she comes down to us in history as her facial deformities did bear simian resemblances. It is curious to notice that her medical condition is so rare (only one other case is reported, that of Krao, renamed the Missing Link, exhibited during the late nineteenth century) that her ugliness seemed so irresistible that she - or at least her mummy - was advertised as "The Most Interesting Woman in the World", attracting millions of people, a success matching that that she had while still living.

The reading of Satyasama as a freak within the framework of *When Dreams Travel* represents, in itself, a subversive approach to physical monstrosity, for, as the case of Julia Pastrana proves, the visibility of freaks is such that it annuls the natural complexities of human ontology. Unlike Julia Pastrana, veiled and a prisoner to herself, Satyasama is free to a degree even other Eternals are not; she is culturally and socially dissociated on the one hand by lacking the attention of the people to whom, in a magical realist way, she is no more than a

provides, was caused by the emotional trauma of the death of her offspring though the real causes were complications during childbirth. The two versions surrounding the circumstances of Julia Pastrana's death agree with the scholars' general positioning towards the Pastrana phenomenon. Fiedler tends to demythologise freaks ascribing them "normal" reactions such as being horrified by the birth of a freak child. Bondeson, on the other hand, though extensively supported by factual evidence and careful research, manifestly pities "poor Julia" (234), remorselessly exploited by every businessperson or wealthy voyeur she happened to meet. Her teenage years, for instance, were spent at Pedro Sanchez's household where the governor of the state of Sinaloa kept her as an object of scientific study. See Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, "Beauty and the Beast: the Eros of Ugliness" and Jan Bondeson, *A Cabinet of Medical Curiosities* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1997). See particularly "The Strange Story of Julia Pastrana".

²³⁷ Based on Linnaeus's (1707-1778) differentiation of races, of which Homo Ferus is one, theories came about disapproving miscegenation on the "evidence" the black person was the product of intercourse between a white European and a simian. Thus, what was socially highly disapproved of found support in science.

hideous banality, and on the other by self-alienation; Satyasama is obsessed with looking at something no one else seems to be aware of. Insofar as freaks remain contained within the realm of otherness they pose no problem for the system. Performances themselves aim to assure the distance. Bondeson, for instance, comments that Julia Pastrana was a “model freak, a house-trained monster who behaved well in front of the audience”²³⁸. Her singing, dancing and acrobatic tricks diminished and helplessly trapped her in her role of performing monkey. Satyasama’s singing, however, contrary to the Eternals’ opinion, does not deface her as a performing fool but quite on the contrary, it is a part of her political engagement. In a carnivalistic twist, she becomes more than just a mere *lusus natura* but rather combines her entertaining aspect with a serious one, eventually seen as dangerous since she refused to accept its exclusive seasonal character, that is, she refused to stop singing. Thus, her transformation into a grotesque being was not something immanent but rather a social reaction, which imposed the attribute of grotesqueness on her, and was simply triggered by fear. The nature of the fear is change, regardless of its representing the possibility of peace, for in the Eternals’ view a strange body can bring with it nothing but frightful otherness. Again, Hariharan manipulates the historical experience of freaks which have been invariably invested with horror. During the German tour of the late 1850s Julia Pastrana’s public exhibition faced great opposition as it was feared, even among the medical community, that the sight of her would cause miscarriages or would bring about multiple births of hirsute babies by reason of an “impression”, the superstitious belief reported in all major cultures that pregnant women who stared at a given object, arousing their longing or frightening them, would produce infants somehow marked by the impression. Thus, it comes as no surprise, given the fear that she aroused, that in 1921 Julia Pastrana’s embalmed body and that of her son’s were bought for a chamber of horrors in a Norwegian fairground. While Julia Pastrana was always a freak-grotesque character, Satyasama, owing to Githa Hariharan’s intention to emphasise grotesqueness as a social phenomenon, only becomes so at some stage and as part of a process devised as a communal opinion and later as a result of the cruel and direct intervention of that community. It suggests that the true nature of the grotesque, in a non-Bakhtinian interpretation, lies not in the bodies they are attached to but in the producers of the ideas of grotesqueness or grotesque subject/object.

Part of that process is rendering the freak infantile. Satyasama on arriving at the palace is presented thus:

²³⁸ Jan Bondeson, *A Cabinet of Medical Curiosities*, 221.

Once a slave-buyer brought a rare and entertaining catch to the palace. The woman was obviously a foreigner. She knew so little Shahabadi that her answers to the sultan's questions were *laughably childish*. (*WDT*, 91. Italics added)

As a slave she enjoys the status of a rare animal but she is also referred to as “woman” as if any or all women were somehow represented in that particular one. Shahryar “has not only collected women, but gems, arches, kingdoms, calligraphers, stallions, automatons, wise words and many other curiosities” (*WDT*, 153). Satyasama, as a woman in his collection, is an avatar of Shahryar's idea of Woman, of all women in their turn freakified when referred to as “curiosities”, one of the most popular epithets for the freak in the side show. It points to the denial of individuality the sultan refuses to all women. In his mind, all the women are alike, that is, morally feeble, as the memory of the sinful dead queen whispers in Shahryar's ear: “We are all like this, we women” (*WDT*, 216). As such, her foreignness is that of all women who remain outside the symbolic order insofar as within that system they never become sign producers but constructions of the male word. In this sense, women come to be associated with children: powerless and hopefully obedient to the Father. This stereotyped view is clearly challenged by women in *When Dreams Travel* and by Satyasama in particular who, by being a poet and living up to her name, challenges the exclusive male right to speech. Records of the experience with feral children, as Fiedler calls them, demonstrate the difficulty of the animal-children to be at home with what can ultimately be identified as the parameters of the symbolic. Fiedler seems to find that, at best, they will be impersonators:

Indeed, they have trouble learning to imitate even the most ordinary human behavior. Speech especially baffles them; but it is also hard to teach them to wear clothes or walk upright or even to smile, laugh or recognize their own images in a mirror.²³⁹

Satyasama, at the same time that she embodies all the measures of freakishness, definitely surpasses them. Shahrzad is infatuated with the mirror, able to stretch, enlarge or distort, in a constant misplacing of the truth, but Satyasama is indifferent to it. She is never portrayed smiling or laughing and indeed walking upright is discarded in favour of sitting on tree branches. However, the most important issue is that of speech which does baffle the

²³⁹ Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, 157.

sultan's court which is unable to realise it is not Satyasama who is alien to their language, *it is they who are alien to hers*. Indeed, it had been the alienation of her speech and the fear arising out of the lack of understanding that speech that resulted in her being sentenced by the Eternal court of justice to death by hanging, which she survived only owing to the kindness of the executioner but not without permanently damaging her throat and *voice*. Satyasama's invisibility as a freak is allied to her elusive existence even as a mere character; she sways through the novel *in other people's speech* like a "restless ghost" (*WDT*, 145). Freakishness and immateriality contribute to make Satyasama a mythical figure who possesses Dilshad just as the legendary Shahrzad possesses her sister's imagination. Therefore, when Part II places four women in Dilshad's bedroom, two of them are imagined but nevertheless real and who, by sheer storytelling are themselves possessed, re-defined and (de)mythologised. In my view, that is the real inheritance Satyasama leaves Dilshad in the kiss given on her death-bed, symbolised in the furry mark it leaves and that attracts Dunyazad: the shifting power of speech. This interpretation is supported by the scene where Dilshad, before telling Shahryar a tale, one of Satyasama's in fact, caresses that mark and confesses she received from the poet a magical gift.

Deconstruction of myths assumes the form of reconstruction. Though it aims to demythologise, *When Dreams Travel* nevertheless depends on several myths, the most relevant one to refer to here being the achievements of Hanuman, the monkey god, who is the only character to make an appearance in the two great epics, Ramayana and Mahabharatha. The similar monkey bodies aim to draw attention to more subtle common elements between Sri Hanuman and Satyasama. He embodied the most desirable characteristics in a person: he was both strong and intelligent, and was always true to the highest moral standards. Like Satyasama herself, he had an intimate relation with the arts, especially with music and the word. Moreover, the sky is particularly important to them.

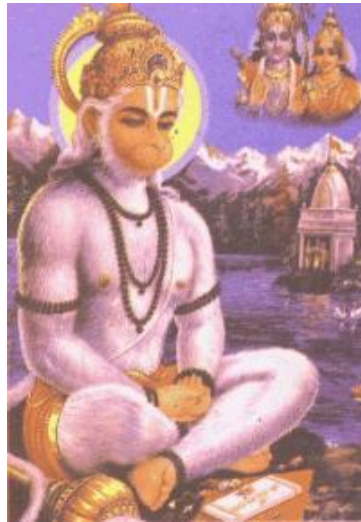
Saint Tulsidas describes Hanuman as being golden-coloured, with exquisite curly hair and shiny earrings. His mother had been an apsara, an angel, who was cursed to live on earth as a female monkey known as Anjara. For slaying the demon Sambasadan, the monkey hero Veerakesari was given a reward by the saints whose Asram had been attacked; Anjana, who had also been assaulted by Sambasadan, was that reward. The couple remained childless for a long time in spite of Anjana's Tapasya, or austerities in the hope that Lord Śiva would grant her a boon, that the god himself be born to her and that her curse be lifted. Emperor Dashrath's three wives had no children either. Following the instructions of his priest-advisor Vashishta, the emperor agreed to perform a yagam to please the gods. Dashrath performed

the pooja and a bowl of payasa, or of rice pudding, was left in place of the fire. Each of the wives ate a part and eventually conceived but at the bottom there remained a piece. At that moment a bird snatched the bowl and headed to the forest. Suddenly a strong wind blew and the bowl fell right in Anjana's hands as she meditated. Having no doubt it had been a gift from Lord Śiva, Anjana ate it. Thus Anjana became the mother of Sri Hanuman, an incarnation of the god Śiva. Since the event was assisted by the wind, the wind god Pavan became his godfather.

Hanuman's name is related to an episode that takes place immediately following his birth. He was terribly hungry and, mistaking the sun for a fruit, he leapt towards it intending to eat it. He was stopped by Indra's thunderbolt which broke the baby's chin and, in fact, in Sanskrit, "hanu" means chin. Hanuman turned from a mischievous reckless child into a highly educated one due to careful ministrations by the sun god Surya. The *sky* became his home as he was forced to follow his master on his runs. His evolution was not only physical, in order to be able to accompany Surya, but also intellectual and ethical.

He is reportedly the strongest, most intelligent and skilled being ever to have lived, the ideal human in the body of a monkey. With the assistance of other gods and goddesses he learned to fly, to master all martial arts, philosophy and *music* which he learned from the goddess Saraswati. His feats were numerous and incredible but his most noteworthy accomplishment is that that seals his fate with Lord Rama, after which Hanuman becomes the god's closest friend. It deals with the rescue of Sita Devi, Sri Rama's beloved, who had been seized by the demon Ravana. The Sundara Kanda (Sundara was the name Kesari and Anjana had given to him) the fifth canto in the Ramayana, describes that plight and makes the great difficulty of the achievements coincide with Hanuman's exceptional qualities. Hanuman is associated with sense and mind control and with his actions he proves that a high nature always wins over lower behaviours. His civil manners and elegant use of language, often poetic even, succeeds in impressing Sri Rama who appears to him in disguise. His courtesy is used with friends and enemies alike and he respected the codes of warfare scrupulously. His obedience to Sri Rama was absolute, his faith in him unshakeable, his courage unlimited. Hanuman is regarded a master strategist in war, planning and studying carefully his actions, but also an exceptional diplomat. The descriptions referring to his behaviour in battle are vivid so that he can be seen as a terribly powerful warrior, the embodiment of strength and physical value. But his sensitivity to the arts is also extraordinary. In order to sing praise to his lord Sri Rama, Hanuman becomes a skilled musician and student of music. He is able to discuss *ragas*

and many other traditional musical forms. In the Ramayana he is also said to be a Sanskrit Grammarian, a learned linguist and a scholar capable of quoting scriptural law to Ravana in an effort to convince him to release Sita Devi. Though the mace is considered his principal weapon, Hanuman also fights with a sword, a rope, the *ankusam* (goad), the trisul (trident), and even his fist. He killed the demon Dhrumraksha with a mountain and destroyed the chariot and eight horses of Akshakumara with a tree, the same weapon he used to slay the demon Akambanan.



Pl. 105. Hanuman, contemporary religious figure

By making connections with Hanuman, a reference drawn from Hindu mythology, the novel lends his traits of exceptional value in the arts and ethics to Satyasama. Satyasama's mythic potential and magical gifts contribute paradoxically to her being a sacrificeable victim. As I will argue later on, the victim cannot be just anyone. Freakishness, which may or may not be revealed in magical abilities but that always rests on exceptionality, stands as a usual parameter of a sacrificial event which, when allied to her being a woman, make Satyasama a probable choice for ritual sacrifice.

If the text uses the idea of woman as child it deconstructs it by presenting that of woman as poet whose words are prophetic. Instigated by the sultan to recite one of her poems, Satyasama stands "silent, stupid and hairy" and rushes to the window to look at the sky, mouth hanging open (*WDT*, 91). But even as she acts as an odd retarded child she foresees the tales of Part II:

‘Fire - flames in a palace mean fire. There are swords unsheathed, meat is being carried away. Three women and a palace, then a monkey and donkey marry.’ Her words made no sense to her listeners. But there was an eerie sense of remoteness in her eyes, as if they were travelling to different places and times though she stood there safely trapped. Her manner was portentous; she was in the throes of a fit; and when her words filled the room, they immediately took on the shape and weight of an oracle. (*WDT*, 92)²⁴⁰

In accordance with ancient beliefs that regarded the births of the freaks as favourable or ill omens as well as the individuals themselves as beings of magical and prophetic powers, Satyasama silences the room with her words. It is her in-betweenness marked by her animalesque figure and inexplicable abilities, by existing somehow somewhere else, that prompts Dilshad’s tale of the nine jewels, a eulogy of resistance and a story of contempt for cruel ignorance. It begins with the end:

Once, in the land called Eternal City, a one-eyed monkey-woman was chopped, limb by limb, till all that was left of her was a misshapen trunk. This thing of matted fur and blood refused to die. It lay in the shade of the treetop that had been its home, moaning eerily at passers-by. Once in a while, a compassionate inhabitant of the land would stop and consider the thing: what act of mercy would heal and revive it? Or let it die at last into a blessed silence? (*WDT*, 134)

The portrayal is that of an utterly grotesque being, the *constructed* grotesque remains of a body, dismembered beyond repair. Moreover, her ambiguous identity, perhaps better described as ambivalent, is now, by reason of a social inability to incorporate that very ambivalence, converted into a misshapen pulp. This externally originated metamorphosis is inevitably reflected in the way people assimilate her in their own language. It is said:

²⁴⁰ The reference to meat refers the reader to the tale of Rupavati’s breasts and of the Shahrzad-goat sacrificed by her father and eaten by a gigantic voracious god representative of Shahryar’s rapacious urge for murder of his virgin brides. The monkey and the donkey make their appearance in “The Well-Constructed Lie” tale, each presenting a different version of the story of the minar reaching for the sky. They reappear in “The Dreams of Good Women” where is told the story of the rival villages of the monkeys and the donkeys. The storytelling female monkey is seduced by the donkey prince whose people wish to steal their neighbours’ food and though she eventually tells him the secret of her tales and he learns to sing them, he loses the gift and is reduced to braying. This is, in fact, the story Dilshad tells the sultan.

We have seen that very few in the city considered Satyasama a woman. It was not just her gender that was in danger of being lost. Living high up on the city's fringes, she was also liable to have her name suddenly taken away from her; to be given another in its place; lose that in turn. (*WDT*, 140)

Closed out of any participation in the changes she is submitted to, symbolised in the marginal place she makes her home, her name is appropriated and altered at will: Satyasama, then Monkey-Face and later One-eyed Monkey-Face. But it is only when she starts singing and contesting openly, the deed that establishes Satyasama as an individual inserted in a given world, that the decline begins. As a reaction to a non-authorized action, she is reduced to One-eyed monkey-woman. Not only are capitals withdrawn but she is also considered as a sexualised being albeit strictly as an avatar of the reprobate woman whose figure is constantly presented, through the view of men's morals, battling against the chaste woman. Therefore, gaining and losing a gendriified self is always equivalent to downgrading. Finally, she is divested of any name; she is a bleeding monster, no more than a thing. Yet, despite these radical manoeuvres, intended to deprive her of her body and identity, she obstinately stays alive and with her moaning, the only language she can now have access to, continues to perform some sort of resistance. Notice that it is not the case she happens not to die but rather that she refuses to. It seems that, in fact, it is at this point that she reaches the peak of the awesomeness of the freak not because of her unnatural non-dying condition but because of what underlies it, its motivation which the moaning only contributes to perpetuate. As she hangs from the tree all sorts of women, children and men come to molest the "thing", hitting "it" with sticks, kicking "it", and spitting at "it" to demonstrate their reprobation of "its" very existence and their fury at not understanding "it", as if by moaning louder "it" became more accessible. The grotesqueness of the body is a sign of its sublimation through martyrdom (another theme neither Dilshad nor Dunyazad are able to discard) which contrasts categorically with the grotesqueness, a moral one, that these families (which do not stand for tenderness, love or understanding) adapt for themselves. The metaphor that is found to justify the Eternals' anomalous behaviour is that of the heatwave making "their grotesque, sunstroke brains [work] away on a crusade to spread madness" and that ended up in the creation of the Department of Shame, Fear and Loneliness and eventually in Satyasama's mutilation (*WDT*, 145). It is purposefully constructed as a feeble metaphor to reveal the unreasonable grounds for violence. In fact, it is as if Satyasama-the-thing is transformed into the essence of life itself:

The thing twitched like a truncated lizard's tail. Sweat streamed down its bruised breasts, changed course at its navel, and dripped to the ground from its hips, or the stumps where its legs should have begun. It did not stop moaning. No matter what they did, it kept to the same volume; the same pitch; and it remained *a stranger to silence*. As they heard the moan go on and on, a few Eternals mumbled that they had never heard anything so steady and rhythmic before - except *the breathing of a living thing*. [...]

The thing that used to be a one-eyed monkey-woman lay there - whether they came and went, whether it was day or night. The woman, or what was left of her, moaned. (*WDT*, 135-6. Italics added)

The possibility of physical regeneration being unattainable, the arguably compassionate onlooker must come to terms with the defeat of silence. The first time Satyasama was arrested, before her “unreasonable refusal” to stop singing, she was locked away in a stifling underground cell (*WDT*, 147). A year later, when she emerged, she had become a subterranean creature: her eye had become misty and her fur was covered in fungus. The experience seems only to have strengthened her resolve for if her physical degradation was well under way, the earth nourished Satyasama's spirit. Since only “complete silence would earn her the right to be a free citizen of Eternal City” she does away with that final and merely nominal tie (*WDT*, 148). As soon as she is released, at the bewitching hour of midnight when in the city it was neither day nor night, she gave her most ardent concert and draws the attention of the authorities who hack down the peepal, making it a vision of her own fall:

They hacked at the tree so that she had to clamber down before it was all gone. Then first they chopped her limbs: one, two, three, four. Next the left eye, the blind and gifted one, was gouged out; then the right, so that blindness would be perfect and complete. The tongue, that word-dripping treacherous tongue, was pulled out and thrown into a purifying fire. It seemed a pity to leave the head. After all that was the ultimate traitor, the ringleader who had thought and imagined all those lying fantasies into existence. So off went One-Eye's head. (*WDT*, 149)

The goriness and dispassionate tone of the description do not contribute to Satyasama's grotesqueness but solely to the abjectification of the aggressors. On the contrary, the body parts removed are like gems and the trunk, where the ninth gem remained, lingered

on through Dilshad, whose name means “happy heart”. For the Eternals that went to pick up the chopped parts only as they were already rotting, the moaning of the trunk made them “wish they were deaf, or that they could go into exile somewhere to hide their fear and self-loathing” (*WDT*, 149), but, in a more generative perspective, the thing was “the unrelenting moaning voice of the city” (*WDT*, 149) and thus, the relationship with Shahrzad comes full circle for her name means nothing else but “born of the city”. However, these voices of the body of the city may succumb; Dilshad’s closing tale guesses (for this is “only” a tale) that Shahrzad is after all just a forgotten madwoman in an attic somewhere and Satyasama will remain alive only as long as her chosen neophyte persists in the mission of performing resistance. A mad old crone (at one point the rani was said to be one) lets Dilshad into the secret of the survival of the mutilated:

‘She will resist succumbing to the relief of silence, its escape from pain and hatred, as long as that moan continues. As long as it is there, that ninth and last little jewel of life, Satyasama will still be alive. But only just, I think, only just’. (*WDT*, 149)

In the passage two aspects stand out which bridge grotesque and feminist theory, a combined context that needs to be more closely looked into. I refer, on the one hand, to the construction of femininity within the parameters of sacrifice and, on the other, to the relation women establish with language and to the extent it can delineate a politics of resistance. In the end, the two views can be said to argue for the same purpose or cause.

It is suggested that the insistence on self-authorising action is put forward for women only through martyrdom. Furthermore, this action is extremely fragile. Martyrdom is the distinctly axiomatic theme both of *The Thousand and One Nights* and *When Dreams Travel*: Shahrzad is the virgin and martyr whose body is sexually presented in appeasement but every night it runs the risk of being trespassed if her tongue is not able to produce stories that stimulate the sultan’s curiosity. From the start, the preservation of the woman’s physical integrity is dependent on the realities her discourse produces. But what or *whose* language is used? Shahrzad and Satyasama typify two antagonistic approaches to the matter. The former operates within a male framework of linguistic signs and symbolic representations. The poet, in her turn, is set to build a reformist female language unintelligible to men, which is to say to the standard, socially acceptable language of patriarchy and the Law of the symbolic. As such her language is *patronisingly* dismissed by the male Word. Satyasama’s proposition is

consistent with that of the radical feminists of the Anglo-American trend who assume reality to be a product of a process of linguistic determinism, that is, that humans' perception of the world, their own thoughts, are determined, thus constrained, by language. Thereby language becomes a means of control as it is assumed that men regulate it and imprint their own perception which is to say they build a reality for men and women alike but contemplating their own experience exclusively. Confronted with the absence of an authentic non-misogynistic language, women have to use a language unsuitable to describe their experience and that misrepresents their thought. In the process, women themselves are used by the language that reinforces the state of patriarchy. Hence, Satyasama's poems are inscrutable to the male court including to the author of "the edifying treatise" *A Guide to Slave Buying*, whose words withhold the cold artificiality of scientific prescriptivism (*WDT*, 92). Hariharan intentionally constructs a deeply misogynistic discourse, reminiscent of early treaties on teratology, in order to expose both the means by which control is conveyed in language and its inadequacy from a woman's point of view. The learned adviser speaks out of Satyasama:

'The Hindu jawari are faithful and tender, but unfortunately they tend to die young. Now this one - her eyes are not deep-set, so she can't be an envious sort. She doesn't blink too often either, so that's malice taken care of. Her hair is thick and wiry; obviously has courage. And though she sounds mad, I think I can clear that doubt - the black part in her eyes is not larger than the white, so there's nothing to worry about.' (*WDT*, 92)

Therefore, the very body of the novel - as Shahrzad's stories and Satyasama's poems - works as a distorting mirror that reflects back the very reflection men put forward. In other words, it offers an ironic and clearly deconstructivist comment on the discursive constructions reiterated by male power. Men and women of the Eternal community then give voice to a male perception of Satyasama by defining her grotesque and Hariharan, in her turn, denounces the grotesqueness of linguistic determinism precisely by means of a written text. The radical feminist approach reads language as a mechanism of control and its followers "believe that the deterministic powers of language may be exploited, and routinely are exploited, by the privileged groups who control language for political ends"²⁴¹. However, it seems that in this case the dominant/muted theory of Shirley and Edwin Ardener presents a more relevant model of discussion than that of the American linguists Sapir and Whorf,

²⁴¹ Deborah Cameron, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (Hampshire and London: Macmillan, 1985) 100.

foreparents of the determinist theory and according to whom peoples have different views of the world by reason of linguistic differences. The Ardeners, though admitting the existence of some degree of control, conceived it as limited as far as women are indeed capable of producing a reality of their own but are forced to resort to a process of translation since they are unable to realise it linguistically. In the words of Deborah Cameron:

The basic premise of the dominant/muted model is that while every group in a society generates its own ideas about reality at a deep level, not all of these can find expression at a surface level because the ‘mode of specification’ or communicative channel is under the control of the dominant group. In the case of men and women, women are in this relatively less articulate position: they are, in the words of the Ardeners, a ‘muted group’ whose reality does not get represented.²⁴²

What I would like to suggest is that Satyasama’s “usual mute self” engages in transgression insofar as she finds an alternative communicative channel which allows her own language to be realised in speech and also in physical otherness (*WDT*, 92). That is the profound meaning of the beauty that had nothing to do with fur or face; it is the emergence of a politically transformative language. It is important to establish that the theory of the Ardeners considers thought not conditioned by language in full measure. Cheris Kramarae follows the 1970s dominant/muted model and in her book *Women and Men Speaking* (1981) elaborates three pieces of possible evidence to sustain the Ardeners’ model, all of which are registered in *When Dreams Travel*. They refer to women’s unskilful handling of public speech deriving from the usage of a male language (understood in the novel not as the poet’s unskilfulness in handling language in public but in making language understandable), to women’s broader linguistic abilities since they are aware of the two levels of language whereas men can only “speak” the dominant one and finally, this lack of understanding on the part of the male community generates feelings of dissatisfaction that push women toward the formulation of alternatives. The problem Cameron sagaciously sees in the dominant/muted theory is that, among others, it does not explain why muted groups can produce distinct forms of reality but are unable to come out with a mode of specification suitable to express them. Cameron’s answer moves away from a mere linguistic issue to that of relations of power and the narrative of *When Dreams Travel* goes in that sense as well; the root of the problem is not

²⁴² Ibid., 103.

that women are linguistically unable but rather that the expression in their own terms is “socially unproductive and politically inexpedient”²⁴³.

Cameron’s presumption is fictionally realised in Satyasama who was very literally made a mute (her tongue was thrown into a “purifying fire”, the idea of purity clearly pointing to the moral pollution that represents a woman’s language and to the absolutism of the male word). Therefore, mutilation and the lack of understanding of the language she produced did make her discourse socially unproductive and her ultimate death definitely politically inexpedient. Nonetheless, the very narrative of *When Dreams Travel* indicates that is not wholly true given that it embodies Satyasama, Dunyazad and Dilshad’s re-constructions of the male-oriented tales told, as they had been, in a woman’s voice, that of Shahrzad. Whereas Satyasama, the “muted poet” (*WDT*, 115) aims to evoke a distinctly female language, misapprehended by any group but by a few reactionary women, Shahrzad’s use of language is wholly successful in the necessary translation to make it “understandable”. Moreover, it appears to be far more efficient, both in social and political terms, as it is through them that Shahrzad saves herself and the few remaining virgins of Shahabad, putting an end to the age of terror and allowing the country to find a necessary economic stability.

However, a reading that goes beyond the traditional fairy tale view presented needs to come to terms with two issues. First, that at the bottom of the question lies a sexual problem that arises through a role-switch which enhances the deeply misogynistic construction of the story. Second, to question whether in terms of effectiveness and precision the linguistic standpoints of the two female storytellers are indeed that different. With respect to the first issue both brothers, but particularly Shahryar, are symbolically castrated by the infidelity of their wives. Their belief in women’s “untrustworthy desire” is but a male’s utter inability to handle women’s sexuality (*WDT*, 13). The recurrent figure of the novel is the nymphomaniac, embodied by the gigantic jinni’s wife who collected rings as sexual trophies, and by the bride shrunk to the size of an ant living inside her husband’s stomach, the brahmin. It is the defilement the two brothers feel they have been subjected to, by being treated as sexual objects, by being treated *like women*, that will condition the rest of their lives: Shahryar seeks purification in virgins’ blood and Shahzaman’s suicide, that is, his own blood, is the only thing able to recover the ring kept in the purse belonging to “the collector of skin, flesh, lovers and their tokens” before whom he felt “naked and unprotected” (*WDT*, 193)²⁴⁴. The issue is

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁴⁴ Note that Freud considered a woman’s purse as a symbol of her vagina.

clearly that of power, therefore of control, that is made diffuse. If women can use and do not submit to being used (symbolised in her *wanting* to be mounted by Shahzaman and in her mounting Shahryar during intercourse), then men are liable to both equations as well. In other words, the rule of the phallus is contested by the *femme castrative*, a figure in open opposition to Lacanian psychoanalytical theory.

Evolving from Freud's doctrine, Lacan postulates two stages in the formation of a child's identity: the first, the Imaginary, is characterised by a complete communion with the mother and her body who/which the child does not recognise as an Other. Then occurs a split via the introduction of the phallus (understood not literally - that would be the penis - but as an object of the mind). During the Oedipus complex stage, still in its Imaginary phase, the child develops sexual urges for its mother along with feelings of jealousy towards the father. But the situation is resolved when the child (always assumed male) becomes aware of his phallus and fears his father will castrate him. The castration complex, as it is called, allows the child to differentiate himself from the mother and assume his role, like his father, of the holder of the Law symbolised in the phallus. Females, on the other hand, are left with the realisation that they have no phallus, thus that they are already castrated, giving way to the so-called penis-envy complex which can only be overcome by bearing children. The transition from the Imaginary to the symbolic order is thus marked by the phallus conjecture which introduces the notions of difference and absence alongside those of control and power.

Following these premises it is concluded that language is acquired when the child, confronted with lack, is able to understand that language works on the same reasoning: words are an absence that stand for some reality that the child craves; through language that desire can be expressed and eventually fulfilled. The question some feminists ask themselves and that justifies the appearance of the castrating female in this discussion is why children (assuming they do) come to the conclusion that the male child is the possessor of something the female lacks, that is, why difference is assigned to women and why that difference is regarded as a lack.

Deborah Cameron maintains that Jacques Lacan's "theory of language and sexual identity offers no explanation *why* the symbolic order is patriarchal. It can deal with matters of sexual differentiation, but it cannot deal directly with sexual power"²⁴⁵. The *femme castrative* aims to posit the existence not only of a female language but to assert its own powerfulness. Thus, it is able to escape the power of definition that is inherent to men's controlling the set of

meanings that rise up to a given view of the world. In a male composition, to use Lacan's famous postulation, women are excluded from the world of words and thus from the nature of things. Therefore, by being unable to articulate their experience through male language women fall into silence or are forced to assimilate the very male reality that alienates them. But silence, echoing Fiedler's words in relation to freaks, is a non-verbalised presence.

Dale Spender, in *Man Made Language* (1980) relies on both the premises of silence and alienation in her model that is at one time deterministic and Lacanian. While language is assumed to be the means through which we make sense of reality, it is not, nevertheless, constructed by the individual; s/he simply enters a social structure of patriarchal imprint - in Lacanian terms, the symbolic order - and by doing so a contribution is being made to reinforce it. That seems to be the meaning of Hariharan's words: "He [Shahryar] is willing himself, this king with the lion's appetite, to *see* her words, flesh them out; draw strength from them once he has confirmed their trustworthiness" (*WDT*, 6. Italics in the text).

In the man-made language theory, Cameron concludes, "every single meaning is literally man-made, and, inevitably then, words encode a male point of view which is often at odds with female experience. This is the source of alienation and silence; in a man-made language you either see things through male eyes or you reject existing words, silencing yourself"²⁴⁶. Male language, following misogynistic politics of difference and dominance, conveys the idea of masculine superiority at the same time as it assigns negatively any mark of femaleness²⁴⁷. Some positive views of exclusive feminine attributes become necessary to guarantee the system. Nevertheless, as it amounts only to a strategic manoeuvre it is questionable whether those patterns do not convey negative impressions at a deep level. The most idiosyncratic example is perhaps that of motherhood. In the generally accepted system of meanings motherhood is associated with notions of love, tenderness and emotional satisfaction. It rejects the physical discomfort and pain, the biological processes involved, namely those referring to blood, urine and excrement, to the tearing of flesh and the smell,

²⁴⁵ Deborah Cameron, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*, 124. Italics in the text.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁴⁷ When delineating these linguistic theories most of the problems they might involve were overlooked except when there was obvious relevance. For instance, the deterministic models do not explain satisfactorily how control over meaning is actually exerted by men, why muted structures exist at all since it is assumed there is no encoding language, why the male dominant does not efface them altogether or whether language can really achieve the necessary degree of fixity any deterministic model requires. It is also built on a highly controversial assumption: the existence of a Woman's essence opposed to a Man's essence. One must also take into account that, among other problems, the

and to the often irretrievable marks it leaves on women's bodies. More significant yet is motherhood understood not just as an act of giving birth. If women are not likely to comment in public that excrement was involved in the birth of the supposedly most important being in a woman's life, it is even less likely they will affirm that motherhood was not the most blissful event in their lives. Afraid not just of what others might think of them but especially of how they see themselves (abnormal, grotesque) they retreat into silence; the alternative is alienation by an order and a language that do not contemplate the notion of ill-fated motherhood.

It is clear then that the triad language-power-sexuality must be taken into account. It has been said that Satyasama's language, a feminist alternative, was not successful in terms of communication and that it triggered the poet's demise. On the other hand, Shahrzad, using male language, achieved salvation for herself, her husband and her country. This approach points to Satyasama's alienation and enforced silence and to the queen's glorification. The second aspect then that I find that has to be considered is that the novel goes on narrating after the "happy ever after" moment and that instead of depicting happiness it tells of Shahrzad's progressive departing from her position of powerful storyteller, ruled out by the very one-sided discourse she re-produces. After all, for *The Thousand and One Nights*, she was no different from any sex slave, Satyasama included. Though she submitted voluntarily it was still repeated rape; the reason for this lies in the idea, again conveyed through male-oriented language and as ingrained as that of motherhood, of female sacrifice.

Responsible for finding a solution to the king's problem that was devastating the country, the wazir thinks he has found "a promising pupil" in his own home (*WDT*, 51): "He has trained and nurtured her till she has crossed over to firm ground, exiled herself from the shifting, unreliable sea of a feminine enclosure" (*WDT*, 51). The carefully chosen verbs "trained" and "nurtured" indicate to what extent it is a man's doing, a father's doing in fact, her exile from her own femininity (its unreliability stands for female sexual urges) and her commitment to the mission of salvation so that when the time comes she instantly answers: "I must go. Nothing can change that, I know" (*WDT*, 51)²⁴⁸. Already as children, Shahrzad and Dunyazad played a game called The Martyr's Walk, a game described as "useful entertainment", useful, the reader is led to believe, insofar as it trains the girls into martyrdom (*WDT*, 52). The deed itself will be realised on their bridal nights and is, consequently, closely

semiologic approach of the Lacanian School is vulnerable to critiques of phallogentrism as it unfolds a biological principle to be at the basis of gender definition and sexual identity.

²⁴⁸ Elsewhere it is said: "Shahrzad's face was ready, already prepared, when the wazir interviewed her in his room" (*WDT*, 68).

related to the loss of virginity. The text puts forward the girls beholding a metaphor for their sexual (dis)satisfaction; they see a sky lit up in red slits, as if they were knife-wounds. The gash, representing the female genitalia, is “a slim bracelet of pink and vermilion beads” and the “hint of blood in the darkness” is the proof of their sexual initiation (*WDT*, 52). The rules of the game itself are quite simple: they have to act out the walk to the place of execution but those girls whose loss of virginity has been publicly acknowledged are barred from participating. The Walk provides the sort of emotional adventure that otherwise they will never be able to experience:

[I]t is always a man who waits for them and he has something sharp in his hand, something that draws blood. Otherwise where is the terror and the excitement and the hard-won martyrdom? (*WDT*, 53)

Here the sharp object clearly stands for the phallus, the instrument of a patriarchal order able to abuse and mutilate women into silence, and for the actual penis, suggesting a violation of rights and a rape. This assumption is again put forward when the jinni’s wife instigates Shahzaman to have intercourse with her. She says “Where is your sword, you eunuch?” (*WDT*, 193). But it should not be assumed that martyrdom might allow the fulfilment of some death wish as it is said Shahrzad is “passionate but less willing to die [than Dunyazad]” (*WDT*, 53). On the contrary, the passion is that of someone who desperately wants to live to the fullest. The vision of her martyrdom makes it explicit:

[H]er sweat reeks of fear and excitement. She walks in measured steps though she has never been naked in public before. Her executioner appraised her with interest. Their eyes meet. He thinks he can vanquish her with a simple dagger. [...] She looks at him steadily - at the man who will be her *lover and tormentor*. Her hands move to her breasts as if gesturing at an offering. The sun is in his eyes but he can see through the glare a little hoard of sparking red jewels. Her daring, her tenacity, her *love of power and danger*, and most of all, *her greed for life*. (*WDT*, 54. Italics added)

The symbol for a woman’s attributes is concentrated in the reference to jewels. One of them is the eagerness for power exerted in the public sphere and thus not the traditional jewel to be looked at, privately appreciated, possessed and hidden away. In a way analogous to Arjumand in *Shame*, Shahrzad secures power using the male tools she has at hand and it is that

same urge on the part of someone who has always been a spectator in all major events that arouses feelings of jealousy in Dunyazad. She had wanted to be the chosen martyr but her father rejected her, and night after night she will watch the couple immersed in storytelling and sex. It is only with her sister's presumed death as well as her husband's that she finally rises to first place by becoming Shahryar's lover.

Shahzad's role as a queen eventually becomes vital so that after the king's redemption she becomes Wise Shahzad, the defender of the people. However, it is by becoming politically important that she becomes a threat to her husband:

Shahzad had got used to being on-stage. Though there is a sultan she must please, the omniscient narrator hovering over all scenarios and lives is herself. Her body too is now familiar with soaring, with grand scenes in which passion, danger and excitement can be flaunted. The rest of her waking life, large chunks of background scenes, are mere links and joints. In these moments submerged in darkness, she realizes how alone she or any martyr is. She then sees everything from her powerless perspective, a body spreadeagled, the mind glowing dully like the embers of the kitchen fire put out for the night. (*WDT*, 127)

The perspective is of Shahzad who sees herself as the puppeteer and others as her puppets, clearly violating the limits between reality and fiction. Her dream life has taken over and her actual life will have its revenge; the lonely, forgotten Shahzad that closes the novel is already presented. Though she realises martyrdom is a condition both of (imagined) power and powerlessness she cannot do without performing it, including on the night she gives birth:

'Where are you going,' Shahzad asks, though she knows of course, why else has Dunyazad come here dressed in those ridiculous clothes that don't suit her? Dunyazad will take her place. Her enigmatic sister knows how to wait, poised like a feline hunter stalking her prey. (*WDT*, 129)

Even her sister becomes a rival though her depiction as a calculating hunter, a sanguine feline, does not in any instance match Dunyazad's actual character. Her performing clothes make Shahzad grand but others are, in her eyes, utterly unsuitable for them. Martyrdom is a spectacle Shahzad desires only for herself.

1.1.3. Female sacrifice, the discourse of resistance and Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection

The epitome in Western culture of the female martyr is the Virgin Mary whose figurative value can, at some crucial points, be compared with the character of Shahrzad in *When Dreams Travel*²⁴⁹. If Mary can be considered the re-presentation of pagan mother goddesses, namely of the Judeo-Greek tradition, it also definitely stands for the virginity through which a daughter guarantees the father's power²⁵⁰. Indeed, Shahrzad's earliest denomination was the Virgin and it was by her father's hand and her virginity that she was able to approach power but she will not be able to secure it. Accordingly, Mary's virginity annulled any relation with death, just as Eve's Fall has brought down on humanity its mortal condition. Thus Mary does not die, she rises up to the Heavens. It is also Mary who comes to represent the divine power on earth: she is regally dressed and embellished with jewels. This tendency is further institutionalised when Mary's image is gradually combined with that of a feudal lady. Her power is officially established when she is declared Queen by Pius XII (1954) and Mater Ecclesiae (1964). Julia Kristeva, in her 1977 article "Stabat Mater" is deeply concerned with these issues of virginity, martyrdom and motherhood. The essayist writes of the merging of Marian and courtly traditions:

[B]y the exclusion of all other women, both were embodiments of an absolute authority that was all the more attractive because it seemed not to be subject to the severity of the father. This feminine power must have been experienced as power denied, all the more pleasant to seize because it was both archaic and secondary, an ersatz yet not less authoritarian form of the real power in the family and the city, a cunning double of the explicit phallic power.²⁵¹

²⁴⁹ This analysis will be restricted, as far as possible, to the figure of the Virgin Mary. Variations would imply complex accounts beyond the scope of this study. Among them are the Mother of God that defines Mary through Christ or God and Our Lady, a religious representation that being grounded on the medieval noble lady poses issues related with earthly love.

²⁵⁰ As is well known, in the original Hebraic text Mary is referred to as an unmarried girl but in the Greek translation the word for virgin was favoured. Though it certainly illustrates the patriarchal manipulation of language, I consider the error unessential to my point since it was a mandatory requirement of the honourable single woman to be a virgin.

²⁵¹ Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater", ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard UP, 1985) 106-107.

Therefore both Mary and Shahrzad seize power, royal power, with the kind of determinacy that *excludes other women*. Furthermore Shahrzad, as Kristeva suggests in relation to Mary and the court lady, dreams of power existing independent from phallographic control. What I find meaningful in Kristeva's words is that, in spite of the authority attributed, it remains not the real one. Moreover, it evolves according to a philosophy of carnival: it is a double allowed to exist for a given period of time. It remains an Other in terms of potency and time. For Mary, humanisation took place in the form of suffering. The devoted mother is codified in the Mater Dolorosa figures, bringing Mary closer to the maternal pains experienced by women. When the reward is eternity "the devotion, *or even the sacrifice*, of motherhood, is but a ridiculous small price to pay"²⁵². The very split of Kristeva's text represents sacrifice: of the virgin, of the mother and her pains and even the separation that inevitably draws her away from her son when abjection is installed. Therefore, an "actual woman worthy of the feminine ideal embodied in inaccessible perfection by the Virgin could not be anything other than a nun or a *martyr*"²⁵³. Considering Shahrzad, I can only understand masochism as the pleasure drawn from anticipating the seizure of powerful domination over both men and women. Sacrifice becomes just a means to a given goal. It does not exclude, however, a certain degree of paranoia. Mary aspires to being made queen of Heaven and the Mother of Church, to eluding death and to ruling over all humanity, setting aside even other women; Shahrzad craves to be crowned queen of Shahabad, believes her stories will allow her to live forever and shuns every other human being, including her sister and her father. But if Mary is made a means to deal with that very same paranoia²⁵⁴, Shahrzad is unable to do so. Eventually she is crushed by her own ambition and all the sacrifices performed are simply ruled out by a still overpowering force that she helped to nurture through her stories.

Shahrzad became addicted to martyrdom because as such she could guarantee the sole role as a public performer (Mary, on the contrary, was relegated to a lesser condition by her son). An example of the *spectacular* role of sacrifice articulated through the death of the artist is

²⁵² Ibid., 108. Italics added.

²⁵³ Ibid., 115. Italics added.

²⁵⁴ Kristeva writes: "Striking a shrewd balance between concessions to and constraints upon female paranoia, the representation of virgin motherhood seems to have crowned society's efforts to reconcile survivals of matrilinearity and the unconscious needs of primary narcissism on the one hand with, on the other hand, the imperatives of the nascent exchange economy and, before long, of accelerated production, which required the addition of the superego and relied on the father's symbolic authority". Loc. cit.

encapsulated in the three visions of the wazir. In the first, Shahrzad's father imagines himself in a pool of blood:

He dips his face in the water, then shakes the reviving moisture out of his hair and eyes. He feels something, a piece of flotsam, cleave itself to his newly slaked tongue. He spits but it remains stubbornly in place. The taste of stale vinegar fills his mouth. He opens it, peels the tiny strip off his tongue and examines it. It seems to be a piece of shrunken dead skin; [...] He has just looked about himself, and seen the pool for what it is - a wardrobe of exclusively female discards. A whole population of dismembered bodily parts, pickled in a viscous fluid, are floating around the wazir; a long snake-haired, purple-throated head, a hairless thigh, a lone breast with a hideously engorged nipple. All of female Shahabad seems to be represented in this hellish oasis. He feels the pain of every severed head, every slit throat, every torn, shrivelling limb. (*WDT*, 171)

Martyrdom is imaginatively embodied in a grotesque vision of exaggeration, dismemberment and violence; even the mouth, the most potentially grotesque element after the genitals (with the possible exception of the anus), plays its part. However a Bakhtinian interpretation seems insufficient as it does not acknowledge that gender contributes to this scenario of grotesqueness and that a non-somatic abjectifying component is equally preponderant. With the publication in 1980 of *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* by Julia Kristeva these two aspects come to be intimately associated. The book, translated two years later as *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, has established itself as a fundamental reference in sociological, cultural and psychoanalytical studies with special relevance to the fields of women's studies and feminist criticism. The introduction of the notion of the abject allows the discussion of the grotesque within a gender-concerned philosophy and thus presents a complementary standpoint when confronted with passages such as the above. The book opens with an attempt at a definition of that which is "neither subject nor object"²⁵⁵:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It is there, quite close, but it cannot be

²⁵⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982) 1. Further references will be indicated parenthetically with the abbreviation *PH*.

assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. (*PH*, 1)

The abject causes meaning to collapse resulting in the absolute necessity to exclude it radically. Though jettisoned, it lies close and “from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master” (*PH*, 2). Threatening to extract the “I” from its knowable borders towards the unknown non-self, causing feelings of uncanniness, the abject is “radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A ‘something’ that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me” (*PH*, 2). But the abject always hovers over the subject for in the constant re-demarcation of limits and by its exclusion the “I” positions itself in the symbolic. The hallucinatory vision of the wazir, though it is a manifestation of a *repressed* content of the unconscious (that of guilt), is situated beyond that level of interpretation to that of the abject. What is intolerable and unthinkable, causing the dark revolt, is not just the active participation in genocide (and possible filicide); it is also a vision clearly sexually denoted: the viscosity of sexual undertones, the floating thigh, and the engorged nipple that the reader knows to be the result of the sultan’s lasciviousness (but how was the wazir to know unless he too was a spectator at his daughter’s sexual activities?). The father, by providing his child for the older man’s bed, a man probably as old as himself, plays a part in their sexual performance. This reasoning lends sexual innuendoes to the image of the pool of women which justifies the suggestion that it manifests possible incestuous undertones and it is the prohibition of incest by the symbolic conjunction that is at the basis of abjection itself.

Abjection as preservation of something “primal”, relates to an archaic time prior to the brutal separation from the Other’s body, specifically the maternal body. Kristeva argues that “I” breaks from the mother only through the acquisition of language that confers autonomy: “When I speak of symbolic order I shall imply the dependence and articulation of the speaking subject in the order of language [...] [as] the only concrete universality that defines the speaking being [is] the signifying process” (*PH*, 67. Italics in the text). Hence, before proceeding to mimetic attitudes which allow the subject to become, “I” must break with the mother that becomes abject, “something *horrible to see* at the impossible doors of the invisible - the mother’s body” (*PH*, 155. Italics in the text). In order to enter the realm of the symbolic (related with the phallic power of the father), the pre-subject struggles violently with the mother and her polluted body of excremental and menstrual wastes:

Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death. Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger of issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference. (*PH*, 71)

To Kristeva, pollution takes place in the relation the body establishes with the outside through its corporeal orifices. All unclean material can be incorporated within the two categories of excrement and menstruation. Springing from the Bakhtinian grotesque body theory, Kristeva goes further by gendriying it (perhaps in the sense Mary Russo suggested in “Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory”): “those *two* defilements stem from the *maternal* and/or the feminine, of which the maternal is the real support” (*PH*, 71. Italics in the text). It seems evident how menstruation relates to sexual differentiation but with excremental defilement it is not so straightforward. Kristeva argues that the association is made through the maternal authority felt most intensely during sphincter training²⁵⁶. This training is executed with prohibitions which map the body, its orifices, surfaces and hollows, always guided by the archaic/maternal authority that indicates what is proper and clean and that which is not. Kristeva calls it primal mapping of the body or semiotic for it constitutes the precondition of language (it is grounded on meaning) although different from the symbolic one: “Maternal authority is the trustee of that mapping of the self’s clean and proper body; it is distinguished from paternal laws within which, with the phallic phase and acquisition of language, the destiny of man will take shape” (*PH*, 72). In sum, the maternal body becomes the *chora*, the receptacle for drives escaping the prohibition assigned to the mother’s body and where the primal repression lies: “before being *like*, ‘I’ am not but do *separate, reject, ab-ject*” (*PH*, 13. Italics in the text). When the voice of the father calls her, Shahrzad is unhesitant about submitting to sacrifice in the Name of the Father, that is, her response to his call implies not just a change in spatial terms but also the transition to the patriarchal level of significance:

²⁵⁶ Kristeva does not discuss the possibility of sphincter training to be carried out by the father or another male figure which would evidently affect her points. It would be quite interesting to follow this line of thought having in mind a novel that justifies that discussion, but that is not the case of *When Dreams Travel*.

To go to the wazir's room, where books, plans, men and their seductive powers awaited her, she had *to cross the invisible line that edged her mother's wing*. Behind this shoreline lay a sea of predictable movement, bodies swelling and going flaccid, bodies dripping blood or milk, bodies coming together in sticky embrace, bodies heaving and pushing to come apart. Shahrzad had to leave behind this monotonous, *womanish sea, this watery womb, and put her foot on land*. (*WDT*, 68. Italics added)

Therefore, when the woman acts in accordance with the male Word²⁵⁷ and finds her place in the symbolic order, she is confronted with sacrifice not just of her body, an instrument to a cause, but also in the sense of loss of her mother (as happens with men) and of her potentially motherly self contained in any form of femininity. On the one hand, and as far as we know, her children are a secondary matter in Shahrzad's life, focused as she is on fighting to stay on top in order to enjoy men's seductive powers, but on the other, in her old age she sees her nurses as ungrateful daughters, unable to recognise the warrior in her as well as the legacy she thinks she has left them. Moreover, her stories, that she sees as her "illegitimate children" (*WDT*, 274; notice both the tenderness and the infringement suggested), are the ones who she imagines beating their fists against her door because she, now an old woman, has forgotten them.

Shahrzad made the cross (suggesting a dangerous voyage) from her mother's wing (thus of the motherly domain) to *his* room, her father's room, and it will be him who will give her the power to speak. The invisible line is that of abjection:

We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it - on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. (*PH*, 9)

Being something beyond the barrier, that which threatens with extinction, the object is something the "I" can never separate from. If the "I" desires and constructs meaning, the

²⁵⁷ This Word is symbolised in the books and plans that attract Shahrzad and that, being written, is clearly in opposition to the female language which not only is not referred to as Word but is usually considered as oral expression. Just to take this novel as an example it is possible to contrast the book on slave buying art and the oral productions of Satyasama and Shahrzad. Being written, *materialised*, gives a political advantage to men's language and traditionally implies a certain fragility, deriving from being ephemeral, on the part of women's language. This view has started to be surpassed not only with respect to women's re-valuing but also in the context of postcolonial studies where the repressed oral

abject also finds its place in meaninglessness. Permanently tempted by abjection, to which the subject returns in moments of *jouissance*, the “I” repels it due to fear of annihilation, making the abject identifiable with the “demoniacal potential of the feminine” (*PH*, 65). Thus, abjection is necessarily ambiguous. Though rejecting any sort of feminine potential for goodness, as is assumed in the male-oriented world of the wazir, he still makes an abject digression back to the womb: *the pool of dead women is the same watery womb* he had left when he set foot on land²⁵⁸. Women are described exclusively through their bodily processes and functions: swelling, probably because of pregnancy; aging therefore becoming flaccid. Other elements are associated both with motherhood and abjection: blood (menstruation) and milk (breast-feeding). Food loathing, in extreme cases expressed through nausea and vomiting, might represent a border, that Kristeva illustrates with her reaction towards milk cream:

Along with sight-clouding dizziness, *nausea* makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. ‘I’ want none of that element, sign of their desire; ‘I’ do not want to listen, ‘I’ do not assimilate it, ‘I’ expel it. But since the food is not an ‘other’ for ‘me’, who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*. (*PH*, 3. Italics in the text)

And in terms very close to Bakhtin’s she adds: “‘I’ am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which ‘I’ become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit” (*PH*, 3). Developed from Mary Douglas’s concepts of purity and defilement, Kristevan abjection is drawn from the categories of the unclean and the improper such as blood, vomit, excrement and filth. The most abject waste is the corpse, so that if the body separates itself from filthy items in order to continue on living,

expression of the colonised peoples by the imperialist foreign language is now recognised to be fundamental in the cultural fabric of those societies.

²⁵⁸ The passage being considered here is still that of page 68 and that recuperates another also already mentioned referring to the wazir training Shahrzad until she had “crossed over to firm ground, exiled herself from the shifting unreliable sea of a feminine enclosure” (*WDT*, 51). Notice the colonialist undertone associated with the action of conquering land. There is also a connotation of stability and reliability in relation to land and one of fluctuating or vacillating movement associated with water. This idea is supported by physical otherness (Satyasama’s animalesque/mutilated body) and decaying change (Shahrzad’s aging) accompanied by the change in the names. Satyasama is referred to as a “shape-shifting, name-shifting woman” (*WDT*, 115): as a child we do not know her name and it is as Satyasama that she is first presented. She then becomes Monkey-Face, One-eyed Monkey-Face, One-eyed monkey-woman, and, at the end, simply the thing. A similar process takes place in relation to Shahrzad: the virgin, Wise and finally Witch.

the cadaver is the state when the body has already fallen over the limit. It follows that the pool of pieces of women in the wazir's mind suggests the ultimate abject fulfilment:

The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; [...] [R]efuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit - *cadere*, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached everything. (*PH*, 3. Italics in the text)

The corpses awoken in the wazir remembered feelings of love and tenderness but they emerge blended with others of revolt and disgust and, consequently, they are sharply fought against. The pool is utterly abject in as much as in its surface the remainders of the most precious devotion, but the remainders nevertheless:

He is brutal in his haste to push and clear a way for himself out of the pool. His hands claw at a hyacinth-face, minus eyes and nose, floating towards him; his legs thrash at slimy tendrils that wrap themselves lovingly around him. [...] [H]e seems [...] to recognize some of the mutilated spoils. A breast, a stomach, a pear-shaped buttock, greet him with familiarity as if he has met them before on their rightful flesh-and-blood owners. (*WDT*, 171-2)

The spoils he recognises (notice they are described almost as if erotically provocative) are of his own daughter and as he escapes the gory pool he absently grabs a hand that he recognises to be Shahrzad's. He strokes it with his cheeks and kisses it, full of fatherly love, but then throws it back into the pool and walks away, without even turning back, aware its abjectedness would destroy him: "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. *It is something rejected from which one does not part* [...]. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us" (*PH*, 4. Italics added). Kristeva's reference to God and science indicates that it is the corpse's being outside the realm of the accepted symbolic, clean and disciplined, that makes it abject which is to say Shahrzad did not succeed after all. Though we are never told of the actual fate

of the storyteller - she might have been put to death by the sultan or just locked away - her imaginary floating corpse undoubtedly lets us know she fails. Either the woman invests in a communicative alternative of her own like Satyasama and is subsequently silenced or alienated, or tries to deconstruct male language in her favour from the inside like Shahrzad and is made a martyr or imprisoned. Either way, it seems the outcome does not differ substantially. However, it seems significant that Satyasama does leave a legacy to Dilshad, one of love and of speech (recall that when Dunyazad finally is given the chance to surpass Shahrzad, that is, is given the turn to tell a story, she is unable to produce it and confers the honour on Dilshad who reinvents Shahrzad herself): “as long as a slavegirl carries her kiss around like a tattoo on her face, the poet’s soul - Satyasama’s hardy beast of a soul - will manage to stay alive” (*WDT*, 94). Shahrzad, on the other hand, is seen by her “daughters”, no more than cold-hearted guardians, as a witch; wise, but a witch nevertheless.

Shahrzad had lived in the shadows of having been a maker of realities, the most powerful storyteller of all, but in the end, she is transported to the realities of her own stories:

She bent her back and built the skeleton of enduring bones, the framework. Others stretched their canvas in her frame. They colonized her body, her skilfully planned design, to paint in their sticky colours and words, their own moral themes. (WDT, 274. Italics in the text)

Her body has become her stories and these, like any fleshy body, can be possessed by others. In the past this colonisation has been made by men but now it is carried out by women too. The image of the woman’s body being written by the Word of the Father has been used by other artists and, for instance, by Peter Greenaway in the 1997 film *The Pillow Book*. Every year, on her birthday, Nagiko’s father, a writer and a calligrapher, would paint her face with the words of Creation. And as he tells the myth that God gave life by signing his name on the piece of human clay he was happy with, *Nagiko’s father would sign her back in the name of God*. The scene articulates both the idea of man creating woman, more specifically that of the Father creating the symbolic self of the daughter, and of man standing for God. As a woman, Nagiko starts a quest for the perfect lover who would need necessarily to be an excellent calligrapher (like her father). She demands from her lovers that they write on her body so that she can evaluate their sexual potential by analysing their handwriting. The sensuous relationship with her father is thus further nourished. It is only when she inverts the parts and becomes the writer that she develops a profoundly inspiring relationship with a man, an English

translator²⁵⁹. She no longer mimes inculcated expressions of love; the woman's voice beneath it, Sei Shonagon's, is liberated and, in the face of tragedy, Nagiko literally makes Jerome's body the paper for her writing. Snatched away from the abjection of death, the man's body is made a book of erotic poetry by the hand of a woman writer. It is not just that the gender of the colonised and the coloniser are subverted. The film escapes this deadlock of abuse since it is the editor that unburies and literalises the man into a book. Nagiko considers it a sacrilege for which, as well as for her father's demise, she demands his death.

In *When Dreams Travel*, the hand that the wazir catches in the pool of corpses is the hand missing on the virgin of the old man's second vision. Like this, Shahrzad cannot write and thus she will remain excluded from the male world of power and books. Both the approaches that Shahrzad and Satyasama represent seem to dictate women's lack of authority over language, therefore, over the construction of their own identities. However, this assertion contradicts our experience of the world; women, more or less frequently, more or less articulately, do organise forms of linguistic and political resistance. The two basic arguments Deborah Cameron presents to support the integrational approach to language she stands for are that there is always a certain degree of variation in meaning for all speakers evolving from variations in time, space and social structure and that language, being a creative process, is in perpetual change. Thus it necessarily carries a certain degree of indeterminacy that makes it a space for multiple meanings. The integrationalist approach rejects linguistic determinism on the grounds that language is but one part of a larger social system; male control over meaning is impossible to realise since meaning largely depends on indeterminacy and on creative reconstruction. To suggest one is socialised into patriarchy is quite different from having a misogynous experience of it; finally, still deriving from a sense of flexibility, it does not make sense to suggest that language cannot serve women's experience, which is not the same as to claim that women do not feel alienated by the *usage* that is made of language. The reason why language is patriarchally dominated is the same as that which justifies male hegemony in non-

²⁵⁹ Though Jerome's (Ewan McGregor) intervention is material in Nagiko's (Vivian Wu) change of attitude I do not consider his maleness or even his Englishness as indicators of a patriarchal-Eurocentric liberating force. This demystification is revealed in a comment made by Jerome's own mother, a presumptuous aristocratic lady, who affirms that he had always wanted to be a foreigner. In fact, he too falls a victim to Nagiko's autonomy as a writer and to her rigid need to revenge her father. In the end, he is transformed, by *her* pen on *his* body, into a beautiful work of art and love. He becomes the Book of the Lover, the sixth chapter of Nagiko's version of Nagiko Sei Shonagon's pillow book, a medieval court lady known for her wisdom on the matters of the flesh *and* of literature (notice they share the same name). After Jerome's death, he is exhumed by his former male lover who cleans and cuts his skin into a perfect book.

linguistic fields: those who are politically and economically privileged control social institutions. In the words of Cameron:

Language, the human faculty and communication channel, may belong to everyone; because of the crucial part it plays in human cognition and development, it cannot be appropriated. But *the* language, the institution, the apparatus of ritual, value judgement and so on, does not belong to everyone equally. It can be controlled by a small elite.²⁶⁰

When Dreams Travel re-constructs women's treatment in a patriarchal environment (either by men, other women and even themselves). In order to do so the novel uses metaphors such as the monkey-woman and, some would add, a female language. Therefore, even if the integrationalist approach seems theoretically the most plausible one, in no way does it invalidate the points that were made when resorting to other discourses. Furthermore, *When Dreams Travel*, in accordance with Cameron's view, clearly stresses that the issues of women's language, identity problems and status denial are conditioned in terms of (lack of) power²⁶¹. Thus, regarding women's silence and alienation, the points made are valid regardless of male bias denounced being conveyed *in* language or *through* language.

1.1.4. Myth and the politics of sacrifice

In the final part of my analysis I will complete my considerations on the grotesque in the specific context of femininity arguing that the politics of sacrifice, achieved through abjecting strategies, assumes a particular form already observable in primitive rites. I will emphasise those myths that through death enable regeneration, therefore, that are grotesque in character. What becomes gradually visible is that the process of transition of rebirth is accomplished quite often through a sacrifice. Moreover, the sacrifice tends to take the form of dismemberment. The realisation of the existence of a link between grotesque dismemberment and ritual sacrifice takes the study to the next chapter and to the work of René Girard.

²⁶⁰ Deborah Cameron, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*, 145. Italics in the text.

²⁶¹ The integrationalist approach is not without its imprecisions either. Deborah Cameron does not refer, for instance, to how economic and political power was taken over by men in the first place or how it is a generalised phenomenon in most every society in the world. I do not mean to imply this approach is hers and, in fact, she goes back to Roy Harris's studies, for instance, to support her view on the language myth.

The extreme violence of both Satyasama and Shahrzad's deaths relive the Hellenistic myth of Iphigenia who is sacrificed by her own father. When the Greek armada prepares to sail towards Troy there are no favourable winds to make the departure possible. It is then that the seer Calcas declares that he has been told by the gods that the reason was that one of Artemis's favourite wild animals, in some versions a deer, in others a goat or a hare and its offspring, had been killed by the commander-in-chief, general Agamemnon, or by other Greeks. In order to make the goddess's anger subside a human sacrifice was demanded: Agamemnon's eldest daughter was to be sacrificed²⁶². Thus, Iphigenia's sacrifice purified the sin of the nation and allowed the whole Greek army to break the historical impasse, even if it meant sailing off to war. In other words, Iphigenia's sacrifice is the condition of the group's salvation which, as shall be looked into in detail in my next chapter, is precisely René Girard's reasoning²⁶³. However, considering that both Satyasama and Shahrzad were dismembered some attention must be given to this fate for two related reasons. Firstly because dismemberment plays a considerable role in Bakhtinian theory where it is made analogous to eating; therefore they often appear in the same context. In *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin affirms: "Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing up of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, *dismemberment*, swallowing up by another body - all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. In all these events the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven" (*RW*, 317. Italics added). Secondly, dismemberment is at the basis of any orphic myth which, by being simultaneously a myth of creation, is in accordance with Bakhtin's ideas of regeneration.

Iphigenia's sacrifice is not an isolated event and, in fact, the House of the Atreus, was smeared with innocent blood since its foundation. On arriving at Agamemnon's palace as a

²⁶² This version is Aeschylus's (circa 450 BC) in *Agamemnon*. Many details change from one author to the other but, given that they bear no relevance to this context, they will not be commented on. However, the existence of versions where Iphigenia is saved at the very last moment (perhaps because the crime of filicide struck them as hideous) ought to be mentioned. They are by Choerilus, reproduced by G. Kinkel in *Epicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* (1877), where she was replaced by a hind, Phanodemus, reproduced in F. Jacoby's *Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* and Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* (a bear), Nicander cited in Antoninus Liberalis's *Metamorphoses* (a calf), and Hesiod's *Catalogus mulierum* (a spectrum). Iphigenia's fate after that also varies from being carried off to Tauris, becoming either immortal, or a priestess of Artemis whose duty was to preside over human sacrifices to the goddess.

²⁶³ Similar myths include Ariadne's journey to the labyrinth of the Minotaur to save the people of Athens, Andromeda offered in sacrifice by her father Cepheus so that a terrible sea serpent spares Ethiopia, and Polyxena by Achilles's tomb in order to appease his restless ghost and thus to cause the winds to take the Greeks back home.

war prisoner, Cassandra is horrified at the atmosphere since her extraordinary gifts make her immediately aware of the unspeakable crimes committed by the family. Among them stands out the sacrifice and consumption of the flesh of a kin. The founding forefather of the House was Tantalus, Zeus's son, who had his son Pelops killed and cooked in order to be served to the gods of the Olympus. But they were aware of the mischievous plot and only Tetis, or possibly Demeter, tasted the abominable meal so that when the body was reassembled, it needed an ivory arm to replace the missing one. This unfortunate event marked an appalling fate for the descendants who were invariably involved in murder. Pelops's twin sons Atreus and Thyestes killed their half-brother but eventually become enemies. Thyestes becomes a lover to Atreus's wife, Aerope. Atreus's hatred was such that he served Thyestes the flesh of his own sons. At the end of the feast, Atreus showed Thyestes the remains, the heads and hands, as proof. Thyestes is subsequently banned from Micenas and goes to his daughter following the advice of an oracle that informed him that he would only get his revenge by producing an incestuous son²⁶⁴.

It does not seem that Medea's sacrifice can be regarded exactly in the same light. The killing of her sons aimed to spare them a life of slavery, a consequence that Medea deemed unavoidable after she succeeded in having Jason's new bride burnt to death. Though she actually murdered and dismembered her own brother and tricked Pelias's daughters into killing, tearing apart and cooking their father (they did not actually eat him), in none of these instances, except the assassination of the princess of Corinth, was Medea motivated by revenge. Only personal happiness, the conquest of the love of a man and the attenuation of a greater harm were at stake²⁶⁵.

Numerous murders, traditionally offensive moral crimes such as incest and two instances of consumption of flesh, dismembered and cooked, frame the sacrifice of Iphigenia pointing to a group necessity of purification. In addition to the influence over humans' collective welfare it is observable that the consumption of human flesh appears linked with Hellenistic myths of the Fall. Two myths appear related with the titan Kronos: the fall of

²⁶⁴ That would be Aegist who murders Atreus and gives his father access to the throne. Agamemnon is Atreus's son and Aegist the lover of his wife, Clytemnestra. The adulterous couple kills Agamemnon, an act that Clytemnestra feels to be justice being made for Iphigenia's sacrifice. Orestes, Iphigenia's brother, to revenge his father's assassination, slaughters his mother and Aegist.

²⁶⁵ I mention Medea at this point given the close relation with the subject but she did not belong to the House of the Atreus. She was linked to the House of Prometheus through her relationship with Jason, his descendant. The magical potion Medea uses to make Jason invincible and therefore able to realise

Uranus by Kronos which enabled the birth of the Giants and the Erinyes, and Kronos own fall by the hand of Zeus which installed the supremacy of the goddesses and gods. It is the second that refers to eating though the first upholds the life-giving power of blood. Then several myths appear to justify the birth of humankind. They give key roles to Zagreus, Lycaon and Prometheus. But not only in Hellenistic mythology do we find dismemberment and sacrifice of human beings followed by their consumption as chief elements for the creative moment. The death and resurrection of Osiris provide further support.

Kronos responds to the appeal of his mother, Gea the Mother Earth, against Uranus, Heaven, his father. Besides the titans, Uranus fathered the Cyclops and huge monsters with one hundred hands and fifty heads. Uranus kept these prisoners inside the earth's body to spare himself the horrible vision. Kronos alone was courageous enough to stand up to his father. He inflicted a terrible wound on Uranus and from his blood, fruitful like Abel's, sprang the Erinyes, better known by their Latin name, the Furies, with serpents instead of hair and blood instead of tears. In spite of their terrible appearance, they were responsible for the honourable affairs of justice. They were in charge of the persecution and the punishment of sinners. Kronos ruled for countless ages, a true golden age but for one detail. Knowing that one of his children would overthrow him, Kronos ate them at birth. Zeus, the sixth child, was saved by his mother who fooled her husband with a rock wrapped in swaddling-clothes. Later Zeus forced Kronos to vomit his other five children and secured his supremacy after a long war that nearly annihilated the universe. Eating, vomiting, bleeding and dismembering contribute to a Bakhtinian-grotesque scenery of (re)generation in the myths of Kronos.

Zagreus is usually regarded as Zeus and Persephone's son and to whom Zeus intended to concede the rule of the world. But Hera wanted to destroy Zeus's illegitimate child and charged the Titans with killing him. Zagreus tried to escape by metamorphosing into a bull but he was hopeless against the Titans who dismembered his body and ate him, partly cooked, partly raw. Apollo gathered the pieces and Athena was able to save the heart. Two versions tell of how Zeus brought him back to life: either Zeus had Semele eat the heart and she produced the "second Dionysus", or Zeus himself ingested it and regenerated Zagreus. Humankind was believed to have sprung from the Titans' blood and ashes after Zeus sent a lightning-bolt to destroy them. It follows then that humans' nature is necessarily impure, born of the sin of consuming forbidden food and marking a path of eternal misery. With the exception of the

the extraordinary tasks her father demands from him was obtained from a plant bred in the soil where Prometheus's blood was first shed.

matter that was ingested, this myth lying as the starting point for any orphic myth shares striking similarities with Christian theology and the Fall of Adam. Notably, the abstinence of animal food was common to orphic practices and to Christian rites. Teixeira Rego recalls Saint Basil's idea that fasting and the expulsion from Paradise are two related matters²⁶⁶. Fasting aims to repeat, to mime, life in Eden where "Man" was satisfied with what God provided. After eating the forbidden fruit, needs were created: the need for wine, the need for killing in order to have something to eat and the need for purification. The first generations of disciples of orphism mimed the moment of the Fall as well. They would tear apart a living bull and eat its raw meat, though later they adopted vegetarianism. Christ himself offered his body in sacrifice; one life cleaned every sin and provided the salvation of all people. The renovation of life through the ritual repetition of that moment is the ingestion of the host, that is, the symbolic consumption of the body of Christ. One of the arguments of the opponents to the Christian faith was precisely that its followers engaged in cannibalistic practices. Nonnus of Panopolis and Servius (both 4th century AD) put forward a different punishment for the Titans, a flood, and Ovidius in the *Metamorphoses* tells of how Deucalion, Prometheus's son, built an arc which saved him from a flood after Zeus decided to punish the general evilness of humans. Another common element between the Genesis, the *Metamorphoses* and its Greek models is the reference to the creation of "Man" through moulded earth and moulded clay as is told in the Bible. It makes sense to suggest then that both conceptualise original sin and, moreover, that it is related to the consumption of forbidden food.

A myth that definitely supports this view is that of Lycaon. Lycaon maintained very good relations with the gods until the day he, either to offer a sacrifice or to test the gods' divine nature, decided to kill a child and serve it in a reception. The form of the retribution varies: a thunderbolt, a flood to punish all mortals or transformation into a wolf. Either by fire or water, destruction redesigned human fate. Lycaon was reportedly the first werewolf. There were also stories of people living as wolves for nine years and, if they abstained from human flesh during that period, they would regain human form. In another version of Lycaon's story the responsibility for the abhorrent feast was that of his sons. Lycaon's metamorphosis is surely linked with the human sacrifices performed in Arcadia in honour of Zeus Lycaeus. The attendants would eat the bowels of the victim and were said to turn into wolves but they could change back if they endured the sort of fasting mentioned above. Metamorphosis into animal form becomes thus an exterior mark of the original sin and brings humans closer to animals

²⁶⁶ José Teixeira Rego, *Nova Teoria do Sacrifício* (Lisbon: Assírio & Alvim, [1912-1915] 1989) 46.

so that the latter or animalised humans come to substitute humans in the role of the necessary victim of sacrifice, regardless of its/her/his culpability.

One of the most popular versions attributes the responsibility of the creation of mankind to Prometheus who lighted a torch in the very sun and gave it to men to compensate for the fact that Epimetheus had provided the other animals with gifts that permitted them to protect themselves such as speed, courage, cunning and strength. Zeus's anger was due not only to Prometheus's stealing the fire that made men dangerously powerful but also to an animal sacrifice. Prometheus had killed and torn apart a huge bull and inside the skin he hid the best pieces. Next to it he placed the bones which he covered in appealing fat. Then the titan asked Zeus to choose a pile. Naturally Zeus preferred the second. Zeus was extremely displeased with such a disrespectful trick. He decided to have his revenge first over men and then over Prometheus himself. For up to that moment only men existed. So Zeus created a beautiful creature who men found irresistible. She was Pandora and though she gained notoriety as a bringer of disease, war and famine because of her curiosity, the legend already places beauty as the prime origin of sin and instigator of evil tendencies. Women's bodies could therefore be regarded as the appropriate site where the cause of social maladies can be found and consequently they were made likely candidates for scapegoating.

Prometheus's punishment was to be chained to the scarps in the Caucasus but Zeus had additional motivations. As in the Bible, the matter of knowledge was at stake for Zeus, like his father before him, knew he would be deposed by one of his children and Prometheus alone knew the name of the woman who was to be the mother. The torture was therefore intensified. Prometheus was condemned to be served as a human banquet to an eagle that lacerated his body but it regenerated so that the abominable feast was endlessly repeated. In writing *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley does not limit herself to presenting the modern Prometheus in the sense of a quest for knowledge (scientific knowledge, in this case) and the audacity to aspire to divine creation. She provided the paramount elements of the mythologisation of Fall and creation: bodies dismembered give way to a reunited body.

Death and rebirth, dismemberment and reconstitution are also key moments in Egyptian mythology regarding Osiris. The first of the five great gods was king of the underworld and god of agriculture, the most common association being made with wheat and corn. His sister and wife, Isis, helped him with his teachings and showed the people how to weave, pluck cotton and spin. Women would turn to her for an easy labour and healthy child. Having provoked the wrath of his brother, Seth, ruler of Darkness, Osiris dies at his hands.

Osiris has a spectacular party and Seth appears with a magical jewelled box. To prove that only an immortal could fit inside, Osiris agrees to climb in. The box is quickly sealed and thrown into the river. Seth takes over the party and incites others to heavy drinking and to beating the servants. After a long search over the whole country, Isis finds the box and hides it. Seth realises the imminent danger and, having found the hiding cave, hacks Osiris to pieces. The body parts are thrown into the river and they spread. Only his head had been left by the river bank. Isis and Anubis, their son, make a spice and wheat body for Osiris's head. They are determined to reassemble Osiris's body which they do, piece by piece (only the penis could not be located; it had been eaten by fish). Thoth came and aided in the first mummification (in pre-dynastic times, before 3000 BC that is, the custom was to cut up the dead)²⁶⁷. Isis and

²⁶⁷ A convincing connection can be made between Satyasama and Thoth, the Egyptian god of the moon, magic and writing. Often represented as an ibis or ibis-headed man, Thoth could also appear as a baboon when his relation with writing needed to be stressed. Thoth was considered the wisest and most eloquent of all gods. These qualities always served him well as when he was able to trick the sun god Ra to allow Nut (Heaven) to give birth to the great gods and goddesses (Osiris, Isis, Seth, Nephthys and Horus) or when he convinced Tefnut, the goddess of moisture, to go back to Egypt and with that the inundation of the Nile took place once again and life was renewed in the country. On that occasion Thoth metamorphosed into a baboon, his sacred animal. As many Egyptian deities, he is an ambiguous god. He is the god of the moon but he appears with a sun disk on his head along with the crescent of the moon. That is due to the fact that he was believed to be the tongue or heart of Ra and that is why his symbol can also be a group of baboons greeting the rising sun. Originally, Thoth was a god of creation who, assuming the form of an ibis, laid the World Egg. His singing created four frog gods and snake goddesses which continued his song to help the sun's journey across the sky. Later he invested humankind with the outlines of civilisation: civic and religious rites, musical arts, writing, magic and healing practices. He was believed to be the scribe to the gods and when depicted on the shoulder of a scribe Thoth granted protection and inspiration. He was always watchful to safeguard scribes' responsibility in their work, inciting them to be meticulous, trustworthy and precise. His wife Ma'at was the symbol of justice, balance and truth. Thoth's character, close association with order through Ma'at, and his service to Osiris against the murderous attacks of Seth, god of chaos and destruction, made him the chosen advisor of Osiris and pharaohs alike who turned to the baboon god for insight and clarity of mind. When the deceased faced the judgement of the afterlife, Thoth recorded their deeds, allowing them to continue the journey to the underworld had they led an honest and moral life. Thoth was therefore portrayed in front or on top of the scales in which the heart of the dead person weighed against a feather, the symbol of Ma'at. Since he was a lunar god but also associated with Ra, Thoth became the god watching over the passage of time, hence of calculation too. With time his power was extended to include all mathematical knowledge so that even the invention of arithmetic, geometry, and engineering is attributed to him.

The association with Satyasama is made on several levels: firstly there is Thoth's link with the heavens, including the sun, the moon and the stars, pointing to his integrationalist view derived from his just nature and wise thinking. Secondly, the Egyptians turned to him for inspiration in the arts, from literature to music, so that he became the personification of knowledge and learning in general. Even though he had a direct connection with writing, his might was believed to lie in speech, convincing even fellow deities to act as he saw best for all. In fact, he was called Lord of Language. Thirdly, as the judge of the underworld, his relation with death was intimate. In due time, the central role he played in the reassembly of Osiris's dismembered body and subsequent resurrection will be explained.

Nephthys's spells and magical chanting bring him back to life but not exactly in the form he had before. Geb, the earth god, swallows him and he becomes incorporated. He is everything and sees all. He becomes the god of the underworld. The murder and rebirth of Osiris was celebrated with a human sacrifice performed by reapers on the harvest field²⁶⁸. The Abydos passion play took place yearly during the period of the Old Kingdom (2575-2150 up to 400 AD)²⁶⁹ and it was the representation of the slaying of Osiris by Seth, often ending up with real deaths. Through this sacrifice, the pattern of birth, death and resurrection was re-enacted, to all observable in the cycle of the seasons. Effigies made of vegetable mould stuffed with corn were made to accompany mummies in the place of burial. Osiris thus is made a symbol of fertility and death. The festival of Pamyliia also celebrated the fructifying powers of Osiris who was represented with an abnormally large penis. Osiris being the source of all sources could concede fertility to animals and abundance of agricultural products. The god's ambivalence turns grotesque when he is described in *The Book of the Dead* devouring ravenously mortal and immortal beings so that through his body life maintains its vigorous cycle:

Here all creation is represented as being in terror when they see the deceased king rise up as a soul in the form of a god who devours 'his fathers and mothers'; he feeds upon men and also upon gods. He hunts the gods in the fields and snares them; and when they are tied up for slaughter he cuts their throats and disembowels them. He roasts and eats the best of them, but the old gods and goddesses are used for fuel. By eating them he imbibes both their magical powers, and their Spirit-souls. [...] He carries off the hearts of the gods, and devours the wisdom of every god; therefore the duration of his life is everlasting and he lives to all eternity, for the Heart-souls of the gods and their Spirit-souls are in him.²⁷⁰

It is noteworthy that in these myths of the Fall, creation is accompanied by tearing of the flesh, by its consumption and by the reassembly/recovery of the body, or in Lycaon's case, by a metamorphosis. In any case, a Fall from a state of grace occurs which involves bodily regeneration (to a state similar to the one held before or reshaping in animal form).

²⁶⁸ See Sir James George Frazer, *The Illustrated Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. 1922. *Internet Sacred Text Archive*. Ed. John B. Hare. Jan. 2004. Aug. 2004 <www.sacred-texts.com>. See chapters 38-40.

²⁶⁹ Abydos was the capital of the eighth Nome of Upper Egypt. Since it was believed that Osiris had been buried there, the city became the seat of his worship.

²⁷⁰ E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Dead*. 25 Jun 2002 <www.mystae.com>

Dismemberment is also the theme underlying the stories of Pentheus and Orpheus. The former involves the god Dionysus as well and achieved fame with Euripides's *Bacchae*. Returning from his conquests in the east Dionysus passes through Thebes only to find out that the ruler, Pentheus, does not recognise his divine status. Pentheus, who does not identify the foreigner as the god, determines that he should be arrested because of the immoral influence he exerts over women. Dionysus easily frees himself and causes Pentheus to go mad and to travel to Mount Chithaeron where the frenzied maenads wait for him. The women, led by his mother, tear him to pieces. Agave takes Pentheus's head home as a trophy, believing it to be the head of a lion. A similar death befell Orpheus, who fell prey to the derangement of the Bacchic maenads. They killed him, dismembered the cadaver, threw the pieces into the river and they were carried out to sea. The head and lyre of the poet arrived at the isle of Lesbos where Orpheus continued to sing and deliver prophecies. Not only that, the mystery of his still being alive originated Orphic literature, cherished particularly by Neoplatonists who were actively involved in the appearance of orphism (6th century BC), that is, its development into a set of religious and mystical beliefs. Pythagoreans and Bacchic mystery followers claimed him as their patron as well. Orpheus's adventures bear close resemblance with the legend of Dionysus; they almost appear to be a human version of the god's experiences: Orpheus is born in Thrace, he is devoted to the Muses, he descends and returns from Hades, and suffers death by dismemberment. It is understandable then that orphism recovers older Dionysian and Bacchic rites (5th century BC to 2nd century AD) and assumes its place in a line of continuity which restricted to a minimum over-excited celebrations but retained the sacramental symbolism and ecstatic mysticism (for instance the ritual of omophagy – the sacrifice and consumption of the raw meat of a bull, goat or fawn – is abolished and offerings of meal cakes and honey are made instead). Orphism became the founding Hellenic School and one of the first fully-organised religious systems. Its final purpose was to attain redemption by separating the Dionysiac spirit from Titanic matter since flesh always recalled the original fall (eating the flesh of Dionysus). The body thus acquired all the marks of decay, a tomb from which one could only be freed and approach a pure spiritual existence by asceticism and moderate food habits. Therefore there is a strong orphic resonance in Satyasama's demise: the dismemberment, the strong connection with music and speech, and the mystery of a voice that is stronger than death.

In this line of thought, sacrifice has to be assumed as the re-enactment of the moment of the Fall with an opportunity for purgation as well as legitimating killing in order to survive

by acting out a transformation from flesh to meat. What is observable in the myths presented here is that the original sin, that gave way both to the rebirth of the glories and the miseries of a “civilised” society, took place through the consumption of human flesh. This moment in human history was relived over centuries by adherents of Bacchic and Orphic cults and by lycanthropes. With time though, the sacrificial ritual replaced the human victim with an animal one and in myth, specifically with that installed with Genesis, it assumed the form of a fruit. However, any reference to eating an unauthorised product, whatever its nature, is absent in Satyasama and Shahrzad’s deaths. The element that substitutes it is that of a violent death followed by dismemberment which, however, fulfils the requirements of a sacrificial structure. To understand the function of dismemberment as a sacrificial practice we must turn to the studies of René Girard who built up a comprehensive theory on sacrificial systems read as organisms that through violent action restrain human violence and prevent society from consuming itself in riot. As the cause of all this negativity Girard sees an original sin of a murderous nature which is repeatedly recalled in myth and relived in ritual sacrifices viewed as abhorrent in the usual context of social relations. Though Girard cannot identify precisely the contours of the primordial violent action its character is maintained in rituals of incest, dismemberment and other forms of human or animal sacrifices. Drawing our attention once again to Bakhtin, we find that his ideas on the grotesque also presuppose violent behaviour where dismemberment plays a specific role in the scheme of regeneration but where the idea of sacrifice is only implicit in the killing of one, by and to the benefit of all. The brief outline of Hellenistic and Egyptian mythological examples not only demonstrates there to be an intimate relation between myth and sacrifice but it also points to the common features between the latter and the Bakhtinian grotesque: the existence of a victim at the expense of whom society heals itself of its evils, the concern with food, the concept of incorporation, a magical rebirth and death by dismemberment or dismemberment following death. With Girard other elements come into view which brings closer the carnivalesque-grotesque and sacrifice: the participation of all members of the group and the absence of guilt when making someone a scapegoat. Girard thus provides illuminating tools to read *When Dreams Travel* and the novel that I will consider next, *Shame*.



“Manticore”, *M. S. Bodley 764 Bestiary*, 1220-1250

1.2. *Feline metamorphosis in Shame*

“Shame, shame, poppy-shame, all the girls, know your name”

Salman Rushdie, *Shame*, 275

Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, and what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? and what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp? [...]

William Blake, “The Tiger”, 71-72

1.2.1. René Girard's theory of the sacrificial victim



In the latter part of the previous chapter, I tried to demonstrate by means of exemplification that a sacrificial scheme was a critical strategy to sustain the foundations of myth, particularly those of the creation and the Fall. The rituals performed on their account intended to serve as histrionic mirrors with corrective intentions, that is to say, as pedagogical representations of social conduct. The fact that rituals are often of a sacrificial nature reveals their violent origin. For René Girard violence is at the basis and genesis of humanity, its culture and institutions. The primal violent action was that of a murder, which hides behind those institutions. One cannot have direct access to this murderous genesis but it can be detected in rituals that aim at re-enacting that moment. Furthermore, an attentive look at the mechanisms through which we interpret and interact with the world provide the key to the understanding of the murder. Girard identifies two of those mechanisms: mimetic desire and surrogate victimisation. He poses that desire is stimulated not by the object itself but rather through the existence of a third party in the context: besides a subject and an object, there is a rival. Moreover, the nature of desire is that of lack, more precisely, lack of being. Realising that the rival desires a given object, the subject gathers that there lies what s/he is missing. This reasoning is deceptive for the rival follows it as well:

The rival desires the same object as the subject, and to assert the primacy of the rival can lead to only one conclusion. Rivalry does not arise because of the fortuitous convergence of two desires on a single object; rather, *the subject desires the object because the rival desires it*. In desiring an object the rival alerts the subject to the desirability of the object. The rival, then, serves as a model for the subject, not only in regard to such secondary matters as style and opinions but also, and more essentially, in regard to desires.²⁷¹

²⁷¹ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, [1972] 1977) 145. Italics in the text. Henceforth indicated parenthetically with the abbreviation *V/S*.

If for Kristeva abjection, horror and death fill the lack of being (*PH*, 134 and 173), these desires are difficult to locate precisely because they are lack. Moreover, they are based on the phenomenon of mimesis since the subject, not knowing what to desire, turns to the object desired by the model:

[H]e desires *being*, something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess. The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being. If the model, who is apparently already endowed with superior being, desires some object, that object must surely be capable of conferring an even greater plenitude of being. (*VS*, 146. Italics in the text)

Desire thus activates the mimetic mechanism and originates rival conflict. The model, who was not originally aware of the subject's competing intentions, feels betrayed by the follower. The dominant sensation on the subject's part is that of rejection by the one whose superiority s/he admired. Conflict thus gives way to other forms of negativity. The subject associates desire with violence: s/he imitates the rival's desires, and when s/he feels the object is close enough to be reached, s/he sees himself involved in violent conflict. Following a supremely paradoxical reasoning, the subject becomes convinced that the nature of the subject's desirability is violence itself. Two common traits can already be detected in Girard's theory of sacrifice and Kristeva's notions of abjection: violence and indefinition of being, expressed in the previously quoted phrase "violent, dark revolts of being"²⁷². Furthermore, the relationship of the subject towards the model changes under the influence of violent conflict; s/he begins to be regarded as a monstrous double, driven to the same object. Admiration and inspiration give way to repulsion, triggering off a defence mechanism that, recurring to Kristevan terminology, we could refer to as abjectifying. A common desire contributes to the sameness of subject and rival, but when confronted with it, the latter feels disgusted and seeks to distance her or himself from the model. The phenomenon of monstrous duality is the element through which the community can break the cycle of reciprocal violence caused by

²⁷² Violence is present both as an essential component of the theory of abjection through the necessity of separation from the mother's body and as a discursive element as well. She says, for instance, "I am in the process of becoming at the expense of my own death. During that course in which 'I' become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit. Mute protest of the symptom, shattering violence of a convulsion that, to be sure, is inscribed in a symbolic system, but in which, without either wanting or being able to become integrated in order to answer to it, it reacts, it abreacts. It abjects" (*PH*, 3).

impulses of vengeance. To avoid the rippling effect that the emergence of a conflict would bring to society, thus putting at risk its own survival, violence must be transformed into generative violence. When the violence of mimetic conflicts stems from a context that already manifests symptoms of political and economic instability, there is a very real danger of violence breaking loose and of spreading quickly and destructively. That can only be avoided by channelling violence towards a single victim. The victim must be chosen arbitrarily since there is no issue of expiation as in theory everyone is involved in a monstrous/double situation which erases all differences (*VS*, 159), or, if experiencing a collective situation of the monstrous double, the differences tend to be confused to such a degree that to extricate them becomes impossible (*VS*, 161)²⁷³. Sacrifice is therefore at the basis of the process that rescues society from its self-destructive impulses and as such carries forth a jubilant feeling that is akin to Bakhtin's ideas:

Sacrifice is the boon worthy above others of being preserved, celebrated and memorialized, reiterated and re-enacted in a thousand different forms, for it alone can prevent transcendental violence from turning back into reciprocal violence, the violence that really hurts, setting man against man and threatening the total destruction of the community. (*VS*, 124-125)

So that sacrifice does not contribute to the continuous movement of violence, it must annul the impulses of reprisal. That can only be accomplished if the sacrificial victim is the possessor of a given set of characteristics. The fundamental requirement for the scapegoat mechanism to function properly is that of ambiguity. The victim cannot be either too identical or too different: "In order for a species or category of living creature, human or animal, to appear suitable for sacrifice, it must bear a sharp resemblance to the *human* categories excluded from the ranks of the 'sacrificeable,' while still maintaining a degree of difference that forbids all possible confusion" (*VS*, 12. Italics in the text). The criterion is, therefore, that of degree of integration which allows heterogeneity to exist under a broader trait that all sacrificeable ones

²⁷³ For Kristeva's own comments on the relation between the thetic and its role in a signifying contract and mimesis see *La révolution du langage poétique: l'avant-gard à la fin du XIX siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1974) particularly pages 41-43 and 57-61. She asserts that the thetic is both frontier and rupture, a position of difference and identity. She writes: "Toute énonciation est théthique, qu'elle soit énonciation de mot ou de phrase: toute énonciation exige une identification, c'est-à-dire une séparation du sujet de et dans son image, en même temps que de et dans ses objects". Julia Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique*, 41-42. The very formulation of the thetic in language systems already presupposes separation, therefore, crisis.

share: they live on the fringes or outside society. They are children, unmarried adolescents, slaves, prisoners of war, or the handicapped. The communal fabric that enters the scene weakened is reinforced by ritual sacrifice. It is imperative then, as in the Dionysian *sparagmos*, that all participants take part²⁷⁴. Only through violent unanimity can the sacrificial victim substitute all the members of the group and avoid the possibility of vengeful reprisal as they all direct their anger toward the same entity:

[The victim] is a substitute for all the members of the community, offered up by the members themselves. The sacrifice serves to protect the entire community from *its own* violence; it prompts the entire community to choose victims outside itself. The elements of dissension scattered throughout the community are drawn to the person of the sacrificial victim and eliminated, at least temporarily, by its sacrifice. (VS, 8. Italics in the text)

As previously noted, for Kristeva only through the violent act of cutting oneself off from the mother can one's identity be preserved. Though Girard's discourse distances itself

²⁷⁴ Helen Foley's reconstruction of the procedures in a Greek sacrifice reveals there to be specific functions to be carried out by appointed individuals (carrying water and grain, flaying the flesh, cutting the animal's hair or screaming) but also given steps that all should follow that went from washing their hands, sprinkling the animal, praying and eating the *splangchna* (vital organs or parts with blood). The actions in which all were made to participate refer to the necessity of all being purified to annul the concept of killing as crime, and contributing to the death whose positive effects were then literally assimilated. See Helen P. Foley, *Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1985) particularly pages 29-31, 33 and 38. The way in which ritual sacrifice and carnival strive for equality and through which paradoxically reinforce hierarchies was apparent in the distribution of meat following the killing. Women and children, whose political relevance was reflected in their minor participation in the sacrificial ritual, received a smaller share. This aspect gives strength to feminists' arguments of a misleading notion of equality. The ritual of Bouphonia is an example of the event's ability, if not even purpose, to integrate an individual in the body of a social group. The killer was often a foreigner who after slaying the bull was forced to flee (expulsion motif). The community, having participated in the ceremony, tries to blame one another but finally finds the axe and knife responsible and throw them into the sea. The bull was subsequently stuffed and harnessed to a plough (resurrection motif). The exile could then come back to the group. See Helen P. Foley, *Ritual Irony*, 31-34 and René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 98 and 307. Foley argues that "[p]articipation in sacrifice binds the worshipper to his community, organizes his place in that community, and implicitly obtains its consent to the violence upon which this organization is in part predicated". Helen P. Foley, *Ritual Irony*, 39. Towards the end of her book she amplifies this remark to include other ritual forms: "Sacrifice, *agon*, and festival are ritual experiences that help to define a society from both within and without: who is a legitimate participant in the society, and how power, privilege and prestige will be allotted within it". Helen P. Foley, *Ritual Irony*, 255. Italics in the text. Sir James George Frazer, in his *The Illustrated Golden Bough*, makes a reasonable detailed description of the Bouphonia ritual. See chapter 49, section 1, "Dionysus, the Goat and the Bull". Sir James George Frazer, *The Illustrated Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* <www.sacred-texts.com>. For a reference to the regeneration of the hunted prey in the Palaeolithic period see Helen P. Foley, *Ritual Irony*, 46-7.

from psychoanalytical ideas, his reasoning can be said to work along similar lines²⁷⁵. Not only does sacrificial violence prevent generalised mayhem, it also restores social harmony. This is how Girard explains the victim's approximation to the sacred, a point also made by Kristeva:

A whole facet of the sacred, true lining of the sacrificial, compulsive, and paranoid side of religions, assumes the task of warding off that danger [disintegration by contact with the mother]. This is precisely where we encounter the rituals of defilement and their derivatives, which, based on the feeling of abjection and all converging on the maternal, attempt to symbolize the other threat to the subject: that of being swamped by the dual relationship, thereby risking the loss not of a part (castration) but of the totality of his living being. The function of these religious rituals is to ward off the subject's fear of his own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother. (PH, 64)

Girard clarifies the connection when addressing Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus* as, in his view, the evolution of tragedy and ritual should be regarded jointly. For Girard it is no coincidence that tragedy reaches its height precisely at a time when ritual culture declined. Tragedy emerges in the transitional process between actual ritual performance and the model that both ritual and mythologisation try to reproduce. The verbal *agōnes* or contests of the tragic text encapsulate the analogous violence of mimesis and cultural indifferentiation, that is, the sacrificial crisis installed in the royal house, a microcosm of a wider social crisis²⁷⁶. Tragic catharsis, like ritual, enables the restoration of peace and health to the community through the sacrifice or expulsion of the scapegoat that absorbs violent conflict at loose²⁷⁷. Tragedy and

²⁷⁵ Girard's reluctance to resort to psychoanalytical methodologies is justified, in his view, as he finds them not so much invalid but insufficient insofar as they enable descriptive interpretations which are nevertheless limited when it comes to identifying the causes for those situations.

²⁷⁶ The *agōnes* in *Oedipus Tyrannus* and the *Bacchae* are between the king and two older men. In the former case it is between Oedipus on the one hand and Tiresias and Creon on the other; in the *Bacchae* the *agōn* is between Pentheus, Tiresias and Kadmos.

²⁷⁷ The proximity between tragedy and comedy which enables a transition from a genre to the other is distinctly clear when approaching the subject considering the theme of the scapegoat. "Buffoon", which finds close words in most European languages ("bouffon", "buffone", "bufão") possibly derives from the Greek "bouphonos" which means "the killer of the ox". The relation with the Greek origin was repeatedly denied as it appeared to bear no connection with the set of meanings the word carries in French, Italian, Portuguese or English. The buffoon belongs to a time of carnival when ritual culture had died away but where remains of its existence could still be discerned. He takes on the role of the king, channelling the royal power as well as the abuses of the population on him. In carnival, as in sacrifice, there comes the moment for the termination of the scapegoat, setting the old to a time past. The buffoon is a true *bouc émissaire* analogous to the goat expelled from the community on expiation day, *yom kippur*, Adam from Eden or any of the protagonists of myths of the Fall. The buffoon

ritual can therefore be said to perform identical functions and even share the same limitations as tragedy also withdraws to myth when it approximates the origin of culture. In *Oedipus Tyrannus* the victim, Oedipus, is regarded as a polluted being by reason of his heinous crimes (patricide and incest). Any contact with him might prove deadly since he has become infectious and threatens to contaminate the whole city with his *miasma* (stain). On Oedipus's arrival, then, Thebes is afflicted by the threat of the plague. Through his death, all the ills of the community can be purified. The victim is therefore the bringer of death and salvation; *pharmakon*, poison and antidote²⁷⁸. As in many cases, Oedipus undergoes a dismembering ritual, plucking out his eyes (though not one that is so utterly complete as Shahrzad, Satyasama, or Sufiya's) and which Kristeva, in her own analysis of the tragedy of Oedipus, relates once again with abjection: "Blinding is thus an image of splitting; it marks, on the very body, the alteration of the self and clean into the defiled – the scar taking the place of a revealed and yet invisible abjection" (*PH*, 84).

Girard takes precisely one of the myths previously mentioned to illustrate the abundance of myths with reference to dismemberment to explain how Dionysian rituals worked in terms of a sacrificial structure. The *Bacchae* displays the traits of a sacrificial composition; the bacchanals install the sacrificial crisis, that is, a crisis of distinctions characterised by the absence of difference between beneficial and impure violence: everyone is called to participate in the festivities, the old as well as the young. Tiresias says that "the god has not distinguished between the young man having to dance and the older man. But he wishes to have honours in common from all, and to be magnified while distinguishing nobody"²⁷⁹. The eradication of the cultural order is conspicuous in the frantic behaviour of the women from whom the social customs demanded a more serene attitude. They become ferocious warriors, hunters, kidnappers and plunderers (v. 753, 758-763). Their ruthlessness makes resistance impossible; "women did this to men", the messenger tells Pentheus (v. 763). Dionysus has a distinctly female appearance (v. 234-236, 353) which will incite Pentheus's reproach. The god's revenge is generating in Pentheus the desire to act in the same fashion.

occupies the same place in comedy that the sacrificial victim does in *tragōidia*, the Greek word for tragedy and which means "a song at the sacrifice of a goat".

²⁷⁸ Girard argues that the king is also marginal to society insofar as he is so central to society he lacks his own place or that he is situated above all others and is, consequently, apart from the community. See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 12.

²⁷⁹ Euripides, *Bacchae*, intr. and trans. Richard Seaford (Warmister: Aris & Phillips, 1996) v. 206-9. Also v. 430-431, and 1295 and other references in the body of the next to follow shortly. There is also a reference to the maenads being of all ages, v. 691-694.

Dionysus convinces Pentheus that the safest manner to spy on the maenads is to disguise the king as one of them so the god dresses up and instructs Pentheus on how to behave like a woman (v. 827-836, 914-948).

In addition to age and sexual loss of differentiation, there is also the disappearance of the barrier between animal and human that makes a “fine sacrificial victim” (v. 1246) out of Pentheus. The tragic climax is reached when Pentheus’s mother takes him for a lion (1107-1108, 1142) and sets off the hunt that ends up with his dismemberment. But there are other instances of human and animal confusion: Agave is equalled to a lioness (v. 990. She is also compared to the monstrous Gorgon, v. 991), the bacchantes tear apart cattle taking them for men (v. 735-747) which prepares the audience for the wild beast-like breaking apart of Pentheus’s flesh, particularly Agave, foaming and rolling her twisted eyes (v. 1122-1142); they abandon their babies and breast feed wolf-cubs instead (v. 698-702), they are compared to birds (v. 748, 1090), and called hounds (v. 732, 977); like the sacrificial animal in festivals, they are “like fillies that have left the decorated yokes” (v. 1056); Dionysus is regarded as prey (v. 433), a beast (v. 436, 1018), a multi-headed snake (v. 1016), a lion (v. 1017) and when he is captured he is confined to the horses’ mangers (v. 508); the reference to Dionysus’s birth from Zeus’s thigh presents him as the “bull-horned god” (v. 100) and, adding to a similar comparison made by the chorus (v. 1017), Pentheus himself mistakes Dionysus for a bull (v. 618-620); the maenads’ tearing apart of Pentheus’s body turn him into the hunted prey of a wild beast (v. 1108). Girard argues that the distinction between human and god is also at stake given that Dionysus assumes a human form and even takes a human disguise whereas Pentheus claims to possess divine strength²⁸⁰. The maenads themselves seem to borrow some

²⁸⁰ Helene Foley identifies some problems in the application Girard makes of his theory to the tragedies being discussed here. She argues that the scapegoat mechanism is activated and carried through by Oedipus himself, who performs the mutilation. Furthermore, the play closes without a definite indication regarding Oedipus’s expulsion from Thebes. Though in several occasions I have argued against self-sacrifice as a disguised form of sacrifice, I am inclined to agree with Foley since the king thought nothing could be an agreeable sight from the revelation moment onwards (v. 1334-1335) and he, not the city, asks for exile (v. 1340-1342, 1411-1413, 1436-1437, 1518). However, the passage when the chorus asks Oedipus who instigated him to blind himself and he ambiguously answers that Apollo is to blame for all his misfortunes though the deed was his alone (1327-1333) should also be taken into account. Still, it is Apollo’s oracle and Oedipus’s sentence against Laius’s murderer that make him the victim and there is no mention to any hostility of the community against him. Concerning the *Bacchae*, the element of spontaneity is not present as Foley sees it because the dismemberment was orchestrated by Dionysus and the principle of unanimity is questionable insofar as only Asian maenads and Theban women carried out the ritual. Against this perspective there is only Kadmos’s reply to Agave: “You [Agave and the maenads] were mad, and the whole polis was in a bacchic frenzy” (v. 1295). It becomes clear that Dionysus’s influence had spread through the city but it

of Dionysus's divine powers as they carry their loot without holding it on their backs, their hair is on fire but it does not burn them and men's weapons do not harm them (v. 755-762)²⁸¹.

This indistinctness comprises ambiguity, doubleness and impreciseness and it derives from the very idea of a Dionysiac poetics, an art form inspired in the Dionysiac character. Charles Segal affirms that the "Dionysiac includes the dissolution of limits, the spanning of logical contradictions, the suspension of logically imposed categories, and the exploration of in-between-ness and reversibility in a spirit that may veer abruptly from play and wonder to unrestrained savagery"²⁸². The *Bacchae*, imbued of this spirit, is concerned with "the dissolution of order and boundaries – the boundaries between divinity and bestiality in man, reality and imagination, reason and madness, self and other, art and life"²⁸³. There is something of the grotesque in the Dionysiac, because it is a "vision opened by Dionysus, whether through his wine and cult or through the illusion of the drama, [that] makes us *see in simultaneous perspective things otherwise kept apart*"²⁸⁴. In a Dionysiac framework, the choice is not made between the two poles but there rather is an experience of a permanent tension upheld by paradox, interchange and confusion "that questions the very thought-processes that make reality intelligible and therefore manageable"²⁸⁵. The god is an expression of human ability for creativeness and destructiveness, for rapture and obliteration, and for self-assertion and collapse. Like that other god, Janus, Dionysus has two faces: a bright side expressed in the pleasures of communion with nature, artistic creativity and joy, and a dark side that emerges whenever he finds obstacles to his purposes that gives way to violent insanity. The grotesque element of madness reaches its peak in one of the most commented on scenes of the play. I refer to the

does not confirm the participation of all citizens in the *sparagmos*. See Helen P. Foley, *Ritual Irony*, 57. All references to Sophocles's text are from *Oedipus Tyrannus* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001).

²⁸¹ To support even further the relevance of Girard's comments on the erasure of boundaries, I added elements from my own reading of the play, some from Richard Seaford's remarks in the Introduction to the *Bacchae*, as well as references collected from Helene Foley's *Ritual Irony* and Charles Segal's *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' 'Bacchae'*. Seaford finds that despite "the implausibilities of Girard's overall theory", he rightly perceived the importance of sacrifice in the context of Greek religion and culture for only through Pentheus's dismemberment could the cult of Dionysus be founded in Thebes. Introduction to the *Bacchae*, 32. Charles Segal is of a different opinion. He claims that Pentheus did not possess the necessary requirements in terms of purity, namely because of his madness and his playing the role of the *pharmakos*, and that unlike Oedipus, the disintegration of his identity carries forth the fall of Thebes. See Charles Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' 'Bacchae'* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997) pp. 45 and 49. Therefore his dismemberment and sacrifice do not signify reintegration. However, it is a historical fact that the *pharmakos* was made a sacrificial victim.

²⁸² Charles Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics*, 4.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 3. See also page 10 where Segal lists the contrasting characteristics of Dionysus.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 15. Italics added.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

moment when Pentheus sees two suns and two cities. Charles Segal's remarks support my own view of the grotesque in the *Bacchae*, therefore of its existence in a sacrificial format:

His [Pentheus's] is not a vision that can contain the hidden doubleness of the world and survive. He stands there on the stage in a grotesque combination of king and maenad, a visual representation of contradictions that he cannot harmonize. The element of the grotesque gives the scene a comic touch, suggesting still another bifurcation of meanings. But the tragic aspect of this bizarre collocation of opposites lies just in the fact that doubleness and reversal coincide, that the protagonist sees only one side of reality at a time [...]. When he swings to the opposite pole, it is not for integration, but for destruction, dismemberment.²⁸⁶

The elements of disorder and combination that serve as the background for the sacrificial crisis are scattered through the play, frequently with reference to the unanimous participation principle: women driven mad by Dionysus are "[m]ixed up together" with the daughters of Kadmos (v. 35-37), "the whole land will dance" in honour of Dionysus (v. 114), and the god gives away his wine equally among the poor and the rich (v.421-423). But other elements contribute to the sacrificial moment: the cult is referred to as a disease (v. 353); Pentheus is the outsider coming from war to find the city so utterly changed by the Dionysian religion he has become a stranger; with Pentheus's sacrifice Dionysus establishes his cult definitely and order returns to Thebes; violence is exerted according to the principle of unanimity; the mob is able to carry out the metamorphosis of reciprocal violence into unilateral violence²⁸⁷; furthermore, the sacrifice of Pentheus is performed according to the Dionysian ritual of *sparagmos*: dismemberment by an unarmed group²⁸⁸. *Sparagmos* is a ritual doubly associated with Dionysus. In the myth of Pentheus he is the executioner but, like Zagreus, he was the victim of dismemberment by another killing mob, the Titans. In the

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 30.

²⁸⁷ This change is repeatedly referred to as metamorphosis. See for instance pages 86, 95, 96, 98, 107, and 247. The concept that violence possesses metamorphosing potential is a chief idea in my reading of the literary works in question, particularly when associated with *sharam*.

²⁸⁸ The rivalry and doubleness established between Pentheus and Dionysus is manifested on many levels. Pentheus's sacrifice parallels the death by stoning that he wished to submit the leader of the foreign cult to (v. 356). For an exhaustive analysis of instances of doubleness in the play see Charles Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics*: 7-26 for the paradoxical nature of Dionysiac rituals and religion, 27-54 address in detail the splintered images of Pentheus and Dionysus, and 158-214 consider the issue according to a psychological perspective that views Pentheus as the adolescent who failed in the initiatory ritual and is still therefore tied down to the mother and Dionysus as the successful, independent male (a Kristevan view would certainly not fail to see yet an additional meaning: that he is killed by the mother and his severed head rests on her arms in the final scenes).

former case, Thebes was restored to peace and in the latter it not only gave way to the rebirth of Dionysus (the piecing together of Pentheus's body recalls Dionysus's own reconstruction) but also to the birth of humankind. Following a Girardian viewpoint this ambiguity is utterly coherent: either as a killer or as a victim, what must be secured is the emergence of generative violence. Pentheus's story, that can be found repeated in the myths of certain primitive societies²⁸⁹, bears more resemblance to the original collective murder because at least two key elements were preserved: unanimity and no resort to weapons. Consequently, *those instances of dismemberment are closer to the genesis and significance of sacrifice as well as to its saving role:*

The ritual *sparagmos* re-enacts with scrupulous exactitude the mob violence that brought riot and disorder to an end. In the ritual performance, the community tries to mimic the gestures that effected its salvation. It is also trying, paradoxically enough, to recapture through ritual the element of complete spontaneity. (VS, 131. Italics in the text)

The meaning of dismemberment in the context of ritual sacrifice is made clearer when its *finality* comes into view in the myth of the Tsimshian princess. By being dismembered by the tribe of cripples of Chief Pestilence, Master of Deformities, she eliminated the possibility of reciprocal violence. Her cousin had scarred his own face for her and having been magically healed by Chief Pestilence he demands she mutilates herself as well. But the princess, by not having her beauty repaired and in being put to death in such a manner, ascertains a definite difference between the two. The *sparagmos* is therefore a most constructive means to secure differentiation. Girard summarises the value of dismemberment thus: "Dismemberment is emblematic of triumph and resurrection; it reflects the operation of the surrogate victim, the transformation of maleficent violence into beneficent violence" (VS, 286).

The sacrificial victim always embodies the duality of the epitome that is the Greek *pharmakos*, an individual whose living was supported by the finances of Athens and who was sacrificed whenever a crisis threatened the city in any of its forms: low agricultural production, disease, political crisis, foreign invasion or social upheaval. The individual is paraded in the city

²⁸⁹ Girard himself notes the continuation of this specific model of sacrifice among the Dinkas, Upper Egypt (VS, 97-98), and in the Incwala society, Swaziland (VS, 110-111). He also quotes Robertson Smith in Freud's *Totem and Taboo* to add an example of a tribe of the Sinai desert (VS, 199) and mentions Franz Boas to introduce a myth to be looked into shortly belonging to the Tsimshian Indians, Canada (VS, 244-48). I recall that Girard's interpretation of primitive society is that where a sacrificial system is still valid as a contrast to a society where a functional judicial system regulates the forces of negativity that that very society produces while eliminating the possibility of reprisal.

streets to receive the insults and beatings which transfer to his body the citizens' guilt and frustration²⁹⁰. But by restoring serenity, the scapegoat's image re-emerges filled with respectful veneration. Girard concludes: "This duality reflects the metamorphosis the ritual victim is designed to effect; the victim draws to itself all the violence infecting the original victim and through its own death transforms this baneful violence into beneficial violence, into harmony and abundance" (*VS*, 95). Underlying the transformation of a situation of surrogate victimisation into sacred mythologisation is the scapegoat mechanism through which the victim is transferred to the area of myth and subsequently sacralised. The ways through which the sacred myth restores peace remain mysterious and they too are ascribed to the field of myth.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* provides a good illustration of the scapegoat mechanism. The story evolves around three children, two twins and their cousin. The arrival of Estha and Rahel's half-white English-educated cousin enhances the previously sensed notion of adequacy and right to love. Sophie Mol's presence made it clear that there were laws, unsaid and unwritten but laws nevertheless, to define who should be loved, and how, and how much. Sophie Mol was, in fact, much more the focus of the family's love, particularly of Mammachi, their grandmother, and Baby Kochamma, their grandaunt, and that in spite of this being their first meeting. The strict rules regulating the right to love are presented in *The God of Small Things* as lying at the basis of India's social fabric. The transgression of such fundamental guidelines by Velutha, the untouchable servant, on daring to touch Ammu, requires dire punishment on the part of those who were already shaken by the death of Sophie Mol. On the one hand, someone who is not entitled to be loved dares to ask for it; on the other, there is the loss of the object of love. The deviation from the established norms of conduct threaten the social boundaries, in a word, the membrane of separation must be renovated. The renovation must be performed as a sacrifice. His father offers to kill him, to "tear him limb to limb" but it is the police who are the agent of this dismembering ritual²⁹¹:

They heard the thud of wood on flesh. Boot on bone. On teeth. The muffled grunt when a stomach is kicked in. The muted crunch of skull on cement. The gurgle of blood on a man's breath when his lung is torn by the jagged end of a broken rib.

²⁹⁰ Having cross-dressed Pentheus, Dionysus also makes him parade the city (v. 853-854).

²⁹¹ Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (London: Flamingo, 1997) 256.

[...][T]hey watched, mesmerized by something that they sensed but didn't understand: the absence of caprice in what the policemen did. The abyss where anger should have been. The sober, steady brutality, the economy of it all. [...]

The twins were too young to know that these were only history's henchmen. [...] Feelings of contempt born of inchoate, unacknowledged fear – civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness.

Man's subliminal urge to destroy what he could neither subdue nor deify.

Men's Needs.²⁹²

By shattering Velutha's physical being, for he will succumb to the injuries, the policemen annul its transgressive action. It is a sacrifice in the name of social preservation and historic continuity achieved through the withdrawal of the right to humanity:

What Esthappen and Rahel witnessed that morning, though they didn't know it then, was a clinical demonstration in controlled conditions (this was not war, after all, or genocide) of human nature's pursuit of ascendancy. Structure, Order. Complete monopoly. [...]

There was nothing accidental about what happened that morning. Nothing *incidental*. It was no stray mugging or personal settling of scores. This was an era imprinting itself on those who lived in it.

History in live performance.

If they hurt Velutha more than they intended to, it was only because any kinship, any connection between themselves and him, any implication that if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature – had been severed long ago. They were not arresting a man, they were exorcizing fear. [...]

Unlike the custom of rampaging religious mobs or conquering armies running riot, that morning in the Heart of Darkness the pose of Touchable Policemen acted with economy, not frenzy. Efficiency, not anarchy. Responsibility, not hysteria. They didn't tear out his hair or burn him alive. They didn't hack off his genitals and stuff them in his mouth. They didn't rape him. Or behead him.

After all, they were not battling an epidemic. They were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak.²⁹³

²⁹² Ibid., 308-309.

²⁹³ Ibid., 309. Italics in the text.

Two aspects should be pointed out in the passage. The first is the choice of the image of severance functioning with a double meaning. It refers to the difference between Velutha and the policemen (between the lack of authority and authority, between untouchability and touchability, between inferiority and superiority) and to the effect of the action of the policemen on Velutha's body. This leads to the second point, that the description of the sort of mutilation *not* done to him is, in reality, an accusation of what symbolically they are acting out. Velutha's hopes were burnt, the beating did aim at emasculating, his rights were violated, and he was beheaded in the sense he was denied the capacity to a free thinking will. He *was* torn apart by people with an appetite for destruction as vicious as that of an enraged mob. Again the grotesque can be found in a context of sacrifice:

His skull was fractured in three places. His nose and both his cheekbones were smashed, leaving his face pulpy, undefined. The blow to his mouth had split open his upper lip and broken six teeth, three of which were embedded in his lower lip, hideously inverting his beautiful smile. Four of his ribs were splintered, one had pierced his left lung, which was what made him bleed from his mouth. The blood in his breath bright red. Fresh. Frothy. His lower intestine was ruptured and haemorrhaged, the blood collected in his abdominal cavity. His spine was damaged in two places, the concussion had paralysed his right arm and resulted in a loss of control over his bladder and rectum. Both his kneecaps were shattered.

Still they brought out the handcuffs.²⁹⁴

We are reminded of Salman Rushdie's handcuffs of history. Sacrifice can thus be identified as a necessary resort in the survival of a given community. What I would like to consider shortly is why, as Martha Reineke has noticed, scapegoats tend to be female, an issue that Girard was unable to address by reason of the perspective of his subject being in all cases male. When he says that "[t]he theory that mythological themes serve to express man's fear of natural phenomena has in the twentieth century given way to the idea that those same themes conceal man's fear of the purely sexual and 'incestuous' nature of his desires" (*VS*, 118), Girard can only be coherent with his own discourse if "man's fear" is synonymous of a male fear.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 310.

1.2.2. Martha Reineke's gender-informed perspective of the theory of the sacrificial victim: the socio-historical treatment of the witch reconsidered

Julia Kristeva's accomplishment was to develop a theory of sacrifice which added a sexual dimension to René Girard's perceptive decoding of the workings of sacrificial mechanisms. Girard's sparse comments on the role of women in a sacrificial economy are, in fact, not wholly coherent. He gathers that cultures of violence do not bear any particular connection with women. Though he admits that often they occupy an inferior position in society, he posits that they are seldom chosen to be protagonists in a sacrificial ritual. The reason for that circumstance is linked with the profile of the victim mentioned before. A woman, by not being regarded a truly autonomous member of society, belongs to the sphere of the father, the husband, or both. Hence, if a woman were to be sacrificed, she would arouse the vindictive instincts of those men (*VS*, 12).

Elaborate as it might be, this reasoning is bluntly contradicted by our experience of the world and by historical evidence. Martha Reineke in *Sacrificed Lives: Kristeva on Women and Violence* aims precisely at investigating why women's bodies are privileged sites for sacrifice, in her own powerful expression, why any woman is "marked for murder"²⁹⁵. On dwelling on the persecutory phenomenon of witch-hunting Reineke identifies unmarried women, childless women, businesswomen and midwives as particularly exposed groups to the rage of witch-haters. This was especially true when mingled with a Puritan mentality which viewed these women as monstrosities rejecting the roles that God and tradition had assigned them to fulfil and that were directly linked with procreation²⁹⁶. Furthermore, Girard fails to see a flaw in his own argument for when referring to the disposition of the houses where the women lived in given South American groups he refers to their peripheral location, which reflects women's reduced importance in the social structure as a whole (*VS*, 140-1). To be marginal, I recall, is precisely the decisive sign Girard had identified as the sign of the sacrificeable. In addition, in order to support his view of a loss of differentiation marking a sacrificial crisis, he interprets the violence of the bacchants in Euripides's tragedy as absence of sexual differentiation insofar as it depends on the masculinisation of women (*VS*, 141).

²⁹⁵ See Martha Reineke, *Sacrificed Lives: Kristeva on Women and Violence* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1997) pp. 1-7. The quotation appears on page 29.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

In my view, the categorical refusal to accept a strictly feminine ability to exert violence is at the least unfounded, and probably even misogynistic. Girard's reluctance to accept women's violence is such that he even speculates that probably the ruthless dismemberment of Pentheus was not even carried out by women but by men who later transferred the authorship of the murder to a weaker group of people (*VS*, 139). In any case, his conclusion confirms Reineke's and my own perspective that regards women as preferred victims. Contradicting his own remarks at the beginning of the book, Girard asserts that "[I]ike the animal and the infant, but to a lesser degree, the woman qualifies for sacrificial status by reason of her weakness and relatively marginal social status. That is why she can be viewed as a quasi-sacred figure, both desired and disdained, alternately elevated and abused" (*VS*, 141-2). The reason for the discrepancy is that Girard throughout his book makes the sacrificial *individual* (Oedipus, Pentheus, Dionysus, the selected individual of a given tribe) the main performer in the spectacle of ritual sacrifice, and only occasionally, such as in the passage above, does he consider the victim as one of a sacrificeable *group*²⁹⁷.

One of the reasons that makes any woman a sacrificeable victim is mentioned by Girard himself. He identifies menstrual blood as an impure substance that can contaminate the community. To avoid that, many societies have developed a taboo concerning menstruation and menstruating women can even be temporarily removed from the group (*VS*, 33). There are two implications to Girard's argument that he seems to be unaware of himself: the first is that most, if not almost all women will bleed, do bleed, or have bled, which is to say, that the vast majority of women are marked with the impurity that sets victims apart. The second points in the same direction; by being physically removed to a place *on the fringes* of society, women are made to occupy a place where one goes to look for a victim if the need arises for a sacrifice. Kristeva, on the contrary, reads menstrual blood as a polluting element with specific sexual connotations. It points to the feminine power of pollution, that is, the power of destruction, as well as to a procreative power that can be equally harmful. "Fear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power", Kristeva argues (*PH*, 77)²⁹⁸.

²⁹⁷ The fact that *The Scapegoat* takes off from Guillaume de Machaut's making of the Jews the scapegoats for the fourteenth century plague in a village in France makes his blindness to women's particular permeability to victimisation even more puzzling. Contrary to the view concerning the Jews, Girard does not tend to see women as a group.

²⁹⁸ See pages 78 and 79 as well.

1.2.3. Bakhtin and Girard meet and divide: the issue of violence

The formulation of a theory that is myopic to gender issues is common to Bakhtin and Girard. Their views coincide in numerous aspects which should not be surprising considering both are concerned with issues of violence. When Girard draws his attention to carnival festivities, he interprets them as ritualistic manifestations which have a meaning coinciding with a Bakhtinian perspective²⁹⁹:

[In a festival] [f]amily and social hierarchies are temporarily suppressed or inverted; children no longer respect their parents, servants their masters, vassals their lords. This motif is reflected in the esthetics of the holiday – the display of clashing colors, the parading of transvestite figures, the slapstick antics of piebald ‘fools’. For the duration of the festival unnatural acts and outrageous behavior are permitted, even encouraged.

As one might expect, this destruction of differences is often accompanied by violence and strife. Subordinates hurl insults at their superiors; various social factions exchange gibes and abuse. Disputes rage in the midst of disorder. In many instances the motif of rivalry makes its appearance in the guise of a contest, game, or sporting event that has assumed a quasi-ritualistic cast. Work is suspended, and the celebrants give themselves over to drunken revelry and the consumption of all the food amassed over the course of many months. (VS, 119)

²⁹⁹ For an in depth comment on festival and ritual in the *Bacchae* see Helene P. Foley’s *Ritual Irony*, pages 205-258. Her assumption is that Pentheus’s sacrifice becomes a necessity for he would not accept the truth of the festival and theatre, therefore blocking the benefits it could bring to the worshipper and the polis:

The old can be temporarily rejuvenated; women can leave the confined internal space of the home and move about unhampered by marriage and children; pain can be released in wine, song, and dance; peace reigns. [...] By adopting new garments and new movements the participant can take on another role. In accepting the god’s myths and symbols he may see the world differently and express this change of state with a special ritual vocabulary. The god’s costume suggests that of a structural inferior, woman; his *thursoi* and fawnskins are emblems of a ritual power that can overcome man made metal weapons. As the chorus emphasizes, the wisdom of Dionysus is the wisdom of the masses, of the whole community: his followers speak with one voice. (Helen P. Foley, *Ritual Irony*, 236. Italics in the text)

Charles Segal considers the themes of Saturnalia, disorder and regenerative dismemberment briefly as he sees that approach, along as the Girardian, to be over optimistic since the text, in his view, never discards the ambiguity of ritual action and Dionysiac religion thus it retains its problematic aspects. See Charles Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics*, 37-38.

This approach, though wholly concurring with Bakhtin, already puts forward various aspects that hold a particularly relevant meaning to Girard: the elimination of differences, the aspect of violence, and the introduction of the logic of rivalry which can be added to the previously mentioned carnivalesque aspects of unanimity and abundance. For Girard, the effacement of social difference does more than concede temporary relief from a tightly knitted system; violence is not only openly admitted but preserves a negativity that can nevertheless serve the interests of the group; and the concept of doubleness, that Bakhtin also viewed as a carnivalesque-grotesque feature, gains contours of monstrosity in Girard's sacrificial theory. Though their reading of the festivities coincide they are illuminated by different supporting social models: Girard regards them as the observable remains of the spectacle that once commemorated a sacrificial crisis whereas Bakhtin sees them as fulfilling a function of relief that is absolutely fundamental to that time to prevent the very structure that allows one's existence in a socially organised space from crushing the individuals that make it up. From Girard's viewpoint, the festive character of events that draw on ritualised death is justified insofar as originally festivals worked as background to an event that would bring prosperity to the community. The fact that those festivities can be maintained is due to their link having been broken with the original bloody sacrifice; festivities do not recall their cause. In some cases, a clue was preserved, usually of a carnivalesque nature, such as the mock battles that took place before the Greek Bouphonia (*VS*, 98), in Dinka rituals (*VS*, 97, 140) or between the exorcists (*VS*, 123). Girard is closest to the grotesque spirit, both Kayserian and Bakhtinian, when he says that "the festival revitalizes the cultural order by re-enacting its conception, reproducing an experience that is viewed as the *source of health and abundance*; reenacting, in fact, the moment when the *fear of falling into interminable violence* is most intense and the community is therefore most closely drawn together" (*VS*, 120. Italics added). Antifestivals, periods during which the rules and norms instead of being relaxed are reinforced, play the same function: to avoid the setting loose of violence that can disseminate society, in other words, to prevent that a sacrificial crisis is installed.

Girard shares enough characteristics with Bakhtin for his thesis to be considered in the context of the grotesque. Besides carnival and sacrificial crisis contributing to cultural indifferentiation, Bakhtin and Girard also develop their thinking along the lines of a cathartic consequence, namely through festivals and their brutish manifestations (beating and insulting). Following diverse reckonings, they assume the role of generative violence branching from the unanimity that Girard manifests in a tone echoing that of Bakhtin: "The act of collective

murder is seen as the source of all abundance; the principle of procreation is attributed to it, and all those plants that are useful to man; everything beneficial and nutritive is said to take root in the body of the primordial victim” (*VJ*, 94). In addition, it is implicitly and explicitly acknowledged that through the sacrifice of the victim death enables life, so that the concept of pregnant death is also part of Girard’s theory (*VJ*, 255). It is thus established that the theory of sacrifice can bring additional significance to the grotesque, particularly as far as the Bakhtinian view goes. The chief discrepancy is the theme of violence itself that, at least in a Bakhtinian-inspired perspective, seems to be deprived of its very violent substance. Being central to both theories and to my joint approach, this apparent difficulty needs to be addressed in detail.

Violence is a corollary to the grotesque spirit insofar as it is the disintegrating force that puts the world under a permanent tension and fear before the vision of its imminent destruction. But going beyond the Kayserian view, violence can also play a part in the more optimistic grotesque network of relationships of Bakhtin’s approach. The meaning of violence can be taken further than just a shattering menace; it can be the starting point that leads to regenerative death. Stressing the correlation between violence and the grotesque in Flannery O’Connor’s work, Gilbert H. Muller claims that the former contributes to heighten situations, particularly those with theological implications and to illuminate a world where spiritual disorder and warfare rule. As a consequence, we have to face the problem of the existence of evil and can move on to trying to find solutions. In O’Connor’s fiction, Muller argues, violence serves the purposes of the grotesque: it is used to shock the characters and the readers and it is made an expression of sin. Violence intrudes, suddenly, in a familiar and reliable landscape and makes it a hellish place. Muller’s remarks about Shiftlet and Pointer, the criminals in the tale “Good Country People”, describe the nature of the violence that is also Sufiya’s in *Shame*:

Through violence they both create the irrationality of their own lives and lead other victims into it. These acts of violence cause relationships to collapse, and they clarify the hatreds, fears, and obsessions of the grotesque antagonists as well. By revealing a world which resists order, the violent antagonist becomes a crucial figure in revealing the nature of the demonic landscape in which he operates.

The violent figure frequently becomes an extension of the world which he inhabits.³⁰⁰

Acts of violence in Flannery O'Connor's fiction realise a specific religious context so that the grotesque helps to interpret sin, punishment, purification and otherwise ramifications of spirituality. But violence seems to perform an exorcising task as well. By depicting violent actions, it is tested whether violence represents "a sufficient power to rejuvenate a fallen world" and whether it has the capacity "to resurrect the grotesque world" or, if we do away with the religious imagery, to what extent can violence actually contribute to fight against the disintegration of the world³⁰¹. Gilbert Muller's approach favours a Kayserian perspective but violence, though less emphasised, is also considered by Bakhtin who views it, sometimes forcefully, as a re-organising, regenerative principle. Medieval feasts and most manifestations of carnival spirit did presuppose violent behaviour. The victory of the Venetian doge, Peter II Orsola, over the fleet of Frederick Barbarossa of Aquileia, already mentioned elsewhere in my work, was celebrated by releasing a dozen pigs in St Mark's Square where they were beheaded and quartered by butchers and blacksmiths. In Italy, team combat was immensely appreciated and though they were in principle harmless events, they often ended in bloodshed due to their enormous aggressive charge. The groups, the *brigata*, wore the colours and banners of the respective *quartiere*, parish or city and, particularly in the latter case, these chivalrous fights, the *battaglie*, were organised as actual tournaments. These fights occupied an important place in the social system since they reinforced group cohesion. The Castello d'Amore, devised as a love game, frequently ended with brutal conflicts. Groups of young noblemen, sumptuously dressed, charged a wooden or paper fortress inside of which the maidens measured their boldness. As proof of their affection, the young men would throw them flowers, candies, confetti, small bags with rare spices and even bottles of perfume. The competition was so strongly felt that when the winners were chosen, the defeated ones and their friends frequently started street fights. Among the popular classes the same warrior spirit pervaded; in Venice and Pisa took place the so-called bridge fights consisting of two parties, one from each side of the river, fighting bare-handed or with clubs. The winners would then roam the city, humiliating the losers. The bridge fights and the celebrations following them always had as a consequence a considerable number of injured men and, at times, even of dead ones. Horse racing, a legacy of Roman times, remained popular in the late Middle Ages and in Genoa,

³⁰⁰ Gilbert H. Muller, *Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1972) 80-81.

Bologna and Rome they were one of the most anxiously expected events of the year. In Siena, the winning team would boastfully exhibit the prize, the *palio*, and among shouts and affronts, would ride their horses in front of rival churches and even inside, at the altars.

Violent actions of this sort, directed at given people, could also occur in relation to a single individual, thus gaining the innuendo of a sacrifice. It is reported, for instance, that in 1237, Frederick II, on successfully commanding a military force against the Lombard League, a confederacy of Lombard towns formed with papal support in 1167 against attempts by the Holy Roman Empire to weaken their liberties, ordered that the prisoners be paraded in the *carroccio* through the streets of Cremona. The chained captain was the prime focus of attention. A similar episode refers to the triumphant return to Paris of Philip II Augustus, after defeating the armies of Otto IV, the count of Flanders, at the battle of Bouvines in 1214. Contrasting with the proud banners of king Philip, the traitor Ferrand was chained and helpless against the insults and mocking of the people who stood watching the cart passing by.

These examples demonstrate how violence originated from all social spheres but they also point to the political and social nature lying underneath: exaltation of political fidelity, warning against enemies, strengthening of the sense of national consciousness, reinforcement of the status quo and of community ties. Feasts make a public and violent demonstration of common strengths and stress dependencies as well. Hence, their place in Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival³⁰². But violence is also present for Bakhtin when it comes to the grotesque body. It has been said that Bakhtin's position is based on the theorisation of the material bodily principle and its stress on the outward and inner features of the animal or human body (blood, bowels, heart and other organs). Grotesque images may well be for Bakhtin representations of dismembered parts of the body. On focusing on the materiality of the body he is concerned with its conception, processes of biologic evolution (degradation) and death. The very process of becoming presupposes death. Thus his extensive study on banquet imagery in Rabelais's work, such as the previously described cattle slaughter episode, and the identification of the wide-open mouth as the leading theme of *Pantagruel* where food images appear interlocked with images of birth, procreation and death. In other instances of Rabelais's books that Bakhtin looks into the element of violence is also inherent. Such would be the case of sacristan Tappecoue ("Ticklepecker") who, by refusing to lend vestments to a

³⁰¹ Ibid., 96.

³⁰² These examples were taken, however, from a different source so that the validity of the historical evidence can be established. They are independent from Bakhtin's intentions about carnival. See Jacques Heers, *Fêtes des fous et Carnavals* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1983).

passion play, incurred a bloody revenge. The actors playing the devils of the play threw burning tar at Tappecoue who was passing by the inn where they had been feasting. It frightened his filly and Tappecoue fell, hanging only on a foot. The filly “trepann’d his thick Skull so, that his Cockle Brains were dash’d out near the *Osanna* or *High Cross*. Then his Arms fell to pieces, one this way and t’ other that way, and even so were his Legs serv’d at the same time: Then she made a bloody havock with his Puddings, and being got to the Convent, brought back only his right Foot and twisted Sandal, leaving them to guess what was become of the rest”³⁰³. It is noteworthy that dismemberment is highly exaggerated and that, in addition, it is described with culinary terms.

Another passage describes the journey to the island of the Catchpoles whose inhabitants, in exchange for a monetary compensation, let themselves be thrashed. Friar John is seen thwacking and cracking a Catchpole on the belly, back, head and legs until he falls to earth for twenty gold crowns³⁰⁴. Thrashing Catchpoles is also the theme of the episode at the house of the Lord of Basché. The French custom of *noces à mitaines*³⁰⁵ referred to a ritual taking place during some wedding feasts, whereby guests gave each other light blows. In Rabelais’s exaggerated version the Lord of Basché devises a strategy to punish slandered Catchpoles who come to his castle with summons to court. Whenever one of them made an appearance, a mock wedding was enacted and the guests forced to participate since it was a ritual consecrated by custom. However, in these cases the cuffing was replaced with heavy beating. This is the description of what happened to the second visitor:

[T]hey stroak’d him so to the purpose that he piss’d Blood out at Mouth, Nose, Ears, and Eyes, and was bruise’d, sore, batter’d, bebump’d, and crippled at the Back, Neck, Breast, Arms, and soforth. Never did the Batchelors at Avignon in Carnival time play more melodiously at *Raphe*, than was then play’d on the Catchpole’s Microcosm: at last down he fell.

³⁰³ François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Book 4, ch. 13, 559. Italics in the text. In *Rabelais and His World* it reads: he “bashed his head so hard against the road that his brains spurted out somewhere near the Hosanna.. Both arms and both legs were crushed to a pulp; his intestines were pounded to a jelly; and when the filly reached her monastery stable, the sole trace of Friar Ticklepecker was a right sandal and the stump of the foot inside” (RW, 263-264). Once again the problem of sources is raised but the content, though not so much the words, is very close.

³⁰⁴ François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Book 4, ch. 16, 566.

³⁰⁵ *Noces à mitaines* can be translated into “gauntlet weddings” which carries a double meaning: it recalls physical violence (“gauntlet” as the metal glove of the medieval warrior) and the exposition to social reprobation (“gauntlet” in the sense of being the subject of severe criticism, or of being at risk or even danger). These mock beatings immediately bring to mind Girard’s own references.

They threw a great deal of Wine on his Snout, ty'd round the Sleeve of his Doublet a fine yellow and green *Favour*, and got him upon his snotty Beast.³⁰⁶

The numerous beatings, fights and insults of Rabelais's imagination have, as in these cases, an unequivocal carnival dimension. The images of the grotesque body make it clear: Tappecoue is torn to pieces (like Penpheus and Orpheus by the Bacchantes) because he refused to commit sacrilege by making a sacred vestment a gift for a popular spectacle, a masquerade, in fact; he refused to contribute, that is, with a change of dress, to the change and renewal of life. The Catchpole Friar John beats up makes a sudden, clownish jump and is back on his feet, returning happily to life to receive his money. The victim of the Lord of Basché's ingenious revenge is decorated with colourful ribbons like the fat ox that in carnival season was led through the streets of France in solemn procession to the place of slaughter. The Catchpole and the ox thus become the protagonists of carnival sacrifice. The Catchpole's punishment becomes festive laughter because with him is beaten and killed the ways of the old. With the thrashing is associated the set of carnival images of merriment, food, beverage, travesty, debasement, humiliation, resurrection, punishment, body parts and dismemberment³⁰⁷. Bakhtin sees the "anatomizing dismemberment" or "carnival dismemberment" of these people in a positive light (*RW*, 202): "Thrashing is as ambivalent as abuse changed into praise. There is no pure abstract negation in the popular-festive system of images; it tends to embrace both poles of becoming in their contradiction and unity. The one who is thrashed or slaughtered is decorated. The beating itself has a gay character; it is introduced and concluded with laughter" (*RW*, 203). Thrashing and abuse contribute then, as far as Bakhtin sees it, to a carnival spirit:

³⁰⁶ François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Book 4, ch. 14, 561. Italics in the text. In *Rabelais and His World*.

They laid on so heartily that blood spurted from his mouth, nose, ears and eyes. Catchpole was beaten to a pulp; his shoulders dislocated; his head, neck, back and breast pounded into mincemeat. You may take my word for it that Avignon, in carnival time, never produced youngsters that played more melodiously at thump-socket than those vassals of My Lord of Basché upon the person of Catchpole. The poor fellow fell, in a faint, to the ground.

They poured several gallons of wine into his snout; they tied yellow and green ribbons, for favors, to his double; and they set him on his snotty horse (*RW*, 201-202)

³⁰⁷ See also, for instance, Book 1, ch. 27, the episode describing the atrocious beating and killing by Friar John of 13,622 men.

In such a system [the popular-festive system of images] the king is the clown. He is elected by all the people and is mocked by all the people. He is abused and beaten when the time of his reign is over, just as the carnival dummy of winter or of the dying year is mocked, beaten, torn to pieces, burned, or drowned even in our time. They are 'gay monsters.' The clown was first disguised as a king, but once his reign had come to an end his costume was changed, 'travestied,' to turn him once more into a clown. The abuse and thrashing are equivalent to a change of costume, to a metamorphosis. (RW, 197)

Anticipating Girard, Bakhtin already views violence as synonym of positive metamorphosis. Bakhtin's discourse is careful to avoid the issue of violence per se and concentrates on its imagery, that is, on the de/construction of the body in order to preserve his argument of ambivalent value. In *Rabelais and His World* the words "violence", "aggression", or "pain" as well as their derivatives are systematically avoided as they point to a non-material reference much more liable to negative connotations. Only rarely and timidly does he approach the subject. When he comments that authority is made into "a Mardi Gras dummy, a comic monster that the laughing crowd rends to pieces in the marketplace" (RW, 213. Notice again the theme of dismemberment), he adds that "[le] *Jind* master Rabelais deals with these dummies pitilessly, cruelly, but merrily. Actually, it is gay time itself in whose name and with whose voice the master speaks. Rabelais does not torture living persons. Let them go, but first of all let them remove their royal robes and pompous academic gowns of the Sorbonne in which they masquerade as heralds of divine truths" (RW, 213. Italics added). What seems to happen though is that the removal of those robes is achieved with, if not torturing, at least definitely violent methods (which is not to deny the discrowning potential of beating). His position has a double consequence: women's specific location in the culture of violence is overlooked and it withholds the related themes of sacrifice and abjection. Bakhtin does admit that in the *querelle des femmes*, taking place between 1542 and 1550, Rabelais adopted the point of view of the Gallic tradition that upheld a medieval-based attitude towards women and wedlock which was opposed to the idealising tradition that exalted womanhood. Bakhtin justifies Rabelais's standpoint arguing that the Gallic tradition was itself ambivalent: along with its Christian-oriented mentality that regarded women as the source of the fall of humanity, that is, of *man*, and the embodiment of lustful temptation, stood a popular tradition of a much more positive vein. He further argues that, by being misrepresented in *fabliaux*, *facéties*, novellas and farces, the idiosyncratic ambivalence of womanhood is changed into ambiguity. Women

are made repositories of sensuousness, falsehood and baseness. He feebly defends his point by adding that “these are not abstract moral traits of the human being” but it is difficult to conceive of those characteristics as anything else but moral judgements (*RW*, 240). Furthermore, Bakhtin misses the point since they were attributed not to any human being but to women in particular. His argument is thus weakened, even as he insists that women are the performers of the processes of renewal of life. He says that in the Gallic tradition

[w]omanhood is shown in contrast to the limitations of her partner (husband, lover, or suitor); she is a foil to his avarice, jealousy, stupidity, hypocrisy, bigotry, sterile senility, false heroism, and abstract idealism. The woman of Gallic tradition is the bodily grave of man. She represents in person the undoing of pretentiousness, of all that is finished, completed, and exhausted. She is the inexhaustible vessel of conception, which dooms all that is old and terminated. (*RW*, 240)

On claiming that this tradition is not detrimental to women, Bakhtin himself is destroying the very ambivalence he says it incorporates: he chooses to privilege its joyful aspects and disregards the obvious hostility and misogyny of Christian thought. Mary Russo is, however, aware of the perilous situation of women in society, history and even in the theory of carnival and the refusal to recognise it, and to take into account all perspectives and *subjects*, including women, instead produces what she calls the carnival of theory. She draws special attention to the issue of violence when she discusses the figure of Lady Skimmington. In the Wiltshire riots of 1641, men cross-dressed and adopted the name of Lady Skimmington, a reference to a ride performed on the streets to humiliate a henpecked husband. The appropriation of the image of the virago with social transformative purposes is not, as Russo observes, a straightforward affair. It is questionable whether it contributes to the inclusion of the female subject in history. As Russo herself comments,

as a form of representation, masquerade of the feminine [...] has its distinct problems. The carnivalized woman such as Lady Skimmington, whose comic female masquerade of those ‘feminine’ qualities of strident wifely *aggression*, behind whose skirts men are protected and provoked to actions, is an image that, however counterproduced, perpetuates the dominant (and in this case misogynistic) representation of women by men.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁸ Mary Russo, “Female Grotesques”, 216. Italics added.

Therefore, Lady Skimmington and her husband stand for depreciated qualities of their respective genders; Russo calls Lady Skimmington's characteristics strong aspects of femininity, but based on her own words, I would argue that that strength is directly linked with aggression. Thus, there is a risk for women to put on the feminine as they might become parodies, possibly undermining the liberatory and transgressive role that masquerading has for men since there is an identification with the cultural sign. Bearing this in mind, it becomes clear that being aware of gender differences is crucial in the context of the carnivalesque because of the strength/aggression potential. When Russo asserts that carnivalesque festivities are dangerous for women even on a physical level (she mentions rapes, for instance), I read it as a strategy to repress, through violence, women's own instinctive violence. She writes: "in the everyday indicative world, women and their bodies, certain bodies, in certain public framings, in certain public spaces, are always already transgressive - dangerous, and in danger"³⁰⁹. Dangerous, that is, not only because they embody social revolt (acting both for men and women) but also, I would add, because they can deploy danger against men (and even other women). This context of imbalance of relations of power and of claustrophobic oppression creates a need for a temporary escape that allows tension to be released, that is to say, for a carnival moment. That manifestation assumes the function of a sacrifice since on having only brief permission to pass on the accumulated tension of social obligations and the anger resulting from private frustrations, it becomes important to release those quickly and effectively. Violence towards a single individual or clearly identified group thus takes place. Women, for the reasons Russo indicates, occupy a particularly weak position in the network of social relations and thus are more liable to become scapegoats. Julia Kristeva's thinking of sacrificial economy clearly agrees with this reasoning.

1.2.4. The carnivalesque-grotesque: Sufiya Zinobia and Omar Shakif

Having thus considered Girard's theory on violence and sacrifice, I can turn to Salman Rushdie's *Shame* where those mechanisms can be found at work. Having also pointed out the necessity to complement Girard with a feminine-concerned view, Julia Kristeva's always incisive work will be throughout fully expanded. But firstly attention must be drawn to the mood of shame that belongs to the semantic field of sacrifice as much as martyrdom in *When*

Dreams Travel or, in fact, penance in one of Githa Hariharan's other novels, *The Thousand Faces of the Night*.

Salman Rushdie's *Shame* is a new history of a country Rushdie refers to as Peccavistan and inflected through several literary strategies such as the grotesque, magic realism, reversals, exaggeration and improbability. The author's subversive intentions of denying the one-sidedness of historic authority is fictionalised in the plural alternatives that the novel provides to what Pakistan *might* have been. The multiple versions of history, none more "authentic" than the other, show history breaking into little pieces, exhibiting its inner weakness, that is, the always already potential for fragmentation: "[H]owever I choose to write about over-there, I am forced to reflect that world in fragments of broken mirrors [...]. I must reconcile myself to the inevitability of the missing bits", says the narrator (*S*, 69). Recurring to a metaphor of another reputable demythologiser, Angela Carter in *Nights at the Circus*, we can say that history in *Shame* is just another confidence trick or in Rushdie's more positive expression, that it is an imaginary homeland.

Positioned at the centre of the novel, exerting its merciless force like a vortex, does not lie a character. In fact, if one must specify two protagonists they would either be Omar Shakil and Sufiya Zinobia Hyder or the political rivals Raza Hyder and Iskander Harappa (the parodic representations respectfully of General Zia and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto). As the text itself comments, Omar is just a peripheral hero, a sidelined figure who is unable to become an agent and to whom, strangely enough, history just seems to happen. His wife, Sufiya, is a retarded, homicidal, metamorphosed-into-a-feline virgin. Even the lives of the two dictators revolve, in a permanent attempt to escape it, around the inexhaustible, inexorable and infamous idea announcing itself in the title: shame. Being aware of one of the most often referred to problems involving postcolonial studies, the author (who constructs the text so that the reader can have no doubt that the voice of the narrator is one of his own) feels the need to clarify the cultural, social and even ethical difference in meaning that is implied in translation. Omar was the child of one of the three Shakil sisters but the reader never learns who his "real" mother is; all undergo the pains of labour and assume the role of the mother when it comes to his education. So that we, supposedly non-South Asian readers, can begin to understand the extent of the shame that *should* involve Omar's birth (but does not because Omar does not assume it), the narrator/author makes an inflamed exposition:

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 217.

This word: shame. No, I must write in its original form, not in this peculiar language tainted by wrong concepts and the accumulated detritus of its owners' unrepented past, this Angrezi in which I am forced to write, and so for ever alter what is written...

Sharam, that's the word. For which this paltry 'shame' is a wholly inadequate translation. Three letters, *shin rē mim* (written, naturally, from right to left) plus *zabar* accents indicating the short vowel sounds. A short word, but one containing encyclopaedias of nuance. It was not only shame that his mothers forbade Omar Khayyam to feel, but also embarrassment, discomfiture, decency, modesty, shyness, the sense of having an ordained place in the world, and other dialects of emotion for which English has no counterparts. (*S*, 38-9. Italics in the text)

To this definition is added a gender dimension provided by Sufiya whose birth is announced as a wrong miracle. The first born of Bilquis and Raza Hyder, a much desired boy, was strangled to death in his mother's womb. Their imaginations had been possessed for months with the great triumphs of this child so that, confronted with a stillborn, the parents became convinced that "a second pregnancy would be an act of replacement", "a free substitute for the damaged goods" (*S*, 83). Sufiya was, therefore, expected to be the reincarnation of her dead brother. *Vis-à-vis* the birth of a daughter, everyone is silent because silence, we are told, is "the ancient language of defeat" (*S*, 89). It follows an angry outburst on the part of the father, trying to argue with the medical staff that a mistake might have occurred in relation with the child's gender. Apparently, femaleness can lead to such extremes of ridicule and aggression (the general's shouting is described in terms of warfare so that his acceptance of Sufiya's gender is felt like a defeat in battle). Despairing, he tears the baby's clothes and with a raping gaze he "penetrate[s] to the baby within" (*S*, 90), indicating that a female body can at any stage be a victim to some sort of violation. In a final attempt to fight back the evidence the general tries to convince the audience and himself that the baby's swollen genitalia could be a penis but once the doctor dismisses that idea, the general is deflated, crushed by his son's second execution (first he was hanged by the mother and now is killed by the sister). As if aware of the "mistake" her birth represents, Sufiya blushes, which is a paradigmatic demonstration of public shame.

Sufiya's condition is worsened when she contracts brain fever, the effect of the treatment of which was to turn her into a retarded child. Rushdie plays with Sufiya's name and

follows the carnivalistic tradition³¹⁰. Talking on the phone with her friend Rani, Bilquis complains about Sufiya's mental state:

Rani, a judgement, what else? He [Raza Hyder] wanted a hero of a son; I gave him an idiot female instead. That's the truth, excuse me; I can't help it. Rani, a simpleton, a goof! Nothing upstairs. Straw instead of cabbage between the ears. Empty in the breadbin. To be done? But darling, there is nothing. That birdbrain, that mouse! I must accept it: she is my shame. (S, 101)

Maybe it is indeed a matter of judgement but not on the mere birth of a girl but rather on her family, particularly her parents: on Raza's increasing tyrannical behaviour and on Bilquis's adultery³¹¹. The shame of their own sins is therefore transferred to Sufiya who finds herself entangled in a system of sacrificial logic. She becomes a literalisation of her mother's words "she is my shame".

Julia Kristeva reads sacrifice as the adopted strategy of the socio-symbolic contract. Her theories evolve from the notions of abjection, previously discussed with respect to *When Dreams Travel*. In this chapter, I will resume that context, expand it by introducing new concepts (such as mimesis, sacrificial economy and thetic crisis) and I will focus particularly on the specific aspect of violence that not only is paramount for the Kristevan thinking on the abject but also reinforces its intimate link with martyrdom and with analogous forms of potentially violent actions such as sacrifice and the grotesque. In my next chapter I will depart from that point and I will establish a parallel between manifestations of violence and the asymmetries of power benefiting patriarchy, namely by installing institutions of terror such as the Departments of Shame, Fear and Loneliness in *When Dreams Travel* and the Inquisition in *Del amor y otros demonios*.

The joint theme of shame and sacrifice had its origins in actual events, thus giving a certain historical credibility to Rushdie's treatment of it. The borders of fact and fiction are blurred so that we are bewildered. Sufiya's character was based on the story of a Pakistani girl

³¹⁰ See Bakhtin's quote in the previous chapter "Problems of Carnival Poetics and the Dialogical Constituent" when the scholar pairs stupidity and wisdom.

³¹¹ With respect to this judgement, my position is not in accordance with that of James Harrison who interprets Rani's words as an admittance of her own culpability, namely of her adultery with Sindbad Mengal. My reasoning is that Bilquis does not assume responsibility and, like most other characters, transfers her shame to Sufiya. See James Harrison, *Salman Rushdie* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992) 85.

in the East End of London murdered by her own father, the narrator tells us in the opening pages of "Blushing". The account conveys most insightfully and even passionately the complexities and paradoxes of a world where the intensity of shame is more strongly felt: in spite of the father's unquestionable love for his daughter, he performs the sacrifice because, having supposedly made love to a white boy, "she had brought such dishonour upon her family that only her blood could wash away the stain" (*S*, 115). In several points of the novel the reader is instructed in the almighty, omnipresent monster of shame but it tends to attach itself above all to women. We are told, for instance, that in the dead of night, in the enormous room where the Hyder women slept, one of Bilquis's new cousins, not coincidentally named Duniyazad, throws insults at her inability to produce healthy boys (living ones at least): "The disgrace of your barrenness, Madam, is not yours alone. Don't you know that shame is collective? The shame of any one of us sits on us all and bends our backs" (*S*, 84). It is clear that author and narrator coincide in the account of Anahita Muhammad's story (the name is supposedly made up); the narrator admits, as the murderer's friends did, to understanding that man's attitude and that even in spite of rumours be proven false. The author is someone from "real" Peccavistan: "We who have grown up on a diet of honour and shame can still grasp what must seem unthinkable to peoples living in the aftermath of the death of God and of tragedy: that men will sacrifice their dearest love on the implacable altars of their pride" (*S*, 115). The narrator concludes: "[b]etween shame and shamelessness lies the axis upon which we turn; meteorological conditions at both these poles are of the most extreme, ferocious type. Shamelessness, shame: the roots of violence" (*S*, 115-116). These words disclose the motivation at the core of the novel and establish the relations between sacrifice, violence and shame.

Ferocity (an image that foreshadows the feral metamorphosis) is an element that is also present in the author's mind when he recounts the episode of the Asian girl, set upon and beaten by white boys in an underground train. The girl, who Rushdie has identified with Sameen, his sister, and to whom *Shame* is dedicated, feels "not angry but ashamed" (*S*, 117)³¹². The second reference relates to Sufiya's beast as the author indulges himself with visions of retribution in the form of social chaos: victims of humiliation stampeding, setting fire to shops, destroying property and attacking the authorities.

³¹² See Rushdie's interview with John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985) 256. It is reprinted in *Conversations with Salman Rushdie*, ed. Michael R. Reder (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000) 30-56. Quote on page 52.

The third and last event was that of a boy who spontaneously combusted in a parking lot in London. The episode alerts the reader to the novel's impossible and grotesque transformations, to its magical realist resonances. The innocent body is taken over by a fire within: "the boy had simply ignited of his own accord, without dousing himself in petrol or applying any external flame. We are energy; we are fire; we are light. Finding the key, stepping through into that truth, a boy began to burn" (*S*, 117). Sufiya's self-destruction echoes the boy's explosion and the explosion of her grandfather who, like herself was sacrificed for being a woman, or rather womanly, and who willingly accepted the sacrifice of his life for a greater cause. The three incidents, the first and third more explicitly because they involve sacrificial death, remit to the field of martyrdom. What seems painfully ironic to us now, enlightened by events that would follow, is that Salman Rushdie found himself the protagonist of a similar situation. He was literally "marked for murder" in the name of the preservation of a given system of beliefs:

I would like to inform all the intrepid Muslims in the World that the author of the book entitled *The Satanic Verses*, which has been compiled, printed, and published in opposition to Islam, the Prophet, and the Qur'an, as well as those publishers who were aware of its contents, have been declared *madhur el dam* (i.e., 'those whose blood must be shed'). I call on all zealous Muslims to execute them quickly, wherever they find them, so that no one will dare to insult Islam again. Whoever is killed in this path will be regarded as a martyr.³¹³

Six years after the publication of *Shame*, Salman Rushdie became the cause of endemic violence which made martyrs out of publishers around the world, of their attackers and murderers, and, at least in the eyes of the West, of Rushdie himself who was forced to a life of seclusion and hiding. In many ways, the *fatwa* was a forevision of the radicalisation of positions that after the September 11 attack divided the world into Islamic supporters and antagonists and that, ultimately, globalised terror. Through violence and martyrdom (for the Islamic pilots are seen as martyrs by many as are the passengers on flight 93 that went into the ground in Pennsylvania) justified by the defence of given cultures, a true Kayserian world came into being for a great number of people.

³¹³ Declaration of the *fatwa* by Ayatollah Khomeini on the 14 February 1989. Reproduced by James Harrison, *Salman Rushdie*, ix. Italics in the text. Obviously, the carnivalistic coincidence of the declaration being issued on St. Valentine's Day has not gone unnoticed.

In Julia Kristeva's view, sacrificial logic is the expression of a pathological oppression of patriarchal domination over women which she is very careful to distinguish from the symbolic order itself that she sees as the very principle of language and sociality. The construction of subjectivity is, nonetheless, dependent on a necessary condition, that of violence. The transition from a non-differentiated state with the maternal continent or semiotic chora to the symbolic order and the universe of signs and language is founded on death-work that includes self-abjection, the rejection of the maternal matrix and submission to castration. The logic of separation is therefore a precondition of language and of binding social structures which articulates difference between object and subject and that, in the space between (characterised either by lack or desire), allows meaning to emerge. The subject's sense of unity remains but a pretence. Instability is always installed as a consequence of the processes of negativity that lead to subjectivity and that account for the human tendency to exert violence and, ultimately, to invest in a sacrificial economy. This economy is put forward in situations of thetic crisis by which Kristeva means situations potentially threatening to subjectivity by reason of a boundary failure. The distance from a chaotic place of origin is maintained by way of an engagement in mirror images of signifying sites and by repressing any marks of threat. But if systems of protection fail, subjects re-enact the primordial conflict with the mother's body and resort once again to archaic marks of identity, such as abjection. The mimetic reaction accounts, therefore, for the emergence of violence in the wake of a thetic crisis (his/her own division is recalled) and is linked with sexual difference since the subject and her/his body feel the maternal marking once again. In Martha Reineke's words:

The battle is characterized by mimesis because the maternal body mirrors the subject, in a dynamic and wholly threatening fashion, its own division - and its abject marks (diverse material debris) are contested by the subject who struggles for differentiation from a matrix that threatens to subsume it. For a subject who is yet not one, the maternal space displays multiple marks of mimetic terror: it threatens as abyss, dividing wall, or suffocating vise. Only one can emerge victorious from this conflict. And the not-yet-a-subject seeks, for signs will enable the subject to incorporate and subsume difference - which, after all, is its own - throttle the threat posed by mimesis, and emerge victorious before its newly minted image.³¹⁴

³¹⁴ Martha J. Reineke, *Sacrificed Lives: Kristeva on Women and Violence*, 27.

Death-work becomes matricide: the mother (now an object different from the newly formed subject) is killed so that the subject can be, that is, acquire a given language and space, control over signifying practices and erect boundaries. That is the condition of the socio-symbolic contract. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva says “before being *like*, ‘I am not but do *separate, reject, abject*’ (PH, 12. Italics in the text). Kristevan reasoning follows that for the subject who is trying to become, a certain measure of violence cannot be avoided (the imaginative death of the mother). But when subjectivity is already ascertained, a thetic crisis can cause a real act of extreme violence, a sacrifice, that is sanctioned by patriarchal patterns that enhance estrangement and the residue of the abject maternal matrix. The social contract assumes contours of a sacrificial contract that puts any woman’s body at risk marking it for murder as on it is imprinted the abject marks of the mother (milk, blood, bodily fluids). Women “are made hostage to others’ dramatic efforts to repeat individuation from the maternal matrix”³¹⁵. Kristeva writes in “Women’s Time”:

In this sense of psychosymbolic structure, women [...] seem to feel that they are casualties, that they have been left out of the symbolic contract, of language as the fundamental social bond. They find no affect there, no more than they find the fluid and infinitesimal significations of their relationships with the nature of their own bodies, that of the child, another woman, or a man.³¹⁶

Thus, women’s identification with the sacrificial logic is frustrating and difficult insofar as it fails to articulate the desires, histories and experiences of women’s “irreducible identity” and that, instead, constructs them as sacrificial victims: scapegoats³¹⁷. It then makes sense to read Sufiya’s metamorphosis as scapegoating or the destructive consequence to a woman’s body when submitted to sacrificial rituals imposed by a socio-symbolic order notoriously identified as patriarchal oppression and expressed in domestic and political repression. She is, accordingly, the repository of her world’s shame:

Sufiya Zinobia Hyder blushed uncontrollably whenever her presence in the world was noticed by others. But also, I believe, blushed for the world.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 30.

³¹⁶ Julia Kristeva, “Women’s Time”, ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism* (Hampshire and London: Macmillan, 1989) 206. Julia Kristeva’s article was first published in 1981.

³¹⁷ Julia Kristeva, “Women’s Time”, 202.

Let me voice my suspicion: the brain fever that made Sufiya Zinobia preternaturally receptive to all sorts of things that float around in the ether enabled her to absorb, like a sponge, a host of unfelt feelings. (*S*, 122)³¹⁸

Therefore, when Bilquis says that Sufiya is the incarnation of the family's shame, the expression gains a whole different meaning; not only does it anticipate an embodiment (the metamorphosis becomes the body of shame) but its meaning is also subverted: Sufiya's intellectual limitations and savage behaviour do not bring shame on the honour of the family but rather become a public display of her family's shamelessness. And the list is almost endless: her father's tyrannical ruling, the murder of political rivals (for instance Iskander Harappa) and adultery (namely with Pinkie Aurangzeb that leads to the first revelation of the Beast and to the savage killing of two hundred and eighteen turkeys in one night); her mother's lack of affection for her in favour of Naveed, her sister; the constant insults and beatings of her retarded child (the episode when she cuts short Sufiya's hair); marrying her daughter off to a physically repugnant fat man, older than Raza himself; her adultery with Sindbad Mengal (Naveed's real father); Naveed's scandalous marriage (the cancellation of the marriage to Haroun on the day of the event), her losing her virginity to Talvar Ulhaq and her ultimate suicide; Omar's marriage based on aspirations of social improvement to the daughter of the man responsible for his brother's murder; his bohemian and promiscuous life, whose consequences were the pregnancy of at least two women (he does not father the first child and pays for the abortion of the second); his playing the role of God by abusing his position as a doctor; Iskander Harappa's dissolute life, resulting in numerous illegitimate children, and the terror of his regime: the torture, the spying, the corruption, the conspiracy with foreign politicians, and the murder of his cousin, Little Mir. However, the shame for these actions is not felt by them. It is dealt with in another way:

Where do you imagine they go - I mean emotions that should have been felt, but were not - such as regret for a harsh word, guilt for a crime, embarrassment, propriety, shame? - Imagine shame as a liquid, let's say a sweet fizzy tooth-rotting drink, stored in a vending machine. Push the right button and a cup plops down under a pissing stream of the fluid. How to push the button? Nothing to it. Tell a lie, sleep with a white boy, get born the wrong sex. Out flows the bubbling emotion and you drink your fill... but how many humans refuse to

³¹⁸ Sufiya is clearly analogous to the *pharmakos* who Girard says acts like a sponge to sop up impurities. See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 95.

follow these simple instructions! [...] Then what happens to all that unfelt shame? What of the unquaffed cups of pop? Think again of the vending machine. The button is pushed; but then it comes the shameless hand and jerks away the cup! The button pusher does not drink what was ordered; and the fluid of shame spills, spreading in a frothy lake across the floor.

[...] I submit, it is siphoned off by the misfortune few, janitors of the unseen, their souls the buckets into which squeegees drip what-was-spilled. (*S*, 122)

Sufiya is such a bucket for other people's waste. The result is the transformation of Beauty into a Beast that is directly identified as the body that "[s]well[s] slowly, feed[s] on inadequacy, guilt, shame, bloat[s] towards the surface" (*S*, 218). Following her furious attacks there are talks about performing the sacrifice of Abraham but Raza is unable to give the order to eliminate her. Instead she is locked away in an attic where Omar reduces her to an unconscious state. Nancy Gray Díaz, in the introduction to *The Radical Self: Metamorphosis to Animal Form in Modern Latin American Narrative*, says that a metamorphosis in which consciousness is totally deleted is a metaphor for death³¹⁹ and Omar himself admits his wife is dead when the creature takes over completely: "Yes, she was dead all right, I'm sure of it, no more Sufiya-Zinobia-ness, everything burned up in that Hell" (*S*, 243)³²⁰. Death becomes a synonym for lack of being. The reader is not a witness to the final metamorphosis because she escapes. She

appeared to be spellbound by the sorceries of the drug, but the *monster* inside her never slept, the violence which had been born of shame, but which by now lived her own life beneath her skin; it fought the narcoleptic fluids, it took its time, spreading slowly through her body until it occupied every cell, *until she had become violence*, which no longer needed anything to set it off, because once a carnivore has tasted blood you can't fool it with vegetables anymore. (*S*, 242-3. Italics added)

This passage makes an unmistakable connection between shame, violence and grotesque corporeality through the prism of the monstrous double. Sufiya lacks being and turns to others, namely to the ayah, to try to find the contours of her being based on a

³¹⁹ Nancy Gray Díaz, *The Radical Self: Metamorphosis to Animal Form in Modern Latin American Narrative* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988) 5. In accordance with my position that Sufiya and the Beast are the embodiment of other people's shame, Nancy Gray Díaz adds that "the individual does not become the Other absolutely but rather takes on certain extraordinary characteristics of that Other", loc. cit.

desiring principle whereas the family makes her a monster where their shame is doubly expressed. Sufiya's grotesqueness reaches its full form with metamorphosis but it is already apparent prior to that. Rushdie, in the imagined universe of Peccavistan, or Pakistan turned upside down (perhaps, only shown as the country is in the author's view, shown that is, with its darker Janus face towards the public), uses the allegory of the grotesque within the wider frame of Otherness. By moving beyond the space of social codes and by dwelling outside the rules of normalisation, in sum, by embodying a deviation from the norm and a mistake in the system, Sufiya is alienated. She is unable to assimilate the functioning of the world that is strange to her so that she involuntarily enters into situations of "inadvertency and loss of boundaries", to use Mary Russo's expression. On the night the Loo blew, the wind causing fever and madness, the twelve year old Sufiya rises from her enormous cot and goes to the neighbouring backyard where the two hundred and eighteen turkeys of Pinkie Aurangzeb (the representation, says the narrator, of that woman's victory over other men's wives) waited for her³²¹. By moving next door, Pinkie makes Bilquis's shame a public affair and makes Raza's adultery a spectacle. Bilquis, whose mental stability was already a matter of concern for the family, takes to leaning out of windows to insult the birds, "See if I don't slit your throats!", she screams (S, 134).

The following day, sitting on her cot equipped with rubber undersheets, Sufiya suffers another humiliation. It involves the girl's hair that Naveed wanted to prove was long enough to sit upon. Naveed instructs Shahbanou to pull hard, as hard as possible, obviously causing great pain to the girl. The episode combines two readings. The first is that in Pakistani society (perhaps as much as in Western societies) female beauty is an extremely important issue in determining a woman's success in her community. Naveed herself comments that a woman's beauty grows down from the top of her head (S, 136). The second point is that this call of attention to Sufiya's hair is a preparation for her forthcoming animality. Moreover, the reader, anticipating her ritual sacrifice, learns that Sufiya had already taken to tearing out her own hair which "she did seriously, systematically, as if inflicting *ritual injury* upon herself" (S, 136, Italics

³²⁰ See another reference on page 242.

³²¹ Sufiya corroborates my previous argument concerning freaks and a tendency to deal with them as if they were children. In this case the point is taken further because Rushdie actually gives Sufiya the mind of a child (at the time of her death she had the mind corresponding to that of a nine-year old). Moreover, the reader witnesses not just her child-like behaviour but also her infantile world. She is a giant baby in a gigantic cot, unable to control her own bowels. If the picture is indeed an example of disproportion it is also true that it is ridiculous, pathetic and tender. Later in this chapter this issue is resumed to look into Rushdie's intentions on attributing a retarded mind to Sufiya.

added). This embryonic manifestation of the Beast, already burning like fire, gave Sufiya a Medusan appearance: “the torn cloud of hairs stood out around her face and formed in the sunlight a kind of halo of destruction” (S, 136). Sufiya, in pain, cries silently while Naveed transfers her own frustration to the helpless girl:

‘You. Thing. Look at you. Who would marry you with that hair, even if you had a brain? Turnip. Beetroot. Angrez radish. See how you make trouble for me with your tearing. Elder sister should marry first but who will come for her, ayah? I swear, my tragedy, what do you know. Come on now, pull again, this time don’t pretend it won’t reach - no, never mind that fool now, leave her with her stinky blushes and her wetting. She doesn’t understand, what could she understand, zero.’ (S, 136)

As Satyasama, she is reduced to a thing and a fool, and the elected object for a sacrifice (the insults, the inflicted pain). Therefore, the narrator prefers to see that first violent expression of the Beast as the result of twelve years of “unloved humiliation” (S, 138)³²²:

They found her in the aftermath of the Loo, sitting fast asleep [...], a little huddled figure snoring gently amidst the corpses of the birds. Yes, they were all dead, everyone of the two hundred and eighteen turkeys of Pinkie’s loneliness, and people were so shocked they forgot to clear away the corpses for a whole day, leaving the dead birds to rot in the heat [...]. Sufiya Zinobia had torn off their heads and then reached down into their bodies to draw their guts up through their necks with her tiny and weaponless hands. Shahbanou, who found her first, did not dare to approach her; then Raza and Bilquis arrived, and soon everybody, sister, servants, neighbours, was standing and *gaping at the spectacle of the bloodied girl* and the decapitated creatures with intestines instead of heads. (S, 138. Italics added)

Rushdie destabilises our perception of the gory act by introducing elements that displace the reader’s predictable reaction of disgust: the killer combines the opposing elements of the fairy-tale, Beauty and the Beast, and in the middle of the carnage, Sufiya is Sleeping Beauty as well, resting peacefully as if inserted in an idyllic milieu. The fragility of her body contrasts with the murderous potential of her hands; the horror of the audience of the spectacle of death contrasts with the innocence of the agent; the precision and perseverance of

the killing (decapitation will remain her *modus operandi*), as well as the grotesqueness of the strangely forgotten rotting bodies contrast with Sufiya's helplessness (as do the turkeys that screamed in their helpless panic, anticipating they were to become sacrificial victims to make Sufiya's rage subside and to re-establish the order of the world). This approach can only work because Rushdie is able to avoid a consciously double-faced character. Sufiya is, instead, a double-bodied, unaware of herself, idiot, a metaphor, Rushdie admits, intended to make her pure (*S*, 120). Purity is preserved because the killing is carried out in a somnambulist state; it is not Sufiya who commits the atrocity, it is the Beast, the shame belonging to others. Her violence clearly reflects the violence of her existence that instead of love is marked by "[g]roans, insults, even the wild of exasperation rained on her" (*S*, 121).

However, instead of exorcising her family's shame, the deadly attack only serves to make the Hyders, once again, the centre of attention of servants and neighbours. Therefore the sacrificial ritual needs to be re-enacted, this time having as a victim Sufiya herself. It is a part in the gradual process that leads up to the metamorphosis into a hairy beast: Bilquis herself cuts short Sufiya's hair. Scissors in the air, we are told, mean trouble in the family (*S*, 140) because, it makes sense to argue, the mother castrates the daughter, that is, matricide does not take place and an inversion in the sacrificial logic occurs instead. Curiously enough, Sufiya's appearance becomes a public display of her mother's loathing. Furthermore, if depriving Sufiya of her hair leads to the denial of her femininity (hair at the root of feminine desirability) it clearly relates to Sufiya's definite transformation that is triggered by becoming aware of Omar and Shahbanou's sexual encounters (Sufiya is removed from her position of wife and lover). After the hair episode the beast re-emerges. It makes itself announced by the presence of fire (its permanent mark is Sufiya's blushes): "Sufiya Zinobia's head looked like a cornfield after a fire; sad, black stubble, a catastrophic desolation wrought by maternal rage" (*S*, 140). Not only is the image of destruction recalled but it is done using a metaphor that links it with the earth and the land after harvest. Sufiya's body is now the incarnation of her own emotional void. She is desolation: just like Good News represented the "monsoon of love" to her parents, Sufiya is "dry as the desert" (*S*, 121). These expressions mean to position the two sisters in two opposing poles: Good News is immersed in motherly love and children and Sufiya is deprived of both. The dichotomy is, as happened with Satyasama and Shahrzad,

³²² Omar is also twelve when he leaves Nishapur, the gothic-like mansion that was neither spirit nor reality (in a magic realist way, both coexisted) where the boy was entrapped by the presence of a rotting past.

in the end annulled since both Naveed and Sufiya are forced to give up their ontological and somatic selves. One through suicide, the other through a metamorphosis. Distinctions, such as those in the following passage, become elusive insofar as the two Hyder girls are made equal in sacrifice by their womanhood:

What contrasts in these girls! Sufiya Zinobia, embarrassingly small [...], and Good News rangy, elongated. Sufiya and Naveed, shame and good news: the one slow and silent, the other quick with her noise. Good News would stare brazenly at her elders; Sufiya averted her eyes. (S, 137)

Another aspect of this early sacrifice in Sufiya's life is that she is made a woeful picture of a girl in order to become a pathetic masquerade of a boy, re-establishing at the core of sacrifice gender-related issues. Thus it is the incompatibility and dissatisfaction that determine Sufiya's illness right after the turkey attack and the subsequent hair cutting. The illness is, beyond any doubt, the Beast stirring. Sufiya falls into a faint, develops high fever, blotchy rashes, boils between her toes and back, and vermilion lumps. She over-salivates and black buboes splotch on her armpits. The narrator faces the rebelliousness of her body as the symptom of the plague of shame, establishing yet another link with the myth of the sacrifice of Oedipus. "It was as though the dark violence which had been engendered within that small physique had turned inwards, had forsaken turkeys and gone for the girl herself", thus marking the moment when Sufiya accepts her role as a scapegoat (S, 140-141). Sacrifice and martyrdom are brought together with Sufiya's acceptance of a role given to her. "What is a saint? A saint is a person who suffers in our stead", the narrator concludes (S, 141) and, in fact, her description with the sunlight shining from behind, enhancing the impression of a halo, reminds us of the artistic representations of saints.

The use of the element of sacrifice provides the link between Beauty and the Beast since sacrifice is both a phenomenon invested with seductive beauty and death. It concentrates on a single individual the poles of opposition: "whatif, whatif a Beastji somehow lurked *inside* Beauty Bibi? Whatif the beauty were herself the beast?" (S, 159; italics in the text). In *Shame*, the great Poet asserts that women are gender-conditioned in the sense that they lack the aggressiveness of a beast. Men are the only subjects of that sort of transformation, as happens in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. The author proves otherwise throughout the novel and in other books he maintains his position. In *The*

Satanic Verses, Alleluia Cone tells Gibreel that will and anger can bend any law of nature so that even Chamcha's anatomy is changed by sheer concentration in defeating Gibreel and a similar process takes place with the latter³²³. When the narrator in *Shame* describes the effect of the drugs on Sufiya he says that they "turned her from one fairy-tale into another, into sleeping-beauty instead of beauty-and-beast" (*S*, 237), the hyphenation brings the paradoxical ideas together in the inanimate body.

Besides being a double figure to her sister, Sufiya is also the very embodiment of doubleness. But the limits of each part are not definitively established and as one part grows stronger, it transgresses and invades the other half. Sufiya's multiple personality has clear abject contours; in spite of the effort to repress it, that which is still not a subject occasionally takes over. The frontiers are always at risk: "the edges of Sufiya Zinobia were beginning to become uncertain, as if there were two beings occupying that air-space, competing for it, two entities of identical shape but of tragically opposed natures" (*S*, 235). The conflict between the benevolent and devilish parties tends to be more explicitly revealed in the presence of her husband. When Omar realises the danger she represents to the family and to the children in particular he tries to tie her down but she jumps from the bed and extends her hook-like hands towards Omar:

He opened his mouth to scream but the sight of her sucked the breath from his lungs; he stared into those eyes of Hell with his mouth open like asphyxiating fishlips. Then she fell to the floor and began to writhe and to gag, and purple bubbles formed on her protruding tongue. It was impossible not to believe that a struggle was taking place, Sufiya Zinobia against the Beast, that what was left of that poor girl had hurled itself against the creature, that the wife was protecting her husband against herself. This was how it came about that Omar Khayyam Shakil looked into the eyes of the Beast of shame and survived, because although he had been paralysed by that basilisk flame she had snuffed it out long enough to break the spell, and he managed to shake himself free of its power. She was flinging herself around the floor so violently that she splintered the frame of his bed when she collided with it. (*S*, 236)

³²³ This reference to the great Poet's words are clearly satiric, as if to expose the ridicule of the thought. Literature at least presents examples by men and women. Emma Tennant considers violence to be a generalised characteristic of the human condition in her *Two Women of London*, an adaptation of Stevenson's story. In it Tennant claims women's right to carnivalesque doubleness, grotesqueness and even evilness. Other examples include H. Rider Haggard's *She*, Erendira's grandmother in Gabriel García Márquez's "La increíble y triste historia de la cándida Erendira y de su abuela desalmada" and the three sisters in *Las Piadosas* by Federico Andahazi. This topic will be resumed later with respect to Omar's mothers.

The construction of Sufiya as a character invested with a mythic quality is reminiscent of the wild-haired, tongue-lolling Medusa. More importantly, Sufiya's character is closely related with Hindu traditions of feminine violence. The combination of a frightening appearance with a tendency to spread destruction is common to Sufiya and the goddess Kali. Kali displays a set of characteristics, many of which are common to Sufiya. Kali's hair is dishevelled and her eyes are remarkable for their expression of strength and fierceness. She lolls out her tongue threateningly to her enemies and she is attributed animal characteristics as well. She exhibits lethal fangs, her mouth is smeared with blood and she is depicted naked, like Sufiya in her final form. The few ornaments Kali covers herself with are symbols of her deadly power. Besides a girdle of severed arms, Kali uses adornments that are particularly meaningful in the analysis of Sufiya's character: a necklace of heads or skulls and earrings of dead children. The mighty warrior spirit of the goddess is manifested in the objects she holds in her left hands, a human head and a cleaver, and the right hands make the signs not to fear and of she who grants boons. Sufiya beheads her victims as well but her animal abilities make tools dispensable. Traditionally, Kali's four-armed figure is embedded with ambiguity, though her violent character is emphasised. Variations occur but the black goddess is always terrible:

She is dark as soot, always living in the cremation ground. Her eyes are pink, her hair disheveled, her body gaunt and fearful. In her left hand she holds a cup filled with wine and meat, and in her right hand she holds a freshly cut human head. She smiles and eats rotten meat. She is decked with ornaments, is naked, and is absorbed in drinking.³²⁴

Kali's natural settings are the battlefield and the cremation ground and both places are locations for fire and death. When she fights she howls like a ferocious animal; in the cremation ground she is accompanied by jackals, snakes and ghosts. Because her thirst for blood is great, animal sacrifices are performed in her temples. In her description in *Devi Mahatmya*, she is said to have sprung out from Durga's *brow* when the latter is attacked by two demons. Kali is the embodiment of Durga's fury that comes into being to save Durga and behead the demons. However, her notorious companion is Shiva himself, with whom she is seen in his devastating missions. When Shiva asks Parvati to kill Daruka, the good goddess

enters his body and is remade as Kali. Kali performs her murderous duty but puts the whole universe at risk, frenzied as she is with the beauty of destruction. Kali, thus, incarnates Parvati's violence. Kali and Shiva incite one another to mad, cataclysmic, disruptive actions and when the two deities dance together the very universe is threatened. A common representation of Kali shows her standing on Shiva's corpse; another pictures them having sex and she is on top of him, dominating. Both situations seem to be echoed in the episode of Sufiya's killing of the four young men: an aroused deadly woman overpowering and feasting on masculinity. The legacy Kali and Sufiya leave behind is dead men. Moreover, both women ultimately endanger the very world they aimed to keep safe from harm. In David R. Kinsley's words:

Kali is a goddess who threatens stability and order. Although she may be said to serve order in her role as the slayer of demons, more often than not she becomes so frenzied on the battlefield, usually becoming drunk on the blood of her victims, that she herself begins to destroy the world that she is supposed to protect.³²⁵

Sufiya's sacrifice also intends to purge the people of her world but the outcome is quite of an opposite nature, reminiscent of a nuclear explosion even, because, recalling an expression by Angela Carter, once a carnivore has tasted blood, its determination to kill again is unstoppable. Moreover, both Kali and Sufiya dwell outside any moral laws and become alien to their judgements and constraints. They are beyond and abject. This interpretation is supported by the facts that both females occupy physical spaces marginal to society (Kali, like Sufiya, is at times depicted roaming the woods) and that Kali is the protector of criminals whereas Sufiya is a murderess. Furthermore Sufiya becomes the expression of *maya*, *prakṛti* and *sakti* in terms quite close to Kali's. *Maya* refers to the act of creation and to the essence of life, replete with mystery and magic, that can, occasionally, reveal destructive aspects when egos, divine or human, enter into conflict. Kali is the embodiment of the more violent side of *maya*. *Prakṛti* is understood as the established order or natural order of things evolving from *sattva* (purity), *rajas* (energy) and *tamas* (lethargy). Sufiya demonstrates that she has all three qualities: purity in her virginity and retarded condition, energy in the power of the beast and

³²⁴ The *dhyānamantra* of *Smasanakali*, quoted in David R. Kinsley, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff, "Kali", *Devi: Goddesses of India* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1996) 77.

³²⁵ David R. Kinsley, "Kali", 80.

lethargy when it subsides. *Prakerti* “is lush and teeming and is difficult to control. So is Kali. She perhaps represents *prakerti* uncontrolled. She is growth, decay, death, and rebirth completely unrefined”³²⁶. So is Sufiya. Kali is *sakti*, that is, power and action, in its more violent and riotous manifestation. In a society deeply rooted in the idea of pollution, especially with respect to blood and death, which are purified through strictly defined rituals, Kali’s interference demonstrates that there is always a certain degree of unpredictability that threatens the dharmic order (the cosmic order, social norms and ritual duties). By revealing the limits of the dharma, by transcending it, Kali is able to provide a wider perspective on reality. She is regarded by many as mother since her destructiveness can be a means to strengthen dharmic virtues or a means to be released from the cycle of birth and death towards the ideal of *moksa*. Rachel F. McDermott stresses the wholeness of the goddess rather than a purely destructive tendency. She claims Kali’s nature to be “a union of opposites, as a paradoxical deity who combines within herself the poles of creation and destruction, birth and death, love and fear. This dual aspect of her character is implied by her epithet “Terrible Mother”³²⁷. The evocation of Kali here is also relevant in terms of women’s reappropriation of their aggressive traits, throughout the ages repressed by patriarchal influence. As such, Kali has a special appeal to Western scholars who see her as a goddess of transformation:

As a general phenomenon, goddess spirituality is attractive for women because it makes possible an affirmation of the female body, of women’s anger and aggression, and of the changing cycles of life which menstruation and birth so readily illustrate. The same is true of Kali: the very characteristics that patriarchy repressed and demonized - her potent, sexual, dark side - can be claimed as liberating for women, within a context of wholeness and balance.³²⁸

In this sense, the head Kali holds gains a Bakhtinian value: Kali is unafraid to sever that that limits her action. Sufiya is associated with the goddess also in this sense of repressed female sexuality and power, driven to dangerous transformation. Whether in the end the result is positive remains debatable among scholars who study Kali, as among those who concentrate their efforts on Bakhtin’s theories of carnival. When it comes to Sufiya, the doubt

³²⁶ Ibid., 82.

³²⁷ Rachel F. McDermott, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff, “The Western Kali”, *Devi: Goddesses of India*, 285.

³²⁸ Ibid., 288-9.

remains at this point for if she reveals the deadly powers of the basilisk (*S*, 236) she is also withdrawn from that mythical universe and assumed to be no different from other people (*S*, 200). With the reference to the basilisk, attention is once again drawn towards the fatal might of her look. The cohesion of the novel is, in fact, provided by the systematic reference to symbolic elements, one of those being the eyes, and two others, to be looked into shortly, are fire and water.

After the metamorphosis, Sufiya escapes and there is news of a beast slaying the population. Its direction is back to its source, home and husband. When the feline reencounters Omar, she paralyzes him with its hypnotic gaze, just as Omar had done to others in the past:

She saw him and shuddered; then she rose up on her hind legs with her forepaws outstretched and he had just enough time to say, 'Well, wife, so here you are at last,' before her eyes forced him to look.

He struggled against their hypnotic power, their gravitational pull, but it was no use, his eyes lifted, until he was staring into the fiery yellow heart of her, and saw there, just for an instant, some flickering, some dimming of the flame in doubt, as though she had entertained for that tiny fragment of time the wild fantasy that she was indeed a bride entering the chamber of her beloved; but the furnace burned the doubts away, and as he stood before her, unable to move, her hands, his wife's hands, reached out to him and closed.

His body was falling away from her, a headless drunk, and after that the Beast faded in her once again, she stood there blinking stupidly. (*S*, 286)

This beast is the female expression of powerful sexuality, able to utterly destroy men; Sufiya is not just a revengeful Nemesis of herself and the people but also a virgin turned into a vampire, a black widow spider or Salomé tempting and seducing men in order to murder them. In other words, she is a *femme castratrice*, a castrating woman. She seeks revenge for the pain/shame inflicted on her as well as for being denied her right to sexual activity. Thus, her first victims are male to whom she becomes a very real and deadly *vagina dentata*. Sufiya renovates the ancient myths of the Bacchae, the Gorgons, the Sirens or the Furies who are not castrated but castrators. Unlike the Freudian theory of the phallic woman, aimed at appeasing male fear of castration (if woman is phallicised then she can be castrated, giving way to the image of the female body as bleeding wound), the *femme castratrice* resorts to violence and destruction. Her savage behaviour serves only to reinforce the dread of the female genital

organs because she is beyond male control. Her murderous attacks are indeed directed towards phallogocentrism. It is ironic that the “fantasy” is real because they *are* husband and wife but it is a dark fairy tale encounter the realisation that it is a fantasy for him too who is finally able to admit to himself that he wished her as a woman. But being a mariticide it is also the welcoming of postponed shame for having a defective attitude as a human being, doctor and husband.

Barbara Creed establishes two types of castrating females: the psychotic (an obsessed woman with no limits to what she can do to get what she wants, usually a man) and the avenger³²⁹. *Shame*'s monstrous female falls into the second category since she has been victimised, although not sexually abused as Creed formulates. In the end, Sufiya is destroyed by her own accumulated anger as if being punished for her murderous deeds. In these two aspects, *Shame* does not comply with Creed's view of the *femme castratrice*. In any case, Creed does not explain how a murderous psychotic female can be regarded “a sympathetic figure”³³⁰, for instance. Sufiya does, nevertheless, represent the woman/death connection through castration, though to what extent sex and/or love can function as a male death-wish is uncertain. Sufiya's “eyes forced him to look” and, as if paralysed by the Medusan gaze, he is powerless to escape. However, the final explosion might be interpreted as the physical consummation of a marriage that though implying the male's (and the female's) annihilation is not avoided by either of them, a sort of ritualistic purification and abandonment to abject fulfilment.

In the context of the novel, it also makes sense to suggest that previous to Sufiya's castrating activity, she was castrated herself. One element supporting that view refers to the fact that Sufiya's specific disability (in a way representative of her castration) makes her a freak and as such she had to be “tamed” though she could never achieve either social acceptance or respectability. Another interpretation relates to women's integration in a patriarchal society, particularly one as repressive towards women as Pakistani society. Bearing in mind the overwhelming disappointment that was Sufiya's birth due to the fact she was a baby girl, Sufiya's castration represents a fragmentation of the Self. In *Powers of Horror*, the author appropriately writes “Before the beginning: separation” (*PH*, 12). This separation preceding the formation of the Self (that is, the beginning as existence within the Symbolic order) is translated into the abjection of the aggressive and sexualised half in favour of the passive and

³²⁹ See Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) p. 123.

³³⁰ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 123.

respectable part. This split is most clearly put forward in the prototypical image of the bad and good (sometimes twin) sisters, though Rushdie subverts the dichotomy so that Good News does not deserve the reader's sympathy while Sufiya does, at least up until she metamorphoses. In Sufiya's case, circumstances do not allow her to repress those undesirable characteristics within the realm of abjection. The Beast stirring inside the girl, the alien that in order to be born bursts out of the body it inhabits, is nothing else but abjection itself. Like Angela Carter's Little Red Riding Hood in "The Company of Wolves" who makes peace with the beast within her (instead of projecting it onto male sexuality), Sufiya cannot deny her wolfish desire; similarly, her vampiristic activity is a demonstration of the voracity of the female genitalia. But at least, on giving in to abjection, Sufiya finds some sort of regenerative possibility because "[t]he subject is dissolved, but in the convulsions of nausea its body-boundaries are re-made"³³¹.

Kristeva points out that "[t]he abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*" (*PH*, 12. Italics in the text). Accordingly, Sufiya, in her final scene, is an absolutely grotesque woman and animal figure: "low, hidden, earthly, dark, material, immanent, visceral" covered in the detritus of her own body which causes revulsion and abjection but which marks her incontestable victory over the shame remorselessly evicted on her. She is Rushdie's equivalent to Bakhtin's pregnant old hag laughing, celebrating her grotesque body. It is, nevertheless, an ambiguous laughter for whereas abjection represents a liberatory gesture from patriarchal oppression, it announces what is most likely to be a non-regenerative explosion.

The phenomenon of gazing is not restricted to Sufiya's character and, in fact, gains contours of a fetish for Omar. Furthermore, it is linked with his whole position in life from the very first moment marked by carnivalistic inversion. The hero, the epithet that is repeatedly used to contrast with his overall personality, on being born, is hung upside down by the ankles as is customary (on his dying day, Iskander Harappa will be hung by the feet too). However, great importance is given to the fact that his very first visions are the *inverted* peaks of the Impossible Mountains. Even prior to his birth there are signs of his unusual condition in the form of his mysterious conception and the multiple pregnancy of his mothers (not even he knows whose body carried him in its womb). Omar is one of the characters constructed with more carnivalistic detail and ambiguity. His mothers refuse to instruct him in the Islamic

³³¹ Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the 'fin de siècle'* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 44.

faith and by not being submitted to the mutilation of circumcision, he is deprived of divine blessing. To many this is a handicap (*S*, 21), or, in other words, he has something in *excess*. The bed where he is born is also a place of death:

Born in a death-bed, about which there hung [...] the ghost-image of a grandfather who, dying, had consigned himself to the *peripheries* of hell; his first sight the *spectacle* of a range of *topsy-turvy* mountains... Omar Khayyam Shakil was afflicted, from his earliest days, by a sense of *inversion*, of a world turned *upside-down*. And by something worse: the fear he was living at the *edge of the world*, so close that he might fall off at any moment. Through an old telescope, from the upper-storey windows of the house, the child Omar Khayyam surveyed the emptiness of the landscape around Q., which convinced him that he must be near the very *Rim of Things*, and that beyond the Impossible Mountains on the horizon must lie the great nothing into which, in his nightmares, he had begun to tumble with monotonous regularity. (*S*, 21-2. Italics added)

His vertigo is originated precisely in his fear of falling off and to overcome the constant fear, Omar decides not to sleep (Sufiya was an insomniac too before she was drugged to sleep). The telescope becomes a fundamental piece in the observation of people not on the edge like himself and, in a way, to rise above the claustrophobic walls of Nishapur. Gradually, he gains consciousness of being “a person apart” and develops his own order of things (*S*, 24). He becomes convinced that hell is located above and heaven below for the Impossible Mountains (also known as the roof of Paradise, which made no sense according to his reasoning) were an area prone to earthquakes, therefore was a zone of instability, and thus that through the cracks on the earth angels could emerge to observe human existence. The terror of falling leads to an obsession with frontiers and limits, and even his body is from a tender age a grotesque, fat accomplishment. It is that terror that brings about the fainting vertigo when he sees a cloud stopping at the frontier guarded by Farah Zoroaster’s father. He describes himself as “a fellow who is not even the hero of his own life; a man born and raised in the condition of being out of things. Heredity counts, dontyouthinkso?” (*S*, 24). He is aware of the influence of his mothers. Already in his fifties he “was sometimes plagued by that improbable vertigo, by the sense of being a creature of the edge: a peripheral man” (*S*, 24). His heritage is also to follow his mothers’ footsteps and not to feel shame so that his vertigo comes about as a substitute purgation. Thus, personality and blood ties seal his fate: “Dizzy,

peripheral, inverted, infatuated, insomniac, stargazing, fat: what manner of hero is this?" (*S*, 25)³³².

However, he is able, from the periphery, to affect the lives of those surrounding him and that ultimately constitute his life³³³. Initially he appropriates their lives through the telescope and he becomes an actual voyeur when he falls in love with Farah, also known as Ice Block and Disaster. His infatuation only stresses his being apart. The realisation of sexual difference provokes a thetic crisis aggravated by his mothers' closeness that only makes more apparent his own being outside and divided. On the one hand there was their closeness to which he was just a mere spectator. They would finish each others' sentences, talk and giggle in a private female language, swing together with their arms entwined, put their heads together and whisper unknown secrets. His hatred for his mothers gives rise to the realisation: "who else implanted in his heart the conviction of being a sidelined personality, a watcher from the wings of his own life?" (*S*, 35). On the other hand, the walls of Nishapur are more and more felt to be the walls of imprisonment. Nishapur is an extension of his mothers' bodies, a universe existing beyond the reach of patriarchy in "reject[ing] God, their father's memory and their place in society" (*S*, 35-6). The trinity is abject in its undifferentiated "obscene unity" and also in its exclusively feminine fabric (*S*, 38). The mansion, as place of birth, decay and death, is reminiscent of the womb turned abject since the semiotic has successfully pushed away the introduction of the symbolic: "Omar Khayyam, walled up in 'Nishapur', had been excluded from human society by his mothers' strange resolve; and this, his mothers' three-in-oneness, redoubled that sense of exclusion, of being, in the midst of objects, out of things" (*S*, 35). However, the seal is broken with Omar's illicit activities with the phallic telescope that awaken a repressed sexuality (*S*, 35). His hate is the realisation of their abjection. His emerging aggression is a need for demarcation of his young maleness from his mothers' overwhelming femininity which, he realises, has provided an exceptional childhood, from journeys in the forgotten underground labyrinth to being breast-fed until he was six (*S*, 30).

³³² Kristeva interprets dizziness as dizziness of identity which can be triggered by the threatening presence, for instance, of a (racial) Other (*PH*, 182). More poignantly to our point, she writes: "The no man's land of dizziness that links suffering and sex gives way to a disgust for decay or excretion" (*PH*, 148).

³³³ The influence that he exerted, acting unobserved but devastatingly, as well as the reference to plague in this context (see quote above) remit the reader to the myth of Oedipus, therefore to sacrifice. Moreover, the garland of shoes and shame that he is meant to receive are part of carnivalistic rituals but also a requirement in sacrificial ones. Helene P. Foley refers to garlanding the victim and celebrants as customary practice in animal sacrifice of which the ox procession performed in medieval France is an example.

His singularity allied to his obesity is increasingly felt as freakishness. The discovery of the power of hypnosis is an experience of transition between his mothers' realms and that of the Father. It is the written word that Omar feels to be his grandfather's legacy, that is, the library. However the books with which the boy instructs himself provide just an illusion of a legacy. Since the library had been bought from some Colonel, it is just a sham of male bonding though it serves to relate Omar's parentage with white imperialism. It is there that he finds the treaties on mesmerism and "*animal magnetism*" (S, 34. Italics added). He begins by putting the three male servants into a trance only to discover the active manifestation of sexual instincts. The trinity of homosexual love contrasts with his mothers' asexuality from his birth up to that moment. By being introduced to the universe of sex, he is, necessarily, put in contact with notions of abjection. Vertigo arises when one is above others, in the clouds so to speak, hence his fainting when he was with Farah at the frontier. His vertigo seems to be related to his hypnotic activities, described in abject terms when Hashmat Bibi puts herself under his spell: "You are sinking deeper,' he intoned as she lay upon her mat 'and deeper into the cloud. It is good to be in the cloud; you want to sink lower and lower'" (S, 34). The maidservant's subsequent death is an abandonment to abjection, for "having been given glimpses of non-being" she decided to stop living (S, 34). However, Omar struggles against the engulfing abjection of his mothers: "He suffered the sensation of being lost inside a cloud" and "in spite of what he murmured to Hashmat Bibi, cloudiness was not attractive to the boy" (S, 37). The sisters represent a "mother country" that eventually Omar will have to leave behind. His going to school at twelve, marking his late entering in the symbolic universe, causes a rupture in the women's unanimity. As he goes out into the world, the world is able to penetrate the cracks in Nishapur's walls. The women want Omar to take their legacy of shamelessness with him by forbidding him the emotion of shame (S, 38) but the world also crawls in and the "three sisters were finally pierced by the forbidden arrows of *sharam*" (S, 39. Italics in the text). The author's words, connoted with phallic innuendoes, are insightfully chosen. Quarrels between them verify the disintegration of their pre-symbolic existence that is only restored with the audacious repetition of an illegitimate pregnancy, that is, when they re-invest themselves with shamelessness.

Omar's arrival in the outside world is referred to as a "descent back to earth" which, according to the order he devised, meant he was descending *from* hell (S, 40). The reception constituted by anonymous onlookers and enemies of the family confirm the connection with evilness and with hell in its religious sense. He was regarded as "the symbol of incarnate sin"

(*J*, 42), “the Devil’s seed” and “Flesh of infamy” (*J*, 43). The family of Farida Balloch, whose husband died in the construction of the dumb-waiter, that umbilical cord that linked Nishapur to the outside world, are enraged that their “right” to revenge on the boy is overshadowed by the religious leader Maulana Dawood and his fanatic follower, the postman. Both parties ask for divine intervention. “O God! O scourging Lord! Bring down upon this human abomination Thy sizzling fountain of fire!” (*J*, 42) cries out Dawood, to which the Balloch supporters respond, “Devil’s seed! - Fountain of fire!” (*J*, 43). Sufiya’s husband is, like herself, pushed towards the context of hell so that many years later, when the General studies the possibility of their union, Dawood pronounces “That she-devil and this child of she-devils [...] let them make their hell together” (*J*, 198).

Another parallel can be established between husband and wife which demonstrates them to share a set of traits that contributes to Omar’s empathy and eventually even affection for Sufiya. If she indeed metamorphoses into an albino panther in the later stage of her life (*J*, 221), he is from early on identified with nocturnal animals and creatures of mischievous reputation. The boy’s sleeplessness makes his mothers call him “Little bat” (*J*, 31). Wearing a chadar to wander in the dark tunnels he gives the appearance of a “caped crusader” like Batman, or perhaps of a “cloaked bloodsucker” like Dracula (*J*, 22). His complains are described as howls (*J*, 31) and he is referred to as “a spoiled and vulpine brat” (*J*, 31). When he grows impatient with the lack of liberty he behaves like a caged beast: “His roving freedom-of-the-house was only the pseudo liberty of a zoo animal; and his mothers were his loving, caring keepers” (*J*, 35). In addition, when he finds a way out from Nishapur and actually sees daylight during the explorations of the labyrinthine passages, he is compared to the minotaur, a beast wholly dependent, at least for the time being, from the walls that protect him from the world outside (*J*, 32). The most evident passage is that where he is compared to wolf-children, where the narrator seems almost to be talking about Sufiya’s mental condition and feline dirtiness:

Have you heard of those wolf-children, suckled - we must suppose - on the feral multiple breasts of a hairy moon-howling dam? Rescued from the Pack, they bite their saviours vilely in the arm; netted and caged, they are brought stinking of raw meat and faecal matter into the emancipated light of the world, their brains too imperfectly formed to be capable of acquiring more than the most fundamental rudiments of civilization... Omar Khayyam, too, fed at too-many mammary glands; and he wandered for some four thousand

days in the thing-infested jungle that was ‘Nishapur,’ his walled-in wild place, his mother-country. (*S*, 30-31)

It will be Omar who will play the role of the saviour in Sufiya’s life, as unsuccessfully as described here. Omar tries the jungle-boy speech on Farah Zoroaster hoping to soften her heart but he is rudely answered “‘You’re no fucking ape-man, sonny jim’” (*S*, 31). But when the narrator takes over, he adds that he was denying “the wildness, the evil within him” as the Hyders did before they were forced to deal with consequences of Sufiya’s actions (*S*, 31). Even though the image of the mowgli slowly retires and disappears completely when he starts to instruct himself (*S*, 33), there remained hidden a beastliness only perceptible in the weakness of his character.

It would appear then that Sufiya and Omar have experiences and associations that make them more identical than what was supposed at first. There is, however, an inescapable difference. Sufiya is invariably portrayed in contexts of grotesqueness with very strong negative expressions whereas Omar is more of a comic grotesque character. The scene when he is born into the world is deeply carnivalistic: he is insulted and the crowd is maddened with hate but there is balance in the satiric elements provided: Dawood appears on a motor-scooter, a gift from British officials, to spread his message of imminent and generalised damnation; the postman feels offended because the letter to Omar’s school was not mailed but delivered by a woman who rejected him; the animosity towards Omar is weakened by the petty competition between the two groups and their absurd claim to rights to revenge and, most of all, there is the carnivalistic incident describing how Dawood, pleading on his knees to God to bring down his striking justice on the boy’s head (described as a “grotesque display”, *S*, 42), ends up with the shameful garland of shoes around his neck when it was meant to be put around Omar’s. Everyone, from Omar to the widow Balloch and even the street urchins are brought to tears with laughter.

Another element that I indicated that provides cohesion to *Shame* is fire. There is, first of all, an association of Sufiya with fire in all its destructive forms and effects: blushes like petrol fires (*S*, 121), burned lips (*S*, 121), smell of burning clothes by being in touch with the girl’s skin (*S*, 121), water almost at boiling point given Sufiya’s embarrassment at being naked in order to be bathed (*S*, 121), flames, Hell or “demon of shame” (*S*, 170). The explosions that take place in the novel point to the world of femininity as well. Bilquis appears to be trapped in a woman’s world: Sufiya was supposed to be a boy and the shame of that failure ends up in

her daughter's explosion and Mahmoud Kemal, her father, was known as the Woman which had a direct link with his being blown up. At the source of the trouble was the film *Gai-Wallah* which favoured a Hindu-inspired approach to life. In the days of the partition watching *Gai-Wallah* became a synonym for a political stand in the Muslim-Hindu conflict. Mahmoud decides to run both *Gai-Wallah* and a cow-butchering western in his theatre, revealing a misjudgement of the situation that the narrator prefers to call tolerance. If initially his nickname was related to the fact that he had been forced to assume the role of the mother since Bilquïs was only two, at this stage it acquires a *dangerous* meaning. As Sufiya will learn, Mahmoud himself confesses there to be an overwhelming shame in being called a woman:

But now this affectionate title came to mean something more dangerous, and when children spoke of Mahmoud the Woman they meant Mahmoud the Weakling, the Shameful, the Fool. 'Woman,' he sighed resignedly to his daughter, 'what a term! Is there no end to the burdens this word is capable of bearing? Was there such a broad-backed and also such a dirty word?' (S, 62)

The danger was obviously that of provoking violent reactions. The bomb-planters, referred to with the ironic term of "gardeners of violence", put an end to Mahmoud's existence, described in a passage saturated with images of Armageddon: "that afternoon when the world ended" (S, 62), "the hot firewind of apocalypse" (S, 63), that is, the Loo, that made Bilquïs alien to her nakedness because "the universe was ending" (S, 63), and even "a sound like the beating wings of an angel", supposedly the exterminating angel (S, 62). The explosion is powerful and grotesque: Bilquïs "saw everything come flying out, seats, ticket books, fans, and then pieces of her father's shattered corpse and the charred shards of the future" (S, 63). Sufiya's explosion is even more grandiose. Omar's violent death makes part of it, as if the whole explosion is the consummation of the lovers' desires. It also represents the culmination and justification of a lifetime of terror of clouds and "great nothing" (S, 22):

And then the explosion comes, a shock-wave that demolishes the house, and after it the fireball of her burning, rolling out towards to the horizon like the sea, and last of all the cloud, which rises and spreads and hangs over the nothingness of the scene, until I can no longer see what is no longer there; the silent cloud, in the shape of a giant, grey and headless man, a figure of dreams, a phantom with one arm lifted in a gesture of farewell. (S, 286)

Mahmoud's dismemberment is also the dismemberment of Bilquîs's majestic world. In *Shame* fire is a privileged means for destruction: Sufiya's blushing, her fever, the fire of the beast, her spontaneous combustion-like explosion and the fire of the young people mentioned by Rushdie in the second story said to inspire the novel; they are unable to identify the source of their rage and, consequently, to control its power. The contrast is made evident: "shame burn[s] on [the youngsters'] brows" and Bilquîs, after that afternoon when a bomb blew to ashes her father's cinema house *and* her eyebrows, is unable to carry the weight of shame (*S*, 117). On that occasion the Loo blew strong as well (hence her irrational actions later in life when the Loo blew but which can hardly work as a valid excuse for any person's behaviour)³³⁴ and by the end of it she was naked, eyebrowless, "stripped of history", stripped of shame (*S*, 63).

Bilquîs performs one of the most vivid spectacles of the novel, that of complete rupture with the past by standing "naked amidst the scorn of strangers upon whom they see the rich clothing, the brocades of continuity and the eyebrows of belonging" (*S*, 63-64). The image complies perfectly with Bakhtin's ideas on discrowning: she was treated like a princess in her father's Empire (another example of carnivalistic humour since Mahmoud's theatre was of very small dimensions) and he considered himself a Slave-King, someone who had become great through his own merit. A princess does not serve breakfast, her father used to tell her and, in the end, she created for herself a fantasy of queenhood that the explosion brought to an abrupt end. Bilquîs does not realise the wicked sarcasm of the street urchins who wailed at her "o gracious lady, o Rani of Khansi", that is, queen of coughs, the narrator explains, of expelled air, sickness and *hot wind*. Here, the queen is already being made a fool. It is therefore utterly dispossessed both of material and spiritual goods (even her "royal" gowns have disappeared) and under the poster of *Excelsior*, that film celebrating male nobility and chivalry, Raza Hyder enters her life and clothes her with his own garments. The scene, according to the grotesque spirit, is both tragic and comic. Hyder reminds Bilquîs of a king³³⁵. The dream of majesty is recovered as Hyder, only a captain at the time, returns regularly to the red fortress where she and other Muslims were being kept. With every visit, he brings some new piece of clothing or make-up utensil. However, the sense is strong that it is just an illusion: she behaves

³³⁴ Rushdie uses this strategy often: he presents a magical or fantastical excuse to events only to discredit it soon afterwards.

³³⁵ The name Bilquîs or Bilqîs refers to the Middle Eastern version of the Biblical Queen of Sheeba. The reference is therefore of a queen (as Bilquîs is ironically characterised as well) subdued to the authority of a great ruler, Solomon.

like a queen but in the actress-like manner her father encouraged her to, she is clothed but the muddied bodies in the river have been looted and stripped naked. Her eyebrows will never grow back and she can only pretend to maintain some balance by painting them on. Bilquis's mistake seems to be not to accept the temporary nature of carnival on perpetuating the fallacy of queenhood as an approach to life that she will pass on to Good News, also with disastrous consequences. Hyder's attraction lies in the fact that he proposes to re-establish the vision of herself that her father cultivated, that of a queen, never of a fool. This marks the first moment when Bilquis refuses to accept her shame. In spite of the extreme humiliation that even made her faint when she realised, like Eve in the Garden of Eden, that she was naked, people hardly notice her. But when she is fully clothed again she covers herself with shame that she promptly dismisses. The other inmates call her scavenger and harlot but she ignores the remarks. It is as if old Bilquis is one of those bodies floating down the river and to oblivion. But regardless of how much Bilquis wishes to become someone else, she remains rootless. The reason why she falls in love with Hyder is admittedly because of his solidity but eventually the marriage fails to compensate: every time the Loo blew she acted mad and ordered the servants to hold objects down to their places. Her sense of stability and fixity was lost.

Sufiya's explosion mirrors her grandfather's and fire links her with her mother but she is also a contrast to Omar insofar as they represent the confronting natural elements: she is linked with fire and he with water. Images of water, fish and of their related fields are recurrent in the novel. Omar's asphyxiating fishlips in fact belong to a wider context. On the eve of the arranged marriage with Omar (because what else is a fairy tale but a tale of an arranged marriage? *J*, 158), Bilquis, who since the attack on Talvar had not spoken to Sufiya, gathers strength to tell her daughter some dutiful words: "You must think of yourself as the ocean," she told Sufiya Zinobia. "Yes, and he, the man, imagine him a sea creature, because that is what men are like, to live they must drown in you, in the tides of your secret flesh" (*J*, 199). Sufiya's blunt answer is "I hate fish" (*J*, 199). Because she takes literally the metaphors of ocean and fish, she imagines Shahbanou and Omar metamorphosing on those nights that the servant, in order to protect Sufiya, performs her own sacrifice and slides into the master's room: "Behind her eyes she sees the Parsee ayah metamorphosing, becoming liquid, flowing outwards until she fills the room. Melted Shahbanou, salty, immense, and a transmogrifying Omar growing scales, fins, gills and swimming in that sea" (*J*, 212-213). Interestingly, these "metamorphoses" acquire several grotesque nuances; the transformation, in itself a grotesque incident, makes Shahbanou grow disproportionately, well beyond her corporeal limits. In fact,

she loses any pretence at borders and at physicality. Because she is made to represent the procreative potential denied to Sufiya she becomes a mere symbol, that of fertility. The illicit love-making, well-intended since Omar also honoured his intentions not to force himself on his wife and satisfied his needs with someone else, is nevertheless grotesque given its decisive contribution to Sufiya's transformation.

At first, the reader doubts Sufiya understands the meaning of it all. S/he is amused by Sufiya's infantile thinking: the servant must certainly have changed into the sea because there are damp patches on the sheets but she is puzzled by the mechanics of the metamorphosis and cannot find any remains in the room such as starfish or seaweed. But there is a more direct relationship with Sufiya's metamorphosis and with her role as a sacrificial victim understood as the denial of her sexuality *and* of her procreative urges. Before she marries, Sufiya imagines herself asking Shahbanou what husbands are for. She is told they are for babies but that babies are not for her. Sufiya is angry with the response, angry at not understanding and at feeling that, once again, the guilt lies with her: "*And babies aren't for you. Why? 'Just, I say so.'* But why? 'O shoo. Why why why away you fly. It always ends like that, without explaining anything. But this husband business is important. She *has* one. Everyone else must know but she doesn't. Again her own stupid fault" (S, 214. Italics in the text). At this point of her life, Sufiya shows evident signs of fragmentation symptomatic of the multiple personality she is developing; she spends a lot of time engaged in fantasy and in role-playing dialogue and situations. She imagines putting people in and out of her head to talk or interact with her.

Sufiya's desire is increased by the presence of her numerous nieces and nephews with whom she likes to play. Babies become an obsession. Reminding herself that babies are off limits for her, she concludes there must be something wrong with her, which makes Sufiya realise a change in her, the arrival of the beast: "This gives her a feeling. Just like a blush, all over, hot hot. But although her skin tingles and her cheeks burn it is only happening on the inside; nobody notices these new internal blushes. That is strange also. It makes the feeling worse. Sometimes she thinks, 'I am changing into something'" (S, 215). Fish, ocean, babies, beast, all occupy a position in the context of Sufiya's inability to deal with the role she is asked to play. It is unfair to blame her but she feels she is to blame; she desires but she rejects:

There is a thing that women do at night with husbands. She does not do it, Shahbanou does it for her. *I hate fish.* Her husband does not come to her at night. Here are two things she

does not like: that he does not come, that's one, and the thing itself makes two, it sounds horrible, it must be, the shrieks the moans the wet and smelly sheets. Chhi chhi. Disgusting. But she *is a wife*. She *has a husband*. She can't work this out. The horrible thing and the horrible not-doing-the-thing. She squeezes her eyelids shut with her fingers and makes babies play. There is no ocean but there is a feeling of sinking. It makes her sick.

There is an ocean. She feels its tide. And, somehow in its depths, a Beast, stirring. (*S*, 215. Italics in the text)

The foreground of Sufiya's internal revolution is abjection itself: it is sex-related, it disgusts and sickens; with its bodily fluids, it alienates and awakens desire. In addition, it is clearly related with motherhood: the sacrifice of not becoming a mother. Sufiya is the barren ocean, usually a place of abundance and vitality; the beast is an absence (there is an ocean, there is no ocean). The beast becomes able to control Sufiya's consciousness and able to act without the family knowing. Its very first victims in the community are children and we know Sufiya made babies play in her head (I recall that Kali's earrings are corpses of children). Before the episode of the headless boys, children just disappeared, in great numbers and systematically, though no bodies were ever found. It is no coincidence either that the beast had chosen for its first murderous spectacle males in transition, that is, they were still almost children but they already were sexually defined and active subjects (their spilled semen was found on the corpses). Boys fulfil both Sufiya's needs, herself a child-woman.

Consistency is provided with other references: Raza Hyder and Omar are on a fishing expedition in the lake haunted by a fish-hating ghost when the discussion of Sufiya's termination takes place (*S*, 232-4) and Good News wishes Sufiya had been drowned at birth when she attacks Talvar at the wedding reception (*S*, 171).

As the novel progresses, the grotesque is intensified and finally in the closing scene, Sufiya appears in her full, grotesque glory:

He stood beside the bed and waited for her like a bridegroom on his wedding night, as she climbed towards him, roaring, like a fire driven by the wind. The door blew open. And he in the darkness, erect, watching the approaching glow, and then she was there, on all fours, naked, coated in mud and shit, with twigs sticking to her back and beetles in her hair. (*S*, 286)

The becoming of an exclusively somatic being coincides, paradoxically, with the most abstract, because representational, meaning: "What had escaped, what now roamed free [...]"

was not Sufiya Zinobia Shakil at all, but something more like a principle, the embodiment of violence, the pure malevolent strength of the Beast” (S, 242). By becoming a principle she is not just divested of her individuality; she is unable to overcome her own thetic crisis, transgresses her borders and returns to the chaos of a state of original indifferentiation and violence. The sacrifice is also to make her lose her place in a symbolic order that forces her subsequent return to a state of pre-subjectivity. By not being allowed to move completely to a symbolic existence through the denying of her formation in sexual terms (she remains incomplete because she never has intercourse with her husband), the Beast is awakened from its deep ocean: it seduces four boys and, afterwards murders them. They became its/her husbands. Sufiya “discover[s] in the labyrinths of her unconscious self the hidden path that links *sharam* to violence” thus complying with the reasoning above that presupposes violence in a system of sacrificial economy (S, 139). René Girard, as previously noted, relates the emergence of death with mimetic desire. The subject, lacking being (and one recalls Gray Díaz’s association of lack of being with death), imitates the other (the model) to learn what it should desire in order to be. Clearly, Sufiya lacked being and the mimetic desire, culminating in the empty sex and homicide of other victims (we envision a system that multiplies its sacrificing strategies), lay precisely in her achieving plenitude as a being and a woman. It is on realising that her husband was having sex with the servant, Shahbanou, that the Beast takes over her body definitely. Furthermore, not only was Shahbanou the model identified with the object of Sufiya’s desire but the fulfilment of her lack was represented in the baby the servant conceived. For Sufiya, desire and lack of being are intimately connected with her womanhood and her not being able to become a sexualised entity.

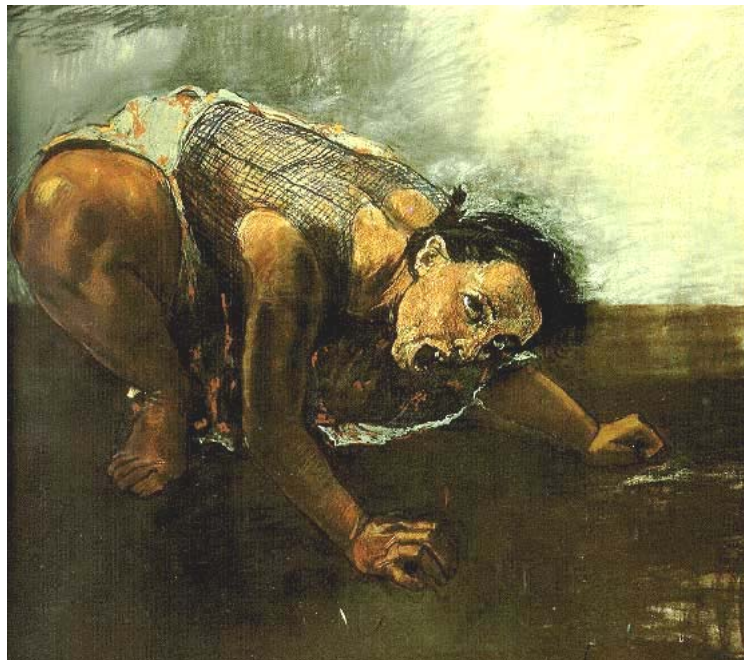
Sufiya’s sacrifice is necessary so that the stability of the symbolic order is maintained. The characters of this novel are presented in situations of sequential thetic crises (the *leitmotif* of borders and frontiers pervades the text) and their survival can only be assured at the expense of a sacrifice. This “was the danger of Sufiya Zinobia: that she came to pass, not in any wilderness of basilisks and fiends, but in the heart of the respectful world. [...] To comprehend Sufiya Zinobia would be to shatter, as if it were a crystal, these people’s sense of themselves” (S, 200). It is thus confirmed that the subject’s sense of wholeness in the socio-symbolic order is fragile, needing to engage in repeated actions of abjection and violence. Furthermore, the community is willing to sacrifice one of them, a woman, in order to re-establish the boundaries of selfhood. What the novel seems to suggest is that, in the end, the economy of sacrifice is not inadequate and possibly deadly to women alone; it might be for

everyone because the sacrifice has created an exterminating angel that re-directs accumulated negativity back to its source:

this Sufiya Zinobia turned out to be, in reality, one of those supernatural beings, those exterminating or avenging angels, or werewolves, or vampires, about whom we are happy to read in stories, sighing thankfully or even a little smugly while they scare the pants off us that it's just as well they are no more than abstractions or figments; because we know (but do not say) that the mere likelihood of their existence would utterly subvert the laws by which we live, the processes by which we understand the world. (S, 197)

The dismembering element makes a regular appearance in texts that resort to grotesque images. Shahrzad and Satyasama are cut to pieces, and Sufiya explodes. Even Saleem is reduced to a pulp by the mass of all the individuals of the Indian subcontinent that tread on him which is not only an echo of Kali dancing on Shiva's body, but also an actual sacrificial ritual performed, for instance, in the Dinka society. Saleem, like the chosen animal in this rite, is trampled down and crushed by the weight of a whole community demanding his death. Girard rejects the idea that the female body always represents a potential victim for a sacrificial ritual but the inadequate aspects of his view, once detected, do not jeopardise the value of the theory. Supported by Julia Kristeva and by the practical analyses of Martha Reineke, whose studies of the figures of the mystic ascetic and the witch drive the point home, it was possible to develop a reasoning which incorporates the notion of women's precariousness in a signifying economy exclusively by virtue of their gender. Moreover it remains an open issue whether the women in *When Dreams Travel* and *Shame* go through the change from surrogate victims to sacred myths. In the case of Satyasama, her magical powers not only make her a living candidate to victimisation but represent at the same time her ability to exert the redemptive authority of the sacralised scapegoat. However, by living through Dilshad she not only guarantees her own continuation but an ongoing ability for society to heal itself through its very scapegoats: women. Satyasama's apparent alienation to her destiny does not signify self-sacrificing resignation as it is also made clear that she could not escape the atrocious death. Ground-breaking as Satyasama's peaceful resistance might be, and as optimistic the tone that closes the novel might sound, it cannot be said that women have risen above sacrificing practices that satiate social needs on their bodies. Sufiya's metamorphosis could be argued to correspond to that metamorphosis into generative violence. However, the same characteristics that pose reservations in regard to Satyasama are seen repeating

themselves in *Shame*: the transformation is unwilling, and the effects are too ambiguous since the ending of the novel is imprecise as well. Furthermore the goriest deaths are reserved for the final pages and the tone is darker. Sufiya does not become a sacred monster and her world is not repaired through the exertion of the violent justice Sufiya embodies. Her sacrifice is in vain since for a long time it delayed the fulfilment of the ultimate goal of scapegoating: the elimination of the victim. The principle of unanimity was not followed; husband and father refuse to participate actively in the killing so Sufiya ends up functioning as a sponge for too long. Violence, in order to take care of itself, must be kept circulating and it merely accumulated in her body and as a consequence her world does not survive its own reciprocal violence and explodes like a nuclear bomb.



Paula Rego, *Mulher-Cão*, 1994

1.3. *The Grotesque in a Religious Context and in an Authoritarian Regime: Del amor y otros demonios and Shame*

Men don't have to be drunk to make havoc of heaven and earth. *With them carnage is ingrained.*

Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *London Bridge*, 406. Italics in the text

1.3.1. *Sierva María: dog-woman and witch*



Sierva María de Todos Los Ángeles from Gabriel García Márquez's *Del amor y otros demonios* is one of those creatures that, like Sufiya, is presented as an exterminating angel, on account of supposedly carrying a deadly contaminating disease, and simultaneously as a pure soul. For those surrounding her and to the reader, it is difficult to say plainly what sort of an angel she is. She threatens the tight fabric of social relations with her unearthly form of existence and unattainable otherness. Sierva María goes through a metamorphosis which is the result of an extraneous force of social appropriation of her body that can thereby be controlled, fashioned, forged and broken. She is described thus:

Empezaba a florecer en una encrucijada de fuerzas contrarias. Tenía muy pouco de la madre. Del padre, en cambio, tenía el cuerpo escuálido, la timidez irredimible, la piel lívida, los ojos de un azul taciturno, y el cobre puro de la cabellera radiante. Su modo de ser era tan sigiloso que parecía una criatura invisible. Asustada con tan extraña condición, la madre le colgaba un cencerro en el puño para no perder su rumbo en la penumbra de la casa.³³⁶

³³⁶ Gabriel García Márquez, *Del amor y otros demonios* (Barcelona: Círculo de Lectores, 1994) 23. Henceforth indicated parenthetically with the abbreviation *DD*.

Sierva María is characterised as an unbalanced grotesque creature, embodying the two opposing characters of her parents. However, one of them prevails: the spiritual over the physical. Sierva María performs a plain contrast with her mother, Bernarda Cabrera, clearly defined through her body. First through her Gypsy beauty and rapacious sexual appetite; later in her grotesque bodily decay. Bernarda's appearance is that of a several days-old overblown corpse, covered only in a shroud-like tunic, that shows itself only to be living because it defecates blood, breaks wind and vomites bile. The transformation had its origins in a change in her food habits. Bernarda abuses fermented honey and cacao, willing herself to the desired state of corrupted woman. Sierva is the object in this passage of one of the few moments of attention her mother pays to her, one that discloses her later animalisation, then as a dog. If mother keeps her at bay, disconcerted by her outlandish self, her father demonstrates little interest for twelve years.

The result of these unusual circumstances is an eccentric education, divested of parental control. The daughter of the Marquis of Casaldüero is brought up outside the rules and constraints of eighteenth century Colombian aristocracy. She does not belong. Moreover, she finds a place for herself outside. She spends most of her time in the slaves' courtyard and ends up being brought up by Dominga de Adviento who rules the house. Though she follows the Catholic faith she combines it with the Yoruban beliefs of her ancestry. Dominga and the slaves blacken Sierva María's face with soot and around her neck they place Santería necklaces, her only and truly cherished possession. The girl becomes even stranger by excelling in the group bonding rituals of these Others, that is, of the slaves. She exhibits more grace in her dance, she sings in voices not her own, and in languages not her own that range from African to animal languages. This Kali-like figure has the gift of multivoicedness but when she is locked up in the convent of Santa Clara she refuses to respond to the questions posed. Consequently she is believed to be a deaf-mute by the gullible novices. This idiosyncratic colonialist attitude of one-culture, one-language beyond which no others exist, brings back to mind Satyasama's treatment by the sultan's court. Sierva María also refuses all forms of established or conventional knowledge so she fails to learn Peninsular Spanish, arithmetic, natural sciences and music. The comment that the dismayed teacher makes is that "No es que la niña sea negada para todo, es que no es de este mundo" (*DD*, 61). This world refers to her "condición fantasmal" (*DD*, 61) and to the world of imported European culture because, as

her mother admitted, there was nothing white about Sierva María but the colour of her skin (*DD*, 61).

The girl is gradually removed from the universe of her parents and their presumed society. But they also dissociate themselves from a regular social conduct. Bernarda wanders in the slums and licentious establishments of the city port with her lover and Don Ygnacio hardly participates in any social events, not even Mass. So immersed was Sierva María in the slaves' world that she decides that her name must identify her with them. Her first metamorphosis is of her own doing; she renames herself María Mandinga³³⁷ and by dropping the name "Sierva", she takes a step towards freedom: "En aquel mundo opresivo en el que nadie era libre, Sierva María lo era: sólo ella y sólo allí. De modo que era allí donde se celebraba la fiesta, en su verdadera casa y con su verdadera familia" (*DD*, 22). Sierva María is thus representative of a thetic crisis manifested in transgressive behaviour that implies valuation of a hierarchically and economically inferior group of people. Consequently, she is also a probable object of institutional violence exerted in order to reinstate the established social, in this case also religious, order. Moreover, she lives in a context of accumulated shamelessness. Bernarda is utterly unashamed of her grotesque and almost denuded body, of her illicit relationships, of being pimped and sodomised by Judas, of smuggling and slave trading³³⁸, of taking drugs, of hosting orgies at the plantation, and most of all, like Bilquis, of hating her daughter. Don Ygnacio's behaviour is definitely more serene but the power of the word is that of constructing realities and when Don Ygnacio's first wife is struck by lightning, people say it is a divine punishment for some hideous sin. Sierva María appears then as a contrast, a contrast of innocence, which once again recalls Sufiya's own situation. In spite of her remorseless life experiences, Bernarda accuses Sierva María of being their shame, worse still, their public shame (*DD*, 135).

³³⁷ Mandinga is an individual of the Mandingas people in Guinea-Bissau but the word is also a synonym of witchcraft or of magical arts. When she finds one of her daughter's dolls floating in her water jar, Bernarda interprets it as an evil spell cast by Sierva María. It is then that Bernarda demands that the girl be permanently removed to the slaves' shack.

³³⁸ Bernarda used the slave trade to smuggle flour in, which revealed itself to be much more profitable than selling the slaves themselves. It must be said that slave trading was an economic activity that at the time did not raise the ethical problems that it obviously raises today. I mention it as a complement to the evaluation of Bernarda's character insofar as being individuals of our age we are bound to register the information as negative. The author was acutely aware of that. In addition, it is through the slave trade that Bernarda gets to be the most successful smuggler of her century, thus one of the greatest criminals as well. If she turned to smuggling instead of trading slaves it was only because it was more profitable a business. See pages 59-60.

The crisis took the form of disease. An Indian woman asserts the existence of a plague of rabies and an eclipse, traditionally viewed as an evil omen, was to take place in a short time. The woman, of reputable healing knowledge, knocks on Don Ygnacio's door to inform him of the fate of the people who, in addition to his own daughter, had been bitten by a rabid dog. The information is presented as solid proof of Sierva María's imminent yielding to the disease. Two could not be found as they had "certainly" been removed elsewhere by their families, one had died and one lay in hospital though the latter had only been touched by the dog's spittle. Sierva María, having been the first to be bitten, could not possibly escape the excruciating death, the woman figured, though her wound had healed. Dogs were poisoned and the marquis who rarely left the house headed towards the Amor de Dios Hospital to visit the rabies patient. Among the slaves there were rumours and they recalled the attack on the city years before of the forest monkeys that maddened by the disease slaughtered pigs, hens and, covered in blood, invaded the cathedral with their shrieks right in the middle of Te Deum. One man was clubbed to death and was still remembered in children's lullabies. Significantly that time the chosen scapegoat had also been the first to be bitten. People are convinced by this accumulation of doubtful information that they run a serious risk of being victimised by a plague.

The circumstances are therefore favourable to the performance of a sacrifice. For Sierva María to assume the role of the scapegoat she is associated with animality which has become the standard victim in ritual and which confers the necessary balance of identification and difference with humanity. Throughout the text, her animal nature is continuously stressed. The red-haired girl surprises birds and other animals, so perfectly does she imitate their voices; she inherits her father's paleness, who, in his turn, got it from having his blood systematically drained by bats³³⁹; Bernarda compares her daughter's silent movements to the slithering of a snake and when at the convent a novice tries to remove her necklaces, she "se revolvió como una víbora y le dio en la mano un mordisco instantáneo y certero" (*DD*, 83). Her violent reactions have the aggressivity of a tiger (*DD*, 123) but when confronted with love, as in the case when Cayetano confesses his irrepressible passion, she is like a startled deer (*DD*, 156), revealing Sierva María's fragile and helpless side.

³³⁹ Notice the vampiric element. Another link between Sierva María and her father that concerns an animal is precisely that of the dog. Don Ygnacio had an irrational fear of all animals, particularly of dogs. His remark "I live in fear of being alive" is illustrative of Kayser's idea of the grotesque (*DD*, 50). That was his feeling up until the moment when all animals deserted him on account of a flood, all but

Another animal that is made to symbolise these aspects is the lamb with which Sierva María appears in the dream that the lovers have. It is a dream with two separate components, both pointing to death. She appears eating grapes, a manifestation of life, thus eating the last one signifies the moment of the end. The setting is also meaningful. It is a scene of one particularly rigorous winter in Salamanca of which Cayetano recalls the dead lambs in the snow. The context indicates where death is coming from, that is, the imperial nexus. The image of the lamb, once again of a sacrificial lamb, is by no means a secondary one. Besides the common dream (*DD*, 96 and 134) it is recalled on the occasion of Cayetano's invitation to travel to the New Continent (*DD*, 99). That and the reference to Salamanca, where Cayetano comes from, suggest he is the instrument of death. If she is the lamb, as a cleric he is the shepherd and he is the one who will lead her to the sacrifice of exorcism by remaining blindly confident in the justice of the Holy Office, by instigating her not to flee when she has the opportunity and by involuntarily showing Martina how to escape which obviously resulted in the immediate discovery and sealing of the tunnel through which he got in and she could have gone out. That dream, always in that desolate white landscape, haunts him for the rest of his days, bringing to the surface his culpability in the process of Sierva María's sacrifice.

To the frequent associations with specific animals is added a component of general animal behaviour that corroborates the relation. Grotesqueness makes up part of the character with regard to her hygienic habits because once in the cell she defecates anywhere and does not attend to the removal of the excrement. Her behaviour does not comply with notions of public and private either, corroborating the existence of an age of innocence, of a pure wild nature. As such, she is also unable to recognise the nuns' singing as the musical sounds of her own kind, even of her own species, and like a frightened animal she hides from the strange sound:

Cuando cantaron la tercia Sierva María se había levantado una vez para tomar agua en el estanque. Asustada, regresó al banco sin beber, pero volvió cuando se dio cuenta de que eran cánticos de monjas. Quitó la nata de hojas podridas con un golpe diestro de la mano, y bebió en el cuenco hasta saciarse sin apartar los gusarapos. Luego orinó detrás del árbol, acuclillada y con un palo listo para defenderse de animales abusivos y hombres ponzoñosos, como se lo enseñó Dominga del Adviento. (*DD*, 83-84)

a mastiff, which led to a radical change of heart towards these animals. This change finds echo in his relationship with his dog-daughter, initially almost invisible, later worth the sacrifice of his life.

The emphasis on her bodily functions approximates Sierva María to animality but that perception is sharply undermined when given characteristics are swapped: men are predatory, animals abusive, that is, they take the opportunity to attack. The very text intentionally confuses humanity and animality and reveals them as malleable conventions. In this passage Sierva María's animality means simply to have an instinctual response to basic necessities (thirst and urination). When she is locked up her reactions are those of a caged animal tormented by a night's encasement. In the morning the nuns find the girl "durmiendo sobre los matorrales de paja del colchón, que había destripado con los dientes y las uñas" (DD, 89). But from a human point of view, and when it applies to another human, it acquires other meanings: eccentricity, impudence and evilness. The earthly grotesque changes into a terrible grotesque. Hence her identification with a serpent, a venomous one that brings sinfulness and vice to the Garden of Eden (the irony being that the town was not a paradise to begin with). One of the novices remarks that she has the eyes of the devil (DD, 83). She is *driven to* despair and acts *wild*, which is interpreted as a symptom of possession. Her behaviour is similar to Sufiya's when the Beast takes over and whenever the remains of her world are in danger of being taken away from her, she defends herself violently:

Una de ellas [novicias] trató de quitárselos [los abalorios]. Sierva María se encabritó. A las guardianas que trataron de someterla se las quitó de encima con un empujón. Se subió en la mesa, corrió de un extremo al otro gritando como una poseída verdadera en zafarrancho de abordaje. Rompió cuanto encontró a su paso, saltó por la ventana y desbarató las pérgolas del patio, alborotó las colmenas y derribó las talanqueras de los establos y las cercas de los corrales. Las abejas se dispersaron y los animales en estampida irrumpieron aullando de pánico hasta en los dormitorios de la clausura. (DD, 89-90)

Her attacks have the precision of those of a wild animal so that when she jumps at Cayetano she weighed and measured him first and only then did she go at him "con un salto certero de animal de presa" (DD, 108). The metaphor about men's nature is completed here for if they are predatory she must also be their hunted prey. She scratches and bites Cayetano on the face and in that way she makes him more like herself, scratched and bruised from the treatment she is given (DD, 105-106, 108). It is an important moment for through marks of grotesqueness in the flesh and through pain, they are made identical, therefore not on the side of the establishment, in spite of Cayetano's being there as the appointed evaluator of her spiritual condition and in the name of the Church. He stood as the instrument of her

condemnation by the Holy Office and as her possible freedom as well. The bond is definitely established through the abjection of their mutual wounds: she touches the burning wound of her own making on his hand and he dresses and cleans the infected dog-bite on her ankle (*DD*, 105-106, 108). The intimacy is reinforced by other abjecting love demonstrations: he helps to kill the lice in the cell and even in her hair (*DD*, 155) and at her request he eats a live cockroach (*DD*, 159).

For a short time it had looked as if even inside the convent's walls Sierva María could escape the consequences of being a suspect of diabolical possession but that situation changes rapidly. When she slaughters a *goat* she is not performing any ritual of sacrifice but she already anticipates her own scapegoating. Her devouring appetite is a manifestation of a will to live and to incorporate the world and all its edible pieces. When she plays *diábolo* she does not become the devil but to the novices she looks like one; by eating the eyes she is effacing the power of gazing to take hold of her. When she eats the testicles she is empowering herself through assimilation and performing a form of emasculation to the very system that oppresses her:

Recuperó su mundo al instante. Ayudó a degollar un chivo que se resistía a morir. Le sacó los ojos y le cortó las criadillas, que eran las partes que más le gustaban. Jugó al diábolo con los adultos en la cocina y con los niños del patio, y les ganó a todos. Cantó en yoruba, en congo y en mandinga, y aun los que no entendían la escucharon absortos. Al almuerzo se comió un plato con las criadillas y los ojos del chivo, guisados en manteca de cerdo y sazonados con especias ardientes. (*DD*, 84)

The concerns of language and otherness, central topics in postcolonial fiction, are very much present in *When Dreams Travel* and *Del amor y otros demonios*. In both cases the female head-figure is identified with an animal (the ultimate othering stratagem) and has extraordinary language abilities which they express through singing. This singing has a magical quality that makes it irresistible to whoever listens to it. Their voices are a form of empowerment and therefore also a form of control over other people. This too brings danger for, as in the myth of the sirens, control can be used to destroy the spellbound audience. This characteristic of the implausible is, as previously noted, a trait of magical realist texts. Like many of Gabriel García Márquez's books, the structure of the novel is dependent on this element that is often manifested in strangeness. Examples include Dulce Olivia's habit of cleaning and sweeping the marquis's mansion during the night without being detected over a period of years, Cayetano

seeing Sierva María in a dream exactly as she was without ever meeting her, the prophetic dream that both Cayetano and Sierva María have, the one hundred year-old horse, the rain of paper birds claiming the responsibility for the lightning-bolt that hit Doña Olalla, Don Ygnacio's farm animals fleeing like Noah's from the flood, the circumstances in which he lost his virginity at fifty two, and the absurdity of an old bishop dedicating his life to prayer and penitence after having realised in his youth that God no longer existed. The most exceptional examples are the characters themselves, particularly the Alfaro y Dueñas family whose peculiarity assumes forms that range between the deranged and the wondrous, the pitiless and the indifferent. Still, they do not become fantastical characters *stricto sensu* and they remain subjects that hold to their half-believable, if only fictional, reality.

Sierva María's most striking magic realist quality is that of possessing magical powers. Powerful women with magical powers have been of two main categories in history: holy women and witches. When Sierva María is born it is prophesied that she will be a saint because though she was on the brink of death she was able to defeat it³⁴⁰. Her life is so shaped by death that it is better expressed by the notion of postponing than of actual defeat. It is significant that she is born with the umbilical cord around her neck, an image that is reflected in *Shame*³⁴¹. To support Sierva María's alleged sainthood, in the preface the author explains the origins of the book that combined the legend of a marquise said to perform miracles and the discovery of a two-hundred year-old tomb where the body of a girl with hair over twenty meters long was found. Later, when imprisoned, her unkempt appearance and refusal to eat remind the reader of the medieval mystic. Her miserable state provides a contrast to her mother whose eating and sexual habits can only be characterised as excessive. Taking the individual body as a microcosm of the social body, through the symbolism of food is revealed the preoccupations of society as a whole. Concepts such as food pollution and taboo serve to demarcate cultural and religious boundaries indicating that what is assimilated by the organic body finds an echo socially. An unregulated appetite, says Reineke, is symptomatic of an unregulated society³⁴². The acceptance of this reasoning is fundamental in *Del amor y otros demonios* for it points to the community's crisis, already expressed in Bernarda's disorderly body. Sierva María's physical decay is comparable to the ascetic's who drew to herself the

³⁴⁰ It is also said that she could become a whore, suggesting there to be only insignificant differences between these two types of women. The abbess of Santa Clara, led by her conviction that colonial aristocracy is gutter nobility (*DD*, 86), qualifies Sierva María's hat as typical of a slut.

³⁴¹ I will deal with this issue later in the chapter with regard to Iskander Harappa's death. At that time I will resume the importance of the cell again as a representation of pregnant death.

wounds of social conflict thus effecting its salvation. But the ascetics embodied an indelible contradiction that Sierva María lacks. They *desired* to be freed from that mortal shroud that was their bodies through an intense bodily experience. Through the practice of rejecting food, a practice of absence, they contributed to a signifying economy that was built on death-work. On the contrary, the circumstances surrounding García Márquez's character are imposed. But as Reineke compellingly argues, the mystics' sacrifice comes down to another fallacy. If death was an actual risk, the interpretation of their behaviour as a defiant reaction against the imposition of marriage or as empowerment through religion loses credibility:

Such self-inflicted violence, even when interpreted as the rebellion – cultural, political, and spiritual – of women who quested after salvation was not an emancipating gesture. Instead, it was always, already the rebellion of bodies colonized by the larger culture. The mystics' bodies were not so much free as they were fractured by the conditions of their production within the larger social body of late medieval Christendom. [...] They failed to gain a foothold on such a space of freedom: rather, the freedom to which they aspired was glimpsed only on the margins of the social body, at the point of bodily fracture, at the moment the mystics plummeted into the abyss of being.³⁴³

Martha Reineke draws on the figure of the witch as well and her considerations are quite helpful to relate Sierva María's sacrifice with her being labelled as a witch. The realisation that no legal or political conveniences could explain the time and amount of violence involved in witch hunting (if that were the case, the selected enemy could possibly be more easily put to death) leads Reineke to attribute importance to the torturing process itself and to seek complementary reasons. In her view, scholars have paid increasing attention to social, political and economic aspects and not enough to religious grounds which regarded witches not only as malevolent individuals but also as potentially threatening to the village or town. Though the non-religious motives certainly played a material part, the tremendous influence of Christianity approximately between 1450 and 1750 in Europe and North America, the years of the witch craze, must be given its due credit.

The introduction of the Inquisitorial trial unites in a single body the religious and secular systems. Referring to the trials in late sixteenth century Germany, Reineke notes that for a court to condemn a person it required three independent denunciations. Whoever

³⁴² Martha Reineke, *Sacrificed Lives*, 108.

denunciated Sierva María remains an issue the author does not address but the reader knows it was done. The bishop sends for the marquis and as if to comfort him he patronisingly declares that “Te hemos hecho venir [...] porque sabemos que estás necesitando de Dios y te haces el distraído” (*DD*, 72). Thus, the Church makes Sierva María’s health its affair. Reineke adds that denunciations obtained under torture tended to name “women notorious in the community for eccentric or unusual behaviour, and well-known women”³⁴⁴. Secondly, the court requested a bodily mark proving the presence of the devil. That could either be a sign insensitive to pain or one that would not bleed when pricked. Sierva María fulfils both requirements. Her eccentricity was known to everyone and she had a mark in her flesh. Though it was not a sign, it was still an unmistakable mark: the wound. Though it strikes me as less relevant, it is also mentioned that she had an unusual tolerance to pain (*DD*, 106). Reineke points out that the marriage pattern and potential access to economic power were decisive factors in making women, certain women at least, more liable to be accused of involvement in witchcraft. Like Sierva María, unmarried women (usually widows and spinsters) were outside the key institution, the family, the material vehicle to exert patriarchal control. Moreover, when confronted with the phenomenon in New England, she concluded that women who put the economic order at stake were likely to be suspects. Sierva María falls in one of these categories: “[d]aughters of families without sons, mothers of only female children, and women with no children”³⁴⁵. Supported by a Puritan belief that enacted a fierce struggle against witches, viewed as creatures of demonic inspiration, young men who in the seventeenth century saw their expectations to their share of land falling on account of the shortage of land found in witches an accessible object whereon to effect their grudge. Other motives underlying the witch craze included the introduction of an ethic of individualism as opposed to the communal which permitted the reasoning that one’s misfortunes were the work of a neighbouring witch.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries women started to be dislodged from a deterministic gender role which deemed them fit for procreation but prone to wickedness and lust. With the Reformation women were recognised to have moral value, thus moving the responsibility for their behaviour and virtue from their male relatives to women themselves. An ambiguity concerning the nature of women is installed that, in the end, contributes to a

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 116-117.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 132.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

double-edged means to associate femaleness with witchcraft. According to a pre-Reformation perception all women had the gender inclination to moral weakness that made them liable to be tempted by witchcraft whereas based on a Reformatory line of thought the responsibility for the practice of witchcraft could be placed on the side of the women. As such, they could be made criminal suspects. The new view did not, therefore, present any benefits for women:

Women who misjudged the limits of their responsibility and saw a license for equality in the Reformation's affirmation of their capacity for responsible behaviour were instructed by the witch trials to the error of their views. The witchcraft trials were therefore pedagogical: by means of the trials, lines of appropriate female behaviour were drawn, and overly independent women had the new theory of female responsibility turned back on themselves.³⁴⁶

Not only that, witch hunting is a phenomenon that emerged in a context of religious conflict and is therefore one of the various processes of demonisation that each party used against one another. Thus, in 1484 Innocent VIII issued the bull *Summis desiderantes* ("The Most Desired Ones") aiming at denouncing the deviation of believers in the direction of the devil-inspired faith in German territory. Shortly after two ecclesiastics initiated a ferocious campaign to eradicate that evil following the ideals they postulated in *Malleus Maleficarum* ("Hammer of Witches") and which was particularly concerned with witchcraft practices³⁴⁷. On the Protestant side, the milestone was the 1563 Scottish Witchcraft Act that made witchcraft a civil crime that presumed the existence of deviant sexuality punishable with the death penalty.

Reineke finds a need to restore the importance of the religious fundament in the scapegoating process of witches that she finds to be absent in the discourses of the studies that refer the root of the problem back to economic and political agendas. Scapegoats were needed by the agricultural class as a relief from the plagues and natural catastrophes that brought about famine and death; they were needed in the permanent struggle between the

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 135.

³⁴⁷ Sprenger and Kramer, the authors, express their virulent hatred towards women thus: "what is a woman but a foe of friendship, a necessary evil, a desirable temptation, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil of nature in fine colours?", quoted in Howard Daniel, *Devils, Monsters and Nightmares* (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1964) 40-41. The book provides very helpful illustrations and reproductions of varied grotesque material. It is necessary, however, to consider the short written text with caution as it presents, on occasion, the author's insufficiently documented view or insight. Regarding the misogynistic disposition of Sprenger and Kramer, Howard Daniel sees it as more than a religious and moral conjuncture. He finds it expressly irrational, as pure nonsense and even attests to the Dominicans' need for psychotherapy. Needless to say, these comments lack any serious scientific grounding.

ruling classes, namely by the clergy appointed to find, seize and witness in trials, and by landowners who presided over those trials. Witch hunting was an activity that aimed to reinforce the influence and power that each of these classes was able to wield in the countryside.

These arguments, considered as a whole, offer a plausible scenario for the emergence of witch hunting but they do not justify the use of religious discourse as the chosen course of action to serve political and class interests. Besides, it does not explain the employment of the scapegoating system. But through René Girard can be included the missing element to give a well-grounded frame for the phenomenon of witch hunting. At the basis is the adoption of the point of view of the time that attributed to the suspects of witchcraft given mysterious powers, in other words, that ferocious persecution was founded on the concept of sacred myth. Girard's perspective is in clear dissonance with Howard Daniel's twenty years before, for which the responsibility of considering the magical powers of witches was straightforwardly discarded, notwithstanding the fact that apart from a few great thinkers, the belief in witches was universally installed.

By supporting our analysis on Girard's categorisation of types of persecution the circumstances that involve Sierva María's scapegoating can be interpreted in the light of a sacrificial theory. Regardless of the nature of the persecution, this social phenomenon occurs invariably in a time of crisis. Its marks are manifested also in reasonably homogeneous patterns: disintegration of social order, disempowerment of institutional organisms, mob action, disregard for rules, and absence of difference and disappearance of cultural divisions. The first type of persecution can be defined as widespread loss of cultural difference, a situation that destabilises human social ranking and relationships so as to create violent urges. The immediate threat is that of lack of differentiation which finds correspondence in Kristevan subject theory as the Semiotic. Both Girard and Kristeva perceive this state of non-differentiation as potentially deadly to the individual or group but whereas Girard conceives surrogate victimisation as the means to reinstate difference, Kristeva asserts the saving role to the abject, which, nevertheless, is a strategy directly dependent on violence.

In a situation of social unrest, people look for other signs, other stereotypes, which corroborate their perception. In doing this, they already search for possible culprits whom to accuse of the generalised crisis. Another stereotype is the occurrence of violent crimes that contribute to the state of indifferentiation. The crimes attack authority (the monarch, the father), and the weakest (children), or they are crimes of a religious or sexual nature. In all

cases is implied a disrespect for the taboos that regulate behaviour, that is, that establish rules, limits, and differences. Crimes such as these endanger the very existence of order by assaulting its landmarks: hierarchy and family. At this point, when fears are confirmed, takes place a phenomenon Girard refers to as mobilisation of the crowd. Coming out of the crowd emerge persecutors enlightened by the conviction that a given individual or group is responsible for the crisis. The mob is an organism whose formation does not intend to explain the factual causes of events but that instead emerges spontaneously to fulfil a need for action, specifically for violent action.

The marks of the victim constitute the third stereotype and they are rooted in the dichotomy of normality versus abnormality. The signs can be manifested either in culture or in the body. They are thus displayed by the deficiently integrated in society such as ethnic or religious minorities, by the physically different, but also by those who exhibit socially abnormal behaviour or who distinguish themselves positively or negatively. The list is quite extensive: women, children, the handicapped, aged people, the sick, the mentally ill (“helpless” groups in general), the foreigner, the orphan, the single child, the poor, the rich, the ruler, the successful, the failed ones, the beautiful, the hideous, the virtuous, the vicious, and so on. Crowds can either direct their destructive attention towards those who once they admired or towards those who recall them of their fragility. In the distorting perception of persecutory action are not considered the truthfulness or falsity of the accusation (for indeed the accusation might be true) but what is important is to attach the guilt to a single victim for the harm of all others. The victims tend therefore to be accused of difference-erasing crimes that justify that very state of society in the moment of crisis. The victim is blamed for the absence of difference. Girard takes the argument further and explains what happens when a given society displays differences that are usually alien to its social body, differences of a much more radical nature than those small instances that a system always includes:

The signs that indicate a victim’s selection result not from the difference within the system but from the difference outside the system, the potential for the system to differ from its own difference, in other words not to be different at all, to cease to exist as a system. This is easily seen in the case of physical disabilities. The human body is a system of anatomic differences. If a disability, even as the result of an accident, is disturbing, it is because it gives the impression of a disturbing dynamism. It seems to threaten the very system. Efforts to limit it are unsuccessful; it disturbs the differences that surround it. These in turn become *monstrous*, rush together, are compressed and blended together to the point of destruction.

Difference that exists outside the system is terrifying because it reveals the truth of the system, its relativity, its fragility, and its mortality.³⁴⁸

In other words, the handicapped becomes monstrous because s/he is self-sufficient and not incapable; the same with the immigrant who is not sensitive to differences established by tradition, conduct and language. Failing to recognise the signs of cultural differentiation, these individuals cause the hate of the community to fall down on them. The fourth type of persecution is the very exertion of communal violence against the victim who displays the state of generalised indifferentiation but whose body can be brutally marked with that difference. Through its torturing pain and death, the victim saves the community for its flesh now puts on view the reestablishment of an ordered, discrepant social body. At the first stage of the creation of a myth, the scapegoat embodies all evil that abounds in a time of crisis and at a later stage that very scapegoat is made sacred for, due to its mysterious powers, the community is reconciled and healed. The magical quality attributed to the scapegoat is ambivalently interpreted: it brings about misfortune but it also is the expression of corrective intervention that the scapegoat alone possesses. That, asserts Girard, is the mythological reasoning behind witch hunting and this being an indisputable historical phenomenon to which many other examples could be added it demonstrates that the lines dividing myth and history are purely arbitrary when they are narratives of persecution³⁴⁹.

³⁴⁸ René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986) 21. Italics in the text.

³⁴⁹ See René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, pp. 45-56. Girard's paradigmatic example of the strong, direct relation myths establish with our historic and social reality is that of the cripple whose arrival at a village coincides with an agricultural calamity. By analysing the details, Girard concludes that this story set in Middle Age Europe bears all the elements of the Oedipus myth. René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 29. It would be interesting to consider in the same light Flannery O'Connor's short story "Festival of Paltridge" where the outsider's presence and good fortune as well as disregard for social treatment of individuals that does not differentiate them makes him the suspect of several alleged crimes which instigate the crowd's revenge. This story is particularly relevant as it evolves in a context of carnival joy and riot.

In the context of this discussion on dog-women, it is also noteworthy that to illustrate the functioning of the fourth type of persecution, specifically when discussing violence and its relation with magic, Girard supports his interpretation in a myth of the Dogrib Indians, a Canadian tribe. The myth recounts yet another version of a dog-woman. A woman, having had intercourse with a dog gives birth to puppies and is sent away from the group and forced to search for her own food. On discovering that in her absence her children took off their canine vests and became human, one day she tricks them and takes their skins away. The crisis, that is, the erasing of difference, is represented in the woman's ambiguous animal-human nature. Girard argues that the sign of the victim is precisely her gender and the crime bestiality. But the puppy children, by representing the community, also display the undifferentiated state and it is the community that imposes the punishment: she is banished and must provide for herself. See René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, p. 49.

To some Sierva María is an agent of the Evil one and her difference, excellence even, is interpreted as a sign of her being a witch. Sierva María's enchanting singing is regarded by the abbess Josefa Miranda as the voice of the devil so she raises a crucifix in Sierva María's direction and accuses her of being the spawn of Satan (*DD*, 87). The girl is taken there by Don Ygnacio, who, like Agamemnon, subjects his daughter to a sacrifice when the population and the authorities start to grow restless. As if aware of the awaiting betrayal, she does not ask him any questions and allows herself be led to the convent but she denies him the comfort of saying goodbye, after a period of reconciliation between them. He gives in to the pressure of the bishop of the diocese who convinces the disheartened father that the appearance of the disease is a deception of the devil. However, it is made clear that Sierva María's grievances are the result of the paranoid treatments she is submitted to when Don Ygnacio loses faith in the method of happiness that Abrenuncio Cao, the Jewish doctor, had prescribed. The advice had brought together father and daughter, resulting in a positive change of conduct in him, and allowing her to have a real contact with white culture. The girl's loss to the hands of the Catholic Church and eventually to death ensues from the lack of faith to take Abrenuncio's prescription through:

Un médico joven de Salamanca le abrió a Sierva María la herida sellada y le puso unas cataplasmas cáusticas para extraer los humores rancios. Otro intentó lo mismo con sanguijuelas en la espalda. Un barbero sangrador le lavó la herida con la orina de ella misma y otro se la hizo beber. Al cabo de dos semanas había soportado dos baños de hierbas y dos lavativas emolientes por día, y la habían llevado al borde de la agonía con pótimas de estibio natural y otros filtros mortales. (*DD*, 68)

The grotesque medical methods induce an artificial disease which is but the consequence of inflicted pain. Her behaviour leads the population to believe that a person infected with rabies metamorphoses into the animal that inflicted it, a superstition that only Abrenuncio refutes:

[A] las dos semanas sin ningún resultado tenía una úlcera de fuego en el tobillo, la piel escaldada por sinapismos y vejigatorios, y el estómago en carne viva. Había pasado por todo: vértigos, convulsiones, espasmos, delirios, solturas de vientre y de vejiga, y se revolcaba por los suelos *aullando* de dolor y de furia. Hasta los curanderos más audaces la abandonaron a su suerte, convencidos de que estaba loca, o poseída por los demonios. (*DD*, 68. Italics added)

Once again, the grotesque is not originated in the subject but a mere product of ignorance's violent methods and its form is a metamorphosis into a dog-woman. Satyasama is imprisoned for singing and Sierva María is taken to one of the convent's cells for the same criminal affront: "Terminaron por llevarla a la fuerza, pataleando y tirando al aire dentelladas de *perro*, hasta la última celda del pabellón de la cárcel. En el camino se dieron cuenta de que estaba embarazada de sus excrementos, y la lavaron a baldazos en el establo" (*DD*, 88. Italics added). Sierva María reacts like a maddened dog when it is scared and, in turn, she is taken to animal quarters and cleaned like one. Though the possession is fictitious, its manifestations are real and the power of definition makes Sierva María no less of a degraded animal than if she were an actual dog. In this respect, Leslie Fiedler draws attention to the common background of dogs and the devil: "Long associated with the Devil, such beasts were a recognized symbol for sexuality and aggression, domesticated but unsubdued. [...] Popular mythology explained their affinity with a legend about how the Creator, having somehow lost Adam's rib, created the second sex with the chopped-off tail of a passing dog"³⁵⁰. Not only does Sierva María become an anihuman³⁵¹ but she does so reinforcing the popular belief of a pact with the devil. Moreover, the connection with canines confirms her propensity for rebelliousness, for violence, for transgressing borders and abjection indicating a refusal to surrender without reservation to the Law. Finally, even if mildly, it refers to the myth of creation which gives the female the responsibility for the Fall. Given our previous discussion on the theme of dismemberment and myths of creation, the inclusion of the mutilating element becomes very pertinent³⁵². As Girard himself says, "[p]estilence and mutilation signify one and the same reality: the sacrificial crisis" and Sierva María embodies both forms of that reality (*VS*, 245).

³⁵⁰ Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, 76.

³⁵¹ I am recurring to the useful terminology by Charles D. Minahan, "Humanimals and Anihumans in Gary Larson's Gallery of the Absurd", *Animal Acts: Configuring the Human in Western History*, ed. Jennifer Ham and Matthew Senior (London and New York: Routledge, 1997). The expression "anihuman" refers to an animalised person whereas "humanimal" to humanised animals.

³⁵² Maria Aline Ferreira has studied dog metamorphoses in Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*, Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* and in paintings by Paula Rego. I find Paula Rego's pictorial texts particularly close to Sierva María's transformation that, though falling short of a full metamorphosis, are nonetheless impregnated with immanent animality. In an interview with John McEwen, Rego sheds some light on the interpretation she herself gives to the dog-woman concept: "In these pictures every woman's a dog woman, not downtrodden but powerful. To be bestial is good. It's physical. Eating, snarling, all activities to do with sensation are positive. To picture a woman as a dog is utterly believable. It emphasises this physical side of her being. What is important is that the dog is the animal most like a human. A dog learns people's ways and behaves like a person; just as people do. Women learn from those they are with; they are trained to do certain things, but they are also part animal. They

Animal metamorphosis was one of the reported faculties of witches who were akin to the demon. Eventually the girl herself declares to have the devil living inside her body (*DD*, 108). For Cayetano the demon she represents is that of love, which he denies himself and that his position forbids. But along with love springs the demon of lust and, recalling Fiedler's

have independence of body, independence of spirit and their tastes can be quite gross". John McEwen, *Paula Rego* (London: Phaidon Press, 1997) 216.

There is no doubt that Rego's dog-women have a very strong Bakhtinian component and that the association with Sierva María is quite relevant in terms of a common position towards a phallogocentric universe. Aline Ferreira's reading of the dog-women in Rego's painting, that "these dog women can be read as stray dogs, who scavenge and fight for their survival, presenting a moving metaphor of the often violent power relations between master and slave, dog and owner, man and woman" makes sense in the context of *Del amor y otros demonios* where the trilogy dog-slave-woman is most notably depicted. "Becoming Woman, becoming animal: Jeanette Winterson, Djuna Barnes and Paula Rego's dog-women", unpublished paper. But in an interview with Maria Aline Salgueiro Seabra Ferreira, Paula Rego emphasises the love tie between the dog-women and their unseen male partners in detriment of the aggressive aspect that they appear to symbolise. See Paula Rego, interview with Maria Aline Ferreira. "O Grotesco é Belo". *Ler: Livros e Leitores* 58: Spring, 2003, 57. Another common trait between the dog-women and Sierva María is put forward by Ruth Rosengarten and is developed in the same line of thought as Paula Rego. Rosengarten sees love as the silent impetus behind the dog-women: canine love that in spite of punishment and mistreatment remains loyal. Rosengarten regards the painting that lends its name to the series as the representation of a wild wounded beast, abject in her/its nakedness and unbearably human at the same time. Surrounded by nothingness, not even by God, no one can hear its/her scream. In the other paintings she is shown licking her wounds, pushed out of bed, sleeping on the master's coat, sitting still, baying and waiting to be fed. In all instances intimacy, eroticism, violence, inner suffering, private humiliation and self-denial are emphasised. Like Sierva María they move unsteadily between *eros* and *thanatos*, supplicant and stubborn at the same time. What seems to me to be the difference between Rego's dog-women and Sierva María is that the latter's animality is *painfully imposed, that she is unwillingly shaped* by androcentricity and that therefore she is neither privileged with independence of spirit nor body. Sierva María fights against being animalised like the goat against dying. Furthermore, her sexuality is alien to her and exists only through the male gaze and therefore it cannot be said that her animality is the expression of a right to sexuality or a means to counteract denied agency in general. In other words, it does not bring about female empowerment. Instead, it is only at the expense of a sacrificial death that Sierva María comes to represent a rebirth. For more details see Maria Aline Salgueiro Seabra Ferreira, "Becoming woman, becoming animal: Jeanette Winterson, Djuna Barnes and Paula Rego's dog women" and Ruth Rosengarten, "Verdades Domésticas: O Trabalho de Paula Rego", *Paula Rego*, ed. Margarida Veiga, Lisbon, Fundação das Descobertas do Centro Cultural de Belém, Ministério da Cultura and Quetzal Editores, 1996, 43-120 (particularly 88-101). In addition, in Paula Rego's interview with Ana Marques Gastão, the painter corroborates the link between the dog-women's maddened love and hate and she also explains the interpretation she makes of Jane Eyre as a witch in the paintings exhibited in 2002 at the Yale Center for British Art. In Paula Rego's art women also appear associated with animals and witchcraft. See Ana Marques Gastão, "Jane Eyre, a bruxa". *Diário de Notícias* (July 2002) 3 Sept 2004 <<http://dn.sapo.pt>>. Another example is the illustration Paula Rego made of one of Blake Morrison's collection of poems that takes its name from the one entitled "Pendle Witches". There is a historical reference supporting it and it deals with the Lancashire Witch Trials that took place in 1612 which ended with the hanging of ten people, eight of them women. It is interesting to notice that two of them, Elizabeth and James Device, were accused of having in their possession imps that took the shape of dogs. They subsequently confessed to the truth of this claim and to using them to murder whoever displeased them. The poem avoids historical specificity and concentrates on the sexual rivalry between the young and old generations of women.

comments, it is a sort that resists being restrained. Not much attention is given to the fact that Sierva María was only twelve and Cayetano thirty six. Though she repeatedly behaves in a child-like manner, her sensuality is a part of her innocence and one of the reasons why the priest is first attracted to her. Sierva María seems unaware of her power over a much older (though not sexually experienced) man, as if indicating the surreptitious evilness that can be hidden in any woman's body regardless of her age. By being incapable of accepting the demon inside him, he transfers the devilish impetuosity to Sierva María who inspires in him abject pleasure. Cayetano's appearance (*DD*, 101) and disposition impel him to Christ-like martyrdom but in the end he contributes in a decisive manner to make a martyr out of Sierva María:

[L]a niña le soltó una ráfaga de escupitajos en la cara. Él se mantuvo firme, y le ofreció la otra mejilla. Sierva María siguió escupiéndolo. Él volvió a cambiar la mejilla, embriagado por la vaharada de placer prohibido que le subió de las entrañas. Cerró los ojos y rezó con el alma mientras ella seguía escupiéndolo, más feroz cuanto más gozaba él, hasta que se dio cuenta de la inutilidad de su rabia. Entonces Delaura asistió al espectáculo pavoroso de una verdadera energúmena. La cabellera de Sierva María se encrespó con vida propia como las serpientes de la Medusa, y de la boca salió una baba verde y un sartal de improperios en lenguas de idólatras. Delaura blandió su crucifijo, lo acercó a la cara de ella, y gritó aterrado:

“Sal de ahí, quienquiera que seas, bestia de los infiernos.” (*DD*, 146)

To the bishop he confesses it is the most dreadful of all demons (*DD*, 147), a demon that at this point he still has not identified with love and it is because of this episode, and of his verdict that she is possessed, that the long process leading to exorcism begins. By imagining a Medusan creature not only is the association with the venomous serpents reinforced, but, more importantly, it recalls the mythological reference of a powerful woman whose magical gifts present a deadly threat to all people and men in particular. In order to save himself then, he condemns her. Clearly at this point, he sides with the establishment and with Josefa Miranda who he closely resembles brandishing the crucifix. Initially he is inclined to believe that the demonic signs are merely the expression of the superstitious customs and languages of the black people which she embraced. But, in fact, she is the only one to face the eclipse unconcernedly and not as prophetic or in any way mysterious. The author introduces the ironic element by having Sierva María not seeing reality magically and instead by demystifying it. However, on falling in love with Sierva María, a thetic crisis is installed in

Cayetano, a rupture that can only be overcome through a “sacrificio purificador” (*DD*, 151). He tries to be the scapegoat when he dedicates his time to the disabled and the lepers but he fails to contract the disease and seals Sierva María’s fate instead. Cayetano is the reason for some of Sierva María’s furies, therefore, for her reputation as a possessed woman. Before his ingenuous insistence in obtaining the bishop’s pardon and dreaming of their impossible marriage, before his refusal to remove her from the filthy cell, she is overtaken by frustration, attacks the warden and threatens to set fire to herself.

Besides her animalesque figure and violent behaviour that point to her witch-like nature, Sierva María was also said to possess a supernatural force (*DD*, 89), to be able to change the migrating habits of the birds (*DD*, 109), to fly with grown wings (*DD*, 90), bad luck was thought to be Sierva María’s revenge for having her necklaces stolen (*DD*, 90), that she made herself invisible (*DD*, 116)³⁵³, that she caused the death of a bricklayer (*DD*, 121) and that she was behind the mysterious death of Father Aquino, drowned in a cistern (*DD*, 168). All sorts of strange happenings took place and they bear the same mark of those registered during the witch hunts: the livestock evaded itself (*DD*, 90), people began to have visions in the reflection of the water (*DD*, 90), a pig spoke (*DD*, 102), a goat gave birth to three lambs (*DD*, 102), and during the exorcism the cattle goes mad and the earth trembles (*DD*, 182). Gabriel García Márquez uses exaggeration to enhance the ridicule; even the insignificant flight of a hen to sea is connoted with sorcery. All events, real, exaggerated or simply made up, were attributed to Sierva María’s diabolical influence.

Sierva María contributed to the general belief in her powers by using her ability to imitate voices to impersonate the responses of the deceased and of the devil’s workers to the requests of the novices. Even other inmates come to her to alleviate their conditions and Sierva María pretends, for she had always been a compulsive liar, to be acquainted with demons and to intercede with them. No one more than the abbess believes in the consequences of the “contubernio descarado de la niña con el demonio” (*DD*, 119). Magic, to the eyes of the Church, becomes black magic, a synonym of sorcery and the devil’s work. The Church is unquestionably identified with the law (*DD*, 140) in all its aspects (judicial, moral, customs). But most of all, its character of repression of the young independent and attractive woman makes it an expression of Law in a Lacanian context. Its authority figures are the

³⁵³ Her incorporeality works as a metaphor for rejection of a socially defined rank which coincides with the Church’s. In fact, she learned “a deslizarse por entre los cristianos sin ser vista ni sentida” and instead maintains a direct relation with Olokun, a Yoruban deity (*DD*, 59). Her invisibility originates in the fact that she dwells outside the sphere of authority.

bishop and the abbess, both of advanced age and fiercely opposed to sharing social influence and power. Sierva María becomes an instrument in their deadly game.

The abbess Josefa Miranda has a natural “don de mando y el rigor de sus prejuicios” (*DD*, 85) turns her into a phallic, heartless woman so obsessed with authority that even the nuns appointed to assist her in her work find out they are not needed: the abbess neither wanted nor needed help to see through the convent’s affairs. She is utterly convinced of Sierva María’s possession and submits her to cruel treatments, from having the girl’s hands and feet strapped and not attending to the infected wound, to the inhuman conditions of the cell (there were iron bars in the window, a wooden lattice covered the other window blocking the light and the view to the sea, the straw mattress was stained, the bench was made of stone and the work table was also used as an altar, a symbol of authority and locus of sacrifice). The cruelty displayed by the abbess leads to an inversion of interpretation: if any demons were to be found, Cayetano burst out, they were Josefa Miranda’s alone. They were the demons of rancour, intolerance and imbecility (*DD*, 119). The bishop Don Toribio possesses none of these faults but a genuine belief in the existence of evil, of the cunning machinations of the devil, and its ability to take possession of one’s body. Confronted with a situation that went beyond “su sabiduría y a su poder”, the bishop dedicates himself to an exceptionally rigorous exorcism that aims to enlighten him with divine understanding and that, in fact, succeeds in creating the very demons he intended to destroy (*DD*, 181):

[E]l obispo reasumió los exorcismos con una energía inconcebible en su estado y a su edad. Sierva María, esta vez con el cráneo rapado a navaja y la camisa de fuerza, lo enfrentó con una ferocidad satánica, hablando en lenguas o con aullidos de pájaros infernales [...] y ya no fue posible pensar que Sierva María no estuviera a merced de todos los demonios del averno. (*DD*, 181-182)

The ruthlessness of exorcism brings it closer to the reputation the Church attributes to witchcraft. Abrenuncio alone realises that the only risk for Sierva María was the cruelty of exorcism (*DD*, 144) and previously it had been claimed that the slaves’ witchcraft was comparatively more human as it was satisfied with the sacrifice of roosters whereas the Holy Office needed to shed innocent blood in a public spectacle (*DD*, 93). Cayetano admits that if she were not possessed by demons, the cells of Santa Clara, the holy ground of the Church that is, provided the most propitious environment to create them (*DD*, 104). Sierva María

finally behaves like a demon-possessed woman when terrified by the bishop's exorcising prayers, delivered in shouts, she starts to scream in panic. In her view, it was he who gave the impression of being the devil (*DD*, 163) and when Cayetano contemplates the ruin of her body, fragile but nonetheless confined in a straitjacket, and her beautiful hair reduced to a cropped head³⁵⁴ (*LD*, 163) he places the crime on the side of Church. Reineke's words on the sacrificial economy working during the witch craze, which comprise Girard and Kristeva's views, apply therefore quite appropriately to the context of the novel:

Applying instruments to flesh that opened and broke it, those who hunted witches summoned once again the divine and sacred powers of order-producing sacrifice which they first had experienced in the throes of formative subjectivity: they tortured substance to make it signify. In doing so, they expressed an archaic wisdom. If initially they had garnered and secured a place in the world by means of a somatic contestation, so also should they do so again in order to recreate their position in the world.³⁵⁵

In *Del amor y otros demonios* Gabriel García Márquez is committed to deconstructing dichotomies by making unusual associations and by refuting the absolutism of given concepts. Humanity and animality are not positioned in two opposing extremes but, in a grotesque fashion, mingle and contribute to the continuous process of understanding the Other. What does humanity mean when humans behave in so inhuman a manner? How can love be a demon? How can the Church be the devil's seat? Why is the voice of tolerance given to traditionally voiceless ones and evil-doers such as blacks and Jews? Though the ambiguity aims to postpone some of the answers it becomes clear that García Márquez imagines a triumph of love over death. In this case, death does fulfil the aspirations of rebirth. She was found "muerta de amor en la cama con los ojos radiantes y la piel de recién nacida. Los troncos de los cabellos le brotaban como burbujas en el cráneo rapado, y se les veía crecer" (*DD*, 183). This is a true pregnant death and the reappearance of hair is the assertion of the continuity of life. When all those years later her tomb is opened to find the girl with excessively long hair, the grotesque potential of death is confirmed. So that even in death

³⁵⁴ Shaving of the head or loss of hair in general seems a common means of illustrating feminine decay and performing a humiliating act. It is performed on Sufiya, Satyasama and Sierva María. See my previous comment on the shaving of Sufiya's hair for a relation with images of harvesting.

³⁵⁵ Martha Reineke, *Sacrificed Lives*, 152.

Sierva María lives as a contrast with her father, “un hombre fúnebre” and with her mother, that corpse-like figure (*DD*, 20)³⁵⁶.

1.3.2. *The downfall of two tyrants and the triumph of three mothers*

In the second part of this chapter, I would like to bring together the analyses of the double themes of shame and violence, metamorphosis and sacrifice, and of magic realism and the grotesque to a single frame through the *leitmotif* of tyranny expressed in a patriarchal system. In *Del amor y otros demonios* it assumes the form of a religious oppressive system, and in *Shame* it is represented in sequential political regimes but in both cases, it is related with post/colonial concerns.

As was already demonstrated in relation with Sierva María, tyranny is a theme that highlights the dark side of the grotesque whole. In *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque*, David Danow tries to shed some light on the complexities of the grotesque having as his basis the Bakhtinian formulation of the carnivalesque-grotesque. Danow recovers the

³⁵⁶ The experience as well as the characterisation of Sierva María justify her being read alongside Saleem in *Midnight's Children* where on the occasion of the annihilation of his family in the bombings of the 1965 Indo-Pakistani war, he is hit by the spittoon and is “stripped of past present memory time shame and love”, Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Vintage, 1981) 343. Saleem interprets the very outbreak of war and the subsequent destruction of his family as a necessary requirement for his purification (Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 338 and 343):

Grieve for Saleem - who, orphaned and purified, deprived of the hundred daily pin-pricks of family life, which alone could deflate the great ballooning fantasy of history and bring it down to a more manageably human scale, had been pulled up by his roots to be flung unceremoniously across the years, fated to plunge memoryless into an adulthood whose every aspect grew daily more grotesque. (Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 345)

He allies the erasure from history to his extraordinary smelling abilities and becomes a member of the canine Unit for Tracking and Intelligence Activities, a military group for Pakistan's West Wing against East Wing (later Bangladesh). All units are constituted by three men and a dog, except Unit 22 where Saleem plays the role of the canine. Amnesia is accompanied by an indifference to all forms of pain therefore he is blocked from past as well as present sensations. Saleem is thenceforth called the man-dog in the CUTIA Unit 22. The acronym means bitch, a relation that is never made in relation to dog-women. As a guide he will lead himself as his small unit of teenage boys to the remotest and most frightful regions of their unconscious. The Sundarbans forest is that surrealistic place where leeches suck their selves away, ghosts accuse them of their murderous deeds, mothers are truly known, and vampiristic forest nymphs indulge them with their most intimate erotic desires. The whole forest seems to grow and engulf them like a ravenous predator forcing Saleem to confront his darkest fears and his human as well as his animal self. Being lost in the Sundarbans is a descent to hell from where Saleem will necessarily need to emerge before he can accept his name and past again. In *Midnight's Children* the metaphor of a canine man acquires a whole different meaning, that of submission to and emptying of history as well as of the character's identity.

idea of the medieval and Renaissance grotesque which bears the potential of monstrous transformation, rebirth and becoming. He does not, however, reject the validity of the Romantic grotesque in spite of the ambivalent element being absent in it, which amounts to say that Danow also accepts an idea of the grotesque producing a world where regeneration does not take place. This being the case, “we are left in the firm, unrelenting grip of one extreme from among the two polarities”³⁵⁷. In sum:

The first such [merry] polarity is typified by the medieval and Renaissance grotesque, whose most significant weapon is laughter, the source of a vital regenerative power. In this literary form, traditional worn-out values are vanquished; what is tired and effete is defeated; even death is conquered by the reiteration of new life, affirmed in the cycle that leads from death to rebirth [...]. In the eventual transformation of the medieval and Renaissance grotesque into the Romantic grotesque, the main result is the loss of the power of regeneration. Instead, a certain fear of the world and its hazards becomes the new message of uncertainty and insecurity.³⁵⁸

In a Romantic context, the freedom laughter concedes is precisely from fear which Danow identifies as belonging to the popular tradition (but which, I would add, was by no means circumscribed to that function). The liberating ability of laughter from the realm of fear arouses the matter of terror that separated medieval and Renaissance grotesque from the Romantic grotesque and that led Bakhtin to repudiate the latter. At a deeper level, it is also linked with Bakhtin’s uncomfortable dealing with violence. But Danow sees laughter exercising the same role in twentieth century fiction. It prospers in a literary form that preserves grotesque ambivalence: Latin American magical realism which while “heralded for its cheerful presentation of the utterly unexpected, may reveal as well an uncompromising, grievous aspect that is equally a part of the reality it depicts”³⁵⁹. But in other cases, of which Holocaust literature is a paramount example, the ambivalence is broken and the horrific aspect, that evolving from fear, subjugates the joyful relativity. Nonetheless, laughter continues to find a place in works such as Eli Wiesel’s *The Gates of Hell* (1967), Yoram Kaniuk’s *Adam Resurrected* (1972) and Aharon Appelfeld’s *Tzili: The Glory of a Life* (1983), but in them its being a means to push down fear becomes its primordial task. It is in these

³⁵⁷ David K. Danow, *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque* (Kentucky, Kentucky UP: 1995) 36.

³⁵⁸ Loc. cit.

circumstances that laughter approximates madness as a form of release from flesh, pain, sin and even meaning. It departs from humanity to hover over it, but it also involves us all immersed in absurdity, be it of war or of some other nature.

Danow thus elaborates a reasoning that leads him to conclude that the regenerative spirit of the medieval and Renaissance grotesque still thrives in Latin American magical realism whereas the Romantic grotesque found a new literary relevance in the literature concerning the Second World War:

In magical realism, death figures in the carnivalesque sense that Bakhtin perceives in popular-festive imagery; it allows for (re)birth and new life. There is a regenerative feature evident in its humor and consequent laughter, first of all, but also in the sheer proliferation of life forms documented in Latin American writings indigenous to the jungle and the sea, to both land and water. In the literature of the Holocaust, there is the repeated depiction of death without its carnivalesque, regenerative effect. [...] Where there is death, in this form, there is only death, with its accompanying terror devoid of any (life) saving grace.³⁶⁰

Danow's approach to a contemporary context is made through well-supported arguments which both sustain his opinion of a sense of continuity from medieval times to the present and reinforce the use of the grotesque as a privileged artistic expression of the spirit of the twentieth century. But Danow deliberately ignores issues that his position necessarily poses. The first is that he never refers to the fact that Bakhtin perceives the Romantic grotesque as a degenerated form precisely for lacking a representation of rebirth. As such, Bakhtin discards it as an invalid type. Danow puts forward Bakhtin's concept of the Romantic grotesque, uses it for his own purposes, without ever referring to Bakhtin's own reservations. This fault could affect severely Danow's whole project quite unnecessarily. He should have demonstrated that he was departing from a Bakhtinian perspective rather than merely using it and, from that point, he should have presented his own arguments that *do* justify the application of the grotesque to the context of Holocaust literature. Furthermore, his reading of the grotesque might be dissonant with Bakhtin but it is not with Kayser, whose work Danow seems to ignore. The second fault, which I consider equally if not even more serious, is Danow's borrowing of the term grotesque realism from Bakhtin in order to avoid using the term Romantic grotesque to designate the texts on the Holocaust and thus implicitly

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 34.

circumventing aesthetic, literary and historical inadequacies. He justifies the use of the expression by its being based on the principles of degradation and debasement. But to make them compatible with Holocaust writings, either deliberately ignoring or by crass ignorance of Bakhtin's thought, he attributes to those principles the significance held by our own times. The point that for Bakhtin in a medieval and Renaissance context these principles bore a positive insight is utterly neglected by Danow. The expression grotesque realism is therefore inaccurately appropriated although the readings of the literary works themselves maintain a certain legitimacy.

Two reasons justify my defence of Danow despite his methodological and theoretical shortcomings; the first is that Danow's theory of the grotesque in Holocaust literature can be related to Julia Kristeva's views on abjection and particularly to her readings of Louis-Ferdinand Céline's anti-semitic work. The second reason is his brief but sound illustration of magical realism as an heir to the carnivalesque-grotesque where the second half of the term is still strongly present in the figure of the monstrous dictator. The text that he chooses to prove his view is *El otoño del patriarca*. I will try to corroborate the usefulness and correctness of Danow's reasoning resorting to the same book without however trying to repeat his points and exemplifications, thus on the one hand avoiding merely paraphrasing his work and on the other providing additional evidence. My ultimate goal is to demonstrate the association of magical realism, the grotesque and the theme of tyranny so that it can be applied to other texts³⁶¹. But firstly let me expand on Julia Kristeva's notion of abject literature.

In full and expressed agreement with Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva stands up for a fundamental dialogism in all novels with the carnivalesque imprint. However, for her the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of what she calls abject literature, "the sort that takes up where apocalypse and carnival left off" (*PH*, 141). With Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Voyage au Bout de la Nuit* (1952) in the background she argues that when literature can no longer hold the anxiety of the indecisive identity of the narrator or the horrors of his surroundings (a point shared with Kayser) then the narrative cannot be told but has to be cried out instead: "The narrative yields to a *crying-out theme* that, when it tends to coincide with the incandescent states of a boundary-subjectivity that I have called abjection, is the crying-out theme of suffering-horror. In other words, the theme of suffering-horror is the ultimate

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 40.

³⁶¹ See Fernando Galván, José Santiago Fernández and Juan Francisco Elices, *El realismo mágico en lengua inglesa: tres ensayos* (Alcalá: Universidad de Alcalá, 2001) for a close reading of *El otoño del patriarca* and particularly of *Cien años de soledad* as sources for *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*.

evidence of such states of abjection within a narrative of representation” (*PH*, 141. Italics in the text). By adding the threat of apocalypse, Céline thus goes beyond carnival’s semantic ambivalences of high and low, corresponding, in Kristeva’s theory of subjectivity, to the sublime and the abject. If in Céline one always finds “a double stance between disgust and laughter, apocalypse and carnival” (*PH*, 138), it is only a literary representation of a form of reality: “Lacking illusions, lacking shelter, today’s universe is divided between *boredom*, [...] *abjection* and *piercing laughter*” (*PH*, 133. Italics in the text).

Not only is David Danow’s theory of the grotesque materialised in the literature of Holocaust concomitant with Kristeva’s (though the points of view of suffering-horror are contrary – the agonies of the victims of genocide and anti-Semitism) but Kristeva also integrates what can be identified as the characteristics of the Romantic grotesque and which are at the basis of Kayser’s formulation. Moreover, like Kayser, Kristeva elaborates a discourse of demonisation. This discourse, because it intersects with her views on abjection, is associated with the feminine. Kristeva defines the Célinian text as one where “inhumanity discovers its appropriate themes, contrary to all lyrical traditions, in horror, death, madness, orgy, outlaws, war, *the feminine threat*, the horrendous delights of love, disgust, and fright” (*PH*, 137. Italics added). Further ahead, Kristeva makes an even blunter association between fascism and the feminine: “At the doors of the feminine, at the doors of abjection [...] we are also, with Céline, given the most daring x-ray of the ‘drive foundations’ of fascism. For this indeed is the economy, one of horror and suffering in their libidinal surplus-value, which has been tapped, rationalized, and made operative by Nazism and Fascism” (*PH*, 155).

Unlike Danow, though, Kristeva does not perceive the literature of Holocaust as the sole bearer of the specific topic of abject literature. As Kristeva sees it, “all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to be rooted, no matter what its socio-historical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so – double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject” (*PH*, 207). Abjection, metamorphosis, animality and doubleness are certainly present in *Shame* but I also wish to demonstrate that a repressive political regime, genocide and apocalypse, foundational elements of Kristevan abject literature, coincide with David Danow’s idea of grotesque realism.

The second reason I pointed out as an useful argument in Danow’s theory refers to the link between the carnivalesque-grotesque and magical realism. In *El otoño del patriarca* both the magical realist and grotesque aspects (I am using here “grotesque” in Danow’s sense)

emanate or revolve around the tyrant, patriarch of the nation and father of countless children. The characteristics Danow sees of the carnivalesque-grotesque in the novel can be summarised as: the strange and enormous powers of the patriarch; the carnivalisation of the relations between animal and humans, time, space, sickness, and even death; the use of the hyperbole and the paradox; the duality of clown/authority and self/double, the depiction of marketplace milieus and atmospheres; and the element of fakedom and, through it, of illusion. I will refer to some examples to clarify Danow's claims.

The despot's power is immense, excessive, and mysterious but, at the same time, a cruel farce. If he decides that three o'clock in the morning is eight instead so it must be and he remains indifferent to the effects: "un estrépito de armas asustadas, de rosas que se abrieron cuando aún faltaban dos horas para el sereno, de concubinas sonámbulas que sacudían alfombras bajo las estrellas y destapaban las jaulas de los pájaros dormidos y cambiaban por flores de anoche las flores trasnochadas de los floreros, y había un tropel de albañiles que construían paredes de emergencia y desorientaban a los girasoles pegando soles de papel dorado en los vidrios de las ventanas para que no se viera que todavía era noche en el cielo"³⁶². The dictator's view of a world turned upside down becomes real and poetic, a vision so pressing that people of all ranks, animals and flowers bow to it. The dictator is indeed the "descompositor de la madrugada, comandante del tiempo y depositario de la luz"³⁶³. He generates eclipses, subdues hurricanes, tempers with nature's very laws and reverses the course of a river. Still he knows that in spite of what the guards tell him, not all is all right, that they have the habit of deceiving him, that for fear he is lied to, that nothing was for real³⁶⁴. His own existence is often put at stake; no record of his mother's birth can be found, but there are three attesting to his own birth (he is somewhere between 107 and 232 years old when he dies); his death is repeatedly announced, celebrated and denied to the point that the population believes he is immortal or that he is only dead when he acknowledges it, and not others³⁶⁵. Even films and radio news are forged for him, amounting to, just like his mother's sainthood, a mere "engaño de circo"³⁶⁶. Patricio Aragonés, a mirror image of the dictator used to make more difficult the task of the enemies of the regime, plays a part in generating a sense of unreliable reality. Patricio Aragonés tastes his food, replaces him in political events, and

³⁶² Gabriel García Márquez, *El otoño del patriarca*, 66-7.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁶⁵ See Gabriel García Márquez, *El otoño del patriarca*, p. 118.

³⁶⁶ See Gabriel García Márquez, *El otoño del patriarca*, p. 141.

perfects himself in imitating the General's behaviour. Physically they are identical (supposedly doctors were even able to cause a hernia in Aragonés's body like the General's own) and in the palace the dictator stands so close to his double that they resemble Siamese elephants³⁶⁷, "tan apartados del mundo que él mismo no cayó en la cuenta de que su lucha feroz por existir dos veces alimentaba la sospecha contraria de que existía cada vez menos"³⁶⁸. Patricio Aragonés paid with his life long before he actually died in the place of the ruler since his whole past existence and present desires had to be utterly erased.

The patriarch's greatness is only matched by his mendacity: a testicle comparable to a frog in the darkness³⁶⁹, his sweat smelling of rotten onions³⁷⁰, the direct scatological references (not being able to urinate, defecating in his pants when a false leper jumps in his way to shoot him down, the excrement all over the palace floor, Leticia Nazareno cleaning his huge testicle of the excrement he defecated every time he made love), the careless and repeated rape of the servants, his homicidal superstition, the terror of being alive (that made him lock himself in his bedroom at night like a frightened boy), his virginity until a very late age, his blind reverence to his mother (who he tries to canonise and for whom he declares war on the Vatican which refuses it), and his illiteracy for most of his life. But from a pitiable bird-woman and some unknown father, the clown who would be king was born, "un hijo de nadie que llegó a ser rey",³⁷¹ if only a mere "rey de la baraja"³⁷² fulfilling a fortune teller's prediction that having no palm lines meant that he had been born to be king³⁷³.

The opening pages provide exceptional instances of carnivalesque imagery, full of Bakhtinian examples of degradation and topsy-turvydom where the positive significance of decay is that of the death of the patriarch and consequent end of the regime. There were black vultures on the presidential balconies, the gates were rotting, weeds could be seen between the floor mosaics, weapons were left lying about, the remains of the Sunday lunch were still visible, mushrooms and lilies sprouted among petitions, and the plague cart, the coach of the year of the comet, the automobile and the limousine were covered in camellias, spider webs and fluttering butterflies. The military quarters had been made into milking stables giving the courtyard a pestilent smell of cow urine and manure but where the perfume of roses was also

³⁶⁷ See Gabriel García Márquez, *El otoño del patriarca*, p. 23.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁶⁹ See Gabriel García Márquez, *El otoño del patriarca*, p. 149.

³⁷⁰ See Gabriel García Márquez, *El otoño del patriarca*, p. 22.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 126.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁷³ See Gabriel García Márquez, *El otoño del patriarca*, p. 123.

intoxicating. The confusion in the kitchen and laundry left unattended in the tanks gave the impression of the panicked escape of a thousand women. On the main floor, the cows had wiped out the exquisite carpets, and throughout the halls, bedrooms and corridors, more could be found gently eating away the velvet curtains and satin arm chairs. Their dung lay about among the broken paintings of saints and eminent officers. The bovine rule serenely imposes itself on years of history and civilisation: “vimos un comedor comido por las vacas, la sala de música profanada por estropicios de vacas, las mesitas de dominó destruidas y las praderas de las mesas de billar esquiladas por las vacas”³⁷⁴. It is among the decay and fetid smell that the body of the once terrible dictator is found, precisely in the position it had been foretold.

David Danow correctly identifies a marketplace character in the palace where outside and inside, governmental business and commercial, popular market, as well as human and animal frontiers collapse³⁷⁵. The general turmoil parallels the political insecurity as both can be displayed in carnivalesque terms that resemble the confusion of Brueghel’s *The Fight between Carnival and Lent*:

aquello no parecía entonces una casa presidencial sino un mercado donde había que abrirse paso por entre ordenanzas descalzos que descargaban burros de hortalizas y huacales de gallinas en los corredores, saltando por encima de comadres con ahijados famélicos que dormían apelonadas en las escaleras para esperar el milagro de la caridad oficial, había que eludir las corrientes de agua sucia le das concubinas deslenguadas que cambiaban por flores nuevas las flores nocturnas de los floreros y trapeaban los pisos y cantaban canciones de amores ilusorios [...], y todo aquello entre el escándalo de los funcionarios vitalicios que encontraban gallinas poniendo en las gavetas de los escritorios, y tráfico de putas y soldados en los retretes, y alborotos de pájaros, y peleas de perros callejeros en medio de las audiencias, porque nadie sabía quién era quién ni de parte de quién en aquel palacio de puertas abiertas dentro de cuyo desorden descomunal era imposible establecer dónde estaba el gobierno.³⁷⁶

Death also shares this feeling of lively disarray. When he stages his own funeral with Patricio Aragonés’s body he sees himself being submitted to public humiliation, being dragged through the streets and leaving behind brocades, insignias, medals, and even the ten suns of

³⁷⁴Ibid., 9.

³⁷⁵ See David K. Danow, *The Spirit of Carnival*, p. 47.

³⁷⁶ Gabriel García Márquez, *El otoño del patriarca*, 12.

his king of the universe title. But the cadaver is also spat on and the ill pour their pots from their balconies over him completing the carnival of death setting (an image we will see repeated in *Pinocchio in Venice*). The illusion of his death propitiates a carnivalistic period where the strict order of his authority, which nonetheless coincides with disorder in its whimsical cruelty, is lifted and the people come out to the streets to celebrate. He recognises that the people “celebraban alguna boda de pobres con el mismo alborozo con que hubieran celebrado su muerte”³⁷⁷. The reestablishment of the truth thus gains a supplementary meaning: the truth that the dictator still lives and Truth analogous to Order in opposition to the illusion of temporary carnival time. Discipline and Rule are once again imposed and the grotesque manifests itself not in its carnivalesque aspect as it did with the people’s joyfulness on his death but in a darker form: the death of the king follows his rebirth (for indeed he comes back to life) imposing a new order of savage repression motivated by his desire to avenge the offence performed on “his” body. The continuous cycle of carnival is therefore confirmed but it appears not to offer renewal and historical evolution as Bakhtin argued since *the dictator is the same*. For a moment the novel seems to suggest that carnival is trapped in a vicious cycle but that impression is nonetheless counterbalanced by the repeated previsions of his death. He avoids the outcome for countless years but the reader knows the equilibrium between order and disorder is never at stake because the novel opens precisely with the finding of his cadaver in the midst of carnivalistic decay. Later his body is exhibited on the banquet table ornamented with flowers and false medals³⁷⁸ concurring with a true carnivalesque-grotesque scenario where the ridiculous is combined with seriousness, reality with fable, truth with falsity, maleness with femaleness, and life with death:

Poco antes del anochecer, cuando acabamos de sacar los cascarones podridos le las vacas y pusimos un poco de arreglo en aquel desorden de fábula, aún no habíamos conseguido que el cadáver se pareciera a la imagen de su leyenda. Lo habíamos raspado con fierros de descamar pescados para quitarle le rémora de fondos de mar, lo lavamos con creolina y sal de piedra para resanarle las lacras de la putrefacción, le empolvamos la cara con almidón para esconder los remiendos de cañamazo y los pozos de parafina con que tuvimos que restaurarle la cara picoteada de pájaros de muladar, le devolvimos el color de la vida con parches de colorete y carmín de mujer en los labios, pero ni siquiera los ojos de vidrio

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 25.

³⁷⁸ See Gabriel García Márquez, *El otoño del patriarca*, p. 197.

incrustados en las cuentas vacías lograron imponerle el semblante de autoridad que le hacía falta para exponerlo a la contemplación de las muchedumbres.³⁷⁹

The death of Bendición Alvarado is also an extensive illustration of a carnivalesque death. Here profanity and sacredness are indistinguishable, the decay of the body is followed by its miraculous rejuvenation, and everyday life worries deny the seriousness of passing away. The fetid smell of the plague made sick the lepers appointed to slaughter the sheep on whose blood she bathed. Her body was covered in wounds and pustules but that did not disgust her son who attended her, feeding her and even himself from the same plate and washing her with dog's soap. As she lies dying her thoughts go to her birds which should not be forced to sing in parties and to the attention that should be taken to remove the chicken from their nests when there was thunder to avoid generating basilisks. When she finally passes away all marks of old age and illness disappear and the bells of the cathedral toll for one hundred days to mourn her death. Her body lies in the glass coffin as if she were a fairy tale princess and it is paraded in the streets as if it were the body relics of a saint. It resists decay but this magic too is revealed to be a trick:

[The body] estaba disecado mediante las peores artes de taxidermia igual que los animales póstumos de los museos de ciencias como él lo comprobó con mis propias manos, madre, destapé la urna de cristal cuyos emblemas funerarios se desbarataban con el aliento, te quité la corona de azahares del cráneo enmohecido cuyos duros cabellos de crines de potranca habían sido arrancados de raíz hebra por hebra para venderlos como reliquias, te saqué de entre los filamentos de revenidas piltrafas de novia y los residuos áridos y los atardeceres difíciles del salitre de la muerte y apenas si pesabas más que un calabazo en el sol y tenias el olor antiguo de fundo de baúl y se sentía dentro de ti un desasosiego febril que parecía el rumor de tu alma y era el tijeiteo de las polillas que te carcomieron por dentro, tus miembros se desbarataban solos cuando quise sostenerte en mis brazos porque te habían desocupado las entrañas [...] de modo que no quedaba de cuanto fue tuyo nada más que un cascarón de hojaldres polvorientas que se desmigajó con sólo levantarlo en el aire fosforescente de las luciérnagas de tus huesos y apenas se oyó el ruido de saltos de pulga de los ojos de vidrio en las losas de la iglesia crepuscular.³⁸⁰

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 153.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 142.

The carnivalesque imagery of a joyous nature is systematically accompanied by a more macabre one in *El otoño del patriarca* and if in the depiction of the deaths of the Bendición Alvarado and her son the ambivalence is preserved many are the instances where it is not, emphasising therefore the negative pole: Leticia Nazareno and Emanuel, their son, are eaten alive by dogs in the town market³⁸¹, Mauricio and Gumaro Ponce de León are quartered with horses³⁸², Narciso Lopez inserts dynamite in his anus when he realises he cannot resist his pederasty³⁸³, the massacre of general Bonivento Barboza betrayed by a Trojan cart of milk which blew up the rebels' headquarters³⁸⁴, the savage killing, dismemberment and exhibition of each of the body parts in different points of the city of the counterfeit leper³⁸⁵, the torture and hanging by the knees of José Ignacio Sáenz de la Barra with his own genitals stuck in his mouth³⁸⁶ after he had helped the dictator to impose a regime of terror (a period during which the terrible assassin was said to have brought to the palace nine hundred and eighteen heads, whose decapitated bodies were supposedly used to feed his Doberman)³⁸⁷, and Rodrigo de Aguilar being cooked and served Peter Greenaway style, on a large silver tray with cauliflower and bay, to be finally eaten by his horrified comrades³⁸⁸. There is another episode that turns feast into mass murder and it is that of the birthday party. The patriarch leaves the six generals drunk and asleep, closes the several latches and makes his round as usual before going to sleep. Then a single firing attack of his guards put an end to his fear of one day being betrayed by one of them:

[Y] ya está, se acabó la vaina, solo quedó un relente de pólvora en el silencio del mundo, sólo quedó él a salvo para siempre de la zozobra del poder cuando vio en las primeras malvas del nuevo día los ordenanzas del servicio chapaleando en el pantano de sangre de la

³⁸¹ See Gabriel García Márquez, *El otoño del patriarca*, p. 180.

³⁸² See Gabriel García Márquez, *El otoño del patriarca*, p. 188.

³⁸³ See Gabriel García Márquez, *El otoño del patriarca*, p. 56.

³⁸⁴ This passage reminds us of the horrible deaths during the Second World War and the subsequent handling of the cadavers. Here eighteen officers are executed by a firing squad (in pairs to save munitions) and their bodies are removed from the courtyard of the harbour's fortress in garbage trucks. See Gabriel García Márquez, *El otoño del patriarca*, pp. 109-110. Another instance reminiscent of the atrocities of the World War is that of the two thousand children used in the weekly lottery to guarantee the tyrant's winning. So that they could not denounce the corruption of the system, the General has them imprisoned and when their number is too great to ignore, he deports them in boxcars. They are carried, like the Jews by the Nazi army, to their deaths, which for the Caribbean children is drowning in the sea. See pp. 100-102.

³⁸⁵ See Gabriel García Márquez, *El otoño del patriarca*, p. 111.

³⁸⁶ See Gabriel García Márquez, *El otoño del patriarca*, p. 215.

³⁸⁷ See Gabriel García Márquez, *El otoño del patriarca*, p. 191.

sala de fiestas, vio a su madre Bendición Alvarado estremecida por un vértigo de horror al comprobar que las paredes rezumaban sangre por más que las secaran con cal y ceniza, señor, que las alfombras seguían chorreando sangre por mucho que las torcieran, y más sangre manaba a torrentes por corredores y oficinas cuanto más se desesperaban por lavarla para disimular el tamaño de la masacre.³⁸⁹

Therefore “la vaina”, the feast, is substituted by fear and terror leading some critics, like American novelist William Kennedy in his review of the book in 1976, to affirm that *El Otoño* has no “life-affirming quality”³⁹⁰. If on the one hand excess is the tool that shows the immensity of life, on the other excess is expressed mainly in terrifying aspects. The figure of the tyrant that dominates the novel is “a spectacle, the embodiment of egocentric evil unleashed, maniacally violent, cosmically worthless and despite pretensions to eternity, as devoid of meaning as anything else in an absurd world. His main contribution to life, finally, is fear; but fear such as thunder, cancer or madness can provoke, fear based on irrational possibility, on the oblique ravages of a diabolical deity”³⁹¹. In my view, Kennedy undervalues the ambivalence of such images as that of the cow drinking from the baptismal font while the lepers and paralytics sleep in the bushes nearby creating an impression of post-apocalyptic idyll³⁹².

The issue is therefore a difficult one, which explains remarks like those of Lindsay Moore who in one paragraph states that “terror overwhelms the possibility of rejuvenation in magical realism” but that the mode also explores “the bright life-affirming side of the carnivalesque”³⁹³. But paradox being one of the distinguishing techniques of magical realism, terror not only can take place but also contributes decisively to its inner balance. The fact that the archetype of the dictator can be found in many novels coming out of Latin America by authors more or less consensually regarded as magical realists or in same way connected to its literary practice leaves no room for doubt regarding its political commitment. They range from Ramon del Valle-Inclán’s *Tirano Banderas* (1926), Miguel Asturias’s *El señor presidente* (1946),

³⁸⁸ See Gabriel García Márquez, *El otoño del patriarca*, pp. 114-115.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁹⁰ William Kennedy, “A Stunning Portrait of a Monstrous Caribbean Tyrant”. *The New York Times* (Feb. 2003) 6 Feb. 2003 <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/06/15/reviews/marque-autumn.html>>

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*

³⁹² See Gabriel García Márquez, *El otoño del patriarca*, 24.

³⁹³ Lindsay Moore, “Magical Realism”, 06 Feb. 2003 <<http://www.emory.edu/english/Bahri/MagicalRealism.html>>

Augusto Roa Bastos's *Yo, el supremo* (1974), Alejo Carpentier's *El recurso del método* (1974) to the more recent publication of Mario Vargas Llosa, *La fiesta del chivo* (2000). The political theme is shaped in revolutionary terms positioning it on the side of resistance to totalitarian rule. However, magical realism, like the grotesque, cannot be reduced to static duality or solid opposition. The roles can at any given time be swapped and the dissenters become kings or fight oppression with bombing and murder.

The feast is always dangerously close to funereal procession. Like the beast nested inside Beauty in *Shame*, the grotesque is a hidden energy that might unexpectedly burst out from any magical realist textual body. For a time the beast runs wild but eventually it subsides. Or it should. Whatever the case, repression provides a most fertile background for grotesque imagery which is by no means restricted to the geopolitical context of Latin America. One only needs to think of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954).

In the editorial to the issue of *Jouvert* dedicated to magical realism, Bainard Cowan refers to it as an international or interregional style typical of nations in transition which necessarily imposes a tense encounter between tradition and the modern. If at the heart of magical realism is struggle then the mode is not exclusive to Latin America and can serve the purposes of postcolonial writing. Moreover, in that it "responds to the sense of displacement and discursive impoverishment extended everywhere by the world system" it might become a practice of resistance as pertinent to the centre as to the margins³⁹⁴. It can even happen that a single book is saturated with both points as in Fernando Vallejo's *La virgen de los sicarios* (1994) where the traditional faith of Colombian people is combined with utterly absurd and unbearable urban violence. Centre and periphery are no longer monolithic cultural locations precisely due to the permeability that characterises them and which constitutes the positive, life-affirming side of displacement. The displacement argument allows magical realism to be ascribed to women other than Latin American writers such as Isabel Allende or Laura Esquivel. Angela Carter appears as one of the most important European magical realists. The character who she created in *The Passion of New Eve*, Mother, is as much of a ruthless tyrant, demanding self-mutilation and total obedience from her disciples, as the General in *El otoño del patriarca*. But the monstrous feminine figure finds roots as much in British literature, particularly with H. R. Haggard's *She*, as in an African tradition grotesquely embodied in Ben Okri's *Madame Koto*.

At the early stages of this study, it was argued that magical realism is intimately related with postcolonialism. Linda Hutcheon affirms that magical realism is a major point of conjunction between postmodernism and postcolonialism through its construction of a textual fabric where the fantastic and the realist are mutually interwoven. Key strategies of magical realism aspire to blurring conventions on the limits of genre and realism which are also part of the intentions of postmodern and postcolonial politics. Following Stephen Slemon she recalls that the term magical realism has expanded its range of action to include other postcolonial geographies and even other “culturally marginalized contexts”³⁹⁵ whose literature encodes “resistance to the massive imperial centre and its totalizing systems”³⁹⁶. It is this totalising aspect that finds itself represented in various cultures which produce literary works of resistance. They need not be from a specifically determined location. *Shame* not only uses techniques that defy cultural imperialism in the manner of most postcolonial texts but it also chooses despotism as its very theme. Moreover, Hutcheon positions magical realism as part of the dialogue that postmodernism and postcolonialism engages with history. *Shame*, as a distorted reconstruction of the history of Pakistan, concentrates heavily on the dictatorial rule that characterised most of its existence. Rushdie’s resistance is to this political imposition; in opposition to Raza Hyder’s ramming-down-the-throat religion Rushdie suggests liberty, equality and fraternity (*S*, 251).

T. S. Tikoo regards *Shame* as a tale where national history is transformed into a comic epic where the adventures and failures of the heroes are told. Salman Rushdie has also argued that the comic epic is “the natural form for India”³⁹⁷. These are however of a political nature that through the continuous movement of rise and fall shapes national history. The comic aspect evolves from the author’s intentional withdrawal from an admittedly real country. The historical figures are therefore masked behind names and behind fiction which as a literary form constitutes an approach that can more easily adjust to the comic elements drawing from everyday life and from petty actions. Moreover, Tikoo relates comedy to non-realistic representation because as the author/narrator himself sadly acknowledges, realism can break a

³⁹⁴ Bainard Cowan, “A Necessary Confusion: Magical Realism”, *Jouvert* 7:1 (Autumn 2002) 6.

³⁹⁵ Linda Hutcheon, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, “Circling the Downspout of Empire”, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) 130. Originally published in 1989.

³⁹⁶ This quote appears on Hutcheon’s text and it is from Slemon’s “Magical Realism as Postcolonial Discourse”.

³⁹⁷ Salil Tripathi, “The Last and the Best - Salman Rushdie Interview in India”, ed. Michael Reder, *Conversations with Salman Rushdie*, 25. Originally in *Celebrity*, May, 1983.

writer's heart³⁹⁸. Tikoo sees for that reason Rushdie's calling *Shame* a modern fairy tale as a synonymous expression of comedy: "[he] chooses to put his material into a comic vein, though he would prefer to call it a fairy-tale"³⁹⁹. This identification of comedy with the fairy tale would probably need further discussion but I think the relation can be made through the aforementioned malleability of fiction. The book is however unmistakably about Pakistani national politics where the fairy tale motif becomes just an illustration. Despite his words, the author does not want the reader to see *Shame* as a mere entertaining novel. As in other occasions, he leads us to think something by stating precisely its opposite.

The Pakistani world is present in Rushdie's story on Peccavistan through references to historical facts and through bare disguises of events or characters. In the first category there is mention of Ali Bhutto's execution (*S*, 27), of the Deputy Speaker's homicide in the National Assembly (*S*, 70), of filmic and journalistic censorship (*S*, 70), of presidential corruption during Ayub Khan's administration (*S*, 70), of genocide in Baluchistan (*S*, 70), of financing the education of fanatic students abroad (*S*, 70), of hangings carried out strictly with the purpose of justifying Ali Bhutto's death sentence as well as the never explained disappearance of his executioner (*S*, 70), of drug traffic (*S*, 70), and of manipulation of anti-Semitic feelings in order to meet the economic ambitions of Arab countries (*S*, 70). These are issues Rushdie says he is not going to talk about except that he has already obviously done so and he will continue to throughout the novel in other ways. This strategy Tikoo sees as "intentionally abortive" or fiction's caving in to "the pressure of reality"⁴⁰⁰. Historical reference and humour can indeed coincide as in the joke the author claims he was told about God and his deals with Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan, Ali Bhutto and General Zia but it is still black humour for it is based on the atrocities each committed during his rule (*S*, 112). The problem of history is even addressed at points by Rushdie, particularly regarding the migrant condition. In those instances there is an inherent admission that the material he uses is drawn from actual events: "As for me: I, too, like all migrants, am a fantasist. I build imaginary countries and try to impose them on the ones that exist. I, too, face the problem of history: what to retain, what to dump, how to hold on to what memory insists on relinquishing, how to deal with change" (*S*, 88).

³⁹⁸ See *Shame*, p. 70.

³⁹⁹ S. K. Tikoo, "*Shame*: A Modern Epic in Prose", ed. G. R. Taneja and R. K. Dhawan, *The Novels of Salman Rushdie* (New Delhi: Indian Society for Commonwealth Studies, 1992) 47. The reference is to the passage in *Shame*: "Fortunately, however, I am only telling a sort of modern fairy-tale, so that's all right; nobody need get upset, or take anything I say too seriously" (*S*, 70).

The analogies that can be perceived by anyone living in Pakistan and India in the times preceding and following the Partition, as well as by historically informed readers, are abundant. The foremost identification that is made is between General Zia ul-Haq with Razor Guts Hyder and between Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his fictional counterpart Iskander Harappa. The technique can be found expanded on various levels: General Shaggy Dog's imposition of house arrest takes place in similar ways to that of President Ayub Khan by Yahya Khan, the results of the elections that brought conflict between the East Wing and the West Wing are closely reproduced, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, leader of the East Wing Awami League is turned into Sheikh Bismillah, head of the People's League and Bhutto's People's Party becomes Popular Front. Additionally there is a reproduction of the feelings of the peoples against their rivals (*S*, 179), the allegation of American support to the East Wing (*S*, 179) and the description of Harappa's assassination in the terms in which Bhutto's own fall occurred⁴⁰¹.

Both regimes - Harappa/Bhutto's Russian friendly socialist Islamism and Hyder/Zia's fundamentalist Islamism more prone to American alliances - eventually collapse as none was actually able to supplant the power of the military forces which invariably tried to put an end to the poor state of affairs with more bloodshed. Proving the affinity between politics and religion, the rule that Hyder installs is magnified by the religious ideals set forth by Maulana Dawood. A new age of terror begins, a period marked by Islamic-inspired education, censorship in the arts, veiled women, and the promotion of mutilating punishments for those committing civil crimes and disrespecting religious regulations. Both rulers are tainted by their conduct which aimed at satisfying their personal interests in sex, finance and power. Hyder's theocracy is as prejudicial to the country as Harappa's autocracy as they do not promote the welfare of the people who are systematically crushed by the leaders' wars among themselves. The mock-epic, which is no more than a sub-category of the mock-serious, encloses an element of ambivalence:

By bringing this history back to life, by ridiculing and scolding the heroes and the nations, by indulging in metaphorical invective, by entertainment, by resorting to the obscene (which is shameful) and the erotic, and by deflating the exalted reputations, Rushdie has

⁴⁰⁰ S. K. Tikoo, "*Shame: A Modern Epic in Prose*", 56.

⁴⁰¹ For more details on the historical versus the fictional correspondences see O. P. Mathur, "Sense and Sensibility in *Shame*", ed. G. R. Taneja and R. K. Dhawan, *The Novels of Salman Rushdie* and Tikoo's essay where in addition the significance of the historical pieces that Rushdie preferred to leave out and that point to a possible Pakistani political inclination on the part of the author are commented on.

indeed created a diverting literary work and demonstrated his scintillating ability to use the mock-epic prose form to combine politics with literature.⁴⁰²

My intentions from this point onward are to pick up where Tikoo left off since there is an element missing in this list that is of utmost relevance: the nature of the deaths of the dictators. The scenes are mentioned in the closing lines but strangely, giving the unconditional praise they receive, not matched by any other reference in the article. That is due to Tikoo's realisation of the inadequacy of approaching them strictly through the mock-epic view. I therefore argue that the grotesque is the missing angle which as the novel develops finds different equilibria between its two poles where the comical is probably more accentuated in the beginning while the grim register takes over towards the end⁴⁰³.

Like *El otoño del patriarca*, *Shame* concentrates on the humorous and horrifying stories of tyrannical rule but in the latter the element of the double is a key technique which displays more visibly the mechanisms of carnivalistic exchange. Furthermore *Shame* conveys a prevailing representation of the grotesque that is akin to Danow's perspective. The grotesque arises from the horror of intolerant regimes and from their manoeuvres to maintain the control which result in repression, torture and murders. Iskander Harappa advocated democratic principles but behaved dishonourably. He became such an influential person in national foreign policy that President A. had no option but to invite him to make up part of his government. Gradually, the President loses popularity and Harappa leaves him to form his own party, the Popular Front, which wins the majority in the West Wing. In the East Wing, however, the party fails to gain any significant seats and the population refuses to accept Harappa as their leader. War and separation between the two Wings follows and Sheikh Bismillah becomes the leader of the new country in the east. It is at this point that Harappa's

⁴⁰² S. K. Tikoo, "*Shame*: A Modern Epic in Prose", 61.

⁴⁰³ My study does not, however, follow the methodology of Thakur Guruprasad who has identified Salman Rushdie's fiction as a genre "mixing free-flight fairy tale with savage political indictment" and "creating the grotesque on such overwhelming scale as to reduce the object of his dislike to the ridiculous", Thakur Guruprasad, "The Secret of Rushdie's Charm", ed. G. R. Taneja and R. K. Dhawan, *The Novels of Salman Rushdie*, 169. The charm, as Guruprasad puts it, is none other than the grotesque but in this article he is not supported by an appropriate theoretical background so that the final result is a set of illustrations of grotesque characters and events in which the magical and absurdist traits are acknowledged in passing. Attention was first drawn to the grotesque deaths in a single paragraph in *Shame* with M. D. Fletcher's "*Shame* as Apologue" where he classifies the deaths of the minor characters as clownish, wholly according to the Bakhtinian precepts. With respect to other characters Fletcher's interpretation differs: Good News's is tragic, Little Mir's macabre and those of the dictators grimmer and less humorous. See M. D. Fletcher, "*Shame* as Apologue", *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 21.1 (1986) 127.

actions start to serve his own interests instead of Peccavistan's. As Prime Minister he is a man with considerable power so when he accuses President Shaggy Dog of the defeat, the Army immediately takes appropriate measures. Hypocrisy is, in fact, one of the characteristics of his political performance as he places the blame for the shame of defeat on another despite drawing substantial financial benefits from it. The reader becomes aware of the weight of repression in episodes such as the interview by a foreign television network whose interviewer is too afraid to reproduce the epithets Harappa receives from his people. It is Iskander himself who verbalises them: patrician, autocratic, intolerant and repressive (or, in Arjumand's view, the man behind the exercise of rough justice, but justice nonetheless).

Instead of describing with factual precision the horrors of Harappa's rule, the author chooses a device that works as a polyptych or reel: Rani's embroidered shawls jointly known as "The Shamelessness of Iskander the Great". Their themes covered a wide range. The badminton shawl revealed Harappa involved in orgiastic pleasure because in spite of his commitment to duty and celibacy, the white girls living in the nearby village bore his children, received his money and appealed to Rani when he failed to support them. Despite what he wants the people to believe he has distanced himself from notorious debauchers such as Omar but not from the life style. Before embracing a political career he was notoriously known for drinking, gambling on anything from stud poker to roulette, for smoking opium, for spending his time in idle and cruel games like cock, bear and snake and mongoose fights, for fixing horse races, and for disco dancing. His vice was frequently associated with sexual depravity. He was a renowned womaniser to the point of stealing Little Mir's French lover at a public event and, in fact, he drew pleasure from caressing the legs and ankles of beautiful women under the tables at dinner parties. He attended belly dancing shows, international hotel swimming-pools where naked white prostitutes were present or warehouses where he photographed the women on him or Omar, singly or in groups. Moreover, he had the censor edit compilations for him of sexually explicit scenes from films which were then distributed nationally.

The shawls were eighteen in total: the slapping and kicking shawls denounced the physical abuses he ministered from the highest minister to the lowest servant and the hissing shawl depicted Iskander in the throne-like chair of his cabinet organising the massive network of spies: "the head spider at the heart of that web of listeners and whisperers, she [Rani] had sewn the silvery threads of the web, they radiated out from his face, in silver thread she revealed the arachnid terrors of the days, when men lied to their sons and women had only to

murmur the breeze to bring a fearsome revenge down upon their lovers” (S, 192). The torture shawl confirms that his later treatment as a prisoner was just a replica of his own jail system:

[S]he embroidered the foetid violence of his jails, blindfolded prisoners tied to chairs while jailers hurled buckets of water, now boiling hot (the thread-steam rose), now freezing cold, until the bodies of the victims grew confused and cold water raised hot burns upon their skins: weals of red embroidery rose scarlike on the shawl; (S, 193)

There was also the white shawl of white-uniformed policemen running night clubs with unrestricted alcohol consumption and sniffing drugs; the swearing shawl where could be seen “vermilion cockroaches, magenta lizards, turquoise leeches, ochre scorpions, indigo spiders [and] albino rats” crawling out of Harappa’s mouth (S, 193)⁴⁰⁴; the shawl of international shame where Harappa was embroidered bowing to Chinese politicians, cooperating with other dictators such as Idi Amin Dada and Shah Pahlevi, and riding an atomic bomb⁴⁰⁵; the shawl of Shaggy Dog and Harappa’s plucking the feathers of the east wing bird; two election shawls: the first of Harappa’s victory showing broken seals, refilling the ballot-boxes, being physically violent to voters and threatening them with weapons while the second, with similar content but larger, denouncing Harappa’s overwhelming ambition for he would have won the elections anyway though, obviously, not by the same margin. The powerful Death of Democracy shawl illustrated Harappa choking democracy, hands around her neck, with bulging eyes and defecating in her pyjamas while a horde of Generals remained blind to the murder behind dark glasses, all but Hyder; the shawl of Iskander, referred to as

⁴⁰⁴ There are several references to Harappa’s obscene language and even blasphemy. See for instance p. 106. In the end, it is his language that causes him to die. M. D. Fletcher insightfully notes the contrast between Harappa’s oratorical virtuosity and his bad language. See M. D. Fletcher, “Rushdie’s *Shame* as Apologue”, 125.

⁴⁰⁵ This is yet another instance where history enters through small cracks in the body of the text in order to lend it credibility. By being associated with such repressive systems as that of General Idi Amin Dada who ruled Uganda from 1971 to 1979 (a period when an estimated 300,000 people were murdered) the reader can have a concrete understanding of Iskander Harappa’s own regime while criticising the real dictators. Reza Shah Pahlevi’s rule is particularly close to the idea the reader generates regarding Harappa. Initially Pahlevi promoted a reform plan of the nation intended to increase the people’s quality of life, through land redistribution, promotion of literacy and women’s rights, and building of houses. He was a moderate leader who did not turn his back on the West. But in the end his political rivals and religious groups became suspicious of an attitude they found too pro-American. In the 70s (he ruled Iran from 1941 to 1979) he used progressively more violent methods to contain popular discontent. The secret police, SAVAK, resorted to the most vicious means to maintain the shah in power. Riots broke through out the country until he was forced into exile in 1979 leaving the rule of the country in the hands of Ruhollah Khomeini.

the assassin of possibility, where the murdered metaphor is a girl inspired by the figure of Sufiya; the autobiographical shawl where Rani depicts herself lacking the attention of her husband, reduced to a house and earth covered in cracks and spiders⁴⁰⁶; the shawl exposing the horizon where the future Harappa was supposedly building for the country should be; and the shawl of Pinkie's suicide. The remaining two showed the goriest deeds: the repression of the separatist movement in the west and the assassination of Little Mir. This is the description of the first, the shawl of hell:

[I]n the name of never-another-East-Wing, the bodies sprawled across the shawl, the men without genitals, the sundered legs, the intestines in place of faces, the alien legion of the dead blotting out the memory of Raza Hyder's governorship, or even giving that period, in retrospect, a kindly, tolerant glow, *because there was no comparison, daughter, your man of the people, your master of the common touch, I have lost the count of the corpses on my shawl, twenty, fifty, a hundred thousand dead, who knows, and not enough scarlet thread on earth to show the blood*, the people grinning lifelessly with bullet-holes for second mouths, the people united in the worm-feast of that shawl of flesh and death; (S, 194-5. Italics in the text)

The other is equally horrifying and grotesque in its anatomic detail, dismembering care, and equating to animalistic debasement. In the end, Little Mir's looted body illustrates the looting he carried out in Mohenjo to affront the Harappas. It is also a more gruesome portrait of Rani's plundered house/body:

Little Mir buried at the bottom of a trunk, but of course he rose to clasp his cousin in his own phantasmal grip, to drag Iskander Harappa down to hell... [...] Little Mir Harappa dangling by the neck under the eaves of his family home, [...] his sightless eyes staring down at the very spot where, once upon a time, the cadaver of an unloved dog had been permitted to decay, yes, she had delineated his body with an accuracy that stopped the heart, leaving out nothing, not the disembowelling, not the tear in the armpit through which Mir's own heart had been removed, not the torn-out tongue, nothing, [...] 'It looks as if,' the fellow [the embroidered villager] said, 'his body has been looted, like a house.' (S, 195)

⁴⁰⁶ Iskander Harappa's estate makes another bridge between fiction and reality. Mohenjo-Daro is a site of archaeological interest whose foundation dates from the Harappan civilisation of the Indus Valley, also known as "the mould of the dead" and that is located near Bhutto's own family home, Larkana. There is also an intention of recalling General Iskander Mirza. See Timothy Brennan, "Shame's Holy Book", M. D. Fletcher ed., *Reading Rushdie: Perspectives on the Fiction of Salman Rushdie* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi: 1994) 110.

With Iskander Harappa there is seldom a direct depiction of his crimes which is compensated for by the minute attention given to his utterly grotesque death, an echo of the hidden deaths of his doing. The symptom that is primarily manifested is that of debasement. When the coup that overthrows him is accomplished by his own Chief Martial Law Administrator, the king is made into a sacrificeable fool. That is evident from one of the judge's comments: "He thinks he is the former Prime Minister, but we do not care for him." (S, 228). First Harappa is deprived of his liberty. He is taken to the Kot Lakhpat jail in Lahore and there a process of bodily decay commences. He loses weight, and contracts in turn malaria, infection of the colon and influenza. The teeth of the great leader begin to fall out. The author contrasts this grotesque portrait with Omar's losing weight through the activities he maintains with the ayah. This juxtaposition of death and sex, of thanatos and eros, removes the sombreness of the tragic that the death of the tyrant imaginatively possesses⁴⁰⁷. This carnivalesque-grotesque characteristic is openly defended by Salman Rushdie. In the interview with John Haffenden, who defines the mode of the novel as burlesque and calls the dictators buffoons, Salman Rushdie says:

[T]he characters involved didn't deserve high tragedy. Although the relationship between Raza and Iskander is basically tragic, the actual figures are clowns - gangsters, hoodlums - and not people who deserve Shakespearian tragedy. So you have to bring comedy into it - you have to write black comedy, because they are black-comedy figures - and I rewrote the entire book, changing the tone, making it lighter. I find, in a book where the plot is dark and the characters unsympathetic, that if you can make it comic it doesn't lose the tragic content - the story is still the story - but it gains an extra dimension which makes the characters more human.⁴⁰⁸

The day Harappa is sentenced to die is the day Good News chooses to commit suicide. More than a premonition of Harappa's fate or metaphorical illustration of the effects of her father's regime, Good News's suicide relates to Harappa's death through the emblem of the death-cell. Indeed Harappa's death-cell is his prison cell where through the power of Hyder's mental association the prisoner is killed and resurrected as Hyder's own still-born son.

⁴⁰⁷ For M. D. Fletcher it is the absence of a tragic sense in their deaths that makes *Shame* a parody. See M. D. Fletcher, "Rushdie's *Shame* as Apologue", p. 122.

⁴⁰⁸ John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, 241.

It is a Bakhtinian pregnant-death cell. Harappa notices the change of the space gradually and at first it is only an impression of throbbing walls (*S*, 229). As time goes by, he assimilates the relationship that exists between himself and that dead boy which enhances his viewing of his quarters as a womb. The womb-room is an image of the grotesque complemented with the allusions to the abjecting maternal that sucks him helplessly to his death. However, the grotesque is withdrawn from the pure plane of the fantastic because it might be a production of Harappa's affected state of mind so we know the transformation is not for real as opposed to the literary conventions of the gothic that makes us accept the spectre in *The Castle of Otranto* (*S*, 229). At the same time a uterine portrait of a prison cell is not a realistic description of the dire conditions in prison which permits us to regard it as a scene of a magical realistic nature with a strong emphasis on its ominous side through the grotesque imagery which nonetheless retains its regenerative but hardly optimistic feature:

His son. Who emerged dead from the womb with a noose about his neck. *That noose seals my fate.* Because now he understands the cell, the throbbing walls, the smell of excrement, the drumbeat of a foul invisible heart: death's belly, an inverse womb, dark mirror of a birthplace, its purpose is to suck him in, to draw him back and down through time, until he hangs foetal in his own waters, with an umbilical cord hung fatally around his neck. He will leave this place only when its mechanisms have done their work, death's baby, travelling down the death canal, and the noose will tighten its grip.

A man will wait a lifetime for revenge. The killing of Iskander Harappa avenges the still born child. *Yes: I am being unmade.* (*S*, 231. Italics in the text)

Through Iskander Harappa's debasement in prison Good News is also linked to the brother who on the surface appears to be associated only with Sufiya. Good News's body is a place of unbearable reproduction so that she decides to transform its natural grotesqueness into that of death. But it is meant to be comic too. She is said to look as if she had swallowed a whale (*S*, 226) so that it becomes ridiculous to imagine her putting the noose around her neck and breaking the rope with the weight of her colossal pregnant self. Necessarily, she had to get up with comic difficulty to make a second attempt. Furthermore, she hopes to regain the youthfulness of her maiden days perfuming her hair with jasmine. Contrasting with the putrid smell released when "bowels open[ed] in death" (we imagine the foetuses fallen on the floor in the midst of uterine waters, urine and excrement and spread through the room) is the expensive French perfume with the ironic name Joy (*S*, 228). In this case too the grotesque

shows its double face but the comic, instead of fulfilling its own purposes, seems to enhance the negative pole.

The debasement of Harappa in prison, after his sentence is pronounced, focuses on the conjunction of the grotesque and abjection as it develops in the vein of disgust. He is tormented by gigantic cockroaches tangled in his hair which crackle when he crushes them with his bare feet; flies fornicate on his toenails; mosquitoes savour the blood from his wrists, perpetuating life through a body about to perish; his mattress, which he finally got after five months complaining, was infested with fleas; and in winter he freezes whereas in summer the odour of the latrine even makes his eyes bulge. Repulsion is at times combined with sheer cruelty, for instance, as when he is served boiling water in the hot season so that he has to wait for hours for it to be drinkable and cuffing him at all times except for one hour a day. As a consequence his health deteriorates and he starts to feel chest pain, to vomit blood and his nose bleeds. Towards the end reality is redefined in his head. The concreteness of insects is the remains of physical contact with worldly existence and he questions his very being at that place. It is as if he is being dreamt by someone else, Hyder, who is equated to God:

[S]omeone is dreaming him. God, then? No, not God. He struggles to remember Raza Hyder's face.

[...] The General of whom this cell is one small aspect, who is general, omnipresent, omnivorous: it is a cell inside his head. Death and the General: Iskander sees no difference between the terms. (S, 230)

In a dream state limits are loosened and a man can become god but also the devil for is Harappa not the father of a devil, as the quote below makes clear, and deserver of the epithet? Moreover, living inside Hyder's head, that is, his body, Harappa is in fact dwelling inside a motherly womb whose engulfing, and abjecting desires will terminate him. Like the maternal body, Hyder is animalesque, voracious and deadly. Filial and gender relations are further complicated when bearing in mind the ramifications of the reasoning introduced above, that Harappa is taking the place of Hyder's real son:

From darkness into light, from nothingness into somethingness. I made him, I was his father, he is my seed. And now I am less than he. They accuse Haroun of killing his father because that is what Hyder is doing to me.

Then another step, which takes him beyond such aching simplicities. The father should be superior and the son, inferior. But now I am low and he, high. An inversion: the parent become the child. *He is turning me into his son.* (S, 230. Italics in the text)

The carnivalesque duality and inversion is acknowledged by the very text which draws attention to the value of high versus low and superior versus inferior. So this is not just a story of uncrowning of a king, dethroned by another (who will, according to the cycle of carnival, be deposed himself). It is also of a father reduced to the role of his son which Bakhtin also mentioned in *Rabelais and His World*. Harappa's metamorphosis reverses time placing him back at the very beginning of life itself. In a sense there is also a magical realist suspension of time, as if history is caught in a temporal hiatus between life and death⁴⁰⁹.

When death finally comes, it does not lose the carnivalesque-grotesque trait. Colonel Shuja brings him his favourite cigars (*Romeo and Juliettas*, another ironic brand) as a celebration of the outcome of the appeal to the Supreme Court regarding the death sentence. Harappa, who had prophesied the next time he smoked would be his last, interprets it as the sign of his imminent execution. But Harappa's life can be spared if he signs a confession. The prisoner is extremely offended and insults the colonel viciously. The violence of his language is emphasised but it is totally unrelated to Bakhtin's views on insults; its obscenity hurts like stinging blows piercing Shuja's skin: "Fuck me in the mouth, pimp, go suck your grandson's cock" (S, 237). The beast, the disclosure of violence, is referenced when Colonel Shuja draws his gun slowly and very simply shoots Harappa down. Then, to disguise the murder, a hanging is staged.

The distinction between living and dying is a matter of confusion, even of risible confusion with successive confirmations and refutations. Shuja brings the news of life recovered and Harappa interprets it as a sign of death; the Colonel should have brought salvation but executed the prisoner instead; the cigar that one knew to be the warning of death seems for a moment to escape the magical realist inescapability which every premonition seems to represent but then, when Harappa causes his own execution, it is proved that the initial idea was correct; finally a dead body is hanged as if it were alive. Furthermore, echoing *El otoño del patriarca*, Harappa in death becomes a saint which drastically contrasts with his conduct while and prior to being in power. There is sarcasm in the allusion to the miracles the

body enabled: blind people seeing, the lame walking, and the lepers cured when they touched “the martyr’s tomb” (*S*, 238). The carnivalesque in Harappa’s death is present in details that assume great significance such as Harappa becoming a patron saint for affliction in one’s teeth when the fact was that he died almost toothless. The carnivalesque extends itself to include another magical realist moment, that of Arjumand calculating the defeat of her father’s enemies, causing an immediate toothache in Harappa, in the instance those very enemies break in and arrest him.

The complex network of life and death is taken to an extreme when Hyder begins to be haunted by the voice of his dead rival trying to impose his opinion over that of the also deceased Maulana Dawood. The carnivalesque-grotesque interferes in every plane in *Shame* and even this metaphor of a verbal combat between the forces of Good and Evil is deconstructed. On a strictly theological level, the metaphor deconstructs itself when religious goodness is tainted with radicalism and cruelty whereas evilness, in the form of Harappa’s advice, becomes questionable as when Hyder is finally forced to deal with Sufiya’s murders (Dawood’s voice abandons him for there is nothing God can do to save her but Harappa stays) or when he instructs Hyder to be less ruthless towards the people (*S*, 248). The difficulty of distinguishing the frontiers between godly and devilish inspiration, later to become the critical theme of *The Satanic Verses*, supports the idea that these ideological necessities are conventions. The conventionality aspect is unmasked through paradox. Harappa, “the world champion of shamelessness, [...] international rogue and bastard number one” (*S*, 108) becomes Martyr Iskander, able even to replace the myth of God (*S*, 276). There is an admission of the opposition between Good and Evil, but it is only skin-deep as it is subject to historical changes: “I remember Raza Hyder when he was not a devil with horns and tail, and also Isky, before he became a saint”, says Rani (*S*, 108). God and the devil’s ways tangle until they become a confused knot: Hyder is the defender of the Islamic faith and is seen as a devil and Harappa, the debaucher, becomes a saint whose voice is, nevertheless, that of the devil whispering in Hyder’s ear⁴¹⁰.

⁴⁰⁹ For a brief study on the issue of time in *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame* see M. Madhusudhana Rao, “Time and Timelessness in Rushdie’s Fiction”, ed. G. R. Taneja and R. K. Dhawan, *The Novels of Salman Rushdie*.

⁴¹⁰ M. Keith Booker stresses the importance of the cartoon and comic-book visual discourse in Rushdie’s fiction apropos of this image that is but a variation of the angel and devil cliché on someone’s shoulder posing for one’s conscience. He also refers to the fact that they are voices, opposing ones, thus pointing to the dialogic value of the image. Later in the article Booker makes it explicit: “Rushdie (like Bakhtin) emphasizes the inherently dialogic power of words. No word can have

The deconstruction on a more symbolic level is achieved through carnivalesque-grotesque strategies. The representation of the two adversaries, as imagined in the delirium of poisoning, transmogrifies Dawood and Harappa into animal form:

The monkey on the right [shoulder] had the face of Maulana Dawood and its hands were clasped over its mouth; on the left shoulder sat Iskander Harappa scratching his langoor's armpit. Hyder's hands went to his ears, Isky's, after scratching, covered his eyes, but he was peeping through the fingers. 'Stories end, worlds end', Isky the monkey said, 'and then it's judgment day.' Fire, and the dead, rising up, dancing in the flames. (S, 276)

Reducing the dictator and the religious leader to performing monkeys not only arouses laughter but it also makes a sarcastic comment on the rule of Raza Hyder, blind and deaf to the people's misery and cries. This turn to a grim imagery of the carnivalesque-grotesque is accentuated in the prediction, soon to become real, of an apocalyptic destruction: Sufiya's explosion. Violence, the daughter of totalitarianism, puts a drastic end to that rule.

The nexus of the grotesque, that is, comic and terrible ambivalence, is supported by Rushdie the narrator who says that "inconsistency doesn't matter; I myself manage to hold large numbers of wholly irreconcilable views simultaneously, without the least difficulty" (S, 241-242). This comment refers to the dual nature of the politicians. Rushdie goes on to argue that history is propelled by the ongoing tension of the dialectics of Puritanism versus Epicureanism. These divisions are only on a superficial level based on matters of parties and race. The fight that opposes "virtue versus vice, ascetic versus bawd, God against the Devil", between shame and shameless we could add, is therefore at the core of the rivalry of Hyder and Harappa (S, 240) or of Robespierre and Danton, introduced in the text apropos of Georg Büchner's play *Danton's Death*. Robespierre and Danton do not represent absolutisms. Each has something of the other, they are Robeston and Danpierre. In the same manner, Hyder was not pure terror or Harappa mere pleasure. It is possible to conceive that Hyder's Terror period resulted in some enjoyment on his part, a period not wholly different from Harappa's own. That was certainly the case when he had Shuja, Talvar and Tughlak killed. The serious handicap was that Sufiya had assumed the role of the guillotine of her father's establishment; she had become a human guillotine beheading men throughout the country (S, 244). For

unquestionable authority, because all words inherently contain the potential echoes of responses from opposing voices". See M. Keith Booker, "Beauty and the Beast: Dualism as Despotism in the Fiction of Salman Rushdie", ed. M. D. Fletcher, *Reading Rushdie*, pp. 244 and 248.

Keith Booker, the acceptance of contradiction is paradigmatic not just of *Shame* but of all Rushdian fiction: “[his] fiction consistently embraces contradiction, privileging the plural over the singular, the polyphonic over the monologic. One of the clearest ways in which it does so is through the careful construction of dual oppositions, [...] only to deconstruct these oppositions by demonstrating that the apparent polar opposites are in fact interchangeable and mutually interdependent”⁴¹¹.

Harappa’s degradation and death are mirrored by Hyder’s with analogous meaning. Hyder’s decision to guide the government of the country inspired by religious principles results in the establishment of a rule that is more oppressive than religion or politics could be on their own. They strengthen one another mutually. When the coup takes place, Hyder appears on television knelt on the prayer-mat, reciting the Koran and holding the sacred book while he exposed his plans for the elections. But being a religious man, Hyder is distraught by having betrayed Harappa and broken his oath. This incompatibility between political needs and the faith of the individual will demand from Hyder an adjustment towards increasing tyranny and that will ultimately lead him to his destruction.

The general bends his wishes to divine purposes revealed to him in dreams and through voices. In one of those dreams Dawood appears to him to demand that he choose between the love of God and that of his devilish daughter. He wakes up in tears before the realisation that he belonged to the type capable of sacrificing his own flesh, like Abraham, to satisfy his God. It is this ruthlessness that is so valuable in politics. The revolution might not have been masterminded by Hyder himself as his character seems at first to lack the audacity and ambition to carry out a coup. After the deed, Hyder calls General Tughlak for him to tell him what to do next. It is also suggested that he was blackmailed to participate in the coup to overthrow Harappa and until the moment he was insulted by Harappa in prison that it was not his intention to assume the presidency. Colonel Shuja sardonically comments. “That stupid man [...] brought his fate on his own head” (*S*, 224). This sense of the future president’s lack of astuteness is felt during the transition period. He allows Harappa to give interviews to foreign newspapers, an opportunity that Harappa takes to slander Hyder. In turn, Hyder defends him even in private: “highly-strung bloke. Always was. And the chap is naturally upset” (*S*, 224). This tolerance from one who has just undertaken a coup in relation to the defeated party is, at the very least, unusual. His behaviour before Harappa is markedly

⁴¹¹ M. Keith Booker, “Beauty and the Beast: Dualism as Despotism in the Fiction of Salman Rushdie”, 238.

strange; initially Hyder maintains the belief in the realisation of elections where Harappa's party would be permitted to run but then Colonel Shuja alerts him to the consequences of his rival's possible triumph: "Raza looked surprised. 'What is this *do?*' he cried. 'To me? His old comrade, his family member by marriage? Have I tortured him? Have I thrown him in the public lock-up? Then what is there for him to do?'" (S, 224. Italics in the text).

But it is not just space that gains a carnivalesque-grotesque dimension. Hyder's governorship is marked by religious compulsion and disregard for human rights⁴¹². That is verified both on a political and on a personal level. At the beginning of his career, controlling dacoity (robberies by armed gangs) and separatist rebels earns him the promotion to Brigadier and the compliments of an always short-sighted West. The success is due, however, to mass murder. "Hyder kept hanging innocent people by the balls", says Harappa (S, 119). Were Hyder's crimes exposed in tapestry like Harappa's there could be seen the murder of Chief Minister Aladdin Gichki, who had managed to escape the death penalty for corruption charges. Gichki is an enemy of Maulana Dawood and it does not go unnoticed that Gichki's disappearance coincides with the political empowerment of his closest friend, now minister of education, information and tourism. Other murders would have to be accounted for, namely those of Sindbal Mengal, Bilquis's lover, of Babar Shakil, and of those involved in the conspiracy against him: Talvar Ulhaq, General Tughlak and Colonel Shuja. In an interview given to a British television channel (yet another element of doubleness) it is said that to Western eyes his application of the Islamic law of flogging and cutting hands is barbaric. That is vehemently refuted by him because they are the words of God. Furthermore rather amazingly he claims that barbarity depends on the individual applying the law, not on the action. Hyder presents a third reason for using those methods of punishment, a reason described in a truly carnivalesque-grotesque manner completed with his role-playing and accompanying sounds: "let me say, sir, that we are not some savages down from the trees, you see? We will not simply order people to stick out their hands, like this, and go fataakh! with a butcher's knife. No, sir. All will be done under the most hygienic conditions, with proper medical supervision, use of anaesthetic etcetera" (S, 245).

Under the pressure of Harappa's constant muttering, Hyder becomes even more fanatical which Rushdie describes in a humorous tone. Following his orders, the consumption

⁴¹² Timothy Brennan sees "Raza" as a variant form of "Raja", in its turn suggesting "Raj", the former British authority. This connection permits Brennan to read Raza Hyder's tyranny based on religious rhetoric as a continuation of the practices of the British rule. See Timothy Brennan, "Shame's Holy Book", 110.

of alcohol is forbidden and television was only permitted to run religious teachings so that people were in a frenzy to call the repairers because they thought there was something wrong with the TV sets. On the Prophet's birthday people were jailed if they failed to pray at the appointed time. Beggars initially demanded to establish a minimum standard for alms; one hundred thousand of them found themselves in jail along with twenty five hundred members of the Popular Front. The ban against foreign films was total. The burqa became compulsory in any public place and women were spat on if they did not follow the codes of clothing thoroughly. Smoking could be punished with the death penalty during Ramadan. Schools and courts were taken over by Islamic theology. His motto of stability in the name of God was cruelly and not unanimously imposed.

When groups of women start protesting publicly Maulana, or Hyder's voice of God, cries in his ears that "he should strip the whores naked and hang them from all available trees" (S, 249). The virulent irony is present in the camouflaged clemency Hyder sees himself applying: injuring the women's breasts should be avoided. Their leader is only arrested when it is discovered that she organised the traffic of women and children to be sold abroad. The charges strike the reader as suspiciously convenient but no comment is made in relation with their falsity or authenticity. But a careful reading proves to be enlightening. It is Harappa's whispered compliment. It is disturbing to become aware that in the fight between Good and Evil, Good has been simply pushed out of the framework; Maulana admonishes Hyder for not being even more brutal and Harappa praises the exercise of evilness under the disguise of justice but none defends the true practice of goodwill. The adoption of Islamic rhetoric to rule Peccavistan "creates a grotesque world in which official mendacity and repression have killed the habit of truth-telling in the people. The people are self-alienated. They separate their human self from their ordinary self and ruthlessly the urges of the former. In the end they allow monsters to terrorise them and the sane world, whether of politics or any other, disintegrates"⁴¹³.

Hyder goes through a process of grotesque purification, namely through debasement, that prepares him for his death. It begins with the fall of his regime, the uncrowning of the king. With the publication in the newspapers of the true identity of the ravenous feline, Hyder's already weakened rule comes to an end. At home, he waits for his demise either in the form of popular rage or filial revenge. Helpless to react it is Bilquis who comes up with the

⁴¹³ Tariq Rahman, "Politics in the Novels of Salman Rushdie", ed. G. R. Taneja and R. K. Dhawan, *The Novels of Salman Rushdie*, 116.

solution. Now that he is a “crushed figure” he can take on a womanly veil described as a cloak of invisibility, the invisibility a deposed tyrant needs to hide and the invisibility every woman was covered up with in his regime (S, 262). In a Bakhtinian view it is the characteristic gender-role change: a son that once was reborn as a daughter and a man that turns into a woman. But in this specific context where a woman is constructed as an inferior being it has an additional debasing quality. The humiliation of being veiled is accompanied by the carnivalistic release of Order that puts anyone’s lives, but particularly theirs, in danger. They travel through secondary routes, bump on buses, share the vehicles with chickens and vomiting peasants, hide in the darkest places of stations, eat little, and drink whatever is available no matter how abject the drink or animalesque the attitude: “livid green cordials, pink tea scooped out of large aluminium pots, water drawn from yellow lakes in which enervated water-buffalo sprawl” (S, 267). Encounters with the police are always unnerving, they travel with infuriated demonstrators, there is news of the growing violence of the riots and adding to the fear there is the droll humiliation of their using the ladies’ facilities. An instance that is life-threatening, shameful and comical is that of the bus driver taking the fallen ruler for a transvestite. Presently miners and quarrymen insult them with wolf-whistles, obscene compliments, ululations and body caresses. It is utter dishonour and degradation.

Taking on the veil has further carnivalesque ambivalence: Hyder is finally forced to accept and hide his shame behind a veil and simultaneously replays the actions of his daughter whose deeds he pretended to ignore⁴¹⁴. Long ago he had found her veil covered in blood and burnt it as a form of denial that she too used a mask for her murderous shame that once belonged to others. The woman in the veil is the father but also the daughter. With this gesture he is not being a coward, a deposed tyrant trying to survive; too late but he finally takes back from her some of the shame that was his. On yet another carnivalesque-grotesque resonance it materialises the opposition between life and death, again a blurred distinction, for the veil is more than a woman’s clothing; it is a shroud, a mourning sign for his rule but also for himself and his family who will all soon be terminated. *“The living wear shrouds as well as the dead”*, which means that people can breathe but have the status of the dead like Harappa, Hyder but also Bilquis and Rani (S, 262. Italics in the text).

⁴¹⁴ When Hyder and Omar say that shame should come to them the expression has a double meaning: the acceptance of their share of shame which they had refused in the past and their wait for Sufiya whose nickname is shame. In the end, she finally comes for them.

Hyder's is a true carnivalesque-grotesque debasement summarised in: "[h]ow Raza Hyder fell: in improbability; in chaos; in women's clothing; in black" (*S*, 262). Hyder's ambiguous state allows the Shakils to toss away the shame that murder carries with it so that they remain the only truly shame-less or shame-free characters until the end. As they set about to kill him, one acknowledges Hyder's already death-like existence: "'He [Omar] did well to bring you here,' Bunny reflected, 'our son. He did well to wait for your fall. There is no shame in killing you now, because you're a dead man anyway. It is only the execution of a corpse'" (*S*, 281). His death will therefore reproduce another death of his responsibility establishing an inescapable link of doubleness between Raza Hyder and Iskander Harappa.

After such a perilous journey Hyder, Omar and Bilquis leave Q. behind and cross the border towards an actual possibility of survival and hope (*S*, 267). The fact is that they are running away from death towards it. The escape is an illusion as can be seen in the case of Iskander Harappa, who seemed as if he could be saved but in the end could not. The escape is futile because it is directed towards the maternal country, as Omar thought of it, towards engulfing abjection. It is at Nishapur that Hyder's process of debasement is completed with poisoning and disease:

They had left him to rot in the bog of his own juices. It was obvious that no one had been to see him for days. He was lying in the pestilential squashiness of his own excrement, in sheets turned yellow by perspiration and urine. Mould had begun to form on the bedclothes, and there was green fungus on his body as well. (*S*, 279)

The deaths that occur in the final pages of the novel aim to recall the deaths he was responsible for. Given the atrocities that he committed, only absolute grotesqueness and pain can provide some sort of possible regeneration. Bilquis, who saved him from the enraged crowd, is one of the scapegoats in this scheme. The description of her corpse strongly emphasises the anatomical details of death, its smells and bodily reactions. It is because it is a scatological portrait that Hyder imagines revenge in such terms:

The stench was even worse than it had been in his own room, and Bilquis Hyder lay still in the obscenity of her shit. 'Don't worry, Billoo,' he whispered to her, 'Raz is here. I'll clean you up good and proper and then you'll see. Those animal women, I'll make them pick up turds with their eyelashes and stuff them up their nostrils.'

Bilquīs did not reply, and it took Raza a few moments to sniff out the reason for her silence. Then he smelt the other smell beneath the putrid odours of waste matter, and *he felt as if a hangman’s knot had smashed him in the back of the neck.* (*S*, 280. Italics added)

Whether it is truly regenerative remains debatable but there is certainly an attempt on the part of the author in that direction through humour for before this disgusting spectacle of death, Hyder sits on the floor and impatiently drums his fingers. “For God’s sake, Billo, what are you up to? I hope you’re not acting out or something. What’s the meaning of this, you’re not supposed to die?”, he says (*S*, 280). At the same time there can be detected in his cry a sense of mad despair increased by the realisation the Shakil sisters are pointing a gun at him. It is also a counterpart to the mad optimism, put to an abrupt end only when he finds his wife dead, which had taken hold of him when he survived the poisoning: “Fever,’ he said happily, ‘I beat you. Old Razor Guts isn’t finished yet’” (*S*, 279). The voice that for years had tortured him ceased to disturb him and crows (those birds of ill-omen) sang beautifully. Even after realising the poor condition he was in, his spirits remained high so that he indulges in dreams of regaining political leadership and even of reuniting himself with Bilquīs in a true relationship of love.

The successive debasing processes prove to be successful as Hyder rises from his sick bed overtaken by a determination to win. His body is also rejuvenated as he showers away the remnants of those processes. Having no clean clothes, he covers himself with nothing but a towel which, on being removed, presents Raza Hyder as a contrast with himself: the naked man purges the veiled woman. But he also plays the double to his daughter, whose nakedness is emphasised in most descriptions of her animal self, and to his wife who suffered an inverse process from youth to mature age. Once she had been naked, but he covered her and eventually she retreated into a veil; later it is she who veils him (*S*, 228). Thus prepared Hyder is cleansed to face death, and not, as he mistakenly assumes, to restart life. Not hiding from it anymore, he proudly walks to his demise carrying his wife’s body, to which he also represents a contrast (health and life versus illness and death). At the end, the general conquers anew the character of the epic hero: “He rose to his feet; the towel slipped; he made a grab for it, missed, and stood naked before the old women, who had the grace to gasp... freshly showered, and wholly undressed, General Raza Hyder carried the stinking, mould-encrusted body of his wife through the corridors of ‘Nishapur’” (*S*, 281).

Paralleling what happened to Iskander Harappa, Hyder's death is covered in a grotesqueness matching that of his dictatorship. One of the murders he committed comes therefore to his mind as he is about to be murdered himself:

The image of Sindbad Mengal flashed into Raza's mind as the three sisters pulled down the lever, acting in perfect unison, so that it was impossible to say who pulled first or hardest, and the ancient spring-releases of Yakoob Balloch worked like a treat, the secret panels sprang back and the eighteen-inch stiletto blades of death drove into Raza's body, cutting him to pieces, their reddened points emerging, among other places, through his eyeballs, adam's-apple, navel, groin and mouth. His tongue, severed cleanly by a laterally spearing knife, fell out on to his lap. He made strange clicking noises; shivered; froze. (S, 282)

The principle of doubleness is reinforced: two executions of corpses and two death cells. Moreover Hyder's dumb-waiter is "the last room of all rooms in his life" in the same manner Harappa's prison cell was his last (S, 281); in the same vein, if Harappa's cell possibly was a regenerative room, strongly suggested by the womb metaphor, so it must be that Hyder's death represents some sort of hope for the future. In the sense that it represents the end of a cycle it undoubtedly encloses that carnivalesque-grotesque possibility; the sacrifice of the king was successfully carried out. Another strategy through which doubleness is carried through is in linguistic repetition. Among the several phrases that find themselves echoed in the text is "[s]tories end, worlds end; and then it's judgment day" introduced at the time of Hyder's imminent fall, at the point of his most deranged hallucination with the monkey ghosts, and also referring to Iskander Harappa's end, as in this case when Rani after spending long years in embroidery work finally sends her now empowered daughter the trunk with the infamous shawls (S, 277)⁴¹⁵.

There certainly is a strong Kayserian vein in both rulers in the description of their exercise of power. The psychological grotesque linked with repression and absurdity creates fearful worlds where the banality of evil is the rule. But, as Kayser himself acknowledges, that feeling emanates from material existence. Torture, murder, and generalised violence, which

⁴¹⁵ Tikoo sees a comic potential at the end of the novel through Hyder's death which fulfils Rushdie's off-centring ambitions: to maintain the necessary distance between imagined and real Pakistan. See S. K. Tikoo, "*Shame: A Modern Epic in Prose*", 62. I disagree with this comic perspective on Hyder's death which, on the contrary, I read as a redemption through which the general recovers the character of epic hero. Instead I see the comic being present in the grotesque description of the several moments that led to his death.

constitute a fundamental piece in the grotesque scenario of *Shame*, are exemplary in this sense and are closer to Danow's contemporary reading of the grotesque: at the limits of the psychological grotesque as well as the physical. The somatic trait is embodied particularly in the effects of a rough political system (mutilation, torture and metamorphosis) whereas the psychological trend is more deeply felt in the alienation to which women, and especially wives, are condemned as well as in the element of madness. The primary example is Bilquïs. It is she who brings the life-saving shroud that enables her husband and son-in-law's escape and solves the bus crisis revealing a practical sense frequently absent in her later years making her resemble a useless wife and mother; the silent quietness with which she moved gave her a phantasmagorical appearance. But once in the mothers' country, at the Shakils', she finally abandons herself to her long lived fear of the wind and goes back to her customary conduct of compulsive window closing as if the world could be shut outside.

An analogous form, hallucination, also takes over Omar making him imagine the monkey-obsessed dictator as well as his own interrogation by dead Talvar, dressed in his white police uniform. For the most part of it the interrogator is not identified so that it acquires an appearance of reality. Hints are nevertheless provided: the policeman is late to polo and he has a familiar stiff neck. Omar is being accused of the murder of Raza Hyder, found sliced up in bits, but he thinks the accusations refer to the life he led. Carnavalesque confusion sets in: Omar confesses to be guilty of facts not related to the interests of the interrogator while he insists Omar confesses to a murder. The deception is maintained because Omar perseveres in a confession equivalent to an end of life admission of errors while the other presses to bring to light a political murderer; subjective versus objective, abstract versus actual. But these oppositions are illusions attesting to Omar's hallucination. About to expire, Omar accepts his share of shame:

'I can confess to many things. Fleeing-from-roots, obesity, drunkenness, hypnosis. Getting girls in the family way, not sleeping with my wife, too-may-pine-kernels, peeping-tommery as a boy. Sexual obsession with under-age brain-damaged female, resultant failure to avenge my brother's death. I didn't know him. It is difficult to commit such acts on behalf of strangers. I confess to making strangers of my kin. [...] I confess to social climbing, to only-doing my job, to being cornerman in other people's wrestling matches. I confess to fearing sleep'. (S, 283)

The deception, that is, that the interrogation is imagined, is only broken with the introduction of the grotesque element. The reader is told who the interrogator is (Talvar has been dead for some time) when he goes into Omar's pockets to find pieces of Hyder's sliced body: moustache, eyeballs and teeth. Magical realism intermingles with the grotesque in this scene for in the middle of his delirium Omar gets to know not only that Hyder was killed, but how and by whom (S, 283-4). Moreover, that connection is at work also in the exact reproduction that is made of Harappa's death. Since the details of the execution were kept a secret Omar could not have known how the events occurred. The magical realist feature maintains its close relation with the grotesque because the symbolism and the manner of death are the same: "[c]ontractions were coming regularly, squeezing his temples, as if something were trying to be born. The cell was swarming with malaria-bearing anopheles mosquitoes" (S, 282). The cell of Omar's dream is very likely a prison cell where the imagery of birth is also present. Moreover, through Talvar, the author draws attention to Omar's rather advanced age, sixty five years old, contrasting with his behaviour that is like that of a baby (S, 282-3). Furthermore Omar is under the influence of a disease (real, caused by the poisoned cake, and imagined, malaria) and to be granted a pardon he too must confess. Finally, Omar dies in the exact same fashion: the interrogator draws his gun and shoots him through the heart.

Such an abundant set of parallelisms between Omar's execution and that of his former companion in debauchery does not however jeopardise in any way the cohesive doubleness of Raza Hyder and Iskander Harappa because he remains to the very end a peripheral man to whom the two politicians were the "principal actors of [his] life-story" (S, 283). He dies as an outsider to the game of power and to his own life. Certain differences are maintained to secure the distance such as the cowardly way Omar grabs hold of the possibility of salvation and the violent but nonetheless brave conduct Harappa evinces when he is informed of the necessary condition for him to obtain the pardon. When Talvar prepares to shoot him Omar cries "I confess", admitting to a murder he did not commit solely to save himself (S, 284). This is the explicit interpretation corroborated by the idea that he cried *too late*, which can only mean too late to prevent Talvar from shooting. But it does not rule out other readings that can be inferred from such a short and authoritative cry; he is perhaps confessing once again to his trivial life or, more likely, to his actual responsibility for Hyder's murder on bringing him to his bloodthirsty mothers.

The magical realist trait seems to me to be carefully built by the author so that one must accept that Omar was killed by Sufiya's intense shock wave. But given the circumstances

Rushdie involves the characters in and probably to protect the historical association as well as his political intentions, he makes it possible to assume that Omar died from the disease, or more likely, that he was put to death by the enraged people. That can be deduced through the imagery of fire. Once Raza had said that “[t]he people are like dry wood. [...] These sparks will start a fire” (S, 261). He was referring to the crowd that day and night surrounded his house demanding with shouts and hisses he turned in his monstrous daughter. In both descriptions of Omar’s death, there is mention of fire; in his hallucinatory dream “[t]he cell had begun to burn. Omar Khayyam saw the abyss open up beneath his feet, felt the vertigo come as the world dissolved. [...] He tumbled into the black fire and was burned” (S, 284). But when he says he recovered from the illness, admitting he did, he sees himself surrounded by a crowd holding electric torches and smouldering firebrands. This coincides with the arrival of Sufiya who is repeatedly described through blazing elements and more even so at the moment of her husband’s killing. It makes sense to suggest then, that her massive explosion might be an analogy to the concerted action of a large group. In this respect my point goes along the same lines as that of Indira Bhatt, who identifies Sufiya with the Pakistani people confronted with a world of freedom that is, after all, a world of shameful fanaticism⁴¹⁶. Her view of Sufiya’s repressed instincts as the fury of the people is congruent with my reading⁴¹⁷.

The grotesque emanating from Sufiya’s character departs from a gender-based issue to a wider meaning. As the nemesis of her father she must be a political symbol. That can be demonstrated by referring to another of Salman Rushdie’s works, *The Jaguar Smile: A*

⁴¹⁶ Indira Bhatt, “*Shame: A Thematic Study*”, ed. G. R. Taneja and R. K. Dhawan, *The Novels of Salman Rushdie*, 65. She also identifies Sufiya’s failure in growing into mental maturity as Pakistan’s not having grown into full nationhood (see page 66) and her shame as that of “the simple-minded people of Pakistan” for the appalling conduct of their politicians to conclude that “Sufiya Zinobia the fantasized heroine represents the shame felt by the individual by the nation, but also by the universe and the writer himself”. Indira Bhatt, “*Shame: A Thematic Study*”, 67 and 69 respectively. In the same vein K. V. S. Murti says that Sufiya is “a symbol of public rage and violence”. See K. V. S. Murti, “Bacchus and Buddha: Salman Rushdie and R. K. Narayan”, ed. G. R. Taneja and R. K. Dhawan, *The Novels of Salman Rushdie*, 163.

⁴¹⁷ See Indira Bhatt, “*Shame: A Thematic Study*”, 68. In the same vein Ashutosh Banerjee sees Omar’s decapitation as a symbolic punishment of a Eurasian immunologist who did not care to cure and save Pakistan, embodied as his wife. See Ashutosh Banerjee, “A Critical Study of *Shame*”, ed. G. R. Taneja and R. K. Dhawan, *The Novels of Salman Rushdie*, 74. This interpretation plays a motivating complement to Timothy Brennan’s association of Sufiya to the eastern tradition through the phonetic echo of “Sufi” and Omar’s relation to Europe where he got his amoral education, so that in his view there might be a relation between “Shakil” and “Shah-kill”. See Timothy Brennan, “Shame’s Holy Book”, 111. My own belief is that the plausibility of his reasoning in relation to the dichotomy Sufiya/Sufi does not apply to “Shah-kill”.

Nicaraguan Journey where he echoes *Shame*: “Beauty, in Nicaragua, often contained the beast”⁴¹⁸. The fusion of girl and beast achieved through an image of eating is at the core of the book, evolving from the following limerick:

**There was a young girl of Nic’ragua.
Who smiled as she rode on a jaguar.
They returned from the ride
With the young girl inside.
And the smile on the face of the jaguar.⁴¹⁹**

Hallucination is unarguably allied to mental disturbances which bring Omar closer to his wife’s realm of mental illness. This sort of grotesque manifestation achieves its peak with Bilquis and the Shakil sisters but it is well patent in the two despots. Whereas Harappa gradually loses his sense of reality, an effect of a dubious mental state from the point he starts to befriend repulsive animals, Hyder goes through a similar process in the form of voices of the dead, whose constant arguing makes his head spin; as a result he acquires a “wild look” (*S*, 244). It is clear that Harappa’s voice represents the devilish side of the dictator now in charge for he annoyingly recites the work of Machiavelli, an “infidel and foreigner” (*S*, 246). The reaction to the voices in his head proves his slow derangement:

Raza lay awake all that night with the spectral buzzing in his head. ‘In taking a state,’ Iskander was saying, ‘the conqueror must arrange to commit all his cruelties at once, for injuries should be done all together, so that being less tasted, they will give less offence.’ Raza Hyder had been unable to prevent an exclamation – ‘Ya, Allah, shut up, shut up!’ [...]

‘Sorry, Raza,’ Iskander whispered, ‘only trying to help.’ (*S*, 246)

Another detail corroborates my line of thought. Omar at the time spent his days in the attic waiting for Sufiya to come. He had also taken to eating great amounts of pin-kernels while looking at the horizon. At some point Raza Hyder joins him in this strange ritual because they were “Sufiya Zinobia’s favourite treat, which she had spent long and happy hours releasing from their shells, with crazy dedication, because *the shelling of pine-kernels is a*

⁴¹⁸ Salman Rushdie, *The Jaguar Smile: A Nicaraguan Journey* (London: Picador, 1987) 90.

⁴¹⁹ S. S. Sharma, “An Anti-Colonial Stance: *The Jaguar Smile*”, ed. G. R. Taneja and R. K. Dhawan, *The Novels of Salman Rushdie*, 195.

form of lunacy, you spend more energy getting the damn things out than they give you when you eat” (*S*, 244-5. Italics added). By sharing the habit, they are sharing the lunacy as well. Meaningfully the Shakil sisters also indulged in this habit during their mysterious pregnancy (*S*, 20). The climax is reached when Hyder develops the belief that God’s mysterious ways make his enemies disappear into thin air. But one is not absolutely sure about his ignorance in these affairs. Does he feel so close to God that he can say to himself that his hand is that of the divine? Is it just a metaphor in the sense he argued for previously, that whatever is done in the name of God is just the result of his intervention through Hyder and is never barbaric? Or does he grow utterly oblivious of the orders he gives? Whatever the interpretation, the overall impression is of magical, mysterious disappearance of the unfortunate people who cross his path.

Finally, derangement must also be considered in relation to the Shakil sisters, who are present at the beginning of the book, then withdraw into obscurity only to remerge in their full grotesque and abjectifying power at the end. Their action, like that of any tyrant, obeys a will completely disengaged from the needs of others. Hence their obstinate refusal, for instance, to reveal the identity of Omar’s father or even of who was his actual mother. The monstrosity of their rule is therefore typified in their undifferentiated existence. The isolation of their mansion-country from the world is a microcosm of the monologic closed systems of another wider country. The fact that Nishapur is described in a gothic-grotesque manner is for that reason symptomatic of other crumbling structures:

Omar Khayyam passed twelve long years, the most crucial years of his development, trapped inside that reclusive mansion, that third world that was neither material nor spiritual, but a sort of concentrated decrepitude made up of the decomposing remnants of those two more familiar types of cosmos, a world in which he would constantly run into - as well as the mothballed, spider-webbed, dust-shrouded profusion of crumbling objects - the lingering, fading miasmas of discarded ideas and forgotten dreams. (*S*, 30)

The gothic imprint is a key element for the description of the house where Omar and his in laws go to close the novel. His mothers, for instance, are described as the ghosts inhabiting the house and are referred to as spectres and phantasms (*S*, 274 and 275). They bring with them social mayhem and carnivalistic disorder which are related to the gothic spirit.

Moreover, the broken family also attracts to the mansion the avenger, who, following the gothic tradition, is a victim to a doomed heritage, that of shame:

[Omar] plunged deeper and deeper into the seemingly bottomless depths of that decaying realm [...]. [H]e stumbled down corridors so long untrodden that his sandalled feet sank into the dust right up to his ankles; that he discovered ruined staircases made impassable by long ago earthquakes which had caused them to heave up into tooth-sharp mountains and also to fall away to reveal dark abysses of fear... in the silence of the night and the first sounds of dawn he explored beyond history into what seemed the positively archaeological antiquity of 'Nishapur', discovering in almirahs the wood of whose doors disintegrated beneath his tentative fingers the impossible forms of painted neolithic pottery in the Kotdiji style; or in kitchen quarters whose existence was no longer even suspected he would gaze ignorantly upon bronze implements of utterly fabulous age. (*S*, 31)

The visceral quality of the grotesque, particularly in the image of the womb that is a recurring theme of the novel, joins the gothic *leitmotif* of confinement to complete the image of Nishapur as an actual living body. Without referring to the Kristevan views of the abject maternal body, Catherine Cundy establishes the link between the body of woman and the body of the house:

[Nishapur] is presented as a limbo world between real and unreal, material and spiritual. The woman-centred claustrophobia is presented as a womb to which Omar seeks to cling. The decaying bowels of the house become like a parallel universe of faded antiquity to set aside the real world outside. Omar's accidental glimpse of this outside world through a crumbling wall strikes immediate fear into him and sends him running back indoors - back to the womb - rather than risk venturing forth.⁴²⁰

The obsession that Omar has with crossing borders is revealed once again when he is taken by vertigo as the group safely reaches the country of his birth. The dizziness, sign of abjection, establishes that this country is synonymous with his mothers' country: "The vertigo carries him back to his childhood and shows his once again the worst of all his nightmares, the gaping mouth of the void" (*S*, 268). The vertigo is associated with nausea for someone is puking on his feet, strengthening the idea of a maternal source: the return to an infant stage

⁴²⁰ Catherine Cundy, *Salman Rushdie* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1996) 54.

and helplessness to avoid being swallowed up by the vaginal mouth processing him into a state of non-beingness. Nothing exists beyond the border they represent:

The deepest parts of Omar Khayyam are stirring once more, the dizziness is churning them up, they are warning him that whatever anyone says he ought to know that the border is the edge of his world, the rim of things, and that the real dreams are these far-fetched notions of getting across that supernatural frontier into some wild hallucination of a promised land. Get back into ‘Nishapur’, the inner voices whisper, because that’s where you’ve been heading, all your life, ever since the day you left. (S, 268)

Not only is hallucination placed on the side of the mother, identified with fruitful earth through the reference to a promised land, but it is also said to be wild land, that is, unattainable. The voices, besides establishing a link with Omar’s father-in-law’s own hallucinatory visions, also point to the insanity of a voyage that takes him back to his mothers, inevitable as it might be. The abjection that comes back to him in waves at given moments of his life is perceived as being simultaneously caused by desire and its repudiation. In the end there can be only death in his incapability to avoid the re-union. Omar Khayyam, the eleventh century poet to which this Omar represents a grotesque-carnavalesque double, was born in Nishapur (present-day Iranian territory) and there he died so the same must be for Omar-the-Other. In Sanskrit “Nishapur” means “the city of nights” and the nights are his mothers. On entering in Nishapur-the-house Omar is invaded by a “nostalgic terror” no different from that that Bilquis says that Hyder once caused by his sheer presence, providing yet another grotesque comparison (S, 270); but that man who was once a giant is reduced to a pygmy or bug: “even a giant can be pygmified, and he has shrunk now, he is smaller than a bug. Pygmies pygmies everywhere, also insects and ants – shame on the giants, isn’t it? Shame on them for shrinking” (S, 271). There is a strong possibility that the headless giant that is formed by Sufiya’s explosion, besides representing her victims, is none other than her own father, mutilated by his children, Sufiya and the Pakistani people, but nonetheless leaving in a reconciliatory gesture of farewell. The shrinking metaphor corroborates nonetheless the association of the house to an era coming to an end while it contributes to an image of demented old women; “We keep on losing rooms, [...] today we mislaid your grandfather’s study” (S, 274), says Bunny to which Chhunni replies “It’s so sad, son, look how life treats old people, you get used to a certain bedroom and then one day, poof, it goes away, the staircase vanishes, what to do” (S, 274-5).

Omar's fear is constant but it still gains contours of cartoon humour as when he rattles his teacup on the saucer, overwhelmed by the gothic milieu of the carnivalesque tea-party described as "demented theatre" (S, 271) and characterised as "the cryptic atmosphere of his childhood home, which could turn living persons into the mirrors of their ghosts" (S, 270). Omar can feel that he and the Hyders have trapped themselves in another reign of terror, this time in a "land" governed by women, insanely waiting for decades for destiny to provide the opportunity to avenge their son. The sense of their insane cruelty is perceivable in the mysterious smiles, gentle remarks and calm before the fact they are about to murder three people, one of them being their own flesh and blood. When Raza Hyder falls ill with their intervention, they come to his bedside to watch him suffer and a shiver is sensed when Bunny declares "[h]ow nice, [...] the general seems to be in no hurry to depart" (S, 273). Realising that they have poisoned him solely to kill Raza Hyder, Omar muses in his delirium over their undeniable madness (S, 273).

The sisters are characters whose mythic trait is more carefully constructed. It has been said that they are modern Furies because of their ruthlessness but also due to their power to decide when one should die. As postmodern equivalents to the classical power of cutting one's thread of life with their proverbial scissors, the Shakils arm themselves with another sort of deadly blade: in order to force Hyder into the blades of the dumb-waiter, they armed themselves with a rusty blunderbuss, but also with a scimitar and a spear. In another sense, if Sufiya is the embodiment of shame, they are the materialisation of fury. But references taken from popular culture add a different mythic angle while maintaining the *vagina dentata* resonances. There is a clear intention to associate them with the bloodthirsty vampire, an analogy that is also manifest in Sufiya's habit of neck-biting⁴²¹ and which led to the often-quoted affirmation by Aijaz Ahmad for whom Sufiya becomes "the oldest of the misogynist myths: the virgin who is really a vampire"⁴²². But it is the prediction of their deaths, when the house shrinks to a non-habitable point, which reveals their vampiristic handicap: "[i]n that sunlight, without walls [...] we [the Shakil sisters] will not be able to survive. We will turn to dust and be blown away by the wind" (S, 275). Their unexplained disappearance acknowledged by the invading population in the final moments is therefore part of a magical

⁴²¹ Hyder also calls them animal women which, obviously, adds another link with Sufiya's character (S, 280).

⁴²² Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992) 198. Making a humorous comparison, Rustom Bharucha says that Sufiya makes the Widow in *Midnight's Children* look like a ninny. See Rustom Bharucha, "Rushdie's Whale", 168.

realist closure that makes them vanish along with their increasingly small mansion given that ghosts such as they are, of a vampiristic disposition or not, can be as much part of a magical realist setting as they can of a gothic one.

In *Shame* there can be found an intimate and not at all times truly distinguishable association of magical realism with the carnivalesque-grotesque which is primarily evident in the characterisation of the two dictators but that can be found spread throughout the text. Magical realism is exemplified in Talvar's clairvoyance, Good News's exceptional fertility, the Shakils' common pregnancy and labour, Iskander Harappa knowing it is his last cigarette but one (S, 221), and the reaction of Talvar's children to his death emitting a cry at the same time, with the same pitch and pausing simultaneously for whole forty days (S, 250). Moving towards the carnivalesque-grotesque but still within the magical realist realm we find dismembered Sindbad Mengal warning Hyder in a dream that he too will be sliced up (S, 273) and Omar's vision during fever of events that will take place (S, 276) as well as events taking place as he lies in his sick bed, such as Hyder's murder and method (S, 283). Omar also reproduces the words of his dead and unknown uncle who, like him, was involved in brotherly rivalry (S, 278). Bilquis's making of the shrouds not knowing their purpose but ultimately using them for saving (and also condemning) her husband, can be included as well.

The carnivalesque-grotesque elements are equally developed: Sufiya's cartoon-like hole on the wall marking hands, legs and head (S, 239); Hyder's accidental killing of Gulbaba, the servant (S, 110); Babar's angelic nature contrasting with his habit of sheep raping (S, 132); his glowing like a golden angel so that he becomes an easy target (S, 132); the fact that he was called Babar, like the Mughal emperor Babur the Great but he never achieved any significant political feat or benefited from a life of luxury (S, 131); Harappa tearing his shirt to show the people the wounds in his heart which on the one hand is a spectacular hypocrisy on his part, for he is guilty of the charges of profiting from the war, and on the other its grandeur becomes comical because he is imitating Richard Burton in the epic *Alexander the Great* (S, 180) ("Iskander" is, in fact, a variant of the name of that great conqueror who in the fourth century B.C. conquered the territory that is present day Pakistan); Harappa's disrespectful treatment of international ambassadors: whenever the Soviet ambassador picks up the receiver he hears the Hail to the Chief whereas the American is tormented with the speeches of Mao; he sends boys to the British ambassador ultimately to be used sexually by his wife; Harappa summoned the ambassadors at any time in the night to torture them with shouted accusations of conspiracy (S, 185); the unexpected leap Hyder gives from his chair to unroll the mats where he and the

other generals must kneel to thank God for the impending war with Russia (S, 255); the outcome of the crisis of the hijackers who were put to sleep with large quantities of food and drink (S, 259); the religious campaign against the consumption of prawns and crabs on the grounds of their being scavengers and therefore as unclean as the pig which resulted in an even morally more reproachable action: the significant increase of contraband as an economic alternative (S, 120); and Omar's inattentive revelation in public of the affairs of Hyder and Harappa with Pinkie that becomes a key issue in the affairs of honour between the two men feeding subsequent rivalry and immediately victimising the old servant (S, 108).

The characteristic element of chaos is not restricted to the novel's end either: the General's palace, like that of the General in *El otoño del patriarca*, is taken over by a mass of wandering people, his grandchildren, so that it resembled more an orphanage than the seat of government (S, 226); Good News's wedding that begins with a surprise groom and ends with an attempted murder with equal emphasis on the laughable and gory sides of the grotesque (another feast made into a killing): five people pulling Sufiya away from Talvar while he squeaks like a pig, tossing tables with the reception's food and debasing the guests with their festive garments which now turn them instead into workers for a halal slaughterhouse (S, 170-171); and the looting of Mohenjo (S, 96 and 189) that is matched with Hyder's palace being emptied (S, 262) and the invasion by the people of Nishapur (S, 285).

In *Shame* the grotesque becomes the means through which magical realism is not lost in its fantastical half. Peter Brigg for instance claims that "the mythic and grotesque horrors of the fantasy seem in no way or degree greater than those of history; and so the novel sets out to prove that they are mutual, common"⁴²³. The male expression of the grotesque in *Shame* arises from instances with political content and historical intentions. It belongs to the realist half of magical realism. But the grotesque is not restrained to these contexts and it emerges as successfully in a magical framework. The grotesque resolves the inner paradox of magical realism that is apparent in the very term assuring a balance between the two poles. I therefore must disagree with Catherine Cundy for whom magical realism produces a feeling of quietism and detachment from a political reality precisely, I argue, because the grotesque holds magical

⁴²³ Peter Brigg, "Salman Rushdie's Novels: The Disorder in Fantastic Order", ed. M. D. Fletcher, *Reading Rushdie*, 182. In the concluding remarks Peter Brigg reiterates the point of fantasy being so entangled in history that it sometimes becomes hard to distinguish them, even when the narrator steps in as the latter constructs the reality of Pakistan stranger than fantasy itself. Moreover, the representations of a fantastical nature, detached from history, leave shamefully bare the inexplicable horrors of Pakistani life. As a consequence, the over-ordered elements of the fairy-tale only emphasise the disorder of the reality of the country.

realism down to a historical reality⁴²⁴. Salman Rushdie, who sees himself as a political novelist⁴²⁵, has acknowledged that in his homeland/s his fiction, not unlike the reception of *Cien años de soledad* in South America, is not labelled fantastic: “I think that’s quite true about ‘magic realism’ - what is important about it is that it is realism”⁴²⁶.

There is a diametrical contrast between the two sorts of grotesques that find themselves represented in *Shame* and the origin of the difference lies in the issue of gender. The text itself attests to this division when referring to the issue of political repression: “Repression is a seamless garment; a society which is authoritarian in its social and sexual codes, which crushes its women beneath the intolerable burdens of honour and propriety, breeds repressions of other kinds as well. Contrariwise: dictators are always - or at least in public, on other people’s behalf – puritanical” (*S*, 173). In a more straightforward fashion, Salman Rushdie affirmed that *Shame* was concerned “centrally, [with] the way in which the sexual repressions of that country are connected to the political repressions”⁴²⁷. The male exercise of power assumes a form that is in accordance with Danow’s view of the grotesque and that is intimately connected with torture, human suffering, cruelty, random brutality and murder. Since it is also a more internal phenomenon where the violence against one’s sanity is preponderant, it is also Kayserian in disposition. Tariq Rahman also relates the grotesque in *Shame*, in which he sees similarities with the work of the absurdists and Luigi Pirandello, to the political, therefore inferably male, level of the novel. Consistent with Kayserian discourse he writes that the “political forces have created a macabre world alienated from the ideal human world”⁴²⁸. Rahman interprets the unreal atmosphere of the novel as one “in which anti-human forces (most of them political) flourish. The human world shrinks into insignificance, the universe appears absurd as the grotesque assumes gargantuan proportions”⁴²⁹.

⁴²⁴ See Catherine Cundy, *Salman Rushdie*,

⁴²⁵ See the interview with David Brooks, ed. Michael Reder, *Conversations with Salman Rushdie*, 61. Reprinted from the original version published in *Helix* 19/20, 1984.

⁴²⁶ Salman Rushdie, interview with Chandrabhanu Pattanayak, ed. Michael Reder, *Conversations with Salman Rushdie*, 18. From the original publication in *The Literary Criterion* 18:3 (1983).

⁴²⁷ Salman Rushdie, “*Midnight’s Children and Shame*”, 13.

⁴²⁸ Tariq Rahman, “Politics in the Novels of Salman Rushdie”, 104.

⁴²⁹ Tariq Rahman, “Politics in the Novels of Salman Rushdie”, p. 104. Because the article is solely concerned with politics it does not explore any field relating with the Bakhtinian that his use of the word “gargantuan” might suggest. His interpretation, though not consciously Kayserian, is concerned with the psychological effects of oppression. His use of the image of the anti-human attests to that though the tendency is felt throughout: “politics dehumanizes human beings and makes them appear to us as strangers, aliens and monsters”. Tariq Rahman, “Politics in the Novels of Salman Rushdie”, 113.

I agree with Bayapa Reddy for whom “the disfigurement of Sufiya [...] creates an oppressive world that becomes really grotesque”⁴³⁰. That world is Pakistan which instead of being a holy country is “a centre of brutality and grotesqueness”⁴³¹. But the female grotesqueness embodied by Sufiya’s character is nevertheless embedded with an affirmative spirit akin to that of Bakhtinian grotesque realism. In spite of the deaths around her and of her ultimate destruction, comparatively, it cannot be denied that the metaphor of the metamorphosis is constructive because it carries a message of liberation. When Sufiya comes to overthrow the misogynistic, immoral, and pitiless rule of (her) Father, her grotesqueness is definitely associated with a notion of liberty that is markedly feminine:

On all fours, the calluses thick on her palms and soles. The black hair, once shorn by Bilquis Hyder, long now and matted around her face, enclosing it like fur; the pale skin of her *mohajir* ancestry burned and toughened by the sun, bearing like battle scars the lacerations of bushes, animals, her own itch-scratching nails. Fiery eyes and the stink of ordure and death. ‘For the first time in her life’ – he [Omar] shocked himself by the sympathy in the thought – ‘that girl is free.’ He imagined her proud; proud of her strength, proud of the violence that was making her a legend, that prohibited anyone from telling her what to do, or whom to be, or what she should have been and was not; yes, she had risen above everything she did not wish to hear. Can it be possible, he wondered, that human beings are able of discovering their nobility in their savagery? (S, 254. Italics in the text)

This depiction of Sufiya exemplifies my point above. In most other instances Sufiya’s metamorphosis acquires a magically grotesque expression but here it is a more likely or realistic image of a girl who lived in the woods for four years in a purely wild state, similar to that of wolf-children. But the readers of Rushdie’s novels, like the readers of the newspapers reporting the case, nourish a certain fondness for monster stories so that when a witness tells of a more human form complete with individualising details (white and bald but for the black head, black obviously because of her long hair, with peculiar wobbling movements) they reject it as an amusing account of a boy with too vivid an imagination. At the same time that there is fascination for the unexplainable, there is fear of it, pushing it away from the plane of reality

⁴³⁰ Bayapa Reddy, “*Shame: A Point of View*”, ed. G. R. Taneja and R. K. Dhawan, *The Novels of Salman Rushdie*, 96.

⁴³¹ Bayapa Reddy, “*Shame: A Point of View*”, 98.

where it belongs. The idea that reality is magical is just too terrifying because it can easily be monstrous as well.

Nonetheless absolutes must not be accepted for not all forms of feminine grotesqueness are assumedly positive. Bilquès's specific sort of grotesqueness, insanity, is easily observable as an effect of male grotesqueness but the three mothers appear to offer a straightforward counterpoint to the idea of free femininity as a positive representation of the grotesque ideal. That is suggested quite vividly through the imagery of dismemberment, abject indifferentiation and chaos but which, as in previously looked into cases, can be deceptive in the sense that they are borrowed grotesqueness:

[W]hen they were divided by Omar Khayyam's birthday wishes, they had been indistinguishable too long to retain any exact sense of their former selves – and, well, to come right out with it, the result was that they divided up in the wrong way, they got all mixed up, so that Bunny, the youngest, sprouted the premature grey hairs and took on the queenly airs that ought to have been the prerogative of the senior sibling; while big Chunni seemed to become a torn, uncertain soul, a sister of middles and vacillations; and Munnee developed the histrionic gadfly petulance that is the traditional characteristic of the baby in any generation, and which never ceases to be that baby's right, no matter how old she gets. In the chaos of their regeneration the wrong heads had ended up on the wrong bodies; they became psychological centaurs, fish-women, hybrids; and of course this confused separation of personalities carried with it the implication that they were still not genuinely discrete, because they could only be comprehended if you took them as a whole. (S, 40)

Through the mothers a whole network of dialogical relationships is woven, a dialogue between East and West made up of a carnivalesque Trinity (Bunny the Father/Mother, Munnee the child, and Chunni the Holy Ghost) that is neither Christian (in fact, not even Muslim) nor male. Moreover, their depiction is the very illustration of the fantastic hybrid monsters of the Italian grotesques of the sixteenth century. But when associated with the elements of the text itself like the dismemberment of Sindbad Menghal in Hyder's dream and Hyder's own, it recalls the more psychologically unbearable imagining of the interruption of our physical integrity as painted by Paul Klee in *Outbreak of Fear* (1939).

As long as their father was alive the Shakils were kept virtually imprisoned in their own home. With his death they are set free even to continue to live in isolation but now they have become free to act. Their pregnancies might be interpreted as whims, particularly due to the

fact that the real mother does not accept her motherhood and shares them with the sisters. Moreover, the mother, whoever she is, seems to be deprived of the socially presumed overwhelming maternal affection and to prefer the company of her sisters to that of her only child⁴³². More shocking still, the mother/s will not hesitate to assassinate their/her son to avenge the dead one. Suresh Chandra compares them to the three witches in *Macbeth* but nastier, locked in isolation for their whole lives inside the dark walls of Nishapur; “[t]hey are born, they grow, live and breed in darkness and practise witchcraft with complete devotion”⁴³³. But even this grotesqueness can be seen as the effect of the living conditions women are forced to in closed societies. Rushdie defends that the tripartite motherhood is not such a fantastic metaphor considering the up close day-to-day living of women in certain Islamic countries. He stresses that under these conditions, where sharing is almost total, women weave strong ties of solidarity and sustenance⁴³⁴. What happens in *Shame* then is that the grotesque maternity is also a metaphor for too-much closeness leading to the erasure of frontiers and ultimate fusion, unavoidable consequences of a patriarchal imposition of spatial restriction. Without referring to the use of the grotesque as a technique in Rushdie’s critique of this situation, Anurandha Dingwaney Needham nevertheless expresses an opinion in agreement with my view concerning the relationship of women with space in its wider sense: “He [Rushdie] seeks, rather, to *expose* the particular and horrifying conditions of their oppression through his searing indictment of a culture that closes off from the whole range of the social, cultural, and political networks that men have such an easy access to”⁴³⁵. In this

⁴³² This bond between the three sisters has been interpreted as the indelible historical link between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. See Suresh Chandra, “The Metaphor of *Shame*: Rushdie’s Fact-Fiction”, ed. G. R. Taneja and R. K. Dhawan, *The Novels of Salman Rushdie*, 78 and Stephanie Moss, “The Cream of the Crop: Female Characters in Salman Rushdie’s *Shame*”, *The International Fiction Review* 19:1 (1992) 28.

⁴³³ Suresh Chandra, “The Metaphor of *Shame*: Rushdie’s Fact-Fiction”, 79. Indira Bhatt sees *Macbeth* as an inter-text in *Shame* insofar as in its world of topsy-turvydom what is foul is fair and fair is foul. In her concluding remarks she also makes an implicit connection between the medieval carnivalesque-grotesque with the grotesque of present day authoritarian regimes which Rushdie’s reference to *The Trial* suggests to be engulfed by absurdity (*S*, 118): “The reference to the Islamic Calendar indicates the repressive life of the people dragged backward and chained to the Middle Ages; the world where heroes are clowns and clowns are heroes, where fair is foul and foul is fair, where life is full of turmoil and suffering and there is no escape from shame, from the Kafkaesque nightmare in a totalitarian state”. Indira Bhatt, “*Shame*: A Thematic Study”, 70.

⁴³⁴ Salman Rushdie, interview with David Brooks, *Conversations with Salman Rushdie*, 62.

⁴³⁵ Anurandha Dingwaney Needham, “The Politics of Post-colonial Identity in Rushdie”, ed. M. D. Fletcher, *Reading Rushdie*, 153. Italics in the text.

sense, she sees the unearthing of the covert histories of women intertwined with the construction of postcolonial identities⁴³⁶.

Another reading regards killing the murderer of their son, without a moment of hesitation or regret, as putting the love of a mother above all laws. With that gesture, they place the love for their child on the highest plane. Is there not nobility in that savage crime? In the same vein, is there not justice in Sufiya's murders, a sense of retribution? Being the *noble savage*, her actions must be noble. Once, says Rushdie, this tale was a masculine one but women intruded to impose their own perspectives (*S*, 173). We could add then, that along with their stories, women brought the positive grotesqueness that is a dominating trait of their participation, an optimism which Rushdie has openly admitted he would have wished to maintain:

Salman Rushdie: [...] well, I'm not entirely sure about that explosion. I don't know what it is, or signifies, I don't think it necessarily means anything as simple as the end of the world. It's a kind of question mark. I suppose it implies a kind of cleansing of the stables.

Mary-Anne Paton: So you wouldn't really see it as pessimistic?

Salman Rushdie: Well, it is sometimes necessary to wipe things out in order that you can write other things. That's true of writers, and it's also true of history.⁴³⁷

However, the tight symbolic system, along with a strong predisposition to negativity, does not allow for many readers a final positive interpretation of the concluding carnivalistic destruction. From the interviews it becomes clear that Salman Rushdie was committed to not losing the comic vein in favour of the serious tragic instinct of the novel, which proved at times to be difficult to achieve and to some a purpose that the author failed to fulfil⁴³⁸:

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 150. For a discussion on the similar roles women and the expatriate writer have as well as in what terms she sets them apart, an issue mainly of access to power see pages 154 and 155.

⁴³⁷ Salman Rushdie, interview with David Brooks with the presence of Mary-Anne Paton, *Conversations with Salman Rushdie*, 67.

⁴³⁸ See for instance Rustom Bharucha in "Rushdie's Whale", for whom the lesson he draws from *Shame* is that the world is such an appalling place, so unsuitable for a bearable living, that in the end it must be destroyed along with its all unredeemable male and female inhabitants. See Rustom Bharucha, "Rushdie's Whale", 170. In a similar vein Peter Brigg says that it has "more anger, sadness and disgust" than *Midnight's Children* deriving from the order Rushdie gives to the novel which he quickly steals away; what remains then is "the welter of confusion, suffering, passion and disorder that is the human

I always thought that it would be a book about the connection between shame and violence, and that it would inevitably contain certain acts of violence. I tried to convince myself that I could make those largely comic. I mean beheading turkeys, for instance, may be disturbing, but it is also funny, or at least is supposed to be. I thought maybe I could keep the thing in control by the use of farcical imagery like that. But then, you know, if you create a figure of nemesis, there is a point at which you have to accept that nemesis is not funny. That was the difficult bit.⁴³⁹

Even if Salman Rushdie still keeps critics arguing about the regenerative ability his novels are able to suggest to Third World countries, his contribution to literature has been enormous in the sense that Timothy Brennan formulates, that Rushdie, as well as other “cosmopolitan” writers of those countries are able to bring the tragedy of many a human existence to novels which are infused with a markedly political content. This combination, which appears to me to be another realisation of the dialogical principle, contradicts Fredric Jameson’s diagnosis of a postmodernism that is always devoid of the laughing factor, a combination thus that is bringing about a new age for postmodern literature⁴⁴⁰.

The apocalyptic finale in *Shame* can therefore be seen as Salman Rushdie’s materialisation of the rowdy type of literature which is simultaneously political and comical. As he wrote in what became one of his most famous essays, “Outside the Whale”:

I am recommending the ancient tradition of making as big a fuss, as noisy a complaint about the world as is humanly possible. Where Orwell wished quietism, let there be rowdiness; in place of the whale, the protesting wail. If we can cease envisaging ourselves as metaphorical fetuses, and substitute the image of a new-born child, then that will be at least a small intellectual advance. In time, perhaps, we may even learn to toddle.

condition in the lands Rushdie chooses to mourn”. Peter Brigg, “Salman Rushdie’s Novels: The Disorder in Fantastic Order”, 185. Timothy Brennan seems to share this perspective; he says “[the] comic tyrants are so bitterly drawn that they induce only horror, and the comic relief Rushdie had promised comes primarily in the form of hopeless mockery on the verbal level, a willy-nilly distancing in a ‘postmodern’ mood of automatic, and humourless, parody”. Timothy Brennan, “Shame’s Holy Book”, 109. For Brennan the sinister tone of the first draft of the novel survives in the final and hardly comic version of the epic as *opera buffa*. See page 112.

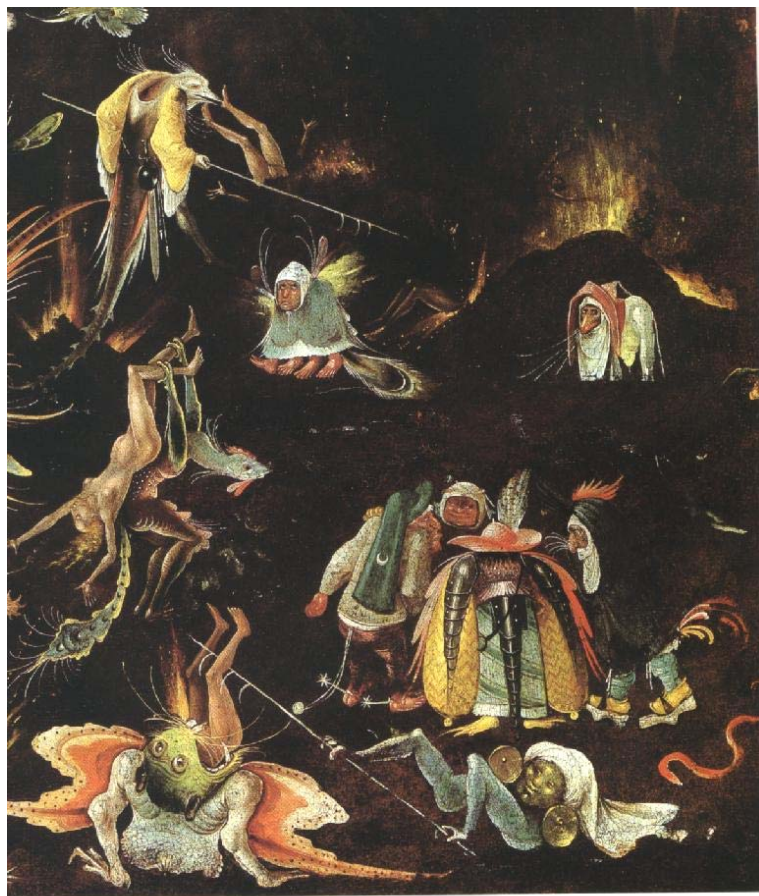
⁴³⁹ Interview with David Brooks, in *Conversations with Salman Rushdie*, 65.

⁴⁴⁰ Timothy Brennan, “Shame’s Holy Book”, 120.

I must make one thing plain: I am not saying that all literature must now be of this protesting, noisy type. [...] What I am saying is that politics and literature, like sport and politics, do mix, are inextricably mixed, and that that mixture has consequences.⁴⁴¹

Shame does not comfortably rest therefore within the frame of abject literature though an image of the apocalypse is invoked; *Shame* does not fully discard ambivalence and thus it does not proceed to the sublimation of murder. It does not operate in the way Kristeva read Céline's *Guignol's Band*: "the vision of murder turns sublime, the murderous apocalypse shows its lyrical side before everything founders into vomit, money swallowed as ultimate food, reincorporated excrement; and fire, actually apocalyptic, devastates everything" (*PH*, 151).

⁴⁴¹ Salman Rushdie, "Outside the Whale", *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, 99-100.



Hieronymus Bosch, *Last Judgement* (fragment), 1506-1508

*2. Spiritual Realism or African Magical Realism: Hunger and the Supernatural in The
Famished Road*

The spirit child is an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and the dead. Things that are not ready, not willing to be born or to become, things for which adequate preparations have not been made to sustain their momentous births, things that are not resolved, things bound up with failure and with fear of being, they all keep recurring, keep coming back, and in themselves partake of the spirit-child's condition. They keep coming and going till their time is right. History itself fully demonstrates how things of the world partake of the condition of the spirit-child.

Ben Okri, *The Famished Road*, 487

2.1. *The debate over the concept of African magical realism and the accusation of cultural imperialism*



David Danow's association of the lighter form of the grotesque with magical realism and of its darker form with the literature of Holocaust prompted my analysis of *Shame* wherein the elements of political abuse and terror are certainly at the centre of Rushdie's concerns. If the carnivalesque-grotesque is in the intersection of Danow's formulation of grotesque realism and magical realism, in *Shame* that dimension is surpassed insofar as it is a book of postcolonial magical realism where violent mass conflict, as with Holocaust literature, is determinant for the novel's very *raison d'être*. My including of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) and of its sequel *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) in this context aims to problematize the issue further as the magical realist component becomes accentuated but is nevertheless accompanied by an equally increasing sense of fear and misery. But before dealing with the grotesque, some considerations must be made with regards to the issue of African magical realism.

The terminological problem involving African magical realism is one that is still insufficiently developed. Critics have come up with several terms, rarely having in mind prior attempts at achieving a satisfactory term, if one can indeed be found. In 1992 Kwame

Anthony Appiah suggested the term “spiritual realism” to distinguish the African vein of magical realism from the Latin American one⁴⁴². The term is a fitting one since the criticism on Ben Okri’s work is often drawn to his form of realism. Alice Mills refers to it as “psychic realism” based on Maggi Phillips’s analysis of Madame Koto’s character⁴⁴³. Phillips supports her view in the principle that perspectives on reality are dependent on cultural frames so that Mills concludes that the grotesque in this sense must be understood as “an artefact of cultural difference”⁴⁴⁴. Maggi Phillips’s main argument is that to understand the grotesque in *The Famished Road*, the concept must be divorced itself from the purely Western construction for if one does not the novel becomes an exercise in the fantastic. Ben Okri himself rejects the fantastic view. He has claimed that the Azaro stories evolve in terms of reality’s many dimensions. In an interview he argued: “One always has to inhabit a state of a higher kind of consciousness [...] to see that actually everything is magical – an apple, a table, a tree, a spear When you look at other people, another culture, if all you see is what you’ve termed exotic, then one can say that you’re not seeing except in a vacant sense of the word”⁴⁴⁵. This view is in tune with that of Stephen Slemon, which I discussed earlier in this study, and that postulated that magical realist texts seen as forms of postcolonial discourse “comprise a positive and liberating engagement with the codes of imperial history and its legacy of fragmentation and discontinuity”⁴⁴⁶. This type of reasoning understandably leads Phillips to associate Ben Okri with Salman Rushdie as authors aware of magical realism as a favourable form of expression of “Third World” consciousness. Rushdie has written in this respect:

*El realismo magical, magic realism, at least as practised by [Gabriel García] Márquez, is a development out of Surrealism that expresses a genuinely ‘Third World’ consciousness. It deals with what Naipaul has called ‘half-made’ societies, in which the impossibly old struggles against the appallingly new, in which public corruptions and private anguishes are somehow more garish and extreme than they ever get in the so-called ‘North’, where centuries of wealth and power have formed thick layers over the surface of what’s really going on.*⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴² See Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Spiritual Realism”, *The Nation* 3 Aug. 1992: 146-148.

⁴⁴³ See Alice Mills ed., intr. *Seriously Weird: Papers on the Grotesque*, p. 7.

⁴⁴⁴ Alice Mills ed., intr. *Seriously Weird: Papers on the Grotesque*, 7.

⁴⁴⁵ Jean Ross, “Contemporary Authors Interview”, *Contemporary Authors*, vol. 138, ed. D. Olenдорф, (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research, 1993) 338.

⁴⁴⁶ Stephen Slemon, “Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse”, 422.

⁴⁴⁷ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, 301-302. Italics in the text.

As far as the term goes, Ben Okri is positively against being called magic realist because he sees Latin American magic realists to be tied down by a European influence: “The difference [between *The Famished Road* and South American magical realist writing] is this: the Latin American writers – let’s be quite honest – are largely European Latin American writers. Their writing has, as it were, come through the journey of symbolism, surrealism, and then come right around to the reality of that particular place”⁴⁴⁸. Speaking of *Cien años de soledad*, Okri affirms that, unlike García Márquez’s novel, in his work “what seems like surrealism or fantastic writing actually is not fantastic writing, it’s simply writing about the place in the tone and the spirit of the place. [...] It’s a kind of realism, but a realism with many more dimensions”⁴⁴⁹.

Renato Oliva opts for the term “shamanic realism” for the shaman travels between the physical world and the spirit world accessing to the unconscious through ways other than dreams which are the only means at our disposal. Azaro, as an *abiku*-child, shows the spiritual capacities of the shaman whose social importance is prominent in Africa: “the shaman preserves a conscious memory of his descent into the underworld or of his magical flight through the air, and on returning from his journey into the unconscious brings back scenes from his people’s mythology, religion, and past or future history, visions when he then passes on to the community”⁴⁵⁰. In common with magical realism, Oliva sees shamanism to work in terms of prophecy, hallucination, symbolism, metaphor, and the crossing of frontiers and thresholds such as reality and dream, rationality and irrationality, and consciousness and unconsciousness. Another noteworthy contribution to the debate has been that of Ato

⁴⁴⁸ Jean Ross, “Contemporary Authors Interview”, 337.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 337-338. Fernando Galván, José Santiago Fernández and Juan Francisco Elices justify the widespread rejection on the part of writers of the epithet “magic realist” in the following manner: “Los motivos [...] derivan de un desconocimiento de sus verdaderas características, o se deben a una concepción un tanto simplista, que les lleva a identificar el realismo mágico con una visión local y etnocéntrica que ya ha sido descartada por la mayor parte de la crítica”. Fernando Galván, José Santiago Fernández and Juan Francisco Elices, *El realismo mágico en lengua inglesa: tres ensayos*, 50. I share their opinion on Okri’s own rejection: “El error de Okri radica en asumir que el realismo mágico excluye la posibilidad de alcanzar esta verimilitud [de la mitología Yoruba], ignorando la existencia de variantes antropológicas en las que puede percibirse una cosmovisión coherente y unitaria con mayor claridad que en la obra de García Márquez”. Ibid. 51. Gabriel García Márquez has, as noted before, expressed the same resistance, particularly in relation to his European readers who he fears are dominated by “su racionalismo [que] les impide ver que la realidad no termina en el precio de los tomates o de los huevos”. Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza and Gabriel García Márquez, *El olor de la guayaba*, 46-47.

⁴⁵⁰ Renato Oliva, “Re-Dreaming the World: Ben Okri’s Shamanic Realism”, ed. Elsa Linguanti, Francesco Casotti and Carmen Concilio, *Coterminous Worlds: Magical Realism and Post-Colonial Literature in English* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999) 176.

Quayson who in 1995 situated Okri within the African literary tradition of non-realism. Okri's work is "ghostly writing", at one time "poetic and surreal", distinguishable for its use of esotericism⁴⁵¹. Two years later Ato Quayson expanded the same article and opted for the term "new mythopoeic discourse" to describe the effect of the esoteric scenes⁴⁵².

The compound definition "shamanic realism" seems to convey more accurately African realism than "psychic realism" which, nonetheless, is a term that Oliva uses as well. Shamanic realism is more specific given that psychic realism can evoke mental reactions which do not have necessarily to do with spiritualism, which I see at the heart of African magical realism, at least as Okri constructs it. Psychic realism can suggest a kind of literature more easily pulling towards fantasy. Furthermore, Oliva can hardly be contradicted in the convergences he sees in the literatures sprouting from certain parts of the world: "Carpentier's Latin America or Ben Okri's Africa are cultures not dominated by rationalism and still open to a magic-mythic worldview [...], [cultures] whose definition of reality is less rigid than that of the Western world, and where magic is part of the tradition and faith of the community"⁴⁵³. However, this cannot be accounted to say that magical realism can be fenced within certain geographies or cultures because, Oliva argues, magical realism is first of all, the offspring of the unconscious. Oliva's use of the Jungian principle of the collective unconscious allows the liberation of magical realism from the Latin American space towards Africa and, one has to assume, towards other parts of the globe. He argues: "The magical continent exists, but cannot be given a geographical collocation. It is within us, in the unconscious, where we think according to the categories of magical thought and speak the magical language of dreams"⁴⁵⁴. Obviously, Renato Oliva's argument becomes contradictory: while claiming that magical realism is characteristic of cultures less conditioned by Cartesianism, he also argues that magical realism is the manifestation of the unconscious, thus inflecting it with respect to an ahistorical, undefined geography. Oliva's silence on the globalisation of magical realism that he suggests, reflects, I feel, the difficulty in providing convincing and even empirical arguments to support the view for it is undeniable that magical realism is more favourable to given

⁴⁵¹ Ato Quayson, "Esoteric Webwork as Nervous System: Reading the Fantastic in Ben Okri's Writing", ed. Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Essays on African Writing: Contemporary Literature*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Heinemann, 1995) 144.

⁴⁵² Ato Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing: Orality and History in the Work of Rev. Samuel Johnson, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka & Ben Okri* (Oxford, James Currey/Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1997) 121.

⁴⁵³ Renato Oliva, "Re-Dreaming the World: Ben Okri's Shamanic Realism", 172.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 174.

cultural world views. As argued previously, my position is that these cultures tend to be linked to the experience of postcolonialism and the issues that it involves: pre-colonialism and colonialism⁴⁵⁵.

The debate, however, has not only revolved around terminology but, consequently, on the “nature” of the work itself. Anna Smith disagrees with denominating Okri’s literary work magical realist altogether on the grounds that it “draws something of a protective boundary around it. It lodges it behind the safety of ‘genre’ where the writer becomes, despite efforts on the contrary, merely an ‘imaginative’ rhetorician”⁴⁵⁶. This view denies the work’s historical and political source as well as the commitment that magical realist texts make from *Cien años de soledad* to *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame*. Anna Smith seems to take off from an interpretation of magical realism that emphasises the fantastic component and thus feels that it cannot be “a discourse of resistance with material consequences”, which is what she sees *The Famished Road* to be⁴⁵⁷. That is, however, not the conception of magical realism that I favour. Magical realism can certainly interact with so-called common-sense reality and not be a mere literary fancy. It can indeed investigate hidden dimensions of reality which highlight the ways of political, historical and social actions. It is also *because The Famished Road* represents a discourse of resistance with material consequences that it can be called magical realist.

Ato Quayson’s articles implicitly raise old questions about magical realism, namely its relation with fantasy and surrealism, seen through the prism of esotericism. In fact, given the analyses Quayson makes, the reference to Ben Okri within the magical realist tradition is not confirmed. One major argument in favour of viewing it in the tradition of magical realism is that the supernatural is not exiled and that it instead occupies the same geographical space of the real world:

There is a continual intersubstantiation of the two dimensions of existence that is not always evident to the senses. The implication of this is that Azaro, and by extension the whole of nature, is located on a kaleidoscopically moving space in which the same space can be arbitrarily re-located on either world at any point in time. In *The Famished Road*, the

⁴⁵⁵ This is also Fernando Galván, José Santiago Fernández and Juan Francisco Elices’s opinion for whom magical realism is “un movimiento literario de carácter global, en el que se plasma la naturaleza híbrida y multicultural de las sociedades modernas; en particular aquellas que han sido sometidas a algún tipo de colonización”. Fernando Galván, José Santiago Fernández and Juan Francisco Elices, *El realismo mágico en lengua inglesa: tres ensayos*, 46.

⁴⁵⁶ Anna Smith, “Dreams of Cultural Violence: Ben Okri and the Politics of Imagination”, *World Literature Written in English* 38:2 (2000) 47.

potential intersubstitution of things derives from a postulation of a spiritual/physical duality in all things. The expression of the arbitrary interplay of this duality is what gives the novel its peculiar surreal texture.⁴⁵⁸

Quayson identifies Okri's writing with surrealism for its hidden potentialities, for its endless transformations, arbitrariness, and pictorial presentation. However, the impact of surrealism, as an artistic form, falls short of describing the deeper meaning of Ben Okri's work; because it departs from folklore, therefore from a communal body sharing the belief of interrelationships between the real and the spirit worlds, the surreal imagery and action have deliberately introduced consequences on events.

Probably the most significant study on the issue of magical realism and Ben Okri has been provided by Brenda Cooper with the publication in 1998 of *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye*. The third eye metaphor is borrowed from *The Famished Road*: "And then suddenly, out of the centre of my forehead, an eye opened, and I saw this light to be the brightest, most beautiful thing in the world"⁴⁵⁹. At the book's basis is Brenda Cooper's idea of a "reconstituted Marxism", a combination of postmodernism with what she calls the Marxist force: "It is a position that recognizes individuals as gendered, racially constituted, unevenly privileged subjects, playing out many-layered lives that are both structurally determined and idiosyncratically forged"⁴⁶⁰. The third eye is, in the end, "the confidence to perceive the system and the humility to recognize that the vision of structure is mediated by the eye, in complex, but not altogether random ways"⁴⁶¹.

Cooper is not concerned with nomenclature, which must be related with her unproblematic identification of the sources of contemporary magical realism in African myths and history as well as in Latin American magical realism⁴⁶². She maintains that magical realism evolves "on transition, on the process of change, borders and ambiguity" which one recognises as being akin to the grotesque as well⁴⁶³. The grotesque must therefore be involved

⁴⁵⁷ Loc. cit.

⁴⁵⁸ Ato Quayson, "Esoteric Webwork as Nervous System: Reading the Fantastic in Ben Okri's Writing", 151-152.

⁴⁵⁹ Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* (London: Vintage, 1991) 229. Henceforth indicated parenthetically with the abbreviation FR followed by the page number.

⁴⁶⁰ Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) 1.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁶² See Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye*, 15.

⁴⁶³ Loc. cit.

in the spaces that Cooper characterises as prone to the production of magical realist fictions. Those spaces are creolised societies where Western capitalism and technology force themselves on defenceless pre-capitalist communities. In *The Famished Road* an example would be the massive destruction of the forest by foreign, white groups to which Okri finds a mode of resistance only when resorting to myth, as the earth, in its enraged anguish, devours workers and supervisors (FR, 288). Cooper thus stresses the commitment of magical realism to its time and place of production: “This social patchwork, dizzying in its cacophony of design, is the cloth from which the fictional magical carpet is cut, mapping not the limitless vistas of fantasy, but rather the new historical realities of those patchwork societies”⁴⁶⁴.

With respect to the matter of magical realism within the frame of this study, I must return briefly to its relationship with the grotesque. In her very interesting article “Psychic Realism, Mythic Realism, Grotesque Realism: Variations on Magic Realism in Contemporary Literature in English” Jeanne Delbaere-Garant argues that magical realism is not necessarily a postcolonial phenomenon, the most indisputable evidence of this being that magical realism predated the appearance of postcolonial literature. She finds three types of magical realism to be created in the English language. Having as a backdrop Angela Carter’s *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, she coins the term “psychic realism” to convey the sort of narrative that incorporates fantastic components absent in “realistic” texts. Jeanne Delbaere-Garant continues:

They usually center on an individual whose fissured self renders him or her particularly sensitive to the manifestations of an otherwise invisible reality and whose visionary power can be induced by drugs, love, religious faith or, as is the case in Carter’s novel, erotic desire. The “magic” is almost always a reification of the hero’s inner conflicts, hence the vagueness of the spatial setting [...] and the thematic recurrence of elements linked with the initiation journey.⁴⁶⁵

This tradition of magical realism can be traced in the works of several European writers including Massimo Bontempelli, Ernst Jünger, Johan Daisner, Hubert Lampo, Julien Green, Julien Gracq and even in Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* in the passages

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁶⁵ Jeanne Delbaere-Garant, “Psychic Realism, Mythic Realism, Grotesque Realism: Variations on Magic Realism in Contemporary Literature in English”, ed. Lois Parkinson and Wendy B. Faris, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, 251.

concerning Gibreel and Rosa Diamond's hallucinations. An obvious terminological problem must be confronted at this stage which is the convergence of Maggi Phillips's and Jeanne Delbaere-Garant's use of psychic realism to define a specific form of magical realism while having no awareness of each other. Though they apparently do not coincide, on closer inspection they do not differ substantially. Phillips, in her anxiety to emphasise the value of cultural difference between the West and African approaches to reality, is less diligent in explaining the reason for the choice of the term but, in reality, Jeanne Delbaere-Garant's definition gives the impression of approaching Phillips's intentions. The problem is that whereas one refers to a European tradition positively the other tries to use it contrastively in order to identify an African specificity. As I argued earlier, I have reservations with regards to Phillips's choice of the term which Jeanne Delbaere-Garant's article only confirmed as the latter uses it much more substantially to meet her theoretical purposes. My preference for Anthony Appiah's term is justified insofar as it avoids this type of terminological confusion at the same time that it preserves a space for the grotesque.

When spatial vagueness is substituted by a material *and* intervening setting, Jeanne Delbaere-Garant asserts the presence of the variant of mythic realism. Mythic realism is the contemporary counterpart of Alejo Carpentier's *real maravilloso* in the sense that he underlined the source of the particular kind of literature springing from the Americas to be folkloristic, drawing from the specific myths of the indigenous peoples. Unlike the psychic vein then, it is independent of the individual's imagination and of his or her subconscious fantasies and delusions. It refers to "all countries that still possess 'unconsumed space', where 'magic' images are borrowed from the physical environment itself, instead of being projected from the characters' psyches"⁴⁶⁶.

The third type is the grotesque. Jeanne Delbaere-Garant borrows the term grotesque realism from Bakhtin but she adapts it in view of the interconnections she sees that the phenomenon has with magical realism. In magical realism the story teller and his or her ability to distort the material at hand are crucial elements. She starts from those elements and combines them with the carnivalesque to arrive at her vision of grotesque realism: "I would, further, suggest that 'grotesque realism' be used not just for popular oral discourse but also for any sort of hyperbolic distortion that creates a sense of strangeness through the confusion or interpenetration of different realms like animate/inanimate or human/animal"⁴⁶⁷. Be it

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 253.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 256.

psychic, mythic or grotesque realism, what the variants have in common and which is at the heart of magical realism, is that they find ways of heightening the “real” and do not therefore annul its weight in the whole of the narratives. Making a point which is central to *The Famished Road*, Jeanne Delbaere-Garant concludes that magical realist fiction is “strongly anchored in the real and the moral”⁴⁶⁸. In Fernando Galván, José Santiago Fernández and Juan Francisco Elices’s study on *The Famished Road* they do not identify the grotesque as a type of magical realism but it is certainly one of its basic aspects. Though their influence is admittedly Bakhtinian, it is interesting to notice that they associate the grotesque with what can be regarded as a Kayserian purpose which, furthermore, is derived from intentions contradicting the interpretation of magical realism as escapist writing. One of the magical realist elements found in *The Famished Road* is, therefore, “[l]as técnicas de desfamiliarización, haciendo especial hincapé en la utilización de imágenes grotescas y en las estrategias empleadas para llevar a cabo una crítica política e ideológica”⁴⁶⁹.

It is precisely with Ben Okri that Jeanne Delbaere-Garant closes her article. In her concluding paragraph she indicates Ben Okri and Africa as the bright future of magical realism, free of the ineffaceable weightiness that she sees constraining Anglophone literature. Though her remarks verge on the culturally reductive, her opinion should not be discarded when she argues that the liberation of magical realism in English is created in Africa:

Much as the Anglophone world wants to challenge traditional realism, it is not the Hispanic world. The pragmatic and puritanical Crusoe, not the well-balanced magic realist couple Sancho/Quixote, stands at the front door of its house of fiction. As for Friday, he has gone his own way, back to the “marvellous” reality of his native Africa, where novels like Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* clearly pull the balance in the opposite direction.⁴⁷⁰

This type of magical realism represents an alternative to another postcolonial literary tradition of which Chinua Achebe has become an epitome, but because this latter type is a

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 261.

⁴⁶⁹ Fernando Galván, José Santiago Fernández and Juan Francisco Elices, *El realismo mágico en lengua inglesa: tres ensayos*, 62. The other elements are: the presence of supernatural and magical events which are never divorced from realistic discourse; hybridism and liminality; the treatment of time, space, identity, history and progress; and the weight and value of the community in the plot. Regarding the supernatural and the reality conflict, the authors expand thus: “la intervención de los agentes sobrenaturales no se utiliza para desviar el interés del lector de las dificultades a las que tienen que hacer frente los habitantes del gueto, sino que sirve para llamar la atención sobre la injusticia que sufren los principales personajes de la novela”. Ibid., 65.

more realistic discourse, it has also been said to be adopting a Western literary style of writing so that whereas in content it repudiates the colonial experience, in form it remains subordinated to the Western manner. Though identified with the more magical sort, Ben Okri nevertheless belongs to the phenomenon of the cosmopolitan writer that was produced by colonial and postcolonial history. Unlike the writer in exile, the cosmopolitan writer among which can be counted Michael Ondaatje, Salman Rushdie, and Ben Okri, is the outcome of cultural hybridism. His/her roots are scattered and the ties with the writer's various cultural references are constantly tense. The writer in exile is, sadly, one whose life is directly threatened by her or his presence in the fatherland/mother country, consequently moulding her or his relationship with the nation out of nostalgia and affection but also with the unreliability of memory and second-hand knowledge by media news or the experience of others.

It is an unavoidable paradox that the African magical realist, while wishing to recuperate the myths of his/her country, that in theory as a whole contain the spirit and identity of the nation, suffuses his or her fiction with myths that were either inherited from the colonial presence or from a postcolonial emancipation which in the process of hybridising put the formerly colonised in contact with the myths of the West. This apparently straightforward reasoning, however, has important implications. Firstly, it must be recognised that the exiled or cosmopolitan writer is in the vast majority of cases an intellectual and in that sense not in the same position as the ordinary Nigerian, Indian or whatever the case may be. S/he has access to past and present intellectual debates on the issues of nationhood and preservation of communal memory which, again in theory, put him or her in a privileged position to identify errors, and to discern or to elaborate a way out of his or her people's affliction, hoping to perform a sort of "national healing"⁴⁷¹. Frequently the way is that of going back to the moment where the country was left off before the imperial acculturation deprived the people of its identity. However, this reasoning carries two crippling consequences: the assumptions that decades or hundreds of years of history, terrifying that they might be, can simply be erased and not be counted as part of the heritage shared by all, and that there was *a priori* a bulk of common beliefs, traditions and myths which constituted the basis of the nation, in the end, an essentialist principle of nationalism. In the case of Nigeria, as in other instances,

⁴⁷⁰ Jeanne Delbaere-Garant, "Psychic Realism, Mythic Realism, Grotesque Realism", 261.

⁴⁷¹ Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye*, 58.

the ethnic separations which still survive today were already existent, making any attempt to recover the past an expression of an idyll which never was.

It must also be said that arguing that the postcolonial writer is an intellectual is not to deny the existence of the non-Western intellectual during the times of historical imperialism. Though there was always resistance posed against imperialist occupation, both intellectual and activist, the non-Western intellectual of the colonialist period was shaped according to the Cartesian tradition of Western thought. The mythic European heritage was incorporated in some form into the mind of the intellectual. This position cannot be said to be adopted by postcolonial fictionists who, recognising those myths to be as much part of their cultural baggage as those of their native countries, use them inquisitively and are not afraid to interact with, mix or even to break them. However, as Brenda Cooper emphasises, the magical realist writer, who often also falls in the category of the cosmopolitan or the exiled, nevertheless utilises indigenous points of view of the world which are then complemented with the variously-sourced imaginative devices of the writer her/himself. The magical realist text is the product of these confluent sources: the pre-capitalist or mythical vein which is then filtered by the writer's literary choices that concentrate on given aspects of society and history which s/he wishes to emphasise. The situation gives way to the paradox I mentioned above: "Western educated and well travelled writers of magical realism are not themselves inserted within these indigenous, pre-technological cultures that provide their inspiration. Although connected to such communities by their own history, such writers are separated from them by their class, despite claims they make for an 'authenticity' derived from a unity with indigenous culture"⁴⁷². In sum, the relation between the magical realist writer, postcolonial politics, the surfacing of nationalism, and the grotesque appear entangled in the same complicated web:

Magical realism at its best opposes fundamentalism and purity; it is at odds with racism, ethnicity and the quest for tap roots, origins and homogeneity; it is fiercely secular and revels in the body, the joker, laughter, liminality and the profane. I say that it can potentially do these things, when at its best, to emphasize that it does not, by definition, do them. In reality, the novels themselves are heir to many traditions, pressures and conflicting strategies and as such, tend to be an amalgam of politics and purposes, working at different times in the interests of different segments of different populations.⁴⁷³

⁴⁷² Ibid., 16.

Brenda Cooper also sees the link between the Bakhtinian carnivalesque-grotesque and the magical realism of postcolonial experience deriving from the repudiation of classical modes of approaching realities, the delight in the changing body, and the socio-economic similarity between Russia in the thirties and the late twentieth century “Third” World. Conditioned by an unequal economic power, the social fabric mirrored the unevenness creating the type of paradoxes which in novelistic terms materialised in polyphony. The magical realist novel, on partaking of the carnivalesque-grotesque, reflects social fracture as well as the ways in which unevenly powered groups speak amongst themselves. Brenda Cooper’s conception of the third eye completes the picture: “Such aversion to totality, to the system and structure of social life, is a blind spot. Seeing with a third eye entails celebrating the rich, sensuous irreverence of carnival, revelling in the riotous imagination, in the truths of mysteries and imponderables. But it also entails a vision that can perceive oppression and can focus on systems of exploitation”⁴⁷⁴. Ben Okri’s writing can be found in the intersection and thus at the heart of a cultural and political struggle that still involves the problem of magical realism:

Magical realists are postcolonials who avail themselves most forcefully of the devices of postmodernism, of pastiche, irony, parody and intertextuality; they are alternatively recognized as oppositional to cultural imperialism, but also as reactionaries, who perpetuate the retention of the Western stereotype of the exotic Other. In other words, magical realism and its associated styles and devices [e.g. the grotesque] is alternatively characterized as a transgressive mechanism that parodies Authority, the Establishment and the Law, and also as the opposite of all of these, as a domain of play, desire and fantasy for the Rich and Powerful.⁴⁷⁵

The set of novels narrating the journeys of Azaro are definitely Afrocentric works but they also use European modes of literature to their advantage. Though like Salman Rushdie Ben Okri refuses the categorisation of magic realism on the grounds that no label can ever do justice and that it can be a form of neo-colonial authoritarianism because it is assumed to be an imported formula, the term is approved by most critics in relation to Okri. Okri’s reservations are scarcely justified when his work is admittedly the product of both Western

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 29.

influence and an African source. But again this recognition seems to revitalise Okri's fears of neo-colonial hegemony for in crossing cultural boundaries, mixing European and African genres, and in resorting to intertextuality and parody the author is in the end utilising postmodern devices and thus devices already thought and defined by the West. Nevertheless, the novels' concerns are with the postcolonial individual and the attention to the figure of the coloniser almost disappears with the exception of the figure of the Governor-General in *Infinite Riches*. In theme then, he privileges the African experience and in form he creates a balance between mythopoeia and postmodernism.

2.2. Rebirth and nationhood: Boschian and Brueghelian imagery

In *The Famished Road* Okri uses myths from his native land as much as those from the Western world, performing the contradiction Cooper defines as celebration of being and seeing independent from the West while, as a hybrid writer, he cannot avoid European influence. Being a novel on the birth of a nation, myths of origins are justly integrated. From Adam and Eve (FR, 140) to floods (FR, 140, 186-188, 286, 311-318, 377, 423-424) the novel emanates a feeling of beginnings that are, nevertheless, repeatedly delayed. Other myths and references of non-African origin which are directly mentioned or suggested include that of Erisicton (FR, 258-261), of the prophet Jeremiah after whom the photographer is named and whose pictures also work as a warning against the immoral state of the world (FR, 45)⁴⁷⁶, of Sisyphus in Azaro's father's strenuous but vain labour since the family remains constantly threatened by hunger and eviction⁴⁷⁷, of the tortoise, both a well-known figure in African tales (appearing in one of Azaro's dreams and in the shape of Madame Koto's car) but also recalling in the mind of the Western reader *Alice in Wonderland* (FR, 16-17 and 379, *Songs of Enchantment*, 92⁴⁷⁸), of the female vampire (FR, 496), of the Christian paradise (FR, 4), of Pandora (FR, 450), of Nostradamus (SE, 5), of Pythagoras (SE, 5), of Oedipus (SE, 188) and of the Sphinx which is shared by African myths too (FR, 461 and 479).

⁴⁷⁶ Brenda Cooper makes connections also between the photographer and Scarlet Pimpernel presumably because of his adventures under the nose of the law and the Pied Piper in relation to his being responsible for the rat massacre. See Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye*, 96.

⁴⁷⁷ See also Elsa Fedra Moreira de Pinho, "A Africanidade de Ben Okri e Mia Couto", mestrado diss., U. of Aveiro, 1999, 39, who presents a slightly different interpretation of the myth of Sisyphus.

⁴⁷⁸ The reference is to Ben Okri, *Songs of Enchantment* (London: Virago, 1993). Henceforth indicated parenthetically with the abbreviation SE followed by the page number.

The recurrence of non-African myths and legends should not be considered as the twisted effect of the postcolonial reader or critic who falls into the trap of viewing the world through the cultural codes of the “civilised” West, installing a new form of imperialism through literary criticism; it is Ben Okri himself who acknowledges that his childhood literary interests ranged from oral folktales told by his mother to reading Greek, Roman, German, and African myths as well as Western classics such as Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Jane Austen, Milton, Shakespeare and the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. An evidence of that direct influence is Azaro’s father, simply known as Dad, being referred to in the context of the *Odyssey*, suggesting him to be the great king Odysseus trying to find his way home (and certainly anticipating his regal fantasy in *Songs of Enchantment*. FR, 427)⁴⁷⁹. Since European cultures are associated with Judeo-Christian culture that preceded them, that influence was transported to Africa through colonialism and thus is also present in the cultural background of a postcolonial writer. Brenda Cooper goes as far as to suggest the parallelism that allowed Christianity and its mythologies to infiltrate African cultures: “the supernatural myths of Christianity are not incompatible with an indigenous worldview, as they are steeped in the same paradigm of supernatural power and miraculous cures and feats”⁴⁸⁰.

The Western intertext of biblical Lazarus is also included in order to reinforce the allegory of the spirit-child or *abiku* and, possibly, to make it more accessible to the non-African since its understanding is crucial to the structure of the novel. The *abiku* is a child who has insufficient force to live and enters in a vicious cycle of death and rebirth. Before each incarnation the child makes a pact with his/her spiritual peers vowing to return to the world of the Unborn as soon as s/he can. Says Azaro: “We were the ones who kept coming and going, unwilling to come to terms with life. We had the ability to will our deaths” (FR, 4). Whenever an *abiku*-child broke the vows and decided to remain with the Living, it was bound to be haunted by spirits trying to take it to their world. These become gifted children, with visionary powers which can both see the future and inside other minds as well as beauty amidst horror. It is by presenting the narrative through the eyes of the *abiku* child that Okri arrives at a depiction of reality which partakes of the spiritual and the material: “Those of us who lingered in the world, seduced by the annunciation of wondrous events, went through life with beautiful and fated eyes, carrying within us the music of a lovely and tragic mythology.

⁴⁷⁹ See Jane Wilkinson, *Talking with African Writers* (London: James Currey, 1992) 78 and Roy Hattersley, “A Man in Two Minds”, *The Guardian* (Aug. 21, 1999): 9 Jan. 2004 <www.guardian.co.uk >

⁴⁸⁰ Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye*, 44.

Our mouths utter obscure prophecies. Our minds are invaded by images of the future. We are the strange ones, with half of our beings always in the spirit world” (FR, 4). The grotesque anticipates, through the hybrid *abiku*, a form of hopefulness linked to the events about to take place, the birth of Nigeria. However, those events are continuously postponed, like the political rallies which are expected but never happen. Moreover, other forms of the grotesque interfere in the process which seem of a more sinister sort and that clash with the positive forces of the grotesque.

The story of Azaro’s naming reflects the always present process of becoming of the *abiku*. Originally he was named Lazaro but because people were reminded of Lazarus the name was shortened to Azaro. Using a strategy Salman Rushdie also used in *Midnight’s Children* Okri makes of Azaro’s life a metaphor for the country. Nigeria had the opportunity to be reborn when in 1960 it gained its independence from the United Kingdom, but its successive attempts at becoming a confident, autonomous state were matched by numerous symbolic deaths through governmental incompetence, public insecurity and institutionalised corruption. Not only was the well-being of people not guaranteed, but the multi-ethnic country was also unable to satisfy the need for a national identity.

Azaro is thus frequently lost in the forest, the land of dreams and nightmares, and is compelled to be on the road, putting his life in peril, unable to decipher what he is pursuing. That is the quest of Nigeria too, a road that was “the worst hallucination of them all, leading towards home and then away from it, without end, with too many signs, and no directions” (FR, 114-115). In one of Azaro’s visions he sees strange people building a road but what they do not know is that the road, a symbol of Nigeria’s painstaking construction of its nation, will never be finished (FR, 328-331). Road and hunger thus meet that quest expressed in mythic language: “In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry” (FR, 3).

Life for the *abiku* child, when s/he chooses to live it, becomes an exile for s/he is also from the spirit world where s/he can only be barred from returning after the performance of the proper rituals. The mythic discourse Okri adopts allows him to go beyond the *Bildungsroman*, that is, from the purely literary European form, and to range through a wider web of connections that transcends the individual⁴⁸¹. The interweaving of the child and the

⁴⁸¹ Though the story of Azaro is a tale of maturation, Ato Quayson raises an excellent point on noting that the mature content of Azaro’s comments, frequently entangled in enigmatic phrases that need to be decoded, while retaining a child-like simplicity reveal nonetheless the wisdom of a man. Thus, the

country enables Okri to rummage through Nigerian past and mythologies, invoking epic struggles and expressing the determination of the country to survive:

These are the myths of beginnings. These are stories and moods deep in those who are seeded in rich lands, who still believe in mysteries.

I was born not just because I had conceived a notion to stay, but because in between my coming and going the great cycles of time had finally tightened around my neck. I prayed for laughter, a life without hunger. I was answered with paradoxes. It remains an enigma how it came to be that I was born smiling. (FR, 6)

The concept of rebirth in the novel assumes a carnivalesque-grotesque potential. A metaphor of death, the rope around the neck, announces life, that is, that it is finally time for the nation to be born and remain, after several failed attempts. In *Shame*, the execution rope of Iskander Harappa's death is also made to recall the umbilical cord. Ambiguity is expressed, as the passage tells us, through paradoxes and so the future reserves both laughter and hunger.

The conflicting images are matched by two types of *abiku* children. Ade is Azaro's friend but, unlike him, the strain of an uncaring family and the weight of a dire life make him liable to the spirits' appeal to death. The same image is used to demonstrate the effect of the *abiku* status on Ade's life, that of "the pressure of time [...] tightening round his neck" (FR, 486). But whereas Azaro is strengthened by the probations and something good comes out of it, the rope around Ade's neck tightens until it chokes him. The boys thus embody two contrasting visions of Nigeria. One is a country unloved, torn apart and driven to despair and the other a country which still finds in itself the drive to carry on through the dreariest adversity but whose romanticised discourse arouses suspicion:

these paradoxes of things, the eternal changes, the riddle of living while one is alive, the mystery of being, of births within births, births within dying, the challenge of giving birth to one's true self, to one's new spirit, till the conditions are right for the new immutable star within one's universe to come into existence; the challenge to grow and learn and love, to master one's self; [...] the probability that no injustice lasts for ever, no love ever dies, that no light is ever really extinguished, that no true road is ever complete, that no way is ever definitive, no truth ever final. (FR, 488)

tales of Azaro's journeys become the tales of a story teller re-imagining folklore and history. See Ato Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing*, pp. 125-127.

Ade personifies the Nigeria that exists in actuality but Okri suggests through Azaro that the country can emerge into harmony if people can remember their roots and keep the faith. If Ade recalls Adam, simply the first individual before millions of others, Azaro not only brings to mind Lazarus, he who rises from the dead, but also Christ himself who conquered death and brought salvation⁴⁸². But by making Azaro the protagonist, Elsa Fedra Moreira de Pinho correctly notes, the special brand of Okri's magical realism can induce the erroneous idea that Azaro is the representative of a Nigeria which does not in fact exist given that he is only the embodiment of what the nation could be⁴⁸³.

But it is from Ade's mouth at the end of *The Famished Road*, after he has given strong signs of caving in to the temptation of death, that the principle that all things are connected (FR, 483, SE, 147) is openly confirmed in relation to the boys and the country: "Our country is an *abiku*-country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong" (FR, 478)⁴⁸⁴. These words are uttered when *The Famished Road* approaches the end giving the idea that the novel to follow will present the realisation of a new Nigeria. But when considered in the context of the whole speech, the prophecy loses strength; there is no hint that that day will be in the near future and, in fact, people are given instead the prediction of an even gloomier immediate life: "Suffering is coming. There will be wars and famine. Terrible things will happen. New diseases, hunger, the rich eating up the earth, people poisoning the sky and the waters, people going mad in the name of history, the clouds will breathe fire, the spirit of things will dry up" (FR, 478). Moreover, on envisioning a future of peace and stability, Ade undermines it on inserting it into a vicious cycle leaving no

⁴⁸² The confirmation that Azaro himself is a Christ-like figure is provided by the text from the start where he, though unwillingly, becomes the officer's guest. On that occasion one recalls that Christ is a guest in every home (FR, 19). Furthermore, Azaro brings salvation to this family, at least in their eyes, as their reborn son. Later it is also mentioned that the beggars awaited "the word of a Messiah's birth" (FR, 497). The interpretation of the expression gives the role of the prophet to his father uttering the word (a role much in tune with his abnegated, mentally disturbed behaviour in *Songs of Enchantment*) and that of the Messiah to Azaro whose illuminated spirit helps to endure daily suffering and embodies change.

⁴⁸³ See Elsa Fedra Moreira de Pinho, "A Africanidade de Ben Okri e Mía Couto", pp. 154-155.

⁴⁸⁴ The principle that all things are connected is related with animism, the religious principle according to which the same line runs through life as through death, through humans and objects. Animism is a fundamental religious belief for the Yoruba. See, for instance, Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye*, pp. 40-41. Renato Oliva, in turn, relates it with magic: "Magical thinking is pre-logical and knows nothing of the principle of contradiction. It mystically unites and fuses what the eye of reason sees as separate and distinct. It hypothesizes the essential homogeneity of all beings, making no distinction between animate and inanimate objects and allowing for all kinds of metamorphoses", Renato Oliva, "Re-Dreaming the World: Ben Okri's Shamanic Realism", 191.

clue concerning the time when the country will decide to remain and depriving the listeners of any hope for themselves or even their children:

‘There will be changes. Coups. Soldiers everywhere. Ugliness. Blindness. And then when people least expect it a great transformation is going to take place in the world. Suffering people will know justice and beauty. A wonderful change is coming from far away and people will realise the great meaning of struggle and hope. There will be peace. Then people will forget. Then it will all start again, getting worse, getting better.’ (FR, 478)

When in fact Ade is run over and dies he confirms that not only is he representative of the country that is but also of the country that will exist in times to come: “I am the country crying for what is going to happen in the future” (*SE*, 195). No mention is given to any radiant future invalidating the assumed cycle to the extent that when one *abiku*-child dies, the symbolism it carried died with it and the country will be regenerated with a new ruling symbolised by Azaro. The degrading process associated with the pregnant death principle is thus not applied. Moreover, the unenthusiastic materialisation of Nigeria embodied by Ade is supported by Dad who, at the end of the novel starts to see and dream the world anew but, likewise, offers no silver lining: “the child of our will [Nigeria] refuses to stay till we have made propitious sacrifice and displayed our serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny” (*FR*, 494). At the end of the novel and after numerous tragedies, one wonders how much more sacrifice is needed.

Another aspect of Western influence in *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* as far as the grotesque is concerned is its Boschian and Brueghelian expression. The spirits, insofar as they are spirits of the dead whose only intention is to reclaim Azaro’s life for themselves, recall Bosch’s hybrid monsters. Okri thus intertwines African folklore with the European tradition of the grotesque. These spirits appear in great numbers in Madame Koto’s bar where only Azaro becomes aware of their presence but they had previously been introduced, rather meaningfully, in the market (*FR*, 15-16)⁴⁸⁵. The overwhelming strangeness they provoke in Azaro derives either from being incomplete copies of humanness, or from their freakish details or pairing⁴⁸⁶. Among the numerous spirits populating the bar Azaro sees

⁴⁸⁵ The market itself is relevant in its Bakhtinian vitality. See Book Two, chapter nine, particularly page 161.

⁴⁸⁶ Given their frequency, it would be impossible to analyse even the majority of the scenes where this point of the spirits’ grotesqueness is raised. The passage which I will be referring to next was selected

two swollen-eyed and lipped men, both with only one hand and voices not matching the movement of their lips, a toothless young man with no thumbs and contorted bald head like a tuber of yam, two albino green-eyed men, two men dressed in agbadas with fish patterns wearing skullcaps and dark glasses whose eyes were all white beneath them, a man with wholly white hair, an indigo-coloured woman, a man and a woman with extraordinarily long legs, short torsos and minuscule heads, a female midget, a man with a camel shaped head, and a woman with a severe hip deformation (FR, 106-108). Their presence in the bar caused smells “terrible and strange, the smells of corpses and rain and oregano, of mangoes and rotting meat, of incense and goats’ hair” (FR, 111). The senses seem awakened to life as well as to death by the spirits through their association with animality, the natural elements and bodily decay. Though the grotesqueness involving the spirits is strongly Bakhtinian they nevertheless cause in Azaro a fear that is alien to that conception of the grotesque and more akin to the psychological grotesque. The spirits try to kidnap Azaro and carry him in a sack to the other world⁴⁸⁷. The boy is terrified for he does not wish to return to the world of the dead and be reborn. Fear of death assumes acute forms since Azaro, as an *abiku* child, not only has previous experience of death but is also threatened daily through the constant traps the spirits set for him and through the journeys he makes to other realms by dreaming and hallucinating. It is also a Kayserian fear because Azaro dreads being alive (FR, 282) since not even in the “real” world is he safe from the “mutant customers” (FR, 133). Whenever the spirits come across Azaro’s way fear is invariably mentioned (FR, 133) often risen to a pitch by the spirits’ laughter (FR, 133).

Indeed, the Bakhtinian trait is well patent whenever the spirits are characterised. The next time they make their appearance they seem to be the same but to have switched bodily features enhancing their bodily instability and creating a mixed effect of familiarity with unfamiliarity. Moreover, they intermingle with everyday people refusing to be ostracised and clearly positioning themselves within the community. There is an additional paradox in that they became increasingly frightening because they display other Bakhtinian grotesque

since it can be used to prove several points. However for further examples see pages 15, 38-39, 59-60, 77, 86-89, 106-115, 246-247, 326-339, 421, 429-434, 459-461. Similar scenes reappear in *Infinite Riches*. See for instance page 144. Ben Okri, *Infinite Riches* (London: Phoenix House, 1998).

⁴⁸⁷ The episode bears resemblance with that in *Midnight’s Children* where Saleem is transported across the border in an invisibility sack. As with Azaro, it becomes a dangerous means to travel across worlds for Saleem runs the risk of disappearing. But whereas Saleem does it willingly with the intention of saving himself here Azaro is forced to. Furthermore, whereas in both cases the metaphor is of a

manners: the abusive language but also the use of alien languages which Azaro cannot understand (they carry the ambiguity of plain foreignness but there is a clear intention of suggesting Otherness), and the crowd element that is taken to an extreme so that Azaro fears being engulfed by them:

[T]here had been a grotesque interchange among the clientele. There was an albino, but he was tall and had a head like a tuber of yam. The man who was bulbous in one eye was white and blank like a polished moonstone in the other. The two men who were sinister in dark glasses now had white hair and curious hip deformations. The youth who had no teeth was now a woman. [...] There were others I hadn't seen before. One of them looked like a lizard with small, fixed green eyes. And amongst these strange people were others who seemed normal, who had stopped off on their way home from their jobs for an evening's drink. The place was so crowded that I had to struggle through the tight-jammed bodies, all of them raucous, all of them singing, passing abuses and bad jokes across the bar. I heard voices that were unearthly, languages that were nasal and alien, laughter that could only have come from dead tree trunks at night or from hollow graves. I began to feel ill again just pushing my way through their bodies which smelt bloodless and looked pale. (*FR*, 133)

The rowdy group would be wholly Bakhtinian in their abusive language, laughing abilities, deformation, fragmentation, animal nature, and overall anatomical becoming extended to gender crossing if it were not for the disturbing fact that they are not human. Though only images of pieces of humanity they are dreadful precisely because they recall humans so faithfully and not only the deformed or mutilated ones such as the beggars. Their joyful vitality is not therefore invigorating and their metamorphosing abilities inspire instability: "As I watched them, they began to transform, breaking out of their moulds. Their shoulders seemed momentarily hunchbacked. Their eyes blazed through their glasses and their teeth resembled fangs. I edged away, slowly, and found another corner, and stared intently at everyone. The clientele kept changing, becoming something other" (*FR*, 135). They are like monstrous insects in cocoons with no way of predicting which type of animal will be generated next, and more than once they are associated with butterflies and even called "golden spirits of butterflies" (*SE*, 105). Ato Quayson, in accordance with my view, affirms that "the boundary [between the spirit and material worlds] is progressively erased with a

journey between the world of materiality and spirituality, in Saleem's case there is a complementary significance as his gradual disappearance is indicative of a historical, political, and individual crisis.

redistribution of the grotesque among figures in both the reality as well as in the spirit plane” and that consequently “real world existence, especially in the context of squalor and dispossession, shares in the absurdity of that other. Thus the dichotomizing gestures of mythopoeia are turned towards showing reality in a new light”⁴⁸⁸.

Another Bakhtinian element that loses its revitalizing potential is the matter of numbers as Azaro, feeling trapped, begins to see the already plentiful group multiplying: “The clientele kept multiplying, filling out the spaces. They stood over me, giant figures with hair that fell off in clumps on my face. Their multiplication frightened me. The woman with no teeth became two. The midgets became four. The two men with dark glasses and white hair became three. The man with a bulbous eye acquired a double, and the double had a bulbous eye on the other side of his face” (FR, 134). Azaro’s reaction is that of terror; he shouts but their laughter drowns his voice and he is taken over by “the purity of fear” (FR, 134).

The chaotic movement of the crowd is also a Brueghelian theme well-known through paintings such as *The Proverbs* (1559), *Children’s Games* (1559-60), and the famed *The Fight between Carnival and Lent* (1559). In the case of the spirits the banging and turning of tables, the aggressions and the insults play the same role as that of corporeality. They looked like “a confused assortment of different human parts”, as if they “had borrowed bits of human beings to partake of human reality [...] [and they did it] because they get tired of being just spirits. They want to taste human things, pain, drunkenness, laughter, and sex” (FR, 136). In sum, the spirits opt for a grotesque experience in opposition to unblemished perfection. Though more than once Madame Koto’s bar gets wrecked, itself forced to be in permanent change as well, its destruction bears the imprint of excess and the carnivalesque:

The disguised spirits were now completely uproarious. They had overrun the place in an orgy of merriment, jumping up and down, dancing to non-existent melodies, fighting, singing unfamiliar songs in harsh languages. The man with the bulbous eye was playing with his other detachable one. A man who had removed his arm from its socket was hitting the toothless woman on the head with it. The spirits were drunk with their borrowed humanity and frolicked in their grotesque merriment. (FR, 137)

Specific elements belonging to the imagery of grotesque realism are also used in a Kayserian sense. That is especially true of the mouth. One of the spirits who terrorises Azaro

⁴⁸⁸ Ato Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing*, 139.

is described as having disproportionate ears, huge nostrils, animal-like breathing and an incredibly wide mouth. Azaro screams and kicks the man who leans over him and “opened his mouth wide as if he were going to swallow me. Then he stayed like that, in apparent contemplation. I found myself staring into the horror of his mouth” (FR, 134). It is worth recalling that the teeth had been compared to fangs, thus endowed with violent innuendoes. Even if it is the mouth of a man, it still recreates the *vagina dentata* symbol though the matter of sexuality is developed only in relation with the midget (FR, 272-274) and, more fully and threateningly, through Madame Koto.

With the story of Azaro Okri chooses as his privileged characters all sorts of grotesque beings who not only embody Otherness existing in palpable, daily experience, and whose extreme physicality has rendered them paradoxically invisible, but also Otherness in the supernatural sense, though in Okri’s view of them they become as corporeal as any human being, even more so as the attention drawn to their bodies is also made by making them physically different. Beggars and the spirits appear to epitomise these two categories of Otherness so as to annul a monolithic construction of reality. In Okri’s fiction there is not only more than one reality, there are several and they interpenetrate. Otherness, however, frequently assumes the Brueghelian mould referred to. When Azaro’s father begins an active campaign for the poor he attracts the attention of all sorts of people living on the margins of society. Amongst them are the beggars who are terribly deformed and who are as horrifying and despised as the lepers at the gates of any medieval European village:

[W]e saw a procession of beggars coming down the road. They were led by a hypnotically beautiful young girl. There were about seven or eight of them. Some of the beggars had legs that were limp and pliable as rubber. Some had twisted necks. Others had both feet behind their heads. One of them had one eye much higher up on his face than the other. Another seemed to have three eyes, but on closer inspection it turned out to be a wound like a socket with an eye missing. One was almost completely blind and could see only through pupils so scrambled up and confusing that they seemed like mashed egg yolk. It was when the girl got closer that we saw she was blind in one eye. All the beggars trailed along the ground, in filthy clothes, each with sticks and pads of cloth beneath the joints of limbs that scraped on the rough earth. [...] Then I saw the procession of beggars were a family. The most deformed was the father. He seemed to have all their deformities. (FR, 416)

The appearance of the beggars is reminiscent of the eldest Pieter Brueghel's *The Cripples* (1568) and *The Parable of the Blind* (1568) as they invoke severe human deformity, its transformation into a survival strategy (Brueghel's cripples are viewed as a possible depiction of hoaxes for commercial purposes) and as metaphor of spiritual blindness. In *The Parable of the Blind* the blind men are each other's guides so that the group is inevitably doomed, their fall symbolised in the river flow to the right of the painting. In *The Famished Road* the blindness is not the beggars' though. It is, in a strict sense, that of the poor who have come, like themselves, to the party of Dad's victory over the Green Leopard and who are incapable of changing their lives. In a broader sense, however, it is the blindness of a country dominated by greed and uncontrolled forms of progress - of which Madame Koto becomes the symbol - on the verge of being destroyed. My reasoning is in accordance with Brenda Cooper who alleges that the poor are portrayed as "misguided or downtrodden. Their passivity, amnesia, naïveté and delusions ensure that they are victims, victims moreover who conspire in their own oppression"⁴⁸⁹.

Seeing and the absence of sight are topics that the author wants to reader to consider. Azaro sees creatures that no else see because he has access to a bridge to the other world symbolised in the third eye in his forehead and Dad, after his death and resurrection at the end of *The Famished Road*, wakes up to a new manner of seeing the ways of the world, a deeper, more sensitive manner. Indeed people "who use only their eyes do not SEE" (FR, 498). It seems reasonable then that the blind old man, because he has spiritual vision, can see the present and the future; his omnivision is thus a contrast to people's blindness. Another example of the importance of sight and blindness is given when people get so scared of the retaliation of the Party of the Rich that they do not find the courage to bury the corpse of Ade's father and, as a consequence of their cowardice, everyone goes blind (SE, 215-282). They hide from their own shame and from the body itself that as it goes rotten haunts the people's minds, especially Dad's, with the need for a dignifying burial. They are degraded as human beings; though they think themselves to be better than the beggars, they are low forms of existence because they can be abused and overpowered. The beggars are in this sense a more visual display of the same miserable, broken down, desperate people. The uninvited people of the compound that show up to Dad's party are not, in reality, dissimilar from the family of beggars outside:

⁴⁸⁹ Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye*, 93.

Dad's modest party had been overrun by tramps whose hair was the breeding ground of lice and sprouting rubbish, and who stank; by the wretched and the hungry and the homeless, all of whom had such defiant and intense eyes that I felt they would pounce on anyone who dared ask them to leave; by the deformed, whose legs looked like the letter K, whose mouths always seemed to be dribbling, whose rickety feet were turned somewhat backwards; by weary ghetto-dwellers, people I had seen sitting outside mechanics' workshops dreaming about sea-journeys, people I had seen in the streets or at the markets, faces worn, eyes yellowish. There were handsome young men who brought their girlfriends, women of unknown histories, old men and women who looked like all the old people I had ever seen. There were people in black habits, with wizened faces, eyes bright like royal jaguars, chests and arms covered with spells and amulets. There were also people long rumoured to be witches and wizards. (*FR*, 415)

If beggars and the denizens of the compound are strikingly similar, the spirits tormenting Azaro also tend to materialise in the terrifying fashion of the beggar type. The first time Azaro heads towards the bar after the disastrous celebrations in Madame Koto's honour which ended up with a bloody car accident, Azaro encounters a group of beggars he does not recognise as being his father's followers. They are disguised spirits that once more want to deceive him into leaving the world of his parents:

Two of them had malformed legs and dragged themselves on the ground like hybrid serpents, with the cushioning aid of elbow pads. The rest of them had twisted arms, elongated necks. One of them had only one arm, another had two fingers, and another, to my horror, seemed to have three eyes. I tried to run, but I was curiously rooted. Salaaming, bringing with them all the smells of the gutters, street-corners, dustbins, rotting flesh, and damp nights, they pressed on me. Their leader was a man of indescribable age, with a face of wrenched metal, deep eyes, and a crumpled mouth. He came to me, begging for generosity, in a language which seemed to belong to another universe. He crowded me, and the others did as well, till I couldn't breathe for their smells. The youngest of the beggars laughed and it seemed that a mashed insect fell out of his mouth. I shouted. The oldest beggar grabbed me, with his two fingers, and his grip was like that of an infernal machine. Pressing his face close to mine, so that I was suspended in a moment of fainting, he said:

'Follow us.' (*FR*, 429)

Therefore the beggars and the spirits (sometimes appearing as beggars) are used as powerful bodily images of the enemies of the people but also of the people themselves whose bodies display spiritual and physical undernourishment. Nourishment and hunger are, in fact, key structural principles in the novel and they relate with the grotesque particularly through Madame Koto.

2.3. A body well-fed: Madame Koto's grotesqueness, the case of unreliable embodiment of wickedness and of the witch stereotype

When Dad is caught up in his utopian dream of building a new country where even beggars go to university, a cause in the name of which he almost loses his life in a clash with the Fighting Ghost, the reader is astounded by his apparent lack of sensitivity towards his own family⁴⁹⁰. So that Dad can eat enough and be strong to fight, his son and wife have to give up their own share of food; Azaro himself appears repeatedly asking for food from strangers and mainly from Madame Koto. One of main reasons why Azaro in fact goes to Madame Koto's bar, though it is populated with spirits who want to take him into the spirit world, is that in the bar he is fed. Only Mum seems aware and consequently angry at her husband for being so concerned with the beggars while their own family lives no better than beggars. The rat chapters are in fact an allegory to their squalid, downgraded existence. When the photographer spreads the poison and the rats begin to die their corpses are by the hundreds and turn up in every conceivable place from mats to cabinets. Prior to this moment, neither Azaro nor any of his parents could even imagine that they shared their home with so many of these creatures. The hyperbolism conveys the idea that like Azaro's family there are hundreds and even thousands of others living anonymously, surviving from scraps and even thieving and who only become visible when their bodies become spectacles in car accidents, casualties in political conflicts, and victims of food poisoning. The parallelism between rats and people is made evident precisely through poisoning for as rats die of it so the poor people of the compound consume the bad milk powder distributed by the Party of the Rich and subsequently fall terribly sick. Another image of grotesque realism is that of the hundreds of people throwing up and the fetid puke accumulating in the latrines and streets.

⁴⁹⁰ The Fighting Ghost, which Dad takes for a white man, could be read in his arachnid grotesqueness to stand for white exploitation. In my opinion it is instead the image of black people mimicking the racial and social attitude of whites, thus also contributing to the perpetuation of an unfair system.

Rats serve yet another intention, that of embodying on the one hand the devastating hunger of the rich for more power and on the other of all forms of misery that wreck even further the already dim existence that Azaro's family leads. When Azaro listens to the rats at night, it is not just their food that is eaten; it is also their lives which are chewed away (*FR*, 189). As with the spirits, attention is drawn to the rats' sharp teeth, capable even, some people had said, of eating up a whole camel. With such gnawing power, it is no wonder that Azaro fears that rats can consume his family:

'Will they eat us?'

'They would have done so by now. But you can't be sure.'

'Of what?'

'Of their hunger.'

I listened again.

'But I know a good poison for killing them. The best. I will bring you some.'

The rats stopped eating.

'They can understand us,' I said. (*FR*, 190)

In this dialogue with the photographer it is suggested that the rats have the human ability to communicate so that they understand what is being said about them and they are frightened or shocked as their stopping eating reveals. But if rats are interpreted in a broader sense, that is, as humans feeding on other people's powerlessness, then the photographer does have the right poison to kill them which is information and public exposure⁴⁹¹. Regarded in a political perspective, the poisoning of the rats is connected not only with the matter of the rotten milk but also with the retaliation the photographer will suffer for publishing photos of the parties' bullying people to silence with relation to the milk story and to voting according to the interests of each of those parties. This interpretation of the metaphor for the rats is eventually confirmed when in a later encounter the photographer compares the rats to bad politicians, imperialists and the wealthy (*FR*, 233).

In this context the significance of eating and hunger is affected. Both poles are amply developed in *The Famished Road*. There are numerous festivities and celebrations where the central concern is always food (*FR*, 42-47, 416-421, 455-467). Though the title of the novel immediately suggests a metaphoric allusion to the burgeoning impulse of Western economics

and its so-called progress, the text itself undermines that assumption by putting the myth of the King of the Road at the centre of the justification for the road's immense hunger for death. In Okri's particular use of oral narrative, the languages of folklore do not travel and adapt to the English language as postcolonial writers sometimes intend. Instead, Okri recuperates the value of the story itself and of the story teller. As he himself writes in the non-fictional *A Way of Being Free* "stories are subversive because they always come from the other side. [...] Their democracy is frightening; their ultimate non-allegiance is sobering. They are the freest inventions of our deepest selves"⁴⁹². It is Dad who tells Azaro the legend of the King of the Road, an old king living in the forest with an appetite so insatiable that he originated a famine in the world. Confronted with the gradual reduction of the forest, the king must appease his hunger with deaths caused on the road. Still, his hunger continued until he ate himself but his stomach melted with the rain and went underground: "What had happened was that the King of the Road had become part of all the roads in this world. He is still hungry, and he will always be hungry. This is why there are so many accidents in the world" (FR, 261). Because his stomach still requested nourishment people left him gifts on the road, hoping he would spare their lives. Brenda Cooper insists on the universality of the hunger as told in the tale, thus separating its morals from a purely postcolonial context; however, Madame Koto appears to me to be inserted in the novel as the female counterpart to this king but whereas the king's hunger remains on a mythological level which can be universalised as any human's impulse to excess and extinction, Madame Koto's acquires a specific signification related with political and economical greed in the context of postcoloniality. In fact, she is called "Queen of the Ghetto Night" (FR, 496) and "Queen of the nights" (SE, 140). Madame Koto thus also stands as an opposition to another king, the King of Spirits, who protects and guides Azaro, to whom he materialises in the shape of a cat⁴⁹³.

Madame Koto is located on the axis of hunger and nourishment, and by extension, of sterility and fertility. As *The Famished Road* unfolds, Madame Koto undergoes a transformation that starting from a beneficial point of influence, symbolised precisely in her feeding of Azaro, moves gradually to the other pole where she becomes the enemy of the people. Whereas at first she is identified with animals of large size emanating a sense of strength such as the

⁴⁹¹ The same imagery and the same value are used in *Infinite Riches* with regards to Sami, the dishonest betting shop owner. See page 254.

⁴⁹² Ben Okri, *A Way of Being Free* (London: Phoenix, 1997) 44.

elephant (FR, 288), as her political involvement confers more power on her, she assumes instead a grotesque physical form based on the idea of uncontrollable growth and excess. Though bigger, she becomes less palpable as the grotesqueness of her new self is seen primarily through Azaro's dreams and visions in *Songs of Enchantment*. Pulled towards darker forces she disappears from sight causing Madame Koto to exist "only in rumours and in our dreams. Her absence had increased the force of her legend" (SE, 52). The outcome is that as one Madame Koto fades away in people's memories more than one arises in their minds instead (SE, 52). Moreover, since she inhabits no space, she multiplies so as to occupy several spaces broadening her haunting range (SE, 53). The impact of the mythic status of Madame Koto achieves such proportions that her absent oppression becomes physically sensed. Azaro, like all others or even more than others, also feels it: "I could feel the awesomeness of her body. She was breathing in the air. Her legend surrounded us, watching every movement" (SE, 53).

Madame Koto's grotesque body thus derives from a moral context. In the final significant appearance she makes in *The Famished Road*, she already possesses the traits distinguishing her from the woman she was before and which are simultaneously captivating and frightening, ridiculous and powerful: "Madame Koto was resplendent in golden volumes of lace attire, feathers in her headgear. Her foot had grown large. Her *stomach* had swollen. Her face was bunched, antimony shimmered on her eyelids. She looked glorious. Her presence alone, already legendary, made us silent" (FR, 451. Italics added)⁴⁹⁴. It is when Azaro and his father head to Madame Koto's bar to demand the return of Azaro's mother who has fallen under her spell that the body is revealed, in the usual alternatively realistic way, to support the negativity of the legend. Azaro and Dad are led through an infinitude of labyrinthic dark corridors by a woman, one of the many who have joined Madame Koto's household as her slavish disciplines, towards increasingly smaller rooms. The closer they get to Madame Koto, the stronger the effects of her powers are felt; Azaro can feel "ritual smells, the smells of power, of the earth liberated by rain, of a mighty woman, of gold and perfume, of

⁴⁹³ For an expansion of this theme and of the photographer being the modern messianic hero whose mythic counterpart is the King of Spirits see Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye*, pp. 79 and 95-98.

⁴⁹⁴ A very interesting connection can be made with the engraving of the Pope-Ass whose right hand was that of an elephant so as to invoke the Pope's crushing power over the people. Madame Koto has also a very heavy foot which she has to drag and that becomes bigger and bigger as her wealth increases as well. The positive image of the elephant is therefore symbolically changed. See for instance the reference on page 455.

childlessness, sweat, eunuchs, virgins and pitchers” (*SE*, 56). The environment is at once mysterious, captivating and frightening, where bondage and mysticism play a predominant role: “A great white veil divided the room. Beyond the veil seven candles were aflame. Two men were fanning a leviathan figure on a regal chair. Young girls were combing and plaiting the hair of this figure. We heard water being poured. Ritual chants reigned in rooms behind rooms. Somewhere a sheep was being slaughtered, a man screamed as if branded, a child wailed, women laughed” (*SE*, 56). When seen on closer inspection those characteristics are complemented with grotesque features linked with motherhood, bodily monstrosity and change. Nonetheless Okri emphasises beauty in the midst of sensations of monstrosity just as he did whenever he referred to Helen, the beggar⁴⁹⁵:

Madame Koto, like an ageless matriarch, was sitting on an ornate chair, with the seven red candles surrounding her. She had a yellow mantilla on her shoulders. She had grown so enormous that the large chair barely contained her bulk. She wore a deep blue lace blouse and volumes of lace wrappers. She had acquired gargantuan space. As the evening darkened, her presence increased. Power stank from her liquid and almost regal movements. Behind her, in a large golden cage, was a shimmering peacock.

The men went on fanning her in slow motion, as if the fan of giant eagle feathers were very heavy, as if they were working monstrous bellows. She studied us in silence and then, with a light gesture of her fat arms, dismissed the men. Drawing up the sleeves of her blouse, she revealed the beauty of her skin, which was the mahogany blue of the forest night. Her face was large, her eyes big with deep secrets, and her features – serene like the bronze sculptings of ancient queens – defied memory. She neither registered nor betrayed any conceivable expression – as if nothing in the world could stir the great mass of her spirit. I had not seen her in a long time and she looked abnormally resplendent. Her face burned with health. (*SE*, 56-57)

Madame Koto’s health is repeatedly mentioned, almost as if it were unnatural, as if she should not look young and healthy. That is because she supposedly drains people of their energies and like a vampire she needs the blood of the young to maintain that state (*FR*, 496). In many respects, the construction of Madame Koto bears a strong resemblance to Mother in

⁴⁹⁵ The name Helen is, not surprisingly, carefully chosen. It is meant to recall Helen of Troy not only because of her beauty which is part of the grotesque principle but also insofar as she was the reason of dissension. In the same manner, Helen brings trouble to Azaro’s household and divides the opinions

Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*. There is a bodily resemblance, the same divine quality, the same mythic dimension and the same prophetic powers. Mother is also surrounded by a horde of followers, though all of them are women, and, in an underground grotto, she constructs herself as a mythic being:

I did not know her awful patience, the patience of she who'd always been waiting for me, where I'd exiled her, down in the lowest room at the root of my brain.

There she waited, in her eternal well-occupied leisure, in a straight-backed chair of scrubbed pine, the fearful, archaic thing at the core of this unnatural helix.

She had been waiting for me all my life, I knew in the moment that I saw her; but nothing in my life had hinted she might always have been there, with her menacing immobility of a Hindu statue [...].

And when I saw her, I knew I had come home; yet a desolating strangeness overwhelmed me, for I knew I could not stay there [...]. Leilah had always intended to bring me here, to the deepest cave, to this focus of all the darkness that had always been waiting for me in a room with just such close, red walls within me.

For in this room lies the focus of darkness. She is destination of all men, the inaccessible silence, the darkness that glides, at the last moment, always out of reach; the door called orgasm slams in his face, closes fast on the Nirvana of non-being which is gone as soon as it is glimpsed. She, this darkest one, this fleshy extinction, beyond time, beyond imagination, always just beyond, a little way beyond the fingertips of the spirit, the eternally elusive quietus who will free me from being, transform my I into the other and, in doing so, annihilate it.⁴⁹⁶

Mother is a woman who through surgery has remoulded her body to become ultra symbolic of motherhood so that she can be stretched to the realm of divinity. She is thus also presented in a regal position, a queen served by myriad ant-like women, controlling their fertility as well as their anatomy by the imposed system of mutilation. Like Madame Koto, the leap into the symbolic state is ambiguously accompanied by a characterisation of solidity; in fact, the characterisation of the two women as statues suggests the memory of leaders and gods of the past, necessarily immovable and now ineffectual. Ultimately, women as goddesses through motherhood are seen as failures insofar as their grotesqueness is innocuous. It does

of Mum and Dad. In *Songs of Enchantment* Helen is in fact the reason of Mum's leaving home as Dad is cursed with the demon's gift (*SE*, 18), love, and wishes to take Helen as his second wife.

⁴⁹⁶ Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, 58-59.

generate fear but that is an end in itself, accumulating until it amounts to terror but incapable of producing regeneration. The technological achievement of Mother, which is so meaningfully a cave turned into a laboratory, is therefore unable to produce a new beginning by merely constructing the New Woman out of a man. The same myth of origins is merely repeated as Eve is once again borne from Adam. That cave, though it is capable of reproducing the womb artificially, an innuendo that is also part though in a lesser degree of the space Madame Koto inhabits, does not therefore successfully substitute the female body. In the end, a rebellion takes place and the women in the subterranean dwelling abandon Mother.

Notwithstanding the common ground there are two significant differences to be noted. If Mother fails as a symbol and as myth-maker, that is justified by Carter's parodic intentions. As I shall have the opportunity to develop fully in the chapter I dedicate to Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, the author had it in mind to undermine all conceptions that contribute to any form of mythologisation because, to use Carter's well-known expression, they are nonsense, that is, with no sense, no meaning, no content, statuesque, in the end.

The second difference emerges with respect to the tone that is given to the sense of abjection which is much milder in relation to Madame Koto. Mother is the source of fear of annihilation through engulfment, which is directly linked to the castration complex (literally carried out in *The Passion of New Eve*), a dark force with magnetic power drawing Evelyn, a representative at first of all men and later on intended to be representative of the New Woman, towards her and thus recollecting the threat of extinction and of an elusive, perilous sense of exile. In fact, the permanence of the subject within a psycho-linguistic place of Symbolic security is dependent on the management of the figure of the archaic mother in exile where she has been moved to by the process of abjection. In Julia Kristeva's own words: "The one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), situates (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging or refusing. [...] [H]e divides, excludes, and without properly speaking, wishing to know his abjections is not at all unaware of them. Often, moreover, he includes himself among them, thus casting within himself the scalpel that carries out his separations" (*PH*, 8. Italics in the text). The

menace over Evelyn's Symbolic identity might be realised if he falls in a state of communion non-beingness with Mother⁴⁹⁷.

But both motherly figures are also androgynous ones embodying the grotesque feature of in-betweenness by reiterating the myth of fertility in most cultures preferably symbolised by women at the same time that they display the distinctive feature of masculinity that was also an attribute of the pharaoh Hatshepsut: a beard, the symbol of royalty. She understands, like Madame Koto who is called "the New Mother of Images", the importance of representation (*SE*, 143). This passage reinforces some of these points:

Yet there it was, in person, the mystery, enshrined in an artificial grotto seated upon an everyday chair [...]. She was personified and self-fulfilling fertility.

Her head, with its handsome and austere mask teetering ponderously on the bull-like pillar of her neck, was as big and as black as Marx' head in Highgate Cemetery; her face had the stern, democratic beauty of a figure on a pediment in the provincial square of a people's republic and she wore a false beard of crisp, black curls like the false beard Queen Hatshepsut of the Two Kingdoms had worn. She was fully clothed in obscene nakedness; she was breasted like a sow - she possessed two tiers of nipples, the result [...] of a strenuous programme of grafting, so that, in theory, she could suckle four babies at one time. And how gigantic her limbs were! Her ponderous feet were heavy enough to serve as illustrations of gravity, her hands, the shape of giant fig leaves, lay at rest on the bolsters of her knees. Her skin, wrinkled like the skin of a black olive, rucked like a Greek peasant's goatskin bottle, looked as rich as though it might contain within itself the source of a marvellous, dark, revivifying river, as if she herself were the only oasis in this desert and her crack the source of all the life-giving water in the world.

Her statuesque and perfect immobility implied the willed repose of the greatest imaginable physical strength [...].

And in that belly, rich as thousand harvests, there was no treacherous oblivion for me for, at birth, I'd lost all right of re-entry into the womb. I was exiled from Nirvana forever and, faced with the concrete essence of woman, I was at my wit's end how to behave. I could not imagine what giant being might couple with her, she was a piece of pure nature, she was earth, she was fructification.

I had reached journey's end as a man. I knew, then, that I was among the Mothers; I experienced the pure terror of Faust.⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹⁷ Another example of the mother as an engulfing, thereby castrating, entity is provided in Carter's work through Mrs Boulder in *Several Perceptions* published in 1968. See pages 75-76.

There is a maddening rejoicing over generative capacities drawn to excess. The Bakhtinian elements, particularly the stress on the lower stratum of the belly and the vagina and on the reproductive bodily function, are sabotaged in the sense that crossing a given frontier they too lose the regenerative potential. Mother is a frightful sight because though her body celebrates life she imposes death (castration). As she re-constructs herself so as to be more mother-like through mammary augmentation, her fertility becomes a source of dread. It is a clear comment on the negative aspects of the socially-ingrained concept of women connected with nature (fig-like hands, olive skin, goatskin touch, and particularly the association with water which is a symbol of fertility). But if the metaphor is taken literally (“Mother [had] made symbolism a concrete fact”, she was “her own mythological artefact”⁴⁹⁹) the sacredness of the figure is not only revealed ridiculous but is made to incorporate deadliness as well.

Mother is thus transformed into a negative version of Bakhtin’s image of pregnant death as she has herself impregnated by Evelyn by means of a sort of rape achieved through psychological manipulation and physical intimidation. Madame Koto operates with the same image and it is in fact her mysterious pregnancy that dictates her definite removal from the territory of goodness in the direction of the dark dominion⁵⁰⁰. Azaro is overwhelmed by the gargantuan size of Madame Koto, provoking a disturbing sensation of oppression and claustrophobia. The sight of and sensation caused by this figure of a great mother make him sweat and shiver. Then, she prophetically announces she is dying. Azaro had already had a vision of three babies inside her. As she gains increasing reputation as a witch causing men’s professional failure, infertility and children’s illnesses, she is rumoured to be pregnant herself, as if invading people’s minds and bodies to drain them of their vitality (*FR*, 100-101). When Azaro sees the babies he is horrified as they are supposed to be the product of Madame Koto’s mental raids. She thus becomes a symbol of pregnant death in a double sense: because

⁴⁹⁸ Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, 59-60.

⁴⁹⁹ See Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, pages 58 and 60 respectively.

⁵⁰⁰ An example of the circular structure of the novel can be provided by Madame Koto’s association at this stage with the pregnant goddess Azaro encounters early in the novel. In addition to the similar details in their physical appearance there is a parallel description: “Her magnificent pregnancy was so startling against the immense sea that she could have been giving birth to a god or to a new world” (*FR*, 13). Also like Madame Koto and Mother, this goddess is served by a cult of women. Another instance wherein Madame Koto is related with the pregnant goddess appears in *The Famished Road* and already at that time Azaro was horrified by the sensation that her pregnancy could crush him. See pages 290-291.

she is a dying pregnant woman and because the pregnancy is the result of the slow death of others: “Two of them [babies] sat upright and the third was upside down in her womb. One of them had a little beard, the second had fully formed teeth, and the third had wicked eyes. They were all mischievous, they kicked and tugged at their cords, they were the worst type of spirit-children, and they had no intention of being born” (FR, 464). Having a baby upside down is indicative not of a carnivalesque twist but of a dark period in national affairs. The popular mind even started to see the forthcoming delivery as an apocalyptic event (FR, 450). The babies are grotesque not only in being frightful instead of lovable, but also in displaying adult characteristics. They are suggestively aggressive, especially the toothed one. The interconnection of chewing, shredding and eating is again ambiguously established. It was no coincidence that on their way to the shrine of Madame Koto Azaro had seen another spirit-baby who had roared like an enraged lion and scratched him so as to draw blood.

Madame Koto is therefore being killed by the children in her womb, spiritual materialisations of high living, money, power and responsibility (SE, 58). They continuously demand more of that type of nourishment with their cord-pulling so that their mother has to eat away the world, as the rats would have done, to satisfy their hunger. By not being born and blockading the grotesque process of becoming, the babies will dictate the extinction of the very body that feeds them; like the road, the babies are always hungry. It is my belief that the grotesqueness of the babies and that of Madame Koto should be considered jointly since a broader reading can be made of Nigerian political affairs. The tendency to see Madame Koto as an emblem of the unrestrained greed which thwarts the birth of the new, independent Nigeria is only one side of the story. Madame Koto is also an embodiment of the suffering mother-country whose children, the people of Nigeria, fight among themselves causing their own downfall and their country's⁵⁰¹. The babies evoke the conflicts that only six years after independence from Great Britain in 1960 resulted in the assassination of Prime Minister Alhaji Tafa Balewa and the several military dictatorships that have drained the country of its human and material resources for decades. They probably even evoke the tribal confrontations between the different groups: the Yoruba, the Igbo, the Hausa, the Mambila, and the Mumuye to name only a few. The Igbo, in fact, attempted a military coup in the 1960s and were the

⁵⁰¹ In *Infinite Riches* the connection between Madame Koto and the country is established directly. At some stage Madame Koto attributes the generalised suffering of the country and of the grotesqueness of her body to the passivity of the people: “You all stare at me as if I am giving birth to a horse, but which one of you can give birth to a country and not die of exhaustion, eh? [...] [W]hich one of you

most representative separatist ethnic group during the 1967-70 Biafran war when an estimated one hundred thousand soldiers lost their lives and a quarter to two million civilians died from starvation alone.

This reading is more consistent than making Madame Koto the sole symbol of the nation's failure. As a woman and a resilient individual, her grotesqueness can only be seen as an abstraction of that responsibility. Okri's spiritual realist way of writing raises a curtain of mist, thus avoiding dealing with the subject in a wholly realistic manner, making the political and historical dimensions of the book recognisable but making it also hard to decide precisely whether Okri wants to blame or where he puts the blame⁵⁰². Occasionally, however, Okri throws hints, again through allegory or metaphor, such as for instance in the image of Madame Koto and her children. Less frequently, he is more direct about his concerns but that is the case of one of Dad's dreams where one encounters one of the few unambiguous connections between the fate of Nigeria and colonialism. Dad dreams he has found a new land and, in the imperialist fashion, he makes it its own by writing his name on a rock. But though it is Dad who dreams this land into existence, including its geographical details, he is unable to reverse the process of colonisation; he assumes the role of the conqueror, equipped even with the appropriating tool of writing so as to gain rights over a land, but he is unable to dream the people according to the historical experience that categorised black people as inferior, that is, when white people are dreamt in the role of natives with a colonising force arriving at their land, they maintain their self-importance, contest Dad's right to be there and eventually he gives up the dream. It is followed by another of a similar nature but now he loses the status of conqueror:

I found myself on a strange island. The people treated me roughly. They were also white. Unfriendly people. Unfriendly to me, at least. I lived among them for many years. I couldn't find my way out. I was trapped there on that small island. I found it difficult to live there. They were afraid of me because of my different colour. As for me, I began to lose weight. I had to shrink the continent in me to accommodate myself to the small island (FR, 437)

can bear the responsibility of power, can fight off all the demons of the poor, tame the devils of the rich, ride the colonized air of the country?" Ben Okri, *Infinite Riches*, 29.

⁵⁰² By contrast in *Infinite Riches* Okri refers to actual politicians (see page 145) and makes a direct anti-imperialist discourse (pages 161-162).

The allegory refers, in this case, to the experience of the migrant worker from the former colonies in England. Her/his Africanness (the continent) must be reduced to a minimum as the rate of difference the island can tolerate is small, recalling the image of Azaro turning invisible. The black immigrant is regarded as a threat and so that s/he is less threatened him/herself by the imminence of retaliation s/he undergoes a process of white-washing. Though his/her skin can never be changed, providing the necessary split underlying the superior/inferior system, his/her attitudes acquire the manner of the adopted culture. To Dad's horror in the dream he then turns white, an admonishment to those black immigrants who insert themselves too comfortably into the newfound land.

Dad's dream appears an essentialist lesson on the part of the author who warns his people against forgetting their past. His views recall the fundamentalist position of negritudists and they appear repeated on more than one occasion, for instance in *A Way of Being Free* where he makes dangerous generalising presuppositions: "it seems that the only way that white people can see black people, and begin to accept them, without really having to accept them, is by lessening their internal realities. [...] [T]his is why a lot of white people can know what black people suffer daily all over the world and not be really bruised in their humanity: because they assume black people are used to their pain, that they feel things differently, and that suffering is their unchanging condition"⁵⁰³. When Dad dreams the world, he sees that with the current state of affairs "black people always suffered", regardless of the place in question (*FR*, 492). Okri's admonition is also puzzling considering Okri's own life experience. He left Nigeria at the age of eighteen and since then he has never resided in the country again, and lives in London most of the time⁵⁰⁴. This fact results solely from his personal choices. Okri's personal life illustrates well the complexity of postcolonial theory regarding the postcolonial writer, particularly when bearing in mind that Okri is the son of a lawyer and a university teacher thus making his experience of migrancy quite distinct from that of an underprivileged, uneducated worker.

Dad's two stories are accompanied by another two, this time told by Mum. The first recounts the arrival of white people in Africa, a continent of advanced knowledge. Contrary to how Western manuals of history have it, it is black people who offer whites their ancestral, highly-valued worldview but white people not only forget the source of the knowledge that is

⁵⁰³ Ben Okri, *A Way of Being Free*, 78.

⁵⁰⁴ Okri had already had the metropolitan experience in his childhood when his father took the family to England. Ben Okri lived there until the age of seven, and then he moved back to Lagos.

now theirs but they also set out to murder black people, supposedly to erase the historical evidence of that source (FR, 282). The second tale is that of the white man who did not know how to leave Africa, of his being reborn as a black man and of his discovery that the “only way to get out of Africa was to become an African” (FR, 483). This tale is re-enacted in *Infinite Riches* when the Governor-General is inexplicably seduced by the country, by

the abounding generosity of the land, its abnormal fertility [...] the innocent eyes of the old, the old eyes of the young, the incomparable sculpting which suffering and forbearance made of the African faces, and the sensuality of the air. He poured out a symphony of words about the docility of Africans and their awe of the white man, about their myth-making natures, their praise-singing souls, their touching obedience, their trusting natures, their immense and ultimately self-destructing capacity for forgiveness, forgiving even those who wounded their destiny.⁵⁰⁵

Both stories told by Mum in *The Famished Road*, while entailing a defence of blackness, do however suggest the essentialist position of the African; the idea of the superiority of African cultures is no more than the reversal of the mentality of imperialism and of the superiority of whiteness and it is also discomfiting that the way to liberation is only within the reach of black people or of those who become African in spirit. While celebrating the encounter of cultures in his novels, namely through adopting given aesthetic and literary devices, Okri simultaneously rails against the cultural forms of neo-imperialism in Africa, sometimes with surprising rancour.

Though there is a reference to an imperial past, no word is given as to why Nigerians have been unable to find their national spirit again because Okri is more interested in telling the stories of the effects rather than the causes⁵⁰⁶. In the next passage, a conversation between spirits, the citizens of Nigeria are mentioned as children too, lost after the arrival of whites and as prone to violence as Madame Koto's babies:

⁵⁰⁵ Ben Okri, *Infinite Riches*, 159.

⁵⁰⁶ In an interview he has stated: “there’s been too much attribution of power to the effect of colonialism on our consciousness. Too much has been given to it. We’ve looked too much in that direction and have forgotten our own aesthetic frames. [...] If the perception of reality has not fundamentally, internally altered, then the experience itself is just transitional. There are certain areas of the African consciousness which will remain inviolate. Because the world-view it is that makes a people survive”, Jane Wilkinson, *Talking with African Writers*, 86. Once again a sense of essentialism regarding the superiority of African culture is suggested, supposedly only touched by European cultures despite years of social and mental repression during the colonial period.

‘Strange things are happening to us.’
‘To our children.’
‘They say he is looking for the spirit of Independence.’
‘They say he is looking for himself.’
‘For his own spirit.’
‘Which he lost when the white man came.’
‘They say he is looking for his mother.’
‘But his mother is not looking for him.’
‘They say she has gone to the moon.’
‘Which moon? There are many moons.’
‘The moon of Independence.’ [...]
‘The world is turning upside down.’
‘And madness is coming.’
‘And hunger is coming, like a dog with twelve heads.’
‘And confusion is coming.’
‘And war.’
‘And blood will grow in the eyes of men.’
‘And a whole generation will squander the richness of this earth.’ (*FR*, 167)

It thus becomes puzzling that it is Madame Koto who is chosen to emblemise evil. Her first appearance was in fact quite positive. Madame Koto had impressed the compound when she threw out men trying to wreck the bar. Courage and generosity are combined with an initially healthy financial ambition which Maggi Phillips sees as emblematising the Nigerian worldview sprouting from “an equilibrium between the opposing forces of regeneration and destruction”⁵⁰⁷. This determination and willpower in face of adversity is seen by Maggi Phillips as a contrast to the attitude Azaro’s own family had. By acting within the moral and social frames of tradition they have only succeeded in reinforcing their ineptitude and poverty. Dad is scandalously humiliated as a carrier and mother suffers long street-hawking hours only to arrive home exhausted and with few sales made.

But Madame Koto’s equilibrium is lost as the scale becomes increasingly heavier on the side of economics. It is then that Madame Koto gains the reputation of being a witch (*FR*, 281, 304, 306). Though one must be cautious not to neglect the chronological, geographical,

⁵⁰⁷ Maggi Phillips, “Madame Koto: Grotesque Creatrix or the Paradox of Psychic Health”, 36.

and cultural distances between Medieval Europe and contemporary Nigeria, it is nonetheless remarkable that Martha Reineke's ideas on the phenomenon of witch hunting bear such relevance to the characterisation of Madame Koto as a witch⁵⁰⁸. Bearing in mind that witches were in reality believed to possess demonic powers, the parallel is drawn even closer as the Nigerian view makes the spiritual and the material powers coincide. In other words, the belief in Nigerian witchcraft in our time is similar to that of medieval Europe. Reineke's insights can thus be used to interpret the transformation of Madame Koto into a witch, at least to some degree, for the witch in Nigeria can be a good mediator, the medicine-woman, which she proved she could be too and the figure is also present in *Infinite Riches* through the benign witch. But the strongest argument in favour of this approach is the unavoidable similarity with witch-hunting perceptible in the scene where the Christian congregation surrounds Madame Koto's bar with the intention of exorcising the signs of evil they see emerging from that place, namely electricity. When they prayed "as if they were purging the land of a monstrous and incarnate evil" (*FR*, 375), Madame Koto is the object of their fierce hate for in their eyes, and using the discourse familiar in witch trials, she is the great whore of Apocalypse (*FR*, 377).

Madame Koto is a woman with an unusual social position in Yoruba society. Firstly, she is not married, nor does she intend to get married⁵⁰⁹. Secondly, she does not belong to any family unit wherein male supremacy is by and large still unquestioned, as Dad's behaviour demonstrates. Though Dad comes to symbolise the positive forces in the construction of post-Independence Nigeria, even assuming a Christ-like abnegation and physical torture, he nonetheless has the privilege of expurgating his feeling of powerlessness by thrashing and spanking his wife and son, who suffer no less than he does⁵¹⁰. It is interesting to notice that this frequently violent man towards his family comes to represent beneficial forces whereas Madame Koto, whose physical manifestations of force are carried out in the rightful defence of her property, is viewed precisely at the other end of the pole. Maggi Phillips states, for

⁵⁰⁸ Elsa Pinho has also argued in her dissertation for a similarity between contemporary African worldviews and pre-Enlightenment Europe but with regards to the structuring of time which was fragmented for the institutionalised elite but not for the common people. See Elsa Fedra Moreira de Pinho, "A Africanidade de Ben Okri e Mia Couto", pp. 51-54.

⁵⁰⁹ A mysterious man appears at her funeral who Azaro suspects was Madame Koto's husband. Whatever the case, this man has no relevance in Madame Koto's life and she is always socially regarded as a woman unrestrained by the obligations of marriage.

⁵¹⁰ Other links that reinforce the tie with Christ refer to the division of a chicken that turns out to be enough for multiple guests, clearly recalling the miracle of multiplication of the loaves and the fishes (*FR*, 419) and the three rebirths he undergoes (*FR*, 359, 400-406, 484). On this last occasion and on another to follow (*FR*, 497) he is also either directly or indirectly compared to Lazarus rising from the tomb.

instance, that in “demonstrating how a balanced personality becomes fanatic, Madame Koto also acts as a warning against transgressing cultural morality which, in this instance, concerns the value of equilibrium”⁵¹¹. Thirdly, Madame Koto enjoys unusual success in the midst of a national crisis. As their lives take a turn for the worse, people concentrate their frustration and envy on Madame Koto. In sum, like the women who were the targets of witch hunting, Madame Koto is a woman whose marital status, family situation and economic success put her beyond the range of a phallocratic system. Thus, I find Maggi Phillips to have too linear an approach. Finally, as with European witches, there is a fear of sexual independence which on the one hand annuls the exclusiveness of the male in that field and on the other transforms male sexuality into a tool for women. An indulgence in the pleasure principle on the part of Madame Koto is furthermore an aberration since she belongs in the cultural categorisation of the Yoruba to the group of bird-mothers, that is, of elderly women whose magical powers approach the supernatural so that they can control matters of fertility but are themselves withdrawn from sexual activities⁵¹². The ambiguity of Madame Koto’s character reflects an ambivalent reaction found in Yoruba society, which while admiring strong, independent women, nevertheless demonises them as they are viewed with suspicion and as threats to the community⁵¹³.

While in *The Famished Road*, Madame Koto’s character remains relatively ambiguous, in *Songs of Enchantment* Okri radicalises the character, making Phillips’s remarks sadly correct: “while Okri suggests that attempts to rise above poverty and support for women’s welfare are commendable objectives, he clearly criticises the destructive fanaticism which emerges from those objectives”⁵¹⁴. What seems interesting for my analytical purposes is that as in *Midnight’s Children* with the figure of the Black Widow/Indira Ghandi and in *The Passion of New Eve*, the figure of the monstrous mother is chosen by Okri to embody the negative forces interplaying

⁵¹¹ Maggi Phillips, “Madame Koto: Grotesque Creatrix or the Paradox of Psychic Health”, 41.

⁵¹² I borrowed the term bird-mother from Maggi Phillips, “Madame Koto: Grotesque Creatrix or the Paradox of Psychic Health”, see page 40.

⁵¹³ Ato Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing*, 145.

⁵¹⁴ Maggi Phillips, “Madame Koto: Grotesque Creatrix or the Paradox of Psychic Health”, 43. The same assumption is present in *Infinite Riches* where Mum is portrayed as a non-passive and politically active person (see pages 34 and 68). But as with Madame Koto, Mum’s spirit is broken down by the temptation of fame (see page 76). The Society of Women she organised is equally unsuccessful and again recalling the midnight’s children conference it ends with squabbles and struggles. The symbolic value is also the same as in *Midnight’s Children*, the failure to communicate and cooperate of the children of the newborn nation (see page 77-78). Thus, the old deity that resurrects with this birth is the god of chaos (see page 41).

in the body of the nation, an intertextual reading supported when one learns that Madame Koto is also rumoured to be a three-time widow (FR, 100).

Madame Koto is able to maintain for most of *The Famished Road* a relative ambiguity by balancing the material with the spiritual, bearing in mind that such coexistence is part of generally accepted Yoruba ways and thus not an invocation of the grotesque through the supernatural. In *Songs of Enchantment* however Ben Okri accentuates the mythopoeic tone so that the spiritual and the actual worlds are torn apart. It is in *Songs of Enchantment* that Madame Koto becomes a full witch figure of the terrible sort, mother and lustful woman, hauntingly grotesque and more akin to Mother in *The Passion of New Eve*:

I saw Madame Koto asleep, completely naked, her mighty breasts heaving like gargantuan bellows, her great legs quivering. [...] [I was] overwhelmed by her heated lust smells, by the deep essences of her enormous body stewing beneath the constraints of her convulsive flesh. Her craven volcanic desire made the air demonic. Around her lashed the fury of a lust that had been rising all her life, hurtling her deeper into the powers of her spirit, making her flesh blubbery with the over-ripeness of days without lust and release. [...] It made her centre riper, richer, voluptuous and soft. It made her face mask-like in the solidity of self-control and manipulation. It deepened her command of the psychic centres of men and women and invisible forms of power, drawing to her great body the magnetism of the earth's hunger for fertilisation. And it turned her from a woman into a Queen of nights, protector of the strong, creator of new rituals, guardian of women's forces, controller of witches and sorcerers. She became a mediator between the women of secret cabals and the spirits of shrines drenched with potent menstrual blood, an encounter which fertilises stones and gives birth to new monoliths with faces and features of alien beings. (SE, 140-141)

The characterisation is strikingly similar to that of Mother in *The Passion of New Eve* in invoking the figure of the Mother-Earth, the divine status and the magical power of menstrual blood, thus reinstating the bodies of women primarily as loci of the experience of birth viewed as mythical and mysterious. This passage, however, because it is devoid of the caricatured principle of Mother, can be quite damaging to what the reader interprets as Okri's view of womanhood. But the scene also conveys an intense erotic feel which reminds the reader that this construction is only one of Azaro's dreams. Madame Koto thus awakens Azaro to an unaware sexuality of which the dream is a manifestation. Riding a yellow horse and flying in the air Madame Koto appears in the boy's dreams as a symbol of his desires. Witches being

historically connected to a heightened sexual impulse, it is no surprise that Madame Koto assumes that role. One is reminded of Margarita in Mikhail Bulgakov's novel flying over Moscow and, perhaps more closely because the engraving retains the fearful element, of Baldung-Grien's *Witches' Sabbath* (the witch rides a goat in this case):

Her awesome desire, which had survived the penetrations of dream-sorcerers who clambered up her spirit-body and got locked inside, and who were released only when they surrendered all their powers; her robust desire of years without rich release drove her on obsessively, drove the yellow horse to distraction, as if it too were in pursuit of the great white mare, maddened by an unearthly lust. I watched her go, her face contorted, her golden nightgown flapping and creating agonised noises in the air. And I had no idea of her destination, or who it was that could so arouse her mountainous desire, or who could satisfy it without getting lost, or drowned, or being swallowed up altogether, or being crushed by the weight of her myth, or destroyed, burned to ashes by her volcanic consummation. (SE, 141)

The grotesque used here becomes a device revealing male fear of female sexuality, and of orgasm in particular, viewed as deadly. Kristeva's notions on the abject are also relevant, particularly with respect to the manners of death which are symbolic and not real: being lost, drowned or engulfed. Destruction is thus the synonym of having no sense of orientation because the order the Symbolic provides is questioned as the boy plunges into fantasies of incestuous contours of having intercourse with a mother figure. Indeed, Azaro is one who has *penetrated* Madame Koto's dreams, arousing anxiety fears of being trapped and emasculated. When he does so, she responds in the dream itself with a threat: "If I catch you in my dreams again I will eat you up" (FR, 350)⁵¹⁵.

Maggi Phillips's article discussing Madame Koto as a repository of the grotesque concentrates mainly on the point of cultural adjustment of theory, that is, though Madame Koto does display the characteristics which would have made the character comply with Bakhtinian philosophy, when it is properly considered in the Yoruba context it is integrated in the cultural space and therefore loses the marginal element which would have been crucial to the grotesque considered from a Western perspective. Insofar as Madame Koto offers "an alternative fund of knowledge about the ways of humanity and the cosmos", her grotesqueness plays a decisive contribution to the field of the grotesque in that it becomes a

⁵¹⁵ An echo is found when Azaro finds himself in the blind old man's dream: "The next time I catch you in my dreams, I will eat you" (SE, 104).

precious tool for postcolonialist thought to resist Western ways⁵¹⁶. Though primarily rooted in European vein of thought referring either to Medievalism, the Renaissance, Romanticism or posterior European art forms, the grotesque can be used by postcolonial writers to fight the centre and its neo-imperialist attacks: “If characters like Madame Koto can affect a transformation in our perception by unpicking assumptions about the grotesque, if her monstrous obesity can generate an appreciation of alternative ways of explaining and valuing this and other worlds, then she contributes to an exchange through which one of the most insidious vestiges of colonialism, intellectual superiority, may be broken down”⁵¹⁷. My reading, however, though respecting Phillips’s ideas on the grotesque in African Culture, also points to the construction of the grotesque woman as negative, and thus not fulfilling the goal of valuing alternative ways of seeing.

In addition to the dialogue that the grotesque in the novel establishes with the so-called First World, through Madame Koto it also talks to local people by provoking “thought on the issue of socio-political injustice and work[ing] against the impact on our cultural heritage and sense of social responsibility”⁵¹⁸. What Phillips points to implicitly is the way to the rebirth of the grotesque that Bakhtin had proclaimed dead in the West. As long as Madame Koto preserves the ambivalence which makes her body a locus of life and death and preserves a strong, dynamic link with the earth, she is emblematic of the Yoruba beliefs alive today in a constantly renewing cosmos dependent on the interaction of opposing forces and the concept of equilibrium. In this sense, she is a truly grotesque character: “Madame Koto is a creatrix who initiates a grotesque cycle of destruction; a creatrix who regains, if somewhat involuntarily, the ambivalent balance of life’s forces”⁵¹⁹. The possibility of regeneration is thus laid on femaleness which Okri nonetheless chooses to sabotage by having Madame Koto succumb to financial fanaticism. The reason for this choice must therefore be addressed.

In this respect, Brenda Cooper is the only critic who to my knowledge has recognised that the authorial treatment given to Madame Koto has implications in terms of the politics of gender, which, in its turn, is not dissociated from the issue of the grotesque. One fundamental question prompts Cooper’s inquiry. She has no doubt regarding the “carnavalesque style” characterising Madame Koto, to the point of almost dispensing with references from the text

⁵¹⁶ Maggi Phillips, “Madame Koto: Grotesque Creatrix or the Paradox of Psychic Health”, 45.

⁵¹⁷ Loc. cit.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., 46.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid., 47.

and mentioning only her unusual customers⁵²⁰. I feel such references are necessary however as only through them can one understand in depth the image of the pregnant hag, for instance. Nevertheless, her ultimate question is indeed crucial: to what extent is the grotesque effective, in accordance with its own doctrine, in posing resistance to the Establishment and the established order, in this case, of disorder? In fact, Madame Koto is lined up with the forces which perpetuate that state insofar as her customers gradually assume the identities of the new forms of exploitation. They are businessmen, contractors, exporters, and politicians (*FR*, 220). Madame Koto herself is a businesswoman and thus is meant to share the blame. Her pregnancy is distinguished from that of the Bakhtinian hags as, in Cooper's view, they are deprived of ambivalent potential, that is, that the death Madame Koto carries in her womb does not bring about, in its turn, regeneration. I not only agree with Cooper that such is indeed the form Okri gives to Madame Koto but I would add that in striving to recuperate the myths and legends from the past through which Nigeria has to grow, Okri also revitalises the old Western myth of Pandora and thus reinforces a very harmful gender stereotype for if Madame Koto ever gets to deliver her children, she will release war, disease and famine on people.

Cooper makes another noteworthy point precisely through the grotesque manifestations of the customers' bodies which is that they neither celebrate the making of a hopeful future nor a rebellious reaction against Order. It is, in reality, the celebration of the opposite: the establishment of a new and horrific power (*FR*, 459-460). Anna Smith's interpretation differs from Cooper's and presents a valid point as well. Though the mutating powers of the spirits do represent the dangers of corruption they also materialise a rebellion against suffering which is primarily visible on the body. The mutant spirits thus display the bifurcated path Nigeria faced, towards dishonesty or towards progression, but always its "struggle for definition"⁵²¹. For Cooper, insofar as Madame Koto is the spirits' accomplice, she is the materialisation of the failure of the subversive potential of the grotesque: "the powerful, grotesque woman, who is pregnant, ugly, old and disturbingly, unnaturally libidinous, [is] female sexuality portrayed as dangerous and deformed. Once again, female sexuality and fertility are either overpowering, or are metaphors for the sickness or health of the nation. Reality disintegrates under the weight of mythology. [...] She becomes the

⁵²⁰ Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye*, 87.

⁵²¹ Anna Smith, "Dreams of Cultural Violence: Ben Okri and the Politics of Imagination", 48.

embodiment, the physical symbol of the new power itself, rather than its transgression”⁵²². In other words, an old-fashioned opposition between the sexes, operated through the axis of the same castration anxiety, is the device Okri chooses to illustrate the relationship between the old and new Nigeria, and between the country and its people. Moreover, it is only effective at the expense of demeaning womanhood.

That battle between the sexes is fictionalised through Dad’s repeated attempts to defeat Madame Koto at her own game. The attempts are systematically frustrated for more often than not, Dad leaves home to confront her and he is either detained by some event or she denies him the opportunity even to play the role of her rival. Her might is thus suggested as being far superior to that of Dad’s fighting adversaries which, by assuming such epic dimensions, only enhance Madame Koto’s dismissal of Dad as a serious political rival. That is motivated by her considering him a man increasingly driven to insanity by poverty. Dad’s dementia, which acquires a significant place in *Songs of Enchantment*, is, it appears, the reason behind Madame Koto’s not taking severe measures against him, contrasting with Dad who is continuously plotting attacks on her. Despite the characterisation that makes Madame Koto a representation of divinity and might, she is not seen acting as a tyrant. This could be read as an allusion to the double nature of politicians whose mischievous deeds are covered up but that, however, is wholly inconsistent with the manoeuvres Okri attributes to the politicians of *The Famished Road*. Whether members of the Party of the Rich or of the Party of the Poor, they openly exert their aggression either bullying or striking people.

It becomes clear in *Songs of Enchantment* that Okri is not interested in preserving the ambivalent element of Madame Koto as, in fact, her only major appearance is reduced to the aforementioned passages but in *The Famished Road* Okri, one gathers rather unwillingly, preserves that ambivalence. For instance, Madame Koto spares Dad retaliation (no doubt she could arrange for him to be killed) in spite of his attacks being irritating and practised in public. Moreover, on one of the occasions that Dad lies on the brink of dying, Madame Koto comes to his rescue and saves his life, playing the role of the medicine-woman, (*FR*, 403-405) in spite of their conflict actually having been triggered by him precisely when he publicly accuses her of being a witch by which he only means, at the time, a wicked woman (*FR*, 304). Finally, she is depicted as a woman of emotion, crying when her bar is trashed (*FR*, 225 and 423) and, more meaningfully, on the occasion of Ade’s death.

⁵²² Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye*, 88.

Ade, like most people of the compound at this stage, is terrified of Madame Koto and it is that feeling created towards her that spawns the ensuing hatred. Madame Koto is given moral responsibility for Ade's death because it is her driver who kills him but the episode itself supports the view that instead, she wishes to protect him. Driven to despair after another riot connected with politics, wherein his family loses its home and both parents become deranged, Ade directs his violence towards Madame Koto attacking her with a knife and wounding her in an arm. The women in the bar immediately fall on him like bacchantes wanting to tear him apart. Oblivious of her own injury, Madame Koto shouts that he should not be hurt because his action was guided by madness. She insists on these points, especially on that Ade should not be hurt, and even alleges that some witch has taken over his mind and that she can cure him. It is not plausible that it is a hypocritical act on her part and though no further hints are ever given as to the identity of that witch, it informs the reader that not only her but other people can insert themselves into other people's heads. Azaro is also a transgressor in this sense, invading, for instance, Madame Koto's and Dad's dreams. However, there is only one character that we know has occupied Ade's mind, precisely the blind old man at the end of *The Famished Road* when Ade makes the prophecies about the future of Nigeria. In *Songs of Enchantment* after stabbing Madame Koto the boy runs off and it is then that he is run over:

When Madame Koto got to where Ade lay she brought the urgency of a great mother, hitting her minions with her stick, shouting at the women, lashing the driver till he bled from his ears, commanding her servants to carry the body to her bar for first-aid treatment and then to organise a car to rush him to the best hospital in the city. [...] Ignoring the blood pouring down her arm, her gestures empowered, she urged the women to hurry with Ade's body. (SE, 196)

Madame Koto proves to be the only person capable of responding to the gravity of the situation, "stunning [people] into a sense of responsibility", despite being injured and she is truly concerned as a mother would have been (SE, 196). It is she who holds him as he dies but even then Ade refuses her affection in what is her most emotional reaction in the novels: "Her tears dropped on Ade's face and turned yellow, as if they were bleaching his skin. Ade opened his eyes, moved his head sideways to avoid the dripping tears, and shut his eyes again" (SE, 197). The facial effect of Ade's death is described as the "true visage of a woman hundreds of years old" but the mythical impact of the expression is diluted as one recognises that the impression of sudden aging can be the result of a profound pain (SE, 199).

Despite her efforts though, Madame Koto continues to be viewed as an evil witch, more so even, for when her driver dies that is not seen as divine justice but instead the demonstration of her magical abilities given that in their eyes *she* is responsible for Ade dying but by resorting to black magic she had the driver killed instead. Noticeably it had been just prior to Ade's attack that Madame Koto had herself suffered behaviour concomitant with a witch's curse following what she considered to be someone else's magical action against her car in the form of snails. Though for hundreds of pages she had been accused and ostracised because she was believed to be a witch, she remained apparently indifferent. Only when provoked with an alleged attack on her car did she turn on people; moreover, having just proclaimed herself to be too strong for any of them, it almost gives the impression of divine retribution when in the moments to follow she is crushed by Ade's death and cries in front of those she had just shouted she was superior to. When Ade dies when trying to murder her, she is not victorious though her prophecy is fulfilled and is instead a victim of her own curse. In that instance, as in others throughout the novel, whenever Madame Koto wins, she also loses:

My enemies will turn to stone, will go mad, go blind, lose their legs and hands, forget who they are. They will tremble from dawn to dusk, their wives will give birth to children who will torment them, and some will give birth to goats and rats and snakes. The rock is my power. The sea never dies. Anyone who tries to kill me will kill someone else in my place, will kill their best friends, their child, an innocent bystander, a servant, but they won't touch me. (SE, 191)

The two events in which Madame Koto intervenes in *Songs of Enchantment* reveal the radicalisation of the character, breaking the fragile tension of spiritual realism treasured in *The Famished Road*. As a great goddess, she becomes a caricature and as a crying woman an unlikely mother for Azaro had always been the one she demonstrated to have a special affection for⁵²³. Any interaction between her and Ade had been minimal and therefore the scene becomes less reliable in terms of the configuration of the novels.

⁵²³ I disagree with Elsa Pinho who sees Madame Koto's request that Azaro goes to her bar as a sign of her ambition. Initially it is true that he is asked to sit in the bar because she believes his special gifts will attract customers but their relationship evolves to personal caring. Elsa Pinho sees instead her affection to be a disguise and a strategy to get Azaro to go to her bar. See Elsa Fedra Moreira de Pinho, "A Africanidade de Ben Okri e Mia Couto", 160.

Notwithstanding the affliction, Azaro is supposed to be Madame Koto's adversary as his spiritual superiority will prevent that what happened to her also happen to him: "The road will never swallow you. The river of your destiny will always overcome evil. [...] Suffering will never destroy you, but will make you stronger. Success will never confuse you or scatter your spirit, but will make you fly higher into the good sunlight" (*FR*, 46-47). It is only consistent that when he makes a journey with a spirit and his character is tested that he cannot eat and that he resists food no matter the temptation and weakness (*FR*, 325-339). The immediate reasoning is that Madame Koto emblematises that spirit that lets itself be corrupted by success⁵²⁴. But that perspective is, as I have claimed, motivated by suffering and envy. When Madame Koto first starts to be seen as a witch, when Dad insults her with that epithet, he only means a wicked woman, a woman oblivious to other people's suffering. Her behaviour towards Azaro's family contradicts this view but nonetheless the image sticks. Indeed, the feeling is shown to emerge also from plain ignorance. Though progress is depicted negatively in relation to the destruction of the forest, it is not always so but people, afraid of the unknown, associate it with dark forces. An example is the gramophone that Madame Koto presents in her bar. Never having seen one but nevertheless also astounded by it, they see it as "an evil-looking instrument", fit for "the dances of light spirits and fine witches" (*FR*, 272). Nor is electricity a harmful phenomenon nor, in fact, even a car but because she is the only possessor of those symbols of progress they are disapproved of by the generality of people. Moreover, Okri moves on to prove that when the means of progress are not understood they cannot be controlled and then they can become tools of destruction. Madame Koto's wild driving results from the misunderstanding of how technological advancements work and thus she is no different from the mesmerised people who, on looking at electrical bulbs, do not understand the source of the light (*FR*, 373).

⁵²⁴ The reading of Dad as Madame Koto's moral adversary, through his son, seems corroborated when one learns that Dad will fight for money but unlike Madame Koto it is to support his family. A deeper reading reveals this is a fallacious argument for he is constantly complaining about the lack of food for himself. Moreover, as a rule, and following the social habit, he eats first and his wife and son have to eat whatever he leaves. There is no reference to any thought on his part revealing whether he cares about if there will be enough for his family to eat but his ravenous appetite at mealtimes is, on the contrary, often mentioned. Furthermore, it does not make sense to suggest that Dad will fight to feed his family when his training and increasing hunger determine that his wife and son have less to eat and become leaner as a consequence (*FR*, 366-367). This fact he overlooks though it is in plain sight. His growing hunger symbolises therefore, the emergence and development of a need for social recognition and adulation as if he were a hero, accompanying the dawning and uncontrolled desire for political success for himself.

The Famished Road shows determination in changing Nigeria but it also problematizes it. The positive form of change is embodied by the King of the Spirits, the guide instigating people to move forwards; the negative form is mostly on the side of technological progress which is not progressive at all and has as an immediate consequence the destruction of the forest, that is, of Nigerian natural resources and of the imaginative source of the collective unconscious, thus condemning people twice: “sooner than you think there won’t be one tree standing. There will be no forest left at all. And there will be wretched houses all over the place. This is where the poor people will live” (FR, 34). As the novel draws to a close the same feeling prevails: “I witnessed the destruction of great shrines, the death of mighty trees that housed centuries of insurgent as well as soothing memories, sacred texts, alchemical secrets of wizards, and potent herbs” (FR, 457).

Okri is extremely hesitant to provide an advantageous view of technological advancement and is evidently more in favour of re-valuing tradition, invalidating any possibility of combination between the two forms of change. This opposition is emblematised in the actions of driving versus Azaro’s walking, the grandson of a Priest of the God of the Road. Ben Okri advises against accelerated progress which is wise advice but when Azaro is never seen arriving anywhere, trapped in a cycle of journeys between the spiritual and the material worlds, the reader questions whether his selected form of change actually carries out any change at all. The sense of circularity, reinforced by the metaphors of the *abiku* and repeated rebirth, contribute to a mixed sensation of optimism and pessimism also found in *Shame*. Thus, though some critics do not lose sight of the negativism of Ben Okri’s texts⁵²⁵, others interpret their circularity not as a sign of fatalism and eternal suffering⁵²⁶ but symbolic of the undying energy that enables people to survive in the face of whatever adversity⁵²⁷.

I believe that the invocation of the myth of Sisyphus in this context, of endless repetition, is complemented by that of Prometheus. The reader’s response to *The Famished Road* is probably similar to that s/he has towards the Promethean myth, either emphasising human resilience or the pointlessness of that resilience. Ben Okri himself seems to operate

⁵²⁵ See Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye*, pp. 88, 91, 98-99, 101.

⁵²⁶ See Elsa Fedra Moreira de Pinho, “A Africanidade de Ben Okri e Mia Couto”, 136.

⁵²⁷ The concept of circularity is applied on other levels. Consider, for instance, that *The Famished Road* begins with Azaro being held as a hostage by an officer whose son was run over. Azaro is kept as a substitute of that boy; but Azaro is also a double to Ade and representatives of the *same*, so that Ade’s being run-over completes another full circle. The theme of the double is first presented when Azaro sees and talks to a spiritual double that he encounters in the forest (FR, 66-67).

more in the area of the latter when he has people not distinguishing the Party of the Poor from the Party of the Rich since their attitudes are the same (FR, 194). When the very actuality of brutal events is denied, thus also the power of the memory of the people who should store it but cannot due to its unbelievable degree of violence, then suffering and even massacre simply did not exist. One of the few instances of good technology is provided by the photographer's cameras which prevent people from forgetting and thus from denying the value of their hurt. Nevertheless, the idea that reality only happens when it is recorded is pessimistic since the majority of happenings go unregistered (FR, 183). Therefore the road invokes not only a crossroads of cultures but also of choices, namely between tradition and progress. The road is "the danger of curiosity and adventurousness that can kill the restless traveller. It is colonial degradation, the African past, the universal human condition. It is simultaneously an opening up of the possibility of change" but as Brenda Cooper concludes "[t]his possibility establishes some ironic distance from conservative warnings from the past, even when this ironic distance falters in the face of the writer's own trepidation and ambivalence"⁵²⁸.

Madame Koto and her construction as a grotesque woman thus become material in the ambiguity of *The Famished Road* as far as Okri's ultimate position towards his native Nigeria is concerned. It also justifies why readers are divided in that respect; their response depends, in the end, on the author's capacity in restoring in them the ability to believe. Faith being antagonistic to the Cartesian thought which is characteristic of the Western world, the fact that critics tend to give Okri the benefit of the doubt is demonstrative, perhaps, of its being a value that is emotionally and psychologically yearned for. Readers have to accept as true the principle of resistance that Dad proclaims at the end: "My son, our hunger can change the world, make it better, sweeter" (FR, 498), presented previously in the story of the stomach looking for a person to take over (FR, 80) and particularly through Azaro's hunger strike from which he is reborn stronger than before (FR, 325-339), like "a newborn child" (FR, 341)⁵²⁹.

⁵²⁸ Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye*, 80. A misprint must have occurred and which I corrected substituting "writers" with "writer's".

⁵²⁹ Not only does Azaro experience rebirth, but also does Dad who is also turned into a baby after his fight and "death" with the Yellow Jaguar. More attention is given to this rebirth so as to accentuate the birth which will be at the same time of the political and of the madman. This is part of the description in question: "We had to feed him pap, as if he were the biggest newborn baby in the world. He slept for long hours, day and night. He slept like a baby. He grinned like one every now and then. He howled like one. And he sometimes even betrayed the curious stare of genius that only babies and certain madmen have. For a time he lost control of his limbs and he jerked constantly on the bed. He

The principle of subversion at work could be described as making deprivation not an effect of an external force but an appropriation of that detrimental energy which is internalised and redirected as beneficial rebounding precisely against the origin of harm. That is achieved by maintaining “a sense of exhilaration [on] highlighting the constant miracle of physical things”⁵³⁰.

Most critics however make a conscious choice to emphasise a constructive reading but they are nevertheless aware of the shortcomings the novel has in that area. Renato Oliva sees utopia to be the novel’s strength and weakness: “The sympathetic, anticipatory and utopic nature of the imagination helps us create a new reality. To dream and imagine the future is to begin to build it”⁵³¹. The way he sees it, utopia can evolve into actuality precisely through the restoration of the characters’ faith in the power to endure all sorts of hunger: “Okri is a utopian who has faith in the resilience of the African spirit and in the great dreaming capacity of African art. He believes in the transforming power of suffering”⁵³². This position is somewhat problematic as Ato Quayson’s comments, which are in the same vein as Renato Oliva’s, expose: “If the country is like the *abiku*, the affective status of its history is thrown into doubt precisely because it is trapped in a grid of non-progressing motion. When Okri suggests this, however, it is not to postulate an ineluctable determinism, but rather to suggest that his country has not done enough to transcend the trauma of unending underdevelopment or the nausea of confusion in its unfocused attempts to escape it”⁵³³. This highlights the feebleness of the book’s argument as while it asserts that misery is not a compulsory way of life for Nigerians it cannot point a way out of it and thus the nation falls into a state of *unending* lethargy. The characters, and Azaro’s family in particular, thus become defeated heroes, only a few in “an endless parade of anguished beings crushed and beaten down by daily experiences; yet never completely deprived of hope”⁵³⁴.

This, in fact, might have been Ben Okri’s vision of the world in 1991 but his convictions seem less firm recently. His views on the war in Iraq begun in 2003 indicate that were he to write *The Famished Road* today, the spark of hope would shine not as brightly as his

drooled and farted indiscriminately. He made funny faces and twiddled his great fingers like a horrible buffoon” (FR, 359).

⁵³⁰ Denise Coussy, “Ben Okri’s World of Enchantment”, ed. André Viola, Jacqueline Bardolph, and Denise Coussy, *New Fiction in English from Africa: West, East, and South* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998) 17.

⁵³¹ Renato Oliva, “Re-Dreaming the World: Ben Okri’s Shamanic Realism”, 189.

⁵³² *Ibid.*, 194.

⁵³³ Ato Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing*, 132. Italics in the text.

belief in the ability of the people to survive the systems that dehumanise them is affected: “We ask why have they [the Iraqi] turned on themselves, looted their own museums, and burnt their priceless National Library. The answer is simple. Some have been dehumanised. They have been broken by sanctions, crushed by tyranny and annihilated by the doctrine of overwhelming force”⁵³⁵. This does not come as a surprise when one has in mind that *Infinite Riches* (1998), the third and last novel recounting Azaro’s stories, takes a gloomy turn with visions of a world stripped of its wild life and threatened by nuclear bombs.

Ben Okri’s difficulty in preserving an ambiguity that would allow a stronger belief in the power of dreams derives, in my view, from weakening the feminine role in the novels. There is only one character whose dimension is such that she could carry out a positive transformation, and that is Madame Koto, but by preventing that from happening *The Famished Road* reveals its “inherent masculinism”⁵³⁶. Its male figures are unable to enact a form of heroism that would pass on hopefulness. The most illustrative example is that of Dad whose party of beggars ends up not bringing any improvement to their lives, thus divulging the incapacity of underprivileged people to break the cage of wretchedness. If, as Anna Smith alleges, “cultural experience may be altered through the imaginative dreams of gifted individuals”, those individuals can hardly be found in *The Famished Road*⁵³⁷. The gifted boy in the novel cannot occupy that position because, and in this point I agree with Ato Quayson, Azaro does not appear to have the energetic magnitude of the hero since his travels from and to the spirit world are not willed⁵³⁸. Besides, contradicting Renato Oliva, I also have difficulty in viewing Azaro as fulfilling the part of the shaman, capable of healing the world, as the healing never comes to be. But once again I also find Ato Quayson’s argument lacking in consistency insofar as, in denying Azaro the role of the hero, he gives it to Dad while admitting that his deific and titanic body, as well as his fights, lead nowhere: “efforts are shown to be cranky and severely limited because of the seriously debilitating structure of underprivilege of which he is clearly a victim”⁵³⁹. Unable to reasonably sustain Dad as a satisfactory hero, Quayson moves the epithet to Mum because in *The Famished Road* (but I must emphasise, not in *Songs of Enchantment*) she is the pillar of trust and reliability during times

⁵³⁴ Anna Smith, “Dreams of Cultural Violence: Ben Okri and the Politics of Imagination”, 45.

⁵³⁵ Ben Okri, “The New Dark Age”, *The Guardian* (April 19, 2003): 2 Jan. 2004 <www.guardian.co.uk >

⁵³⁶ Ato Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing*, 146.

⁵³⁷ Anna Smith, “Dreams of Cultural Violence: Ben Okri and the Politics of Imagination”, 50.

⁵³⁸ See Ato Quayson, “Esoteric Webwork as Nervous System: Reading the Fantastic in Ben Okri’s Writing”, pp. 152-153 and *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing*, p. 139.

⁵³⁹ Ato Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing*, 142.

of actual hunger, domestic violence and her husband's successive political flights. But Quayson does not debate the issue in depth for had he done so he would have come to a conclusion similar to the one he draws in relation to Dad, that is, her silent suffering and acute deprivation do not save her family from the misery they find themselves in, hopelessly and repeatedly, like rats on a wheel.

2.4. The grotesque ignored: the misogynist approach to the blind old man's character

Finally I would like to argue that the masculinist approach of *The Famished Road* applies to Okri's demonisation of Madame Koto and not to another magically empowered character who is, nevertheless, not treated as hostilely as the female equivalent. Though one does not know it for a long time, the blind old man is a master sorcerer who seems sadistically pleased only with general misfortune. Only when Dad fights the Fighting Ghost does it become clear that he has magical powers to interfere, namely through the horrid music of his harmonica. He was also able to peek inside people's minds and he does this to Ade and to Azaro, through whose eyes he wishes to see the world again. But what Azaro sees, and which corresponds to the old man's view, is a world upside down (FR, 313). Nevertheless, in *The Famished Road*, he is primarily a cranky and wicked man whose handicap and age make him powerless to the intervention of children, Ade and Azaro, who take him away from the place of the fight despite his shouted protests or lays helplessly facedown in the mud when Azaro runs from him (FR, 287).

Though the blind old man frightens the children, his character comes out much milder when compared to his appearances in the sequel. If Madame Koto is reinterpreted as a huge, grotesque flying witch, it is the blind old man who is accountable for the massacres, also much more descriptive and abundant than in *The Famished Road*: "He had crowded the air with apparitions of our fears, materialising our terrors, converting our cowardice and anxieties into concrete bestial forms that wreaked havoc without any mercy" (SE, 144). The riots which had a political nature derived from the freeing loose of the Masquerades, the traditional Nigerian parades here turned evil. The blind old man controls them and uses them to spread terror and then he strolls among the carnage, the dead animals, the torn-up streets, the damaged houses, ruined huts and fallen trees, "inspect[ing] the evidence of his powers" (SE, 144). He is delighted in "the twisted forms of animals, the contorted shapes of women caught in the

forest, the quivering maniacal rage of his followers and party supporters in their unholy bacchanalian possession” (*SE*, 145).

When he wanders among the dead bodies his formal black suit contrasts with the butchery around him, among which he stands proud and elegant, the old rags of the derelict old man having disappeared. But, through a vision similar to that presenting Madame Koto as a full transformed witch, the reader is given an image of the blind old man’s grotesqueness. This sight of his spiritual self constructs a type of the grotesque totally deprived of any positive aspects. Azaro describes him as a hybrid of bird and skeleton, neck-feathered, and glow-worms and quills coming out of his face. The whole body is horrendous: “He had the eyes of a bull and the feet of a dog. He kept beating his bony wings, with an expression of tormented ecstasy on his bristling face. [...] He had the tongue of a cat. [...] I saw fierce soldiers behind him [...] clubbing men and women in a crowd. They hit the women till they became a mass of writhing worms” (*SE*, 88). The reason for the hideous sight is that the old man is another, the darkest, incarnation of Nigeria, one of the children trapped in Madame Koto’s womb, “a demonic spirit-child of the worst kind, the kind that had developed all its potential for malignity to the highest degree” (*SE*, 146). But Madame Koto is not their/his mother in the sense that she generated or caused this nation to be. On the one hand because on assuming the body of the archaeopteryx the text indicates that the old man is a symbol of an archaic evil, of all the negativity that prevents Nigeria from developing⁵⁴⁰. On the other hand, it is quite meaningful that though both characters are sorcerers they never establish any connection, revealing that they cannot possibly stand for the same thing⁵⁴¹. In fact, the blind old man represents a mythic, abstract and primeval impulse to pure evil whereas Madame Koto, a much more humanised character, stands for someone who has lost control over his/her ambitions.

On invading the blind old man’s dreams, Azaro is confronted with the future of Nigeria, one devastated by war and famine:

⁵⁴⁰ The archaeopteryx is a chief symbol in *The Passion of New Eve* as well, proving it to be a useful image when writers want to elaborate on the issues on birth and origins.

⁵⁴¹ It is only in *Infinite Riches* that a reference appears acknowledging that one knew of the existence of the other. Moreover, Madame Koto confesses and asks for forgiveness for her crimes as she feels her time to die approaching, thus redeeming herself. The old man, on the contrary, is portrayed as a hypocrite in throwing himself on the ground at her death. His intentions are, however, malevolent: “while he was mourning in public, and mourning very loudly, he was seizing power, taking over Madame Koto’s terrain, swalling it into his shrivelled body, sucking it into his public weeping”. Ben Okri, *Infinite Riches*, 294-295.

I saw soldiers stick their bayonets into the eyes of their countrymen. I saw bombs explode, laughing, while limbs scattered about the place in unholy jubilation. Blood spurted from the trunks of palm trees. Limbs, intestines, eyeballs and pulped torsos grew from the earth and writhed and crawled amongst the rain-washed undergrowth. Flowers sprouted out of slit and rotting throats. Mushrooms bristled out of the suppurating anuses of the dead. The battleground became a liverish carpet of sliced tongues and slug-infested hearts. The blind old man turned into a skull, the skull exploded, and blood washed down on the earth. (*SE*, 90)

The graphic horror of the blind old man's dream bears no resemblance to any passage found in *The Famished Road* or indeed to any reference to Madame Koto in *Songs of Enchantment*. The blind old man imprints a mark so ominous that the customary uplifting mottos like "life is a story and a song" (*SE*, 293), "One great thought can change the dreams of the world" (*SE*, 294) or "One great action [...] can change the history of the world" (*SE*, 294), appear meagre incentives. Dad, for instance, ends this story much more defeated and ashamed (*SE*, 292) than in the prequel, after his deluded dreams of royalty are shattered (which no doubt can be paralleled to Madame Koto's aspirations to success but whereas she earned her success, Dad is portrayed merely as a dreamy fool). *Songs of Enchantment* thus ends with more promises of fighting and the evils of fast development prophesised in the old man's dream:

I flew into a world of violence, of famine, of pullulating hunger, with beggars swarming the city centre, with maggots devouring the inhabitants, with flies eating the eyeballs of the children who were half-dead with starvation, with traffic jams everywhere, and people dying of hypertension at their steering wheels; with gases burning in the air [...]; with housing projects built by corrupt businessmen collapsing and crushing to death their inhabitants all over the country; with soldiers going mad and shooting at people, emptying their guns at students, butchering their mothers, while riots quivered all over the landscapes; with the prisons overcrowded and exuding an unbearable stench of excrement and blood; with children poisoned by their mother's milk, the mothers having been poisoned by just about everything; (*SE*, 89)

Paradoxically the dream is imbued with the realistic detail of actuality and divorces itself from the magical or spiritual realistic style characterising Ben Okri's discourse. Because *Songs of Enchantment* unfolds mainly through mythopoeia, there is a danger that the reader

cannot follow the author's intentions of denouncing the evils in the country so that Okri felt the need to compensate with this wholly realistic description. Moreover, this dream of Nigeria's future is in fact a depiction of present-day urban Nigeria, which cripples our hope insofar as the gloomy visions of what could be have already materialised so there is nothing that can be done.

The second part of the dream contrasts with this passage because it evolves along a surrealistic vein, more than actually a magical spiritual vein. It is an allegory of birth and death acted out on the body of the blind old man. Though still heavily charged with negativity, with its emphasis on metamorphosis, dismemberment, consumption and hybridism it is closer to the spirit of the carnivalesque-grotesque but is also complemented with a Kayserian fear which Azaro feels to be intolerable (*SE*, 92):

I was surprised to see a fervent mass of men and women tearing the blind old man's body apart, eating his entrails, gorging themselves on his divinatory head. And when they had finished devouring him, his sorcerer's blood drove them mad and they jumped into the ocean and drowned in a choir of ecstatic voices. The maddened waves [...] deposited on the beach a new thing, a new image, a being, wriggling like a great horrid worm – the blind old man, reborn as a baby, regurgitated from the sea. [...] He had two sexual organs, his prick was monstrous and erect, his vagina was tiny, like a comma. (*SE*, 91)

The excerpt is strangely similar to the end of *The Passion of New Eve*, particularly in the use of the ocean as the great place of birth and the source of our origins, invoking a grand new beginning. This passage, however, positions the image of pregnant death in a fatal cycle wherein Nigerians savagely murder their parent only to have it resurrect as a freakish being, ready to repopulate the empty space with brand new beings. But the swiftness with which the country is re-erected exposes the absence of a real renovation. It is only "a dying country that had not yet been born, a nation born and dying from a lack of vision, too much greed and corruption, not enough love, too many divisions" (*SE*, 91). The hermaphroditism is symptomatic of the vicious circle the nation finds itself in and a symbol of the country trying to give birth to itself, that is, to its destiny. As the country is once again reborn it nevertheless seems fated to rapidly become worn-out, old and blinded by repeated sins.

The baby grows under Azaro's eyes, impregnates itself and gives birth to other babies which will then grow and re-enact the murder of their father-mother:

I noticed at the feet of the man-woman a bizarre birth, a birth within a birth. [...] The man-woman had delivered several babies who were joined at the hips. They were all different, they had few resemblances, their hues were dissimilar, and they were secretly antagonistic to one another. It was truly frightening, this pullulation of babies with different voices, different eyes, different cries, different dreams, similar ancestry, all jostling, all trapped within the same flesh, pulling in conflicting directions. Unable to escape one another, growing at incompatible rates, some dying as others grew fatter, some dragging the corpses of their siblings through the days and nights, feeding off the dead amongst them – this horrible sight made my head swell. (*SE*, 91-92)

It is no doubt a re-vision of Madame Koto and her ghastly foetuses in *The Famished Road*. Here however, the parent is a man metamorphosed into a gender hybrid, adding the element of the unnatural. Moreover, whereas Madame Koto as the mother country is shown suffering under the assaults of her children, the blind old man rejoices in playing his part in the continuation of the process. The perspective is therefore more negative for Nigerians are no longer foetuses but have been born into the world where their progressive tearing apart of the country is dictated by their being dependent on the misery and bereavement of others. Differently from *The Famished Road*, the grotesque parent is conniving and masochistically willing to bring about his own demise, diminishing even further the prospect of a positive change; the country has given up on itself and people are unable to accept their joint past: “their unnumbered legs, their multiple arms and heads, seldom thinking together, suspicious of one another, condemned to wander as one, to build as one, to destroy as one, yet always trying to be separate from one another, always failing, for they were all of one body, one ancient and forgotten ancestry, their destinies linked - in union or division – for ever” (*SE*, 92). Bearing in mind the context that *Songs of Enchantment* prepares, it is with no surprise that the reader witnesses the assassination of Madame Koto in *Infinite Riches* at the hands of her children. Because Madame Koto started to love the poor, she is savagely stabbed to death by the women of her religion *and* by the blind old man⁵⁴².

The blind old man could have become a grimmer character in himself and even in what he represents than Madame Koto in either of the two novels but he is not enveloped in any type of judgements. The structure of *Songs of Enchantment* prevents it by reducing enormously the interaction between the spirits, and especially between him as their most

⁵⁴² See Ben Okri, *Infinite Riches*, 201 and 270-275.

terrifying representative, and the people. In contrast, Madame Koto used to be seen in the bar, talking to customers or going to Azaro's house. But the blind old man is not in this sense a real character, rather only an abstraction or personification of a concept. He is, therefore, not subject to the moral judgements that the people could have made. Only Madame Koto was subjected to that sort of judgement, supporting the reading that there is, in fact, a pervading masculinist point of view.

But these two characters are not the only ones to lose individuality and credibility in favour of symbolism. The compound itself and the people in it are lost in the context and instead an agglomeration of anonymous Nigerians emerges. For these reasons *Songs of Enchantment* provides, in my view, even fewer positive results than *The Famished Road*; the possibilities Madame Koto could have embodied have evaporated, the blind old man assumes a central role as the personification of death (his perambulations among the corpses recall images of Death walking on the battlegrounds of Holocaust camps), Dad is completely alienated and Azaro continues not to be able to organise a noteworthy counterattack. Moreover, the principles of marginality and liminality celebrated by postcolonialism are viewed negatively. Azaro, as well as Nigeria, are stuck in a state of transition. Azaro's words at the beginning of the novel, that "[i]t is terrible to forever remain in-between", continue to be true at the end of the novel and this dreadful barren continuity is still played out in the sequels (*FR*, 5).

In the face of the spirit-child's inability to defeat what in *Songs of Enchantment* could be simply termed evil, one looks for a saving character almost in vain. But Anna Smith's figure of the gifted individual prompts another solution at least for *The Famished Road*, that of the hero, as Brenda Cooper postulated, being the photographer. The hero would then be the artist, making *The Famished Road* a testimony of hope simply because it exists and Ben Okri, and any writer with political and social concerns, the only heroes when everyone else fails. Whether intellectual resistance fulfils our expectations in this situation is any reader's decision but one hopes that some of the confidence he still had when he published the poem "Soul of the Nation" survives in him and in the hearts of other artists and people alike:

The souls of nations do not change; they merely stretch their hidden range.

Just as rivers do not sleep

the spirit of empire still runs deep.

Into a river many waters flow

the merging and conquest that's history's glow.

A gathering of homely and alien streams a tumble of turbulent and tranquil dreams.

Classes overflow their rigid boundaries,

slowly stirring mighty quandaries;

Accents diverse ring from the land's soul

a richer music revealing what is whole;

new pulsings from abroad shake the shores, troubling the sleep of the land's resonant

bores.

But the gods of the nation do not change,

their ways are deep and often strange.

History moves, and the surface quivers,

but the gods are steadfast in the depth of rivers.⁵⁴³

⁵⁴³ Ben Okri, "Of beer, Cricket and Jane Austen", *The Guardian* (Jan. 20, 1999): 6 July 2004

<www.guardian.co.uk>



Paula Rego, *A Fada Azul e Pinóquio*, 1995

3. In the Heart of Darkness: Travels through a Grotesque Puppet Land in Pinocchio in Venice

“Art! art! Beauty! Do you know what it is? Well, my boy, it is a woman’s abdomen, open and all bloody, with the hemostats in place!”

Octave Mirbeau, *The Torture Garden*, 13

3.1. *Classicism versus the grotesque: academia versus carnival and fairy tale versus reality*



he precepts of the Bakhtinian grotesque appear in Robert Coover’s *Pinocchio in Venice* in abundant, even overflowing quantity, and excellence. Opposition, transgression and hyperbole are the very structure of the novel upon which the grotesque imagery develops. The book is organised according to three planes: the story of Pinocchio as established in our collective imagination by Carlo Collodi’s *Le avventure di Pinocchio* and by the 1940 Walt Disney film; the religious plane springing mainly from the figure of Mary and the life of Christ; and the plane of Venetian carnival. As was to be expected the planes do not evolve separately but rather form a unit from which the grotesque spawns in its various forms: language, bodily grotesqueness, images of *parodia sacra*, carnivalistic and carnivalesque instances and *commedia dell’arte* types⁵⁴⁴.

Bakhtin continuously defined the grotesque against the classical novel and in Robert Coover’s novel this opposition deserves from the author a philosophical and aesthetic comment by contrasting the bodies of the characters with their behaviour and desires. Classicism is introduced as the desirable aesthetic and moral ideal determining the conduct that since his boyhood Professor Pinenut has striven to accomplish. So much so that he

⁵⁴⁴ I feel *Pinocchio in Venice* to be an extraordinary example of carnival in literature, of the carnivalesque that is. But in it not only the spirit but the rituals of historic carnival can be discerned. Hence my use of the term “carnivalistic” as well.

willingly (and arrogantly) abrogates to himself the responsibility of becoming a true humanist, a superior being in the arts:

There was a time once, he was still a young man in his early sixties, when he decided that writing about the decline of art in the Western world was not enough, he had to become a painter himself and establish the new classical norms by example. Futurism, expressionism, cubism, surrealism, abstraction, op art and pop art and all the rest: just forms of iconicized naughtiness, when you got down to it, and he felt it was up to him to recover art's ancient integrity, its sense of duty, its inherent grandeur. No more self-mocking irony, no more moral silly-shallying, but true devotion.⁵⁴⁵

His purposes are undermined by several circumstances though: that they are activated not by classicism constituting an ethical and philosophical means to human improvement but rather to please a woman; that they repress and hide a natural instinct towards mischief and cruelty that was apparent in his puppet days; most of all, that the component of the classical body, seamless, closed and perfect, is a notion always already alien to Pinocchio whose disintegration is progressively aggravated so that in his final moments when he comes together with Mamma he has lost his ears, teeth, feet and his flesh has for the most part disappeared.

The opposition between classicism and the grotesque is framed by two other sets of opposing structures that far from being pure dichotomies see one of the terms subversively denying the other its countenance of respectful absolutism. To discuss the theme of the classical versus the grotesque I must therefore address the analogous pairs: academia versus carnival and reality versus fairy tale.

Pinocchio makes his entrance as an emeritus professor from an American university. However, far from being invested with an air of eminence he is presented as an ill and old man, worn out by travelling and jetlag, misled by his failing sight and overburdened with the many bags he brings with him. The return to Venice, the pathetic return of an exile, contrasts sharply with his great academic achievements which include not one but two Nobel prizes and numerous other awards. The quality of his accomplishments is as hyperbolic as the opinion he has of himself and that he expresses at regular intervals, thinly veiled by modesty. When the porter intentionally drops the computer where he keeps his opus magnum (*PV*, 15) which he came to finish in Venice, he is exasperated:

Certain indignities are not, in a civilized world, to be tolerated, even if committed by the infirm. He is not thinking of himself, of course, a poor wretch like any other man, speaking loosely, but rather of that irreplaceable work of art, literature, and social thought of which he has merely been the medium and transmitter, as it were, the porter its temporary custodian – a work of major significance as has already been widely acknowledged, even before its publication, and one deserving of at least a minimum of care and respect. (*PV*, 16)

In Venice he intends not only to write “a universally acknowledged work of art, but also the setting for what he has hoped will be the culmination [...] of his own life seen in just those terms: a work of art” (*PV*, 14). This totally exacerbated view of what is humanly possible is deconstructed on the one hand by the fact that his humanity is debatable and on the other that it depends on a conscious process of ignoring, the existence of episodes that are not compliant with such high standards. From the start, Pinocchio’s serious eminence is showed at least partly to be wishful invention. But if in America he managed to fool everyone, in Venice, the land of carnival, the intrusion of the carnivalesque does not permit the continuation of an identity based on falsehood. He is at first unaware of the presence of carnival so that the refined language with which the professor wishes to express the grandiosity of his feelings is turned comical when juxtaposed with the humour of the situation and the elements involved, notably his nose:

For it was here one day almost a century ago [...] that he, fallen in abject surrender to his own knees, hugged the knees of Virtue herself, and so [...] set into motion a life purified of idleness and fantasy and other malignancies of the spirit, a life worthy, he hopes (and in his heart believes), of those knees he once hugged so passionately, wetting them then with tears of gratitude, his infamous nose running with the high fever of what could only be called redemptive grace. (*PV*, 14)

It is a piteous scene indeed, that of a puppet-boy hanging on to the knees of a woman in such feverish ecstasy that he fails to notice the undignified meaning of running mucus. Moreover, the refusal of earthy passions, wholly in disagreement with the grotesque, demands from him an existence of constant fighting for moral elevation. The woman herself is reduced

⁵⁴⁵ Robert Coover, *Pinocchio in Venice* (New York, Grove Press: 1991) 232. Henceforth indicated in the text with the abbreviation *PV*.

to an emblem: virtue. This attempt at transcending his own humanity, against the immanence that the grotesque stands for, eventually works against Pinocchio, whose humanity was artificially achieved.

Similarly to what happened with respect to other novels looked into previously the physical form of degradation of the grotesque is preceded by debasement shaped as carnivalistic humour. The Professor's ordeal begins with the impossibility of arranging a room for the night. The first attempt to get one is at the tourist office in Santa Lucia station where the clerk, closing the doors, is startled by the arrival of the porter, masked as Plague Doctor, and by Pinocchio⁵⁴⁶. The clerk drops her keys and moves her own mask out of place. This is also a moment of carnivalesque humour:

“Allow me, signorina,” says the porter, kneeling and poking his long curled snout under her skirts, startling the professor perhaps even more than the squatting clerk, who, when the porter shouts out from beneath her, his voice muffled by the heavy canopy around his ears, “Aha! I have it!” merely echoes wheezily, “You *have* it?” and lurches clumsily to her feet, stepping on her hem as she does so (there is an audible rip and, as she snatches desperately at the lowering waistband with her left hand, the professor observes that the poor woman is apparently deprived of its companion) and perhaps on the porter as well, who emits a coarse muffled grunt, something about the unclean hinder parts of benighted blockheads, then emerges with his paper nose bent sideways. (*PV*, 17. Italics in the text)

The deeply carnivalistic moment is a parody of Pinocchio's own kneeling at the feet of the virtuous woman⁵⁴⁷ and the sexual innuendoes, hidden earlier, are now strongly suggested by “it” under the woman's skirts. The scatological references, a female holding her clothes on with one hand so that they do not fall and tripping on other people's feet, and a mask of the Plague Doctor with its nose crushed sets the pattern for the rest of Pinocchio's adventures in Venice which more often than not are misgivings enclosed in laughter. Moreover, the grotesque element is already presented in the composed image of the animal-human *commedia dell' arte* character shoving its snout against a woman's genitals.

⁵⁴⁶ The mention of his weak sight combined with the reference to Santa Lucia points us to the importance of seeing, or in this case, not seeing the trickery of the robbery resulting from the fact that the Professor is also unable to see who the porter and the hotel manager really are.

⁵⁴⁷ The scene is repeated once more when Pinocchio takes Eugenio, dressed as Queen of the Night, for the fairy.

In every instance that his academic prowess is mentioned it is never intended to glorify Pinocchio but is always an opportunity to taint his reputation with an impression of foolishness and to reveal its ordinariness. Referring to the autobiographical work *The Wretch* its boastful nature is singled out, pointing to the immodesty that Pinocchio pretends to himself that he does not have. Eventually the essay developed into a motion picture and a programme guide, sold at theatres to promote the film. The irony of asserting Pinocchio to be “a man ahead of his time”, apart from the fact that he is not truly a man, is revealed in the fact that the financial factor is as important to him as to anyone of his capitalist time (*PV*, 32). The book where he disclaims the denial of “I-ness” on the part of modern and postmodern treatises becomes a best-selling product as well. The situation reflects examples known in every corner of the academic universe of people who on deprecating aspects of capitalist culture make a profit out of it.

Robert Coover makes the Professor an academically believable type by resorting to the terminology of the closed circle (even if “I”-ness is an invented term) but the value of the type is invariably subverted. It is said that *The Wretch* successfully defends the importance of character along with specific instructions on not being naughty and helping one’s ill and poor parents. The inclusion of this prosaic advice removes the impression of scholarly respectability from the book. Moreover, it is particularly ironic that he for whom character counts (*PV*, 33) proves so frequently not to have it: he insults Alidoro and Melampetta who had taken him in and thus saved him from death in a snow-storm (*PV*, 99), he abandons Alidoro in the ruined Veronese church (*PV*, 113), Pulcinella saves Pinocchio from the police assault but is himself caught while Pinocchio, like Judas, denies being associated with the Gran Teatro dei Burattini to avoid being beaten (*PV*, 149) and Harlequin, literally carrying Pinocchio on his back to safety, as Alidoro had done, is also caught and shouts for Pinocchio’s help only to be ignored (*PV*, 154) whereas Alidoro drowns trying to rescue Pinocchio (*PV*, 244).

It could be said that his work and being have been constructed in the light of one purpose alone: to avoid carnivalesque disorder and instincts. But even as he inwardly prides himself of the feat, he finds himself in situations where those instincts are released and disorder prevails. It is in the Gambero Rosso, surrounded by wine and food, that Pinocchio rambles:

[H]e renounced vagabondage and rebellion and idle amusements, and so, through discipline, has acquired that dignity which, as all the world insists, is the innate good and

craving of every moral being; it could even be said that his entire development has been a conscious undeviating progression away from the embarrassments of idleness and anarchy, not to mention a few indelicate pratfalls, and toward dignity. Indeed, he is one of the great living exemplars of this universal experience, this passage, as it were, from nature to civilization – from the raw to the cooked, as one young wag has put it – or, as he himself has described it in his current work-on-hard-disk in the chapter ‘The Voice in the Would-Pile’, “from wood to will”. (*PV*, 36)

The joker is Eugenio who literalised the metaphor of the raw and the cooked when he baked Pinocchio in pizza dough, where being cooked for Pinocchio was hardly a synonym of the civilising process. This process is paralleled by the sophistication of the text so as to be adequate to the grandiosity of the idea, but sophistication is revealed a mere linguistic game when other games, of a humorous sort, are inserted like the word-game of “would-pile” with “wood-pile” and the alliteration in “wood to will”. More importantly, it is at this point that the reader is informed that Pinocchio is turning into wood again in a carnivalistic reversal away from flesh, humanity, will and civilisation towards grotesque metamorphosis. Noticeably, the battle against metamorphosis has been identified by Coover as the basic human fundament⁵⁴⁸.

The metamorphosis is nevertheless prepared by the mechanisms of carnival uncrowning. He is deceived by La Volpe who, disguised as the porter, makes the old Professor carry most of his own bags and walk around the city in an especially dreary night to get to the hotel that was just around the corner from Santa Lucia station. By obeying an impulse, Pinocchio muses significantly, he has been a fool and if he does not find a place to spend the night, given the debilities of such an elderly person, he might become a dead fool (*PV*, 18). As the two of them walk the city’s streets, the porter comments: “The world is made of stairs. Some people descend them and some climb them [...]. Unfortunately we must do both” (*PV*, 22). The process for Pinocchio will be only descending, to lose the throne of the king and to play the fool until not even enough of him is left to fulfil that role. But still at the beginning of the journey, Pinocchio has not realised it yet and takes the porter for the fool instead (*PV*, 25).

Whenever there is reference to his published work, the exaggerated tone with which it is described turns that description into a parody. In addition, the references are instigated by

⁵⁴⁸ See Frank Gado ed., *Conversations on Writers and Writing: First Person with Glenway Wescott, John Dos Passos, Robert Penn Warren, John Updike, John Barth and Robert Coover* (New York: Union College Press, 1973) p. 152.

carnavalesque-grotesque situations. Heading for the Gambero Rosso Pinocchio finds someone he classifies as a deranged drunk regretting his bad luck in the affairs of the heart. In Pinocchio's mind the drunk offers a carnivalesque example by representing disorder in the midst of Order, embodied by beauty, but he also introduces the possibility of a grotesque reading by introducing madness in that world. The man was "a deplorable reminder that even here, in the noblest of settings, loathsome disorderly lives are possible, beauty being no proof against asininity" (PV, 32). In one of his works, with a sly, appropriate title, he had argued precisely in that sense:

Virtue, he had written (the line is now in Bartlett's) in his pioneering transdisciplinary work, *The Transformation of the Beast*, a "lucid and powerful prose epic in the tradition of Augustine and Petrarch," as it was widely heralded, standing as a fortress against the false psychologism of the day (there was perhaps in this work a youthful fascination with beastliness rather than its transcendence, since successfully purged, but it remained to this day the most convincing composite image of the Genius-in-History), *is* sanity. [...] [N]atures *do* remain just as they first appear if they are completely mad. (PV, 32. Italics in the text)

Pinocchio continues to associate himself intellectually with the philosophy of such indisputable figures as Augustine and Petrarch, and even more so if he is considering the matter of beastliness, that is, of his own nature that he forces himself to believe has been utterly subdued. Grotesque beastliness, the absence of human qualities, he therefore derives from the lack of intellectual effort to achieve them, which is to say, from insanity.

The grandiloquence associated with the Professor's scholarly writings is contrasted with carnivalesque-grotesque language which brings together, for instance, the traditional language of academia, Latin, with grotesque motifs. When the winged lion of Saint Mark flies over his head, recalling the childhood trauma that he has come to refer to as the night of the assassins, the creature cries while dropping its faeces: "PAX TIBI – *wurp!* – EXCREMENTUM MEUS!" and "*Hic!* – REQUIESCET CORPUS TUUM!" (PV, 44. Italics in the text)⁵⁴⁹.

⁵⁴⁹ Coover swaps characteristics of the characters as a way of multiplying meanings: Alidoro means "Wings of Gold" but it is the lion that flies, Melampetta is the philosophical beast when the original tale made that a trait of the cricket (now the lion) and the cricket was the voice of consciousness and sensibility but its counterpart is a drunk. In Collodi's story there are two police mastiffs that now are taken over by Alidoro and Melampetta (she initially appears as a guard dog). In *Le avventure* Alidoro is the one who saves Pinocchio from being fried but he is a character distinct from the mastiffs. Coover

The extraordinary variation of the language the author uses ranges from the blasphemous to the comical and from the scatological to the popular. The variation allows not only the establishment of the origin with the people, a fundamental point for Bakhtin, but also the exploration of its grotesque forms. The lion uses a combination of blasphemous with scatological language to degrade the figure of “*il buon dottore*” (PV, 34. Italics in the text):

“You turd! Rotto in culo! Oh! Ah! I’m dying! You head of a prick! I piss in your mother’s cunt! Oh, my head! My ears! Shut up, will you, sfiga di cazzo? By the leprous cock of Saint Mark, you asshole of God, I’ll have you melted down and turned into souvenir gondolas! Where are my teeth - ?! Oh, you whore! I come on you, you sack of shit, on you and all your dead!” (PV, 45. Italics in the text).

The lion’s language on the whole makes of Coover’s version of the cricket a foul-mouthed character with none of the dignity or agility of the felines. Alidoro has just relieved his intestines on the street and the flying lion is unable to avoid the excrement: “[T]he wild-eyed creature flings himself flat out in the turd-stained snow, crying ‘WAAHH-Hhhh!’. Then he springs to his feet again and bellows into the swirling snow: ‘Go to the devil, you ungrateful cold-assed nanny! You cuntless whore! You endless nightmare! Oh, what madness!’ He throws himself at the wall” (PV, 106. Italics in the text).

The “*gran signore*”, as the Gambero Rosso host called him before taking all his money to pay for a gargantuan meal for the hotel manager (the cat), and the porter (the fox), is in this manner obscenely insulted, his person covered with excrement and symbolically also with femaleness and illness (Pinocchio is in reality rotting away), (PV, 33). But the degradation is taken further because it is carried out by the lion who is a decrepit alcoholic creature, already losing its teeth and with its perception so seriously affected by this stage that it hits against the

made Melampetta the female version of Melampo (“Impala”), the dead dog that Pinocchio substitutes as the watchdog of a hen-house. In *Le avventure* appears yet another dog, Medoro, who belongs to the Fairy and who is the one that helps Pinocchio down from the tree where he had been hanged (descended like Christ from the cross). Medoro is the name of a Saracen in Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* (1515-33) who Angelica, queen of Cathay, prefers over the Christian champion, Orlando himself. Orlando is driven mad and as a result the conflict between the two factions is far worsened. Coover, who refers directly to the poem on page 55, recovers the theme of amorous obsession for *Pinocchio in Venice*. Medoro is also revealing of Collodi’s literary sources. It is a poodle, a French dog, and its illustration, with its seventeenth century wig and costume, recalls the French court which is explained by Collodi’s experience of translating French fairy tales. In 1875 he is asked to translate Charles Perrault’s tales but his translations include works by Madame d’Aulnoy and Madame Leprince de Beaumont.

bell tower. Moreover, it had been preceded by an event, smaller in scale but of a similar nature. When he is unceremoniously shown out of the Gambero Rosso Pinocchio realises that none of the others has waited for him and that he has been left lost in the freezing cold. To protect himself he uses his scarf, an Andean llama-wool scarf as excellent as the dignifying rank of an emeritus Professor. He uses it on his head and around his chin *like a woman's shawl* (PV, 39). His Italian shoes, another sign of his position, are ineffective against the cold so he is forced to beg for help from strangers. What he gets in return is not just uncaring unconcern; he is treated shamefully as someone spills human fluids over him. But it is also a comical scene as Pinocchio, as in a similar episode in *Le avventure*, thinks of himself as a geranium being watered. Still it is a scene that renders his academic position, recognisable through symbols of status, as valueless (PV, 39).

Language is a fundamental carnivalesque-grotesque strategy in the process of degrading the Professor. Following the terrifying attack of the flying lion the Professor is arrested for defecating in the street, unable to contain the meal he had eaten early in the evening. Besides the beating, the authorities abuse him verbally even as he helplessly tries to explain that he was tricked, fooled that is, by a gang of thieves and laments the loss of his life's work:

“Ha ha! Don't give us that to drink, you miserable little blister!” they jeer. You *pezzo di puzzo!* You piece of garbage! You shrunken scrotum! You stinking smoke salesman! You gangrenous turd! [...] Look at that beak! Last time I saw one like that it was being used as a billiard stick!” “And bald as a cueball on top of it, the little freak's a whole game in himself!” [...] “To tell the truth, the little asswipe is starting to get up my nose”. (PV, 51. Italics in the text)

The anatomical references (blister, ass, head, scrotum and nose) are once again presented in their relation to health and as starting points for physical degradation even in such unlikely but amusing images as a gangrenous turd (another example of the unlikely combination of medical language with scatology). The exceptional traits of Pinocchio's body are drawn attention to through a game, billiards, which agrees with the word play in “on top of it” referring to his head, “giving a drink”, “to get up someone's nose”, “pezzo di puzzo”, “bald” and “ball” and the alliterative strategy of the “s”.

Professor's Pinenu's classical rhetoric is exposed as pretentious articulation when the character Melampetta is introduced. But the language of the philosophical watchdog, though

still in the spirit of the cricket-lion, carries an exaggerated, therefore made empty, set of philosophical reasonings. A female and an animal, the conversations she maintains with Alidoro unfold through insulting familiar language saturated with encyclopaedic evidence. The dialogues contain political criticism, scatological imagery associated with food and word play (rhymes and words associated for their euphonic effect but semantic implausibility) and redundant scientific support since seldom can the source be securely established:

[C]osì va il mondo, as the philosopher said, if it wasn't the poet - destiny's not to be tampered with unless the Party takes a hand in it, and the Party's hand nowadays is in its pants. So, nothing to do but face whatever comes with a good heart and stout buttocks, and if the evil beggars get carried away, the devil take them; I'll piss on their sandwiches." [...] "You should piss in their wine, Mela, hit the tyrannical swillpots where it most hurts." "The wine they drink, cazzo mio, piss improves it [...]" "When the masters drink pee and call it claret, the wretched of the earth must grin and bear it. But when the masters drink claret and call it pee, then hang the bastards from the nearest tree! I think it was either Pliny or the blessed Apuleius who said that, or else it was Saint John of the Apocalypse". (PV, 57)

The text revolves around its own structure endlessly for if the mention of Apuleius immediately brings to mind his *Metamorphoses*, the Apocalypse recalls the end of the world, the end of Pinocchio's existence at least on account of a Bella Bambina who takes him for a ride in a mechanical device at the fairground appropriately called Apocalypse⁵⁵⁰. Other strategies are the intercalation of Italian and English and idiomatic phrases, at times completed with expressions from the author's imagination concerning given semantic fields like the body (hand, heart, buttocks) and wickedness (evil and devil). Biological functions often receive a special treatment, and in this case the emphasis is put on eating and drinking as well as on the latter's counterpart, urinating.

⁵⁵⁰ *Asinus Aureus* (*The Golden Ass*) as the work is also known is an important intertext in *Le avventure* and, through this, in *Pinocchio in Venice*. The parallels are easy to establish: both Lucius and Pinocchio undergo a metamorphosis into a donkey as a journey of introspection and self-knowledge, are made an ass by others (the slave girl, Fotis, in Apuleius's text), maintain the mind and sensitivity of human beings, are deprived of human language and physically mistreated by their owners, and cross their ways with thieves. Another interesting link can be made with *Frankenstein* through the sorceress Pamphile who creates living men out of pieces of drowned individuals; their members, lumps of flesh, blood and hair were mixed with animal bones and teeth to the effect.

Melampetta, who Alidoro describes as having “a mouth like a brass band [...] and a cunt like a mailbag”, is nevertheless a good friend who will not leave unaided Lido, himself homeless, or Pinocchio (*PV*, 58):

“Melampeto” [...] “Melamputtana! Open the door, you ungrateful diabolectical sesquipedalian windbag, and let me *in!*”

“Aha! Is that you, Alidildo, you shameless eudemonist ass-licking retard? Everything I got *you* to thank for I have to *scratch!* Let you in? Don’t make the chickens laugh! You can go suck the Pope’s infallible hind tit, as attested to by Zoroaster and the sibylline Teresa of Avila, for all I care! Addio, Alido! My regards to your worms and chancres!”

“Hold on, drooping-drains, don’t put on airs, on you they smell like the farts of the dead! Remember who you’re talking to! Your asster will be a whole lot sorer if you don’t drag your vile syphilline cunt-flaps over here and open this gate up! Do you hear me, twaddle-twat? We’re freezing over our nuts off out here!”

“Oh, I *do* remember who I’m talking to, Alidolce, my sweet little bum-gut. I’m afraid your theoretical nuts were harvested years ago, if you feel something down there, it’s probably just boils on the ass for which cold compresses are highly recommended, *vide* Aesculapius’ *Principles of Mycology*, and as for threats of violence, remember who *you’re* talking to, you preposterous old humbug! I could split your hollow toothless skull quicker than Saint Thomas could split a hair from the Virgin’s hemorrhoidal behind in four, in or out of the catechism! No, you can sing all you want, squat-for-brains, you’re just pounding water in your mortar, as Leucippus of blessed memory once said to William of Ockham over an epagogic pot of aglioli, there’s no room at the inn nor in this shithole either, and that’s conclusive, absolute, categorical, and a fortiori finito in spades! So go spread your filthy pox among your misses of the opiates, fuckface! Arrivederci! Ciao!”

“I think she’s weakening,” Alidoro muttered [...]. For her all those citations, enthymemes, postulates, and premises are like a warm nose on her clit, the wormy old gabbler won’t spread without them.” (*PV*, 61. Italics in the text)

The inventiveness of the dialogue is verifiable on a lexicographic level in merging, for instance “diabolic” with “dialectic”, the first to do with the purpose of insulting and the second with the canine’s personality. Popular and foul language continues to be set alongside erudite discourse in the same manner that sacrosanct issues appear in the context of down-to-earth activities, functions or objects (e.g. the Virgin Mary’s pubic hair), at times transgressing in the direction of impious slander (e.g. the Pope’s hind nipple, a grotesque anatomical detail

adjoined in the same expression to the dogma of infallibility). Impropropriety (“peto”, “puttana”, “windbag”, “ass-licking retard”, “farts”, “asster”, “cunt-flaps”, “twat”, “bum-gut”, “nuts”, “shithole”, “fuckface”, and “clit”) and scholasticism (“sesquipedalian”, “eudemonist”, “syphilline”, “epagogic”, “enthymemes”), representing linguistic extremes, blend to create a text of accelerated rhythm and ingenuity. The irreverent aspect is taken even further when the narrator attributes to the saints themselves the responsibility for blasphemy. The carnivalesque is drawn not only from associating inviolable Christian notions with foul language but also by cheerfully violating the bodies of authority figures by drawing attention to taboo parts of their anatomies: anus and nipple.

In my view an authentic Bakhtinian concept is at work here for these apertures do not resonate sexually but as a means of access through which those figures make contact with the world, renouncing an impermeable and unchanging self. The interaction is achieved through one of the chief images of the grotesque: disease. There is mention or a suggestion of scabies, intestinal parasites, syphilis (his and hers), rash, mycosis and haemorrhoids. Nonetheless, the vicious insults, to which are added the violent images of beating and castration, in Bakhtinian fashion, do prove to be celebrations of a friendship which rightly lead Alidoro to conclude that Melampetta is going to give in.

The popular representation of language is another strategy employed by the author, though they tend to be flavoured with the popular style more than actually transcribed from any linguistic reality. Proverbial sayings are both carnivalistic in spirit and in quantity as the text is consistently filled up with them. In the first two chapters alone we find: “life is not a path through the orchard” (*PV*, 16), “he who hurries most arrives last” (*PV*, 16), “[v]olere è potere” (*PV*, 18), “[i]f you can’t save the cabbages, at least save the goat” (*PV*, 23), “saints are more famous for feast days than brains” (*PV*, 23), “as blind as a mole in the bargain” (*PV*, 23), “to reach some places you must cross a bridge twice” (*PV*, 26), “like cheese on macaroni” (*PV*, 26) and “[w]hile the dog scratches himself, the hare goes free” (*PV*, 30).

Idiomatic expressions are a widely represented variation of proverbs. In the same chapters there appear: “make the step longer than the leg” (*PV*, 16), “the devil is not always as ugly as he is painted” (*PV*, 18), “a matter of eat the soup or out the window” (*PV*, 19), “throw the handle after the axe” (*PV*, 23), “lack[ing] a Friday” (*PV*, 23), to have the “wheels out of place” (*PV*, 23), to lack “salt in [the] pumpkin” (*PV*, 23), to “look for the hair in the egg” (*PV*, 27), to “show the rope” (*PV*, 27), “be in a fine leg” (*PV*, 27), “to bend the elbow” (*PV*, 28), and “to make what comes” (*PV*, 28).

In many cases though, to adapt to the circumstances or to provide additional humour or subversion, the sayings and idiomatic phrases are changed: “where there’s a will there’s suffering” (*PV*, 24), “no need to blacken your liver over bagatelles” (*PV*, 26) and “when the horse is given, one must not sound the teeth” (*PV*, 29).

There are also expressions specific to Pinocchio that have mostly to do with wood: “Let’s pick up the old sticks” (*PV*, 22), “stinking joss stick” (*PV*, 50), “twisted little twig” (*PV*, 50), “sawing wood” (*PV*, 94), “sleeping like a little log” (*PV*, 94), “hitting the knots” (*PV*, 94), “[c]aulked off” (*PV*, 94), “[n]othing like splitting whiskers for splitting friends” (*PV*, 144), “[a] little wood [...] will heat a little oven” (*PV*, 158), “[i]f you touch wood, it’s sure to come good” (*PV*, 289), and “[t]hings are bad enough [...] so don’t blow in the fire” (*PV*, 310).

Through carnival the set of values that defines the world of academia is subverted and it is helpless to stop the exuberant and jovial devastation that is brought about. Through misrule the conventionality of this microcosmic universe is disrupted, opening breaches for other, less temperate and decorous modes whose quality is discernible only in the process of becoming. This type of carnivalistic reasoning therefore rejects the presumption of a fixed reality even with respect to a city. Venice is more than simply the necessary setting of the narrative. Pinocchio had come back to Venice to finish his masterpiece and talks of the city with the loving tone of an infatuated man. For Eugenio, Venice’s exquisiteness has also motivated a love relationship with the city: “Ah, Pini, Pini! This incomparable city, this most beautiful queen, this untainted virgin, as a celebrated whoremaster once said of her in his postcoital delirium, this paradise, this temple, this rich diadem and the most flourishing garland of Christendom – *I do love her so!*” (*PV*, 185-6. Italics in the text). To Eugenio it is not just the most beautiful city in the world. It is “a kind of paradise, una città benedetta, set like a golden clasp, as someone has said, on the girdle of the earth, a boast, a marvel, and a show, magical, dazzling, perplexing, the playground of the western world, the revel of the earth – the Masque of Italy! Una vera cuccagna! Pleasure, Pini, is its other name! *I love it!*” (*PV*, 164. Italics in the text).

Such intensity as well as the investment with femaleness contributes to an image of the city that is progressively felt as not an inanimate, unchanging entity. Its inhabitants, and not just tourists, feel lost in its labyrinthine entrails, as if the streets keep changing place. The emphasis on duplicity is a denial of a single identity and the acceptance of a reality closer to fantasy. The poetic eulogy of the flooding also challenges a factual description: “the celebrated lightness of the Piazza [was] made doubly so this bright morning by its own crisp doubling in

the square's limpid pool, this city of endless illusions seeming now to float in its symmetric fullness upon the reflected sky below" (*PV*, 185). For Eugenio, the glorious time in Venice is not that of postcard-like Renaissance beatitude but during the *acque alte* when turmoil rules; when the waters seem a boiling ocean, when waves crash violently against buildings threatening to release them from their foundations, rubbish bins float in the Piazza and freed gondolas make their way into the Golden Basilica. This vision of doom (*PV*, 185) is to Eugenio the perfect expression of beauty.

More than having female aesthetic attributes, the city is characterised as a sexualised being so that Eugenio, in spite of his exuberant homosexuality, offers parodic but nevertheless authentic compliments to Venice which lead him to ecstasy:

"Ah, this thrice-renowned and illustrious city! This precious jewel, this voluptuous old Queen, this magical fairyland! Love of my life and forger of my soul! I wish only to clasp it to my bosom! Una vera bellezza! Ah! Ah! Mother of God, I think I am *coming!*" (*PV*, 202-3. *Italics in the text*).

Later he describes it as a "fabulous house of pleasure, that opulent place for perfect licentiousness, that lubricious refuge of love with its illusion of the credible, its wondrous aura of fairyland-!" (*PV*, 278). Robert Coover's characterisation of Venice is faithful to the spirit of Angela Carter's postulation that space is a woman⁵⁵¹. I find Angela Carter's renowned statement to have an application in *Pinocchio* where it is not only the feminisation of the city that takes place; it is also the body of the woman that is faced as a building in the metaphor of the Blue Fairy's little house. The humanisation of the city works in tune with the grotesque purposes that bring together definable reality, magic and illusion. The text provides an image of the city that makes beauty a synonym of its very essence and, having built that reality, drops it and presents another, wholly contrastive, revealing its tangible and moral ugliness. As the city of masks (*PV*, 102) Venice wears its own mask mirroring Pinocchio himself who, overtaken by physical pain and despair, discloses a face that might or might not be another mask. He sides with the neighbouring enemies and makes rabid accusations:

This infamous city of despotism and duplicity, of avarice and hypocrisy and subterfuge, this "stinking bordello," this wasps' nest of "insatiable cupidity" and "thirst for

⁵⁵¹ Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, 53.

domination,” [...] this police state with the air of a robber’s den, always out after its “quarter and a half-quarter” and “conspiring the ruin of everyone,” this fake city built on fake pilings with its fake trompes d’oeil, this capital of licentiousness and murder and omnivorous greed.” (PV, 102)

Count Agnello Ziani-Ziani focuses on the city’s highly sexual value as well:

“Ah! Venezia! Mother of all my pleasure and profit! [...] Father of my glorious misdeeds! Uncle of my wild oats, sown and unsown, mother-in-law of my exile, and second cousin of my throbbing green-isled imagination! Great aunt by marriage of my melancholic flatulence! Grand nephew of my noble erections and half-sister to my sweet ruin! Venezia! *Veni etiam!* Your errant prodigal has indeed come again! And again! Clasp me close to your bosom as a scrotum clasps its restless testes, let me wander no more!” (PV, 239. Italics in the text)

Venice, once affectionately thought of as the Island of Busy Bees has become instead the home of killer wasps or, at best, the bees are petty robbers making a living out of tourists’ carelessness (PV, 102). This leads to its other denomination, Fools’ Trap, and its heavy emphasis on fakedom, shame and mockery (PV, 102-103). Pinocchio’s grand expectations of a virtuous life are met instead by deception and degradation to which Pinocchio himself contributes. Because everyone appears strange on account of being masked during non-Carnival time, the puppet’s own strangeness is dissolved as one realises that he wears a costume as well: flesh.

In Robert Coover’s account of Pinocchio’s adventures, layers of realities are superimposed, each assuming the role of the deceptive mask to another so that none of them can be proved authentic or invalid. Venice is therefore not *a* city; it is the heart of *three* kingdoms: the Field of Miracles, Toyland and the Island of Busy Bees. The author’s intentions of dialogic multiplicity have a rippling effect within each of the three realms. The bitterest example is that of the Campo dei Miracoli, a fool’s trap to an ingenuous puppet who believed burying money was a fruitful scheme. The episode establishes a correlation between divine intervention and profit that the author decides to adapt to the environment of modern Venice. The miracles that take place now by the hand of the sons of L’Omino are those of industrial development. The Little Man, in the meantime deceased, had bought the Field of Miracles from La Volpe, and aware of its value in the market due to the pure water beneath the land,

made a fortune. Oil refineries, steel plants, petrochemical and electrometallurgical companies became the realisation of the miracles of our times: industrial miracles. The effect of the miracles though is the downfall of the very city that, having its tides changed as a consequence of the construction of new canals to support the industrial complexes, sees its foundations disintegrating. The face of a stunningly attractive city begins to give away to show beneath it the signs of grotesque degradation; the city is falling apart. The sky is shunned by factories' chimneys and the sun turns green. The parallelism with the process in Pinocchio's own body is clear: "pieces of the city split off" and "the walls are [...] eaten by invisible maggots" (*PV*, 108). Venice is presented by means of a multitude of references that express its own multitudinous nature. It is described as a human construct, as a woman and even as an animal for in the morning there can be heard "a fluttering, pattering, pounding, and swishing, as the city, shaking itself, crawls out from under its strange white blanket" (*PV*, 130).

The opening comments on the city already bore the traits of a grotesque city described as a living urban organism as well as in terms of a metaphor of waste which discloses the uneasy composite of historical architecture and modern functionality:

The Stazione Santa Lucia is like a gleaming syringe, connected to the industrial mainland by its long trailing railway lines and inserted into the rear end of Venice's Grand Canal, into which it pumps steady infusions of fresh provender and daily draws off the waste. As such (perhaps it is constipation, [...]) that has provoked this metaphor [...] it is that tender spot where the ubiquitous technotronic circuit of the World Metropolis physically impinges upon the last outpost of the self-enclosed Renaissance *Urbs*, as face might impinge upon a nose, a kind of itchy boundary between everywhere and somewhere, between simultaneity and history, process and stasis, geometry and optics, extension and unity, velocity and object, between product and art. One is ejected through its glass doors as through the famous looking-glass into a vast empty but strangely vibrant space, little more than a hollow echo of the magnificent Piazza at the other end of the Canal, to be sure, severe still in its cool geometry transposed from the other world and stripped of all fantastical ornament, but its edges, lapped at by the city's peculiar magic, are already blurred and mysterious, its lights hazed by a kind of furtive narcissism, its very air corrupted by the pungent odor of the non-functional (*PV*, 20. Italics in the text)

The image of anal penetration literally gives body to a city that maintains its industrial quality, recalling vividly the biomechanoids of H. R. Giger. As a body it is treated with the

appropriate medical instruments but the resultant fluids, instead of introducing protective chemicals, become the means of contamination. This subversion of the customary aseptic syringe which becomes a vehicle of disease clearly derives from the influence of the proliferation in post-industrial societies of diseases such as AIDS. Metaphorically alluded to as the plague, it is mentioned in several points of the narrative⁵⁵², one being specially relevant as it appears in the context of Alidoro's commenting on his sexual life with the "mistresses", that is, prostitutes who are dying of this plague:

"There's a plague in Venice-?!"

"There's a plague everywhere." (PV, 104)

The assertion of its being a world-wide health problem is illuminating. Disease, with its decomposing ability, belongs therefore to the same symbolic field of waste. The vision of this city is dreary almost in the futuristic manner of dystopian science fiction where people lose their uniqueness and where living, conditioned by the logics of cosmopolitanism, is repetitive and mindless, in a sense reduced to animals being fed and producing waste. In the *Island of the Busy Bees*, the idea of bees in a hive (PV, 21) gains a new meaning. The de-humanising interpretation is certainly part of the intended significance of the capitalised expression *World Metropolis* that is bound to bring to mind Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926) with an added emphasis on grotesque bodily processes. The euphemism of *Stazione Santa Lucia* being the "tender spot", the anus that is, through which contact is maintained, is a Bakhtinian image enriched by the additional blasphemous content of the station's holy name. The intended critique, however, can hardly accommodate Bakhtin's positive view.

From another perspective it is difficult to imagine that Robert Coover can seriously hope to sustain absolute dichotomy and preserve intact the "self-enclosed" object that is the antipodics of grotesque becoming. It seems unlikely for if the content of the text is classicist, the imagery is grotesque. Furthermore a subtle but meaningful cycle in the enumeration of the pairs standing for Venice and its suburbs or the industrialised world is noticeable. It begins and ends with a negative pole (everywhere/product) versus a positive pole (somewhere/art) but in the pairs in-between, though preserving the principle, the oppositions are purposefully dubious. It is true that industrial production involves process but process also exists positively

⁵⁵² It is suggested for instance that the Professor's illness is the plague and that it is connected to lack of hygiene. See respectively pages 179 and 78.

in endless other contexts. Stasis, on the other hand, has a strong connotation of idleness, obstinacy or obtuseness. A similar reasoning applies to geometry; if indeed it is the favoured mathematical principle in contemporary urban planning, it has also always been a chief instrument in aesthetic theories. In the latter part of the quotation though, a progressively blurred definition of edges and boundaries is admitted as the depressive outer world suffers from contamination but also from the ideas of the beautiful and fantasy flowing from the centre⁵⁵³.

The emblem of this symbiotic relationship is the statue of San Simeon Piccolo, the dwarf saint, standing on the *other* side of the Grand Canal to greet the passengers arriving at the station. The dwarf is made into a representation of the city's beauty outside its boundaries but the result is another grotesque figure as the dwarf, an embodiment of wide use in grotesque tradition, ejaculates not water, as in other candid Renaissance fountains, but bubbles of waste. This image is revealing of the transformation the elements originating from within suffer when the city expands its frontiers. They do not remain pure and untouched but are tainted by the world they encounter. The process of degradation as an effect of the mixture that travels through holes and canals makes the statue of San Simeon an exemplary model of bodily grotesqueness:

The immense integral Self that is this enchanted city, after all, the Scalzi's baroque façade a kind of Carnival mask, both revealing and deceptive, the popping green bubble on San Simeon the Dwarf rising through the fog with the erotic suggestion of a Venetian double entendre. (PV, 21)

The coterminous existence of the opposing realms of the historical and the industrial permits a constant interaction between them which produces grotesque beings. The grotesque allows a construction of Venice that distances it from the classical, stereotyped view regarded as the "real" Venice, but the distance from a sense of reality is also achieved by the constant movement towards fantasy; hence the comparison of Pinocchio passing through the doors of the station with Alice jumping through the looking-glass. Similarly, the city is like an enchanted place both because of its impossible beauty and also because it is under the spell of carnival. Likewise, Pinocchio is under the spell of the Blue Fairy.

⁵⁵³ Jean-François Chassay reads this passage as a metaphor for the world village and the industry of tourism but I believe the powerful imagery is indicative of more than that. See Jean-François Chassay,

The elements of enchantment, of magical transformations and of the presence of a fairy, that is to say, the components of a fairy tale, have been drawn from Collodi and survive in a modified way in Coover's text. The tale of how Pinocchio met the Blue Fairy maintains the traditional style while subverting it:

(“It all began,” he began), when, one terrifying night, running from murderers, he came upon a snow white house set in the deep dark woods and, knocking frantically with feet, fists, and head, aroused a little girl with sea-blue hair and a waxen white face who would have been quite beautiful had she not been completely dead. She couldn't open her eyes, much less the door, so the two assassins caught him and, after shattering a couple of knives on his hardwood torso, hung him from an oak tree, where, after crying for his daddy, he died. “I still have nightmares about it,” he told them [Melampetta and Alidoro] [...]. “I was up there for hours, blowing about like a bell-less clapper, till at last my neck broke and my joints locked up and my nose went stiff. And all the while that dead girl was watching me with her eyes closed, don't ask me how I know this, but it's true.” Eventually, eyes wide open and grinning like old Maestro Ciliegia on a toot, she staged an elaborate rescue with a bunch of circus animals and some crazy doctors. (PV, 70-71)

The first part apparently complies with the fairy tale tradition from the use of set expressions (“It all began”) to the creation of the setting (a terrible night, a white house, a *snow white* house in fact, and a beautiful white-faced girl who could be Sleeping Beauty in her death-like hibernation). But the dead girl, instead of preserving her beauty, actually displays the frightful paleness of death and the hero does not come to save her but hopes to be saved instead by her mercy in letting him in. Moreover, far from being a handsome and brave prince, he is just a terrified boy-puppet crying for his father's help. In the end, the miraculous salvation that traditionally takes place does not and he is killed. When she *arouses* herself from death, she puts on a spectacular parade so that she can also be reborn in festive but also absurd surroundings. Her rampant behaviour, her grinning smile that is not consistent with innocence, and her assuming the masculine role of the saviour (like the mother in Angela Carter's short story “The Bloody Chamber”) subvert the procedures of the fairy tale. But the most significant twist is that the fairy, who is also the princess of the story, exhibits signs of cruelty because, as Pinocchio realises, he was left suffering for hours before she released him. Nevertheless, the death-rebirth *leitmotif* attests to the evolution from fairy tale predictability to

a Bakhtinian grotesque celebration where the regenerative power is put on the woman, just as Bakhtin did on choosing the old hags as his epitomes.

As the life of Pinocchio unfolds, the singular experience that it has been is enhanced by the fairy tale intertexts where postmodern gender subversion continues to appear. It is no accident that the first night of his return reminds him of the night of the assassins. There are several relevant parallels such as death and a near-death experience (Pinocchio is convinced he will not have the necessary physical resistance to survive through the night) followed by rebirth. The rebirth, that is more of a resuscitation, is literal in the episode of the Fairy and metaphorical in the other instance when he wakes up in his “cocoon of blanket” like Sleeping Beauty (*PV*, 93). This connection is repeated later as Eugenio imagines Pinocchio’s funereal feast and envisions for the Professor a transparent glass coffin (*PV*, 164). Later, when Eugenio attempts to murder Pinocchio by offering his dough-body like that of Christ to the crowd, he actually has had the glass coffin made to receive the remains of the corpse (*PV*, 296). The representation of the Blue Fairy as Sleeping Beauty, or at least one of the Fairy’s embodiments as Sleeping Beauty, is also repeated when Bluebell appears in the exact same circumstances: in an apparent state of death. In his despair, Pinocchio reacts in princely fashion and kisses her tenderly, whereupon she comes to life, jumps to her feet, and rudely pats his behind (*PV*, 274). The story of Sleeping Beauty becomes a central analogy in *Pinocchio in Venice* primarily due to its rebirth theme although through subversion and contiguity to the grotesque its effect is amplified⁵⁵⁴.

Another idiosyncratic element of the fairy tale is metamorphosis, in this case, the transformation of Pinocchio into a boy accomplished through the magic powers of the Fairy who changes reality according to her wishes. It is felt as an enchantment: puppet into boy, straw cottage into beautiful house, new clothes, gold and even Geppetto’s health restored (*PV*, 326). In the closing passages of the novel, the logic of the trope of the fairy tale is still being followed as the Fairy grants Pinocchio three wishes: that she spares the lives of the surviving puppets, that Pinocchio-the-puppet is infused with life (renewing the pregnant death theme) and that physical union with her is postponed no longer. The novel ends with the conversion into reality of the third wish, the equivalent to a marriage in a traditional fairy tale. Here it is a literal union between the two beings who do not just live together (happily?) ever after, they *become* one as he is incorporated into the Blue Fairy’s body. While the form of the

⁵⁵⁴ The story of the princess and the pea is also mentioned in passing. See page 81.

happy end is maintained (man and woman come together), the effects are drastically dissimilar: he is obliterated and she lives on.

It is clear that to achieve an alienation effect Coover resorts to literary sources, Collodi and Lewis Carroll, and to the fairy tale. The crazy doctors, who are also products of Collodi's imagination, make a second appearance when Eugenio requests their help in diagnosing and finding a cure for Pinocchio's maladies (Eugenio takes the place of a female figure, the fairy, in *Le avventure*). The scene is utterly comical as the three of them talk of Pinocchio's imminent death in a casual tone, paying no attention to the feelings of the patient and involving themselves in long and pointless discussions on medical matters. They are perpetually in disagreement and each speaker not only repeats the same idea to exhaustion but also confirms, while dismissing it, the point of his fellow physician:

“[He is] truly between bed and cot! His hours are counted! He will soon be, morto e sepolto, making soil for the beans! That is to say -”

“On the contrary,” interrupted the second, crowding in front of the first, “he is rather, Sir, as the saying goes, more on the other than on this side! È bell’e spacciato! Dead and done for! Furthermore -”

“Ah!” screamed the third, bounding about the room and banging his head vehemently on the walls. “But what’s the moral? *What’s the MORAL?*” (PV, 180. Italics in the text).

The absurd outburst of the third doctor with respect to the morals of death as the patient lies dying is matched by his idiotic violence against his own physical integrity. These doctors are not even interested in preserving their own health, let alone that of others, busy as they are in the empty philosophy of the issue. Their tendency to fight each other's opinions while saying basically the same thing (dermatological cytoclasis, cytolysis of the epidermis and turning back into wood, 180-181) is a characteristic borrowed directly from *Le avventure* but, as in most elements that Coover borrows, he exacerbates them⁵⁵⁵. The twin brothers Dupond and Dupont of the Tintin series share the same characteristics of multiplicity, repetition and comedy that can be found in Collodi's doctors which make them very similar to Coover's own; perhaps it also indicates another area where *Le avventure* have served as inspiration. Collodi himself, as shall be seen in detail below, was inspired by the figure of the physician generated by the Italian *commedia dell'arte*. By making his characters cartoon types, Robert

⁵⁵⁵ Cytoclasia is the technical term for fragmentation of the cells.

Coover is applying the approach of reinventing characters from other fictional sources, such as *Le avventure* and *commedia dell'arte*, repeatedly denying them realistic status.

3.2. Instances of sacred parody: Pinocchio as a Christ-like figure, the Madonna of the Organs as demythologisation of the Virgin Mary and the engulfing Mamma

Venice's duplicity has been shown to exist on several fronts: from beauty to ugliness, from morality to immorality, from old to new, and from human to literary or fairy tale characters. Despite its variety the concept in question is the same: the ongoing fight between reality and illusion, an inseparable carnivalesque pair (*PV*, 91), a prototypical Janus-faced model. There is another city which doubles as Venice for it is also a privileged setting for the confrontation between reality and illusion. In Filmland, Pinocchio becomes unable to distinguish the two of them (*PV*, 91). Feeling life slowly waning, he compares the peace of death to a Hollywood ending and his life, he realises, has had the quality of films (*PV*, 78)⁵⁵⁶.

A film of his life has actually been produced and, as Pinocchio begins to tell it, one expects to hear Walt Disney's infantile tale. However, it develops in the style of sacred parody. The story is told to Alidoro and Melampetta at the moment of their cleaning his body and is articulated in such a way as to confuse that literary reality with the film which appears to be running that very moment. Licking away Pinocchio's cheap veneer, the dogs find a pelt that transforms the man into a donkey. In the film this change also occurs but the setting gives it a whole different meaning. The studio set is an unusual composite of Tintoretto lighting with contemporary elements of the two key Christian festivals: Christmas and Easter. The scene is purposefully built up as an artifice with attention being drawn to the two missing walls and the imitation of a fireplace, with the latter example directly drawn from *Le avventure* where the issue of illusion versus reality is already established. This is an unrefined reconstitution of the nativity scene where all participants are absent but for the baby whose birth is being celebrated. This baby is nevertheless only a parody of baby Jesus; it is only "a cheaply made wooden stick-figure lying in the straw" (*PV*, 80). Pinocchio, the mischievous puppet, thus replaces the holy child. The wooden figure also demonstrates to have different characteristics: he can talk and walk steadily, becoming a scaring and grotesque display both because he is not human and because his movements are not the same as those of a new-born baby.

⁵⁵⁶ For the use of spectacle and namely of cinema in Robert Coover's work see Jean-François Chassay, *Robert Coover: L'écriture contre les mythes*.

Throughout the chapter Pinocchio's self is assumed by several bodies, moving from one to the other without previous notice, in a perfect demonstration of dialogic fluidity. Occasionally he is several personae simultaneously. Jumping off the straw-bed Pinocchio-Jesus rides on Pinocchio-the-donkey, in a picture intended to recall both Pinocchio's metamorphosis into a donkey in *Le avventure di Pinocchio* and the escape of the holy family, in this case reduced to its most eminent member, to Egypt. As is well known, the biblical scene in question was at the root of one of the most popular medieval festivities: the feast of the ass. Hence Pinocchio's assertion that "The public, oh *holy ass*, is never wrong" (*PV*, 81. Italics added).

Bakhtin regarded the humorous manifestation of medieval folk culture as an opposing mechanism against the ecclesiastical and feudal social norm that he referred to as official culture, marked by seriousness. That precise form of folk culture has for its most part disappeared except for a few festivities where its spirit can still be discerned such as in bullfights and the Tomatina in Bunol, Spain⁵⁵⁷. It is therefore quite extraordinary that so much of the medieval folk European tradition appears in a fictional work by an American postmodernist. In the same way that medieval festivities represented the continuity of the Roman Saturnalias, Coover, in a much more deliberate manner, represents one of the contemporary expressions of the same quality that pervaded folk manifestations among which the grotesque assumes a central place. Moreover, by choosing as a background a European setting, Venice, he was able to get closer to the tradition of medieval people as it permitted the permeation of carnival atmosphere and the participation of the figures of *commedia dell'arte* and of their heir, Pinocchio.

The three forms that Bakhtin identified as the manifestations of folk culture are not only present in Coover's novel but they also constitute the pillars that sustain it. The novel itself represents one of those forms: the literature of parody. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance these parodies, which were not necessarily written works and therefore could also be produced by the witty among the vastly illiterate population, appeared in both Latin and the vernacular. Comic verbal compositions manifested a carnival spirit and made use of carnival images. This category, however, like *Pinocchio in Venice*, might be an expression of

⁵⁵⁷ The latter retains an anti-establishment feeling as it sprang up in 1945 as a form of demonstration against the Franquista regime. Its political value is nevertheless balanced against its carnivalesque profile of fighting, laughing, eating and popular gaming. Besides the famous street fights that in three hours use up 240.000 pounds of tomatoes, the festival includes Rabelaisian food contests. The food is cooked outdoors in huge pots.

popular laughter but it is combined with elements of official culture. Largely produced by schoolmen, minor and major clerics or even by theologians, they were recreational parodies of rituals or texts which those learned individuals had a profound academic knowledge of. The Bible constituted a favourite source but *parodia sacra*, parodying doublets in Latin, was concerned not just with the texts but with the forms of Christian cults. However, the scope of *parodia sacra* was wide: from the Gospels to liturgies, prayers, litanies, hymns, psalms, and even wills, epitaphs and council decrees.

Another form, billingsgate, or marketplace insults and oaths, has been demonstrated to be largely and intensely developed in *Pinocchio in Venice* where, as Bakhtin put it, the type of communication established beyond the forms permitted in daily life gives way to new speeches, that is, discourses, whose meanings are new though they emanate from the old forms (RW, 16). The relationship between Melampetta and Alidoro is illustrative of familiar language in the terms Bakhtin devised them: affectionate abusive vocabulary, insulting the divine or authority, mutual mockery and indecent expressions. If indeed Bakhtin is correct when pointing out that in modern familiar communication the carnivalesque freedom of medieval popular language is absent, it is definitely present in Coover's parodying literature and it preserves what he calls the essentials: "the all-human character, the festivity, utopian meaning, and philosophical depth" (RW, 16).

A novel cannot understandably be an example of the third category, ritual spectacle, but it can include it. That is what happens in *Pinocchio in Venice* which has common ground with humorous literature in the vernacular, a form of secular parody of the feudal system here adapted to the academic world and society in general. But it is in relation to its erudite counterpart, *parodia sacra*, that ritual spectacle makes its appearance: with the exception of the language used (and Latin does not disappear from the text altogether), *Pinocchio* is an example of *parodia sacra* as it takes as reference the life of Christ relived by a foolish puppet, which allows the inclusion of the feast of the ass as a ritual absorbed by literature.

The emblematic ritual of this feast was the asinine mass throughout which the public brayed in response to the priest's interpellations. The priest himself brayed three times to bless the community and instead of replying with amen, the people brayed in return. This glorification of the ass is due to its being "one of the most ancient and lasting symbols of the material bodily lower stratum, which at the same time degrades and regenerates" (RW, 78). In a missal from Besançon, France, dating from the thirteenth century, is transcribed an official church letter by Pierre de Corbeil, archbishop of Sens, for a feast of fools. This letter includes

a detailed description of the proceedings for the feast of the ass, more specifically, for the mass. The donkey was led to the reading-desk where it might be covered with a cape, like a cleric. Then a young girl possibly mounted the donkey, personifying Mary holding Jesus, and the donkey's *prosa* was sung⁵⁵⁸. The *prosa* was a composition praising the virtues of the animal, and it was delivered amid shouts, brays and rude imprecations. Singing during the service is a clear indication of the importance of pleasure in the ritual as it was complemented with the bacchic shout *évoché*⁵⁵⁹. This particularity does not constitute material evidence of a thread of continuity between bacchic cults and medieval rituals for Jacques Heers for whom the former derived from a conscious action of the intellectuals who wrote the *prosa*⁵⁶⁰.

Riding on the donkey's back Pinocchio chooses as a topic of conversation precisely the ass motif as a prototypical religious icon in the Renaissance. The parody in his words is inescapable: "the reluctant gait a trigger of passionate spiritual response, the upright ears emblems of devotion and orthodoxy, and the haunches, radiant as halos, more emotionally reverberant than angels' wings" (*PV*, 81). Sometime before this the reader had been informed that the Professor was in fact a world expert in the motif of the ass in Venetian paintings depicting the life of Christ.

Spectacle thus establishes itself as a decisive element of the novel that combines traditional ritual with modern technology and where the feast of the ass represents a link with a historical context while cinema contributes to a certain detachment from a sense of reality. The distance from a believable reality to the realm of spectacle and particularly that of cinema can be perceived by instances such as the cliché of a public always being right but also by the topic of conversation (the Hollywood *star* system – another hint on the importance of spectacle – crossed with big bang theories, *PV*, 79), comparisons (Pinocchio's hair is coiled in the seam of his backbone "like the runout trailer from an old reel film", *PV*, 79), gestures (throwing the pages of the script in the air, *PV*, 81) and Pinocchio's buffoon wisdom which observes that regardless of what an actor does on the scene what really matters is to stay inside the frame (*PV*, 81). Purely dichotomic reasoning issues from the puppet while the donkey generates hypotheses. It is the donkey's brain that discloses the impossibility of such radicalisms: "Is that all there is, then, this monotonous dynamics of inclusion and extrusion, of

⁵⁵⁸ The *prosa* was a Latin hymn sung at masses.

⁵⁵⁹ See Euripides's *Bacchantes*.

⁵⁶⁰ See Jacques Heers, *Fêtes des Fous et Carnavals*, pp. 105-106. Heers is on the whole not favourably disposed regarding a Roman or Hellenic influence in medieval rituals though he does not argue the case at length.

presence and absence (of pretence and abscess, he is thinking, or perhaps the little wooden man, mocking him, is saying this), this timid seizure of shadows, this insensible shying from the edge” (*PV*, 81). Paradoxical thinking builds an intricate network of meanings: a philosophical donkey which is only capable of braying, a puppet who wishes to be a star, and a self divided into two bodies (the puppet and the donkey together incarnate Pinocchio) discussing oneness while avoiding one of its forms, doubleness; wholeness sometimes is masked as doubleness but here radical opposition is rejected. Inclusion is not confronted with exclusion, but extrusion, a more relevant image in the context of forging one’s identity while presence and absence, a straightforward opposition, are rejected in favour of a pair of concepts which are phonetically similar but also more appropriate in that context of self-searching.

The slippage (*PV*, 81) from boy to donkey also takes place from boy to man to simulate the passage of time. But this phenomenon of displacement (*PV*, 81) occurs in relation with the man and Christ, introduced subtly via the donkey reference or in comparisons of a religious nature (the sheets of the script *falling* down recall the sinners at the Last Judgement, *PV*, 82)⁵⁶¹. Not only is time thus represented as a cinematographic trick; the same happens to identities and space. To maintain the illusion of progress, painted backdrops are revolved so as to recall scenes from his life: the Tuscan village where he lived with his father who not only bore the same name as the father of Christ (Giuseppe/Joseph) but also had the same occupation, the fairy mother’s cottage in the woods (the woods allude to the fairy godmother taking the reader once again to the realm of fantasy), Fool’s Trap, Toyland and even a western landscape in an improbable combination of Paolo Veneziano and Bellini’s gleaming talent for religious themes⁵⁶².

The comparison with the Last Judgement is clearly not accidental as Pinocchio sees himself being judged like Christ, except that it assumes a burlesque character. The donkey turns to dust like a witch (another fairy tale character) and Pinocchio sees himself facing a judge who is not only an anthropomorphised ape but one that delivers his sentence as if they were actors in an opera buffa⁵⁶³. The aria that the ape sings, “The Picture That Could Change

⁵⁶¹ When he wakes up in the gondola yard, wrapped in blankets and newspapers, Pinocchio is compared to a parody of baby Jesus. See p. 57.

⁵⁶² Giuseppe is in fact the Italian name for Joseph whereas Geppetto is the equivalent to the short form, Joe.

⁵⁶³ The history of opera buffa is intertwined with *commedia dell’arte* performances. When it appeared in Italy in the eighteenth century it represented a developed form of the *intermezzi*, or comical interludes, between acts of *opera seria*. They aimed to provide comic relief from the highly dramatic narratives of

Your Life”, is a condemnation of a most unusual kind: to be rolled in flour and crucified. In *Le avventure* Pinocchio appears with a dough hat and in one episode he encounters a green-coloured fisherman who, taking Pinocchio for a rare sort of fish, wants to fry him. Already floured all over like the other fish, it is Alidoro who saves him at last. Therefore, *Pinocchio in Venice* expands an idea already present in *Le avventure*, that of banquet imagery which in Rabelaisian terms often evolves from images of splitting, tearing and dismembering; in *Pinocchio in Venice* though, the idea of death performed to enable a new life is ambiguously handled: images of eating (flesh turned into fish/meat) are paralleled with Christ’s supreme sacrifice to save humanity from sin. Moreover, the ambiguity is present in a major mystery of the Christian religion: Christ gives his body to the apostles in the form of *bread* and through that gesture they are saved. The construction of a religious figure as an edible martyr is not exclusive to Christ; another well-known example is St John the Baptist’s head served on a plate during a banquet. Finally another piece of evidence brings Pinocchio and Christ together: the symbol of the fish that Pinocchio is taken for has been a symbol of Christ himself since the days of the early Church.

A significant example of *parodia sacra* is the *Coena Cypriani* (“Cyprian’s Supper”) which travestied the Bible in the specific carnivalesque spirit of *risus paschalis*. Written in Latin between the fifth and eighth centuries it was basically a selection of scenes from sacred texts having as a background or topic the issue of food. It was therefore a comical recounting of Christian mythology from Adam to the Messiah set in a festive environment⁵⁶⁴. Images from the semantic field of eating have therefore some tradition in *parodia sacra*, a phenomenon also verifiable in *Pinocchio in Venice*. Appropriating the words of Christ as he is taken to the place of crucifixion Pinocchio cries: “Blessed are they who turn the other omelette”, reducing the moral teaching to the culinary method of turning omelettes (*PV*, 82). Not that the element of food is not one of primary importance in *Le avventure* but there it is connected with poverty. Having thoughtlessly run away from Geppetto, Pinocchio finds himself with nothing to eat. He complains: “Oh, what a terrible disease hunger is”⁵⁶⁵.

the main opera. The *intermezzi* were performed by actors from the *commedia* who maintained the improvised style.

⁵⁶⁴ The *Coena Cypriani* is also the name by which the second treatise of Aristotle’s *Poetics* is known. This coincidence seems to have passed unnoticed by experts but there is reason to believe there exists some connection as the concern of both is laughter.

⁵⁶⁵ Carlo Collodi, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, intr. and trans. Ann Lawson Lucas (Oxford: Oxford UP, [1883] 1996). This quote appears twice, one on page 14 and again on page 15. See particularly chapter V where Pinocchio tries to scramble an egg but to his desperation a chick flies out from the inside.

Banquet imagery takes on truly gargantuan proportions at the Gambero Rosso (“Red Crayfish”) episode and it is certainly described in an excessive and carnivalesque spirit. Due to a stomach condition the cat could ingest very little: “a few modest portions of mullet al pomodoro, grilled cuttlefish, sea bass baked in salt, razor clams, and stuffed crabs, the house speciality, and finishing with sweetbreads and mushrooms, plus a simple risotto with sliced kidneys trifolato, smoked eels, and prawns with chicken gizzards and polenta” (*PV*, 34). The fox, on the other hand, felt a tinge of hunger and proceeded to consume the food in all its organic variety:

[La Volpe] devour[ed] monumental quantities of tortellini and cannelloni, penne all’arrabbiata, rich and tangy, spaghetti with salt pork and peppers, heaps of thick chewy gnocchi made from cornmeal, tender pasticcio layered with baked radicchio from Treviso, pickled spleen and cooked tendons (or nervetti, as they call them here, “little nerves,” slick and translucent as hospital tubing), bowls of risi e bisi and sliced stuffed esophagus (the professor skipped this one), fennel rolled in cured beef, and breaded meatballs with eggplant alla parmigiana. [And also] a dish of calf’s liver alla veneziana, wild hare in wine sauce with a homely garnishing of baby cocks, beef brains, pheasants, and veal marrow, a small suckling lamb smothered in kiwi fruit, sage, and toasted almonds, and a kind of fricassee of partridges, rabbits, frogs, lizards, and dried paradise grapes. (*PV*, 34)

Pinocchio’s film becomes a parody of the Passion of Christ imbued with strong carnivalesque humour and gastronomic references which, through ridicule, annul the possibility of creating an empathetic effect with the suffering martyr so that the pain is only his, he does not reach the public and fails to save anyone:

[S]narling gendarmes swarm over him, strip him of his imported finery, lather him up with flour paste, and dress him for the party in his tattered old suit of flowered wallpaper, with a silver sash bedizened with bright ribbons bound round his waist and white camellias tied to his ears. Children are invited up from the audience to hammer the nails in, some of whom he recognizes as old schoolchums, who take pleasure in reviling him in the old style, calling him a stick-in-the-mud, pencil-peter, and a woodenhead, pulling his nose, covering his paper suit with graffiti (“HOORAY FOR TOYS!” they scrawl, “DOWN WITH ARITHMETIC!”), and tying strings to his hands and feet to make him dance, as though he were still a puppet and without the dignity of flesh and history. This is what it means, he realizes in his suffering, to

be, of anything, incarnate. The children are clumsy and impatient, driving nails in randomly, some crooked, others only halfway, sometimes missing the nails altogether and hammering his flesh, and complaining all the while about the hardness of his bones and the wood, solid holly, of the cross beneath, which keep bending the nails and making their little hands sting. (PV, 82-83)

The process leading to the crucifixion begins with degradation: he is stripped of his clothes which, on account of their richness, suggest the uncrowning of a king, made into an edible human, and made to put on the clothes of a clownish beggar whose flowery and colourful appearance, though wholly identical to Pinocchio's paper suit in *Le avventure*, gains a new meaning by contrast with the human/puppet sacrifice about to take place. This is another difference between Christ and Pinocchio, the fact that the boy-puppet does not wish to be sacrificed. Nonetheless, he is made into the sacrificial victim, quite similar in the ornamentation with ribbons to the sacrificial ox of the French carnival. In the spirit of carnival the sacrifice becomes a celebration, hence the presence of cheerful flowers of springtime rebirth which replace the crown of thorns on his head, while the subtle reference to holly indicates Christ's own birth. Degradation is completed with insulting and bullying that divest him of the cloak of humanity.

The Passion of Pinocchio might be seen as Coover's rewriting of the episode narrating the encounter with the puppets from Swallowfire's Company. The puppets immediately recognise Pinocchio as one of them, a brother, and welcome him with overflowing joy. But when Coover replaces the puppets with children, he also substitutes the pleasurable feeling for its opposite. Pinocchio's crucifixion is performed as an interactive play where children and even his friends are called upon the stage to act out the hidden cruelty of infancy, in stark contrast with the Christian spectacle of the innocence of children. They swarm over Pinocchio's helpless body like thugs and in their deranged, frenzied pleasure of hurting they remain selfishly unaware of his excruciating pain and only conscious of their own discomfort. In this version of the life of Christ, the "blood-thirsty" Romans are replaced by an even grimmer threat: heartless creatures who subvert the religious construct that has been made of children in Christian-dominated cultures.

The main strategies of this parody are, however, to equate the "son of God" to a badly-behaved puppet also born without the stain of sexual intercourse between a female and a male and to liken Christ's crucifixion to Pinocchio's having the strings nailed to the cross

that controls the toy. From this point onwards the association between the two figures is patent but it unravels in sexual terms, changing a parody, at best a text of subversion, into blasphemous writing. The voice of God talking to his son on the cross becomes instead the voice of a ringleader, L' Omino in *Le avventure*, presenting the spectacle of Pinocchio's death (notably, the voice does not descend from the heavens but rises from below, the earth):

“Rispettabile pubblico, cavalieri e dame!” bellows a voice from below: “Your attention, please!” [...] “Direct from the burning mountains and savage highways of wildest America, we bring you now in living color, speaking loosely, our feature attraction, in a performance more thrilling than the deeds of man, more beautiful than the love of woman [...] the final stirring episode in the Passion of Pinocchio! You will see before your eyes the farewell dance of the world’s most notorious bad boy, this impossible son of an impotent carpenter and a virgin fairy, baptized by a chamber pot and circumcised by woodpeckers, part flesh, part spirit, and a legend in his own lifetime! Right this way!” (PV, 83. Italics in the text)

The dogma of Christ's dual nature is turned into a freakish quality, in the same way that Pinocchio is presented as a hybrid monster and main attraction of this show although, in spite of what he says to himself or others say of him, his duality is not flesh versus spirit; it is flesh versus wood.

Religious offences multiply in the crucifixion scene: the sign above his head reads “star of the dance”, a title that insists on the theatrical and festive character of the event⁵⁶⁶; the solemn sacrament of baptism is carnivalised by being performed with human liquid; and sexual suggestions abound from Pinocchio's peculiar circumcision to his parents' (lack of) sexual activity. The identification of Geppetto with Joseph is evident here in the mention of his profession and in the assertion of Joseph's metaphorical castration paralleled with Geppetto's improbable fatherhood in the absence of a woman's body to generate the child. That being the case, Geppetto, not unlike Victor Frankenstein, claims for himself the godly powers to become a sole parent. In accordance with this perspective Scott Cuttler Shershow posits that Pinocchio is “a parthenogenetic fantasy which wholly effaces the messiness of the carnal, and which also thus distantly echoes the symbolist distrust of the female body and the futurist fantasy of mechanical reproduction”⁵⁶⁷. Pinocchio's mother, the virgin fairy/virgin

⁵⁶⁶ During the procession in honour of the Madonna of the Organs he was paraded as well and another sign, of identical blasphemous and comical intent, was put up around his neck. It read “Ecce Nasus”.

⁵⁶⁷ Scott Cuttler Shershow, *Puppets and “Popular” Culture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1995) 230.

Mary, suggested here in the insistence on a bluish environment (a blue sky and an “empty space, blue, vast, and inscrutable”, *PV* 83 and 84) will therefore be a character developed in the most bloody and organic sense to fight against masculine exclusivity.

The scene of the Passion of Christ is subverted to the extent of becoming a symbol of Pinocchio’s fantasy of intercourse with the fairy, this desire being the novel’s central impetus. Images of piercing and inserting are spread throughout: he is nailed to the cross, the phallic cross is placed into the hole he once made in the ground to plant the coins though his body is the only fruit to have sprung from that earth, and, in addition, it is not just his hands and feet that are nailed; his whole body is studded with nails arousing a feeling of eroticism (*PV*, 83) similar to the contemplation perhaps of Saint Sebastian’s body penetrated by arrows in a composite of horror and pleasure.

The picture is complete with the introduction of the two thieves, played by La Volpe and the blind Gatto, the latter having only one paw nailed through and, on the side of his amputated forepaw, a nailed glove⁵⁶⁸. As if oblivious to their pain, the fox and the cat re-introduce in the text the humour deriving from language play. Making comedy out of Pinocchio’s situation and mental state the fox says “You got the short stick, as one might say, you’re out on a limb – you are, in a word, up the pole!”, the mention of the word recalling the word of God, driving the cat to maddening laughter (*PV*, 84). The talking cross, in its turn, comments that it is cross as two sticks (*PV*, 85) and that Pinocchio, ceasing to be a puppet, was capable of crossing over (*PV*, 84). Complaining about its fixed condition, the cross delivers a long speech based on its wooden body or on human anatomical references which are precisely what it lacks: “I’m dumb as a stump, I’m thick as a plank, I’ll never make my mark, or any other. [...] And I can’t take steps to do anything about it, I can’t keep my nose to the grindstone or listen to reason or kick the problem around, so what chance have I got? I’d be down in the mouth about it if I had a mouth. I can’t even put my foot in it. I can’t show my hand or beat around the bush or face the music” (*PV*, 85).

Moving beyond mere comical effect, the fact that the comment is driven to excess points to the obsession with humanity and particularly with the body. That is also the reason for the sexualisation of the cross, a phenomenon that the cross is itself aware of: “People like to wear me on their chests. I’m vaguely sexy. I have a good silhouette. I stick out, as you might

⁵⁶⁸ Collodi makes this amputation the consequence of Pinocchio’s violent actions: being hunted down by the crooked pair the puppet bites the cat’s paw off to release himself. The villains’ murdering intentions are therefore not so far from the violence Pinocchio is capable of exerting as well.

say. And I stick *it* out” (*PV*, 86. Italics in the text). The desire of the cross, emblematic of Pinocchio’s own, becomes abject paranoia, hoping to achieve an illusion of humanness in the destruction of human life by literally ingesting and incorporating human elements: “I like the blood! I soak it up! I can’t get enough of it! I think: this must be what ‘tasting’s’ like. Am I right? This must be ‘appetite.’ I like the writhing and the sweat: it oils me up” (*PV*, 86).

As the end approaches and darkness settles in according to the biblical narrative, the reason behind the absurd dream is faintly discerned: the cross is an old friend who Pinocchio could have saved but did not. Thus, this has been the representation of his death, and only a prevision of Pinocchio’s who in the dream hoped to gain a second opportunity to rescue Lampwick from death. The fact that he hangs impotent from the cross becomes instead an authoritative reminder that once the situation was different. The dream is a confrontation with Pinocchio’s own fluid nature pervaded with metamorphosis and with his repressed desire for a full humanity which would allow an approximation to the fairy. The macabre dream does not, in the end, work as expiation; on the contrary it opens the way for the guilt and remorse which Pinocchio has continuously pushed aside. Struggling against the realisation of a dire truth about himself, Pinocchio insists he has a heart, that he has always had one, gripping his humanity to that organ. But even as he promises he will remain human under the accusation of Lampwick (Candle-Wick for Collodi) that Pinocchio is going to leave him again to die alone, Pinocchio begins to turn into wood and is powerless to at least embrace his friend, now himself turned into a donkey.

The final part of the dream is truly grotesque as the puppet and the donkey remain crucified to one another as the latter expires⁵⁶⁹. Pinocchio, slowly withering, does not die in the end and wakes up from the nightmare instead next to Alidoro “bawling like a lost lamb” (*PV*, 87). The image of the lamb, one so symbolic in Judeo-Christian theology, does not however indicate a rebirth into innocence but it more likely suggests the sacrifice that will take place later on.

Along with Christ, Mary receives a treatment that draws heavily on the carnivalesque-grotesque and visceral imagery. She is a figure that appears as a gift from Count Agnello Ziani-Ziani Orseolo to the carnival of Venice and therefore her characterisation agrees with the spirit of carnival in its exaggerated behaviour, indecent presentation and anatomical

⁵⁶⁹ The symbol of a crucified donkey is not a new one. Thomas Wright includes in his book a design from graffiti found in Rome. It was made during the early stages of Christianity when the cult still met considerable opposition and it shows Christ with a donkey’s head hanging from the cross. See *The History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art*, p. 39, figure 24.

grotesquery⁵⁷⁰. The Madonna of the Organs, a transmutation of the icon of the Madonna of the Bleeding Heart and taking as an artistic inspiration Bellini's Madonna of the Little Trees is a shocking version that in all aspects subverts, ridicules and embarrasses the original. She is the embodiment of carnival itself, which in relation to her reinstates the etymological root of "carnival", that is, "camera levare" (taking away of flesh). In tune with the count's own behaviour, cursing and dangling his enormous fake penis around

the monumental Madonna of the Organs for her part reach[es] into the scarlet folds of her glistening vagina with both hands and pull[s] out her ovaries which she proceeds to flick on their fallopian strings at the Count's shaft like little pink yo-yos. [It is] not just her heart (which is bright green) [that] is outside her body, but *all* her glands and organs are dangling from her generous flesh like Christmas ornaments: her spleen, kidneys, liver, brains, bladder, stomach, larynx, pancreas, and all the rest, her lungs worn like water wings, her mammaries like shoulder pads, her intestines looping from her rear like a long spongy tail or a vacuum sweeper hose. (*PV*, 239-240. Italics in the text)

Such a licentious display of her body, even of her inner body, is in straight opposition to the view of a woman that is the archetype of female reservation, timidity and humility. On the contrary, this Madonna proffers her anatomy around, particularly her sexual organs, which are dealt with in a playful manner while she is clearly aware of their sexual value.

The comparison to a Christmas tree moves away from the preconception of a suffering Mary towards one of joyful exuberance. Hence the disfavouring of a scarlet bleeding heart for a green one, like the tree, symbol of vigorous nature and a pagan reminder of the birth of Christ. The Madonna of the Organs is therefore a rejection of the construction of a figure lacking human corporeality as a consequence of centuries of moulding strictly based on moral virtues of a religious nature. Hence also the development of a tradition that to set her above regular human mortality (for instance, she is not allowed to die; she rises to heaven) makes Mary an untouchable virgin being. But by making Mary a person not detached from her body and subsequently from her sexuality she is made more of a woman, someone palpable, tangible and accessible. The parody consists in having an equally fervent adoration, as that shown to the Virgin Mary within Roman Catholicism, on the part of her believers who are the participants in the carnivalesque procession: the count who blesses Mary with his penis and

⁵⁷⁰ Orseolo is a canal in the heart of Venice.

the Rabelaisian public that farts in her honour. The focus of the count's speech is therefore her "crimson-petaled gash" (*PV*, 240). The eulogy is delivered in the amorously inflamed tone characteristic of the male infatuation with feminine attributes:

"Heroes have trod this spot! Poets have slept here and signed their ineffable names! Merchants have here lost all their earthly goods, philosophers their minds! Only a few intrepid explorers, venturing into its labyrinthine depths, have returned to tell the tale in their epistles and travel guides of the fatal gift of beauty, the very sight of which sets us afire with pain and longing and sends us plunging, lance hoisted, blind to dangers, into the awesome abyss! Ah, but roses, roses all the way, good friends and figfuckers, so loving and so lovely, nature herself shivers with ecstasy at the sight of this toothsome apparition! [...] [S]he is the answer to our bedtime prayer that *womankind* have but one rosy mouth, to kiss." (*PV*, 240. Italics added)

The parody of Bellini's Madonna, renamed Madonna of the Stunted Kidneys (*PV*, 241), becomes at the same time a parody of all women: earth, land or continent to be explored by men, colonised by their desire, and mapped like a city, like Venice for instance. Armed with guides, men can play the occasional tourist who comes and goes without ado. In another view, it is also a mockery of men and of the blown up adulation they have expressed for women in literature. These poetic outbursts that ridicule the sexual act also pervade the idea that the very pleasure drawn from penetrating a woman so as to experience her beauty is a dangerous endeavour; it is an abyss, it represents a journey from which men might not return because the crimson valley has teeth. This is therefore a representation of the *vagina dentata* that makes all women potentially castrating.

The visceral quality that makes Mary literally open to the world is the selected debasing process which deprives Mary of her cloak of sainthood achieved through the sacrifice of motherhood, and which endows her body with the female sexual attraction revealed in the metaphors of the troubadours. This quotation recalls their texts in its mention of poets, heroes, lances and roses. As Kristeva has observed in "Stabat Mater", the court lady in her beauty and unreachable physicality, which grant her power over men, becomes similar to the Virgin Mary. But even if the appeal is such that men willingly accept the Oedipal curse and emasculating sacrifice, the dominion of theophanic Mary or of the carnivalesque version continues to be drawn from masculinity insofar as the Madonna of the Organs, like the Queen

Hatshepsut or even Madame Koto or Mother in *The Passion of New Eve*⁵⁷¹, borrow the same male emblem to be invested with power: a beard.

Supported by evidence collected by Caroline Walker Bynum and published under the title *Jesus as Mother*, David Williams ascertains there to have been an iconographic style of representing Mary as a bearded woman during the Carolingian period. Williams's interpretation is that the hermaphrodite "is clearly not the sign of a physical state, but the symbolic representation of an intellectual and spiritual concept", that of a bisexual deity⁵⁷². Saint Wilgefortis, who Williams highlights among other grotesque saints, bears significance in this discussion not only as an embodiment of a bearded woman but also as an alternative incarnation of Christ. As a princess she is depicted richly dressed and crowned but hanging from a cross as a punishment, the legend goes, for disobeying her father, an unidentified king of Portugal, who had arranged for her to marry the Sicilian king, a Saracen.

Saint Wilgefortis's crucifixion, like Pinocchio's own, is pervaded by sexuality. On the one hand, as Williams perceptively notes, the crucifixion was chosen over other forms of death penalties as it encapsulated the befitting union or consummation of the woman's body with that of Christ, her elected bridegroom. On the other, the portrait is completed with symbols that traditionally pointed either to the vagina such as the cup, the toad and the slipper, or to the erotic relationship between the male and the female which is conveyed through the visual metaphor of the bow and the fiddle⁵⁷³. The interconnection of Saint Wilgefortis with a sexual psychopathology has even been recorded by J. Hubert Lacey who sees anorexia nervosa as a consequence of "an inability to cope with the demands and fears of adult sexuality"⁵⁷⁴. Lacey finds in historical evidence elements that indicate that Saint Wilgefortis had an ascetic desire which she materialised in intense prayer and fasting. Besides the irrational fear of normal body weight that leads to actions that aim to reduce that weight, Lacey also points out that in some cases the endocrinological disorder that takes place causes a hormonal imbalance that might originate hair growing in the upper lip and chin. Other factors support contemporary medical evidence and historical facts: generational conflict based on a cultural difference (Islamism versus Christianity) and marriage arrangements coinciding with

⁵⁷¹ Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, 59.

⁵⁷² David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature* (Exeter: McGill-Queen's UP/University of Exeter Press, 1996) 314.

⁵⁷³ It must be noted that, as Williams reminds the reader, in the Middle Ages the language of symbols was known by everyone, making the signs used in hagiographic representations accessible to all.

⁵⁷⁴ J. Hubert Lacey, "Anorexia nervosa and a bearded female saint", *British Medical Journal* 285 (Dec. 1982): 1816.

the first menstruation. The monstrous but miraculous state is thus demonstrated to be a sexual response to a social demand: “The ascetic movement with its emphasis on fasting, purging, insomnia, and heroic hyperactivity is all a part of the struggle against the flesh advocated by the early austere Christians [...] [and] an attempt by minds unenlightened by the Renaissance to explain in a series of well-born girls an overwhelming fear of the implications of sexuality and marriage”⁵⁷⁵.



Pl. 106. Baron Sloet van de Beele, *St Wilgefortis and the fiddler*, 1884

Since there is a clear intention of associating the female saint with Christ and considering that she is a hermaphroditic composite, David Williams concludes that the legend of Saint Wilgefortis is a manifestation of the concept of Christ as a hermaphrodite. Androgyny was therefore constructed as a sign that ultimately represented Christ’s dual nature, “the grotesque coexistence of maleness and femaleness in a single body”⁵⁷⁶.

David Williams takes from the start the grotesque as a mechanism working according to the Pseudo-Dionysian principle of *coincidentia oppositorum* so that grotesque imagery, at least in the context of medieval discourses, aimed to signify the opposite of what it appeared. Regarding the specific iconography of bearded holy women he states:

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., 1817.

In the iconograph of the bearded maiden the audience encounters simultaneously the imperative of gender at the basis of identity and knowledge in order to become one with the known, of *knowing from inside*, as Pseudo-Dionysus put it. This is accomplished through the narrative's establishment of androgyny as sign and by manipulation of that sign through the iconograph and the cult to signify a monstrous Jesus incarnation of the One, the *coincidentia oppositorum*⁵⁷⁷.

The premise in Pinocchio's crucifixion is similar; the question of gender is manifestly put in different terms but there is, through the grotesque, an attempt to transcend a given ontology. Disguised as a negation of the human in favour of the divine it hides in fact the opposite endeavour: to move from being a puppet to being human. Pinocchio's monstrosity or doubleness is that in him the puppet and the man coexist. As for the Madonna of the Organs, she reinforces the idea of gender being the axis of identity and knowledge in the sense that while affirming her feminine attributes, the teratological symbolism of the beard confirms the very denial of femaleness. Androgyny, in this case, though stressing the traits of both genders, cannot be regarded as a symbol of oneness since to carry over the appropriation of knowledge the female body must be made a vessel or shell for a male quality. That much is also inherent in David Williams's words. Becoming a visual display of the desire to know from the inside, the Madonna is more than a mere carnivalesque character; she is a carnivalesque portrait of womanhood and therefore, to some extent, a materialisation of the issues Mary

⁵⁷⁶ David Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, 316.

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 320. Italics in the text. A statue of Saint Wilgefortis can be found in such monuments as the Lady Chapel in Westminster Abbey, another in Notre Dame, also in the church of Rincent (France) and a crucifix in Lucca Cathedral. Several engravings appear in Baron Sloet's work and there are some as well in the Communale Library of Lucca Cathedral. The iconography of the saint is still available in sacred texts and statues where she is at times referred to as Saint Liberata. In painting the most noteworthy example is the *Triptych of Adriaan Reins* by Hans Memling (1480) that once closed exposes on the left side Saint Wilgefortis and on the right Mary of Egypt. Saint Wilgefortis is not an isolated case. Other bearded female saints include Saint Galla of Rome (6th century). Saint Galla grew a beard after a short-lived marriage as a way to avoid new proposals, to preserve her widowhood and to be able to dedicate herself to the poor. Nor is the phenomenon restricted to saints. In a fresco in the church of Saint-Savin Eve is shown to have a beard and Venus Calva is a figure with some popularity. In Italy Venus Calva is the protectress of births and is endowed with male and female organs. A close example is the Cyprian bearded Aphrodite, also an androgynous goddess viewed as the Great Mother. Aphrodite has been identified with Eastern goddesses of an older origin, namely Ishtar (Babylonia) and Astarte (Syria) who have been depicted as bearded deities as well. It is interesting to notice that already Ambroise Paré in his *Monstres et prodiges* (1573-85) reflected on the phenomenon of hairy women which he attributed to what I previously referred to as maternal impression; when women stared at the image

Russo saw in the Bakhtinian grotesque regarding women. I shall take this argument further later in this chapter towards a different conclusion.

In *Pinocchio parodia sacra* represents a process evolving from sacredness to humanness, to womanhood and to sexual ambivalence if not freakery. Nevertheless, as with the phenomenon of bearded ladies, this Mary is extremely attractive to male participants who, in an ultimate carnivalistic liberty, line up to kiss her genital lips where they can taste a rum and holy water-savoured vaginal liquid, a beverage symbolising the union of drunken joy and sacred severity, carnival and lent, flowing from the woman's fecund spring⁵⁷⁸. This sort of stereotype does in fact give credit to Mary Russo's fears that the grotesque can be a deceitful strategy to incarcerate women in cultural signs, instead of evoking the liberty that it publicises.

The Madonna of the Organs exerts over men a further dominion derived from her body though not on account of her beauty. She is the double and opposite of Galatea, the classical icon of the closed, alabaster-white, perfect man-made woman. However, the issue of the exhibitionist, sexed woman opens the way to considerations of pornography and consequently to the discussion over whether she is the mistress of her body or instead if it becomes an instrument of pleasure for the male gaze. The Madonna's pornographic parade resorts neither to the intentional depreciation of the feminine, nor does it have a physically violent side. Nevertheless, it is not a purely voyeuristic activity (a metaphorical rape) for she can be seen but also fondled and licked for the pleasure of men alone. The Madonna remains trapped in iconisation; she has merely travelled from one form of the myth to another: the virgin becomes the whore. Exiled from introspection she is tossed into the territory of dehumanisation. One recalls Angela Carter's often quoted remarks on female archetypes or myths, namely the virgin and the mother which she regards as "consolatory nonsense"⁵⁷⁹. Mythical representations are not disadvantageous to women alone as men are deprived of individualisation as well:

[S]omewhere in the fear of rape is a more than merely physical terror of hurt and humiliation – a fear of psychic disintegration, of an essential dismemberment, a fear of a loss

of Saint John covered in sheep skin during sexual relations they might conceive daughters that embodied the fervour of their mothers' gaze.

⁵⁷⁸ The case being that Robert Coover's text cannot be considered *stricto sensu* a carnivalistic production, as it is not inserted into a social and seasonal spirit of carnival as was that of the Renaissance or the period preceding it, the author must be aware of the offensive potential of the imagery he creates but his purpose, I believe, is strongly akin to that spirit and does not aim to offend *per se*. Hence, my choosing the word "liberty" in detriment of "offence".

or disruption of the self which is not confined to the victim alone. Since all pornography derives directly from myth, it follows that its heroes and heroines, from the most gross to the most sophisticated, are mythic abstractions, heroes and heroines of dimension and capacity. Any glimpse of a real man or a real woman is absent from these representations of the archetypal male and female.⁵⁸⁰

The anonymity that derives from the context of pornography seems at first to create an egalitarian encounter. That however is not the case insofar as pornography, as personalised sexuality, does not exist, as Angela Carter put it, in a vacuum⁵⁸¹. He is One, she is No-one. In pornography individuals might be absent but the social and economic ranking of gender is for that very reason overvalued as the only device at work. “Flesh comes to us out of history; so does the repression and taboo that governs our experience of flesh”, claimed Carter⁵⁸². As one of the means the established male-dominated culture has to strengthen its structure, pornography necessarily re-produces the negativity of femininity constructed by history and retained in myths. Angela Carter’s ultimate argument in *The Sadeian Woman* is that the Marquis de Sade’s demystifying of the conventional roles of women in society exposed the underlying issue of suffering hidden beneath the cloak of sanctification. By bringing into existence “a museum of woman-monsters, [by] [...] cut[ting] up the bodies of women and reassembl[ing] them in the shapes of his own delirium [...] [Sade] renews all the ancient wounds, every one, and makes them bleed again as if they will never stop bleeding”⁵⁸³. In his literary worlds women were submitted to painful roles but they were also given territory, which Carter calls a hole in the text, to be those who cause suffering because that is their desire and not because they were asked to by men, which would only be the fulfilment of the master’s orders. By conceiving violence in its extreme, Sade pointed nonetheless to a sort of sexuality that did not intend to be a political statement in favour of a feminine sexuality but did not disavow it either.

This reading of Sade’s fiction becomes the point of departure for Carter to conceptualise the idea of the moral pornographer. Not being the accurate characterisation of Sade, the moral pornographer would be an artist in whose work men and women indulged in their sexuality without restriction thus becoming illustrative of a model of relations between

⁵⁷⁹ Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (London: Virago, 1979) 5.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁸¹ See Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, p. 11.

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*, 11.

the sexes in which there was no dominion of one over the other. Implicitly the moral pornographer would be making an assessment of the existing sexual pattern of power relations. Though Angela Carter referred to the moral pornographer as a male, the role such an individual plays can be, it seems to me, as aptly carried out by women. Carter herself approached the subject by not refraining in her novels from including sexually explicit descriptions, often evolving in violent parameters, and by glimpsing utopian worlds where women have access to sexual license, though the matter of dominion is always tense and not successfully resolved in every case.

I believe Robert Coover cannot be considered a moral pornographer. His Madonna's pleasure is not an issue, only that of her spectators. By this imbalance it is assumed that Coover has no intention to criticise the conservative relationship between the sexes but merely to reproduce it in a carnivalistic environment that appears to reduce the politics of gender to a light-hearted topic. However this perspective is contradicted by the subversive character of carnival. Robert Coover did not create a woman who is de-personalised, anonymous and a mere abstraction of flesh. The Madonna is a caricature of the Virgin, a carnival character over what she represents one can laugh. Therefore this is not a situation when one laughs at the body of this woman but at *Woman, a man-invented myth*. It becomes clear that the underlying issues involved are not alien to Coover insofar as he had undertaken a social and literary jeu d'esprit on the genre of pornography already in 1982 with *Spanking the Maid*, a work that evolves from the writer's interpretation of sadeian ideology⁵⁸⁴.

In the world of pornography sex is not a close kin of eroticism. Carter explains this phenomenon with a simple equation: if "flesh plus skin equals sensuality, then flesh minus skin equals meat"⁵⁸⁵. Her reasoning then, one adjusted to the Madonna of the Organs, is that pleasure is not of a sensuous nature but that it refers to matter. Pornography is thus transported to the anatomy theatre. Cecil Helman rightly comments that quite distinct from erotic art "the true parallel of dissection, as an esoteric form of performance art, is pornography"⁵⁸⁶. Coover's Madonna belongs in fact to the historical tradition of anatomical study which at least from the Renaissance onwards tried to encapsulate the body's aesthetic and theological dimensions. The humanist reasoning implicit in Philip Melancthon's words in

⁵⁸³ Ibid., 25-6.

⁵⁸⁴ See the very interesting comments by Paul Maltby, *Dissident Postmodernists: Barthelme, Coover, Pynchon* and Linda S. Kauffman, *Bad Girls and Sick Boys: Fantasies in Contemporary Art and Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: California UP) 1998.

⁵⁸⁵ Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, 138.

1540 reveal the scientific and philosophical intentions of the endeavour understood both as art and medical act:

Anatomical learning must not be neglected in understanding why it should be so useful to know about fabrication [*aedificium*] of the human body. It is indeed something worthy of man to scrutinize nature and not to despise the wonderful workmanship [*opificci*] that is this world, put together with such skill [*arte*] that resembles a theatre and informs us of God and His will. But it is especially appropriate and profitable for ourselves to scrutinize the whole series, shapes, layout, powers and functions of each of the parts. They formerly told of an oracle, ‘Know Thyself’, which though filled with warning, signals this aspiration, namely that we should examine all that is admirable within ourselves and that constitutes the source of many of our actions. Since our actions are directed towards wisdom and justice, and true wisdom is the recognition of God and the consideration of Nature, one must admit that one must learn anatomy, through which the cause of many actions and changes are made visible.⁵⁸⁷

What David Williams called the imperative of knowledge is supported by Melanchthon. This knowledge made of the dissecting surgeons masters, people who had a sacerdotal stature because they disclosed God’s greatness to the world. In the anatomy theatre they borrowed some of that divine power because they acted as God’s performers. During the Renaissance the dissecting spectacle was in fact a public event accessible to all curious minds. Meaningfully, in Holland in the seventeenth century dissection was included in the programme of Carnival’s recreations. The abundance of paintings, particularly originating from Holland, must therefore be understood as part of the general view of the surgeons as masters⁵⁸⁸. Their sharing of God’s mysterious ways with the people is one of the meanings of Rembrandt’s famous *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolae Tulp* (1632) but also of previous works such as *Mystery and Communalism of Barbers and Surgeons of London* (c. 1580) possibly by Nicholas Hilliard and *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Sebastien Egbertsz* (1601-3) by Aert Pietersz. But Rembrandt set the tone for the style to come as in Adriaen Backer’s *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Frederik Ruysch* (1670), in

⁵⁸⁶ Cecil Helman, *Body Myths* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991) 121.

⁵⁸⁷ Quoted in Martin Kemp and Marina Wallace ed., *Spectacular Bodies: The Art and Science of the Human Body from Leonardo to Now*, exhibition catalogue of the Hayward Gallery (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: Hayward Gallery/California UP, 2000) 14.

⁵⁸⁸ Most of the visual works I will be referring to appear either in Kemp and Wallace’s excellent *Spectacular Bodies* or in Deanna Petherbridge and Ludmilla Jordanova ed., *The Quick and the Dead: Artists and Anatomy*, exhibition catalogue of The South Bank Centre (London: The South Bank Centre, 1997).

a painting with the same title by Jan van Neck (1683) and in Cornelis Troost's *The Anatomy Lesson of Professor Willem Röell* (1728) this one with fewer similarities. Masters defined the politics of gender and sexuality by mapping bodies. In this sense, they were discoverers, explorers of a new land. Their anatomical textbooks were accordingly known as atlases.



Pl. 107. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*, 1632

Up until the nineteenth century when the Anatomy Act responded satisfactorily to the problem of the supply of cadavers in Britain the bodies used were mainly those of criminals. Dissection was therefore a matter of Justice not only because the shortage of bodies created a new commercial activity (grave-robbing and murdering) but also because it consisted of a moral supplement to the death sentence. Defendants were properly informed of and thereby psychologically tortured by knowing the destiny that awaited their dead bodies so that to death could be added the humiliation of the invasive, violating act of being publicly dissected with surgeons and other people gazing on. This precise situation was captured by William Hogarth in the series *The Four Stages of Cruelty* (1750-1), particularly in the last one, *The Reward of Cruelty*, where the body can be seen being treated with utter disrespect matching the contempt the criminal had had for his pregnant lover when he murdered her.



Pl. 108. William Hogarth, *The Reward of Cruelty*, 1750-1

Gazing at and disposing of bodies have different resonances when considered in the field of feminism; dissecting women was practiced as well but the act had a specific meaning. Deanna Petherbridge and Ludmilla Jordanova describe it thus:

When human development was visually represented in relentless naturalistic detail for the first time, the depths of the mother's body were opened up for anatomists and artists to gaze upon. Given the powerful emotion with which the insides of women's bodies were invested, the progressive revelation of anatomical layers inevitably carried a frisson, a hint of the forbidden, a suggestion of voyeurism, perhaps of violation, and a consciousness of a newly visible land.⁵⁸⁹

The frontispiece of Andreas Vesalius's pioneering work *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543) reproduces the dissection of a female body surrounded, like Coover's Madonna, by numerous men who trample over one another. The theatre is packed, men are agitated and shout, a dog and a monkey join the uproar but in the middle of the unruly confusion,

⁵⁸⁹ Deanna Petherbridge and Ludmilla Jordanova, *The Quick and the Dead*, 104.

clergymen are well visible. One of Pietro Cortona's 1618 drawings which William Hunter used to illustrate his *Tabulae anatomicae* (1741) contrasts with this woman in presentation: she has the pose and elegance of a classical statue that with a modest semblance offers her body for contemplation. But she goes further and also offers the possibility of peering at her insides. The man-handled scalpel is hidden from view and transfers the action of opening the wound literally to the woman's hands.



Pl. 109. Andreas Vesalius, *De humani corporis fabrica*, 1543



Pl. 110. Pietro da Cortona, in William Hunter's *Tabulae anatomicae*, drawings c. 1618

One of the first images of a female dissection is an engraving featured in *De Formato Foetu* (1626) showing a female figure with an open uterus where a foetus can be discerned. The primary association it makes is of woman with nature as the folds of the flesh are meant to resemble a blossoming flower. The established idea of the womb as earth and sperm as seed is thus exemplified. In a much later work, Jacques-Fabien Gautier d'Agoty's *Anatomie des parties de la génération de l'homme et de la femme* (1773), appears a painting that is a milestone of female dissection in the pictorial arts. This woman has a striking similitude with Robert Coover's *Madonna of the Organs*. Not only do mezzotint colours provide a vibrant impression but, though her womb is open, she looks very much alive, staring at the new-born child. Though her baby has also been dissected, the woman seems unaware of their mutual deaths and raises her hand to her breast to feed the baby. The effectiveness of the mythologisation of motherhood was such that still in the eighteenth century another painting reproduced this image, one with a title that befitted the religious intensity of the original: *An Anatomical Virgin and Child: A Seated Woman with Open Womb and Foetus in her Lap, Hand on Breast*. Both paintings are visual examples of Carter's archetypal nonsense in the sense that for the Virgin's most important asset to be preserved a caesarean dissection takes place. Recalling Julia Kristeva's

definition of the erotic cult of the maternal abject (*PH*, 55), Petherbridge and Jordanova comment on the existence of eroticism in this image of a dissected woman whose womb blossoms like Spigelius's *De formato foetu*. Their reading is worth transcribing:

The woman [...] is seated with her skin as a stole, as provocatively as a nude woman at her *toilette* aware of being watched. The baby, wrested out of her womb, lies on her knee with its belly dissected: a mirror inversion. An écorché female sits behind, her vagina exposed to view: disempowered without her legs or arms. [...] Gautier d'Agoty's images are produced for a male gaze. Sexuality here has been taken to its ultimate and, possibly fetishistic depths of penetration into the female body - beyond anatomy, beyond 'science'.⁵⁹⁰



Pl. 111. Spigelius, *De formato foetu*, 1626

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid., 90.



Pl. 112.



Pl. 113.

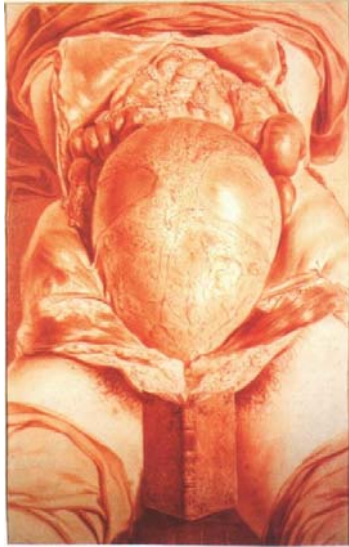
Pl. 112. Jacques-Fabien Gautier d'Agoty, *Dissected Woman and Fetus*, in *Anatomie des parties de la génération de l'homme et de la femme*, 1773

Pl. 113. After Jacques-Fabien Gautier d'Agoty, *An Anatomical Virgin and Child: A Seated Woman with Open Womb and Foetus in her Lap, Hand on Breast*, eighteenth century

An illustration of a woman's dissecting process often concentrated on her womb, a mere container of the male seed. In William Hunter's *Anatomia Uteri Humani Gravidi* (1774) the remarkable Jan van Riemsdyck drew an open uterus with a foetus nested inside; the woman's torso was not included and her legs come across as severed stumps. In this picture there is a shocking contrast between the mutilation of the mother and the perfect new life of her child. Likewise Antonio Citarelli's *Foetus in Uteru* (c. 1850) models the wax baby as if asleep in his cradle (and not in the foetal position) while the small part of the mother's body is just butchered meat; Ruth Ginsburg's comments come to mind: "Pregnancy may indeed be the epitome of the death-life ambivalence. But in the intertextual meshing of Bakhtin and Rabelais, the principle is historicised, narrativised, concretised, and split in the process: death befalls the female so that life can be secured for the male. Ambivalence is neutralised"⁵⁹¹. Ginsburg also notes that authority and control over female specificity are apparent in *Rabelais and His World* as I believe are in medical manuals: "The womb erupts in the text as regularly as carnival and is as rigorously controlled as abstraction and as explication of a narrative that 'kills' all mothers to secure the continuity of male genealogy"⁵⁹².

⁵⁹¹ Ruth Ginsburg, "The Pregnant Text. Bakhtin's Ur-Chronotope: The Womb", 168.

⁵⁹² *Ibid.*, 175.



Pl. 114.



Pl. 115.

Pl. 114. William Hunter, tab. XXVI, *Anatomia Uteri Humani Gravidi*, illustration by Jan van Riemsdyck, 1774

Pl. 115. Antonio Citarelli, *Foetus in Utero*, c. 1850

The principle of homology between the sexes (organic similarity) is another evidence of the view of the female body as derivative of the male's. Leonardo da Vinci's drawings of the male reproductive system as backdrop to the womb demonstrate the value of these documents as cultural representations. As Petherbridge and Jordanova note, the male body was and continues to be seen as the universal anatomical model, imposing phallogentric discourse that excludes women from anatomical manuals or, when they are included, they are dismembered in the name of the life in their wombs. They correctly associate the phenomenon with Kristeva's theory of the abject body of the mother insofar as "[t]he pregnant female body in Van Riemsdyck's images is suppressed in relation to the idealised representation of the infant. The mother is only marginally represented; she is a partial nurturing and delivering machine"⁵⁹³.

The artistic and scientific manipulation of the material constituents of the female body is paralleled by corresponding gestures. The female dissected body appropriated by the arts at the service of medical modelling is definitely portrayed differently from the male's. It can be shown as passive and as submissive to the probing instrument because it is the socially suitable position of the female body anyway but, unlike male corpses, a mixed style of the erotic and

⁵⁹³ Deanna Petherbridge and Ludmilla Jordanova, *The Quick and the Dead*, 86.

the painful is added to the pornographic quality⁵⁹⁴. With the advent of wax models in the late seventeenth century the tradition of purely organic illustration epitomised by da Vinci's drawings was broken and a more expressive, gendered approach was made possible. But that tendency was already perceptible in Charles Estienne's *Dissection of a Woman* in *De dissectione partium corporis* (1545) where both the position and the muscular capacity of the cadaver make it an androgynous individual but still in the appropriate setting for a woman, the bedroom, while men were shown roaming the country. Apropos of the drawings in B. S. Albinus's *Tabulae sceleti et musculorum corporis humani* where human skeletons stroll among Italian ruins or stand elegantly aside a rhinoceros, Marina Wallace and Martin Kemp comment that Albinus "is openly playing on the magnificence and beauty of the divine architecture of *man as lord* of the natural and artificial worlds"⁵⁹⁵. Such depictions of freedom and pride could never have a female subject. The body language of Clemente Susini's *Reclining Woman* displays the ecstasy of a martyr, Giovan-Battista Manfredini's *Female Bust with Open Abdomen* (1773-6) has the distinct quality of a saint, contributed to by the fact that it was a ceramic model and André-Pierre Pinson's *Anatomy of a Seated Woman* (late eighteenth century) is infused with a theatrical fear contrasting with our amusement at her covering her genitals with white linen though her abdomen and thorax are open for anyone to see.



Pl. 116.



Pl. 117.

Pl. 116. Charles Estienne, *Dissection of a Woman*, in *De dissectione partium corporis*, 1545

Pl. 117. Giovan-Battista Manfredini, *Female Bust with Open Abdomen*, 1773-6

⁵⁹⁴ Compare Clemente Susini's *Reclining Male Figure* with its female counterpart. All eroticism is removed from the model which preserves solely a certain languid vitality.



Pl. 118. Clemente Susini, *Reclining Woman*, eighteenth century



Pl. 119. André-Pierre Pinson, *Anatomy of a Seated Woman*, eighteenth century

⁵⁹⁵ Martin Kemp and Marina Wallace ed., *Spectacular Bodies*, 41. Italics added.

The dramatic element of those representations possesses a line of continuity in the work of many contemporary artists. Joel-Peter Witkin preserves the interest in museological types, real, re-shaped or made-up to create a climate of emotion, horror and beauty. The cadavers or body parts of men and women are the hybrids of a new age where the human body has become a malleable concept but one that has deep roots in art and history. Shock at the unrestricted portrayal of bodies seems a common reaction to works by Francis Bacon and Damien Hirst but perhaps even more so in those who still look to medical science for inspiration for new teratological forms. Among them can be counted John Isaacs and Katharine Dowson whose art develops from the dissecting medical activity of previous centuries.



Pl. 120. Joel-Peter Witkin, *Las Meninas, New Mexico*, 1987

The female body, especially the rebellious one, has been worked on by feminists since the late sixties, although some focus on female genitalia to such a point that their work has become ghettoized to some extent. However tempting, the Madonna of the Organs cannot be identified with their art either. While women were depicted in anatomical picture-books only to illustrate their reproductive organs the Madonna makes a spectacle of her body in full, released from the confined laboratory of men into the carnival-frenzied streets. As such, as

one with the people and not with academic aesthetics, the Madonna is a parody of the classical nude imprisoned by frames or in marble. This view is undermined, though not overpowered, by the fact that these people are only men. More problematic is that in the end the Madonna is revealed to be a man which on the one hand recalls the birthing pictures of women open with children inside them and on the other makes of the Madonna no more than the *gnaga* character of Venetian carnival (a man dressed and imitating the gestures of a woman). Though the *gnaga* establishes yet another connection with *commedia dell'arte* it nevertheless reduces the Madonna to a stock character while reinforcing the Bakhtinian carnivalesque ritual of cross-dressing.



Pl. 121. *Gnaga*, seventeenth century

As many literary and cultural theorists have systematically pointed out the body politic is borne out of the personal body. If society or even a city can be interpreted as an organic body, then the material body can also be viewed as a social one, made up of organs and pieces. The symbolism of one thus leaks into the other. The monster in *Frankenstein* is therefore open to cultural views of a new industrial society where masculinity gains further dominance, particularly with respect to reproductive medicine, but which in the end backfires through an increase of widespread violence. It is easy to see the Madonna as the double of Mary Shelley's monster, a reflection of another type of organisation, open and female. Just as the monster's assembled body points to the advent of the mechanical human, the Madonna's torn-open body gorily stresses her organic nature, thus apparently reinforcing one of *Frankenstein's* main themes, the danger of mechanical societies. If that were the case, the iconography of the

grotesque Madonna would be reinstating the myth of the rescuing Mother. Robert Coover resists giving credit to this utopian mythological nonsense by constructing the Madonna as a double-gendered body and by presenting a complementary version in which its destructive abilities are overtly exposed: the Fairy. Coover's concern thus seems not to be gender politics; he addresses the topic and makes it a material one in the novel but in the end he cannot or does not want to resolve it. By using material from the literary and visual arts the writer prefers to make a point which is of general concern and which Cecil Helman expressed thus: "The border of the self is no longer the skin, the shape of the body no longer the outline in the mirror, and the story of an individual body no longer just an autobiography"⁵⁹⁶. This assessment represents a spirit of carnivalistic relativity while the re-assembly of the human body is commemorated as were and still are the bodily relics of saints.

Taking the scene of the Madonna of the Organs as a whole it can be seen that the fundamental elements of Bakhtin's corpus of the carnivalesque-grotesque find themselves repeated to exhaustion: the involvement of everyone present, the loud uproar, disproportion both by default and excess, and a Rabelaisian procession anticipating a feast with "cartloads of free, flowing wine" (*PV*, 245):

a motley assemblage of hundreds of citizens, local or otherwise, many of them bearing or wearing gaudy organs of their own, together with a number of wild animals, demons, extraterrestrials, monsters, and plague victims, all cheering the new arrivals with grunts and roars and exposure of their backsides; a squadron of regally dressed attendants to the Count, standing at attention, their genitals where their faces should be and their faces between their legs, and each with a barrel of wine on a little cart in tow; the Count himself in the crimson cap, vest, and tight breeches of his ancestral dogship, his flowing black gown lined in crimson satin and trimmed with sable, his yellow gloves and golden mules in the Turkish style, and his colossal erection emerging from the gaping money pouch hanging between his thighs; and finally, towering above them all, "The Madonna of the Organs" with all her insides on her outside, including her disproportionately small kidneys, sticking out at either side of her ample waist like shriveled tree-shaped little handles. (*PV*, 241)

The passage is illustrative of carnivalistic images as Bakhtin conceived them: birth and death (in the form of illness), top and bottom, face and backside, and images of things in reverse, of which the Madonna with her insides out is a paradigmatic example (*PDP*, 126).

⁵⁹⁶ Cecil Helman, *Body Myths*, 99.

Another occurrence is that of paired images deriving from contrast (*PDP*, 126) personified by Il Zoppo, a character in this procession that was made up from the violent destruction by the carabinieri. As such s/he epitomises the polarity behind dualism, change and crisis. The contrast is that of gender, as the upper part is Pulcinella but when he opens his flies, Lisetta's badly scarred head comes out. Together they have become a grotesque composite, Pulcinella, legless, nailed to the shoulders of armless Lisetta. Together with the Madonna they establish androgyny as a central *leitmotif* in *Pinocchio in Venice*. In the procession Lisetta and Pulcinella have also chosen the costume of a hunchback so as to demonstrate to Pinocchio, who pities them, that joyful relativity prevails. In this view the forced union of Lisetta and Puncinella is both amusing and revivifying. It has offered a new opportunity in the entertainment business, their world, as they now have a Siamese act. They play with the situation of being half-puppets in a freak-show: "Not everyone's got a woman's head in his crotch! / Not everyone got an asshole behind her ears!" (*PV*, 247).

The paraders embody the concept of multiplicity: they come not just from the city but from other towns and villages and they take on all kinds of otherness. However, in spite of the presence of representatives of terrifying forces (monsters, aliens and demons) which could create an atmosphere of Kayserian fear, these beings are imbued with what Bakhtin referred to as the gay spirit, one where laughter wins over.

The procession culminates in a "sacred pilgrimage", a Via Crucis, which replaces the suffering of Christ in his last moments with protests at each stop over the disappearance of the city's urinals (*PV*, 245). The members of the procession display internal organs on their outsides as well so that they are suitable companions for the count and the Madonna. Parodying another quasi-sacred text, *Julius Caesar*, he exhorts the court to urinate in the river⁵⁹⁷. However, in the midst of the wild celebration, there is death for it is then that Pinocchio learns that Alidoro, to whom he owes so much and abandoned without a moment's thought, has drowned in the futile attempt to save Pinocchio, who had in fact fallen into the river but already been dragged out by the fox. It is in the reference to the river that birth and death come together; though it is not actually there, Alidoro's body is in Pinocchio's mind and therefore debased as the rain of urine falls down and sacks of garbage, reminding us of body bags, float by. The sadness over Alidoro's pathetic, pointless death is strongly felt but the

⁵⁹⁷ "[F]riends, roamers, and dribbling cunnymen [...] lend me your tears and bodily excretions" (*PV*, 246) for "Friends, Romans, Countrymen, lend me your ears". William Shakespeare, *The Illustrated Stratford Shakespeare, Julius Caesar*, Act 3, scene 2 (London: Chancellor Press, 1982) 765. Noticeably, Pinocchio has no ears at this point.

vigour of the procession, its posture of relativity in the face of death, works as if it is watering a rebirth. In the end, for all but Pinocchio who has been playing the fool in the procession, laughter rises above disgrace.

The donkey metamorphosis of Pinocchio's filmic parody serves as a preparatory stage in his degradation to a zoomorphic state. It is anticipated in the dream that was the film of his life where on the one hand the instance of being rolled up in flour already appears and on the other Pinocchio undergoes his first transformation into a donkey. The symbolism of the metamorphosis is directly linked with the phenomenon of carnival: it is Shrove Tuesday and Pinocchio is preparing for the ball as if he were a star or the king but with the anxiety of Cinderella⁵⁹⁸. He wishes for a *bauta* costume whose floating cape would emphasise the eminence of his professional achievements while his walk, he hopes, will confirm the regal image he has of himself. The mask that Eugenio brings him positions him instead on the other pole: an animal with no solemnity among other animals, he is deprived of speech. Fooled by Eugenio, Pinocchio allows himself to be undressed of the clothes that make him a distinguished gentleman and be re-dressed. He is then made into a pizza-donkey, inaugurating the rapacious banquet about to take place. He will become "an old fool literally cooked in love" (*PV*, 272):

[They] stripped him of his fine clothing, his silk suit and monogrammed hand-tailored shirt and his satin underthings, and wrapped him in layers and layers of heavy pizza dough, stuffing in prawns and olives and onions and pepperoni and wild mushrooms and tuna and golden pimientos and eggplant, with a whole garlic salami wedged up between the thighs, a stiffened mane made of wild asparagus and artichoke hearts and extra cheese on the hind portions. (*PV*, 270-271)

⁵⁹⁸ Shrove Tuesday, Fat Tuesday or Mardi Gras marks the day before Lent begins. It is generally accepted that its origin is from "shrive", "to confess", as the habit demanded that believers confessed their sins in the week before Lent. It also explains that the period that in Southern Europe is known as carnival is in England referred to as Shrovetide. Shrove Tuesday is a day of great feasting as it precedes Ash Wednesday, the first day of fast and it is also traditionally associated with the end of winter. In England the custom survives of eating pancakes on this day. Besides indulging in gluttony, rituals include cross-dressing, masking (usually as terrifying as possible), and public mocking of people of the community. Fat Tuesday acquired a particular relevance in Lithuania from the fifteenth century where certain characters became popular: Kanapinis (the hemp man), Lasininis (the fat man), a Jewish businessman, a Gypsy criminal type and an old maid representing the conflict of the season ending with the one just beginning. There are also records of bringing farm animals inside the neighbours' houses, burning or drowning idols, paying visits, pouring water over people and kidnapping young girls, all done in the spirit of laughter.

This pizza is extremely well-garnished and makes of Pinocchio an Arcimboldeque picture such as that which Peter Greenaway created for *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover* (1989) where the penis and the hind parts acquire a particular relevance. In order to make this oversized pizza and to accomplish Pinocchio's transmutation there does not follow a crucifixion, as in the previous case, but another sort of excruciating sacrifice, being baked, causing "the burning dough [to] expand[] around his outer fleshy remains with all the blistering ferocity of a red-hot iron maiden, piercing him through with the most agonizing pain and squeezing the breath right out of him, making him gasp and scream and beg for mercy" (PV, 271). Recalling Saint Sebastian's piercing agony, Pinocchio is also made to think of his own experience in infancy when he had his feet burnt. The pattern of sacrifice is thus multiplied and repeats itself. With the mask over his head, adorned with flowers behind his ears, again camellias, Pinocchio is ready to begin the fanfare (PV, 279) where he will be the star of the dance.

Most illusions Pinocchio had are revealed as such at this point and they are mainly concerned with Eugenio, whom he took for a friend. Eugenio has taken Pinocchio's funds, making the Professor economically dependent on him; the constructions Pinocchio thought to be the romantic setting for his *rendezvous* with Bluebell are after all the structures for a circus-like event where Pinocchio is to be the star. In the midst of a widespread cheerful spirit, Pinocchio feels his world has become estranged, in the process utterly devastating his expectations. The carnivalesque celebrations become the very embodiment of Kayserian evil forces: "It is dark outside, bands are playing, and the crowd noises have mounted: there are shouts and screams coming in through the windows, and bursts of wild laughter" (PV, 278). He is paraded through the "demonically Carnivalized Piazza" but instead of high-spirited joyfulness, the fool or sacrificial victim is instead possessed by terror (PV, 280).

The people are a material part of the spectacle, defined as "riotous multitudes", cheering the acrobatic show Pulcinella/Lisetta performed on Pinocchio's back (PV, 281). But it is the people who horrify Pinocchio as he is "encircled by a crazed menagerie of the impossible, massed up hundreds deep. The racket is deafening. There are bands playing, whistles blowing, flashguns popping, fireworks crackling, and the costumed revelers, the most terrifying of them wearing Pinocchio masks of their own, are dancing about drunkenly and shouting out his name: 'Eviva Pinocchio!'" (PV, 282). At the moment of climax of the festivities, the destructive might of the fanatical crowd is unleashed. They set out to sacrifice Pinocchio through a *sparagmos* ritual but, and in tune with Girard's view, the deed does not

bear any mark of resentment or attribution of culpability. However Pinocchio does carry the necessary sign of difference: unlike any of them, puppet or human, he has crossed over from one sort of ontology to the other. In fact, the crowd admires him and pays homage to him by putting on faces like his, a performance which, nonetheless, becomes a representation of “the collapse of his precious ontology”, another sign of the fragmentation of his being (*PV*, 281). The night spent between life and death in the company of the two dogs, under the falling snow, was regarded by Pinocchio as the devil’s *flour* but now the suffering is taken further and literalised.

The closer Pinocchio is from the circus ring the more chaotic the environment gets. A “tumultuous uproar” greets Pinocchio and no one can be heard as the public “screamed, and screamed still, raising their voices above the din” (*PV*, 286). Melampetta can be spotted in the midst of the “gaudy tumult” but her howls are also rewarded with throbbing lashes, her protests proving useless to save Pinocchio, unheard in the “general pandemonium” (*PV*, 286). The crowd is as if insane in the anticipation of Pinocchio’s dance. Pinocchio is welcomed into “the demented cacophony of the square” amid “applause and wild howling cheers” to undergo the final test in the degrading process that removes from him the desire to be human (*PV*, 286). In the face of the defeat of his ontological principles based on unity Pinocchio-the-dough-donkey rejects the humanity which had been his life endeavour and source of suffering. Knowing that La Volpe has hanged herself in prison with her own tail, which she leaves to Pinocchio, the Professor is finally through with battling; wishing to discharge himself from the nausea he feels for the fox’s suicide, an abject reaction of a purely human nature, Pinocchio chooses to free himself from the obsession with human flesh (*PV*, 285). He develops a feeling of abhorrence towards his human body (*PV*, 288) and realises that he had been under the “cruel enchantment of human flesh” (*PV*, 289). In sum, he sees that once released from the wooden self he was trapped in another ambush: metaphor (*PV*, 289). The revelation of his shattered ontology is the ultimate purpose of his degradation.

Eugenio, dressed as Queen of the Night, assumes the role of the Director, and addresses the famished crowd, whose appetite he counts on having a major relevance in the show, in the seductive discourse of the ringleader: ““All of you beastly boys and ghastly ghouls! Welcome to the *Piazza San Marco!*” The sudden roar is deafening and disturbingly appetitive” (*PV*, 286. Italics in the text). He continues in the vein of anticipating the manner of Pinocchio’s planned demise: “[W]hat a banquet we have for you tonight! A subtle delight, like our voluptuous metropolis itself, for *all* the tender senses!” (*PV*, 287. Italics in the text).

Whipping the donkey is another aspect of degradation as is the humorous but demeaning language; half-way in the speech which evolves in a similar fashion, Eugenio declares Pinocchio to be “the world’s most distinguished woodenknob, spunkily taking on all the knotty problems of the wormy world” (*PV*, 287). At this stage, the crowd is more than just agitated in their seats; they menacingly begin to slide over to the border of the stage “leaping and bobbing and throwing themselves about like fiendish ecstasies” (*PV*, 287). As Eugenio reaches the climax in his presentation, the crowd becomes uncontrolled. The crowd is the monster which can be felt closing in (*PV*, 287):

“So here he is, this most poplar fella and perennial favorite, for whom two’s company and tree’s a crowd, this legno da catasta who became a man of many letters, nine to be exact, the evergreen fantoccino who is nobody’s dummy, with a cherry before and a cork behind, shy o’vener but with balsa walnut and a peach of an ash, the puncheon from Puncheon Judy, our very own boneless bosky-boy, yew all know him of gorse: the one and only, the world renowned, the great, that inimitable old chestnut, nose and all, *Pinocchio!*” (*PV*, 287. Italics in the text)

The puns concerning the semantic field of wooden puppet evolve simultaneously in terms of admiration and humiliation and are combined with the culinary and spectacle in a crescendo that on presenting the name of the star drives the public wild. Finally Eugenio prompts the audience to a direct involvement in the show through a mystic communion with Pinocchio’s body, as if it were that of Christ. However, the director himself acknowledges the savage and homicidal urge in these people who want to tear Pinocchio apart and consume his body in violent feast as if they were animals:

[M]y hale, hellish, and hearty friends, there are no little fish here tonight, it is we who must eat the little ass out of his sorry plight! [...] [W]e must lick the poxy platter clean! Don’t be shy! Dig in! You know the saying: If you touch wood, it’s sure to come good! So come now, my ostrich-bellied butchers, and put your fangs into it! A capriccio! He’s as good as bread [...] Al galoppo, you crapulous maniacs! *Let the feast begin!*” (*PV*, 289. Italics in the text)

The audience is instigated to eat Pinocchio’s cover away as a school of fish did to his donkey pelt when he was a puppet. However, there is no intent to help in the circus audience that instead throws itself at him like piranhas. This instance demonstrates the dangerous side

of carnival when it dislodges itself from a Bakhtinian conception and progresses in a more Kayserian line. In a situation described as one of mayhem and anarchy, Pinocchio is invaded by terror with the vision of ravenous painted faces with their masks displaced, “their eyes aglow with a bestial appetite, their sharp teeth bared, battl[ing] each other for first bite” (*PV*, 289). The laughter coming out of these mouths, as well as that of Eugenio who laughs at the murder, is by no means compliant with that liberating medieval laughter; it is terrifying, death-like and insane. Rapidly, Pinocchio is eaten away:

[H]e is upside down, there are hands grabbing at his legs, trying to tear them from his body, he is dragged one way, then another, is tossed and thrown, he sees someone eating his papier-mâché mask, another with her mouth full of half-chewed camellias, others rabidly biting each other, and then he is lost in the sea of rending teeth. It is not like the time with the little fish. This time there is no sensation of his body wanting to rise from within. No delicious nibbling, no thrilling tingle, no ecstasy of release. And the fish at least knew when to stop ... (*PV*, 289-290)

Pinocchio has experienced several symbolic rebirths of a carnivalesque-grotesque quality; his being turned upside down reminds us of Omar Shakil’s own birth whose first vision of the world was a reverse look of the Impossible Mountains. However, Pinocchio’s experiences are not alike every time. If in the previous instance Pinocchio felt the liberating effect, thus complying with the ultimate purpose of carnival, the attack by the mob would have resulted in his destruction if it had not been for the intervention of the other puppets.

The spectacle of “raw human appetite” is motivated by Pinocchio’s own grotesqueness (*PV*, 292). He is at that stage in-between several forms of being: asinine, human, puppet and edible, literally reduced to fragments of those ontologies. The “mad ruthless feast” becomes therefore the height of the destructive ability of the carnivalesque-grotesque (*PV*, 293):

Most of the pizza pie had by then been eaten away or ripped off and passed around and now the delirious celebrants were trying to do the same with what no doubt looked to them like yet another costume: nothing could be that grotesque and live. They munched at his wooden limbs, tore off scraps of flesh with their teeth, bit his face and hands, chewed his feet up altogether, their prey meanwhile, though in mortal agony, sinking deeper and deeper into himself, as though to distance himself from the dish of the day he had become. (*PV*, 292-293)

The ambience of the novel is always that of the carnivalesque-grotesque where the laughable aspects are balanced with images of aggression, sickness, terror, and dismembering. But the issue of pain is only raised concerning Pinocchio. It is that factor that destabilises the desired effect of the carnivalesque-grotesque of relief from self-images and conceptions. When the phenomenon of carnival does not eventually put an end to itself it is prolonged towards the realm of affliction and of destruction with no return, thus annulling the possibility of rebirth. Feast turns into massacre. Therefore bodily grotesqueness reflects the evolution from a situation of destructive playfulness to Pinocchio's ultimate obliteration. Pinocchio's grotesqueness as well as that of Mamma, the executioner in the story, is therefore demonstrative of the danger of a continuous rule of the carnivalesque spirit and the triumph of abjection over the body. I shall now look into the last chapter wherein Mamma fully reveals those characteristics⁵⁹⁹.

Le avventure has a strong sense of didacticism that justifies its being considered a tale about rites of passage or a metaphorical text on maturation. Collodi overtly upholds the necessity for children to understand the value of morals and ethics for the happiness of the individual, or at least his/her living in dignified fashion, and for the well-being of society in general. He dwells on the issues of labour, education, obedience to one's parents and honesty, for instance. But Robert Coover's approach transforms maturity into its extreme state, old age, which is regarded instead as journey back to the source⁶⁰⁰. In the final chapter Pinocchio makes his exit (life is continuously regarded as a show) which is nothing other than the re-encounter with Mamma. The beginning itself, the return to Venice, already signified a return to the source paralleling the return to another beginning or re-generation: wood.

Mamma is also the Blue Fairy, Bambina and Bluebell. If Pinocchio underwent several metamorphoses the mother appears as different people as well, serving as disguises for her final revelation. However, Mamma does not at all correspond to the tender, loving figure

⁵⁹⁹ A very interesting parallel could be made between Pinocchio's relationship with Mamma and the figure of the Madonna and Günter Grass's character Oskar in *The Tin Drum* particularly in the passage wherein Oskar, a malformed dwarf, serves as a model of Jesus and the beautiful Ulla as a provocative Virgin Mary. Grass is, as several studies have demonstrated, a writer of the grotesque; Alton Kim Robertson includes a chapter about the forementioned novel in *The Grotesque Interface* and he is frequently mentioned in relation to Salman Rushdie. The parallelism between the two novelists has been the focus of attention of Patricia Merivale in "Saleem Fathered by Oskar: Intertextual Strategies in *Midnight's Children* and *The Tin Drum*" and Grass was praised by Rushdie in a short essay now included in *Imaginary Homelands*.

ready with useful advice. She is a grotesque woman as she unites the image of the Virgin Mary with that of a monster. Arriving at the Field of Miracles, Pinocchio and the puppet company enter the Santuario di Santa Maria dei Miracoli. There, the painting of the Madonna with the Child makes plain the symbolism of the relationship between Pinocchio and the fairy, made even more evident with the comparison of the Child to a dummy. The real miracle that Pinocchio has always craved for was that union and the field becomes an analogy to Mamma's generative body.

But Mamma is not just identified with the Madonna. The chapel itself has organic traits not of a human sort but of an animalesque type: the marble is like living tissue, the steps like vertebrae, the walls have the paleness of old bones, they are wet as if they sweated and pulsate to the rhythm of a pumping music (the heart), the ceiling arches are as the "back of a prehistoric beast", the aligned pews resemble ribs and the Byzantine lamps swing "like blood red pendulums under an expanding and contracting cupola" (*PV*, 317). Though they have still not seen Mamma they can already feel her in the fact that the chapel is made to symbolise her body. However, this bodily display is charged with abjection and grotesqueness. Not only is her body like that of a huge prehistoric or pre-phallic beast, and Attila is mentioned as a comparison (*PV*, 317 and 327) which also draws attention to an engulfing ability, but it is also nauseating. She smells of sweet decay which is linked to the fact that she is the bringer of death.

The fairy succeeded in being an ubiquitous presence in Pinocchio's life by making herself into his obsession. From him it was required that at all times he was following her instructions not to be naughty. The impression of Mamma being an omnipresent energy even exceeds Pinocchio's life. Transiting between life and death, the fairy becomes an emblem of the primeval force of the dyadic mother. There is therefore an abyssal imbalance of power so that later when he is sat on the throne by her side he feels it difficult to resist her although then he is conscious of the deceit she represents: "such is the lure of her great power to one so powerless as he" (*PV*, 320). Pinocchio is in her hands, literally displayed in the painting. Though the strings that his father might have used to control him never existed, those connecting him to Mamma have nourished his being but also kept him down as if they were invisible umbilical cords. "*I have been nothing but a puppet!*" he burst at some point (*PV*, 320. Italics in the text). That much is parodied by the Madonna and the Child painting which in

⁶⁰⁰ For its relevance I paraphrased Angela Carter's renowned postulation by another grotesque mother: "Journey back, journey backwards to the source". See Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, 53.

addition caricatures Pinocchio's typical whining and subservient attitude towards the fairy who has inculcated in him the ontological value which each of them has:

“O Fatina mia, why are you dead? Why you, so good, instead of me, so wicked?” squeaks the long-nosed deadpan creature the Madonna is holding, its right hand rising and falling mechanically. Her hands deftly but in full view work the marionette from underneath, pulling the wires down there, and her lips move perceptibly as the wooden-faced baby's lower jaw claps up and down: “If you truly love me, dear Fairy, if you love your little brother, come back to life!” (PV, 318)

The fairy's existence does indeed constitute a danger to Pinocchio. The pink gum the Madonna is chewing (Bluebell's trademark) does not just pop, it explodes and from behind the bubble that has stuck to her face, her “mouth gapes, webbed by moist streaks of gum, and the damp windy voice wails: *‘Birba d'un burattino! Are you not afraid to die?’*” (PV, 318. Italics in the text). Her final transformation, which will make her a truly grotesque mother, starts at this point as the bubble, because of its colour, gives the impression of live flesh from which stands out a horrible wide open mouth still filled with remains that could be flesh too. The mouth's dampness and windiness lends it the quality of a grotto which classical mythology and medieval beliefs traditionally regarded as the thresholds to the kingdom of the dead. Mamma's mouth or its anatomical counterpart, the genitals, are therefore the entrance to the place of death: “Are you not afraid to die?”, she asks. Meaningfully, the white cottage where Pinocchio met the fairy was the house of the dead and she the keeper deciding who should pass through. That night, the night of the murderers, he should have died but she did not allow it only to push him through/in now.

Another of the Madonna's gestures picks up the theme of disembowelment which the other Madonna so vigorously paraded: she plucks out her son's eyes. It is a significant gesture on several levels. Firstly, it makes oedipal castration not a choice of the male individual, but a symbol of the obliterating effect of the mother who is not successfully abjected and, consequently, separated from his body. At the end then, difficult that it might be, he strives to maintain physical distance from her in order to achieve his ends or “any end at all, beyond abjection's shoddy but, alas, appealing joy” (PV, 320). Secondly, blindness, as a metaphor, stands for his not seeing that she was an autocrat, that his obsession was pathetic and that only her view, therefore her moral views, could prevail, though they were only to her benefit. Thirdly, plucking out the eyes was the response of another virgin martyr who had devoted her

body to God and her life to the poor. Instead of asking for divine intervention to make her appearance disagreeable to her pagan suitor like Saint Wilgefortis, Santa Lucia carried out the mutilation herself. Her icon shows the saint with her eyes on a plate and her own vision regained, a miracle God conceded her for her terrible sacrifice. Santa Lucia has, as previously noted, a special significance in Venice. There is some historical evidence that in the thirteenth century one doge managed to secure the relics of the saint in the meantime discovered in Constantinople. The doge then financed the translocation of the body to San Giorgio monastery in Venice. Another account reports that the Venetians gave the head of Santa Lucia to Louis XII of France who laid it to rest in Bourges cathedral. As the patron of the eyes and good sight, she must certainly be recalled in the episode wherein Pinocchio begins to see (at the outset of the novel there was mention of his bad sight). The saint is also associated with light and Pinocchio's adventures can be defined as a process of enlightenment. Even today, in Sicily, eyes of *bread* made to represent Santa Lucia's are eaten by believers who hope to partake of the light God granted to the saint.

Closing the puppets inside the chapel magically (or not so magically if we think it is a metaphor for her body), Mamma appears in flesh and bone. From the beginning there is an indication that in this wedding chapel a consummation was planned to take place as her hair has grown to resemble a bridal veil. The two stools are for the bride and groom to sit on, although they also bring to mind royal stools even if only the fairy acts according to her majestic position whereas Pinocchio, accepting the foolishness of his long standing belief in her, does not want to take the place of the king. Coover's reconstruction of the adventures of Pinocchio is, in fact, much closer to the original than it might appear initially. The book is still on Pinocchio's inability to distinguish right from wrong and the people who want to harm him from those who even sacrifice their lives for him. But whereas Collodi laid the suffering on the side of the mother and the father figures as a result of Pinocchio's gullibility, Coover puts it instead on his wooden and canine friends who are abandoned and even perish as a consequence of Pinocchio's blind confidence in the fairy.

In the face of Pinocchio's resistance to obeying, the fairy displays her authority through terror and seduction. She initially assumes the form of La Bambina except that, as in a revelation, she has become a "gruesome" evil doll (*PV*, 321):

Slowly, though she keeps her back to them still, her head begins to rotate on her shoulders, and the waxen face of the little Bella Bambina of old appears with her strange

rigidly smile and rolled-up eyes, bringing a startled gasp from his friends, pressed tight about him. "I love you," the Bambina stage-whispers, piercing him to the quick with her terrible intimacy. "Stay with me! You shall be my little brother, and I will be your darling sister!" (PV, 321)

However, Pinocchio refuses to "play" with her, finally *seeing* the link between house, vagina and death: "'I have thought about your little white house, Fatuccia mia, [...] and how much pleasure you promised me in it. Yet when I tried to return to it, you took it away and put a tombstone in its stead'" (PV, 321). He is, in the end, wholly enlightened regarding the death threat that the fairy's non-abjected motherly body, and through her all feminine bodies, incarnates: "'I might somehow have found my way back to one little white house or another, but I was always too afraid. Pleasure was death and dissolution. That's what you taught me'" (PV, 321).

The fairy rotates another time and Bluebell takes over. Her arguments are more sexually explicit so as to break Pinocchio's resolution by offering him the gratification he has been deprived of. But her being a means to death is still present through the mention of the day they spent at the fairground. She exhibits her breasts, "[t]hose breasts, last seen on the Apocalypse, are dizzyingly alive, the scintillating rosettelike nipples, lightly gilded, throbbing as though with excited little heartbeats of their own. 'You need some *nourishment*, Professor Pinenut!'" (PV, 321-2. Italics in the text). It is precisely in the maternal sense that he desires the "deceitful ogress" insofar as the breasts appear to him an inviting place to rest his head and expire (PV, 322). Having lost his hands he could not fondle them anyway. Rejected a second time, her body reveals her anger as her appetising nipples degenerate into smallpox-like vaccination scars.

As the woman finally turns into Mamma, Pinocchio recognises in her, as in a Hollywood montage so that he can see its illusionary workings, features of the previous temptresses. The grotesque assemblage in a single woman of Pinocchio's repressed loves (sister, lover, and mother) is nevertheless surpassed by the metamorphosis of Mamma not into someone else but into another part of herself. He had already called her a murderess, of her "son" of course, but she verbalises what else was implied: "'Civilization's lackey! An avatar or Death! The Great Destroyer'" (PV, 323). Giving form to these epithets of mother goddesses throughout history, she then undergoes a devilish transmogrification:

Those fleeting traces of the familiar are now blurred by the strange. Claws on her fingertips. An iron tooth. Smoke curling out her nose, which seems to change shape with every breath. He has seen a scar grow, cross her brow, and rip vividly down her cheek and throat, then as quickly fade and vanish. A moment ago, her ears, peeking out from under her hair twisting like thin blue snakes, seemed to be pointed but now they look like his mamma's once more [...]. An eye slips out of a socket, she pushes it back. Or perhaps the socket moves to cup the errant eye. His fascination is such that he begins to worry: is this yet another seduction? (*PV*, 323-4)

The dominant trait of her grotesqueness is that in it one can see at work the ambiguity of the concept. The bodily ambiguity is the outward expression of a moral amalgamation. She, who pestered Pinocchio about being a good boy, could not tell the difference herself. She “merely” poisoned wells, crushed babies and deposited rectum snakes in beds which, to her astonishment, caused humans’ dislike of her (*PV*, 324). The fairy was also unable to see the evilness of pretending to be dead and of playing the role of the mother simply because she became aware of the importance of dying and mothering to humans. In her view they were just tricks or strategies.

The explanation that gives away her moral numbness, that is, the indifferenciation (the prime feature of non-abjection) between good and evil, is illustrated in the changes in her body; her face “grow[s] increasingly fluid and monstrous, [...] her features again melt into a pool of possible features, an inconstancy that now spreads to the rest of her body, causing all the edges to waver and blur. It is as though the *idea* of her is too big for her canvas” (*PV*, 324-5. Italics in the text).

She confesses to having left inside him a piece of her when she made him. This detail is exceptionally significant in the establishment of motherhood – as the concept around which other principles deriving from Collodi’s story revolve. In the original version, in fact, the fairy does not give life to the puppet or to the piece of wood; the wood is from the start magically alive. The inference is that Robert Coover wanted to attribute to Pinocchio the gift of life through the fairy, therefore establishing the mother/son relationship between them in greater depth. Another idea is that the fairy, by putting something of her inside Pinocchio, wished to create an unbreakable, everlasting link between them, that is, to prevent herself from being abjected. The result is that which Kristeva foresaw: Pinocchio’s progressive loss of body parts is originated from the inside. Because the mother is there, he dies. Pinocchio is also, therefore,

a prototype of the pregnant death metaphor. Pinocchio's reasoning that he was a son pregnant with his mother finally makes some sense.

The grotesqueness of Mamma's body is not limited to a terrifying appearance of malleability. Following the Bakhtinian principle of over-abundance, one notices that during the conversation she has also been growing (*PV*, 327). This growth has two possible interpretations. It can be viewed as a somatic preparation to receive Pinocchio into her body (symbolising the death of Pinocchio) and as his penetrating her, finally consummating the man/woman desire, resulting in her getting pregnant with him and thus reverting the pregnant man/son image and suggesting his rebirth (his wish is to become a talking book). When Pinocchio and Mamma agree on the terms of his surrender to her, affection is stressed but the grotesque traits are maintained though now deprived of their horrifying aspects⁶⁰¹. Pinocchio's obliteration is welcome:

Even as, descending to the pit, they [the puppets] slip from view, he finds himself, home again, on the Blue-Haired Fairy's pillowy lap. Tenderly, clucking and sighing and, it may be, weeping, she goes over him from head to shredded shins, testing the hinges, brushing away the vermin and pizza crumbs, kissing the sore spots. "Poverino!" She raises and lowers his limbs, listens to his heart, picks him up and turns him over, pokes and knocks at what she finds there, gasping with pity when the finger pushes into the soft bits. She does a little makeshift repair work [...] [and] dresses his wounded stumps with wet motherly kisses and twists of her azure hair. "You forgot your third wish," she remarks teasingly as she binds him.

"No," he whispers. "You know it, mamma!" (*PV*, 328)

The tenderness of the monstrous mother is emphasised proving that she, who had done so much harm in lying (pretending to be dead), was truthful in her confession of loving him. But their love is simultaneously erotic. The descent to the pit, an actual gallery where the fairy takes Pinocchio, has an obvious sexual symbolism. Her revolving of his whole body is charged with an identical symbolic value that points towards the fulfilment of the third wish which is not his alone. For that reason his body was gradually mutilated so that it could become a phallus to penetrate her. Nevertheless, she maintains a hermaphroditic quality as it is

⁶⁰¹ Jean-François Chassay makes an implicit identification of Mamma with the devil when he interprets this surrender as selling his soul. See Jean-François Chassay, *Robert Coover: L'écriture contre les mythes*, p. 116.

she who pokes his soft spots with her fingers. This point is confirmed later on when she assumes a Medusan appearance, a sign of the castrating (though also castrated) woman:

The luminous flush returns to her cheeks and throat and he feels a damp dense warmth engulf him for a moment. Her eyes lose focus, though whether in ecstasy or in grief he cannot say, and her blue hair, alive once more, spreads out like a veil above him, then flutters down, the tingly strands flowing over his body like water, curling around all his parts, penetrating the innumerable gaps and fissures, swathing him wholly in their writhing embrace for a moment of what seems to him the very quintessence, although abstract, of passion, as if he were being gripped by a delicious idea. Then, as quickly, her hair slithers away again, releasing him to her subtler ministrations, her kisses, nibbles, soft caresses. (*PV*, 329).

The description is, of course, of their sexual union where mention is made of foreplay caresses, fluids, movements and even of post-orgasmic bliss. This pleasure is, however, at the expense of Pinocchio's engulfing that appears one last time as a figure in a frame of sacred parody. He is the dead Christ of this Pietá composition:

Though his eyes are closed, his senses withdrawn, for one vivid moment he sees himself at a distance in the Fairy's arms. He has not moved from those arms, has indeed fallen deeper than ever inside himself [...]. What he sees up there is a decrepit misshapen little creature, neither man nor puppet, entangled in blue hair and lying in an unhinged sprawl in the embrace of a monstrous being, tented obscurely in her own wild tresses, but revealing, as she picks and nibbles at the ridiculous figure in her lap (it feels, remotely, very good ...), glimpses of tusk and claw and fiery eye. She is grotesque. Hideous. Beautiful. She leans toward the little man's head now as though to suck at the orifices there (yes, he can feel it go, feel it all emptying out), and then the eyes at the doorway turn away from the light and he is finally and for all that infinite span of time still left him [...], in the dark. Somewhere, out on the surface, distant now as his forgotten life, fingers dance like children at play and soft lips kiss the ancient hurts away. And ... is she doing something with his nose? Ah...! Yes...! Good... (*PV*, 329-330)

The closing lines mark the triumph of grotesqueness at the sight of such an intense pleasure that the two grotesque characters draw from one another. Previously he had remarked that the seed that she had planted in him was that of monstrosity so that he became a monster like her (*PV*, 325). Pinocchio was referring to the fairy's inheritance of the inability

to distinguish ethic and moral patterns. The idea of indistinction at last imposes itself as the two, now also monsters in appearance, consummate the ultimate abject deed, that of incest. The feat of the grotesque coincides ultimately with the triumph of the mother that at the end, his end because the myth of the eternal mother is reinstated, succeeds in not being separated, thus abjected, from and by her son.

3.3. The Italian tradition: elements from the commedia dell'arte

The last aspect that remains to be considered is that of the *commedia dell'arte*, an anti-literary artistic expression which Bakhtin aligned with the art of Molière, Voltaire, Diderot and Swift while keeping it closer to its carnivalistic origin. Bakhtin regarded that the works of these writers and *commedia dell'arte* shared the same function: “to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things” (RW, 34).

Bakhtin actually establishes a direct link between the *commedia* and the beginning of the academic discussion on the grotesque. The *commedia*, which originated in Italy in the 1550s, spread throughout Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It arrived in France, England, Poland, Austria, Germany and even Russia. The company of Francesco Calderoni and his wife Agata enjoyed a distinguished reputation which allowed them to tour all over Europe during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. From 1687 to 1691 they played in Munich with considerable success and their presence along with that of other companies contributed decisively to the establishment of Harlequin in German theatres.

It is in this context that in the late eighteenth century a controversy broke out around that stock character, one that has at its root the grotesque and classicist rivalry. For the classicist mind the lewd humour of Harlequin should not be included among the art forms which defended the principle of the Sublime. In 1761 Jüstus Möser published *Harlekin, oder die Verteidigung des Grotesk-Komischen*, a defence of Harlequin's grotesque-comic temperament which became the first scholarly consideration and recognition of the grotesque as a literary and aesthetic tendency. Bakhtin paraphrases Möser's view who refers to *commedia dell'arte* as a world which “constitutes a whole; it has its own legitimate order, its own criterion of

perfection which does not obey the aesthetics of the beautiful and the sublime” (RW, 35)⁶⁰². Though Möser defends the grotesque based on the principles of caricature, parody and laughter, in a Bakhtinian view it is an insufficient defence, especially because Möser separates *commedia* from the spectacle of the marketplace viewed as a low form. Kayser also recognises the strong emphasis of *commedia dell’arte* on the comic and not so much on horror. However, he is not critical of it as he sees *commedia* as a chimerical world where not only caricature is present but also physical distortion and animal allusion in the props and masks⁶⁰³. It was furthermore a fundamental influence on the German drama of the *Sturm und Drang* of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

For the purposes of this discussion suffice it to recognise *commedia dell’arte* in the context of the grotesque and, moreover, as it being at the origins of the grotesque considered by the academic eye. In this sense as well *Pinocchio in Venice* is a journey back to the source. A derivative of the *commedia dell’arte* live performances can also be found in an episode of *Le avventure* wherein Pinocchio attends the show of the puppets who recognise him as one of them and saves Harlequin from being used by Swallowfire as firewood for his roast. It is present in other, more diluted forms. The most visible one lies in the choice of the puppet’s name, Pinocchio, no doubt inspired by the *commedia* mask figure Finocchio, who, in the extremely complex and even confusing world of the *commedia*, appears as one of the many variations of Harlequin’s companion, in many cases limited to a mere change of name, more generally identified as Scapino or Brighella, in other words, a servant. It is also worth mentioning that Pinocchio means pine-kernel and that the pine-nut is generated inside a case that must be broken. In the same manner, Pinocchio, coincidentally recalling Sufiya in *Shame*, has a life inside the wood-log which Geppetto merely gives shape to.

⁶⁰² Bakhtin obviously has in mind Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) where the author made the beautiful to coincide with smooth, unthreatening and pleasurable referents and the sublime with huge, obscure or terrible ones which invigorate and elevate the mind.

⁶⁰³ See Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, pages 37-41.



Pl. 122. *Finocchio*, seventeenth century

Collodi, who had always had political interests related with the Risorgimento movement, became in 1853 the editor of a journal whose name was also drawn from the *commedia*. It was called *Scaramucia* and it was an expression of Collodi's interest in the theatrical arts, among them *commedia dell'arte* and the opera. The Italian opera was at that time living a golden period and Collodi was a passionate admirer of Bellini, Donizetti, Rossini, Puccini and Verdi. Ann Lawson Lucas identifies, for instance, traces of the influence of Bellini's *Norma* (1831) in chapter XXII⁶⁰⁴. Coover, on the other hand, emphasises more the spirit of opera buffa, as in the trial episode. He is also inspired by Mozart, notably by giving Eugenio the Queen of the Night costume, referencing a character from *The Magic Flute* (1791). Mozart actually composed pieces with servants who were *commedia* types as are the cases of *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786), *Don Giovanni* (1787), and *Così fan tutte* (1790). In *Pinocchio in Venice* many of the *commedia* masks participate, not just Harlequin, and their roles are decisive in the unravelling of events.

Pinocchio himself displays characteristics not just of Finocchio, a secondary figure, but also of the four forefront players, the two *vecchi* and the two *zanni*. The old men are Pantalone and Graziano, and the two servants Harlequin and Scapino/Brighella. The strict double alignment was a necessity of the *commedia* form, “a kind of twin-sided mirror is provided for each couple; Pantalone differs from the Dottore, yet they are sufficiently close to each other to reflect, and by reflecting to enrich, the personalities of each; Harlequin has a nature far removed from that of Scapin, yet Scapin's inner being reveals itself in Harlequin's actions and

Harlequin's in Scapin's"⁶⁰⁵. Each member of the pair has something in common with the other while each pair offers as well the possibility of reflecting or contrasting with the other pair. Given this connection among the four figures, it became viable for Robert Coover to make Pinocchio share traits with all of them, revealing a phenomenon typical of the *commedia*: though there is a rigid pattern, it can be seen to encompass continuous modulations.

Pinocchio exhibits some of the social and physical characteristics of Pantalone. He wore red tights and jacket, a dagger or sword at his belt, a handkerchief, black slippers, cape and hat. His hair and beard or moustache were usually grey. The mask's nose was hooked, a symbolism allied to the pouch the character carried and that was used to represent his phallus. Pantalone was frequently involved in romantic affairs and though at times he was ridiculed, others he was not. In sum, in common with Pantalone can be observed their age and sexual aspects as both still feel an erotic impulse but they end up being dependent on the choices of the young women they woo.



Pl. 123. *Pantalone*, seventeenth century

There is also a striking common trace: Pantalone is a Venetian and a man greatly respected by his community. One of his epithets is *Magnifico*. He is either a rich merchant, the head of a household or a nobleman. Though in later years Pantalone was portrayed as a grudging, sneezing, coughing, decrepit old man, invariably rejected by women and tormented

⁶⁰⁴ See Carlo Collodi, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, intr. and trans. Ann Lawson Lucas, p. 181.

⁶⁰⁵ Allardyce Nicoll, *The World of Harlequin: A Critical Study of the Commedia dell'arte* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1963) 42.

by gout or rheumatism, Nicoll considers this to be the representation of Pantalone when *commedia dell'arte* was already in its descending phase.

This wholly risible creature was the consequence of bad acting or of a deficient view on the part of the actors (the play was improvised so there was no need for a stage director *per se*). In his peak, as the existing engravings prove, the old man was a passionate suitor, involving himself in fights, daring escapes, dance and courting. Rather than being a character who evokes laughter by its very presence, there is a serious side to Pantalone which is intercalated with humour whenever the youth and old age conflict appears in view. He either tries to rival young men or becomes the cuckold. In sum, he is “far from decrepitude, and his lapses are effective and amusing rather because of the contrast between, on the one hand, a keen intelligence applied to the conduct of his business affairs, a normally dignified bearing and worthy sentiments, and, on the other hand, actions which might easily be condoned in one of lesser rank but which from him appear unfitting”⁶⁰⁶.

Facing the two types of Pantalone as two representations of the same character, one not necessarily better than the other, one recognises in the old, ill Pinocchio the frail Pantalone but Pinocchio’s eminence and inability to deal with the demands of the human heart echoes the other Pantalone, a “vigorous, downright middle-aged merchant, with a fine career behind him, who has become involved in an emotional world with which he cannot always cope”⁶⁰⁷.



Pl. 124.



Pl. 125.

Pl. 124. Jacques Callot, “Pantalone”, in *Three Italian Comedy Performers*, 1618

Pl. 125. Jacques Callot, “Two Pantalones dancing face to face”, in *Capricci*, 1622

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid., 50.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid., 52.

Pantalone's counterpart, whose relationship to him can either be of friendship or enmity, is the Dottore whose most familiar denomination is Graciano. His similarity with Pinocchio begins with his profession. Only rarely is the Dottore presented as a man of letters though he does appear as a schoolmaster; usually he is a legal man or, at times, a physician. Whatever the case, the profession guarantees a position of respect in society and assumes there to have been a classical education. More relevant still is that his trademark is his speech that, like Pinocchio's, is derived from the discourse of the academy. Generally he is considered more of a buffoon than Pantalone which is due to his more frequent involvement in romantic affairs and to the ornamented quality of his speech. Nicoll identifies three characteristics that individualise Graciano's speech. The first, giving an opinion on all matters as if he were an expert on them, does not so much harmonise with Pinocchio's but the other two do: "Secondly, his mind is so stored with expert back knowledge – mainly classical mythology, Latin tags and legal sentences – that he finds it impossible either to think or to speak in a single logical manner. Sometimes the comic effect of his utterances comes from their inordinate length; sometimes, less effectively, it derives from ridiculous errors. And thirdly, he is apt to express the obvious with grave circumlocution"⁶⁰⁸.

One is immediately led to think of Melampetta whose ornate speech is saturated with classical or scholarly references confusingly inserted in conversation and at times consisting of gross mistakes such as Aeschulapius's *Principles of Mycology*. Melampetta's discourse is constructed as an improbable excess, a conversational caricature, whereas Pinocchio's is more comical and simultaneously pathetic as it refers mainly to the exacerbated view of the Professor regarding his scholarly achievements, also every step of the way supported by references to works of other eminent individuals: Karl Jaspers, Petrarch, Saint August, Bellini or Tiepolo. However, with *Pinocchio* is created in the reader an impression that is typical of the Dottore as well: "Wherever verbiage triumphs and expert knowledge prevents simple thought, there we shall find him"⁶⁰⁹.

In physical terms he is depicted in black, solemn attire completed with a pair of gloves or handkerchief. His mask also exhibits a protruding nose, no doubt pointing to his amorous aptitude, and, unlike Pantalone, he speaks with a Bolognese accent. When the Neapolitan style imposed itself to the detriment of that of Tuscan origin, the Dottore is deprived of his

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid., 56.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid., 59.

position as head of household and becomes, in Nicoll's view, a vulgarising version of which only the "grotesquely elongated nose" stands out⁶¹⁰.

Graciano, having no specific occupation (he appeared with other occupations besides the ones mentioned) aimed to put on stage, and to poke fun at, dottores in general. In *Pinocchio* several appear; besides Pinocchio, called Professore throughout and even *buon dottore*, the novel includes the parodic scene of the three doctors, displaying precisely the speech characteristics referred to above, and a Plague Doctor who is La Volpe. A costume was traditionally used to conceal the identity of the physician who attended to plague victims and that had therefore been exposed to contagion. It is interesting to notice that La Volpe chooses that specific costume and that she is (pretending to be) a porter, that is, a servant. The dottore in late *commedia dell'arte* performances also assumes that position as well as similar ones: servant, gardener and innkeeper.



Pl. 126. *El Medico dea Peste*, seventeenth century

In his degrading phase there is also some association with Pinocchio to the *zanni*. *Zanni* initially defined a category, the servants, and as Pinocchio gets off at the railway station he is tricked by the supposed porter and has to carry the bags himself. A carnivalistic reversal of roles takes place. In time though, *Zanni* was used as the name of the servant rather than Harlequin. The difference between the two servants was supposedly contrastive, *Zanni* playing the astute one and Harlequin the fool. This relationship is exemplary in the case of the fox and the cat, both in *Pinocchio* and *Le avventure*. However, in theatrical performance, it often happened that the servants were difficult to distinguish in that respect as the foolish type could suddenly outwit the foxy companion who thus proved to be an idiot as well. The whole matter is further complicated as both make their appearance under numerous names.

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

Basically the servants were differentiated by their costumes which were of not two but three types: Harlequin's close costume was distinguishable by the patches of irregular shape that still well into the seventeenth century were transformed into the triangle or lozenge outfit; this outfit was completed with strips of ribbon. Some referred to Harlequin's companion as Scapino whereas others identified him as Brighella. His attire was loose and white, with green bands or stripes. Unlike Harlequin, whose speciality was acrobatics, Scapino/Brighella is a musician who appears with an instrument in hand, usually a guitar. Finocchio is regarded as one of the myriad variations of Scapino. Finally there was Zanni, with a wide brimmed or peaked hat and full, baggy trousers. In the early stages of the *commedia* Zanni performed alongside another individualised comic servant but Zanni was gradually replaced by other zanni/servants.

What Pinocchio shares with the three servants is, first of all, their condition. Pinocchio, the remarkable Professor, comes to Venice, suffers a process of degradation and leaves the position of the master to assume one lower in the social scale. The connection between the two pairs of masters and servants is analogous to that between kings and fools and as these can change roles, so can the others. The ambiguity over the identity of the real fool extends to the relationship between the two servants, indicating that the fool can be anyone. Nevertheless it is meaningful that the prototypical fool, Harlequin, has the same set of ribbons as Pinocchio throughout the book. Maybe it is significant as well that one stage character originating in the Zanni type, Pulcinella, developed two distinct outlooks: in Naples he was still close to Zanni but his other costume is that which has become familiar to the English mind through Punch: a big-bellied, hunchbacked figure clad in trousers and jacket with ribbons attached. In addition, Pulcinella could multiply on stage perhaps demonstrating that far from the uniqueness of the early types, the latter forms, namely Pulcinella, could simply be copied repeatedly. The point that I wish to stress is that by looking at a painting like Tiepolo's *A School of Pulcinellas*, trampling over and fighting one another, one is reminded of the attack of children on Pinocchio bearing masks of his face⁶¹¹.

Pinocchio in Venice is virtually taken over by the characters of *commedia dell'arte* made into puppets who serve as Pinocchio's guarding angels. Brighella, Capitano Spavento, Harlequin, Pulcinella, Colombina, Pantalone, Flaminia, Buffeto, Francatrippa, and Truffaldino also

⁶¹¹ See *A School of Pulcinellas*, in Allardyce Nicoll, *The World of Harlequin*, p. 88, figure 59. From all the painters Coover could have chosen to include in his book, it is interesting to note that the author favoured Tiepolo in view of his having painted *commedia* masks such as Harlequin and Pulcinella.

function as reminders of Pinocchio's true nature that he never succeeds in overcoming. The physical grotesqueness of the Professor is manifested in degradation:

The bits that had fallen off were gone for good, awash somewhere in the waterways of Venice, and more vanished every day, teeth and toes in particular, and the patches of flesh that kept flaking away, fouling his sheets with dusty excrescences sometimes as large as dried mushrooms. And what was left of him, once waterlogged, was twisting and splitting now as it dried out, he could hardly move without startling those about him, himself included (this is not *me*, he continued to feel deep in his heart, or whatever was down there, there in that dark place inside where all the weeping started, this *can't* be me!), with awesome splintering and cracking sounds, his elegant new clothing worn not merely to conceal the surface rot, but to muffle the terrible din of the disintegration within. He would shed the rest of his flesh altogether and be done with it, but it sticks tenaciously and bloodily to his frame like a kind of stubborn reprimand, his attempts to scrape it off causing him excruciating pain. Far from transcending flesh, he was dying into it. (*PV*, 206. Italics in the text)

Old age, seasickness, baldness, a running nose, worms, the progressive fall of members (including the penis), and generally speaking splitting, cracking, and breaking are no more than the expression of his refusal to accept who he is but the puppets, which represent the ontological state he is returning to, can be dismembered and reassembled and still preserve the ability to laugh and regenerate. When Pinocchio understands this he also understands the Bakhtinian force of degradation: "As his body weakened, he felt his spirit strengthening, as if being purified by the very impurity of his physical decay" (*PV*, 227).

Coover's approach is therefore consciously distinct from that of another Pinocchio, the infantile, violence and sex-free myth created by Walt Disney and revisited by Stanley Kubrick and Steven Spielberg in *A. I.* (2001). If the latter film is concerned with introducing situations of a recognisable future such as environmental issues, social inequality, the problem of overpopulation, the classification of "reality", the ethics of robotics, the relationship of cyborgs and humans, and the eroticism of non-human beings, the character of David is more obsessed with humanity than Coover's creation. The robot's desire to become human crosses space and time, and reaches beyond the end of the world and of humanity itself. Though it clearly demonstrates humanity to be not a matter of flesh and suggests it is one of emotion, still the goal is the same: to find the Blue Fairy, to become a real boy and to gain his mother's heart.

Paula Rego's vision of the tale is in this sense less conventional. In *The Blue Fairy Whispers to Pinocchio* (1996) the raw sexuality of the Fairy, a strong dark female as most of Rego's women, is overt in her caressing and whispering to the naked boy. In another painting, *Geppetto washing Pinocchio* (1996), the maternal care is transferred to the figure of the father who carefully washes the boy/puppet's body. The relation between the two bodies recalls the pietà, proving on the one hand there to be a suggestion of Christ in the Pinocchio figure recognised by artists and, on the other, demonstrating traditional assumptions of gender and specifically of motherhood to be cultural constructions. The intimacy between father and son is nevertheless as tinged by eroticism as it was in the other where the mother was the fairy⁶¹².

In 1973 Robert Coover stated that writers in South and North America had reached the end of a tradition, effecting a change in their novels and an emergence of the desire to discover new possibilities of interpreting the world. The end of the tradition was caused by a loss of efficacy in the use of social and cultural formations that gave people a sense of unity. Formations such as myths, legends, histories *and* fairy tales could no longer provide a credible set of communal significance⁶¹³. But as *Pinocchio in Venice* comes to prove that is not synonymous with saying that the structures are useless or that the culmination of that tradition seems to be felt exclusively by writers or Americans. In the same interview Coover maintained that "[t]he world itself being a construct of fictions, I believe the fiction maker's function is to furnish better fictions with which we can re-form our notions of the things"⁶¹⁴. That reform can be achieved through old fictions and paraphrasing Jaspers, who is also mentioned in *Pinocchio in Venice*, Coover concludes: "the only way to struggle against myth is on myth's own ground"⁶¹⁵.

⁶¹² See her *Island of the Lights* from the *Pinocchio* collection (1996) as well where the multiple metamorphoses of children are depicted in their horror, evolutionary states and cruelty, all set against the set of the circus spirit.

⁶¹³ See Frank Gado ed., *Conversations on Writers and Writing*, p. 142. Robert Scholes argues that in Coover's novels and short stories fabulation is part of the process of constructing a historical "fact" and not only after it takes place but also prior to it, thus affecting the contours the "fact" will assume. Our sense of history is therefore influenced by a progressive lack of faith in the mythic qualities that shape every historic action: "The fact is that an 'innocent' history, a collection of facts and deeds, is itself a myth - and a myth that has lost its power to command belief", Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (Chicago and London: University of Illinois Press, 1979) 207.

⁶¹⁴ Frank Gado ed., *Conversations on Writers and Writing*, 149-150.

⁶¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 154. In a way or another critics have pointed out the role of myth in Robert Coover's writing. See Janusz Semrau, *American Self-Conscious Fiction of the 1960s and 1970s: Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Ronald Sukenick* (Poznan, Poland: Uniwersytet Im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, 1986) and Jackson I. Cope, *Robert Coover's Fictions* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1986).

For these reasons Jean-François Chassay sees Robert Coover's fiction as a product of discontinuity and as a post-Babel vision. It is in the era following the catastrophe that carnival finds a fertile ground in which to germinate:

L'unité disparue, cependant, laisse place à la fête et au carnaval. À la honte de la chute succède l'éloge du mélange, la polyphonie des discours de la place publique, un babil ininterrompu où la mort n'est jamais qu'une autre façon de se donner en spectacle. Le réel empirique disparaît au profit d'une parole démultipliée, hétérogène, qui rend le monde incertain, fortement problématique et en même temps extrêmement prégnant et crédible. La rhétorique rassurante laisse place à l'inquiétante étrangeté à travers laquelle la littérature peut être une forme de savoir sur le monde.⁶¹⁶

In *Pinocchio in Venice* Robert Coover sets in motion a most subversive type of carnivalesque by inflating the myth with traces of such realistic grotesqueries that they become credible. When Scholes says that “[m]agic is real. The fairy tales are true. Beast and princesses are not phony symbols for Coover but fictional ideas of human essences” he is acknowledging that Coover's writing tries to recover the usefulness of myths while trying to keep at bay the social contents they carried because, as he adds, “[f]or Coover, reality is mythic, and the myths are the doors of perception”⁶¹⁷. *Pinocchio in Venice* opens some of those doors where one can find some of the most grotesque parts of ourselves, not so safely hidden in the closet: our social and psychic disintegration represented in physical dismemberment and the discovery of the identity of the person who can perform that destruction.

⁶¹⁶ Jean-François Chassay, *Robert Coover: L'écriture contre les mythes*, 18.

⁶¹⁷ Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction*, 123 and 122 respectively.



Oskar Kokoschka, *Murderer, Hope of Women*, 1910

4. *A Fairyland of Grotesquery: The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*

4.1. Introduction

[Haroun] looked into the water and saw it was made up of a thousand thousand thousand and one different currents, each one a different colour, weaving in and out of one another like a liquid tapestry of breathtaking complexity; and Iff explained that these were the Streams of Story, that each coloured strand represented and contained a single tale. Different parts of the Ocean contained different sorts of stories, and as all the stories that had ever been told and many that were still in the process of being invented could be found here, the Ocean of the Streams of Story was in fact the biggest library in the universe. And because the stories were held here in fluid form, they retained the ability to change, to become new versions of themselves, to join up with other stories and so become yet other stories;

Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, 72



Lazzling but controversial, Angela Carter's work presents some difficulties from the start. The number of critics who have concentrated their attention on some of her writing is more than just considerable, as is the accretion of accepted wisdom concerning the contours and value of her work. One has only to think of the response John Bayley got from Hermione Lee and Elaine Jordan to an article he wrote for the *New York Review of Books* where he suggested that regardless of Carter's delightful narrative strategies, in the end she always took the side of political correctness⁶¹⁸. Awkward though his comment might have been, the tone of the responses verged on the rabid. Those who enter the wood do it not without peril.

In all the controversy surrounding Angela Carter the topic of political correctness has been raised precisely because of her lack of it. Not only in her novels and short stories but

⁶¹⁸ See Elaine Jordan, "The Dangerous Edge" and Hermione Lee, "A Room of One's Own, or a Bloody Chamber?: Angela Carter and Political Correctness", ed. Lorna Sage, *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter* (London: Virago, 1994).

also in her critical material and interviews she displays her disdain for sanitising her perceptions. Take John Haffenden's interview as an example. He considers that the very expression "magical realism" defines Carter's writing in its "inventive extravagance" and "demythologizing purposes" so acutely that it could have been invented solely to describe her work but Carter herself shies away from the term⁶¹⁹. She claims she has been around longer than Salman Rushdie, with whom the epithet was already associated in the early 1980s, and that she had not read Gabriel García Márquez until she had found her own voice as writer (she had, however, read Alejo Carpentier's *The Lost Steps*, whose meaningful role in the critical theory of magical realism has already been noted)⁶²⁰. Carter is definitely not politically correct when she states that Rushdie and García Márquez, and magical realist writers by extension, have the benefit of dwelling in worlds with "illiterate and superstitious peasantry with a very rich heritage of abstruse fictional material"⁶²¹. She, by contrast, coming from Britain, has to be much more inventive.

The theme of political correctness is addressed with frequency with relation to her rewriting of fairy tales. The topic is also raised in the interview with John Haffenden. The interviewer, who calls the tales in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979) "spell-binding excursions", enquires into the relation between Carter's own tales and the psychoanalytical reading psychologist Bruno Bettelheim had made of fairy tales in *The Uses of Enchantment* (1975)⁶²². Bettelheim's assumption is that fairy tales use fantasy to address the profound emotional strains of the child who unconsciously understands their presence in fairy tales, which, ultimately, always point to a solution. Admitting she had read Bettelheim, Carter asserts that in her view he was at times wrong in the interpretations and supposed effects the fairy tale had on the child:

I'm not sure that fairy tales are as consoling as he [Bettelheim] suggests. An historian named Robert Darnton, in a very nice book called *The Great Cat Massacre*, has a long essay about the oral tradition in seventeenth-century France which really lams into the psychoanalytic school of interpretation of fairy tales. He says you can hardly talk about the latent content of stories which are explicitly about cannibalism, incest, bestiality and

⁶¹⁹ John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, 81.

⁶²⁰ This idea that Angela Carter came first is reiterated by Marina Warner who sees her as a direct influence on Salman Rushdie and Robert Coover. See Marina Warner, "Angela Carter: Bottle Blonde, Double Drag", ed. Lorna Sage, *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, p. 242.

⁶²¹ John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, 81-82.

⁶²² *Ibid.*, 82.

infanticide, and of course he's right. I do find the imagery of fairy tales very seductive and capable of innumerable interpretations, however. But some of the stories in *The Bloody Chamber* are the result of quarrelling furiously with Bettelheim.⁶²³

As Lucie Armitt puts it, if fairy tales are consolatory literature what happens when they do not console anymore?⁶²⁴ Angela Carter's stories in *The Bloody Chamber* could not be considered fairy tales under such a rubric. To Armitt "rather than being fairy-tales which contain a few Gothic elements, these are actually Gothic tales that prey upon the restrictive enclosures of fairy-story formulae in a manner that threatens to become 'masochistically' self-destructive"⁶²⁵. But perhaps the fairy-tale is a form which is more malleable than Bruno Bettelheim or critic Patricia Duncker realised, and which allows a writer to reinvent them, and not merely to rewrite them. This appears to be Angela Carter's own view: "My intention was not to do 'versions' [...] but to extract the latent content from the traditional stories and to use it as the beginning of new stories"⁶²⁶.

Another point raised by the above quotation is Carter's relation with Bettelheim's psychoanalytical approach to fairy tales which is openly one of disagreement. Carter is implicitly supported by Jack Zipes, whose *Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* he dedicated to Angela Carter's memory, and who weaves a harsh criticism of Bettelheim's methodology in an essay suggestively called "On the Use and Abuse of Folk and Fairy Tales with Children: Bruno Bettelheim's Moralistic Magic Wand". In it Zipes is bluntly critical: "Bettelheim's book disseminates false notions about the original intent of Freudian psychoanalytical theory and about the literary quality of folktales [...] [and] *impose[s]* meaning onto child development [in an] authoritarian and unscientific" manner⁶²⁷. He goes on to argue and demonstrate that Bettelheim's use of Freudianism is arbitrary and that the therapeutic authority he claims the fairy tale to have in addressing child's subconscious conflicts does not correspond to the truth. Bettelheim does not identify but merely assumes which conflicts are at work (if indeed there are any) regardless of the age, gender, ethnicity, and class of the individual. Though Bettelheim claims that children themselves should conduct their own

⁶²³ Ibid., 82-83.

⁶²⁴ See Lucie Armitt, "The Fragile Frames of *The Bloody Chamber*", ed. Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton, *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism* (London and New York: Longman, 1997) p. 89.

⁶²⁵ Loc. cit.

⁶²⁶ John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, 84.

interpretation of the tales, and here lies another contradiction, he sets himself up in a position of authority, as a device parents and other adults can use to help their children in that interpretation. The problem Jack Zipes identifies in Bettelheim is that he bases his work solely on a psychoanalytical approach (which he claims Bettelheim bends anyway) which then operates as an “orthodox Freudian wand” transforming every tale into “a symbolic parade of self-realization and healthy sexuality”⁶²⁸. This also results in an apolitical, gender-blind view. No less important is that it is a-historical, that is, it deliberately ignores the specificities of the time of the production and of the reception of the tale as well as the communal and hardly children-directed origin of the folktale. Deprived of the historical context which contextualizes the conflicts at work in the tale and which no longer make sense to the contemporary child, the tale is necessarily reduced, in Zipes’s words, to “incidents of inexplicable abuse, maltreatment of women, negative images of minority groups, questionable sacrifices, and the exaltation of power”⁶²⁹. Angela Carter’s works, on the other hand, are “powerful in their historicity, in their awareness of human temporality within its socio-cultural chains”⁶³⁰.

Bettelheim favours tales which present an orderly state of affairs resulting from restraining impossible aspirations of happiness with a pragmatic understanding of the mechanisms governing the world. In other words, the reality principle subdues the pleasure principle to a satisfactory level (not too much or too little) and the child not only learns its place in society, institutions and hierarchies but also that the acceptance of that place satisfies her/him. Contrarily to Jack Zipes, who openly states that to impose a given type of literature on children as a means to aid in their development is an arguably culturally repressive gesture, Bettelheim asserts that children should be exposed only to tales capable of fitting that healthy structure, which makes Bettelheim, in Zipes’s view, one of the “many cultural censors of morality”⁶³¹. Providing the child with an unrealistic sense of his/her capacity as an individual to achieve a certain degree of happiness in an increasingly dehumanising society can have

⁶²⁷ Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales* (New York: Routledge, 1979) 160. Italics in the text.

⁶²⁸ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁶²⁹ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁶³⁰ Robert Rawdon Wilson, “SLIP PAGE: Angela Carter, In/Out? In the Post-Modern Nexus”, ed. Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin, *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) 115.

⁶³¹ Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*, 163.

considerable negative effects: “Instead of recognizing the power of society to deny autonomy, Bettelheim encourages an internalization which furthers the split between mind and body”⁶³².

Having delineated the fundamental problems of Bruno Bettelheim’s approach so that Angela Carter’s conflict with it becomes more easily perceptible, the variations that Carter elaborates in her tales also become clearer. Lindsey Tucker and Robin Ann Sheets have identified four changes Carter introduced in the plot of “The Bloody Chamber” in order to oppose the moral Bruno Bettelheim offers to women: repression of their sexual curiosity. They are the Marquis’s pornographic tastes, the girl being the narrator of her own story, the inclusion of a second husband with a mild temperament and the attribution of the role of the rescuer to the girl’s mother⁶³³. My intention with this study is not to pinpoint the strategies Carter came up with to contradict Bettelheim but on several occasions I will need to refer to their relationship, as much an antagonism on the part of Carter as a dialogical practice. In the process, the aspects with respect to which Carter succeeds in challenging Bettelheim, and those in which she does not, should become apparent.

The success of some of Carter’s tales is linked to the structure of the fairy tale itself. This controversy has been widely discussed and with particular intensity with relation to “The Company of Wolves”. Just to establish the parameters within which this dispute has developed I will take Patricia Duncker and Merja Makinen’s positions as examples. The first argues that any work developing from a traditional fairy tale is hopelessly caught in an inherent sexist economy:

the infernal trap inherent in the fairy tale, which fits the form to its purpose, to be the carrier of ideology, proves too complex and pervasive to avoid. Carter is rewriting the tales within the strait-jacket of their original structures. The characters she re-creates must to some extent, continue to exist as abstractions. Identity continues to be defined by role, so that shifting the perspective from the impersonal voice to the inner confessional narrative as she does in several tales, merely explains, amplifies and re-produces rather than alters the original, deeply, rigidly sexist psychology of the erotic.⁶³⁴

⁶³² Ibid., 167.

⁶³³ See Lindsey Tucker, “Introduction”, p. 6 and Robin Ann Sheets, “Pornography, Fairy Tales, and Feminism: Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*”, p. 104, ed. Lindsey Tucker, *Critical Essays on Angela Carter* (New York: G. K. Hael and Co) 1998.

⁶³⁴ Patricia Duncker, “Re-imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*”, *Literature and History* 10:1 (Spring 1984) 6.

It must be noted, however, that Duncker is concerned with Angela Carter's apparent disregard for alternative forms of sexuality, namely lesbianism. Thus, according to Duncker, "Carter envisages women's sensuality simply as a response to male arousal, she has no conception of women's sexuality as autonomous desire"⁶³⁵. Makinen, however, defends Carter's use of fairy tale on the part of Carter alleging that each one incorporates historical specificities and therefore the genre is not a universal and unalterable literary form:

Narrative genres clearly do inscribe ideologies (though that can never fix the readings), but later re-writings that take the genre and adapt it will not necessarily encode the same ideological assumptions. [...] When the form is used to critique the inscribed ideology, I would argue, then the form is subtly adapted to inscribe a new set of assumptions.⁶³⁶

Cristina Bacchilega proposes a more cautious interpretation that appears to me a sober but fair point of view. The comments she makes on "Beauty and the Beast" rewritings are also true of Angela Carter's other tales but what validates her position is that it is sustained by the awareness of multivoicedness, a crucial element of dialogism:

[I]n Carter's parodic imitations of "Beauty and the Beast," multiple focalizers, voices, places, and cultures expose the complex narrative mechanisms of the fairy tale as an ideologically variable "desire machine." Even as we joyfully succumb to Carter's magic, we still must confront its construction, power, and dangers. The wonder of fairy tales comes to reproduce its own workings and make them visible; in this way, Carter sustains and renders suspect her own revisions, showing that the magic of the fairy tales is its own beast.⁶³⁷

Probably because of this ambiguity, Angela Carter was enthralled by fairy tales. In 1977 she translated Charles Perrault's *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé*, and in 1982 she translated and published *Sleeping Beauty and Other Favourite Fairy Tales*. Earlier in her career Carter published works specifically for children: *Miss Z. The Dark Young Lady* (1970), *The Donkey Prince* (1970), *Martin Leman's Comic and Curious Cats* (1979), and *Moonshadow* (1982). But in the later stage of her career Angela Carter directed her attention to the tale as a cultural

⁶³⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁶³⁶ Merja Makinen, "Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality", *Feminist Review* 42 (Autumn 1992) 4-5.

⁶³⁷ Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997) 102.

form of crucial importance to the vitality of culture as a whole. She edited a collection of tales from around the world, *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1990), and a follow-up was released posthumously, *The Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1992), collections that concentrate on the oral traditions of numerous peoples and that constitute an important documentary record. Her taste for fairy tales is perceptible in the introduction to the first volume: “Fairy tales are dedicated to the pleasure principle, although there is no such thing as pure pleasure, there is always more going on than meets the eye”⁶³⁸. Fairy tales represent a sort of innocent entertainment which is exciting because it is not innocent at all.

The Bloody Chamber constitutes an early incursion in the world of fairy tales as cultural vehicles not directed at children. Though children were part of the audience of the folktale as public event told to the community which thus absorbed the elements of the grotesque, with the advent of a capitalist society those elements have been deemed unsuitable for children. But Carter recovers the grotesque for the fairy tale. In *The Bloody Chamber* the grotesque appears in its somatic vein, namely by developing themes like the animal-human and female monstrosity, but there is a permanent connection with alienation and terror, frequently allied to sacrifice. Because the Bakhtinian mould is darker it closes the gap from the Kayserian grotesque. All tales are imbued with the popular spirit of the folktale through the fairy tale which is a form deriving mainly from the former but which from the seventeenth century onwards was adapted to the educational demands of the rising bourgeoisie. Oral folktales have been part of culture since the Ice Age but literary fairy tales have become more accessible today. The folktale possessed a central role for the whole community and not just children. In fact, their *raison d'être* was sourced in achieving social integration and reinforcing social ties so that they always reflected the aspirations of the people in a given time, aspirations which related to affirming the established structure or indicating a need to alter it. With respect to this aspect it is important that the folktale was a communal activity wherein the story-teller expected the audience to contribute with its own ideas and subsequently as a means of diffusing the tale itself. Angela Carter's stories share this spirit, and thus she refuses the notion of writing mere “versions”. Instead, Carter is presenting tales which the readers are expected to fill in with their own views, tales that Danielle M. Roemer and Cristina Bacchilega have

⁶³⁸ Angela Carter ed., intr. *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (London: Virago, 1990) xii.

more suitably referred to as “intensifications and modifications of previously instituted and sophisticated narrative modes”⁶³⁹:

[D]o I ‘situate myself politically as a writer?’ Well, yes; of course. I always hope it’s obvious, although I try, when I write fiction, to think on my feet – to present a number of propositions in a variety of different ways, and to leave the reader to construct her own fiction for herself from the elements of my fictions. (Reading is just as creative an activity as writing and most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode.)⁶⁴⁰

Broadly speaking the folktale is characteristic of primitive and pre-capitalist societies and thus, after their appropriation by the literary text especially from the seventeenth century onwards, it came to reveal the traits of a feudal system which had only recently been left behind as the Enlightenment developed. The appearance of the *Kunstmärchen* determined the decline of the *Volksmärchen*, that is, what is known today as the fairy tale emerged to meet the social and cultural needs of a new group, the bourgeoisie and of another that up to that point had not been actively involved in the production of the folktale, the aristocracy. With the massive use of printing and the possibility of easy distribution, the tales which once were meant for the illiterate peasant became liable to be moulded and even mutilated by bourgeois capitalist values. The folktale had an imprint of rebelliousness against authority, was not overly squeamish about hygiene, violence and, more importantly, with morality, and so the effort the bourgeoisie was making to gain a solid and respected position in society demanded that alterations be made. The implicit subversion that the folktale posed for a utilitarian, rationalist society which still needed to settle itself firmly determined that the danger of play, experimentation, and aspirations to social change were nullified in the fairy tale regarded as a cultural form brimming with degenerate spirits and deprived of social content.

However, and hence the relevance of dwelling on the history of the folktale and the fairy tale, from within the very heart of bourgeois repression there were writers who used the fairy tale to criticize the utilitarian principles of rationalism, writers such as Edgar Allan Poe

⁶³⁹ Danielle M. Roemer and Cristina Bacchilega, intr. *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 11.

⁶⁴⁰ Angela Carter, ed. Jenny Uglow, “Notes from the Front Line”, *Angela Carter: Shaking a Leg - Collected Journalism and Writings* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997) 37. The article was originally published in 1983.

and Nathaniel Hawthorne. In this sense too *The Bloody Chamber* collection has affinities with fairy and folktales, terms which nowadays have become more difficult to distinguish. As a product of the late 1970s it reflects the social debates of *its time* which were marked by a spirit of revolutionary thought. Similarly with what happened to the subversive fairy tale writers, intellectual and social revolution stemmed from a world of mass production and commodity epitomised in the capitalist 1950s and already questioned in the 1960s. One of the hottest debates of the 1970s concerned women and thus it is not a surprise that *The Bloody Chamber* addresses the position of women in history, economics, family, and gender politics⁶⁴¹. Carter's stories reveal that she, unlike Bettelheim, was aware that fairy tales must be read taking into consideration the historical framework of their production so she purposefully took advantage of the form to articulate her own ideas about the issues of her time. This is the inference of Robert Coover's words when he writes: "Gothic, they called her, fantastical, nightmarish. But she was, without belaboring the quotidian, a true witness of her times, an artist in the here and now of both life and art, *Bloody Chamber* though it may be"⁶⁴². Similarly Salman Rushdie comments: "She opens an old story for us, like an egg, and finds the new story, the now-story we want to hear, within"⁶⁴³.

The tales belong to four families: those of beasts, vampires, wolves and a non-specified category. A general objective of my analysis is to demonstrate that in spite of the variety of the tales there is a line of continuity passing from one to the other. I have also defined two specific objectives: firstly, to demonstrate that the nature of that continuity is the grotesque and, therefore, that the grotesque is primordial in providing cohesion to the collection; secondly, to overcome a gap concerning the criticism of *The Bloody Chamber* since the work has either been studied fragmentarily, taking just a tale or a family of tales or, when the whole book was considered, the extension of the studies which was necessarily limited could not take into account certain semantic and metaphorical specificities drawn only when looking thoroughly into numerous textual details. The study of *The Bloody Chamber* as a whole has always been brief as it has been part of the study of the total production of the author. Aidan Day, for instance, devotes a chapter of his *Angela Carter: Rational Glass* to *The Bloody Chamber* but there is not a single reference to "The Werewolf". Even when considerations of

⁶⁴¹ For an extended discussion of the history of the folktale and the fairy tale see the introductory chapters to Jack Zipes's *Breaking the Magic Spell*.

⁶⁴² Robert Coover, "A Passionate Remembrance", *The Review of Contemporary Fiction: Angela Carter*, *Tadeusz Konwicki* 14:3 (Fall 1994) 10. Article originally published in 1992.

selected tales are made the tendency is to elaborate interpretations without supporting them with a systematic search in the text for words, phrases or situations to corroborate them.

It can be argued that the fairy tale constitutes the line of continuity pervading each tale and although that would be a reasonable assumption it is not wholly correct. Not only do some tales draw more from the folktale and legend (“The Erl-King”, “The Lady of the House of Love” or “The Werewolf”) but there are also tales which are totally divorced from fairy tales (“Wolf-Alice”). A more solid argument would be that all tales share a gothic disposition. In fact, from the mood to the sets, plot and characters, there is a strong gothic flavour. That is Lucie Armitt’s thesis which she argues in “The Fragile Frames of *The Bloody Chamber*”. Though the Gothic pervades the collection she highlights “The Bloody Chamber” as an admirable example of the Gothic:

[T]he space surrounded by the four walls of the Gothic mansion is determined as an interior dream – (or rather nightmare-) space, while it is the space beyond that functions as the outer world of daylight order. But such three-dimensional constraints are by no means inviolable, for a Gothic text *becomes* a Gothic text only when such fixed demarcations are called into question by the presence of an interloper who interrogates the existence of such boundary demarcations. In the process this character forces the night-dream into a daylight interaction with the so-called world of rational order.⁶⁴⁴

A woman is that intruder who brings with her the revealing light of order. Not just any woman though; the interloper in *The Bloody Chamber* is a girl, a transitional figure between the child and the adult. It is through her that what Armitt calls the fragile frames of *The Bloody Chamber* are crossed. There is a “multiplicity of interconnecting frames” or a kaleidoscopic intertextuality that provides the same story over and over again, where each symbol or image changes meaning⁶⁴⁵. Or it can also happen that the stories appear totally divorced but in the end are bound together precisely because certain elements leak from one story to the next and their significance is maintained. That strategy Lucie Armitt has called “narrative overspill”, an extraordinarily fitting expression in that it also conveys the spirit of the grotesque which travels within and between the stories in those elements which are the object of this study.

⁶⁴³ Angela Carter, *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*, intr. Salman Rushdie (London: Vintage, 1996) xiv.

⁶⁴⁴ Lucie Armitt, “The Fragile Frames of *The Bloody Chamber*”, 90. Italics in the text.

⁶⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

The grotesque, I argue, is the flowing force in *The Bloody Chamber*, flowing with the required “brimming-over abundance” (RW, 19).

Lucie Armitt has expanded her view in another study where she argues that Angela Carter is among the British magical realist writers. Interestingly Armitt claims that on its transference from its South American origin, magical realism surfaced in Great Britain as one of the forms of contemporary Gothicism⁶⁴⁶. Accordingly, Fernando Galván, José Santiago Fernández and Juan Francisco Elices have written:

Somos muy conscientes de que hay escritores británicos, como Angela Carter, Emma Tennant, Iain Banks, y otros, que han sido descritos por la crítica como “mágico-realistas”, si bien los mundos de sus ficciones no guardan apenas paralelos con los de esos espacios geográficos e imaginativos a los que venimos refiriéndonos [Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean]. Se trata, en esos casos, de “otro” realismo mágico, con conexiones evidentes con el latinoamericano, pero con diferencias también obvias en cuanto a la concepción del mundo, el desarrollo argumental, el compromiso político, etc. A veces puede hablarse, en esos casos, de estilo neogótico con ciertas derivaciones foráneas (las perturbadoras ficciones de Angela Carter constituyen un buen ejemplo, si consideramos la huella de la experiencia japonesa en su producción), o simplemente de fantasía de diversa índole.⁶⁴⁷

Gina Wisker in turn places Angela Carter’s writing between fantasy and horror. The processes of horror that Wisker sees Carter utilising in the whole of her work, and in *The Bloody Chamber* in particular, are disempowerment, dismemberment and dehumanization⁶⁴⁸. These are recognisable marks of the grotesque as well and, as Wisker herself observes, Carter’s writing also evolves in the matrix of dark carnival. Supporting herself on *Love and Death in the American Novel*, where Leslie Fiedler refers to the preface Angela Carter used for *Heroes and Villains* to define the Gothic as a composite of parody and grotesqueness, Wisker concludes that through these two components Carter was able to elaborate a transformative shape of our world. Gina Wisker recognises that carnival is a material strategy and principle in Carter’s writing in that it assumes the existence of disorder, dialogue and change but she allies it with

⁶⁴⁶ For Lucie Armitt much of the writing Carter produced revealed this mixed flavour. For a detailed analysis of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman*, *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children* see Lucie Armitt, *Contemporary Women’s Fiction and the Fantastic* (Houndsmills and London: Macmillan, 2000).

⁶⁴⁷ Fernando Galván, José Santiago Fernández and Juan Francisco Elices, *El realismo mágico en lengua inglesa: tres ensayos*, 10.

⁶⁴⁸ See Gina Wisker, “Revenge of the living doll: Angela Carter’s horror writing”, ed. Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton, *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*, 119.

horror, specifically the domestic horror of *The Bloody Chamber*⁶⁴⁹. It is understandable then that Angela Carter adopted the fairy tale form to articulate her interest in horror since “[f]airy-tale families are, in the main, dysfunctional units in which parents and step-parents are neglectful to the point of murder and sibling rivalry to the point of murder is the norm”⁶⁵⁰. Recalling her own experience of being told fairy tales as a child she writes: “Please God, make it stop, I used to say, when they read Hans Andersen’s stories to me at bedtime. Is there no end to human suffering?”⁶⁵¹.

Gina Wisker does not include in her theoretical frame at this point the grotesque, only grotesqueness as a mere aesthetic category. Though still allying grotesqueness to the Gothic, in 1998 Wisker changed her discourse towards noting the significance of the grotesque⁶⁵². In my view, if one admits the grotesque to be the dominant mode of *The Bloody Chamber*, several other concomitant aesthetic theories and philosophies can be accommodated, including the Gothic, carnival and abjection. Nonetheless I favour the grotesque over the Gothic, because it is a more comprehensive structure whose frames are more elastic than the Gothic which is more limited in time and has a more constrained theoretical ground. That is not to say however that the Gothic is circumscribed to the literature of Radcliffe, Maturin or Poe for it has certainly survived and adapted, albeit more in the form of a gothicist flavour than that of the fully-fledged Gothic. In addition these new clothes of the Gothic also tend to blend with adjacent styles and moods. The blending impulse, moreover, has always been part of the grotesque spirit.

⁶⁴⁹ It is no coincidence that *The Sadeian Woman* was written at the same time as *The Bloody Chamber* so that the works can be seen as the essayistic and the fictional discussion of the same issues: the bodies of women and their location in culture, society and home.

⁶⁵⁰ Angela Carter ed., intr. *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, xix.

⁶⁵¹ Angela Carter, “The Better to Eat You With”, *Angela Carter: Shaking a Leg*, 452. The article was originally published in 1976.

⁶⁵² Gina Wisker, “On Angela Carter”, ed. Clyde Bloom, *Gothic Horror: A Reader’s Guide from Poe to King and Beyond* (Macmillan: Houndsmills and London, 1998) 233.

4.2. *The Bloody Chamber*

Considering pornography: decadence, orientalism and the gothic

If morals are to do with the way people behave, then I do think the novel has a moral function. But the moral function should not be hortatory in any way – telling people how to behave. I would see it as a moral compunction to explicate and to find out about things. I suppose I would regard curiosity as a moral function.

Angela Carter, interview with John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, 96

The Bluebeard story appears almost irresistible as a story with which to begin a collection re-imagining fairy tales, as its content has conventionally set up women with roles equating femininity with fragility and helplessness. A tale of a sadistic wife-murderer awakens a repressed but emotionally justified urge to see the criminal punished in a manner equivalent in pain and cruelty. But that effect apparently was what Charles Perrault already aimed to achieve when in 1697 he published “La Barbe Bleue” in *Histoires ou Contes du temps passé*. Several accounts existed in popular tradition prior to Perrault’s first printed version and, following the tendency which marked the transition of the folktale to the fairy tale, they were devoid of moralising teaching and permitted the young wife either to save herself by her own means or through the last minute intervention of her brothers. But if Perrault has the abusive husband killed and thus his crimes punished, and the wife to escape the unfitting punishment, execution, for the “crime” of curiosity, then the woman already assumes a positive position towards an authoritarian patriarchy. The question one puts is thus to what purpose Angela Carter would possibly pick up the Bluebeard motif again. Furthermore, a reason must be found which justifies Angela Carter’s choice to have “La Barbe Bleue” as her prime narrative

instead of folkloristic versions wherein girls of strong, independent will are able to take care of themselves. In a sense, Carter followed the steps of Perrault who privileged, in the first printed version of the tale, feminine helplessness and salvation through male intervention. Could Carter be plotting, departing from the printed word overtaken by masculinity, a return to the freer perspective inculcated in orality? After analysing the case attentively, however, that appears not to be the case.

Indeed it has been argued that despite Carter's subversive intentions, by drawing so much from the fairy tale, she necessarily found herself entangled in the structure it imposes. The fact is that "The Bloody Chamber" presents a structure quite similar to Perrault's. The story follows the exact same line but for one detail designed to overturn the interpretation of the whole. At the conclusion, when the girl is about to be beheaded, the mother re-enters the story, shoots down Bluebeard and saves her daughter's life. Women stand victorious in the end over the representatives of a system that victimises them. However, as one observes carefully the way in which Carter makes use of the motif of sacrifice throughout the story leading to its ultimate rejection, certain problems begin to appear and they are related with Carter's need to build her own story close to Perrault's text. This closeness might have allowed the transference of prejudicial elements to Carter's vision, making similitude with Perrault's text as meaningful as difference.

The first relevant aspect is that the heroine of "The Bloody Chamber" dramatises the continuity of personality of Perrault's heroine. The primary characteristics of the girl's character obey the principle of conventionality. White, suggesting purity, is her colour; from the muslin white dress to her skin, whiteness shocks against the characteristic crimson of the mansion's decoration and against the rubi choker in particular. The girl's body gives the impression of feebleness. She sees herself as a "frail child" with bony hips and nervous fingers⁶⁵³. Associated with a child-like body, she is given a child-like mind unable to read the clues warning against such a hasty marriage. From another angle, however, she can be read very differently, for the Marquis sees in her "thin white face, [...] promise of debauchery only a connoisseur could detect" (BC, 20). Even in what appear to be the infantile dreams of a girl awakening to maturity exist hints of another, less honourable psychological trait. While she travels to "that magic place, the fairy castle whose walls were made of foam, that legendary habitation in which he [her husband] had been born" she does not fantasise about the joy of

⁶⁵³ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (London: Virago, 1979) pages 11 and 10 respectively. Henceforth indicated parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation BC.

marriage or even about the more conventional satisfying comfort of domesticity and motherhood *per se* (BC, 8). The nature of her dreamy vision of marriage is instead based on status; she does not aspire to deliver a child but to “bear an heir. Our destination. My destiny” (BC, 8). For that reason she faces her wedding as a “bridal triumph” (BC, 7).

It might be imagined, following a pattern also common in fairy tale narratives, that the financial aspect is the motivation for the marriage, in this manner turned into the girl’s sacrifice for the salvation usually of a poor family. But here the pattern does not apply. Her only family is her mother, a character totally absent in Perrault, whose perspective of marriage was certainly a more romantic one. The mother resists this marriage without actually showing opposition but rather respect for her daughter’s choice:

‘Are you sure you love him?’ [her mother asked]

‘I’m sure I want to marry him,’ I said.

And would say no more. She sighed as if it was with reluctance that she might at last banish the spectre of poverty from its habitual place at our meagre table. For my mother herself had gladly, scandalously, defiantly beggared herself for love; (BC, 7-8)

The mother is patently suspicious of the marriage, probably because she would like her daughter to follow her own philosophy of life and love. The match is therefore the girl’s responsibility alone, a means to satisfy given needs. By making the girl the narrator the narrative becomes her story, told through her point of view. Both Lindsey Tucker and Robin Ann Sheets point to this change as one of the strategies of resistance to Bruno Bettelheim’s analyses which are viewed as patriarchy-supporting discourse. It is, obviously, one of the merits of Carter’s text but in using that strategy Carter is not only enabling the re-appropriation on the part of women of their own stories but she is also opening a window onto a human being’s interiority, an interiority which cannot be categorically classified as good or evil, whatever male views may be regarding the nature of a feminine “essence”. This means that the implicit idea that the girl’s mother resents their financial situation and that her question is therefore hypocritical is a manifestation of the girl’s transference of her emotion to the mother. The reason that she decided to marry is that she is tired of being poor. When the mother’s marriage is characterised as scandalous, the girl is therefore expressing both the reaction of the community and her own. Moreover, the hardships the two women had to

undergo were a direct consequence of her mother's unwise choice for she married a soldier, a man with an occupation which rather predictably cost him his life.

The girl is not instigated to abandon her life style or her music, which is an element traditionally used to allude to the sensibility and spirituality of the characters. It is she who willingly leaves behind "the tumbled garments I would not need any more, the scores for which there had been no room in my trunks, the concert programmes I'd abandoned" (BC, 7). The idea is discreetly introduced that the girl is not as naive as she believed she was. It is even possible that she, now the mistress of the narrative, induces us to believe in her naivety. In other words, the reader anticipates the "potentiality for corruption" that she (allegedly) only realises she possesses when she is adorned with the ruby necklace (BC, 11).

The young woman was largely seduced by the Marquis's wealth and promise of pleasure in endless parties. She claims that being only seventeen she knew nothing of the world (BC, 9) but that was as much the result of inexperience as of voluntary blindness. This aspect gives an additional meaning to her being equated, through the Flemish painting her husband gives to her, with Saint Cecilia. The immediate relation is that the saint is customarily depicted playing an organ but it is equally relevant that the saint's name means "blind". Once confronted with the dreadful spoils she admits that "in my heart, I'd always known its [the Castle of Murder] lord would be the death of me" (BC, 33). And when she is about to be executed, when the husband actually calls her Saint Cecilia, he asks her: "But does even a youth as besotted as you are think she was truly blind to her own desires when she took my ring?" (BC, 38). It is not out of fearing to commit an indelicacy that she does not ask her husband about the mysterious deaths of his previous wives. It is, she posits, because thinking he had loved other women was a painful remembrance, but it is clearly also because she does not wish to antagonise him and turn her triumph into defeat. The girl knows that in order for the wedding to take place she must preserve her ignorance. But once her position is secured, she can try to overcome that handicap.

By being greedy she was no less liable to the erotic traps he used to lure her into marriage simply because she was "a woman in process, someone who is exploring her subject position"⁶⁵⁴. He delays the nuptial activities until they are back in his castle because he, like a wild animal, has his territory and hunting ground demarcated. In reality, he is described as animalesque: the "leonine shape of his head" is covered with a "dark mane" and he gave out a

⁶⁵⁴ Kathleen E. B. Manley, "The Woman in Process in Angela Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber'", Danielle M. Roemer and Cristina Bacchilega ed., *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale*, 83.

very strong “male scent of leather and spices” (BC, 8). However, like Leonardo da Vinci’s drawings of the leonine man, there is strangeness in his face unmarked by the passing years and experience. He wore his face “like a mask, as if his real face, the face that truly reflected all the life he had led in the world before he met me, before, even, I was born, as though that face lay underneath this mask” (BC, 9). What his face would show was his necrophiliac sexual depravity. In Perrault’s version the girl is disgusted by the blue beard but Carter rejects that mark of such obvious difference in favour of a beard that instead contributes to the erotic games he plays.

The actual wedding night is spent on a train heading to his mansion and it is clear that she is caught in the net of desires he creates by postponing and suggesting caresses. She is induced to long for the pleasure of his bite:

My satin nightdress had just been shaken from its wrappings; it had slipped over my young girl’s pointed breasts and shoulders, supple as a garment of heavy water, and now teasingly caressed me, egregious, insinuating, nudging between my thighs as I shifted restlessly in my narrow berth. His kiss, his kiss with tongue and teeth in it and a rasp of beard, had hinted to me, though with the same exquisite tact as his nightdress he’d given me, of the wedding night. (BC, 8)

The beard contributes to awakening her sexual desire and recalls more intimate hirsute areas. The beard, as the tongue, is a phallic instrument and thus a chief reference in the defloration on the nuptial night. In the absence of the satisfying male body her appetite becomes self-centred. His desire for her has a double consequence: the girl is assaulted by an erotic urge whose object is both another body as well as her own. For this reason, the young woman is not repulsed by the beard when faced by sexual symbolism as is Perrault’s girl.

One of the aspects consistent to women in *The Bloody Chamber* is precisely that they do not fear the sexual performance of males typically labelled as aggressive. The modern tale of Bluebeard incarnates the same ferocious sexuality that Carter matches with physical monstrosity. Whereas a blue beard merely represented a covert perversion, a feminist revision reinforces the perversion by displaying it in full. He is physically a monster because he is a moral monster. Her sentiment towards him reflects her mixed feelings in relation to the discovery she makes of sex: his clammy, moist toad-like skin disgusts her but she is still inexorably attracted to him. His character is constructed as even more perverse by adding a new trait, the fact that he is a pornographer.

The Bluebeard stories are founded on a negotiation between the consequences of women's sexual curiosity and the implicit reproach of male physical abuse. Each version tends to shift the balance and give primacy to one of the poles. Thus Bruno Bettelheim's analysis underlines the moralistic view that advises women to control their curiosity. In response to this misogynistic view Carter reinforces the male's deadly perversion by constructing him as a pornographer. In other words, to allow women's right to sexual knowledge and practice Carter reinforces male sexuality as negative. Sheets argues that Carter merely dismisses this type of sexuality and offers instead a healthy, non-aggressive model by creating the second husband. Though the intention seems to be clear to me in the text it is debatable whether it is a satisfying one. The piano-tuner embodies the stereotype of feminine sexuality, viewed as passive. He too is helpless and can neither help himself nor the girl. His blindness becomes representative of Oedipal castration and of his impotence which is later confirmed in her being the bread-winner. Other texts have posed similar dilemmas, texts such as *Jane Eyre* and *Aurora Leigh*; these are also texts by women starring female protagonists striving for social equality which it appears cannot be achieved. To enjoy their right in society to economic independence and respect, their partners must be maimed, that is, castrated⁶⁵⁵. In those books, as in *The Bloody Chamber*, it appears that equality is out of reach and that a mere carnivalistic

⁶⁵⁵ While arguing against the castration reading Aidan Day paradoxically sees blindness as the means not to objectify Beauty. The piano-tuner is not castrated because he can still establish a genuine and balanced relationship with Beauty through his other senses. This view seems to lack substance and there is no evidence in the text of the piano-tuner's use of his other sensorial senses to achieve any purpose. Moreover, the same could be said of all other examples of blindness, some of which have the castration undertone more firmly hinted. See Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998) p. 157. Elaine Jordan makes an identical interpretation. The piano-tuner is blind but not castrated as this element obeys demands of the narrative as it prevents Beauty from being further possessed by the male gaze (implicitly, she assumes that a male gaze is necessarily abusive). More problematic in my view are the words that follow: "He must *of course* be disabled in some respect, so that it is the bride's mother not he who rescues her", Elaine Jordan, "The Dangers of Angela Carter", ed. Lindsey Tucker, *Critical Essays on Angela Carter*, 36. I find it quite disturbing that the assumed equality is deemed impossible as women can only play authoritative roles in the event of male incapacity. In this perspective, women are no more than competent substitutes. In this context, the redemptive palliative that is love is denied. Sadly in my view, Elaine Jordan concludes: "[b]etter the man who's a friend and ally" than the violent husband. *Ibid.*, 44. Not a passionate lover but a friend. In the same line Robin Ann Sheets sees the piano tuner as a "humble friend and confidant [...], a sympathetic listener, loyal, tender, and sensitive". Robin Ann Sheets, "Pornography, Fairy Tales, and Feminism: Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*", *Critical Essays on Angela Carter*, ed. Lindsey Tucker, 112. For Sheets he is active enough in opening the gate for the Marquise's mother and suggests that "the new relationship may have erotic possibilities that the narrator does not know how to represent and that we do not know how to read", which, she argues, indicates that Carter favoured anti-pornography politics. *Loc. cit.* The suggestion is wholly unfounded by the text and expresses merely a way out of the conundrum Carter left, perhaps purposefully, behind.

inversion of positions between high and low is possible. In these texts, turning the situation around is as innocuous as the turning of an hourglass.

The theme of pornography is materialised in the husband's gaze which objectifies its prey: "I saw him watching me in the gilded mirrors with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh" (*BC*, 11); the innovative idea is that such a gaze is by no means exclusive to men as it could also be compared to "a housewife in the market, inspecting cuts on the slab" (*BC*, 11). The potential for a woman to perpetrate the appropriating look is disclosed and eventually realised in the acquisition of a husband. It is with her first husband that she learns to turn flesh into meat; by learning to see herself as he sees her, she becomes aware of the power involved:

I'd never seen, or else had never acknowledged, that regard of his before, the sheer carnal avarice of it; and it was strangely magnified by the monocle lodged in his left eye. When I saw him look at me with lust, I dropped my eyes but, in glancing away from him, I caught sight of myself in the mirror. And I saw myself, suddenly, as he saw me, my pale face, the way the muscles in my neck stuck out like thin wire. I saw how much that cruel necklace became me. And, for the first time in my innocent and confined life, I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away.

The next day, we were married. (*BC*, 11)

Ángeles de la Concha regards the moment the girl sees herself reflected in the mirror of the Opera as a Lacanian recognition of her imago, which, as I will discuss towards the end of my study, is followed by alienation caused by a sense of fragmentation⁶⁵⁶. Widely used in Carter's fiction, mirrors can represent multiple aspects of one's personality but also a breakable surface where underneath can be found a less agreeable self. In this case, when the shell of innocence is shattered, the girl is able to see her corruptible self. That is only possible because she put herself in the pornographer's shoes. She identifies with him and not only acquires his view of her body but of sex and bodies in general. A disturbing ambiguity is created when she becomes more than his innocent victim but a disciple too⁶⁵⁷. Though he

⁶⁵⁶ See Ángeles de la Concha, "Análisis Bakhtiniano de la novelización del cuento maravilloso de Angela Carter", ed. José Romera Castillo, Mário García-Page and Francisco Gutiérrez Carbajo, *Bajín y la Literatura* (Madrid: Visor Libros, 1994) p. 196.

⁶⁵⁷ It is hinted that the marquis appreciated the potential for sadism and taste for death in women and that he based his choices on that predicament. They all could be his disciples in some sense: the diva whose favourite opera was *Tristan and Isolde*, a piece cherished by the youngest marquise too; the

does have a “monstrous presence” she feels she is on the verge of a precipice but not because of him (*BC*, 20):

No. I was not afraid of him; but of myself. I seemed reborn in his unreflective eyes, reborn in unfamiliar shapes. I hardly recognized myself from his descriptions of me and yet, and yet – might there not be a grain of beastly truth in them? And, in the red firelight, I blushed again, unnoticed, to think he might have chosen me because, in my innocence, he sensed a rare talent for corruption. (*BC*, 20)

Corruption becomes a concept with various meanings: in a material sense as I previously noted, with respect to sexual maturity insofar as she welcomes her eroticism and thus becomes an alternative to Bettelheim and also as a future sexual abuser. Her realisation that the cruel necklace suited her has been interpreted as the realisation of the erotic value of martyrdom. The necklace of rubies is patently the most visible sign of sacrifice. The “choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinary precious slit throat”, “bright as arterial blood”, was given to her as a wedding gift (*BC*, 11). The choker had been made to satisfy the sick fancy of the Marquis’s grandmother who was excited over the idea of death. Aristocrats who survived the blade of the guillotine during the Terror massacres adopted the habit of wearing a red ribbon around their necks as the “memory of a wound” which they escaped (*BC*, 11). The immediate symbolism of the necklace is therefore to announce her impending death which she can avoid only through a miraculous intervention. He insists that she wear it, thus that she puts on her martyrdom:

He made me put on my choker, the family heirloom of one woman who had escaped the blade. With trembling fingers, I fastened the thing about my neck. It was cold as ice and chilled me. He twined my hair into a rope and lifted it off my shoulders so that he could the better kiss the downy furrows below my ears; that made me shudder. And he kissed those blazing rubies, too. He kissed them before he kissed my mouth. (*BC*, 17)

Romanian noblewoman, whose name, Carmilla, is a direct reference to Sheridan Le Fanu’s vampire (the woman-vampire is the leading character in “The Lady of the House of Love”), and the model who must have enjoyed arousing men with the vision of her body. Notice the similitude in content between the marquis’s maxim, “There is a striking resemblance between the act of love and the ministrations of a torturer” (*BC*, 27), Carmilla’s note, “the supreme and unique pleasure of love is the certainty that one is doing evil” (*BC*, 26), and the girl’s own, “I clung to him as though only the one who had inflicted the pain could comfort me for suffering it” (*BC*, 18).

However, another sense can be read in the phrase “the cruel necklace became me” as it clearly states that the necklace represents cruelty and not victimisation as one is immediately tempted to assume and thus it is her potential for enjoying sadistic games that suits her and takes her breath away. Through mirrors they recognise they are reflections of one another. The next day the soul mates are married.

For the innocent young woman she claims to be she is rather paradoxically aware of the price of the marriage (*BC*, 12) as well as of its benefits, among which stands out the escape from a pleasure-devoid life, pleasures which she craves and that can only be met through economic power:

Into marriage, into exile; I sensed it, I knew it – that, henceforth, I would always be lonely. Yet that was part of the already familiar weight of the fire opal that glimmered like a gypsy’s magic ball, so that I could not take my eyes off it when I played the piano. This ring, the bloody bandage of rubies, the wardrobe of clothes from Poiret and Worth, his scent of Russian leather – all had conspired to seduce me so utterly that I could not say I felt one single twinge of regret for the world of tartines and maman that now receded from me. (*BC*, 12)

The girl is positively spellbound by the designer clothes and jewels distracting her even from her music. She longs for an idle, trifling life: “I wanted to curl up on the rug before the blazing fire, lose myself in a cheap novel, munch sticky liqueur chocolates. If I rang for them, a maid would bring me chocolates” (*BC*, 16). The Marquis has always been aware of how she could be lured into marrying him; he is sure he can go on a trip and leave her because he “kn[e]w quite well that this child [he]’d bought with a handful of coloured stones and the pelts of dead beasts won’t run away” (*BC*, 18). She is vain, as she herself confesses to have become now that she is covered in furs like the Countess in “The Snow Child” mainly because she understands she has achieved a great feat: she married the richest man in France (*BC*, 12), a man as rich as Croesus (*BC*, 10). For that reason she is willing to overlook all the suspicions regarding his past and signs which the readers, through her narrative, glimpse as signs of deadly threat: the smell of lilies which she associates with him and with death and which are an obsessive presence in the text (for instance, the bedroom is packed with lilies until it resembles an embalming parlour, *BC*, 18), his taking her to see *Tristan and Isolde*, the detail of his smoking that famous brand of cigars *Romeo y Julieta*, his voice reminding of the tolling of bells, his strangely red lips, and his eyes which have the quality of the eyes painted on Egyptian

sarcophagi. Most meaningfully when he says “soon” without a conversational context one is made to think of the consummation but it is pertinent that as he pronounces the word she is not exhilarated but instead has a premonition of dread and sees “his white, broad face as if it were hovering, disembodied, above the sheets, illuminated from below like a grotesque carnival head” (BC, 12). This vision of sheer Gothic quality is a revelation, like in a supernatural vision, of the dead wives. A similar image comes to her mind some time later, elicited by the sight of the jar of lilies: “the thick glass distorted their [the lilies] fat stems so that they looked like arms, dismembered arms, drifting drowned in greenish water” (BC, 22). On that other occasion she immediately shakes the thought away and lends to this older man, this much older man (BC, 8) the comforting security of her father’s embraces.

This search for security from a father-like figure does not solve her problems. To disagree with Bettelheim in his analysis of Little Red Riding Hood where he claims that a small girl turns to her father to rescue her from her troubles, particularly the emotional dilemmas resulting from her desire to seduce or be seduced by her father, in “The Bloody Chamber” neither the father who “kissed me and left me and died” nor her husband whose desire is precisely the opposite, to eliminate her, can meet any of her expectations of salvation (BC, 12). There may even be a hidden accusation in those words, blaming her father for the poverty and humiliation of having to use her music to survive, in lowering it from its status of art to that of work. It is in one of those circumstances that she meets her husband, a remembrance tainted with bitterness; in the salon of a princess she played Debussy, “among the teacups and the little cakes, I, the orphan, hired out of charity to give them their digestive music” (BC, 13). Hence her ambiguous relation with music; it reminded her of her indigence and of the demeaning sacrifices her mother made such as selling her jewellery, even her wedding ring, to pay the Conservatoire fees.

The girl is undeniably motivated into marriage because she has an understanding of the economic value of the match. This, however, does not erase the child-like fantasies which traditionally make wealth and goodness coincide. The charming prince is invariably good-hearted. And has she not met him at a princess’s salon? So eager is she to leave her past behind that she constructs her future in a purely fairy-tale set, in romantic vein, with mythological creatures which she identifies with rather strangely for a newlywed, given that the mermaid aches over the absence of her lover:

And, ah! his castle. The faery solitude of the place; with its turrets of misty blue, its courtyard, its spiked gate, his castle that lay on the very bosom of the sea with seabirds mewing about its attics, the casements opening on the green and purple, evanescent departures of the ocean, cut off by the tide from land for half a day ... that castle, at home neither on the land nor on the water, a mysterious, amphibious place, contravening the materiality of both earth and the waves, with the melancholy of a mermaiden who perches on her rock and waits, endlessly, for a lover who had drowned far away, long ago. That lovely, sea-siren of a place! (*BC*, 13)

Not surprisingly, the view from her room over the Atlantic makes her feel like the Queen of the Sea. Fantasy is, however, put side by side with economics and sex for if she married him on account of his economic value, he married her because of her sexual one. A trade could only take place if she allowed herself to be turned into a sex object since she had nothing else to negotiate with. At the outset then, the marriage is shadowed by the male's specific sexual tastes and the events to come are directly linked with those tastes; thus Carter overturns Bettelheim's stress on women's sexual inquisitiveness as cause of the attempted murder, though Bettelheim is careful to reproach the punishment the husband applies as well.

The husband is, as Tucker and Sheets note, a pornographer, which justifies his desire to marry someone for sexual reasons alone. His pornographic taste is reflected in the presentation of the bed:

And there lay the grand, hereditary matrimonial bed, itself the size, almost, of my little room at home, with the gargoyles carved on its surfaces of ebony, vermilion lacquer, gold leaf; and its white gauze curtains, billowing in the sea breeze. Our bed. And surrounded by so many mirrors! Mirrors on all the walls, in stately frames of contorted gold, that reflected more white lilies than I'd ever seen in my life before. He'd filled the room with them, to greet the bride, the young bride. The young bride, who had become that multitude of girls I saw in the mirrors, identical in their chic navy blue tailor-mades, for travelling, madame, or walking. A maid had dealt with the furs. Henceforth, a maid would deal with everything.

'See,' he said, gesturing towards those elegant girls. 'I have acquired a whole harem for myself!' (*BC*, 14)

The Gothicism of the colours and decoration is allied to the stereotyped use of mirrors in pornography but here mirrors also separate the two characters into their several selves (social/private, innocent/knowing, and possibly abuser/victim). But the multiple reflections

of one of his wives are also revealing of the absence of other wives and of their common fate. The occasion of the actual consummation puts forward the destructive potentiality of penetration more explicitly while emphasising the multiplying effect: “A dozen husbands impaled a dozen brides” (BC, 17).

Moreover, by recovering the identification of the Bluebeard story with the Oriental tradition of the nineteenth century through the reference to the harem, Carter reveals the double function of dislocating the cruelty of Bluebeard’s actions and voracious appetite from the refined European gentleman to the foreign Other while maintaining the severe admonishment to women who dared disobey their husbands or satisfy their sexual curiosity⁶⁵⁸. This aspect, which is exemplary of Edward Said’s Orientalism insofar as it makes the Oriental as the repository of negativity, is elaborated in relation to the library described as having “rugs on the floor, deep, pulsing blues of heaven and red of the heart’s dearest blood, [which] came from Isfahan and Bokhara” (BC, 16)⁶⁵⁹. But that element is particularly noticeable with relation to the books. One, *The Adventures of Eulalie at the Harem of the Grand Turk*, has a pornographic drawing where the black-masked man has his penis compared to a scimitar. The book’s illustrations specifically display the deaths of the sultan’s wives.

The Marquis’s pornographic sadism is not only developed with an Oriental backdrop; it also lies in arousing his virgin wife longing for consummation and then in leaving her abruptly:

⁶⁵⁸ Marina Warner refers to Arthur Rackham’s woodcuts which portrayed Bluebeard as a Turk. The motif was picked up by other artists so that the story began to be diffused having Bluebeard with a turban, a scimitar, living in the Middle East and even having wives named Fatima. See Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (London: Vintage, 1994) p. 242. I found illustrations of Bluebeard in this vein in works by Harry Clark, Edmund Dulac, Jennie Harbour, G. P. Jacomb Hood, Charles Robinson, W. Heath Robinson, and A. H. Watson. See Danielle M. Roemer’s exploration of the subject of the Oriental in *The Bloody Chamber* by referring to Timur/Tamburlaine, Shah Abbās and Croesus. She includes in the lot the couturier Paul Poiret for being “an entrepreneur of Orientalism”. Danielle M. Roemer, “The Contextualization of the Marquis in Angela Carter’s ‘The Bloody Chamber’”, Danielle M. Roemer and Cristina Bacchilega ed., *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale*, 119. She summarises the similarities of these men with the marquis thus: “there is the crucial and stark contrast between the tyrant’s commitment to territorialism, sensory exploitation, the dehumanization of others, and omnivorous egocentricity, on the one hand, and journeying beyond the status quo with committed respect for oneself and for others, on the other”. *Ibid.*, 124. A final note on this issue refers to Angela Carter’s short text “The Kiss” published in *Black Venus* which has as its central male protagonist Tamburlaine.

⁶⁵⁹ Edward Said defines “Orientalism” as a historical and cultural construction, “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient”. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, [1978] 1995) 3.

I watched a dozen husbands approach me in a dozen mirrors and slowly, methodically, teasingly, unfasten the buttons of my jacket and slip it from my shoulders. Enough! No; more! Off comes the skirt; and, next, the blouse of apricot linen that cost more than the dress I had for first communion. The play of the waves outside in the cold sun glittered on his monocle; his movements seemed to me deliberately coarse, vulgar. The blood rushed to my face again, and stayed there.

And yet, you see, I guessed it might be so – that we should have a formal disrobing of the bride, a ritual from the brothel. Sheltered as my life had been, how could I have failed, even in the world of prim bohemia in which I lived, to have heard hints of *his* world? (*BC*, 15. *Italics in the text*)

She is divided and does not know how to feel about the fact that he has turned her into a whore-bride. She is aroused by the suggestion of being penetrated by several men, by their/his vulgar touch and all along she knows that the ritual of pornographic satisfaction has a price and that it is an expensive one.

“Consummation” belongs to the same family of words as “to consume” and through the verb is disclosed the implications of sex in terms of economics, usage or gastronomy for through sex one can be bought, used or eaten. The following passage is demonstrative of these connections:

He stripped me, gourmand that he was, as if he were stripping the leaves off an artichoke – but do not imagine much finesse about it; this artichoke was no particular treat for the diner nor was he yet in any greedy haste. He approached his familiar treat with a weary appetite. And when nothing but my scarlet, palpitating core remained, I saw, in the mirror, the living image of an etching by Rops from the collection he had shown me when our engagement permitted us to be alone together ... the child with her sticklike limbs, naked but for her button boots, her gloves, shielding her face with her hand as though her face were the last repository of her modesty; and the old, monocled lecher who examined her, limb by limb. He is in his London tailoring; she, bare as a lamb chop. Most pornographic of all confrontations. And so my purchaser unwrapped his bargain. And, as at the opera, when I had first seen my flesh in his eyes, I was aghast to feel myself stirring.

At once he closed my legs like a book and I saw again the rare movement of his lips that meant he smiled.

Not yet. Later. Anticipation is the greater part of pleasure, my little love. (*BC*, 15)

He leaves her with “bewildered senses – a wet, silken brush from his beard; a hint of the pointed tip of the tongue” (BC, 16). The scene is reminiscent of the hungry craving of the wolf of the Little Red Riding Hood stories, including “The Company of Wolves”⁶⁶⁰, with an innuendo of paedophilia in enhancing the desire of “the old, monocled lecher” for the thin, not-yet-developed body of a child attired like a porn actress. Later, when he finds her inspecting his books, his remarks cynically reveal her sexual value for him lies in her immaturity as his second wife’s lay in inferred promiscuity: “Have the nasty pictures scared Baby? Baby mustn’t play with grownups’ toys until she’s learned how to handle them, must she?” (BC, 17). When they make love for the first time he also calls her “my child” and when he stages a voyage, causing her to protest, he accuses her of not understanding because she is “only a little girl” (BC, 18). It is also interesting to notice the purely anatomical examination reinforcing the comments previously made on dissection and pornography. The scene could almost be said to be a literary counterpart to William Hunter’s *Anatomia Uteri Humani Gravidis*.

The passage is paramount in establishing the imbalance of forces in a pornographic situation: she, helpless and edible as a lamb; he, the consumer; she, the cheap goods, he, the purchaser. However, in *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter argued that pornography should not be dismissed at face value and that women should have a right to it as long as it represented the satisfaction of *their* desires. In “The Bloody Chamber”, written at the same time as *The Sadeian Woman*, the pornographic experience tempts the girl. Though she is pushed into playing the martyr by having as yet another wedding present that portrait of Saint Cecilia at the organ, this pianist sees herself as she “*could* have wished to be” (BC, 14. Italics added)⁶⁶¹. But she does not; again if she is stirred it is by the vision of herself in the mirror, that is, with the sight of her own beauty and with their pleasures suggestively multiple and promiscuous. Anticipation is therefore the paramount aspect of pleasure though anticipation is not the same for the two of them.

The grotesque spirit of the Decadent movement has been demonstrated to exist by Ewa Kuryluk who takes as the object of her study the art of Aubrey Beardsley in *Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex: The Grotesque – Origins, Iconography, Techniques*⁶⁶². “The Bloody Chamber”

⁶⁶⁰ When he pushes her into the bedroom she complains about it being still day to which he answers that it is “All the better to see you” (BC, 17).

⁶⁶¹ The other reason for choosing this martyr to compare her to is that she was beheaded, like many early Christians.

⁶⁶² Without considering the grotesque Mary Kaiser compares the murderous and artistic intensity of “The Bloody Chamber” to Beardsley’s illustrations of *Salome*. See Mary Kaiser, “Fairy Tale as Sexual Allegory; Intertextuality in Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*”, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction: Angela*

finds in the dialogue it maintains with Decadent art one of the means for the grotesque to manifest itself. One of the references is a work by Félicien Rops with which the girl is so impressed because she identifies with the condition of the female character, a victim, and of which she finds an analogous drawing in her exploring activities at the library in an eighteenth century book, *The Adventures of Eulalie at the Harem of the Grand Turk*: “I had not bargained for this, the girl with tears hanging on her cheeks like stuck pearls, her cunt a split fig below the great globes of her buttocks on which the knotted tails of the cat were about to descend, while a man in a black mask fingered with his free hand his prick” (BC, 16-17). The equivalence of her body to edible goods is systematic as though she cannot rise above that condition and has to accept her role in the power relations of pornography. Quite similarly to the freak-women of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, there is a sense of inevitability in the role each part plays and in which women’s bodies are reduced to meat through male fantasies of Sadeian inspiration.

The Marquise is looking at the preview of her own death whose consequence is diminished by being made into art. But to her it is the picture of a massacre (BC, 17). Even if only intuitively, she is nonetheless able to identify her husband with the man in the drawing. Her husband’s face does not wear a mask but it is like a mask behind which she longs to know what it hides. It is precisely this desire to know on the part of the woman that is indicated as the cause of the female’s suffering in the drawing appropriately entitled “Reproof of curiosity”, as symbolic of her situation as “Immolation of the wives of the Sultan”.

However, the girl pays no attention to a central work of French Decadent art which she finds, quite suitably given the content of the book, displayed like a missal (he refers to his pornographic collection as prayer books, BC 17). It is Joris Karl Huysmans’s *Là-bas* (1891) on the topic of Satanism and black magic and in which Durtal, the author’s alleged alter ego, sets out to reconstruct the biography of the infamous Gilles de Rais (1404-1440), known for being Joan of Arc’s companion in arms and for his infanticidal mass murder. Gilles de Rais and Comorre, the Cursed, are the two historical figures commonly indicated as inspiration for the Bluebeard myth. The mention of *Là-bas* serves therefore a double purpose: to contribute to the construction of a Decadent mood for the short story which begins in Paris, the centre of Decadent art, and to allude to the tale behind the story in the same subtle manner the Oriental

Carter, Tadeusz Konwicki 14:3 (Fall 1994) 32. Marina Warner also compares Alfred Crowquill’s illustrations of the key of Bluebeard to Beardsley’s depiction of oversized phalli. See Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, p. 244.

indicators do. Another work written earlier, *À Rebours* (1884), is a material intertext for Oscar Wilde as it is the yellow book mentioned by Dorian Gray and its protagonist provides the example for Gray's behaviour. Perhaps it would be going too far to see the girl's desire for a book in yellow paper as an allusion to *À Rebours* but Huysmans is definitely paramount in this particular story.

Huysmans's admiration for Rops is well-known and his Belgian friend was, in his view, an artist of exceptional talent whose Baudelairian style well served his reiterated symbols of the otherworldly quality of evilness: skeletons, devils, whores and death. In Paris Rops befriended Puvis de Chavannes and Gustave Moreau. The former is mentioned to have painted the second of the Marquis's unfortunate wives after they met at one of the cafés of Montmartre. She had the "skeletal, enigmatic grace" which one can admire in Puvis de Chavannes's paintings (*BC*, 10). The fictional acquaintance of that woman with Decadent French painters lends an implicit aura of licentiousness to the millionaire's second wife. Not only did she work as a barmaid in Montmartre but she was painted by them, by de Chavannes for whom she "expose[d] her flat breasts and elongated thighs" and by Redon until her face, like a prostitute's body, became "common property" (*BC*, 10). Redon was not a Decadent artist but a Symbolist, although he became associated with the movement through *À Rebours* since his drawings are mentioned as being inspirational with respect to the protagonist's perverse fantasies.

Moreau supposedly painted the barmaid in a painting called *Sacrificial Victim* and in the Marquis's collection of Symbolist works there is reference to James Ensor and to a painting that is meant to be associated with the newest Marquise, *The Foolish Virgins*⁶⁶³. Ensor's art is a profound inquiry into human nature, particularly on its psychological complexity which is conveyed in one of his favourite motifs, the mask. Other painters related to Symbolist interests represented in the Marquis's family's loot are Gauguin, Watteau, Poussin and Fragonard. It is because French Decadent art provided a suitable context for the short story that "The Bloody Chamber", unlike most other stories, has a framework clearly defined in space (Paris and Mont St Michel) and time (second half of the nineteenth century). The girl also browses through some of Eliphas Levy's (imagined) books. His writings dwell on spiritual

⁶⁶³ There is some confusion concerning the marquises. On page 10 the former barmaid is said to be the second wife but on page 20 she is mentioned as the first. I have maintained the order first presented in the text.

matters and the titles of these works are made to allude to the story line in question: *The Initiation*, *The Key of Mysteries* and *The Secret of Pandora's Box*.

After the girl has been initiated into the secrets of sex, she is ready for her husband's test. On the very same night he is called out on a journey and the prison warder (BC, 19) leaves the keys with his prisoner. In the traditional tale the keys symbolise liberty but the prisoner must be wise enough to know that it is only by not using them that she can be set free, free, that is, only from the menace of death. But this type of woman is not to Carter's taste. At the library she had been an idle explorer, at least until she found *The Adventures of Eulalie*, but now, with the keys in her hand, she is determined "to search through them all for evidence of my husband's true nature" (BC, 24). At first afraid of the consequences, after some consideration she moves on and "felt no fear, no intimation of dread. Now I walked as firmly as I had done in my mother's house" (BC, 27). She sets forth to conquer his territory and make it her own. She is thrust forward by the "exhilaration of the explorer" which she had not experienced while going through the library but now some of the spirit of her mother is revealed in her (BC, 24).

The castle's oppressive opulence acquires a gothic expression in the corridors which, though not characteristically narrow and webbed, are nevertheless dark. She walks on with only a taper to light her way, she examines the Venetian tapestries depicting what she believes to be the rape of the Sabines⁶⁶⁴. The mutilation of women and horses is like a chronicle of a death foretold: hers. Moreover, the descent described in the same parameters as Eve's towards the heart of Beulah in *The Passion of New Eve* is felt like a journey towards the origin of life and knowledge. She becomes aware that "it grew very warm; the sweat sprang out in beads on my brow" (BC, 27). The castle is like a living being: "A long, a winding corridor, as if I were in the viscera of the castle; and this corridor led to a door of worm-eaten oak, low, round-topped, barred with black iron" (BC, 27)⁶⁶⁵.

There is one instance which makes it clear that sexuality and knowledge are associated and that both should be kept at bay from women. It is the girl's curiosity which leads her to

⁶⁶⁴ Another mythological reference concerning rape is used as backdrop. He is compared to a satyr who martyred her hair and satyrs were associated with such activities.

⁶⁶⁵ Notice the similarity: "We were insulated by five fathoms of sand and rock from all natural light and sound; yet, by degrees, the room had grown imperceptibly warmer. Now I found I was sweating profusely. Then [...] the darkness changed its colour, a rosy light began to suffuse the room. The pinkish glow spread, seeped, leaked up the round walls of my cell until everything was lambent; the radiance intensified until it became reddish and, by degrees, crimson. The temperature increased until it

the hellish “private slaughterhouse” (BC, 30) after which she wishes that “morning would find me once more a virgin”, that is, destitute of particular knowledge (BC, 31).

The grotesque elements spread throughout the tale are most visibly displayed with the discovery of the bloody chamber, described in gothic terms and pervaded by religious objects which add further justification to the mention of Huysmans in the short story:

And now my taper showed me the outlines of a rack. There was also a great wheel, like the ones I had seen in woodcuts of the martyrdoms of the saints, in my old nurse’s little store of holy books. And – just one glimpse of it before my little flame caved in and I was left in absolute darkness – a metal figure, hinged at the side, which I knew to be spiked on the inside and to have the name: the Iron Maiden.

Absolute darkness. And, about me, the instruments of mutilation.

[...] [It was] a room designed for desecration and some dark night of unimaginable lovers whose embraces were annihilation.

The walls of this stark torture chamber were the naked rock; they gleamed as if they were sweating with fright. At the four corners of the room were funerary urns, of great antiquity, Etruscan, perhaps, and, on three-legged ebony stands, the bowls of incense he had left burning which filled the room with a sacerdotal reek. Wheel, rack and Iron Maiden were, I saw, displayed as grandly as if they were items of statuary and I was almost consoled, then, and almost persuaded myself that I might have stumbled only upon a little museum of his perversity, that he had installed these monstrous items here only for contemplation. (BC, 28)

The religious fervour lent to the ritual of killing transforms it into a sacrificial ritual quite distinct from mere murder. It has the required detailed procedure which is also characteristic of serial killing:

Yet at the centre of the room lay a catafalque, a doomed, ominous bier of Renaissance workmanship, surrounded by long white candles and, at its foot, an armful of the same lilies with which he had filled my bedroom, stowed in a four-foot-high jar glazed with a sombre Chinese red. I scarcely dared examine this catafalque and its occupant more closely; yet I knew I must.

[...] The opera singer lay, quite naked, under a thin sheet of very rare and precious linen, such as the princess of Italy used to shroud those whom they have poisoned. I touched

was at blood heat. The sweat ran down me in streams. [...] NOW YOU ARE AT THE PLACE OF BIRTH”. Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, 51-2.

her, very gently, on the white breast; she was cool, he had embalmed her. On her throat I could see the blue imprint of his strangler's fingers. The cool, sad flame of the candles flickered on her white, closed eyelids. The worst thing was, the dead lips smiled. (*BC*, 28)

Of the bohemian model only the white skull remained, mysteriously suspended in the air, and shockingly adorned with a bridal veil and garland of white roses. The Romanian Countess was found inside the Iron Maiden, "its sculpted face caught in a rictus of pain", a sight so horrifying that the girl dropped the key (*BC*, 29). It is the Countess's blood that will not come off. The vision of a being from the land of blood-thirsty creatures so utterly destroyed by this man magnifies his viciousness: "She was pierced, not by one but by a hundred spikes, this child of the land of the vampires who seemed so newly dead, so full of blood..." (*BC*, 29). A vampire-child recalls, of course, "The Lady of the House of Love".

The fact that this is a story told in the first person becomes relevant once again when it comes to attributing responsibilities. The girl is, in fact, unwilling to accept any guilt for her curiosity and instead lays the accountability for her behaviour entirely on him:

I had behaved exactly according to his desires; had he not bought me so that I should be so? I had been tricked into my own betrayal to that illimitable darkness whose source I had been compelled to seek in his absence and, now that I had met that shadowed reality of his that came to life only in the presence of its own atrocities, I must pay the price for my new knowledge. The secret of Pandora's box; but he had given me the box, himself, knowing I must learn the secret. I had played a game in which every move was governed by a destiny as oppressive and omnipotent as himself, since that destiny was himself; and I had lost. Lost at that charade of innocence and vice in which he had engaged me. Lost, as the victim loses to the executioner. (*BC*, 34)

Feminist interpretations will in all probability approve the girl's rejection of any sense of guilt concerning her curiosity. Women are entitled to obtain all the information that they see fit. The very thought of self-reproach does not even cross her mind. But there is another aspect to take into consideration. Though she had admitted that she had always known he was terribly dangerous to her, she is unable to justify why she did not keep her distance. Along with the just disclaimer of any blame for her curiosity, she refuses all responsibility for being caught in the situation of being married to a uxoricide. She denies any responsibility for her own actions, suggesting therefore that she was a mere brainless mechanical doll at his disposal.

This claim is incompatible with the cunningness the little Marquise had shown herself to possess on previous occasions, namely with reference to the convenience of not posing imprudent questions regarding his past. She proves she is not the mindless little wife when she does not panic at the twang given out by the Iron Maiden and especially at the abrupt arrival of her husband. In order to save her life she is able to find the presence of mind to throw herself into his arms (*BC*, 34) and to maintain a seductive attitude (*BC*, 35).

The Marquis, who had always been represented through her view, is now presented in a more intimate manner. At the end, his viciousness acquires other meaningful attributes. These are concerned with two main areas: firstly, the “atrocious loneliness”, and secondly, deriving from his loneliness, insanity (*BC*, 35). His appearance suffers an alteration attesting to his madness: “His curling mane was disordered, as if he had run his hands through it in his distraction. I saw how he had lost his impassivity and was now filled with suppressed excitement” (*BC*, 35). Transforming the killer from a plain sadist into a madman with the conventional mannerisms of such a state attenuates his blame. Moreover, there are various references to ancestors having possessed a killing instinct, thus indicating either a Gothic legacy or a genetic disorder such as the one affecting the Báthory family⁶⁶⁶.

The young Marquise realises that the “sombre delirium” of his face is a compound of shame and of “terrible, guilty joy” at having caught her sinning (*BC*, 36). His desire to perform her martyrdom by the same form of execution as Saint Cecilia reflects a twisted application of religious principles. The addition of the religious factor to the story serves only to demonstrate that the punishment of women for their access to knowledge is perverse. Moreover, it is revealing of how the Bluebeard story is but an attenuated version of a much older myth which has Eve as the causer of the concept of sin being brought about. The motif of multiple personality is also implied in his sudden third person speech, as if he does not wish to carry the burden of the kill but it also suggests that he is speaking in the name of God and that it is on him that blame should be located:

‘You disobeyed him,’ he said. ‘That is sufficient reason for him to punish you.’

‘I only did what he knew I would.’

‘Like Eve,’ he said. (*BC*, 37-8).

⁶⁶⁶ See comments on this family, particularly Elizabeth Báthory, in the sub-chapter devoted to “The Lady of the House of Love”.

In the final part of the tale when the mother barges in, the Marquis is compared to Verdi in terms of the hypothetical situation of his characters denying him a tragic finale. The description has a biblical undertone which allows the identification of the puppet master with God. He would be “open-mouthed, wide-eyed, impotent at the last, [seeing] his dolls break free of their strings, abandon the rituals he had ordained for them since time began and start to live for themselves” (BC, 39). The girl’s allegation that she is blameless articulates her view, the view the reader is given of the tale, that she was one of those helpless creatures before the magnificent divine might. But the fact that she does not die in the end proves, Margaret Atwood argues, that she was not an innocent girl anymore due to her sexual experience with her husband⁶⁶⁷. Appropriately Atwood points back to *The Sadeian Woman*: “To be the object of desire is to be defined in the passive case. / To exist in the passive case is to die in the passive case – that is, to be killed. This is the moral of the fairy tale about the perfect woman”⁶⁶⁸.

The religious context as the chosen set for the Marquis’s killing changes the interpretation of the act. The transformation of a simple homicide into sacrifice aims to expurgate the mark of sin that she bears on her forehead, like Cain, after he imprints it with the bloody key on her skin. Unearthing the hidden intertext of religion clarifies the social justification for the sacrifice of women. Thus the whole execution must follow the required precepts of a “lustratory ritual” and “ceremonial robing”, that is, she must bathe and put on a white tunic and the choker (BC, 37). Attired like “a victim of an auto-da-fé” she waits in the chamber which had been made into a temple smelling of masses of dying lilies and she is finally able to see through their symbolism: their smell pronounces bodily decay as the trumpets of the angels announce death (BC, 37). Even the decapitation is regarded as an honourable death process and thus fit for the Marquis’s wife and not for her lover.

Eating also has a specific place in ritual killing thus adding significance to the act and to her meatification beyond the context of pornography. His treatment of his wives’ bodies is not crudely destructive. Every gesture has meaning: “Don’t loiter, girl! Do you think I shall lose appetite for the meal if you are so long about serving it? No; I shall grow hungrier, more ravenous with each moment, more cruel... Run to me, run! I have a place prepared for your exquisite corpse in my display of flesh!” (BC, 39).

⁶⁶⁷ See Margaret Atwood, “Running with the Tigers”, ed. Lorna Sage, *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, p. 123.

⁶⁶⁸ Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, 77.

All the time she is in the company of the blind piano-tuner whose only contribution in the midst of such a ferocious threat is holding her hand. It is the mother who re-enters the story who saves the day. This twist of having a courageous woman come to the rescue and a passive unheroic male is the basis of Carter's whole carnivalistic, life-renewing change. The implications upon a close look are, however, more complex. Firstly the mother maintains the appearance and epic attitude which was already in some cases ridiculous as a characterisation of male heroes because it was exaggerated. Before the age of seventeen this woman had defeated a group of Chinese pirates, shot a tiger in Hanoi and helped a village survive the plague. Age does not appear to have affected her skills⁶⁶⁹: "I saw a horse and rider galloping at a vertiginous speed along the causeway, though the waves crashed, now, high as the horse's fetlocks. A rider, her black skirts tucked up around her waist so she could ride hard and fast, a crazy, magnificent horsewoman in widow's weeds" (*BC*, 38). At the moment she approaches the Marquis for the kill, she is equated with the mythological Medusa:

You never saw such wild thing as my mother, her hat seized by the winds and blown out to sea so that her hair was her white mane, her black lisle legs exposed to the thigh, her skirts tucked round her waist, one hand on the reins of the rearing horse while the other clasped my father's service revolver and, behind her, the breakers of the savage, indifferent sea, like the witnesses of a furious justice. And my husband stood stock-still, as if she had been Medusa, the sword still raised over his head as in those clockwork tableaux of Bluebeard that you see in glass cases at fairs. (*BC*, 39-40)

This utterly unrealistic, exaggerated description could be argued however to be a comment on men's self-adulation which, being transported to a feminine figure, reveals its rather pathetic quality. This interpretation would justify the scene wherein the mother appears to be Winged Victory.

Secondly, the mother is a purely functional character in the story, appearing only at the beginning and the end⁶⁷⁰. On both occasions stress is put on her widow's blackness. Her

⁶⁶⁹ Another unimportant imprecision occurs with reference to these events. The age of seventeen and eighteen is given in two different points of the narrative.

⁶⁷⁰ Sarah Gamble's view differs from mine as she claims that it is precisely because she appears only in the opening tale that the figure of the mother is crucial. In fact, Gamble asserts, "Carter's novels have hitherto done little or nothing to deconstruct the fixed oppositions [...], 'the' couple, man/woman" but here the mother is the third element which destroys the Sadeian model. Sarah Gamble, *Angela Carter: Writing from the Frontline* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997) 154-155. This perspective enhances the importance of the role *for others* and does not value the figure in itself.

bravery and stoic survival give the impression of being related with widowhood, which happened early in her life. In her sexual abstinence lies therefore the source of her strength, channelled completely to the happiness of her daughter. So connected is she to the girl's emotions that the mother is capable of detecting danger even when her daughter has not. It is through a call made prior to the discovery of the bloody chamber that the mother intuits the seriousness of the situation. These realisations lead to some uncomfortable conclusions: the mother/daughter dyad contributes to the mythologisation of a purely empathic, unintelligible maternal nature denominated maternal telepathy (*BC*, 40) and to the reinforcement of sexual self-sacrifice on the part of the mother.

This element is directly related with Carter's own view of myth and it has originated one of the chief debates on her work. In "Notes From the Front Line" she posits that "all myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice. I'm in the demythologising business" and proceeds to dismantle Perrault's stories, *The Ur-Collection*, demonstrating her prowess in "The Better to eat you with"⁶⁷¹. And she continues: "*this* world is all there is" so she cannot help being irritated when people talk about the mythic quality of her writing⁶⁷². Carter's concern with respect to myths is in terms of their contribution to the maintenance of a given system: "I'm interested in myths – though I'm much more interested in folklore – just because they *are* extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree"⁶⁷³. When in 1988 Anna Katsavos asserts that she is not in the remythologising business but in the demythologising business, Angela Carter answers: "I'm basically trying to find out what certain configurations of imagery in our society, in our culture, really stand for, what they mean, underneath the kind of semireligious coating that makes people not

Moreover, it cannot reasonably be said that in the other tales the Sadeian model is not questioned though the third party, the mother, is not there to eliminate it. If the mother is seen as more than just functional, then one arrives at the same conclusion Iwona Maria Kubacki did and for whom "The Bloody Chamber" is "a story about the problems of female individualism". Iwona Maria Kubacki, "Angela Carter's Feminist Grotesque", doctoral dissertation, University of New Brunswick, 1997, 182. The same closed circuit of the mother/daughter dyad is present at the beginning and at the end. Because the mother is phallic (see further ahead my own comments on her using her husband's revolver), thus potentially dangerous, the girl wants separation from the mother. The control exerted over the girl is encapsulated in her feeling like a child's toy on a string (*BC*, 12). Thus she rushed into a marriage where the Marquis, explicitly identified with the girl's father, is expected to be the third party and to break the dyad.

⁶⁷¹ Angela Carter, "Notes from the Front Line", *Angela Carter: Shaking a Leg*, 38.

⁶⁷² Loc. cit. Italics in the text.

⁶⁷³ Loc. cit. Italics in the text.

particularly want to interfere with them”⁶⁷⁴. Critics like Elaine Jordan and Margaret Atwood recognise that Carter re-uses myth but do not comment on the fact that she wanted to dismiss them altogether. Though she does use myth in her work, there is no doubt that it serves to deconstruct the traditional usage it has, precisely because Carter’s fiction is not divorced from the political and social issues of her day. As Mary Kaiser notes: “Carter’s use of intertextuality in *The Bloody Chamber* moves the tales from the mythic timelessness of the fairy tale to specific cultural moments, each of which presents a different problem in gender relations and sexuality”⁶⁷⁵.

The third aspect to bear in mind in relation to the use of the mother as the rescuer is that she switches roles with the male murderer. She has come for a kill and he is but her helpless prey as were his wives in his hands. But the mother, unlike the husband, is authorised by the text to perform the kill. The transference of the type of violence previously associated with masculinity to the realm of women is confirmed not so much in her acquiring a warrior-like posture but more discreetly, and meaningfully, by her being distinguished by the same trait he had: a mane. Not being a human feature, the reference to the mane has to allude to her animal side and to be related with his animalesque characterisation.

Fourthly, the instrument of the kill is as significant as it was for the Marquis. The mother shoots the abuser down with her late husband’s service revolver, similarly to what happens in “The Company of Wolves” where the girl is set to protect herself with her father’s knife. This element strongly suggests that the power to kill and the ability of a woman to defend herself and her family is borrowed from masculinity and that it is not her own. It does not, I think, represent mother as having the powers of femininity and masculinity, as Robin Ann Sheets proposes, since playing the role of the father *as well* implies eliminating the male figure from the alternative system that Carter proposes to patriarchy. It would be the same system but seen in reverse. In this framework the new husband is also left out for “mother and daughter will be the only members of this household who can gaze lovingly at one another”⁶⁷⁶.

The story does not, in the end, provide a satisfying closure. There is a moralising suggestion directed at those women who aspire to gain access to power and money through

⁶⁷⁴ See Anna Katsavos, “An Interview with Angela Carter”, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction: Angela Carter, Tadeusz Konwicki*, p. 12.

⁶⁷⁵ Mary Kaiser, “Fairy Tale as Sexual Allegory: Intertextuality in Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*”, 31.

marriage. The girl seems to have learned her “lesson” and rather anti-materialistically gives her wealth away to institutions of charity and only saves for herself enough to found a “little music school” and another for blind children (*BC*, 40). Again, Carter verges on the sentimental and provides a happy ending typical in many fairy tales. The greedy woman settles contentedly for the poor man and sweeps away any temptations of luxury. She learns her place, accepts she will never become rich and becomes a better person through work. This view, I admit, is not unanimous. For Elaine Jordan, the path to the establishment of a just relationship between the sexes “may involve acknowledging some of the advantages that are side-effects of subordination, and letting go some defences and justifications”⁶⁷⁷. I agree that pornography and sado-masochism can be used to the benefit of women but only insofar as they satisfy their desires. However, having subordination as part of the equation of any kind of relationship seems to be unacceptable as I dare to guess it would be for Carter too.

So it is not only with respect to money that “The Bloody Chamber” could be argued to present a conventional ending. The same happens with relation to sex. Patricia Duncker argues that it is a tale which explores but does not dismiss the subject of female masochism and cooperation in the pornographic representation through which the Marquise is trapped in a patriarchal world. In this view the blood mark on her forehead would be a sign of the girl’s complicity in her own exploitation. This reading, I have shown, does have some grounds but does not invalidate the possibility of the tale being a critique and, in addition, denies women access to pornographic pleasure. But there are other considerations to bear in mind. It is explicitly put forward that the piano-tuner has the advantage over other men of being blind because he is unable to see the indelible stain of *shame* on her forehead (*BC*, 41). The purpose of the short story was, it has been argued, to exempt women precisely from the blame of wanting to have sexually satisfying, active lives. Thus, the reason for this shame should be non-existent. As Cheryl Renfroe has asserted, the stain is not the sign of a wife’s disobedient act but of her “susceptibility to the corruption he [the Marquis] represents”⁶⁷⁸. This explains why the stain of shame cannot be attributed to her avariciousness for she is only interested that her new husband does not see it⁶⁷⁹. In front of others, she feels no shame regarding her

⁶⁷⁶ Robin Ann Sheets, “Pornography, Fairy Tales, and Feminism: Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*”, 112-113.

⁶⁷⁷ Elaine Jordan, “The Dangers of Angela Carter”, 35.

⁶⁷⁸ Cheryl Renfroe, “Initiation and Disobedience: Liminal Experience in Angela Carter’s ‘The Bloody Chamber’”, Danielle M. Roemer and Cristina Bacchilega ed., *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale*, 97.

⁶⁷⁹ I do not agree with Robin Ann Sheets on this matter as she sees the mark symbolising the girl’s materialism and complicity in the sado-masochist fantasies of her husband precisely because Carter

much gossiped on past. It can only be concluded then that his disability is a material condition in the success of the marriage⁶⁸⁰.

wants her protagonists to be free even to choose those paths. See Robin Ann Sheets, "Pornography, Fairy Tales, and Feminism: Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*", p. 108.

⁶⁸⁰ Danielle M. Roemer's reading is, from my perspective, an attempt to excuse the attitudes of the marquise and, though it can be admitted to be accurate in relating the girl's attraction to the Marquis as compensation for the absence of her father, there is an emphasis on this aspect which does not appear to be supported by the text: "Although throughout her narrative the protagonist's tone berates her former self for selling herself to the Marquis [...] her motives were not as petty as her guilty conscience would make them. Even though the Marquis has not sensed accurately the wife's potential for corruption, he has appraised correctly the strong emotional need to recuperate the loss of her father". Danielle M. Roemer, "The Contextualization of the Marquis in Angela Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber'", 117.

4.3. *The Courtship of Mr Lyon*

The structure of gender power relations updated but mimicked

Woman must make the best of her fate; for if she does not love Man, why then he dies, the Beast perishes, and Woman is left a widow, that is to say less than a daughter, less than a wife, worthless.

Salman Rushdie, *Shame*, 158

“The Bloody Chamber” is primarily based on the Bluebeard story but it also draws elements from the Beauty and the Beast. “The Courtship” was written bearing in mind its own fairy tale basis, whose original was published by Madame Marie Leprince de Beaumont in 1757 with the title *La Belle et La Bête*, as well as the short stories preceding and following it, also Beauty and the Beast tales⁶⁸¹. That is the reason why characters from “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” must be read taking into consideration the characters from “The Bloody Chamber”.

Though the tale springs from the Beauty and the Beast story, “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” puts a strong emphasis on whiteness which has the same symbolic value as in Snow White. The opening paragraph begins, in fact, in the same manner. There is a woman sitting at the window making wishes. In this case it is Beauty herself waiting eagerly for her father’s arrival. Beauty is meant to be identified with Snow White, a “lovely girl, whose skin possesses that same, inner light [of the winter’s landscape] so you would have thought she, too, was made all of snow” (like the Snow Child) and with the same purity of the untrodden road she studies, “white and unmarked as a spilled bolt of bridal satin” (BC, 41). Whiteness is used here as a contrast to the whiteness of the previous story, where even white lilies stood for death and white was in harmony with the ominous use of red, black and even gilded objects. The association of Beauty with whiteness, emblematised in her request for a white rose, is first of

⁶⁸¹ Charles Perrault’s “Ricky with the Tuft” belongs to this tradition as well but presents considerable differences. This story, as “The Little Red Riding Hood”, “Bluebeard”, and “Puss in Boots” are part of Angela Carter’s translation of Perrault’s tales published in 1977 as *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault*.

all the visual expression of sexual inexperience and of her refraining from curiosity in the matter, unlike the little Marquise of “The Bloody Chamber”. In a Bettelheimian vein, it could be said that the desire to be maintained in a state of sexual ignorance hides the girl’s wish to prolong the satisfaction of a love relationship of covert sexual undertones with her father for whom she would “have gone to the ends of the earth [...] [and] whom she loved dearly” (*BC*, 46).

But Beauty’s white aura represents the goodness of her character as well, particularly as far as financial matters are concerned. In this sense too she is the Marquise’s lighter double. When she finds herself at the mansion of “an exceedingly wealthy man” as part of the deal the Beast sealed with her father to save his life, she is treated like a princess (*BC*, 42). However, the glass bed, the suave unguents, the smooth towels, and even her sophisticated private parlour do not assuage her longing for “the shabby home of their poverty” (*BC*, 46). Beauty thinks of herself and of her father as one, which is made clear in the use of the pronoun in the plural, and therefore it is his absence, along with the reasons she rationally finds to justify her unpleasant feeling in the midst of luxury (no experience of an easy life and a lack of the pleasure the owner himself has with his own riches) which makes her stay a dreary one.

The Beast also contrasts with the Marquis, who would deserve the epithet much more than the monster. Both are linked with the whiteness but in exactly opposite ways. Whereas with the Marquis it is false, with the Beast it is the expression of his exile, so poignantly that it is as if he is totally absent from his own home. Beauty’s father walks in, and like many before him, finds heat, nourishment and even access to mechanical help for the car but he does not even get a glimpse at the owner of the house. The symbol of the Beast’s loneliness is the garden with its snowy drive and “snow-laden skirts of an antique cypress” (*BC*, 42). Its gate is “barred all within it from the world outside the walled, wintry garden” (*BC*, 42). When Beauty does not return to see him, the description of the garden recalls that of the selfish giant of Oscar Wilde’s story where it was always winter: “It seemed December still possessed his garden. The ground was hard as iron, the skirts of the dark cypress moved on the chill wind with a mournful rustle and there were no green shoots on the roses as if, this year, they would not bloom” (*BC*, 49). Even the magic element of the story is based on human absence: doors opening by themselves and exquisite food unexplainably laid out. There are no servants, not even magically transformed ones because “a constant human presence would remind him too bitterly of his otherness” (*BC*, 45).

From “The Bloody Chamber” Mr Lyon preserves traits which allow an identification with the affluence, loneliness, bibliophily and love for the decorative and pictorial arts of the Marquis. But these characteristics are either less emphasised so that the significance they conveyed with respect to the male’s necrophilic manias is discarded or they are invested with a new meaning. Though the Marquis had a grand mansion, Mr Lyon’s home, despite its luxury is not ostentatious or overblown; it is a “miniature, perfect, Palladian house”, with a “sweet, retiring melancholy grace” offering an agreeable impression never drawn from the other mansion (*BC*, 42). Even the flowers indicate a feeling opposed to that of the lilies: “the candles of a great chandelier cast their benign light upon so many, many flowers in great, free-standing jars of crystal that it seemed the whole of spring drew him [Beauty’s father] into its warmth with a profound intake of perfumed breath” (*BC*, 42).

Another example would be the dog, a she-dog on purpose. As Aidan Day realises, its relation with the Beast as his pet parallels that of Beauty with her father for whom she is less than human⁶⁸². The dog uses collars engraved with precious stones but these do not symbolise any murder conspiracy and are instead the expression of Mr Lyon’s affection for his only friend. Hence they do not have red-blood rubies but diamonds. Mr Lyon has retreated from all human company to spare himself people’s scorn but the Marquis seeks solitude in order to carry out his crimes undisturbed. Moreover, Mr Lyon’s seclusion is complete while the Marquis travels to Paris to allure victims. If indeed the Marquis’s seclusion is eventually connected with his loneliness it is because he is morally, and not physically, utterly different from his peers and vassals. As I mentioned previously, his loneliness derives from his mental disturbances. The differentiation at this level between the two is marked by the absence of a noble title, something which highlighted the Marquis’s association with cruel historical figures such as Gilles de Rais and the Marquis de Sade and of the oppression carried out in feudal systems based on hierarchical distinctions.

Mr Lyon’s library is not packed either with books accumulated through generations of perverts. The type of reading he possesses is no less indicative of his secrets but it is somewhat different: books of French fairy tales narrating metamorphoses of cats, felines like Mr Lyon, with which Beauty entertains herself to pass the time. Whereas “The Bloody Chamber” is a tale of gruesome reality, “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” belongs to the realm of magic and spells. Mr Lyon’s estate is “a place of privilege where all the laws of the world he knew need not necessarily apply”, a place pervaded by an “atmosphere of a suspension of

reality” (BC, 42)⁶⁸³. The visitors are transported to another world, to the other side of the looking-glass it could be said and as is suggested by the *Eat me, Drink me* tags on the table. In the realm of the unreal-ideal there is no place for blood-spilling dismemberments.

The grotesque present in the form of psychological disorder and multiple murders is transferred in “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” to the physical characterisation of a single character, the Beast, an opposite to Beauty’s loveliness. Mr Lyon is not merely animalistic, he is an animal in appearance and presumed violent instincts:

There is always a dignity about great bulk, an assertiveness, a quality of being more *there* than most of us are. The being who now confronted Beauty’s father seemed to him, in his confusion, vaster than the house he owned, ponderous yet swift, and the moonlight glittered on his great, mazy head of hair, on the eyes green as agate, on the golden hairs of the great paws that grasped his shoulders so that their claws pierced the sheepskin as he shook him like an angry child shakes a doll.

This leonine apparition shook Beauty’s father until his teeth rattled and then dropped him sprawling on his knees [...].

Head of a lion; mane and mighty paws of a lion; he reared on his hind legs like an angry lion yet wore a smoking jacket of dull red brocade and was the owner of that lovely house and the low hills that cupped it. (BC, 44. Italics in the text)

The self-consuming dichotomy of predator and prey seems to be installed and according to its principles the lion must slay its victim, the latter role played by the father through the sheepskin he is wearing and by being “shepherded” by the dog (BC, 43). In “The Company of Wolves” there is reference to the wolf’s irrepressible appetite and Beauty, looking at Mr Lyon’s hands, allocates her place in the dichotomy as the herbivore: “And such a one [herbivore] she felt herself to be, Miss Lamb, spotless, sacrificial” (BC, 45).

Once again, it is in the hands of the female to overturn the situation. Interestingly that is done following the pattern postulated by Bettelheim. Robin Ann Sheets analyses “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” and “The Tiger’s Bride” jointly and arrives to the conclusion that Carter sets forth an idea which is not to demonstrate that true love stories are a means for children to overcome their fears concerning sexuality as Bettelheim claims, but that men hide

⁶⁸² See Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*, p. 136.

⁶⁸³ There is a paraphrase on page 47 where it can be read that there “the natural laws of the world were held in suspension”.

a benign nature behind their masks. The other counter argument, the animalisation of the woman, applies obviously only to “The Tiger’s Bride”. Sheets remarks are on the right track but they are inaccurate insofar as they are not faithful to both texts.

If one reads “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” against “The Bloody Chamber” it becomes noticeable that it aims to present a healthy alternative to courtship as it is presented in the opening story, one not based on mutual and self-deceit and on benefits other than those in the emotional field. The two Beauty and the Beast stories are instead purely contrastive. In “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” Carter treads Perrault’s path and asserts the salvation of the girl from her overly filial love, or as Bettelheim would put it, from incest and the Beast, that is, aggressive male sexuality, through a sacrifice. Though the narrator confirms the girl had a head and will of her own, she nevertheless agrees to submit to the Beast’s blackmail and go to his house. Her father does not keep from her the temperament which he has observed in the Beast but, since the agreement that she go with the Beast is the condition to save his life, he does not try to stop her. Moreover, when the Beast suggests, or rather imposes, that the father goes to London to take care of business affairs and that Beauty waits for him at the mansion, she experiences “a pang of dread” but she acquiesces because she understands that is “the price of her father’s good fortune” (BC, 45). She had to because she had “a sense of obligation to an unusual degree” (BC, 45). From Beauty’s mouth not a single word of complaint is uttered and this time her father does not bother to ask her opinion. So she stayed because she knew “her father wanted her to do so” (BC, 45). If in fact Beauty shares the qualities with the fairy tale corresponding person, this version of the father anticipates a weakness which is fully expanded in “The Tiger’s Bride”: avariciousness. He too seems liable to corruption as he leaves his daughter to someone he regards as a monster in exchange for the financial help the Beast offers to give through contacts he maintains in the city. Notice then the double meaning of Beauty’s being the *price* of her father’s *fortune* (once they had been rich but her father had ruined them and now he sees an opportunity to gain the fortune back). Other clues point to the father’s appetite for prosperity: his interest in the gold knocker with the agate eyes (a symbol of Mr Lyon’s own face), his stealing a rose (the Beast openly calls him a thief), and the stereotyping of his occupation (he is a lawyer).

Beauty does accept being the sacrificial lamb except that the Beast never intended to sacrifice her. She pities him but it is he who bridges the gap between them. The nature of the relation is founded on abjection as she thought “his bewildering difference from herself almost intolerable” (BC, 45). He rests his head on her lap, licks her hands and this abject

gesture she understands are kisses. In an initial stage then it is compassion which brings her closer to him. Beauty believes herself to be happy in that place but she still has not overcome “his strangeness [which] made her shiver” (BC, 47). Every night he could not help falling to his feet and licking her hands but she continued to “retreat nervously into her skin, flinching at his touch”, unlike the next Beauty, who through the action of the Beast’s licking breaks away that skin to let her true self out (BC, 48). Finally her father returns for her and she is still not ready to at least kiss him goodbye.

The story agrees with Bettelheim’s analysis also when, after leaving the Beast, the girl learns to enjoy the pleasures money can offer from restaurants, to parties, expensive clothing (furs), and even the sight of herself. She is relieved and feels “she had just escaped from an unknown danger” which Bettelheim identifies in his analysis of Little Red Riding Hood as the danger of facing sexual experience at too early a stage (BC, 48). Beauty forgets the Beast temporarily which provides the necessary time for Beauty to undergo maturation experiences, particularly with respect to her own body. She is now at the end of her adolescence and she realises she is desirable. In the process of investigating the source of her beauty and the changes taking place, she relies more and more on the mirror. Beauty is then at the threshold of her life. On the verge of becoming “a spoiled child” (BC, 48) and even of losing her beauty which was more than skin-deep in favour of “a lacquer of the invincible prettiness that characterizes certain pampered, exquisite, expensive cats” (BC, 49), and hence the reference to fairy tales with cats, she also realises her life is characterised by “a desolating emptiness” (BC, 48). The right amount of social and personal discovery which does not get to be either erotic or sexual has been provided and this is the moment when the girl’s true character emerges. Either she continues a life of eternal search for pleasure which is doomed to be unsatisfying or she recognises where true love lies. The perspective given by this interpretation of the tale is certainly one Bettelheim would approve.

In Bettelheim’s view, healthy love must be transformed from a filial type to an adult one. In a wholly unrealistic, romantic manner, Beauty senses the Beast is dying. Carter’s own view on the encounter is very clear: “Beauty and the Beast” is “an advertisement for moral blackmail: when the Beast says that he is dying because of Beauty, the only morally correct thing for her to have said at that point would be, ‘Die, then’”⁶⁸⁴. But instead of creating the narrative in these terms, she opts to use the traditional pattern while showing the sexual and economic mechanisms working under the surface. The girl leaves her father behind without a

second thought thus realising the transference of love from one man to the other as Bettelheim deems necessary. By finding him in a very modest room, despite the financial means he has at his reach, Beauty learns priorities, at the top of which is love, not money. It is because she has learned this lesson well and she has preserved a good heart that she saves his life and enables his metamorphosis back into human shape. Thus it was her gesture of willingness to be sacrificed which was responsible for transforming a disorderly male sexuality into a socially acceptable one through which her own sexuality is approved and institutionalised.

The tale ends with Mr and Mrs Lyon walking blissfully in the garden. The only problem with this interpretation is that it is not consistent with the Beast's behaviour. With the exception of the assault on Beauty's father, his conduct is always characterised by submissiveness and tenderness⁶⁸⁵: he licks her hands, authorises her to leave, and does not force her to keep her promise to return before springtime. There is even a suggestion of stereotyped feminine suffering in his posture as well as in his eagerness to please her. Since he does away with servants it must be him who prepares the luxuriant dishes which would explain his utter absence from her sight during the day⁶⁸⁶. His eyes appeared to be blind (*BC*, 45) allowing an interpretation akin to that made with relation to the piano-tuner who is a mere attendant to the events taking place involving his lover. The same castrated passivity characterises both. The female characters have to undergo certain experiences and their partners, claimed to be healthy male alternatives, stand to the side and wait for the women to reach the end of their own stories.

Neither in this story nor in the other rewriting of "Beauty of the Beast" which follows does Angela Carter therefore put Beauty acting out what she purported the girl should do; in view of emotional blackmail on the part of the Beast she just should tell him to die. Sarah Gamble finds Carter's re-interpretation, which is almost no re-interpretation at all, an extraordinary achievement in that it illustrates how a relationship can develop based on simple and honest affection⁶⁸⁷. That much was the intention of previous versions but I favour a view which considers "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" as a tale of women regarded as negotiable

⁶⁸⁴ John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, 83.

⁶⁸⁵ It can be assumed that the Beast committed some evil resulting in the spell of metamorphosis. However, since there is no reference to it, it is as if the author wishes to preserve the Beast's image from any sort of wickedness.

⁶⁸⁶ A similar remark can be made with relation to Dracula. See Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 63.

⁶⁸⁷ See Sarah Gamble, *Angela Carter: Writing from the Frontline*, p. 133.

beings, ranked in market values, quite different from Bettelheim for whom the tale of Beauty and the Beast is merely a vision of female maturation and of a solid relationship. It is instead, as Aidan Day puts it, “a parody of the ideological representation of conventional bourgeois marriage”⁶⁸⁸. The merit of “The Courtship of Mr Lyon”, which is subtly achieved, is that by actualising the setting and characters Angela Carter goes on to prove, once again, that the same manoeuvres to take hold of and control women continue to be exercised, given that the dominating order is still the same. The fact that Beauty sees herself as a mere saleable object in “The Tiger’s Bride” supports this reading.

⁶⁸⁸ Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*, 139.

4.4. *The Tiger's Bride*

The carnivalesque version of masculinity and the fully animalised sexed woman

Horror in much of Angela Carter's writing captures a sense of a potion containing the monstrous and the everyday. [...] The mazes and corridors and doors of conformity and normality which we use to confine and hide away our destructive drives, and our nightmares are replicated in the twists and turns of the fiction's realistic artifice, while networks of imagery hint, suggest and occasionally dramatically reveal the sources of the terror, the disgust and the horror.

Gina Wisker, "On Angela Carter", 234

Though "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" appears in the intersection of "The Bloody Chamber" and "The Tiger's Bride", there is no doubt that with the latter it forms a Janus-like, double-faced whole. The story at the basis is the same but whereas the first tale evolves according to the parameters of hope of the fairy tale, the second proves how the exact same characteristics can put forward a more sinister view, which can be allotted to Beauty because the story is again told in the first person.

The sharply short opening paragraph introduces all sorts of notions contradicting the crystallised version of Beauty and the Beast. "My father lost me to 'The Beast at cards'" feels like a stone thrown in our direction (BC, 51). Beauty's tone is rancorous, her father is a vile man, and the Beast takes possession of her not because of an unintended fatherly mistake but purposefully. The underlying idea in the traditional tale of Beauty's objectification is always carefully disguised as parental protection and the Beast's desperate need for love. The end of the masquerade by Beauty herself at the outset of the story is shocking; she *knows* what they are doing to her and why. The idea is as appalling as that of the lamb led to the slaughter

which, knowing of its destiny, denies the spectators the purification of the sacrifice and accuses them instead.

“The Tiger’s Bride” reveals how the story is based on the continuous promotion of an illusion, the deceit that “the lion lies down with the lamb” (BC, 51) which is primarily illustrated in the contrast between Tuscany and Russia. In Italy, where father and daughter have arrived trying to escape their bad luck (which could not be managed since it was due to his gambling) she is deluded by the setting: “Everything flowers; no harsh wind stirs the voluptuous air. The sun spills fruit for you. And the deathly, sensual lethargy of the sweet South infects the starved brain” (BC, 51). In the South you would think “there is no winter but forget you take it with you” (BC, 53). The darkness following them transforms her vision of the city into one of medieval treachery, a city lavishing in death promoted by sanctified institutions as the church (and fatherhood):

This is a melancholy, introspective region; a sunless, featureless landscape, the sullen river sweating fog, the shorn, hunkering willows. And a cruel city; the sombre piazza, a place uniquely suited to public executions, under the beetling shadow of that malign barn of a church. They used to hang condemned men in cages from the city walls; unkindness comes naturally to them, their eyes are set too close together, they have thin lips. Poor food, pasta soaked in oil, boiled beef with sauce of bitter herbs. A funereal hush about the place, the inhabitants huddled up against the cold so you can hardly see their faces. And they lie to you and cheat you, innkeepers, coachmen, everybody. God, how they fleeced us! (BC, 53)

People and even the food which previously was festive are now meagre. Another element deriving from “The Bloody Chamber” is the scent of Russian leather which was used to suggest the Marquis’s coldness and a background of terror of the tsars. In “The Tiger’s Bride” Russia is associated with Beauty and with the past of her family, thus displacing the source of negativity from one place to the other. The negativity originates in the father-figure, the possessor of a contrasting character to that of the parental figure of the little Marquise. In “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” no concrete information is given with regards to the sudden impoverishment of Beauty’s family but here, where she is allowed to speak, Beauty openly accuses her father. His gambling and drinking caused “the last scraps of my inheritance” to be handed over to the Beast (BC, 52). In Russia they owned “black earth, blue forest with bear and wild boar, serfs, cornfields, farmyards, my beloved horses, white nights of cool summer, the fireworks of the northern lights” (BC, 52). Moreover, the guilt over the death of her

mother is no longer the girl's who in the conventional version caused it by simply being born; the guilt is instead attributed to the father. Their marriage was not a match of love but another case of an alliance of convenience between her family fortune with his title of nobility. But he soon dismantled his wife's riches and killed her with grief on account of his womanising and gaming.

However, this Beauty is not the obedient or thoughtless daughter of the previous tales. She, who inherited her mother's beauty, bears resemblance to the Marquise's mother in her strong temperament and wild nature demonstrated in the traditionally male activity of riding. Beauty had such affection for horses that, comparing herself to Gulliver, she desires their company more than that of humans. She watches her father losing all they have left to the beast "with the furious cynicism peculiar to women whom circumstances force mutely to witness folly" (*BC*, 52). Beauty submits to the destiny her father irresponsibly marks out for her not because of some exacerbated sense of duty, as was previously alleged, but because she was absolutely helpless. To ask for a white rose does not therefore agree with her pragmatic character and that element is inserted as part of her characterisation of the Beast. She is not interested in his wealth, either as financial power in itself or as a means to have access to items of cultural and aesthetic exquisiteness. On the other hand, the Beast is not the educated Marquis surrounded by beautiful pieces of art and antique books and, unlike the other beast, in whom these characteristics could still be found though to a lesser degree, this beast does not seduce Beauty with the visual pleasure and superb savour of the meals presented to her.

This Beast lacks the elegance, finesse and charm of the Marquis and whereas the incredible size and posture of the other beast aroused respect and fear among his guests this one does not. The new Beast is seen through a distorted angle, meaningfully, that of Beauty:

I never saw a man so big look so two-dimensional, in spite of the quaint elegance of The Beast, in the old-fashioned tailcoat that might, from its looks, have been bought in those distant years before he imposed seclusion on himself; he does not feel he need keep up with the times. There is a crude clumsiness about his outlines, that are on the ungainly, giant side; and he has an odd air of self-imposed restraint, as if fighting a battle with himself to remain upright when he would far rather drop on all fours. He throws our humanly aspirations to the godlike sadly awry, poor fellow; (*BC*, 53)

The Beast had not the charming aura of older men to some younger women as the Marquis had, but his age, guessed by the several references to his old-fashioned look, is

instead a sign of his weakening influence, of his losing the enthusiasm for life and his ability to understand and attract young females whose tastes are not like the ones of the women he used to know. The white rose had been the only wish of the girl who became Mrs Lyon, reinforcing the valorisation of beauty to the detriment of power and economics as a specifically female interest. But not to this Beauty whose name is never mentioned and thus can even not be named Beauty though once she is characterised as “bella” (BC, 52) and as a child, in a common denomination, as “my beauty” by her nurse (BC, 56). To the new Beauty a white rose borne out of its season is not a precious flower of unusual worth because of its rarity; it is “unnatural” so she carelessly plucks its petals until it is utterly destroyed (BC, 53). Heading to the Beast’s home, the roses he has offered her begin to fade so she sends them out the window without a second thought. Later, already in his palazzo, the Beast tries to make a truce with her for having won her in such degrading a manner with “damned white roses” but her anger is not appeased because no “gift of flowers would reconcile a woman to any humiliation” (BC, 55). Beauty is aware of his loneliness and of his alienation but still she does not sincerely pity him, no more than any suffering is casually pitied, and she is surely not willing to make any concessions to this pathetic man who, incapable of seducing women and dragging them to his lair, very simply buys them off.

Similarly the strong scent which in relation to the Marquis suggested the male sensuality associated with animality here provokes her repulsion, its excess nauseating Beauty and making her suspicious of an attempt to camouflage some unknown quality of his which is precisely his animal nature. The Beast hides what everybody knows he is, la Bestia, but still he strives to keep the masquerade of social manhood which is so evident and risible that it is carnivalistic. The masquerade lacks depth but the purpose is not to fool others or even himself but merely to play the role he was assigned:

[O]nly from a distance would you think the Beast not much different from any other man, although he wears a mask with a man’s face painted most beautifully on it. Oh, yes, a beautiful face; but one with too much formal symmetry of feature to be entirely human: one profile of his mask is the mirror image of the other, too perfect, uncanny. He wears a wig, too, false hair tied at the nape with a bow, a wig of the kind you see in old-fashioned portraits. A chaste silk stock stuck with a pearl hides his throat. And gloves of blond kid that are yet so huge and clumsy they do not seem to cover hands.

He is a carnival figure made of papier mâché and crêpe hair; and yet he has the Devil’s knack at cards.

His masked voice echoes as from a great distance as he stoops over his hand and he has such a growling impediment in his speech that only his valet, who understands him, can interpret for him, as if his master were the clumsy doll and he the ventriloquist. (*BC*, 53-54)

The carnivalistic element is strongly present in the characterisation of the Beast as inauthentic, as a set of props oddly out of their place as when the wig slides to the side when he scratches his head. Though the Beast is obsessively committed to hiding his body from the tiniest sight of the throat to his feet and gloved hands, the very image he creates to conceal himself denounces him because it is obviously a fabrication or because his body finds other ways to be revealed. For instance, the Beast presents himself to Beauty in a gown with an Ottoman pattern, purposefully long so as to hide his feet but the clawed feet of the chair he sits on suggest what lies underneath the garment⁶⁸⁹.

At the level of the structure of the short story itself carnival is also paramount mainly through carnivalistic doubleness. Because this aspect is largely overlooked critics tend to concentrate on the meaning of doubleness only from a feminist point of view, that is, they try to draw meanings from Beauty having a replica which is only part of the story, because the Beast has his double as well. He has, in fact, several of them because in trying to recreate himself he is unable to do it with complete success. On his body then, the Beast reconstructs his physical Other while his valet becomes his voice, the oracle speaking his inner self. But the two creations are not equally empowered. The carnivalistic appearance of the Beast, through its inaccuracy in covering up his body, reveals his liability to breaking, shattering and falling apart; the voice, on the other hand, is the materialisation of the word and revelation of the mind so that it is as if servant and master switch roles: the former the thinker, the latter a mere clumsy doll. And though the valet's loyalty prevents him from bending his master's orders, he is endowed with a sense of adequacy or understanding that the Beast lacks so that he feels embarrassed and shivers when he informs Beauty of the Beast's wish that she present herself to him in the nude.

The fact that the Beast is voiceless is another handicap that Carter invents for her male protagonists, an emblem of his inability to conquer the maiden and of the male entrapment in a patriarchal discourse which does not incorporate an adequate body of linguistic resources as far as male emotion is concerned. As she is mute and unable to fight against her status as

⁶⁸⁹ The other reference to Orientalism is the boudoir Beauty is given by the end of the tale described as "a jinn's treasury of Oriental carpets" (*BC*, 65).

merchandise between negotiators because such a situation derives from a cultural and linguistic system, the Symbolic, which constructs femininity in terms of objectification, he feels similarly since the same system has not elaborated a place in language and thought for his emotions; only for his sexuality. For David Punter this is precisely the point contained in *The Sadeian Woman*, that “the concept and stereotype of femininity is itself constructed within the overarching web of ideological forces which shape the substance of subjectivity”⁶⁹⁰. Not only are women caught in this web “but [we] are ourselves the constructs of desire, but particularly of those desires which are allowed approbation and material confirmation because they serve the interests of the social formation”⁶⁹¹. Disempowered, the Beast can only feebly try to buy her affection with jewels, and on her rejection, he can do no more than pace up and down all day.

Using a technique to which Carter resorted often, the tale within the tale, the author clarifies the identification of the animal with sexuality. On the one hand, there is the nurse’s tale of the tiger-man from Sumatra brought to London who would punish badly-behaved girls by gobbling them up. This unlikely story recovers the theme that underlies the short story, of female’s fear of being engulfed, that is, obliterated by unauthorised sex with a male. Beauty obviously is not afraid as she even volunteers her body to the satisfaction of his carnal desires in exchange for the offer she mistakenly deemed demeaning, that of taking her clothes off to him⁶⁹². Furthermore, it makes a comment on the issue of the colonial or ethnic Other whose sexuality is posited as life-threatening as opposed to an acceptable, English sexuality. On yet another level, the tiger-man who goes to little girls’ bedrooms at night to gobble them up is identified with her father through a black cloak which he owns and that is just like the tiger-man’s. Since the tale is not from the girl’s imagination it is not an unconscious wish for incestuous love, which would be a peculiar innuendo given that the girl witnessed the damage her father’s weak character had provoked in their life style and which eventually determined her mother’s death. The relationship between father and daughter is not felt to have ever been based on affection or sex; this lack is in opposition to Beauty’s unusually intense love for her father in “The Courtship of Mr Lyon”. It is more likely a tale of warning by the nurse telling a tale against any male touch, including her father’s whose animalistic instincts were not exempt

⁶⁹⁰ David Punter, “Supersessions of the masculine”, *The Hidden Script: Writing and the Unconscious*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1985) 41.

⁶⁹¹ Loc. cit.

from being excited by his daughter's beauty. Finally, this tale serves to introduce the main character of another short story, the Erl-King, whose horse the tiger-man would supposedly ride to invade the privacy of the girls' dreams and bodies.

The other tale is a childhood memory of popular gossiping based on miscegenation between a woman, one with no social or aesthetic value, with a bear. Such superstitious beliefs abounded in the past and they were meant to justify both some man's sexual desire for an utterly undesirable woman, asserting women's right to sex irrespective of their beauty, and oddities such as that of the son of the hare-lipped woman and the bear who had the ability to distinguish which eggs would produce cocks and which ones would be hens simply by examining them.

But if the Beast seems unable to fight against his condition, Beauty does not. She bears a grudge against her father and his compliance in this system which devalues her in favour of material goods. Beauty resents his boundless greed which is not merely a wish to regain what was lost but to take away what belonged to the Beast:

Oh, I know he thought he could not lose me; besides, back with me would come all he had lost, the unravelled fortunes of our family at one blow restored. And would he not win, as well, The Beast's hereditary palazzo outside the city; his immense revenues; his lands around the river; his rents, his treasure chest, his Mantegnas, his Giulio Romanos, his Cellini salt-cellar, his titles ... the very city itself.

You must not think my father valued me at less than a king's ransom; but, at *no more* than a king's ransom. (*BC*, 54. Italics in the text)⁶⁹³

It is not clear whether Beauty's father felt truly wretched for losing his daughter or whether this was another of his "agonizing repentances" such as the one he had towards his wife (*BC*, 52). Either way Beauty feels too hurt to forgive him sincerely. He takes the rose he had asked of her as a sign of her forgiveness but the blood it carries from pricking her finger

⁶⁹² Here Angela Carter seems to be answering the very ironic question she posed herself in: "Isn't the function of a good fairy tale to instil fear, trembling and the sickness unto death into the existential virgin, anyway?". Angela Carter, "Notes from the Front Line", 452.

⁶⁹³ These are the only references to works of art and they have a marginal part in the tale, unlike what takes place in "The Bloody Chamber". Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506) and Giulio Romano (1499-1546) were distinguished Renaissance painters. The latter had as one of his studio assistants Francesco Primaticcio and took over the direction of Raphael's workshop on the master's death, after having worked with him in the Vatican. Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571) is to this day considered one of the most brilliant goldsmiths of all time.

on a thorn is her explanation to him that she is fully aware that he sacrificed her to the Beast. Her father's last farewell is bluntly cut short by her drawing the curtains of the carriage which will take her away as her "spite was sharp as broken glass" (BC, 55). That day put an end to her childhood (BC, 56) and the experience she gained taught her that in a world dominated by patriarchal consumerism "my own skin was my sole capital in the world and today I'd make my first investment" (BC, 56). If the lion cannot lie down with the lamb, then the lamb has to learn to run with the lion. From a certain point of view that is not a choice; it is the only survival technique at her disposal.

There is in addition a carnivalistic spirit in the house that the other mansions did not possess. The sense of a world upside down is identical to that of *El otoño del patriarca* where dogs and chicken inhabit the palace. In this particular tale horses play a prominent role, so besides being given the dining room in the palazzo to occupy as they wish, including eating and defecating, the horses have the space decorated in their honour: "The walls were painted, aptly enough, with a fresco of horses, dogs and men in a wood where fruit and blossom grew on the bough together" (BC, 57). The image of harmony between animals and humans, and of miraculous flourish, has an idyllic ring to it wholly contrastive with the sight Beauty got of the landscape of the Beast's estate which was like "a wide, flat dish of snow where the mutilated stumps of the willows flourished their ciliate heads athwart frozen ditches" (BC, 56-57). The Beast's domain is like the negative reel of Heaven where all breathing creatures were brought to extinction: "As far as eye could see, not one living thing. How starveling, how bereft the dead season of this spurious Eden in which all the fruit was blighted by cold! [...] It was a world in itself but a dead one, a burned-out planet. I saw The Beast bought solitude, not luxury, with his money" (BC, 57)⁶⁹⁴.

There is on the part of the Beast, because he is literally a beast, a rejection of all human presence and of its civilising ready-mades while nature, however fierce, is welcomed. The palazzo is therefore emptied of any sign of grandeur that it displayed in previous examples and is characterised by abandonment and ruin:

Gaping doors and broken windows let the wind in everywhere. We mounted one staircase after another, our feet clapping on the marble. Through archways and open doors, I glimpsed suites of vaulted chambers opening one out of another like systems of Chinese boxes

into the infinite complexity of the innards of the place. He and I and the wind were the only things stirring; and all the furniture was under dust sheets, the chandeliers bundled up in cloth, pictures taken from their hooks and propped with their faces to the walls as if their master could not bear to look at them. The palace was dismantled, as if its owner were about to move or had never properly moved in; The Beast had chosen to live in an uninhabited place. (BC, 57).

With its permanent darkness provided by the constantly closed windows and maze-like structure, the palazzo is more like a gothic castle where a wretched creature lives far from the eyes of the world. Beauty's quarters are no different, but they also have an organic quality: "a veritable cell, windowless, airless, lightless, in the viscera of the palace" (BC, 59).

Once at the palace Beauty is finally informed of the mode of her sacrifice. For the privilege of contemplating her, the Beast will not dishonour her and return the amount her father had lost along with a treat for herself: furs, jewels and horses. Had it been the previous incarnation of Beauty, she would have stoically accepted her fate not for her own sake but for the happiness of her father. But not this one. She wants more than trinkets and the attention of her father who she finds irritating when she watches him through the magic mirror crying drunkenly. She is neither willing to sacrifice herself for her father nor for flimsy possessions. Were she to be sacrificed, the act would have to be at the level she thought would be up to her standards. The reason why she is infuriated is that she believes his offer was a "humiliating bargain. That he should want so little was the reason why I could not give it" (BC, 61). But as Cristina Bacchilega perceptively realises, the girl's reaction reveals that she maintains the patriarchal conception of Woman as an object and as such the tiger's gaze can only be an instrument of sexual abuse and she cannot see her body being thought of as anything but as object to rape. In this sense, "Carter's magic can only be the product of a differently framed look, a new order that privileges the 'naked,' neither as pornographic objectification nor as 'natural' state, but simply because it is unmasked"⁶⁹⁵.

The stress the Beast puts on her skin instead of wanting to penetrate her body derives from his knowledge that surfaces or outward coverings must be disposed of to get to the being within. He is terribly eager to dispense with his but he wants to show her that her skin

⁶⁹⁴ This reference to Eden is consistently brought about whenever Carter has in her tales human characters whose distinction from an animal condition is attenuated or even impossible to determine. This issue will be fully expanded when discussing "Wolf-Alice".

⁶⁹⁵ Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*, 99-100.

too is false. Moreover if “[t]he artificial masterpiece of his face appals me” she would be appalled at herself as well if she were not blind to the layers of beingness imposed on her at the top of which is that of the daughter (*BC*, 58). When she becomes aware of this logic at the end of the tale, Beauty decides to send the simulacra of herself to her father.

Beauty’s double is also a carnivalistic element with grotesque features in that it is a fusion of the artificial with the organic, at least as a conception. It must represent Beauty’s fleshiness while emphasising the grotesque spirit of striving for good looks:

[A] soubrette from an operetta, with glossy, nut-brown curls, rosy cheeks, blue, rolling eyes; [...] She carries a looking glass in one hand and a powder puff in the other and there is a musical box where her heart should be; she tinkles as she rolls towards me on her tiny wheels.

‘Nothing human lives here,’ said the valet. (*BC*, 59)

The doll carries two emblems of the objectification of women by creating in them the very need to make themselves pretty. However, her artificiality makes her a frightening creature; her inhumanness is the price for her beauty. Because she is a marvellous machine she can only be a horrid replica of the human condition:

My maid halted, bowed; from a split seam at the side of her bodice protrudes the handle of a key. She is a marvellous machine, the most delicately balanced system of cords and pulleys in the world.

‘We have dispensed with servants,’ the valet said. ‘We surround ourselves, instead, for utility and pleasure, with simulacra and find it no less convenient than do most gentlemen.’

This clockwork twin of mine halted before me, her bowels churning out a settecento minuet, and offered me the bold carnation of her smile. Click, click – she raises her arm and busily dusts my cheeks with pink, powered chalk that makes me cough; then thrusts towards me her little mirror. (*BC*, 60)

As in a science fiction piece, one feels the horror of being substituted by a machine who takes our place, by ambiguous mechanical beings with music-box hearts and bowels. But the mechanism is most of all an emblem of the substitution of women by doll-like women who put up their bodies for the use or pleasure of men who deserve, nonetheless, to be called gentlemen. Moreover, the doll is not only a metaphor for the objectification of women but

also for the actual replacement of women by rubber dolls on whose synthetic bodies men indulge in their sexual fantasies.

On seeing herself thus replicated, Beauty starts to understand her condition, “how I had been bought and sold, passed from hand to hand” and that like the doll she “had been allotted only the same kind of imitative life amongst men that the doll-maker had given her” (*BC*, 63). Firstly “abandoned by my father to the wild beasts by his human carelessness” Beauty sees in the Beast’s refusal to rape her a break in the cycle as he stood next in the line of owners (*BC*, 63). She also realises that it is his identical condition that makes them equal. In the creation of the story of the world she and he had been given second rate status:

I was a young girl, a virgin, and therefore men denied me rationality just as they denied it to all those who were not exactly like themselves, in all their unreason. If I could see not one single soul in that wilderness of desolation all around me, then the six of us – mounts and riders, both – could boast among us not one soul, either, since all the best religions in the world state categorically that not beasts nor women were equipped with the flimsy, insubstantial things when the good Lord opened the gates of Eden and let Eve and her familiars tumble out. (*BC*, 63)

But given that Beauty remains unwilling to denude her body and suffocating layers of imposed selves, the Beast has to set the example. The sight erases all nausea she felt at looking at him because it was his mask and camouflage which were disgustingly false. Sylvia Bryant sees it as “a parody of the beasts in humans” but is in fact a parody of the beastliness that *men* have to put on, locked as they are in a system which proves disadvantageous for them too⁶⁹⁶. Unlike the human masquerade, the Beast’s genuine beingness, in all its sexual self-assertiveness, is terribly seductive: “A great, feline, tawny shape whose pelt was barred with a savage geometry of bars the colour of burned wood. His domed, heavy head, so terrible he must hide it. How subtle the muscles, how profound the tread. The annihilating vehemence of his eyes, like twin suns. I felt my breast ripped apart as if I suffered a marvellous wound” (*BC*, 64). The wound is marvellous because it is from it, from some inner space, that she is finally born to the life she chose. Following his example, she takes off her clothes to feel “at liberty for the first time in my life” (*BC*, 64). The difficulty of the deed makes her aware of the

⁶⁹⁶ Sylvia Bryant, “Re-Constructing Oedipus through “Beauty and the Beast””, ed. Lindsey Tucker, *Critical Essays on Angela Carter*, 92.

magnitude of the request that had been made and which was quite the opposite of that which she had previously believed:

I thought The Beast had wanted a little thing compared with what I was prepared to give him; but it was not natural for humankind to go naked, not since first we hid our loins with fig leaves. He had demanded the abominable. I felt as much atrocious pain as if I was stripping off my own underpelt and the smiling girl stood poised in the oblivion of her balked simulation of life, watching me peel down to the cold, white meat of contract and, if she did not see me, then so much more like the market place, where the eyes that watch you take no account of your existence. (BC, 66)

That her father was paid was really of no concern to her and the act in itself on the part of the Beast does not reinstate the cycle of exchange. Since the father got more than his due, all that Beauty offers to the Beast from that point onwards is completely the result of her will. She decides to put on the earrings the Beast had wanted to give her and, attired with her furs alone, goes to him with the look of the lewd woman which she was entitled to be.

From the moment Beauty has given her heart to the Beast, metamorphoses take place in the palazzo. Her metamorphosis has received all the attention from critics but when considered isolatedly it merely represents the reverse of "The Courtship of Mr Lyon". Here, everybody but the Beast is transformed and thus Beauty's animal change cannot be interpreted under the light of feminist thought alone. It is part of a chain beginning with the valet now covered with grey fur, and even the sables covering Beauty gain life and the rats crawl down her body to hide away.

The end had to present the grotesque elements of the Beast's existence concealed until then so that their union could be truthful. Entering his room, Beauty can smell his urine but she is no longer repulsed by the scent originating in him and she is not shocked at the chewed but still bloody bones lying around which confirm the raw nature of his appetite. She faces the Little Red Riding Hood dilemma, also portrayed in "The Company of Wolves" and as in this latter case, by overcoming the fear of approaching him and of the destructive power of his sexuality she discovers another yellow-eyed carnivore frightened by the courage of her frailty:

He will gobble you up.

Nursery fears made flesh and sinew; earliest and most archaic of fears, fear of devourment. The beast and his carnivorous bed of bone and I, white, shaking, raw,

approaching him as if offering, in myself, the key to a peaceable kingdom in which his appetite need not be my extinction.

He went still as stone. He was far more frightened of me than I was of him.

I squatted on the wet straw and stretched out my hand. I was now within the field of force of his golden eyes. He growled at the back of his throat, lowered his head, sank on to his forepaws, snarled, showed me his red gullet, his yellow teeth. I never moved. He snuffed the air, as if to smell my fear; he could not. (BC, 67)

Before learning to run with tigers she has to conquer his trust by learning to have his bodily posture and offering herself to him. It is very interesting to notice that this passage is to all intents and purposes identical to the closing scene of “The Company of Wolves” except that the controversial element of rape has been removed as she was free to leave the palazzo at this stage. This provides an excellent opportunity to consider the woman’s position regarding sex and sacrifice. It is definitely not self-sacrifice as she was not benefiting anyone with the gesture but possibly herself and the beast, though nothing in the text indicates she took the responsibility herself of saving him from his own prison. Nevertheless there was a risk involved; she could have been shredded to pieces, which raises the question as to her motivation. Since the sacrificial excuse is ruled out it must be concluded that putting her life at stake has to make up part of a plan where the female agent simply has that choice. On the pornographic level, it would be equivalent to claiming women’s right to all fashions of sexual pleasure, even to that of the victim.

The scene is, however, more meaningful on a metaphorical level. As the Beast understands Beauty’s offer, he manifests his contentment by purring and his satisfaction is so great, his purring so loud, that it shakes the house. Tiles fall down from the roof, windows burst, the walls dance. This truly carnivalesque conclusion, identical to that which Carter will use in *Wise Children* and agreeing with his appearance, “cardboard carnival head with its ribboned weight of false hair in”, represents the end of the grey, decayed past emblematised in the house now preparing for a new birth (BC, 61); it is her rebirth begun with the Beast’s licking in “The Courtship of Mr Lyon”, then ineffective kisses only, but now gloriously rewarding:

He dragged himself closer and closer to me, until I felt the harsh velvet of his head against my hand, then a tongue, abrasive as sandpaper. ‘He will lick the skin off me!’

And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur. (*BC*, 67)

For Aidan Day this ending materialises the alternative beyond the Sadeian aphorism of assuming either the role of the victim or the aggressor, prey or predator; instead it realises Angela Carter's postulations in *The Sadeian Woman* of a higher plane where the humane lies⁶⁹⁷. I cannot fully agree with this view. There is an implicit and material downside to this beautiful, concluding picture related with carnival being a limited vehicle of liberation. I cannot fully agree with Anny Crunelle-Vanrigh either who contrasts Madame Beaumont's to Carter's approach: "[w]here Beaumont starts from a recognition of the potentially dangerous polymorphousness latent in each individual and attempts to fix and channel and castrate it according to the requirements of the social structure, Carter's stories move toward polymorphousness as a desirable, excitingly perverse end. Pleasure lies in the unfixing of identity, in the recognition of its fluidity"⁶⁹⁸. My disagreement lies in the belief that the oft-quoted words that "[t]he tiger will never lie down with the lamb; he acknowledges no pact that is not reciprocal. The lamb must learn to run with tigers" encapsulate a trap (*BC*, 64). He will not transform himself to become her partner and it is she who must learn to behave and be like him. Though the transformation of the woman from a lamb into a tiger, even if one like this one who does not devour her, is a pleasant twist, it nevertheless does not become positive. Sarah Gamble, in her perceptible enthusiasm in seeing the scene as the breaking of the dichotomy of the socially imposed roles of prey and predator does not see the value of her own words: "the tiger licks her into her *proper* shape, which is *the mirror of his*"⁶⁹⁹. The "proper" shape of women, both in terms of body and of gender, is still determined by a male perspective. Like Eve who is a double to Adam, constructed from his own body, so Beauty is born out of the Beast's efforts. The tiger will never lie down with the lamb; she is magnanimously permitted to accompany him on his run.

⁶⁹⁷ See Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*, pp. 146-147.

⁶⁹⁸ Anny Crunelle-Vanrigh, "The Logic of the Same and *Différance*: 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon'", Danielle M. Roemer and Cristina Bacchilega ed., *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale*, 139.

⁶⁹⁹ Sarah Gamble, *Angela Carter: Writing from the Frontline*, p. 134. Italics added.

4.5. *Puss-in-Boots*

The story of Bluebeard in commedia dell'arte fashion

“Puss-in-Boots” [...] is a Rabelesian/Carteresque romp, a tribute to the playful kitten aspect of the cat family. It is above all a hymn to here-and-now common sensual pleasure, to ordinary human love, to slap-and-tickle delight – not as an aspect to be won, achieved or stolen, nor to be reserved by the rich and privileged for themselves, as in de Sade, but available to all, tabby cats as well as young lads and lasses.

Margaret Atwood, “Running with the Tigers”, 126

This particular story has received little attention on the part of critics because, it seems, it is not pervaded by a sense of the potentially tragic, as if only a serious tone can be the vehicle for weighty ideas. But it is precisely this aspect that makes Margaret Atwood like it as “Carter thumb[s] her nose at de Sade and tell[s] him to lighten up”⁷⁰⁰. It is on the whole a comical piece, the first Carter wrote with that purpose⁷⁰¹, where the leonine beast is reduced to a witty, unscrupulous cat. In terms of the grotesque it belongs to the realm of *commedia dell'arte* types and plot.

The protagonists are the cat and the pair of lovers. The cat participates as an ironic character assisting in mischievous plans to unite his Master and his beloved, a badly-married young beauty. Though the characterisation of the Master concentrates on his impracticable dreams of love it is alternated by traits which could be found in earlier embodiments of the beast and father figures. The gentleman so infatuated that he stops eating and sleeping is a drinker, gambler and a compulsory womaniser. He is “proud as the devil, touchy as tin-tacks, lecherous as liquorice and [...] as quick-witted a rascal as ever put on clean linen” (BC, 70). Together, the Master and his cat would steal in the market but only for the excusable motive of being hungry. He was a regular customer in every brothel in town and used to make periodical unauthorised visits to the convent and under the carefree eye of his cat he made

⁷⁰⁰ Margaret Atwood, “Running with the Tigers”, 127.

⁷⁰¹ See Angela Carter’s interview with Anna Katsavos, “An Interview with Angela Carter”, 15.

“the beast with two backs with every harlot in the city, besides a number of good wives, dutiful daughters, rosy country girls come to sell celery and endive on the corner, and the chambermaid who strips the bed” (BC, 71-72). Not even the Mayor’s wife escaped his lustful attention, or the notary’s and his daughter who “shook out her flaxen plaits and jumped in bed between them and she not sixteen years old” (BC, 72). That love should come to such a licentious character appears ridiculous, the cat’s commentary only confirming the absurdity of the conjunction: “And she. A princess in a tower. Remote and shining as Aldebaran⁷⁰². Chained to a dolt and dragon-guarded” (BC, 70).

The plot is one familiar to the *commedia* wherein Pantalone, the spurned husband, has his very young wife shut away and guarded by a hag, in the Master’s eyes, the dragon. The exaggerated tone of romanticism and amusement is certainly typical of the *commedia*.

There is a lady sits in a window for one hour and one hour only, at the tenderest time of dusk. You can scarcely see her features, the curtains almost hide her; shrouded like a holy image, she looks out at the piazza as the shops shut up, the stalls go down, the night comes on. And that is all the world she ever sees. Never a girl in all Bergamo so secluded except, on Sundays, they let her go to Mass, bundled up in black, with a veil on. And then she is in the company of an aged hag, her keeper, who grumps along as a prison dinner. (BC, 71)

The reserved posture of this Our Lady-like woman is soon to be lost to a totally unholy love-making and adultery. Her initial restraint due to her being “too much in love with virtue” is easily surpassed once given the chance (BC, 74) and she defiantly puts her hand on the Master’s breeches (BC, 78). Puss’s Master follows this Lady to Mass attired in a uniform boasting a rank not fit to his position, and when he succeeds in touching her dress it is a religious experience as “she is the divinity he’s come to worship” (BC, 72). The cat reflects our cynicism for this love in the name of which the business of scamming is abandoned since the reader, as the spectator of a *commedia* show would have been, is only prepared to view love in this context as “desire sustained by unfulfilment” (BC, 72).

In turn, Panteleone is the stereotyped husband of eighteenth century performances, a fool and a miser (BC, 73): “Poor, lonely lady, married so young to an old dodderer with his bald pate and his goggle eyes and his limp, his avarice, his gore belly, his rheumaticks, and his flag hangs all the time at half-mast indeed; and jealous as he is impotent, tabby declares – he’d

⁷⁰² Aldebaran is the brightest star of the constellation of Taurus and means in Arabic “The Follower”.

put a stop to all the rutting in the world, if he had his way, just to certify his young wife don't get from another what she can't get from him" (BC, 73). From his laughable impotence to his ailments and moral faults, Panteleone appears to deserve the twists and turns that culminate in his dishonourable death. The plot to dethrone the king and turn him into a fool, and whose death benefits all around him, is justified insofar as he gives more importance to extorting rents from already impoverished farmers, indicating that his ambition is immoral, than to overcoming his impotence which condemns his wife to a life devoid of pleasure. The depiction of Panteleone enhances his stinginess:

They set the cathedral clock by him, so rigid and so regular his habits. Up at the crack, he meagrely breakfasts off yesterday's crusts and a cup of cold water, to spare the expense of heating it up. Down to his counting-house, counting out his money, until a bowl of well-watered gruel at midday. The afternoon he devotes to usury, bankrupting, here, a small tradesman, there a weeping widow, for fun and profit. Dinner's luxurious, at four; soup, with a bit of rancid beef or a tough bird in it – he's an arrangement with the butcher, takes unsold stock off his hands in return for a shut mouth about a pie that had a finger in it. [...]

And while she [his wife] breathes the air of evening, why, he checks up on his chest of gems, his bales of silk, all those treasures he loves too much to share with daylight and if he wastes a candle when he so indulges himself, why, any man is entitled to one little extravagance. Another draught of Adam's ale healthfully concludes the day; up he tucks besides Missus and, since she is his prize possession, consents to finger her a little. He palpitates her hide and slaps her flanks: 'What a good bargain!' (BC, 80-81)

Panteleone, like the Marquis, is compared to king Croesus, so great is their wealth, but both know the same end; Panteleone because he cannot get interested in his or in his wife's sexual happiness and the Marquis because he is too interested in his own sexual satisfaction.

The humour of the story is derived from the use of popular language and imagery: the flag at half-mast, the proposition to "antler" Panteleone, Pierrot braying in the cold, the account of intercourse between cats as "the customary tribute of a few firm thrusts of [the Puss's] striped loins" (BC, 73), the lady showing her lover the target towards which he must aim his dart or the description of the dragon-governess: "This hag turns out to be the biggest snag; an iron-plated, copper-bottomed, sworn man-hater of some sixty bitter winters who – as ill luck would have it – shatters, clatters, erupts into paroxysms of the *sneeze* at the very glimpse of a cat's whisker" (BC, 73. Italics in the text). The hag's allergy to cats provides the

opportunity for simple effective humour and for the plan used to make her lose the lady out of sight. The hag, like Panteleone, and thus wickedness, proves easy to deceive through the machinations and determination of lovers.

The carnivalesque imagery derived from references to copulation and defecation abounds as well. The cat appears in the gravest situations systematically cleaning himself: considering the existence of love he “tongu[es] [his] arsehole” (BC, 70), taking his time while his Master jumps from bed to bed he “wash[es] [his] face and sparkling dicky” (BC, 71), and while his Master writes the letter declaring his love he claims to have had the time “to lick the coaldust off [his] dicky” (BC, 73). The cat opines that he “fall[s] to the toilette of [his] hinder parts [as a] favourite stance when contemplating the ways of the world” (BC, 80).

Occasional appearances or comparisons are made with respect to other *commedia* characters. Puss’s acrobatic ascent to and descent from the lady’s bedroom is equated with the mastery of Harlequin’s jumps (BC, 75) while the Master uses a Pierrot costume to serenade his beloved. He pawned the sword for the guitar and “outlandishly rigged out in some kind of vagabond mountebank’s outfit he bartered his gold-braided waistcoat with poor Pierrot braying in the square for, moonstruck zany, lovelorn loon he was himself and even plastered his face with flour to make it white, poor fool, and so ram home his heartsick state” (BC, 74). Even the Master’s posing as the Il Famed Dottore so as to infiltrate himself in the house for a second time after his act as a rat-catcher is a play on the incompetent medical character of the *commedia*⁷⁰³.

One of the customary characteristics of love in a *commedia* play is the erotic, even sexually explicit, expression of love. Thus the seduction manoeuvres, given the pathetic attempts by Puss’s Master to serenade the lady and write love letters, are very aptly described by the wise cat, wiser than any of the other characters, as letting her know she is the centre of the world, or, in his plainer words, that “her orifice [is his] salvation” (BC, 74). Another play is made around the notion of a hole standing as a metaphor for the female genitalia. Getting down on his hands and knees, assuming, that is, a position of sexual insinuation, the false rat-catcher gets under the bed and with orgasmic enthusiasm declares: “‘My god!’ he cries. ‘There’s the biggest hole, here in the wainscoting, I ever saw in all my professional career! And

⁷⁰³ The rat-catcher is also called Signor Furioso which is probably both a play on his vigorous love-making and on Ludovico Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* published in 1516. Being a work on knight errantry, its heroes contrast with the Master of “Puss-in-Boots” who, though also involved in humorous adventures, lacks any sense of chivalry. The evidence for that is, for instance, the episode in which he introduces himself under false pretences in Pantaleone’s house wearing a disguise.

there's an army of black rats gathering behind it, ready to storm through! To arms!" (BC, 77). His career is that of whoring and the rats are a metaphor for the spermatozoids which the Master is so eager to release that he emits a war cry. But so vigorous is the love-making that the music of Venus (groans of lustful pleasure) could not camouflage the music of Diana (rat-killing) attracting the attention of the governess who comes to her lady's door to enquire into those strange noises. From the inside the phoney rat-catcher shouts: "Peace! [...] Haven't I just now blocked the great hole?", both meaning of course the supposed hole under the bed and the lady's vaginal entrance (BC, 79). Similar word play is made with relation to "beast". Previously appearing in the expression "beast with two backs", a synonymous phrase for love-making, it is re-introduced later in the tale when the lady shows the blood-stained sheets as proof to the governess that Puss had had "a mighty battle with the biggest beast", a synecdoche for the penis (BC, 79).

The second encounter has an even more accentuated carnivalesque spirit. It is a superimposition, through black humour, of life and death described as only Carter could: "As soon as they are left alone, no trifling, this time; they're at it, hammer and tongs, down on the carpet since the bed is occupé. Up and down, up and down his arse; in and out, in and out her legs. Then she heaves him up and throws him on his back, her turn at the grind, now, and you'd think she'll never stop" (BC, 82).

One element that is also present in previous stories is the issue of nakedness. Here it is faced straightforwardly, as a preliminary move to intercourse. Its beauty is regarded almost as if it is a religious moment of revelation so that it is no less significant. It falls on the cat to make a comment on the subject: "Accustomed as I am to the splendid, feline nakedness of my kind, that offers no concealment of that soul made manifest in the flesh of lovers, I am always a little moved by the poignant reticence with which humanity shyly hesitates to divest itself of its clutter of concealing rags in the presence of desire" (BC, 78).

It is towards the end that the connection with the Bluebeard stories becomes clear. Up to this point the association had been veiled and imprecise with the exception of the feline beastliness, which was not beastly at all. The conclusion is the same as in "The Bloody Chamber": a dead husband, a new husband, and a wealthy widow. The matter of the lady's coming into her husband's wealth is resolved by her getting hold of the key-ring the "old buffoon" kept tied to his waist (BC, 83). The fact that "Master comes into a great fortune" is achieved through his now pregnant wife who had the cold-mindedness to go for the key first and to buy off the governess's silence concerning the murder (BC, 83). The fool is thus turned

into a king but only because the woman by his side puts him there. The woman's holding the key which previously was her husband's is in this tale an image of empowerment. The lady gains through it her right to denied or illicitly practised sex as well as to finance. Once a forced recluse, with that key no harm comes to her; only her freedom.

The conclusion of the tale presents a happy ending which is similar in its traits but not in quality to that of fairy tales. It presents a future of fertile growth (the Missus is already becoming round and even Puss and Tabs bear a litter) but the pair of lovers is far from having gained bourgeois respectability⁷⁰⁴. In fact, their happiness is compared to that of pigs, as Carter politely puts it, in plunk (*BC*, 83) so that the short story does end with a note of the grotesque. The closing lines are revealing of the new morals, if the readers feel the need for any, which Angela Carter proposes:

So may all your wives, if you need them, be rich and pretty; and all your husbands, if you want them, be young and virile; and all your cats as wily, perspicacious and resourceful as:

PUSS-IN-BOOTS (*BC*, 84)

The grotesque does not live through its dark side alone. Given that in most other cases of Angela Carter's collection that darkness is more strongly felt than the life-affirming impulses which must be dug out from amid goriness, this tale is invested with a particular relevance within the whole of the collection. It provides balance, a combination of lightness in the midst of direness and that is also part of the grotesque. In Margaret Atwood's much more fluent words quoted at the opening of this sub-chapter, it is about ordinary human love. In addition, as Nicole Ward Jouve observes, it occupies a decisive role in the direction Angela Carter's fiction takes from then on while providing closure for *The Bloody Chamber*. "Suddenly Carnival was there. Queen Carnival. Belching, farting, drinking, dyeing, flying, dancing, fucking, in the train of Puss-in-Boots there came Fevvers from *Nights at the Circus*, then Dora and Nora among the multitudinous twins of *Wise Children*. The Bloody Chamber had been crossed. The initiation rites, menstruation and all, gone through. The beasts, the tigers and the wolves had been encountered, mated with. Body was there"⁷⁰⁵.

⁷⁰⁴ Tabs is described also as a soubrette which, for the unusualness of the comparison leaves no doubt concerning the intention of recalling the mechanical doll of "The Tiger's Bride" depicted in the same manner (*BC*, 60 and 76).

4.6. *The Erl-King*

Romantic aesthetics and the murderous conception of the denial of feminine self-sacrifice

“I love thee, I’m charm’d by thy beauty, dear boy!
 And if thou’rt unwilling, then force I’ll employ.”
 “My father, my father, he seizes me fast,
 Full sorely the Erl-King has hurt me at last.”

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “The Erl-King”

“The Erl-King” has been little commented on as it does not belong to the family of tales easily identified as that of the wolves or the Beasts and, though it is not the only one in the collection with that status, it is particularly distinct from the others in its theme, aesthetic mode and poetic expression.

The most detailed study on the tale has been made by Harriet Kramer Linkin in “Isn’t it Romantic?: Angela Carter’s Revision of the Aesthetic in “The Erl-King”” in which she considers the refashioning of the Erl-King legend as the privileged Romantic myth of creation and its silencing effect of the female voice. Moreover, Kramer Linkin investigates the manner through which Carter examines “the ways in which male desire defines and confines the female, but also the ways in which female desire colludes in erecting the bars of the golden cage for the Romantic as well as the contemporary writer”⁷⁰⁶.

In this equation the Romantic writer is assumed to be male and the contemporary writer female insofar as it is an analysis of Angela Carter’s own articulation of nineteenth century poetry which is part of Carter’s literary legacy. Kramer Linkin identifies the specific

⁷⁰⁵ Nicole Ward Jouve, “Mother is a Figure of Speech”, ed. Lorna Sage, *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, 149.

⁷⁰⁶ Harriet Kramer Linkin, “Isn’t it Romantic?: Angela Carter’s Revision of the Aesthetic in “The Erl-King””, ed. Lindsey Tucker, *Critical Essays on Angela Carter*, 120.

texts Carter used for composing “The Erl-King” and the transformations they underwent in being incorporated into Carter’s writing. They include William Wordsworth’s “We murder to dissect” from *The Tables Turned* and “Nutting”, Robert Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover”, John Keats’s “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” and “The Eve of St Agnes”⁷⁰⁷, S. T. Coleridge’s “The Eolian Harp”, Christina Rossetti’s “The Goblin Market”, Percy Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind”, William Blake’s “How sweet I roam’d” and *The Four Zoas* as well as Goethe, as implied in the title. Besides the echoes whose sources can be unmistakably identified, there is also a general borrowing of the ambiance and motifs of those writers.

Kramer Linkin considers that the whole collection “recodes literary history to sanction the feminist writer who comes to embrace her own desire”⁷⁰⁸. Instead of delineating her study linearly between a patriarchal oppressor and his female dependent, Kramer Linkin astutely understands that Angela Carter locates her authorial persona as contributing to the imbalance of power. It is in the protagonist’s desire to be desired that she cements the sacrificial silencing of women and of their artistic ambition at the service of a male-created vision. Angela Carter and the protagonist of “The Erl-King” are therefore as much defined in conflict as in dialogue with nineteenth century male lyricists and with the women around them who are accomplices in their own caging as they willingly impart the vicious cycle in which their selfhood and pleasure is drawn from the pleasure they sense they create in their male counterparts. The cultural ideology which cages women’s desire within the safe boundaries of domesticity made itself desirable causes in the protagonist a reaction of fear over the loss of freedom and, paradoxically, the temptation of compliance:

When I realized what the Erl-King meant to do to me, I was shaken with a terrible fear and I did not know what to do for I loved him with all my heart and yet I had no wish to join the whistling congregation he kept in his cages although he looked after them very affectionately, gave them fresh water every day and fed them well. His embracements were his enticements and yet, oh yet! they were the branches of which the trap itself was woven. But in his innocence he never knew he might be the death of me, although I knew from the first moment I saw him how Erl-King would do me grievous harm. (BC, 90)

⁷⁰⁷ See Angela Carter’s brief words at the end of *The Magic Toyshop*, her play with the Garden of Eden and “Eve of St Agnes” in John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, p. 80.

⁷⁰⁸ Harriet Kramer Linkin, “Isn’t it Romantic?: Angela Carter’s Revision of the Aesthetic in “The Erl-King””, 120.

As the Marquis collected women so does the Erl-King, except that he is not sadistic toward them in their personifications, the doves. The danger of not presenting resistance and even of assisting in building the golden cages is emblematised in vertigo, a metaphor Salman Rushdie also used: “I am not afraid of him; only, afraid of vertigo, of the vertigo with which he seizes me. Afraid of falling down. [...]. I fall down for him, and I know it is only because he is kind to me that I do not fall still further” (*BC*, 87-88). The Erl-King emanates the conception she adopts for herself and which is invariably an image of miniaturization whether she compares herself to ants and flies or by delineating a self-image which is metaphorically and bodily smaller to the king’s own:

Your green eye is a reducing chamber. If I look into it long enough, I will become as small as my own reflection, I will diminish to a point and vanish. I will be drawn down into that blackwhirlpool and be consumed by you. I shall become so small you can keep me in one of your osier cages and mock my loss of liberty. I have seen the cage you are weaving for me; it is a very pretty one and I shall sit, hereafter, in my cage among the other singing birds but I – I shall be dumb, from spite. (*BC*, 90)

From the start that she knows that the Erl-King will harm her but she, like Little Red Riding Hood with whom she compares herself, decides to make the journey through the woods all the same. There “she will be trapped in her own illusion” and caught in the pull of the vertigo of her own desire (*BC*, 85).

The protagonist’s walks in the woods are an attempt to free herself from the cultural baggage which entices women to silence through the stimulation of their desire thus enabling only a construction of a self based on principles of eroticism mastered by a male Other. But the “woods enclose and then enclose again, like a system of Chinese boxes opening one into another; the intimate perspectives of the wood changed endlessly around the interloper, the imaginary traveller walking towards an invented distance that perpetually receded before me” (*BC*, 85)⁷⁰⁹. Given that “everything in the wood is exactly as it seems” the distance between her and the legacy of female submission can only be invented as she brings it along with her into the forest, a journey to her sub/consciousness, where she discovers not only the legacy working inside herself but also that it is hidden by a cultural force which she is a part of, and

⁷⁰⁹ The tiger’s mansion was similarly described as a system of Chinese boxes as it is in there that Beauty must seek for herself by going deeper and deeper in the cultural layers of definition glued to her as if they were skin.

that is as inscrutable as a system of Chinese boxes (BC, 85). Its source cannot be located and therefore it cannot be eliminated. It appears then that within the philosophical framework of Romanticism women are left with no possibility of existence other than that already inscribed in their bodies and minds, as Patricia Duncker argues in relation with fairy tales. In her turn, Kramer Linkin claims that “while male Romantic poets intend no harm, the trap is the trap of Romantic aesthetic theory for females, ensnared by images that bind with affection as they transform women into nature”⁷¹⁰.

In view of this situation the female protagonist of “The Erl-King” conceives only an exchange of positions. To escape being allured and caught by the music the Erl-King plays, she must eliminate him; silence him so that she can speak. But, as Kramer Linkin admits, in “seizing on death as the answer, the protagonist writes herself out of one master plot only to place herself in another, equally damning one”⁷¹¹. It is but a reinscription of the same pattern of domination which leaves the winner alone.

Unlike what is more commonly argued, Kramer Linkin finds arguments supporting a view which is probably not one which she, as the feminist from the start she assumes she is, would like to consider valid; that “The Erl-King” is the story of a “disillusioned architect of an aesthetic theory that continues to operate within the patriarchal prototype in replacing the male with the female”⁷¹² and that the author’s “use of pornographic scenarios does not edify but rather perpetuates the patriarchal philosophy she seeks to undermine”⁷¹³. I admire Kramer Linkin’s sober, unbiased, even courageous reading, which at times cannot be found in other critics, precisely because paths are unravelled which apparently go against the more treasured view of Angela Carter as a revolutionary philosopher speaking not necessarily for women but in their favour. Carter herself admitted being a feminist writer only to the extent that she was a feminist in everything else⁷¹⁴. The success of Carter’s writing and the controversy invariably associated with it has also constructed Angela Carter-the-author occasionally giving the impression of her being entrapped by a network of mythologizing images as well. But the place of the postmodern Mother Goose would not be appropriate for Angela Carter as it would necessarily entail the propagation of new myths and models which her characters would be taken to exemplify. A negative version of old wine in new bottles.

⁷¹⁰ Harriet Kramer Linkin, “Isn’t it Romantic?: Angela Carter’s Revision of the Aesthetic in “The Erl-King””, 129.

⁷¹¹ Ibid., 122.

⁷¹² Ibid., 124.

⁷¹³ Ibid., 125.

Kramer Linkin is not counted among those who want to force Angela Carter to be a maker of salutary feminine forms as her reading of “The Erl-King” proves but she does not go further to see that the conclusions she so sharply draws from the tale, a failed attempt to find a way out of the logic of subjugation between genders, can be applied to other tales of *The Bloody Chamber*, as I have shown. On the contrary, Kramer Linkin sees other stories in the collection “suggest[ing] alternate solutions to the problematic nature of desire, even directing us to a place where men and women might function as independent yet interdependent creators”⁷¹⁵. Unfortunately Kramer Linkin does not identify those stories which is perhaps suggestive of her fear that, not having looked into them with the careful eye she used in “The Erl-King”, she could eventually be mistaken and realise that not only Romanticism but other aesthetic structures employed fail to reveal an alternative to a Sadeian motor of relationships, that is, “an epistemology that insists on the culturally gendered dualism of the subject/object or presence/absence distinctions”⁷¹⁶.

With the exception of a brief approach to the collection, the scope of Kramer Linkin’s essay is a single tale. In the remaining analysis I will therefore consider the elements pervading *The Bloody Chamber* and which I have demonstrated to be linked with the grotesque. The first is that of sacrifice which has been introduced as the silencing of women by Romantic aesthetics but which needs further scrutiny. The metaphor of silence versus speech, installing also the passive/active dichotomy, is also that of death and life. If in the Romantic text women are allowed to exist, though only in non-interfering roles, where their quiet company is a condition for establishing male subjecthood, the inversion of positions and the maintenance of the other’s presence still poses a threat for the woman-subject. To be incarcerated in a relation, even one of disproportionate power where she is the dominator, is still not to be free from the dependence which existed earlier; it has merely changed the nature of that dependence. Therefore, dualism must be discarded. A major difference between male and female domination is observable then: due to a long history and ingrained culture of favouritism, men feel comfortable surrounded by their Others since the latter have been constructed as inferiors; women, on the other hand, lacking that background, cannot cease to see men as potential oppressors. Men must therefore be killed and the dualistic relationship broken. If on entering the wood the protagonist of “The Erl-King” feels “a haunting sense of

⁷¹⁴ See Angela Carter, “Notes from the Front Line”, p. 37.

⁷¹⁵ Harriet Kramer Kinkin, “Isn’t it Romantic?: Angela Carter’s Revision of the Aesthetic in “The Erl-King””, 131.

⁷¹⁶ Loc. cit.

the imminent cessation of being” which the reader immediately interprets as her metaphoric death, substantiated by the enclosing force of the forest, it is also the foretelling of the Erl-King’s death (BC, 84). The image is made ambiguous: it appears to indicate the entrance in the scene of the victim but is in fact that of the murderess⁷¹⁷.

In this perspective, “The Erl-King” anticipates “The Werewolf”. In the former short story the murder is apparent but masked by the anxiety of a justified defence of feminine ontology but in the latter that premise is thinned. The connection between the two tales is further supported by the indication of the season which is given at the onset of each tale. In “The Erl-King” it is the time of the autumnal equinox, “it is not yet, not quite yet, the saddest time of the year” (BC, 84) while in “The Werewolf” there is a strong emphasis on the wintry scenery and on the solstice, the propitious time of magical transformations. But “The Erl-King” could not uphold the concept of metamorphosis; that had been the prerogative of the greenish king alone who transformed girls into doves and nurtured their urges of being consumed. Echoing *Alice in Wonderland*, as in other instances in *The Bloody Chamber*, they moan “Eat me, drink me” (BC, 89). But the end, with the establishment of a new order through murder, even the possibility of transmutation is denied. Demeaning as it might have been during the reign of the Erl-King then metamorphosis was nevertheless possible. If, as Kramer Linkin puts it, Carter “carves a path to another ending where the female is no longer sacrificed for the male poetic vision”, that is only achieved through the sacrifice of the male⁷¹⁸. The view which I have just outlined verifies two key ideas: firstly that by merely having a carnivalistic exchange the system itself is not altered and secondly that the murder that followed proved ineffectual, that is, it was not regenerative. The Erl-King’s rule might not have been polyphonic, but when the protagonist eliminates her rival she imposes a monologic edict where she is literally the only voice and body.

This story is linked with the tales of the wolves because Little Red Riding Hood is not mentioned just in passing. It is a material source in characterising the Erl-King who is thus perceived mainly through his rapacious sexual appetite: “And now – ach! I feel your teeth in the subaqueous depths of your kisses. [...] [Y]ou sink your teeth into my throat and make me

⁷¹⁷ In *Briar Rose* a conflict of a similar nature is raised; though Sleeping Beauty sees herself as a victim of a hundred-year sleep, of incest, of gang rape and so forth and thus insistently enquires why had she to become “the one”, she nonetheless is viewed as a murderess for on her behalf many were the princes who lost their lives trying to conquer the thorny bushes. See Robert Coover, *Briar Rose* (New York: Grove Press, 1996) p. 13.

⁷¹⁸ Harriet Kramer Kinkin, “Isn’t it Romantic?: Angela Carter’s Revision of the Aesthetic in “The Erl-King””, 128.

scream” (BC, 88). The ambiguous participation of the female in her sacrifice is revealed here where her screams are the expression as much of pain as of pleasure. The comparison of the king with the wolf, described with the same words in “The Werewolf” and “The Company of Wolves”, issues again towards the end:

What big eyes you have. Eyes of an incomparable luminosity, the luminous phosphorescence of the eyes of lycanthropes. The gelid green of your eyes fixes my reflective face. It is a preservative, like a green liquid amber; it catches me. I am afraid I will be trapped in it for ever like the poor little ants and flies that stuck their feet in resin before the sea covered the Baltic. He winds me into the circle of his eye on a reel of birdsong. There is a black hole in the middle of both your eyes; it is their still centre, looking there makes me giddy, as if I might fall into it. (BC, 90)

Not only is the Erl-King associated with beastliness through sexuality, like the Marquis and the Beasts, but he also has the hypnotising power that paralyses his prey. His gaze prevents her from moving away from his reach but it is also an instrument of definition which lacks depth as she is the reflection of his desire, a situation she contributed to creating. The black hole she fears she will fall into is the usurpation of her identity.

But the aesthetics of Romanticism is not the only one present in the tale. The theme of child abuse, the poetic language and even details such as the ambiguous delight of fanged kisses are closer to the surrealist prose-poem *Maldoror*, known for being tinged with the poetic but sadistic defence of “the sanctity of crime”⁷¹⁹. The horrifying beauty of the following passage is certainly akin to Angela Carter’s own in “The Erl King”:

One should let one’s fingernails grow for a fortnight. Oh! how sweet to snatch brutally from his bed a boy who has as yet nothing upon his upper lip, and, with eyes open wide, to feign to stroke his forehead softly, brushing back his beautiful locks! And all of a sudden, just when he least expects it, to sink your long nails into his tender breast, but not so that he dies, for if he died you would miss the sight of his subsequent sufferings. Then you drink his blood, sucking the wounds, and during this time, which should last an eternity, the child weeps.

⁷¹⁹ Comte de Lautréamont, *Maldoror & the Complete Works of Comte de Lautréamont*, ed. and trans. Alexis Lykiard (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1994), 33.

Nothing is as good as his blood, still warm, and extracted in the manner mentioned – except it be his tears, bitter as salt.⁷²⁰

As in “The Erl King”, the male abuser plays, though willingly, the double role of the saviour and the murderer where gazing/blindness are a key element in performing the sadistic game: “[b]lindfold his eyes while you rip his quivering flesh, and having listened for long hours to his sublime screams akin to the piercing death-rattles forced from the throats of the mortally injured in a battle, rush off like an avalanche, race back from the next door room, and pretend to be coming to his aid”⁷²¹.

Maldoror was certainly known to Angela Carter as the Comte de Lautréamont became an effigy to surrealists and she was deeply interested in surrealism as “the creative negation of destruction”⁷²². Though she eventually abandoned the surrealists by reason of their biased perspective on women⁷²³, Carter remained truthful to their commitment to freedom and beauty:

Surrealist beauty is convulsive. That is, you *feel* it, you don’t see it – it exists as an excitation of the nerves. The experience of the beautiful is, like the experience of desire, an abandonment to vertigo, yet the beautiful does not exist *as such*. What do exist are images or objects that are enigmatic, marvellous, erotic – or juxtapositions of objects, or people, or ideas, that arbitrarily extend our notion of the connections it is possible to make. In this way, the beautiful is put at the service of liberty.⁷²⁴

On replacing the abuse and murder of a boy in *Maldoror* by a girl in “The Erl King”, Angela Carter was not rejecting the homosexual scenario as Patricia Duncker claims of her writing; instead, it was a necessary change considering that Carter’s prime aim in the tale was

⁷²⁰ Ibid., 31.

⁷²¹ Ibid., 32. See in addition the story of the murderous deeds of Father, a vampire-like creature, divided between the desire for his son and his killing. See pages 44-49.

⁷²² Angela Carter, “The Alchemy of the Word”, *Expletives Deleted* (London: Virago, 1992) 72.

⁷²³ Angela Carter’s well known words are: “They were with a few patronised exceptions, all men and they told me that I was the source of all mystery, beauty, and otherness, because I was a woman – and I knew that was not true. I knew I wanted my fair share of the imagination, too. Not an excessive amount, mind; I wasn’t greedy. Just an equal share in the right to vision”. Ibid., 73.

⁷²⁴ Loc. cit. Italics in the text.

to comment on power and gender relations and to problematise role switching as well as the creative negation of destruction represented by the Erl King's murder⁷²⁵.

Another aspect leaking into "The Werewolf" is the definition of the protagonist in the conflation of innocence and corruption. Being a first person narrative it is the female's view which the reader is confronted with. Thus, the naiveté the reader assumes her to have intermittently reveals elements of a decadent flavour. Her description of the wood follows the Romantic lines she is entangled in but it has the marks of corruption as well. The rays of light penetrating the wood are compared with "nicotine-stained fingers" (*BC*, 84), the berries are "ripe and delicious as goblin or enchanted fruit" (*BC*, 85), an allusion is made to Christina Rossetti's "The Goblin Market", and even the call of the bird goes "piercingly" to her heart (*BC*, 85). It is because it is the female who carries with her the potential of corruption (after all, the Erl-King never intentionally inflicted any harm) that the parallel can be drawn with Eve whose arrival in Eden brought damnation on her head as well as on Adam's. The portrayal of the forest has obvious resonances with that of the biblical paradise and of a primeval, blissful indistinction among beings:

It was a garden where all the flowers were birds and beasts; ash-soft doves, diminutive wrens, freckled thrushes, robins in their tawny bibs, huge, helmeted crows that shone like patent leather, a blackbird with a yellow bill, voles, shrews, fieldfares, little brown bunnies with their ears laid together along their backs like spoons, crouching at his [the Erl-King's] feet. A lean, tall, reddish hare, up on its great hind legs, nose a-twitch. The rusty fox, its muzzle sharpened to a point, laid its head upon his knee. On the trunk of a scarlet rowan a squirrel clung, to watch him; a cock pheasant delicately stretched his shimmering neck from a brake of thorn to peer at him. There was a goat of uncanny whiteness, gleaming like a goat of snow, who turned her mild eyes towards me and bleated softly, so that he knew I had arrived. (*BC*, 85-86)

The fragrance of corruption becomes heavy with the choices of attributes such as ash and rusty colours to describe animals, some ill-omened like the crow, others simply drawn from the traditional imagery of vice, such as those belonging to the rat and snake families. The pheasant, in its turn, recalls punishment as it dangerously puts its delicate neck through the

⁷²⁵ Angela Carter's surrealistic taste has been the subject of several essays. See Sue Roe, "The Disorder of *Love*: Angela Carter's Surrealist Collage" and Susan Rubin Suleiman, "The Fate of Surrealist

thorns and risks beheading/castration. To complete the scene there is an emphatically snow-white goat, presumed to be a symbol of the girl's arriving on the set (and also anticipating "The Snow Child"). But it is not. The image of the sacrificial animal is that of the rabbit to which she is reduced to in her nakedness, a topic discussed in terms similar to those found in "The Tiger's Bride": "He is the tender butcher who showed me how the price of flesh is love; skin the rabbit, he says! Off come all my clothes" (BC, 87)⁷²⁶.

Though he is the butcher then, it is she who will have the knife and blood on her hands. The murder is described as a preview where the murderess loses the use of the first person and changes into the third, aware of the hideous event presently to occur where the victim is one who loves her and trying to dislocate the responsibility from herself to a "she" who can be any woman by her gesture set free⁷²⁷:

I shall take two huge handfuls of his rustling hair as he lies half-dreaming, half waking, and wind them into ropes, very softly, so he will not wake up, and, softly, with hands gentle as rain, I shall strangle him with them.

Then she will open all the cages and let the birds free; they will change back into young girls, every one, each with the crimson imprint of his love-bite on their throats.

She will carve off his great mane with the knife he uses to skin the rabbits; she will string the old fiddle with five single strings on ash-brown hair.

Imagination in the Society of Spectacle" (on *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*), ed. Lorna Sage, *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*.

⁷²⁶ See page 89 as well.

⁷²⁷ Angela Carter concentrated her attention on several murderesses and, as in "The Erl-King" she does not try to conjure excuses for the sadistic behaviour, hence the controversy that "The Werewolf" might arouse since it gives no justification other than plain profit. But Carter imagines plausible scenarios of child negligence and the social invisibility of the female which could constitute the background of the crimes. Lizzie Borden is definitely a favourite as she appears in "Lizzie's Tiger" in *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* (1992) as a small child in the topsy-turvy milieu of the circus and in "The River Fall Axe Murders" included in *Black Venus* (1985) re-imagining the actual murders. The dialogic quality of Carter could very aptly be discussed in the light of these two tales and the beast stories of *The Bloody Chamber*, particularly with respect to "Lizzie's Tiger". Since that is impossible in the scope of this study I will provide one example alone. The moment when the tiger's and Lizzie's eyes meet, creating a moment out of time, is rooted in the recognition of a kinship: the fact that both are trapped in worlds where the place reserved for them is of submission. The Sadeian logic working is the same found in *The Bloody Chamber*: to the tiger it is as if this child "might lead it towards a peaceful kingdom where it did not eat meat". "Lizzie's Tiger", *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* (London: Virago, 1992) 14. In the same manner, it is the spectacle of the bloody attack of the tiger towards its boastful, vicious master that enlightens Lizzie concerning the means of her own liberation that the reader had seen being carried out in "The River Fall Axe Murders" which was published previously. In her constant re-visits to the haunted places of her tales one still recognises the re-emergence of Lizzie in a redemptive form and a true reformulation of the maternal myth in *Nights at the Circus*.

Then it will play discordant music without a hand touching it. The bow will dance over the new strings of its own accord and they will cry out: ‘Mother, mother, you have murdered me!’ (BC, 91)

The girl does not want the Erl-King to see her committing the murder as if his eyes would also reflect her treason. That is the reason why she moves so carefully given that she could easily have caught him by surprise and carried the deed through successfully as well. He trusted her. Though she does not need the knife to kill the king it must be a part of the ritual since it was with it that he skinned the rabbits, the women’s animal counterparts. It has an additional usefulness, that of corroborating the homicide as the betrayal on the part of a woman of the man enamoured with her. The Erl-King and his lover in fact re-enact the myth of Samson and Delilah through this perspective as well, and not only through Romantic aesthetic theory, failing to achieve a constructive solution to the problem of female desire.

The murder scene is linked by Harriet Kramer Linkin to Coleridge’s “The Eolian Harp”, in an account where a daughter gains the status of a mother by putting to death the father-son cluster. Kramer Linkin does not make any further remarks on the subject and is satisfied in seeing “The Erl-King” as a rewriting of the family romance in the feminine⁷²⁸. Assuming that Kramer Linkin is correct in asserting that the maternal voice takes over the paternal voice speaking alone in nineteenth century family romance, and this inference appears soundly supported by the dying words of the Erl-King, she leaves uncommented the fact that the power of creating discourse, ideology and culture cannot be exerted by just any woman. She is clear in affirming that the new voice is maternal. This leads to one conclusion alone; again the reader cannot witness the change of system of oppression but merely the exchange of its head. The question of authority is maintained as well as the inherent hierarchy. According to a Freudian logic, the son desired to ascend to the role of the father and thus win his share of authority one day to be passed over to the son as well. The same takes place in Carter’s rewriting, that is, because the matter of authority is not eliminated, the daughter will commit the necessary murders to climb to a position of domination only now it is not only the male faction that must be subjugated; she must murder the mother as well. Moreover, as

⁷²⁸ See Harriet Kramer Linkin, “Isn’t it Romantic?: Angela Carter’s Revision of the Aesthetic in “The Erl-King””, pp. 122 and 131.

Maria Aline Ferreira questions, the enigmatic ending might suggest that women, as potential lovers, always act out the murder of their sons' and lovers' pleasure⁷²⁹.

“The Erl King” thus dramatises the dangers of feminist essentialism and of its literary expression which is, in some critics' views, implicit to feminine *écriture*. Bearing Hélène Cixous in mind, Lisa Gasbarrone points out that on establishing exclusive features to women's writing and demanding to break away from the (literary) past on the grounds of its phallogentrism, a step is taken towards monologism. In the end, all that is arguably achieved is a mere change of roles and the preservation of the system. Thus Perseus, and his equivalent the Erl King, “as the representative of official discourse, [...] remains precisely that which must be exploded, swept away, if the ‘new history’ of feminine *écriture* is to be written”⁷³⁰. Thus while Angela Carter gives continuity to the monologic tradition disguised as feminine empowerment whose deconstruction remains nevertheless doubtful, she decidedly does not position herself within the ranks of feminist essentialism as she is unafraid to travel back to the past, to Romanticism and surrealism, and establish with them a dialogue which theoretically would not have been possible, for instance, for Hélène Cixous.

⁷²⁹ Maria Aline Salgueiro Seabra Ferreira, “Human Animals, Animal Humans: Feral Women in Angela Carter's Fairy Tales”, forthcoming in *Florida Atlantic Comparative Studies* 6.

⁷³⁰ Lisa Gasbarrone, “The Locus for the Other: Cixous, Bakhtin, and women's writing”, 15. Italics in the text.

4.7. *The Snow Child*

Ultimate images: the phallogocratic father, the submissive daughter and ineffectual rebirth

Desire does not so much transcend its object as ignore it completely in favour of a fantastic recreation of it.

Angela Carter, “Femmes Fatales”, 351

The tight structure of the collection is confirmed with the short but beautiful tale “The Snow Child” wherein Carter attempts to prove that, unlike what Bettelheim claims, Snow White stories are not reducible to Oedipal rivalry between mother and daughter. The king of fairy tales is here a count but the switch is not accompanied with a loss of status or authority. Furthermore the structure allows at the same time to set the tale in a context of monologic feudalism and give continuity to the line of sadistic aristocrats while enacting an internal change: the collection begins with the serial killer of “The Bloody Chamber”, follows with the redeemed beast of “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” (so similar to the wolf of “The Company of Wolves” after he meets the girl) and with the frightened tiger of “The Tiger’s Bride”. The sadistic Marquis gives way to a necrophilic count in “The Snow Child”, followed by a vampire countess. The werewolf stories complete the set of legendary monsters appropriately united in the final tale: the wolf-girl and the werewolf with vampiristic undertones.

“The Snow Child” thus has its own place in relation to the tales preceding and following it. Moreover, the short story whereby Angela Carter readdresses the Snow White story represents a full circle so that the end meets the beginning. In the same manner the stories themselves borrow elements from one another travelling back and forth:

Midwinter – invincible, immaculate. The Count and his wife go riding, he on a grey mare and she on a black one, she wrapped in the glittering pelts of black foxes; and she wore high, black, shining boots with scarlet heels, and spurs. Fresh snow fell on snow already fallen;

when it ceased the whole world was white. 'I wish I had a girl as white as snow,' says the Count. They ride on. They come to a hole in the snow; this hole is filled with blood. He says: 'I wish I had a girl as red as blood.' So they ride on again; here is a raven, perched on a bare bough. 'I wish I had a girl as black as that bird's feather.' (BC, 91)

Repetition is a widely used strategy in fairy tales both with respect to actions and phrases. Cinderella goes to the ball three times, Goldilocks tries the three beds, the wicked stepmother of Snow White makes repeated attempts to eliminate the girl. Likewise, Red Riding Hood uses the expression "what big ..." and Snow White's mother aspires to an ideal-looking daughter: "I wish I had a daughter ...". In Carter's revisioning the snow child is created out of the wishes of the Father who, like God with his words, created humankind. The object inspiring the colours the girl should bear, the colours of tragedy, are the same as in Perrault's story⁷³¹. These colours, red, black and white, are not only used as the defining characteristics of Snow White, an appearance of sharp chromatic contrasts with an artificial, doll-like quality, but are also used with a broader symbolic meaning even when they refer to other characters. The Countess has a highly sexualised look similar to a porn performer resulting from the emphasis on the black and white colours and, related to that, there is the insinuation of piercing and cuts (high heels and spurs), later developed in the repeated attempts to destroy the girl. She eventually succeeds in her purpose when the child pricks herself on a rose and bleeds to death. This version of the stepmother contrasts with the whiteness of the girl's body, a body as fragile as snow under the sun. Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Snow-Image: A Childish Miracle" (1850) appears to be an intertext for "The Snow

⁷³¹ In the Grimms' "Little Snow White" her mother is inspired by the wooden frame of the palace window instead. The closest tale is, however, one of German origin collected but discarded by the Grimms and translated by Bruno Bettelheim: "A count and a countess drove by three mounds of white snow which made the count say, 'I wish I had a girl as white as this snow.' A short while later they came to three holes full of red blood, at which *he* said: 'I wish I had a girl with cheeks as red as this blood.' Finally, three black ravens flew by, at which moment *he desired* a girl 'with hair as black as these ravens.' As they drove on, they encountered a girl as white as snow, as red as blood, and with hair as black as the ravens; and she was Snow White". Quoted in Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*, 33. Italics added. In this tale, the creation of the child from the Father's desire (also a count) is explicit. But, as Bacchilega notes, whether "speaking with the women's collusive voice or the men's, it is a patriarchal frame that takes the two women's beauty as the measure of their (self) worth, and thus defines their relationship as rivalry". *Ibid.*, 34. Voice and voicelessness, and thus implicitly the problem of dialogicality, play a major role in Bacchilega's analyses who concludes with regards to the Snow White stories that "Snow White rarely has a voice of her own, and when she does speak, she merely accepts things as they are". *Ibid.*, 35.

Child” with its girl made of snow by brother and sister which miraculously comes alive but which also melts down when Mr Lindsey forces it to warm itself in their fireplace⁷³².

Though the Countess is representative of sex it is only of one aspect, sexual rivalry, making her primarily a symbol of death. She rides a black mare and covers herself with black fox pelts. The rarity of this colour for a fox draws attention to an object at one and the same time the outer shell of an animal corpse and an image of an animal-woman, specifically a lupine woman. However, this “foxy” woman is only one of Carter’s possible imaginings: in “The Company of Wolves” the girl mates with a wolf (in Neil Jordan’s film she actually becomes a wolf) and in “Wolf-Alice” the most ambivalent degree of female animality is achieved. No doubt the author wanted the reader to establish his/her own connections between the tales by dropping clues like bread crumbs. “The Snow Child”, for instance, begins with the reference to the exact time in the season which is primordial in “The Werewolf” and “The Company of Wolves”. In addition, the adjectives used to describe the season, “invincible, immaculate”, pointing to the dreariness and snow white landscape, are the same adjectives used to characterise the girl in “The Company of Wolves”, only here both draw their meaning with respect to virginity.

The gender of whoever pronounces “I wish I had a girl” determines the significance of the phrase, that is, in one case it is the expression of a would-be mother and in the other of

⁷³² There are other elements pointing to this influence, including the male/female partnership, a sister and a brother instead of a couple. Both bear the name of flowers, Violet and Peony, though it is the latter that recalls the ruddiness of Snow White’s cheeks as well as the gardens Carter invokes insistently throughout *The Bloody Chamber*. There are also grounds to see Mr Lindsey’s character as having influenced Carter’s shaping of the bicyclist in “The Lady of the House of Love”. Both have no marked traits other than their matter-of-fact nature. Though both are kind-hearted and have only good intentions, their unshakeable common-sense becomes, as the narrator comments in “The Snow-Image”, a fault. So sure are they that they know human nature and that by only meaning good there can be no harm done, that they are incapable of further learning and of accepting realities besides those they already know such as a snow-made child or a vampire girl. Another interesting detail is the similarity of the snow-child, open-armed and covered with snow-birds, with the Erl-King who is described in the same position. Finally I would like to draw attention to the magical realist tone and coincidence of *leitmotifs* used in “The Snow-Child” and in Gabriel García Márquez’s “El rastro de tu sangre en la nieve”, published in 1992 in *Doce cuentos peregrinos*. Besides the contrastive use of snow and blood as well as their association in representing perishability, the improbable and the factual are implicitly discussed. This is carried out through Billy Sánchez, a rich, materialist young man with a passion for expensive cars who is confronted with his wife’s death of a haemorrhage caused (what else?) by a thorn from a rose. His alienation is aggravating as he finds himself in Paris not knowing the language, the city, or what to make of Nena’s bleeding. Billy is put on the other side of rationality as now it is Paris which stands for rationality. Its ways (hospital visiting hours, car parking rules, lighting devices) impose an “imperio de la razón” and he has no choice but to submit to its “artimañas racionalistas”. Gabriel García Márquez’s, “El rastro de tu sangre en la nieve”, *Doce cuentos peregrinos* (Barcelona: Mondadori, 1992) 223 and 226.

a male for a child-lover. So if she is “the child of his desire”, she was also of hers, but of a different kind of desire (BC, 92). The core of the tale nonetheless is the coming into existence of a female as the object of male desire. Like Galatea she *is* by male intervention and has meaning solely in that context. As such she can be no more than an object, deprived of speech and will, obeying the orders of her father and master mechanically. His voice is the only one she is sensitive to for she waits for his command to know how to react to the orders spoken by the Countess and which aim to destroy her. The girl even appears unaware of the intentions of the requests.

With each refusal of the Countess’s will one of her garments magically unwraps from her body to cover the girl instead so that the girl is gradually furred and booted and the Countess undressed in the snowy countryside. The transition would probably be seen in the context of a more conventional fairy tale as the righteous retribution of the stepmother for her evil deeds and, consequently, of the girl who refuses to respond in the same terms. However, in most cases, not reacting vindictively is equivalent to not reacting at all either because of an immense goodness or belief in a sense of justice that eventually sets things right. The Snow Child takes non-reaction to its limits; she is so terribly passive in life that she is no different when she is dead. She is equally beautiful and desirable.

A more plausible reading of the clothes flying from one woman to the other cannot therefore be sustained by the goodness of a girl who is devoid of all inner life like the “marvellous machine” of “The Tiger’s Bride”. It is instead an image abounding in real life, that of a man withdrawing his emotional and economic attention from his older wife towards a younger woman. But the attention is fleeting and, as soon as his desires are satisfied, the Count assumes once again his place by his wife’s side. His actions are demonstrative of his status which lends additional weight to his power as a man. There used to be implicit immunity for noblemen as the Gilles de Rais case proves (his murders would have remained untried were it not for his scandalous excesses) and that sense of untouchability also stands for emotional impermeability⁷³³; all he feels for his wife is pity (but not enough to spare her the humiliation of adultery) and as casually at the end he rides off with her, leaving without a second thought the bloody pool of his lover’s remains. To Mary Kaiser the nakedness of the women, besides emphasising the imbalance of power between women and men in

⁷³³ I feel that the case of Elizabeth of Báthory does not invalidate my view. Her ambition was for a position traditionally reserved for men, and the treatment she metes out to her servants and lovers, mere objects of entertainment, obeys a logic of dissimilarity of value which is demonstrated by the patriarchal order. See more on this figure in my discussion of “The Lady of the House of Love”.

pornography, also reveals the negativity of the tradition of associating women with nature and men with culture since it falls on the man to integrate women in culture, thus to clothe her with whatever cultural signs he sees fit, those that reinforce the gentrified class division. To Kaiser “The Snow Child” is

a fable of the struggle between masculine power and women’s sexuality. In the traditional tale the Count must choose between the Countess and the Child. In Carter’s version the Count, who has all the real power, does not have to choose; he can have both Countess and Child. The Countess, in fact, is as powerless as the Child, since both are held in the tyranny of the Count’s desire.⁷³⁴

Snow Child’s death is temporary and like Snow White after being successively “killed” by a pair of stays, a poisoned comb and a poisoned apple, she returns to life. The merely usable side of the girl as a sexual object is insinuated in the bloodstain left on the snow to be found by yet another man whenever he happens to pass by, resurrecting her once again⁷³⁵. It is like the cycle of the snow itself: “Fresh snow [falls] on snow already fallen” (BC, 91). The Snow Child dies, Margaret Atwood astutely notes, because she is only an abstraction, that of virginal passion, and as such she is incapable of surviving the enactment of that passion⁷³⁶. Following this line of thought, it can be concluded that it is also because she is only an idea that she cannot effectively be killed and for the same reason she cannot be said to have actually lived: “No child – no flesh and blood, no life – is produced by the Count’s wish. Only an imaginary being”⁷³⁷.

The blood conveys a panoply of meanings: sex, life/rebirth and death. If the snow child follows the pattern of Snow White’s mother who pricks her finger on a needle as she makes the wish for her unborn daughter, so Sleeping Beauty pricks her finger and remains in

⁷³⁴ Mary Kaiser, “Fairy Tale as Sexual Allegory; Intertextuality in Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*”, 34.

⁷³⁵ The same scary cycle takes place in relation to Robert Coover’s variant of the Snow White story. Though the prince engages in repeated and daring sex with his bride, every morning he discovers her hymen is magically reconstructed and the linen untainted with blood. Every time is a new deflowering. There is moreover an indecipherable relation between Snow White’s utter ignorance of pain, malice and consequences of actions, and her freakish virginity and permanent infancy, indicating that the very infantilization of women is inappropriate and nefarious. Seeing her stepmother being tortured she was “like a happy child at the circus” and instigated the play. Robert Coover, “The Dead Queen”, ed. Bradford Morrow and Patrick McGrath, *The New Gothic: A Collection of Contemporary Gothic Fiction* (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1992) 168.

⁷³⁶ Margaret Atwood, “Running with the Tigers”, 128.

the zone of the living-dead until a man restores her to life. But the Sleeping Beauty intertext sheds light on the inclusion of the rose in this story as the princess's name was Briar Rose. In the tale of Briar Rose, during the time of the enchantment over the castle and the people inside, a hedge of briars grows until it covers the building. The symbolism of the rose is notoriously sexual: "from time to time princes came endeavouring to penetrate through the hedge into the castle; but it was not possible, for the thorns held them, as if by hands, and the youths were unable to release themselves, and so perished miserably"⁷³⁸. The bushy obstacle is clearly the woman's pubic hair and its thorny hostility the revelation of male fear of the *vagina dentata*.

The tale of Sleeping Beauty has also been revisited by Robert Coover in *Briar Rose* (1996) whose structure could be said to resemble that which Angela Carter employed in *The Bloody Chamber* but whereas the latter is a collection of short stories offering new interpretations of several tales, Coover writes a rather long story concerned with one tale alone. Through the alternating voices in it which include Briar Rose's, the prince's and the fairy's/crone's, a study is provided of manifold re-inventions of the tale departing from what could be called the "*plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, [...] with equal rights and each with its own world*" (PDP, 6. Italics in the text). *Briar Rose* points in the end to the intricate and innumerable mechanisms which, though put in an almost surrealistic manner, conduct females as well as males to the destinies that a patriarchal, feudal-like society has assigned for them.

The grotesqueness in "The Snow Child" derives from the bodily issues to do with death, rebirth and sex, and also from the indulging in abject pleasure. Abjection appears associated with the figure of the father, an all-powerful patriarch who subjugates wife and daughter/lover and, giving utter liberty to his own desires, in contrast enjoys them without restriction. The father is free therefore to practise his fantasies of necrophilia and incest as, in fact, also happens in *Briar Rose*⁷³⁹. Incest, falling into the category of taboo in which Freud distinguished the properties of the sacred, the uncanny, the forbidden and the unclean, is also part of the concerns of Julia Kristeva on the abject. But whereas Kristeva makes the abject converge with the maternal, in that in a dual relationship between mother and child the latter does not only risk losing part of *himself* (castration) but his whole being on remaining in the

⁷³⁷ Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*, 38.

⁷³⁸ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Illustrated Works of the Brothers Grimm* (London: The Chancellor Press, [1812 and 1815] 1996) 240.

⁷³⁹ See Robert Coover, *Briar Rose*, p. 11.

Semiotic order, Angela Carter reads the threat of incest deriving from the father. Angela Carter's position, which is based on her analysis of social mechanisms, favours women insofar as she displaces "the abject or demoniacal potential of the feminine" onto the masculine though not discarding that this type of incest follows the same symptoms: defilement, prohibition, and the exclusion of filth (*PH*, 65). Dwelling in a reality constructed by a phallographic reasoning, women are a creation of male desire whose urge for sexual satisfaction knows no prohibitions and no abjecting frontiers "which is the process by which the *femme* gets credited with fatality. Because she is perceived not as herself but as the projections of those libidinous cravings which, since they are forbidden, must always prove fatal"⁷⁴⁰. Fatal, that is, to her.

⁷⁴⁰ Angela Carter, "Femmes Fatales", *Angela Carter: Shaking a Leg*, 351. Italics in the text.

4.8. The Lady of the House of Love

Unwilling monologic feminine authority

She is herself a haunted house. She does not possess herself; her ancestors sometimes come and peer out of the windows of her eyes and that is very frightening. She has the mysterious solitude of ambiguous states. She hovers in a no-man's land between life and death, sleeping and waking, behind the edge of spiked flowers, Nosferatu's sanguinary rosebud. The Beastly forebears on the walls condemn her to a perpetual repetition of their passions.

Angela Carter, "The Lady of the House of Love", 103

The starting point for "The Lady of the House of Love" is the historical figure of Elizabeth Báthory, the sixteenth century Hungarian Countess whose belief that virgin blood was the source of eternal youth instigated her to have hundreds of victims murdered and bled⁷⁴¹. The Countess of Carter's story is both Elizabeth Báthory and one of her descendents.

⁷⁴¹ Erzsébet (Elizabeth) Báthory was born in Hungary in 1560 and died in 1614 after a life of unusual exercise of cruelty. Among her ancestors was counted Vlad the Impaler and the Báthory family became one of the most influential and richest of all European nobility during the sixteenth century, containing kings, cardinals, and prime ministers. But they have also gone down in history on account of an extraordinary talent for deviance ranging from devil-worshipping to insanity and perversity as a result of generations of intermarriage. Aged fifteen she married Count Ferenez Nadasdy who spent long years absent in battle and left her alone in their castle in the Carpathian Mountains. The Countess was often bored so she took lovers, both male and female, and presumably even maintained an incestuous relationship with her aunt Countess Klara Báthory. Supported by a party of faithful followers and a troupe of sorcerers, witches and alchemists, she then became interested in the powers of the occult and evil and began a mission of disciplining the servants through torture. Soon, her castle became a place of horror; servants were whipped not on their backs but breasts so that the Countess could appreciate their contorted faces and pins were inserted in particular painful spots. At the age of forty she found herself appalled at the disappearance of her creamy complexion which she had delighted in observing in the mirror. Apparently her skin was not particularly attractive but no one would dare contradict the lady of the castle. For reasons to do with vanity, sexual desire and aspirations to royal power (she was the next in line to become queen of Poland) she intensified her connections with the occult. On an ill-fated day a servant hurt the Countess while combing her hair; the Countess struck her back so hard that blood spurted onto the Countess's hand. The experts in the dark arts she retained confirmed her impression that virgin blood was rejuvenating and for years to come peasant girls were allured to Castle

On the one hand, the Countess is locked in an existential logic wholly dependent on blood, “a closed circuit [...] helplessly perpetuat[ing] her ancestral crimes” but on the other she rejects that legacy (*BC*, 93). Her dearest dream is to be human but she knows her “future [...] is irreversible” (*BC*, 95). On his death, her father cried out to her “Nosferatu is dead; long live Nosferatu!” and thus passed on to her the burden of continuing the accursed family tradition (*BC*, 95). Her future is indistinguishable from her past which is her family’s past, too imperious a legacy to be ignored: “her claws and teeth have been sharpened on centuries of corpses, she is the last bud of the poison tree that sprang from the loins of Vlad the Impaler who picnicked on corpses in the forests of Transylvania” (*BC*, 94).

The Countess’s beauty is so exquisite it is disturbing because, it is inferred, it is the product of Elizabeth Báthory’s obsession and numerous crimes. The hideousness of its origin is hinted in the association with hunger:

She rises when the sun sets and goes immediately to her table where she plays her game of patience until she grows hungry, until she becomes ravenous. She is so beautiful she is unnatural; her beauty is an abnormality, a deformity, for none of her features exhibit any of those touching imperfections that reconcile us to the imperfection of the human condition. Her beauty is a symptom of her disorder, of her soullessness. (*BC*, 94)

The Countess’s beauty then is a symptom of her abjectedness since abjection is “what disturbs identity, system, order” (*PH*, 4). The vampire imparts therefore of the characteristics of abjection by “not respect[ing] borders, positions, rules” embodied, for instance, in the inverted sleep patterns (*PH*, 4). Abjection meets the grotesque by personifying the “in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” and the vampire is an exceptional illustration of both (*PH*, 4). When abjection is not kept at bay and the Countess unites her vampirism with humanity she dies. In this context one is reminded of Kristeva who posits that abjection is located in an exiled place so that it is understandable that the “end of exile is the end of being” for the Countess (*BC*, 106).

Csejthe in the posts of servants. They were subsequently mutilated and their blood drained into a container where the Countess had her baths. Occasionally the Countess even drank their blood directly from their slit throats. Ten years passed and she realised the blood was having no effect and started her hunt for blue-blooded girls in the belief their blood was more powerful. The disappearance of noblewomen did not go unnoticed and soon she was caught. The register that the Countess herself maintained counted over six hundred victims, fifty of them found in her castle at the time of her arrest. The court sentenced her to life imprisonment, immured in her own bedchamber where she died at the age of fifty-four.

But the Countess is also abject in the sense she is a “criminal with a good conscience” (PH, 4). The Countess abhors the crimes she commits but they are nevertheless premeditatedly committed and thus reveal the fragility of the law:

She loathes the food she eats; she would have liked to take the rabbits home with her, feed them on lettuce, pet them and make them a nest in her red-and-black chinoiserie escritoire, but hunger always overcomes her. She sinks her teeth into the neck where an artery throbs with fear; she will drop the deflated skin from which she has extracted all the nourishment with a small cry of both pain and disgust. And it is the same with the shepherd boys and gipsy lads [...]. The hobbledehoys sit with a spilling cup in one hand and a biscuit in the other, gaping at the Countess in her satin finery as she pours from a silver pot and chatters distractedly to put them at their fatal ease. A certain desolate stillness of her eyes indicates she is inconsolable. She would like to caress their lean brown cheeks and stroke their ragged hair. When she takes them by the hand and leads them to her bedroom, they can scarcely believe their luck. (BC, 96)

In this passage, the parallel is made between rodent and human victims so as to allow the dislocation of the repulsiveness of the scene from humans to animals. Only in relation to the latter is the murder described as if the Countess could not bear to think of the murder as such and only as a correlation. Her abjectedness does not constitute a liberating device therefore. On the contrary, she is disgusted at herself as others are. The Countess cannot be considered then a transgressive construction of the candid female heroine of some fairy tale. Transgression is nevertheless present but working carnivalistically for an image of a sentimental, fragile, animal-loving, maternal vampire is undeniably an image of a world turned upside down. Though the vampire is a figure from folk-tale and superstition, this one in particular wishes to gain entrance to the fairy tale. She is a mellow teenage vampire who only wants to be like the other girls, a wish denied by her uncontainable abjectedness which becomes a prison symbolised in the depressing isolation of the mansion. The transgression of this story is that the fairy tale pattern applies: she is a captive, locked away like Rapunzel, and she dreams of a hero to come to her rescue which eventually does happen but then with dire consequences. The rabbit as the emblem of the ritual victim is the first evidence I would like to present that points to “The Lady of the House of Love” as the follow-up to “The Erl-King”. At this point however, I would like to concentrate on the abjection of the female

vampire. In *The Monstrous-Feminine* Barbara Creed, basing herself on Kristeva, reflects on the matter:

The female vampire is abject because she disrupts identity and order; driven by her lust for blood, she does not respect the dictates of the law which set down the rules of proper sexual conduct. Like the male, the female vampire also represents abjection because she crosses the boundary between the living and the dead, the human and animal.⁷⁴²

The Countess is assumedly “both death and the maiden” and blood, as previously observed, is a prime vehicle of abjection and women through their association with it in menstruation and childbirth have been situated in a locus of abjection (BC, 93). Thus if women are “natural” threats to the Law, vampire-women are doubly so. As predators, they do not observe the social norms of “proper” female sexual behaviour. Thus, the Countess allures males into her castle, males who for their age, occupation and social status are not so tightly protected by the Law. But unlike Sufiya who killed her young lovers as a wild animal would, the Countess performs a ritual of death, a ritual similar to the mystery of transfiguration with the bread and a cup to hold the blood. The abjection of having an empowered female sexuality is apparent in the nature of the appetite described as “nauseated voluptuousness” (BC, 96) set in a context of Christian undertones, especially by denominating her bed as “sacrificial altar” (BC, 104).

The overturning of the sexual conduct disrupts the roles of prey/predator, sacrificed/sacrifier and female/male. It is she, as Maria Aline Ferreira notes, who penetrates men though it is a forced act of penetration since she would like not to have to do it⁷⁴³. The exchange of gender roles also originates from “The Erl-King” where the king, who had been an excellent housewife (BC, 87), becomes the victim. “The Lady of the House of Love” appears in fact to be the continuation of the story of the girl in “The Erl-King” after she kills her lover and is left to rule all by herself. Several arguments can be presented in favour of this view. There is, for instance, an emphasis on the Countess’s loneliness. Like Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*, who years after the aborted ceremony still has on the yellowed and decayed wedding dress, “[w]earing an antique bridal gown, the beautiful queen of the vampires sits all

⁷⁴² Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 61.

⁷⁴³ Maria Aline Ferreira, “Violência e Transgressão: Mulheres-Vampiros nos Contos de Alejandra Pizarnik ‘Acerca de La Condesa Sangrienta’ e de Angela Carter ‘The Lady of the House of Love’”, *Dedalus* 6 (1996) 119.

alone in her dark, high house under the eyes of the portraits of her demented and atrocious ancestors, each one of whom, through her, projects a baleful posthumous existence” (BC, 93). Through this peculiar appearance she is identified also with the victim as one goes back again in the text to find another Romanian Princess in a bridal dress: one of the Marquis’s wives in “The Bloody Chamber”. Another aspect is that the wedding dress had been her mother’s so that in that sense too she is inheriting a female role. Being out of time by repeating the same moment or form of existence endlessly is a striking grotesque device of escaping social control. The passage of time provides the individual with the notion of propriety carefully adjusted to his/her age, of the roles s/he is permitted and is obliged to perform as well as an understanding of the roles of others. The Countess’s beauty is uncanny then also because it derives from a place beyond common patriarchal structures: she is immortal. Her escaping these structures refers only to her vampiristic nature and does not apply in terms of gender. Moreover, her beauty is associated with her youth (the Countess is about seventeen) and thus she is an embodiment of past crimes as it was youth that led Elizabeth Báthory to commit murder. In death she looks older, less beautiful, more fully human (BC, 107).

Another trait which makes “The Lady of the House of Love” a continuation of the “The Erl-King” is the permanence of a patriarchal rule. As I have suggested, the Countess rules alone after the girl in “The Erl-King” has so savagely dispatched male authority. However, as in “The Erl-King”, the female is unable to recreate the ways of the world anew. If the girl in the woods reinstates Order through the re-enactment of oppressive measures, the Countess is depicted as unwilling to exert that violence, emblematised in her repugnance of turning flesh into meat, but finding no alternative. This, as Robert Rawdon Wilson has remarked, is representative not of a system of subordination between the genders but of classes. The feudal lord/lady had no choice but to exert authority which was nonetheless invariably identified with masculinity⁷⁴⁴. The Countess is therefore forced to continue the patriarchal tradition of Vlad the Impaler which her *father* explicitly deposited on her on the occasion of his death. More than putting forward the lack of a soul which vampires are assumed not to have, the fact that the Countess does not have a reflection in the mirror indicates the lack of a self crushed by her patriarchal inheritance. Even the Countess Elizabeth Báthory can be counted among those women driven to the demented pursuit of a patriarchal demand for blood.

⁷⁴⁴ See Robert Rawdon Wilson, “SLIP PAGE: Angela Carter, In/Out? In the Post-Modern Nexus”, pp. 119-120.

The arrival of the bicyclist does break the cycle as the Countess refrains from spilling his blood but only at the expenses of shedding hers. The Countess pricks her finger but unlike Sleeping Beauty's death-like sleep, from which she is eventually brought back to life through male intervention, that moment becomes the actual death of her:

When she kneels to try to gather the fragments of glass together, a sharp sliver pierces deeply into the pad of her thumb; she cries out, sharp, real. She kneels among the broken glass and watches the bright bead of blood form a drop. She has never seen her own blood before, not her *own* blood. It exercises upon her an awed fascination.

Into this vile and murderous room, the handsome bicyclist brings the innocent remedies of the nursery; in himself, by his presence, he is an exorcism. He gently takes her hand away from her and dabs the blood with his own handkerchief, but still it spurts out. And so he puts his mouth to the wound. He will kiss it better for her, as her mother, had she lived, would have done. (*BC*, 106. Italics in the text)

The Countess being identified with the sole authority and thus with the Erl-King, demonstrates to what extent the reversal of roles is innocuous. Though the Erl-King does not mean to be of any harm he is and this idea also haunts the Countess whose despair is well evident in the repetition: "I do not mean to hurt you. I shall wait for you in my bride's dress in the dark. [...] I am condemned to solitude and dark; I do not mean to hurt you" (*BC*, 103). The fundamental difference is that because murder has been committed, though in defence against and giving continuation to male endeavours, the female does know she will inflict harm. She is afflicted in reality by the curse of knowledge, and thus the bicyclist is exempt from blame when the tables turn once again and it is he who, intending only to do good, seals her death. More problematic still is that being good is situated as a condition of femininity, and thus the bicyclist becomes a recreation of the Erl-king too, and more precisely of the notion of motherhood. He kisses the pain away as her mother would have done were she alive.

The spark that initiates the process of the Countess's death is not, however, only the infantilization of the character whose needs for protection and affection are unnoticed or denied for she is the great representative of an outstanding line of vampires. But the bicyclist notices; his first impression is that she looks like a child wearing her mother's clothes as if with that trick the mother could be restored to life and provide the love the young Countess is lacking. The actual gendering of the figure, through the sexualised undertones of the scene

(she pierces her finger, he puts his mouth to her wound, wound being a stereotyped metaphor for female genitalia, and her own mouth seemed to him like that of a whore⁷⁴⁵) suggests that from the moment the Countess gains a gendered identity, that is, that she is assumed as a woman, she instantly becomes unfit to occupy a position of authority⁷⁴⁶. Accordingly, on a previous occasion it had been said that she was “indifferent to her own weird authority” (*BC*, 95). And if a “single kiss woke up the Sleeping Beauty in the Wood”, one is recalled of “The Erl-King” once again (*BC*, 97)⁷⁴⁷.

Sleeping Beauty must be recognised as the prime fairy tale intertext in both establishing the sexual plane and the grotesque⁷⁴⁸. The character is depicted in another revision of the Garden of Eden, one divested of religious undertones and instead favouring an

⁷⁴⁵ The exact quotation emphasises the mixed feelings caused by her loveliness: “he was disturbed, almost repelled, by her extraordinary fleshy mouth, a mouth with wide, full, prominent lips of a vibrant purplish-crimson, a morbid mouth” (*BC*, 101). This is not the sole reference to prostitution to bring forth the topic of pornography in the tale. The countess is also compared to a bony, sad-eyed prostitute of a Parisian brothel where the bicyclist had been directed to initiate his sexual life. The necrophiliac element is openly associated with pornography in the scene as it recognises the erotic pleasure of the body but, unlike the marquis of “The Bloody Chamber” who exploits prostitutes in Paris, this small-scale hero sees the occasion as a “criminal advantage” over the child selling her body as it would now over the Countess who he feels is mentally disturbed. The link with the French prostitutes is reiterated by the Countess’s use of the French language which on a mere superficial level only indicates the language spoken by all European aristocratic houses.

⁷⁴⁶ The transition from girlhood to womanhood is asserted in the morning after the officer arrives when the bloodstains on her white negligee are not read as belonging to her victims anymore (*BC*, 94) but compared to the stains of menses (*BC*, 106). The fact that they are not assumed to be evidence of the loss of virginity proves the puritanical impulse of the couple’s behaviour. There was nevertheless an erotic experience determinant for the girl’s psycho-sexual maturation.

⁷⁴⁷ See page 103 as well.

⁷⁴⁸ Given the constraints of this thesis it will not be possible to discuss the radio version of the tale appearing under the title “Vampirella” or “The Loves of Lady Purple” with which “The Lady of the House of Love” establishes an obvious dialogue. In the latter case the theme of Sleeping Beauty is material because Lady Purple is a doll brought to life with a kiss. The tale could be said to be a darker version of “The Lady of the House of Love” which is apparent even in the title. The vampiristic, sexualised version of femininity utterly deprived of any other trait is a murderous example of male construction of women. The main difference is that being only a puppet, a “sexy and lethal rewrite of Pinocchio” as Salman Rushdie put it, Lady Purple is uninterested in the ability she was given to harm whereas the Countess is repulsed by the evilness she inflicts. Angela Carter, *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*, introduction by Salman Rushdie, xi. Nevertheless, they are at heart the same, sexual instruments devoid of humanity, and thus they are described similarly. Take as an example: “[W]hen she moved, she did not seem so much a cunningly simulated woman as a monstrous goddess, at once preposterous and magnificent [...]. Her actions were not so much an imitation as a distillation and intensification of those of a born woman and so she could become the quintessence of eroticism, for no woman born would have dared to be so blatantly seductive”. Angela Carter, “The Loves of Lady Purple”, *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces* (London: Virago, [1974] 1993) 26-27. “The Loves of Lady Purple” has, in addition, sustained arguments of Carter’s inspiration in Carlo Collodi’s icons. See Anny Crunelle-Vanrigh, “The Logic of the Same and *Différance*: “The Courtship of Mr Lyon””, 141.

anthropological theory of evolution. The Countess suffers a transformation more akin to the werewolf than the vampire, an ambiguity which is also noticeable in “Wolf-Alice”:

On moonless nights, her keeper lets her out into the garden. This garden, an exceedingly sombre place, bears a strong resemblance to a burial ground and all the roses her dead mother planted have grown up into a huge, spiked wall that incarcerates her in the castle of her inheritance. When the back door opens, the Countess will sniff the air and howl. She drops, now, on all fours. Crouching, quivering, she catches the scent of her prey. Delicious crunch of the fragile bones of rabbits and small, furry things she pursues with fleet, four-footed speed; she will creep home, whimpering, with blood smeared on her cheeks. She pours water from the ewer in her bedroom into the bowl, she washes her face with the wincing, fastidious gestures of a cat. (BC, 95)

It is yet another scene of origins but tainted with death as this Eden supposedly of life has not just the quality of a burial ground but is actually one for it is there that her keeper buries the remains of her animal and human meals. The garden cannot fructify as it is marked by the absence of Adam without whom Eve roams pointlessly. On the other hand, it is the thorn-covered castle of Briar Rose where the princess is kept in seclusion until a hero (Adam) penetrates through, resisting the deadly prickles⁷⁴⁹. The scent of roses is so intoxicating that he is overcome by “a sensuous vertigo” so that he too falls into the trap of the girl in “The Erl-King” (BC, 98). It is “a blast of rich, faintly corrupt sweetness strong enough almost, to fell him. Too many roses. Too many roses bloomed on enormous thickets that lined the path, thickets bristling with thorns, and the flowers themselves were almost too luxuriant, their huge congregations of plush petals somehow obscene in their excess, their whorled, tightly budded cores outrageous in their implications” (BC, 98).

The wild garden when opposed to the mansion reinstates the opposition nature/civilisation though the latter seems to succumb to the vitality of the first where death and life

⁷⁴⁹ Coover and Carter’s writing share, as some have commented on, a common ground. In style, themes and images they resort to related strategies. Notice the similarity of the association of the Countess’s body with her mansion and that of Briar Rose’s. In both cases, the deadly potential of the women is clearly suggested: “If you peer through it [the archers’ slot] perhaps you will see the bones of your victims, rattling in the brambles down below. Like you, this slot has long since fallen into disuse, and, see here, a pretty black spider has built her web in it. You are that still creature, waiting silently for your hapless prey. You are this window, webbed in spellbinding death, this unvisited corridor, that hidden spiral staircase of the forbidden tower, the secret room at the top where pain begins. You are all things dangerous and inviolate. You are she who has renounced the natural functions, she who invades the dreams of the innocent”. Robert Coover, *Briar Rose*, 13.

mutually regenerate one another. An image of this reasoning is the roses which bloom because they feed on the dead corpses beneath. The mansion however, is a decaying building with a Gothic quality stressing claustrophobia, darkness and ruin:

The castle is mostly given over to ghostly occupants [...]. Closely barred shutters and heavy velvet curtains keep out every leak of natural light. There is a round table on a single leg covered with a red plush cloth on which she lays out her inevitable Tarot; this room is never more than faintly illuminated by a heavily shaded lamp on the mantelpiece and the dark red figured wallpaper is obscurely, distressingly patterned by the rain that drives in through the neglected roof and leaves behind it random areas of staining, ominous marks like those left on the sheets by dead lovers. Depredations of rot and fungus everywhere. [...] [I]ndustrious spiders have woven canopies in the corners of this ornate and rotting place, have trapped the porcelain vases on the mantelpiece in soft grey nets. But the mistress of all this disintegration notices nothing. (*BC*, 93-94)

Her bedroom is equally sinister: black stained walls, funerary urns at the corners, incense emanating, candles, and her own bed referred to as a catafalque (*BC*, 94). The overall environment is described as “the timeless Gothic eternity of the vampires, for whom all is as it has always been and will be, whose cards always fall in the same pattern” (*BC*, 97). The reference here is to the Tarot cards which the Countess played with obsessively and that until the arrival of the soldier when she drew *Les Amoureux* would inevitably show either *La Papesse*, *La Mort*, or *La Tour Abolie* standing for wisdom, death and dissolution. The bicyclist stands not only for mortality but also for change and he too carries an emblem, the bicycle, a product of Reason and progress. Because of his disbelief he sees her as “an inbred, highly strung girl child, fatherless, motherless, kept in the dark too long and pale as a plant that never sees the light, half-blinded by some hereditary condition of the eyes. And though he feels unease, he cannot feel terror” (*BC*, 104). He is not in fact a hero; he merely suffers from lack of imagination (*BC*, 105). His plans are therefore dreadfully modern: to cure her from the malaise of carrying the past with science. She will be treated for hysteria, photophobia, have her teeth operated on and her nails “properly” cut. But he cannot cure her from herself, from ancient nightmares and the nightmare that she is. And because he cannot see her nightmarish nature, he does not fear her. He will only learn fear in war.

The Countess is also associated with the Beast in her feline appearance and conduct, thus it is she who is the beast of prey, traditionally ascribed to a male figure. However, it is

only in her animal state that she is relieved from her empty routine: “The voracious margin of huntress’s nights in the gloomy garden, crouch and pounce, surrounds her habitual tormented somnambulism, her life or imitation of life. The eyes of this nocturnal creature enlarge and glow. All claws and teeth, she strikes, she gorges; but nothing can console her for the ghastliness of her condition, nothing” (BC, 95). The similarity with Sufiya’s character is remarkable. Salman Rushdie has never indicated “The Lady of the House of Love” as a direct influence on *Shame* but the comments he made on *The Bloody Chamber* reveal his admiration for this particular book by Angela Carter, his friend. To him, in fact, *The Bloody Chamber* is Carter’s masterwork⁷⁵⁰.

It is noteworthy that she is compared to a cat, and thus the Puss-in-Boots motif re-emerges as well as the context of *commedia dell’arte*. This connection is sustained by another convergence, that of the Countess with Columbine so that the Countess’s existence is seen as artificial, empty, and no different from the Tiger’s pathetic carnivalesque disguise:

Her voice, issuing from those red lips like the obese roses in her garden, lips that do not move – her voice is curiously disembodied; she is like a doll, he [the bicyclist] thought, a ventriloquist’s doll, or, more like a great, ingenious piece of clockwork. For she seemed inadequately powered by some slow energy of which she was not in control, as if she had been wound up years ago, when she was born, and now the mechanism was inexorably running down and would leave her lifeless. This idea that she might be an automaton, made of white velvet and black fur, that could not move of its own accord, never quite deserted him; [...] the carnival air of her white dress emphasized her unreality, like a sad Columbine who lost her way in the wood a long time ago and never reached the fair. (BC, 102)

The Countess’s voice is not her own and because she can only speak the discourse of her patriarchal legacy she is made to represent the silent woman. The obvious resonance of “The Tiger’s Bride” lends the image of the mechanical doll representing woman the status of mere construction (though men are constructions in the same degree, as the male servant character demonstrates). “Woman” as construction takes the place of a matured development of individual identity so that she can only become a disembodiment of all that is personal. The Countess, not being in control of her own definition, lacks therefore a structure necessary to exercise power. The strain of her responsibility grows increasingly stronger and she will

⁷⁵⁰ See Angela Carter, *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*, intr. Salman Rushdie, p. xi.

eventually fail under the weight of the inadequate power she received: “Her voice is filled with distant sonorities, like reverberations in a cave: now you are at the place of annihilation, now you are at the place of annihilation. And she is herself a cave full of echoes, she is a system of repetitions, she is a closed circuit” (BC, 93). Another instance which turns this text also into an echo of *The Passion of New Eve*, and particularly the Beulah episodes, appears towards the end: “Now you are at the place of annihilation, now you are at the place of annihilation” (BC, 104).

The final element that puts “The Lady of the House of Love” in the line of succession of “The Erl-King” is the lark kept in “a pretty, silly, gilt-and-wire birdcage” (BC, 100-101). Following the Erl-King’s habit the Countess maintains a bird in captivity but being only one and not many transforms the symbolic value of the image. It remains a symbol of feminine confinement but of the Countess herself, who “draws her long, sharp fingernail across the bars of the cage in which her pet lark sings, striking a plangent twang like that of the plucked heartstrings of a woman of metal” (BC, 93) because sado-masochistically “she likes to hear it announce how it cannot escape” (BC, 94).

The lark and the mechanical doll represent therefore two sides of femininity in a culturally aggressive environment. The question she poses herself, “Can a bird sing only the song it knows, or can it learn a new song?” pervades both “The Erl-King” and “The Lady of the House of Love” (BC, 103). In both cases the stories point to the repetition of the same song by either causing the male’s death or the girls’ own. Invariably it is the song of death. Even if it had not been an actual death, it would be one equated with silence for the lark too gradually ceases its singing. It is the bicyclist who takes the lark to the window so that it can fly away, meaning it is he who gives the bird its freedom. It would seem then, the officer would be redeeming the Erl-King by setting the birds free but it is only a liberation into death. Moreover, it is also said that the lark was already out of its cage, no doubt by the Countess’s hand.

The predatory mission of the Countess is suggested through references to birds. She is described as “poor night bird, poor butcher bird” (BC, 102), with “birdlike, predatory claws” (BC, 103). The Erl-King had been described as a butcher too, as tender as the Lady was serving her guests. His lesson, that the price of flesh (that is, the desired humanity) is love is equally pertinent to “The Lady of the House of Love”. The opposite equation is true as well, that is, that the price of love is flesh which inevitably awakens the notion of the perishability of the body. Carter’s words in *The Sadeian Woman* echo in “The Lady of the House of Love”:

“Carnal knowledge is the infernal knowledge of the flesh as meat”⁷⁵¹. The solution Carter offers out of the impasse that either way the body of women cannot sustain the load which directly or indirectly they receive from a male-favouring world can only be a spiritual one. After the night with the bicyclist, the Countess knows her death is near so she sets the lark free and it starts to sing again.

As the aristocratic equivalent to the Marquis of “The Bloody Chamber” and to the Count in “The Snow Child”, the Countess is nevertheless incapable of their sadistic enterprises. It is she who is terrified by the bicyclist’s presence whereas he has no fear of her though she is responsible for a bloodcurdling inventory of homicides. Likewise, his exorcising presence pierces through her immortal skin so that not only can she die but also assume the other role in the food chain. It is that quality that the officer recognises in her, “the hectic, unhealthy beauty of a consumptive” (BC, 101).

The reversal of the expected attitudes between the predator and his prey is repeated in “The Company of Wolves” where its possible significance is often discussed. A thread of affiliation is woven to link “The Lady of the House of Love” with the wolf stories that follow. The visible connection is the lupine makeover of the Countess but others, more subtle ones, confirm the assumption. There is a correlation between the bicyclist, “an unwise adventurer” (BC, 95) and the discourse used in the stories which follow where one can find, among other resonances, the phrase “[to] go through the wood unwisely late” (BC, 110)⁷⁵². The fear absent in the bicyclist soldier is attributed to a mysterious protective aura emanating from the fact that he is a virgin: “in his youth and strength and blond beauty, in the invisible, even acknowledged pentacle of his virginity, the young man stepped over the threshold of Nosferatu’s castle and did not shiver in the blast of cold air, as from the mouth of a grave, that emanated from the lightless, cavernous interior” (BC, 99). He feels no fear because he has not been initiated in the ways of carnal knowledge and thus cannot recognise the space and the terror it would inspire in others as springing from its analogy with the vagina. He benefits from “the special quality of virginity, most and least ambiguous of states: ignorance, yet at the same time, power in potentia, and, furthermore, unknowingness, which is not the same as ignorance” (BC, 97). Similarly, of the girl in “The Company of Wolves” it is reported that “she

⁷⁵¹ Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, 141.

⁷⁵² At the opening of “The Lady of the House of Love” there is also reference to “traveller[s] unwise enough to drink from the fountain” (BC, 93).

moves within the invisible pentacle of her own virginity. She is an unbroken egg; [...] she is a closed system; she does not know how to shiver” (*BC*, 114)⁷⁵³.

However, given that in “The Company of Wolves” genders recover their traditional places up until that moment (the male plays the customary part of the killing predator and the girl of his helpless victim) and overlooking the relation established with “The Lady of the House of Love”, critics have always interpreted the scene of confrontation as an act of bravery on the part of the female who thus defeats the male’s aggressivity which is as much a cultural sign as is her assigned passivity. Taking the two instances into account simultaneously the meaning each scene might have separately is altered. With the exception of a few discordant voices, the consummation scene of “The Company of Wolves” is viewed by a wide range of the public as the joyful acceptance on the part of the female figure of her active sexuality. However, the celebratory impression is absent in relation to the bicyclist. If the platform is the same for the girl and for him in terms of the value of their virginity, why is not male sexuality celebrated? And why is there a suggestion that he too is fated to die in the French trenches of World War I? The reason is probably related to the tale’s link with “The Erl-King” and the fact that his sexuality, no matter how well-intentioned, has nefarious effects for his female partner. The Countess’s assumption of her sexuality has precisely the opposite consequence of that given in “The Company of Wolves”. But she can also be seen as an instrument of his death. Upon her death she leaves him a rose emblematic of her contagious deadly fate, a “dark, fanged rose I plucked from between my thighs, like a flower laid on a grave” (*BC*, 107). He takes it with him when he joins his group in the armed forces and in a watered vase the rose regains the intoxicating scent of death of the roses in the Countess’s garden and revives. It becomes “a glowing, velvet, monstrous flower whose petals had regained all their former bloom and elasticity, their corrupt, brilliant, baleful splendour” (*BC*,

⁷⁵³ The network Carter creates to give literary expression to the complexity of gender politics and identity is particularly intricate in “The Lady of the House of Love”. If there is a parallel between the boy in “The Lady of the House of Love” and the girl in “The Company of Wolves”, through, for instance, their virgin condition, it does not invalidate other relations such as that between the Countess and that same girl, respectively referred to as “closed circuit” (*BC*, 93) and “closed system” (*BC*, 114). In the same manner, the countess is an incarnation of feudal ancestors appearing both in her past and in stories preceding “The Lady of the House of Love” but the relations she establishes with those characters are not exclusive. The bicyclist is associated with the Marquis of “The Bloody Chamber”, and the lion types of “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” and “The Tiger’s Bride” in his less accentuated but nevertheless present leonine quality suggested by his blond hair, a “golden head, of a lion” (*BC*, 105). Finally I would like to refer to a concluding detail: the fountain where men are recruited by the servant with the purpose of being fed to the countess is adorned with a lion’s mouth, recalling not only the

108). Then he travels to France where war is expecting him and where the scent of death of the roses finds a substitute in deadly gas. The rose is the intermediary between two burialgrounds: the garden and the trenches.

In conclusion, “The Lady of the House of Love” and “The Company of Wolves” are mirrors of one another but nonetheless offer contrary readings, that is, that sexuality can be either a vehicle of liberation for both genders, or their downfall. The scenes are carnivalistic doubles displaying the bright side of mutual salvation and the dark side of reciprocal damnation. As always, Angela Carter does not opt for a straightforward solution, refusing to play the role of the monologic voice which might lead the reader to a well-defined, easily-followed road out of the woods of mental and social patriarchal frames.

Robert Rawdon Wilson reads “The Lady of the House of Love” as a story about the sad fates of vampires, empires and women in a world of patriarchal rule⁷⁵⁴. The construction of a monstrous woman by having her marked by abjection constitutes, as Maria Aline Ferreira puts it, an alternative to the phallogocentric order of the Symbolic⁷⁵⁵. Thus it is with discomfort that one realises that by the end of the tale the world has not changed:

A Ordem Patriarcal é inequivocamente restaurada, e todas as ambivalentes e malélicas manifestações do “abjecto”, e especialmente do “abjecto” associado com o “feminino monstruoso”, são expelidas, de modo a retornar ao modelo convencional de sociedade androcêntrica, que não pode autorizar, por uma questão de assegurar a sua própria perpetuação, quaisquer emanações de uma ambígua sexualidade feminina, ou de erotismo no feminino, tingido de sadismo e criminalidade.⁷⁵⁶

But the weight of constituting a threat and challenge cannot be discarded. Moreover, the tale, though unable to present a strong, resisting order capable of overcoming a phallogocentric one, succeeds in points which should not be minimised, particularly in the construction of a vision of femaleness other than those which constitute the limited number of patriarchal conceptions. Neither an angel nor a demon but something else, more contradictory, more malleable, and more human.

knocker in the shape of a lion’s head of Mr Lyon’s residence but also serving as a warning to any unwise adventurers through the expression’s idiomatic meaning.

⁷⁵⁴ Robert Rawdon Wilson, “SLIP PAGE: Angela Carter, In/Out? In the Post-Modern Nexus”, 121.

⁷⁵⁵ See Maria Aline Ferreira, “Violência e Transgressão: Mulheres-Vampiros nos Contos de Alejandra Pizarnik ‘Acerca de La Condesa Sangrienta’ e de Angela Carter ‘The Lady of the House of Love’”, 123.

⁷⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 123-124.

4.9. *The Werewolf*

An all-women's tale and the same patriarchal story of sacrifice: witches, werewolves and the devil

I believe that all myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice. I'm in the demythologising business.

I'm interested in myths – though I'm much more interested in folklore – just because they are extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree.

Angela Carter, "Notes from the Front Line", 38

All the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming virgin to that of the healing, reconciliatory mother, are consolatory nonsenses; and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth, anyway.

Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, 5

In "The Werewolf" and "The Company of Wolves" the two above-mentioned myths (the redeeming virgin and the conciliatory mother) are annulled in favour of an asexual virgin, of another that uses her own libido to seduce the wolf and of a grandmother (the second mother) that emerges as a predatory animal. The invalidation of those myths seems to imply the denial of feminine victimisation that accompanies them; the girl is not attacked by a starving wolf, she does not passively await her rescue by either a woodcutter or a hunter and the grandmother is not devoured. So that the procedures of the sacrificial pattern could be uncovered they were subversively reused; certain sacrificial elements therefore survive in the text. However, if on the one hand Carter unravelled the sacrificial structures contained in

given myths, on the other she wove her own version, that even when including new elements and when removing the “noxious” ones, she seemed to certify the paradigm.

One of the new elements is the creation of a primeval atmosphere associated with a cultural space of medieval traits. The text opens with a description of the extremely adverse environment. It is a winter context that could indicate the familiarity of the symbolic value of the change of seasons in fairy tales but does not. Nor does it intend to contrast with the warm, benevolent hearts of the hero/ine characters. On the contrary, the atmosphere is indicative of their rudeness and cruelty:

It is a northern country; they have cold weather, they have cold hearts.

Cold; tempest; wild beasts in the forest. It is a hard life. Their houses are built of logs, dark and smoky within. There will be a crude icon of the virgin behind a guttering candle, the leg of a pig hung up to cure, a string of drying mushrooms. A bed, a stool, a table. Harsh, brief, poor lives. (BC, 108)

The brevity of the descriptions, achieved by the use of semicolons and by short sentences, points to the rustic simplicity of human existence in this country. One senses it is a laconic country and not prone to ontological ramblings. The darkness of winter is the darkness of their lives deprived of pleasure and which puts people at the level of the savageness of the other beasts that inhabit the forest. The houses, that appear as shelters in traditional fairy tales or as places of danger which once a test is surpassed have spells removed from them, are mere extensions of a fearsome forest. The expression “wild beasts in the forest” refers therefore to wolves, bears, boars, vampires, witches, even to the devil but it also includes humans that are repeatedly and anonymously referred to as “they”. Even the adjective “crude” used to describe the image of the protectress, the Virgin, indicates rudeness, imperfection and naturalness.

Religion is not introduced as much as a factor of possible salvation but rather in its terrifying aspect, always attentive to signs of damnation. This being the case, the Virgin’s participation in the story is reduced to this small reference while the devil and the witches deserve on the part of Carter lengthy elaboration when considering the extension of the narrative. The mention of the climate and the figures of the vampire, the witch and the devil are not at all secondary to the story which is proved by making the references to them precede the main narrative; they are part of an indispensable characterization that the author

safeguarded from being lost in the story by putting them at the beginning. The devil, and particularly the witches, in fact serve to introduce the notion of sacrifice.

The devil has a direct relationship with death and his supposed appearances take place at the cemetery, a territory that religion does not usually restrict him to. Death was already suggested in the stormy climate, in the slaughter implicit in the pork hung up to cure and in the mushrooms which are not poisonous but others exist in the forest that are. Death is interlaced with the figure of the devil that the panicky imagination produces:

To these upland woodsmen, the Devil is as real as you or I. More so; they have not seen us nor even know that we exist, but the Devil they glimpse often in the graveyards, those bleak and touching townships of the dead where the graves are marked with portraits of the deceased in the naïf style and there are no flowers to put in front of them, no flowers grow there, so they put out small, votive offerings, little loaves, sometimes a cake that the bears come lumbering from the margins of the forest to snatch away. (BC, 108)

In this desolate land where not even flowers bloom, the population makes votive offerings, bringing to mind the devotion to pagan deities which appear linked to certain sacrifices. Here it is not only death and life that are interwoven by the bread offering on the gravestones; the connection also exists in the representation of a bond of primordial characteristics between the humans and the forest: the wild nature, in the form of the bear, collects the bread and it saves the defenceless humans for some time.

The characterization of the atmosphere as one of existential primitivism is allied to medieval traits through the inclusion of popular superstitions and Christian faiths that exorcise an evil that the author, with her denunciatory sarcasm, reveals to be non-existent:

At midnight, especially on Walpurgisnacht, the Devil holds picnics in the graveyards and invites the witches; then they dig up fresh corpses, and eat them. Anyone will tell you that.

Wreaths of garlic on the doors keep out the vampires. A blue-eyed child born feet first on the night of St John's Eve will have second sight. When they discover a witch – some old woman whose cheeses ripen when her neighbours' do not, another old woman whose black cat, oh, sinister! *follows her about all the time*, they strip the crone, search for her marks, for

the supernumerary nipple her familiar sucks. They soon find it. Then they stone her to death.” (*BC*, 108. Italics in the text)⁷⁵⁷

The inclusion of the religious factor definitely distances Angela Carter’s text from the fairy tale. The elements of her text are close to the folktale, existing prior to the didacticist process that characterised the fairy tale particularly since Charles Perrault’s versions at the end of the seventeenth century. He adapted the Little Red Riding Hood story to the needs of an upper class whose social, aesthetic and educational patterns were very different from those of the people. Through the inclusion of the Christian phenomenon and of superstitions of medieval flavouring reminding of Baldung-Grien’s engravings and Bosch’s paintings, one becomes aware that one is at the level of the folktale whose discourse and imagery accentuated the difficulties of the life of the people who produced the tale⁷⁵⁸. The account that Paul Delaure was able to reconstitute and publish in Nièvre in 1885 as “Conte de le mère grande” and that Jack Zipes identifies as the closest to the oral traditions is on the one hand the bloodier version and on the other the most plausible in relation to the reactions of the woman villager before the danger of attacks from wild animals. It is therefore quite distant from the regulating function of society and maintenance of a certain sexual order that Perrault later lent it and that were corroborated in 1812 by the brothers Grimm⁷⁵⁹. Jack Zipes describes the difference in this manner:

Whereas the oral tale referred directly to actual conditions in the country faced by peasants and villagers, Perrault’s literary version assumed a more general aspect. It talked about vanity, power, and seduction, and it introduced a *new child*, the helpless girl, who subconsciously contributed to her own rape. Gone are the alleged cruelty and coarseness of the oral tale.⁷⁶⁰

⁷⁵⁷ Walpurgisnacht refers to the Germanic myth of the witches’ Sabbath. St John’s eve is the summer’s solstice and the longest day of the year, marking the beginning of the countdown to Winter.

⁷⁵⁸ I have in mind Baldung-Grien’s *The Bewitched Bridegroom* and *The Witches’s Sabbath* as well as Bosch’s *The Temptation of St Anthony* where the painter included a black mass. There are many pictorial examples of the alliance between the devil and witches. In 1489 Ulrich Molitor depicted in *Von den Unholden und Hexen* (“Of Monsters and Witches”) demons and witches flying together heading for the Sabbath celebrations and even having sexual intercourse.

⁷⁵⁹ For a detailed discussion of the versions by Perrault and the brothers Grimm including their cultural and political insertion in the specific mentality of their times see Jack Zipes’s excellent introduction to *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) pp. 1-88, and in particular 25-37 and 75-83.

Several elements that are relevant for this discussion were properly “cleaned up” in the printed versions: the existence of a werewolf instead of a wolf, the absence of a hood and of any red-coloured material, the slaughter of the grandmother whose flesh is stored and blood bottled for the granddaughter’s later ingestion, the removal of the clothes at the werewolf’s request and subsequent escape without being molested. There is no doubt that Angela Carter was informed of the outlines of the story before they were remodelled by Perrault since she used them both in “The Werewolf” and in “The Company of Wolves”. Carter seems to have wanted a return to the origins, accomplishing a “return of the repressed”, and the repression refers to the “civilisational” mission of imposing behavioural patterns, manners, and self-discipline that differentiated the bourgeoisie-aristocracy hierarchically. Bearing these factors in mind Carter intended to revive a story wherein the feminine character takes care of herself. With her own resources and astuteness, that is, without the support either of the grandmother or of the game-keeper (the male saviour created by Ludwig Tieck in 1800) she is disentangled from the threat that hangs over her head⁷⁶¹. In other words, Carter aims to avoid the masculine-dominated structure of subsequent texts that inherently made the girl responsible for her tragedy when attributing it to her idleness (she stops to pick flowers while the wolf runs to the grandmother’s house), imprudence (she speaks to a stranger) and disobedience (the mother had instructed the girl to stay on the path).

Based on the oral story, Carter recovers the figure of the werewolf and, through him/it, she introduces the witch who is historically associated with the werewolf. In the Middle Ages there was a widespread belief in werewolves in Europe, and particularly in France (the country that along with Italy is the birthplace of Little Red Riding Hood)⁷⁶². The choice of the epoch of “The Werewolf” is not therefore accidental. However, the association of werewolves with the devil only happens towards the end of the Middle Ages due to a change in Christian theology that, having denied its existence until then, recognised in the superstition

⁷⁶⁰ Jack Zipes, *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, 27. Italics in the text.

⁷⁶¹ Ludwig Tieck’s tale “The Life and Death of Little Red Riding Hood: A Tragedy” manifests an overt Christian sentimentality also characteristic of Richard Henry Stoddard’s 1864 version, “The Story of Little Red Riding Hood”. See Jack Zipes, *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, pp. 99-128 and 173-187. In Tieck’s tale the ultimate reason justifying the sacrifice of the wolf is that his faith was not enough to maintain the belief that all the wrongdoings he/it had been made to suffer would be avenged by divine justice.

⁷⁶² See Jack Zipes’s very interesting relation of witches who, at least in England, were reported to use long red mantles and hoods. See Jack Zipes, *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, p. 83, footnote 20. Thus, though the girl in “The Werewolf” is not attired with a red hood, by reading the short story alongside “The Company of Wolves” the connection is made between the Little Red Riding Hood and the historical witch figures.

of lycanthropy a means of creating the devil's enemies, real creatures who could be seized and punished in judicial spectacles which the people attended. The Church was able in this manner to reinforce its temporary and spiritual authority in times of crisis since not only did Protestantism and Catholicism fight between themselves for believers' allegiance but there were also numerous non-conformist sects to take into consideration. It was imperative therefore to impose a controlling system that was as firm as possible, which resulted in religious intolerance. The obscurantism of this system explains why in the excitement of the witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the religious courts did not distinguish the witch from the werewolf as the hybrid was considered the most common companion of the witch, with the famed exception of the cat.

The ultimate purpose of the persecution of werewolves and witches is seen by Zipes as a need for regulation of sexual practices and roles in order to preserve a social order dominated by masculinity that, in view of a new economic and religious context, faced potentially damaging social changes:

Whereas people in the early Middle Ages had assumed their nature to be determined by the social order and had also accepted the unity of inner and outer nature, the emergence of bourgeois relations of production and the increasing technological capacity to control nature brought about a division between human beings as subjects and the objective outside world. Along with these socio-economic factors, the Church distinguished human beings as 'electors' distinct from nature. The task of all good Christians was to subdue nature, drive out Satan and heretics from the world, restore order, and bring about God's kingdom on earth.⁷⁶³

Witches and werewolves belonged to a natural category roaming the woods that needed to be dominated by civilisational thought and by religious authority. Angela Carter is aware of the convergence of the witch with the werewolf as representatives of the Other, someone free or a "natural" creature. That convergence is rendered in a single figure: the grandmother. It is not surprising therefore that in "The Werewolf" the historical phenomenon of witch hunting is used as a backdrop for the story particularly when one realises that it can be used to serve the author's purpose of feminine valorisation insofar as it inverts the logic of sacrifice: witches are *women* who for reasons that lack substance (the cheese that cures when the neighbour's does not, the cat that follows its lady) are stoned to death, therefore

⁷⁶³ Jack Zipes, *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, 71.

transformed from malicious beings into victims. An association can thus be established with the prototypical victim, the *pharmakos*.

The witch hunting phenomenon is not, evidently, the only example of mass persecution that Western history has experienced. There are records of executions of vestals during the first and second centuries carried out as symbolic purgation when a given city found itself living a crisis or when it had suffered a natural disaster. The spectacle of the execution of a High vestal, buried alive for instance, was embedded with political significance as through it trust in the emperor was recovered; he was considered as one who was able to save his subjects from deadly danger with the performance of that sacrifice. In this context, the guilt factor is necessarily absent. In the same manner, the witch becomes a sacrificial victim because of her gender and of her age that does not allow her to make an active contribution to the general welfare; her life is socially dispensable but primordial to the group through the sacrifice that she is forced to undertake and that saves all. Having the mechanism of substitute victimisation at work, so is a movement of unanimous violence, that is, one the whole community participates in. Therefore all can be included in the benefits of the sacrifice and the blame is diluted.

The witch's relationship with the devil in "The Werewolf" is presented as a collection of clichés enhancing the absence of a crime, just as Girard enunciates, since preponderance is not attributed to the victim but to the sacrificial act itself; the motivation, that need not be actually credible, is the accusation of necrophagy, vampirism, the orgies in walpurgisnacht, a birth of bad omen (the devil is also reported to have been born feet first) of a baby with visionary powers and the discovery, real or imaginary, of the witch's distinctive mark⁷⁶⁴. This mark is the wart on the hand interpreted as the third nipple: "They knew the wart on the hand at once for a witch's nipple" (BC, 109-110)⁷⁶⁵. As Martha Reineke pointed out, one of the pieces of evidence of witchcraft accepted in the trials of the Inquisition was the existence of a mark that was often identified as a third nipple. In this manner is proved the grandmother's

⁷⁶⁴ I believe it is possible to discern in the reference to necrophagy an echo of the consumption of the grandmother's body as described by Delarue. The pork hanging to cure is reminiscent of her death; it is an image of killing, dismembering and eating.

⁷⁶⁵ I am reminded once again of Joel-Peter Witkin's profoundly moving and grotesque work. He has also used the image of the monstrous woman with a third nipple in *Beauty has Three Nipples* (1998). A naked woman stands at the centre and on a base in the usual position of the female nude offering her body in contemplation. This woman, though physically pleasing, with a white body contrasting with the darkness behind her, displays a mark of her freakishness which disturbs the conventional construction of beauty. I find it a particularly coterminous work to *The Bloody Chamber* in that the photographer provided a reformulation of Beauty, again personified in the form of a woman.

intimacy with the devil, already perceptible when the granddaughter discovered the old woman under the blankets contorting “like a thing possessed” (*BC*, 109). Carter expects instead that the reader identifies the true cause: pain.

With respect to witch hunting, I have referred to Martha Reineke’s convincing argument that witches are preferential victims since they tend to live on the margin of society and of the patriarchal institution that protects (or imprisons, depending on the perspective) women: the family. Women who survived reasonably well outside of any environment dominated by masculinity were seen as dangerous particularly if they had prospered, representing therefore a threat also to the economic order. Given that witch hunts have been seen as a social reaction to a non-authorized form of power, one not sanctioned by masculine institutions, it is disconcerting to think that when Carter does not stand up for the witch of her story she is rejecting the alternative of feminine power. Because all characters are female, the forces of evil and good have to be distributed amongst them and in order to make the girl, the new generation of women, victorious, the grandmother, the old women, have to pay the price. Moreover, Carter uses strategies to appeal to the reader’s sympathy for the victim, proving she was aware of the injustice the victim was suffering, one committed as much by the community and her granddaughter as by the author herself, who is unable to release women, or at least some of them, from the vicious circle of victimisation.

In “The Werewolf” the grandmother is therefore the witch and the werewolf (not a mere wolf), both marking her as a diabolical figure. However, the only aggressive action she takes happens in animal form, when the grandmother is not in control of her human faculties which would allow her to make moral judgements. There is no mention of any violence against those who will be her murderers or against her own granddaughter who causes her death. The werewolf of “The Werewolf” is an appropriate literary manifestation of the interpretation that Jack Zipes makes of the wolf prior to the Christian moralization introduced by Charles Perrault: “Symbolically linked to the devil, the wolf is a powerful agent, but he was not necessarily used to punish ‘sinners’ in the folk tradition. The wolf was crucial in archaic thinking as a representative of the human wild side, of wilderness. He was more a hazard of nature linked to sorcery and part of organic nature”⁷⁶⁶. On the contrary it is the granddaughter’s cold blood and calculating behaviour that encourages the reader to see in that character a manifestation of cruelty both when she calmly cleans the knife after having mutilated an animal as when she incites the population to kill her grandmother, which could

be described as “throwing someone to the wolves”. Equally significant is that the granddaughter appropriates the grandmother’s house and prospers, that is, that she has obtained direct material benefits from her grandmother’s elimination. This strengthens our doubt concerning Carter’s relation to her feminist sympathies, that is, whether she is able to write a subversive text or whether she reinforces anti-feminist conceptions given that her protagonist achieves her independence and takes hold of power through violence⁷⁶⁷.

On the one hand it is reasonable to argue that the girl’s violence is imitative of a typified form of masculine behaviour, and thus that she is still working according to patriarchal constructions of gender, simply exchanging a female identity for a male one. The evidence of this is the use of the phallic knife. The masculine factor can be mentioned in passing but it is preponderant in the evolving of events. It is with the father’s knife that the girl attacks werewolf and grandmother; only through a mimetic attitude of violent behaviour that has also been standardized through fairy tales as masculine was the girl able to achieve her goal. But Merja Makinen interprets Angela Carter’s tales in another way:

I believe Carter is going some way towards constructing a complex vision of female psycho-sexuality, through her invoking of violence as well as the erotic. But that women can be violent as well as active sexually, that women can choose to be perverse, is clearly not something allowed for in the calculations of such readers as Duncker, Palmer and Lewallen. Carter’s strength is precisely in exploding stereotypes of women as passive, demure cyphers. That she therefore evokes the gamut of violence and perversity is certainly troubling, but to deny their existence is surely to incarcerate women back within a partial, sanitized image only slightly less constricted than the Victorian angel in the house.⁷⁶⁸

Here Makinen reinstates the Justine/Juliette dichotomy. Killing one’s grandmother is something Juliette would be capable of and that Carter presumably would oppose. It is one

⁷⁶⁶ Jack Zipes, *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, 33.

⁷⁶⁷ Angela Carter’s opinion on her feminism vacillated. When John Haffenden asked her whether she used her writing in the service of some form of feminism her answer left no room for doubt: “No. I write about the conditions of my life, as everyone does. You write from your own history. Being female or being black means that once you become conscious, your position – however many there are of you – isn’t the standard one: [...] you have to keep on defining the ground on which you’re standing, because you are in fact setting yourself up in opposition to the generality”. John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, 93. Compare with the assumption of her feminism in “Notes from the Front Line”, 37.

⁷⁶⁸ Merja Makinen, “Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality”, 9.

thing to have a violent female subject, like the mother in the title story, but it is another to have a child willing to bring about her own grandmother's demise in such a horrifying manner. Still Makinen would argue that no type of violence, as no type of goodness, should be denied to feminine identity. In merely theoretical terms I would be inclined to agree but it clearly cannot serve any positive construction of femininity though an exclusively positive construction constitutes a partial construction and does not take in identity as a whole. Nevertheless, the consequences are undesirable in terms of feminine emancipation in the sense that a whole woman does not have a place in a patriarchal world. Angela Carter's own view on women's freedom (sexual or otherwise) expressed in *The Sadeian Woman* finds a fictional counterpart in the feminine character in "The Werewolf", a murderess: "A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster. Her freedom will be a condition of personal privilege that deprives those on which she exercises it of her own freedom. The most extreme kind of this deprivation is murder. These women murder"⁷⁶⁹. But the crime nevertheless fulfils the higher goal of all fairy tales in the Virago collection and which is the same in "The Werewolf": "On the surface, these stories tend to perform a normative function – to reinforce the ties that bind people together, rather than to question them. Life on the economic edge is sufficiently precarious without continual existential struggle. *But the qualities these stories recommend for the survival and prosperity of women are never those of passive subordination*"⁷⁷⁰.

The subversion in "The Werewolf" is extremely bold since it is based on absence, the absence of the most paradigmatic features of the story and to a large extent of a whole gender, the masculine. Firstly there is the absence of the red hood suppressing the child's sexual value. This sexual dimension is apparent in the story "The Company of Wolves" when the girl takes off her red hood, the colour of menses. Also removed from "The Werewolf" for their sexual connotation were the expressions and the very moment of confrontation when she mentions the size of the eyes, of the mouth and of the teeth of the transvestite werewolf disguised as an old lady, whose image is taken further when it ceases to be a masquerade and becomes a fusion originating a lupine grandmother.

The other manifestation of absence is that of the masculine roles of the story which are eliminated (of the father there is only mention of his knife) or absorbed by a feminine figure (grandmother/werewolf and the girl who takes the place of the hunter/woodcutter/gamekeeper). There is also the inclusion of a character alien to the story but who

⁷⁶⁹ Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, 27.

⁷⁷⁰ Angela Carter ed., intr. *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, xxviii. Italics added.

appears borrowed from other stories, clearly fashioned in other moulds: the witch. When the story is taken over by women it is easy to assume that this represents a success for feminine literature in that it reserves authorship and roles for itself. Clearly this is not a defenceless, passive and sweet girl who needs masculine intervention to save her honour (the wolf's attack in Little Red Riding Hood stories is almost unanimously accepted to have the resonances of a sexual assault on the part of the masculine libido on a recently acquired sexual maturity flaunted with the red cape). The sexual factor is, however, lessened or even eliminated when one realises that in this case the wolf is the girl's own grandmother and that other elements besides the attack do not exist to corroborate the traditional contexts of the tale, such as for instance the dialogue between wolf and girl in the forest during which he tries to seduce her. However, in Angela Carter's story there is a change of the source of violence, moving the focus from the masculine element (hunter/woodcutter/gamekeeper) to the feminine one (the girl) which generates contention similar to that raised by the homicidal and avenging Sufiya, that is, it is debatable whether empowerment on the part of women necessarily assumes a destructive disposition.

In the case of Carter's Little Red Riding Hood a morally reprehensible crime is committed which is motivated by greed or even by feminine rivalry based on the worn-out vision that older women should retreat to give room to young women⁷⁷¹. The second mechanism operating in a sacrificial system Girard indicates precisely to be that of mimetic desire linked to rivalry caused by the absence of a definition of being. Rivalry originates not in a convergence of the desires of two individuals on the same object but one comes to desire that object because the rival desired it first, thus indicating what to desire, how to obtain being. The motivation for the change of the girl's residence is therefore the house itself, the object in question, not because she wants that specific item since there is no suggestion in that sense, but because when the girl takes the grandmother's house she is taking her place. In a Girardian perspective, she is acquiring being and discarding her feeling of ontological emptiness. Already in Ludwig Tieck's version the responsibility for the grandmother's death falls on the granddaughter who irresponsibly (subconsciously) leaves the gate open allowing

⁷⁷¹ Cristina Bacchilega makes a concomitant commentary on the French oral version of the tale: "By eating the flesh and drinking the blood, the young girl incorporates the grandmother's knowledge and takes her place. This involuntary and sympathetic cannibalism requires the old woman's sacrifice [...] but brings about the re-birth of the younger woman". Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*, 56.

the wolf to enter⁷⁷². The murder the girl commits belongs, in fact to the behaviour Kristeva defines as feminine paranoia:

A dark, abominable, and degraded power when she keeps to using and trading her sex, woman can be far more effective and dangerous when socialized as wife, mother, or career woman. The unbridling is then changed into crafty reckoning, hysterical spells turn to murderous plots, extreme masochistic poverty becomes a commercial triumph. While hysterical woman is merely a carnival puppet, under a law she perversely attempts to get around, the paranoid woman becomes successful by making of herself the expression of a murderous sociality. (PH, 168)⁷⁷³

The view of women as negativity in Céline (which should not be confused with Kristeva's own views) is total as they are always abject Others, either as sexual/marginal or repressed/social beings. The girl in "The Werewolf" mimics, as Kristeva argues, murderous sociality. On the second type of woman, to whose category the girl belongs, Kristeva adds: "The capable woman, the intellectual, does not escape being grotesque either. [...] There is thus only decay in this fallen, heart-rending, murderous, dominating, and derisive femininity" (PH, 169).

On the other hand it must be noted that when the girl literally takes her grandmother's place she puts herself in the position of the future victim. As the grandmother was, she now is a "lone wolf". Hence her sheep's cloak that, besides being a visual pun of "the wolf in sheep's clothing", is her equivalent to the grandmother's wart, the indicator of victimisation recalling another expression: "the lamb to the slaughter"⁷⁷⁴. This reasoning is reinforced when bearing

⁷⁷² The girl's faults that most frequently appear are idleness and vanity. However in Walter de la Mare's tale (1927) she is also seen craving for her grandmother's possessions. In that case she is greedy for the food she is carrying to sick old woman. See Jack Zipes, *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, pp. 208-214.

⁷⁷³ Notice the contradiction that issues further ahead, and which is an example of Kristeva's liability to accusations of anti-feminism, when she writes: "the pitiful power of the feminine, however, be it drive or murder, is in fact unleashed only with the help of masculine degradation or bankruptcy – a bankruptcy of the father and manly authority" (PH, 169). Feminine power is always conceived as pitiful, as unsuccessful, and, in addition, only attainable when the Law is weak enough to allow it. Though questionable, I see feminine power achieved through murder as a mimetic response to an internal error of the Symbolic system.

⁷⁷⁴ See Alfred Mills's "Ye True Hystorie of Little Red Riding Hood or The Lamb in Wolf's Clothing" written in 1872. In this version it is the girl's pet, a lamb, which "puts on" the role of the wolf. Though its disguise was merely a prank and thus apparently forgiven by all, the closing lines report that "he shed his blood a few months after [...] for the good of his friends". Jack Zipes, *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, 192. In this tale there is also a convergence of the symbolic value of

in mind the connection that Reineke made between femininity and prosperity. Thus the girl assumes the functions that traditionally appear attributed to two different characters because of their apparent contradiction: sacrificer and sacrificed or wolf and lamb. Viewed in this prism, the girl's character is monstrous because her appearance of innocence is false and because in her the duplicity of other monster stories is inferred as in *Frankenstein* (between human and inhuman) and, more archetypically, in *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (between goodness and evilness). Duplicity is in fact the dominant strategy in "The Werewolf" through which the distinctions between masculine and feminine are blurred (grandmother/werewolf, girl/male saviour), between animal and human (grandmother/werewolf, girl/sheep and girl/wolf) and between good and malice (grandmother/witch and innocent/murderous girl).

It is this type of paradox which has put critics in disagreement since they turn up in several of the author's works. In the introduction to this chapter I referred to Merja Makinen's defence of the use of fairy tale on the part of Carter, alleging that each one incorporates historical specificities and therefore the genre is not a universal and unalterable literary form, that, in fact, the genre has been moulded so as to generate new possibilities. The point seems therefore to be whether it is possible to extract a new set of meanings from Carter's stories and from "The Werewolf" in particular. There is no doubt that the stories reform, that is, give a fresh form of a femininity that evolves from, detaches itself from and subverts the existing formula. This moralising and repressive formula has taken root in the collective unconscious since Perrault warned young ladies not to let wolves, especially the most educated and tender ones since they are the most dangerous sort, to follow them "[r]ight into their homes, right into their alcoves"⁷⁷⁵. However the accumulation of meanings creates a maze of apparent inconsistencies which on one occasion give the impression of promoting a free feminine condition, and on others seem to reinforce traditional roles. These ambiguities, among which is counted sacrifice, are carefully woven and interlaced by the author so that at a superior level of reading her writing is truly revolutionary and different from the masculine literary voice, frequently regarded, justly or unjustly, as autocratic and exclusive, or, to put it in Bakhtinian terms, monologic.

lamb and wolf in a single character, the performance of a sacrifice despite the prank being "innocent", and the consumption of an anthropomorphised animal recalling that of the female characters which characterise many of the versions produced since the seventeenth century. The lamb also works as the girl's double as he imitated her every move and even her greatest fault, vanity. It is thus inferred that the girl will suffer analogous consequences if she does not mend her ways.

⁷⁷⁵ Charles Perrault, "Little Red Riding Hood", quoted in Jack Zipes, *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, 93.

4.10. *The Company of Wolves*

Self-sacrifice suggested and the salvation of the male through female intervention

Sacrifice is passive, it is based on an elementary fear. Desire alone is active, and desire alone makes us live in the present.

Georges Bataille, “Sade”, *Literature and Evil*, 123

“The Company of Wolves” departs from the admonishment by Charles Perrault at the end of *Le Petit Chaperon Rouge*, gradually distances itself from that text and finally comes to a wholly distinctive end. In the opening lines Angela Carter picks up Perrault’s characterisation of the wolf as metaphor for male lust and breaks it down. The wolf is not an anthropomorphised being capable of speech which can be used to seduce the girl. Pretending to fear that somehow some female readers of Little Red Riding Hood stories missed the connection between wolf and man⁷⁷⁶, Angela Carter abandons the personification in favour of a human that explicitly retains his animalistic side. In this manner she creates a male figure, a werewolf, but one whose wild and terrifying characteristics are emphasised. This strategy allows Angela Carter to recover the physical atmosphere of the folkloric tradition of the tale, dramatising the perilous coexistence of peasants and wild beasts in pre-modern Europe:

The wolf is carnivore incarnate and he’s as cunning as he is ferocious; once he’s had a taste of flesh then nothing else will do.

At night, the eyes of wolves shine like candle flames, yellowish, reddish, but that is because the pupils of their eyes fatten on darkness and catch the light from your lantern to flash it back to you – red for danger; if a wolf’s eyes reflected only moonlight, then they gleam a cold and unnatural green, a mineral, a piercing colour. If the benighted traveller spies those

⁷⁷⁶ This connection is only overtly demonstrated in the morals which were frequently simply erased from translations, as for, instance, in Andrew Lang’s *The Fairy Books*, 1889.

luminous, terrible sequins stitched suddenly on the black thickets, then he knows he must run, if fear has not struck him stock-still. (BC, 110)

But already Angela Carter begins to deconstruct the story that systematically conceives the wolf as the repository of evilness. Firstly he is presented as a “natural” creature and in nature there is no question of morals, only of survival. Secondly Carter introduces comments that have as reference the fictionalised stories but which reveal her less straightforward, even contrary, view. The notion of reflection slyly suggests that the two figures double for one another or rather that they are one and the same. That is corroborated by the fact that the colour red comes to be associated with the wolf and it represents danger to the same extent the red hood does. His piercing (that is, phallic) instinct is as lethal as hers. He may be, as the text says, the only beast howling in the dark nights in the woods but he is definitely not the only one prowling around. Still the weight of evilness falls exclusively on his shoulders: he is a shadow, a wraith, a forest assassin and one of the “grey members of a congregation of nightmare” (BC, 110). Among the monsters the imagination peoples the forest with (witches, ghosts, hobgoblins and even infant-eating ogres) the wolf is regarded as the one posing the greatest danger.

On reading the short story the reader tends to apply the pattern of the Little Red Riding Hood tale so that there is an assumption that the pronoun “you” occupies the feminine part. The female reader is therefore invited to assume the role of the girl. Later phrases support the assumption on pointing to the girl’s conventionally recognised faults: “those eyes are all you will be able to glimpse of the forest assassins as they cluster invisibly round your smell of meat as you go through the wood unwisely late” and “if you stray from the path for one instant, the wolves will eat you” (BC, 110 and 111). If in the above passage the narrator deliberately misleads the reader by revealing an encounter between wolf and a male subject (referencing the historical circumstance when anyone, regardless of their gender, could lose their life if happening to meet a real wolf) these two examples indicate that “you” is female. Recalling that Perrault addressed young ladies directly and advised them not to let wolves into their homes, Angela Carter seems to be responding when she writes: “But the wolves have ways of arriving at your own hearthside. We try and try but sometimes we cannot keep them out” (BC, 111). Here “we” is also feminine. Angela Carter thus appears, but only appears, to ask for forgiveness for herself and all those women for not resisting under the excuse of helplessness in the face of that powerful, exacerbated description of the male gaze. Two

related assumptions are inferred from this interpretation: moral weakness as a prototypical feminine feature and the denial of a feminine desire for erotic experience. Their hearthside constitutes as much a physical protection for their supposed weakness as a representational one. Home is also a cultural construct of the Symbolic, a space within which feminine sexuality is repressed. For women to step outside that patriarchal structure is to stray from the path because its frontiers perform a metamorphosis. For the male human subject to be within that sphere means to be loving husbands and fathers who respect women in that space (to respect women is a euphemism in everyday language for not having sex with, not recognising therefore those women as sexualised beings but as breeding ones. Sex in the latter case is sanctioned). To be outside that sphere works a transformation. Men become wolves and in the woods they are permitted to indulge their predatory urges. Anyone who becomes their prey has only herself to blame because the rules are known by all.

Angela Carter ends the first section of the story, consisting of the characterisation of wolves as murderous creatures, with an admonition paraphrasing Perrault: “Fear and flee the wolf; for, worst of all, the wolf may be more than he seems” (*BC*, 111). From this point onwards Angela Carter’s own “version” begins, contrasting with Perrault’s voice, a markedly male voice, which she incorporates in her text. Men’s literary voices usually allow only themselves to speak but Angela Carter demonstrates the channel for her voice, her text, to be able to include that of others. Obviously she does so only to offer an alternative that by merely existing undermines the male logos; Angela Carter is thus as dissimulating, clever and dangerous as her own little girl. She allows Perrault to participate in her “version” only to discredit him.

Before presenting her Little Red Riding Hood Carter prepares her entrance with three stories whose inclusion is part of her demythologising mission. Through them she demonstrates the logics of the dualism of home/woods and men/wolves to be just another piece of nonsense because it simply does not work. The first story, which must be dialogically read with “The Werewolf”, is that of the wolf which, ravished by hunger, had killed livestock and even an outcast, an old fool who had withdrawn from the village to praise the Lord in the wild, that is, someone who strayed from the path and settled himself outside the Law and therefore someone who put himself at the mercy of the wolf. He had also unsuccessfully attacked a shepherdess whose hysterical screams proved to be an effective means of defence. The information is kept scarce so that it passes almost unnoticed by the reader but it already works as an inversion of roles which will be fully developed in due time. Here it is the man

who is unprotected and in the radio play version he is even described as being as innocent as a lamb⁷⁷⁷. The girl, on the other hand, disentangles herself from the problem single-handedly. The wolf could only kill those like himself therefore: animalistic or not following the path.

One day the wolf is caught, killed and has his paws chopped off. Then, in an image recalling Satyasama's mutilation, he is transformed: "no wolf at all lay in front of the hunter but the bloody trunk of a man, headless, footless, dying, dead" (BC, 111). The grotesqueness of the metamorphosis, a transgression of boundaries between man and wolf which accompanies the transition from seamless completeness to fragmentation, is more graphically described in the radio version. Man and wolf appear not so much to alternate but, like Sufiya, to have one part gain supremacy over the other:

The desperate claws retract, refine themselves as if attacked by an invisible emery board, until suddenly they become fingernails and could never have been anything but fingernails, or so it would seem. The leather pads soften and shrink until you could take fingerprints from them, until they have turned into fingertips. The clubbed tendons stretch, the foreshortened phalanges extend and flesh out, the bristling hair sinks backwards into the skin without leaving a trace of stubble behind it.⁷⁷⁸

The second story picks up the figure of the witch again. She, being passed over for another woman, turns all who attended the wedding into wolves. The stress is not however on wickedness or jealousy as happens with the stereotyped witch. The author, as ever, chooses her words carefully and says that "the groom had settled on another girl" implying that the witch herself was a girl, and therefore felt accordingly (BC, 111). The difference was only that this woman had the powers to react in another way. If misery loves company then a pack of wolves is the ideal company. Their howls express the most profound grief.

In the next story the bride who is left alone on her wedding night as her husband goes out to relieve himself also hears a howl: "That long-drawn, wavering howl has, for all its fearful resonance, some inherent sadness in it, as if the beasts would love to be less beastly if only they knew how and never cease to mourn their own condition" (BC, 112). The witch's suffering is the same as the werewolf's in this story who, after spending seven years as a wolf, comes back to his wife to find her with a new family. The woman's first husband, "her first

⁷⁷⁷ Angela Carter, "The Company of Wolves" (radio play), *The Curious Room: Collected Dramatic Works*, ed. Mark Bell (London: Vintage, 1996) 64.

⁷⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

good man”, reappears as a grotesque creature: “he was in rags and his hair hung down his back and never saw a comb, alive with lice” (BC, 112). For years he had been one with the forest and the recovery of human shape was not synonymous with an absolute abandonment of the previous condition. The mysterious quality that is common to both man and wolf can be attested by the eyes because “the eyes alone [are] unchanged by metamorphosis” (BC, 113). And in fact his eyes are red when they fall on the children (BC, 112). He is destined to be a grotesque being in the sense that the period of animality and basic, earthy living⁷⁷⁹ enables his rebirth as a man and also in the sense that his nature is irretrievably made ambiguous.

Images of cutting and dismembering find themselves repeated in response to the severance of one of the child’s feet; the man, in the meantime by rage turned into a wolf again, is simply chopped up. The Beast in the Beauty and the Beast story as he is about to die is transformed into a man by Beauty’s affection. This beast however has to experience actual death to undergo the change into the prince-charming figure. The mutilated body of the wolf-man is not changed back into the dirty, smelly man who had just re-entered into the woman’s life but acquired the beauty and youth he had at the time of his wedding. Though the pattern appears to be greatly altered, namely by having the beast killed and having the woman marry (and stay married) to another man, by looking into the case more closely one realises that is not so.

In this story two transformations into a wolf and two grotesque rebirths occur: one rebirth was originated by the debasement of animal living and closeness with the earth and the other by the exertion of violence on his body. Like the Catchpole who is beaten to death and miraculously jumps back to life, the wolf is restored to beauty: “when the wolf lay bleeding and gasping its last, the pelt peeled off again and he was just as he had been, years ago, when he ran away from his marriage bed, so that she wept and her second husband beat her” (BC, 112-113). His nakedness, the gasping and bleeding are like those of a birth scene. But, as in other cases when the Bakhtinian image of pregnant death is applied, it is unclear whether the rebirth is positive. The idealistic representation of the noble hero of the fairy tale is recovered but with no consequence but his wife’s frustration at the life she could have had if only she had waited for him. The wolf-man stays dead and she is destined to the ignominy of domestic violence. All tales within the tale thus inflect a desire for a fairy tale existence which is made impossible by the circumstances of real life for if the magical element is part of these stories

⁷⁷⁹ The wolf of the first story is attracted by a duck but also by the smell of wolf’s dung, the smell indicating a link with his kind.

(the metamorphoses and the witch's power) it nevertheless is subdued by a context of reality demands and human flaws: the hunt as protection of one's physical integrity, the social pressure for a woman to marry *and* have a family, the brutality of peasant life in previous centuries, jealousy and anger.

These are the stories against which, in a veritable dialogical fashion, the story of Little Red Riding Hood must be read. In my view critics have not paid enough attention to Angela Carter's strategy and, when they do, they tend to concentrate on the hints the stories provide with reference to the dual nature of the wolf.

Angela Carter maintains the characterisation of the girl along the lines of Perrault and the Brothers Grimm but changes the prism. Despite the fact that it is the peak of winter when the wolf's natural prey grows scarce, she insists on going to her grandmother's through the woods. She is put in peril therefore not by her mother who usually sends the little girl to the woods, but by her own decision. In the event of being attacked she has only herself to blame. This is parallel to some views which transfer the responsibility of rape, for sexual abuse is the central topic of the Little Red Riding Hood stories, to the victims. If women present themselves in public "indecorously" by either wearing red cloaks, mini-skirts or deep cleavages they are calling to themselves the attention of potential rapists. If moreover women make a spectacle of themselves by treading paths where they are not "properly" supervised by a big brother-like patriarchal eye they are putting themselves in the position of victims. Only by renouncing liberty of movement and keeping themselves in the public eye can women be safe.

By insisting on going through the woods by her own free will, certain she could not be harmed by beasts, the girl reveals, it could be said, her foolishness and stubbornness. Not so in the author's eye for whom she is instead, a "strong-minded child", conveniently armed with a carving knife (*BC*, 113). The choice of a carving knife in detriment of the hunting knife in "The Werewolf" operates a shift in Angela Carter's use of symbolic value. The girl no longer borrows the defence tool from a male dominion; the carving knife belongs to the realm of femininity, specifically to the kitchen, a place of ambiguous ties. It is related to the banquet imagery which Bakhtin pointed out as a grotesque experience dealing with death, dismemberment, cooking, eating and renewal of life. In the kitchen a chicken's neck is as easily chopped off as a boy's foot. The carving knife is invested with the symbolism of death and rebirth as opposed to the hunter's knife for whom it is strictly a killing device with which he can cut up the animal's body into prizes. That much is exemplified in the first story. Having the wolf trapped in the pit, the "hunter jumped down after him, slit his throat, cut off all his

paws for a trophy” (BC, 111). In the radio play the hunter not only reveals this to be a lifelong passion but also part of a tradition of violence and ostentation practised by men of his family: He “had a fancy to mount this brute’s great pads, d’you see, to decorate [his] mantel, along with the boar’s head and the moose’s head and the great carp [his] uncle caught ten winters [before] that he had stuffed”⁷⁸⁰. The carving knife is equated therefore not with the phallus but with the *vagina dentata*. Carter withdraws the possibility of this reading in the radio play where the girl is one again armed with a knife her father gave her.

Sexuality is the underlying theme of all versions of the tale but here the focus lies on female sexuality. The point of view is inverted: from the condition of being determined and conditioned by male sexuality, female sexuality not only gains autonomy but it also plays an active part in releasing its counterpart from its aggressiveness. This reasoning allows a concept of autonomy that unlike Duncker’s, does not pass through lesbianism. Angela Carter’s concern is, as Elaine Jordan argues, for the heterosexual woman and the issue of desirability in works that emerged later, such as that of Monique Wittig and Judith Butler, consider more directly the theme of the homosexual. Carter writes from an individual position: her interests are “primarily with women’s heterosexual desire and with class forms of desire and power, in a cultural perspective which is English, European, as well as internationally socialist”⁷⁸¹.

Angela Carter’s preoccupation with the girl’s sexuality is explicit:

The flaxen-haired girl will take these delicious gifts to a reclusive grandmother so old the burden of her years is crushing her to death. [...]

Children do not stay young for long in this savage country. There are no toys for them to play with so they work hard and grow wise but this one, so pretty and the youngest of her family, a little late-comer, had been indulged by her mother and the grandmother who’d knitted her the red shawl that, today, has the ominous if brilliant look of blood on snow. Her breast have just began to swell; her hair is like lint, so fair it hardly makes a shadow on her pale forehead; her cheeks are an emblematic scarlet and white and she has just started her woman’s bleeding, the clock inside her that will strike, henceforward, once a month. (BC, 113)

Some references repeat themselves from “The Werewolf” to demonstrate how similarities are confidence tricks as the two-short stories progress, as one shall see, towards

⁷⁸⁰ Angela Carter, “The Company of Wolves” (radio play), 66.

⁷⁸¹ Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton ed., *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*, Elaine Jordan, afterword, 217.

different conclusions. The events take place on the same day, on the solstice of winter which traditionally is an ill-omen. The repetitions also have a parodic intention: the exhaustive repetitions empty the referents of their symbolic value. The parodic tone is evident towards the heroine of the fairy tale with the emphasis on her blonde hair, a sign of her goodness which often becomes a synonym for obedience. But not in this case as she ideologically disobeys her father who would not have permitted her journey and thus would have forced her under his guard. Her mother, in her turn, is unable to resist her strong-mindedness. The explicit relation of this blonde heroine with blood recalls the tale of Sleeping Beauty but again this is another trick. A kiss is the wolf's demand but it is also her desire to concede it. She will not lie down and wait for him to come (how patient she would have to be to wait for one hundred years!) but instead she will go to him, lie down with him and *come* with him.

The dark-haired heroine is not spared either. The mention of the red shawl like blood on snow and of "cheeks [of] an emblematic scarlet and white" aims to establish a connection with the Snow White story, which Angela Carter had already more directly considered in "The Snow Child". Robert Coover, who in a previously mentioned piece called "The Dead Queen" re-addresses the Snow White motif, re-constructs the protagonist as a lover of violence particularly when it is directed at someone from her family. Though the Queen is "only" her stepmother she rejoices at her suffering in a manner recalling Elizabeth Báthory's *jouissance* at the sight of cruelty⁷⁸². In this aspect Snow White is not unlike the girl in "The Werewolf".

Like many fairy tale princesses this girl, the youngest, was special to her parents. Usually that parent is the father but here is the mother and the grandmother. She had been a late child and, as happens in cases of older parents, the child's discipline is relaxed and she receives frequent manifestations of affection. She was therefore "too much loved ever to feel scared" (BC, 113). The text does not however go so far as to suggest she was spoiled as in the other versions where she is vain and idle.

⁷⁸² The description of the torture of the witch Queen, forced to wear hot iron shoes, adds further merriment to Snow White's wedding party and provides a carnivalesque spectacle of the suffering woman: "How she'd [Snow White] squealed to see the old Queen's flailing limbs, how she'd applauded the ringing of those flaming iron clogs against the marble floor! Yet, it was almost as though she were ignorant of the pain, of any cause or malice [...] Once, the poor woman had stumbled and sprawled, her skirts heaped up around her ears, and this had sprung a jubilant roar of laughter from the banqueters, but Snow White had only smiled expectantly, then clapped gaily as the guards set the dying Queen on her burning feet again". Robert Coover, "The Dead Queen", 168. Noticeably this collection includes a tale by Angela Carter from *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders*, "The Merchant of Shadows".

One of the main problems of modern and contemporary versions of Little Red Riding Hood stories is how they, in order to enforce sexual regulation upon a given gender, make a child's sexuality coincide with an adult female's as a means to take control over them both. This was not the case with the folktale which made no distinctions of gender or age in its audience and was devoid of moralising aims. However, as fairy tales change their public the social content is also altered. Inherently a female child already encapsulates the potential for sinful lust and a woman is assumed to be incapable of being responsible for her own sexuality as a child is for her behaviour. The transition is made effortlessly by Bruno Bettelheim in whose view Perrault's tale presents an obvious manoeuvre of seduction: the girl lies down with the wolf and he embraces her. This attitude on the part of the girl leads Bettelheim to conclude that she is either stupid or wants to be seduced. The reasoning he proceeds to make is a simple follow-up: Perrault transforms a child whose curiosity is innocently aroused by nature (listening to birds singing and picking up flowers) and conversation into a plainly degraded woman by which he means fallen. The convergence is total.

This position is unreasonable and Angela Carter deconstructs this simplistic perspective. She recognises that the figure embodying the ambiguity of Little Red Riding Hood is the adolescent. Only she has the complexity and lack of definition which Bettelheim chooses to ignore. Resorting once more to the radio play it is noticeable that the girl has a clear knowledge of her ambivalent state. It rewrites the short story with an emphasis on the in-betweenness that characterises the wolf as well:

Twelve. Going on thirteen, thirteen going on fourteen... not much a little girl, for all that you baby me, Granny. Thirteen going on fourteen, the hinge of your life, when you are neither one thing nor the other, nor child nor woman, some magic, in-between thing, an egg that holds its own future in it.

An egg not yet cracked against the cup.

I am that very magic space that I contain. I stand and move within an invisible pentacle, untouched, invincible, immaculate. Like snow. Waiting. The clock inside me, that will strike once a month, not yet ... wound ... up ...

I don't bleed. I can't bleed.

I don't know the meaning of the word, fear. Fear?⁷⁸³

⁷⁸³ Angela Carter, "The Company of Wolves" (radio play) 64-65.

Lying down with the wolf is not stupidity as Bettelheim claims but, as many other critics argue, an act of taking control over her sexuality. It is particularly during adolescence that the self is more divided between the parties that Bettelheim reduces to black and white, right and wrong. Only with experience, sexual experience included, that might be but not necessarily of an exclusively imaginary nature, can the woman, any individual in fact, recognise the fallacy of the dichotomy.

There is a phenomenon that emblematically changes child into woman. At a given moment the girl is still a child, and the next she is already a woman. I refer to menstruation which is possibly one of the suggestions of the red hood and that sustains Bettelheim's unproblematic convergence between child and woman. Angela Carter, writing from the standpoint of a woman, articulates in her stories a more complicated impact of menstruation on the girl's view of herself:

She stands and moves within the invisible pentacle of her own virginity. She is an unbroken egg; she is a sealed vessel; she has inside her a magic space the entrance to which is shut tight with a plug of membrane; she is a closed system; she does not know how to shiver. She has her knife and she is afraid of nothing. (BC, 113-114)

The description of the girl's new status is at the same time poetic and biological, philosophical and mythic. At first it appears that Carter is going to take the chance to elaborate another parody which would be consistent with her view of the mythologisation of virginity, so often expressed in eulogistic fervour, as nonsense. However, if that was truly her intention, she was not wholly convincing as in the passage there can be felt pride and power that belong totally to the girl. These feelings are neither originated in momentarily-borrowed male authority nor do they aim to strike out at masculinity. She is empowered through menstruation and thus the simple bleeding is consequently mythologized. Thus she is not afraid even though "[t]he forest closed upon her like a pair of jaws"⁷⁸⁴ and she, like the "hare as lean as a rasher of bacon" she sees in the forest, runs the risk of falling prey and being eaten by some predator (BC, 114)⁷⁸⁵.

⁷⁸⁴ Jaws suggest the aggressiveness of the *vagina dentata* and not that of the phallus, pointing therefore to a scenario where the girl has the means to defend herself.

⁷⁸⁵ Notice that Carter's substitution of Perrault's and the Grimms's flowers annuls the suggestion of the fault of character to do with idleness. The element of birds is kept as they intend to personify the female victim. The wolf, in fact, reappears snacking on birds. The connection between women and

Though she is armed and practised in handling the knife, in the kitchen, one gathers, the girl's inexperience does not allow her to recognise the "enemy". She has been warned against wolves and naked men for the latter are werewolves who in order to transform have to strip first. But this is a plain, handsomely dressed man in whom, nevertheless, some suspicious wolfish traits stand out: the white teeth with spittle suggestive of a wolf's hunger, the game birds referred to as carcasses, and his beauty. It is his beauty that distracts her from the other indicators of danger, subverting Mme de Beaumont's assessment that women should be able to see beyond the beastliness of their husbands; instead Angela Carter suggests that if women, and not just wives, were able to see beyond male beauty, they might find a beast⁷⁸⁶.

This wolf is in the possession of an object which is new to the story, a compass. The compass, with the attention being paid to its needle, is invested with a phallic symbolism but it also recovers the motif of pins and needles of the folkloric version. When the girl is confronted with a choice, to follow the path of pins or that of needles, there is very likely a relation with sewing, which was a feminine responsibility. Bettelheim refers to two (unidentified) versions wherein the girl opts for the path of pins, metaphorically choosing the easiest, slackest manner of carrying out her duties, that is, simply pinning the pieces together instead of sewing them. However, in Delarue's reconstruction she takes the path of needles, thus invalidating Bettelheim's interpretation. A more plausible reading is made when the expression is taken as a whole, meaning the prickling sensation felt by a numb limb when it starts to recover. In the same manner, the girl is awaking from a state of slumber to a life full of promised excitement. To be "on pins and needles" also conveys the idea of being in a situation of extreme uneasiness, announcing perhaps the troubles she is about to get into. The earliest use of these expressions appearing in the Oxford English Dictionary date to 1810 which provides a reasonable time period to assume that in 1697 they were being used at least by folk people.

Angela Carter saturates the text with this type of symbolism, broadly preparing us for the complete, visual display of the wolf-man reduced to his sexuality:

birds is, as previously demonstrated, present in other tales and is especially relevant in "The Erl-King" and "The Lady of the House of Love".

⁷⁸⁶ Marina Warner analyses the didactic, pro-patriarchal perspective of Mme Beaumont who made women wholly responsible for the change of men from beasts (abusers) to princes (tender husbands). Warner says, for instance, that Mme Beaumont had "the worried tone of a well-meaning teacher raising her pupils to face their future obediently and decorously, to hear her pious wish that their pupils should obey their fathers and that inside the brute of a husband who might be their appointed lot, the

Off with his disguise, that coat of forest-coloured cloth, the hat with the feather tucked into the ribbon; his matted hair streams down his white shirt and she [the grandmother] can see the lice moving in it. The sticks in the hearth shift and hiss; night and the forest has come into the kitchen with darkness tangled in its hair.

He strips off his shirt. His skin is the colour and texture of vellum. A crisp stripe of hair runs down his belly, his nipples are ripe and dark as poison fruit but he's so thin you could count the ribs under his skin if only he gave you the time. He strips off his trousers and she can see how hairy his legs are. His genitals, huge. Ah! huge.

The last thing the old lady saw in all this world was a young man, eyes like cinders, naked as a stone, approaching her bed. (*BC*, 116)

The text takes itself as reference and goes back and forth, picking up elements almost literally: this man too is covered in lice and he is so slim “you could count the ribs under his skin if only he gave you the time”; similarly it is said that “you could count the starveling ribs through their [the wolves'] pelts, if they gave you time before they pounced” (*BC*, 110). The connection with wild nature, and its delicious dangers, is reinforced and consequently the grotesque character of the werewolf; the coat is not green, it is forest-coloured, and his nipples bear the temptation of lust, red, the colour of ripe fruit used once again as a contrast to whiteness, this time of the shirt⁷⁸⁷. He is presented as edible product, that is, desirable, in the old woman's eyes, as she, and especially her granddaughter is in his. Hunger is mutual. The interjection at the sight of his genitals not only expresses surprise at their size but also her anticipated pleasure. It is meaningful that there is a direct indication that the granny was eaten in bed and that she dies in the arms of a strong young man and does not get to glimpse at the wolf.

By maintaining an actual human male in “The Company of Wolves”, Carter addresses the issue of female sexual rivalry that was absent in “The Werewolf”. The grandmother is not just ill; her death is announced throughout as inevitable: she is “so old the burden of her years is crushing her to death” (*BC*, 113), “[a]ged and frail, granny is three-quarters succumbed to

heart of a good man might beat”. Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, 293.

⁷⁸⁷ “The Company of Wolves” continues the trend of suffusing colours with symbolism: the white sheet stained with blood represents both the death of granny, recently eaten in her own bed, and the loss of virginity of her granddaughter which is about to happen (*BC*, 116), the red hood contrasts with the snow falling from the girl's head as she arrives at her destination (*BC*, 116), granny's white hair is thrown into the fire (*BC*, 116) and the red hood is identified with “the blood she must spill” (*BC*, 117).

the mortality the ache in her bones promises her and almost ready to give in entirely” (*BC*, 115) and “[t]he grandfather clock ticks away her eroding time” (*BC*, 115). Granny would be dead in a short time so that the appearance of the young man does not so much give the impression of being the deed of a depraved rapist of old women but one last opportunity at enjoying her right to sex. “Ah! huge” could thus be an expression of granny’s satisfaction. This lighter vein is also maintained by Ángeles de la Concha who sees the death of the grandmother inserted in the Rabelaisian tradition of humorous death.⁷⁸⁸

This interpretation invalidates an assumed opposition where the grandmother, a devoted Christian, resists but dies as a martyr at the hands, or claws, of the werewolf who popular belief claimed to be the devil’s father (*BC*, 113). Earlier considerations on the devil’s identity aimed at more than pointing to the wolf’s evil nature. Reading the episode of the grandmother’s encounter with the werewolf with those considerations in mind allows an identification of the werewolf with the devil. The devil, who one has grown accustomed to see depicted in the arts as a satyr-like figure is here presented as a similar hybrid creature but with wolfish instead of goatish characteristics. He is reported to have the torso of a man but the legs and genitals of a wolf and the old woman’s attention is drawn to the young man’s hairy legs and sexual organs. So when it is said that on seeing a naked man on the woods “you must run as if the Devil were after you” it must be interpreted that he is a werewolf stripped in order to metamorphose into lupine form (*BC*, 113) and that he is the devil himself.

Regarded as a battle with the devil, the battle against the werewolf is always lost: “you can hurl your Bible at him and your apron after, granny, you thought that was a sure prophylactic against these infernal vermin... now call on Christ and his mother and all the angels in heaven to protect you but it won’t do you any good” (*BC*, 115-116)⁷⁸⁹. But when granny sees him as a man she welcomes him. Notice that the pronoun “you” is still feminine, directed at all women and that the use of “we” has the same value: “We keep the wolves outside by living well./ He rapped upon the panels with his hairy knuckles” (*BC*, 115). “He” refers to the huntsman/werewolf who has just got to granny’s. The same sentence was used to describe his getting to the house except for the absence of a meaningful adjective: “He rapped

⁷⁸⁸ See Ángeles de la Concha, “Análisis Bakhtiniano de la novelización del cuento maravilloso de Angela Carter”, 195.

⁷⁸⁹ The apron, which had already been referred to on page 113, is another folkloric element Carter maintained and it attests to the popular superstition that a werewolf could not transform were he clothed. Throwing a piece of clothing over him would be a desperate attempt to avoid the metamorphosis.

upon the panels with his knuckles” (BC, 115). Hairiness is the characteristic of wolves but as the girl admits, some wolves are hairy on the inside (BC, 117).

Women might seclude themselves at home and surround themselves with ideas of comfort and security (pillows, the patchwork quilt, china spaniels on the fireplace, rugs on the floor) but the wolf is just outside, rapping, asking to be let in and they, like the girl’s grandmother who told him to lift up the latch, will be caught unguarded: “night and the forest has come into the kitchen with darkness tangled in its hair”. In the kitchen of all places, and not in bed, as most versions put it. The symbol of male protection, the grandfather clock, strikes occasionally but in vain, incapable of changing the course of events. It ticks towards granny’s approaching death, when the wolf sits down to wait for the girl after having eaten the grandmother, cracks like a whip when she arrives and strikes midnight with consummation.

The girl walks in, the wolf jumps from the bed’s side to the door to close it. But then, without any explanation, the setting is changed and we find the characters in the kitchen. The girl, like the grandmother, is attacked in the kitchen echoing the episode told at the beginning of the short story about a woman bitten by a wolf while she was preparing pasta (the Italian origin of the tale is hinted at). It is through the kitchen window that the girl sees the pack howling. The change of setting carries a change in signification: in the bedroom, the bed, as the name indicates, dominates and traditionally in bed the woman is dominated by the male. One only has to bring to mind Gustave Doré’s illustrations of *Les Contes de Perrault* (1862), Paul Cozé’s 1927 illustration for a collection with the same title and the 1890s illustration of the Collection Boulet, printed for Jean Boulet’s *La Belle et la Bête* (1958). But the kitchen is the woman’s dominion. Though it can and has been used as place where women have been exiled to, a place severed from the positions of power more related with politics and economics, the kitchen can be transformed into a source of power as well. The reversal has been worked through the element of food, for instance, as in Laura Esquivel’s *Como agua para chocolate* (1989) wherein Tita enthralls her family with her delicacies but she can also use it to harm her enemies, namely her sister Rosaura. Either way, from the kitchen she gains at least some control over the household though not even remotely over her own destiny. In a less manifested way, Angela Carter does the same. By moving the location of events to the kitchen, the wolf becomes an intruder in the realm controlled by women. There he is unable to impose the terrorism of male hegemony. Thus from a situation where the girl feels she is “in danger of death” she becomes the dominator (BC, 117).

This characterisation clashes with the idea that the girl was stupid. Still, appearing to support Bettelheim, Carter constructs a characterisation that gives that impression but one that the author leads the reader to dismiss in the end. Perrault had warned that the worst wolves are “tame, good-natured, and pleasant” and that in fact “the docile ones are those who are most dangerous”⁷⁹⁰. The girl in “The Company of Wolves” is also dazzled by the huntsman’s beauty, “she’d never seen such a fine fellow before, not among the rustic clowns of her native village” (BC, 114). Some petulance is sensed and added to her stupidity for she was not able to recognise the nature of the creature which jumped on her path: “she saw no sign of a wolf at all, nor of a naked man, neither, but then she [...] [saw] a fully clothed one, a very handsome one” (BC, 114). “One” can either be a man or a wolf, and still she hands him over the basket with the knife. But later the reader learns *she has always known* that wolves, particularly the worst kind of their species, were hairy on the inside.

But Carter also seems to say that Bettelheim is right when she discloses the girl’s inclination for erotic discovery. She promises him a kiss, lingers on the way so that he wins the bet (this specific element is traditionally a sign of her idleness but here it is a sign of her lust), and is disappointed not to see the huntsman at her grandmother’s. But as her irresponsibility in crossing the woods was reworked as a form of determination and strong-mindedness, so her supposed stupidity is transformed into shrewdness as to make the wolf believe he was fooling her. Carter maintains the girl’s attraction to the male sex, even stresses it, but unlike Perrault, it is not to reprove it. On the contrary, Angela Carter acknowledges it, makes it public and stands for the young woman’s right, by which I mean to include the adolescent, to a free enjoyment of her sexual impulses.

Eventually the reader wonders whether all indicators of her ingenuity since the encounter in the forest were not just tricks and whether they were not a part of a scheme whereby pretending to be misguided and led on she was in reality deceiving him precisely towards the fulfilment of her desire which in this perspective gains preponderance over his. Her plan is camouflaged by the author who helps her in misleading the werewolf and the reader by suggesting she is as edible as a hare, thoughtless enough to hand the man the knife, and silly enough to believe his rifle would protect them both.

My point in suggesting an alternative reading does not invalidate positions such as Duncker’s according to whom rape becomes inevitable (though, in my view, the fact that in the radio play rape is not an issue is meaningful). Her position, as Robert Clark’s who argues

⁷⁹⁰ Jack Zipes, *Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, 93.

that Carter elaborates a text elucidating the mechanisms of patriarchy but not a release from its constraints for women, cannot be definitely excluded, nor, I believe, did Angela Carter intend for it to be⁷⁹¹. She left open as many interpretations as possible by including as many indications of both views as she could. This is a specifically Bakhtinian trait:

La táctica consiste simplemente en la construcción de un entramado paralelo que al operar contra el marco de referencia anterior, presente en la conciencia del lector, suscita en éste una reacción emocional e intelectual ante la confrontación de puntos de vista, de juicios de valor, de posiciones ideológicas en definitiva, transmitidos por idénticas expresiones lingüísticas en torno al mismo argumento. La versión última exige la lectura de las mismas palabras con otro timbre y otra mímica porque la *heteroglosia* que las impregna extrae de ellas un sentido muy diferente al de la primera. Se ha producido una transformación del language que rompe la univocidad del cuento maravilloso y lo abre a una interpretación de la realidad más compleja, más densa, también más indeterminada, susceptible de una pluralidad de interpretaciones, en la que las significaciones latentes suprimidas se explicitan desafiantes.⁷⁹²

There is a vast number of opinions on the significance of the concluding scene of “The Company of Wolves”. These opinions tend not so much to multiply meanings but to side with either a view that sees Angela Carter’s writing and *The Bloody Chamber* in particular to stand against conventional constructions of femininity or, by failing to achieve that purpose, to reinstate them instead. However, when discussing “The Company of Wolves”, critics rarely consider other elements but the final scene or do they relate it with “The Werewolf”. Lucie Armitt is one of the few who, though siding with Merja Makinen and Elaine Jordan and with the former’s defence of fairy tales as a genre that *can* encode different ideological assumptions in the various versions of a single tale, recognises that not even these critics concentrate on the manner in which Angela Carter dealt with the “narrative *form and structure* contribut[ing] to this ideological reinvention”, that is, they have not considered the stories of *The Bloody Chamber* collection as “(inter)textual metamorphoses of both the fairy tale *and each other*”⁷⁹³.

⁷⁹¹ See Robert Clark, “Angela Carter’s Desiring Machines”, *Women’s Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 14 (1987), 147-61.

⁷⁹² Ángeles de la Concha, “Análisis Bakhtiniano de la novelización del cuento maravilloso de Angela Carter”, 194. Italics in the text.

⁷⁹³ Lucie Armitt, “The Fragile Frames of *The Bloody Chamber*”, 89. First italics in the text and the second added.

There are grounds for arguing that the possibility of death is real to the girl who, seeing some of her grandmother's hair unburned became aware she was "in danger of death". Critics that see what follows as a liberating act never take this expression into consideration which is understandable up to a point as it goes against their reasoning. Duncker, for instance, does not take it into account either which is much more puzzling as I think she could have used it to support her view. I see no possible metaphorical interpretation for the phrase which is to say that, in the face of the possibility of death, the girl resorts to her sexual value to save herself at the expense of the loss of her position of a certain social empowerment derived from virginity. But Carter could hardly expect to demythologise the virgin by taking away her virginity by force. Realising her life is seriously threatened, looking around for a motherly figure to protect her, the girl asks "Where is my grandmother?" (*BC*, 117). Learning from the man that they are alone and surrounded by the sound of howling wolves closing in it is plausible to suggest she is frightened. The text confirms it: "she shivered, in spite of the scarlet shawl she pulled more closely round herself as if it could protect her although it was as red as the blood she *must* spill" (*BC*, 117. Italics added). The girl who was "afraid of nothing" and did "not know how to shiver" now finds herself shivering. Moreover, though later she will undress herself for him, initially she clearly resists intercourse by pulling the shawl closer. Though it could be said that it was because of a social heritage of shame, the scene must be read firstly as one of a child-woman about to be abused. Finally, the use of the modal is embedded with a complex ambiguity: in order to initiate her sexual life, one that she has a full right to, she must bleed, that is, lose her virginity, but it can also mean that she will spill blood because she cannot escape being raped, eaten, or mutilated. The choice of the image of spilling blood instead of the plain verb "to bleed" adds force to this view.

Up to this point there are no apparent signs that would indicate that the girl's spirit of mind is dominated by anything else but fear. The issue of fear must be addressed since the opinions of some critics have been based on assumptions on the subject, and thus their arguments could be undermined when they actually can be proven to be valid in the end. I agree with Maggie Anwell when she asserts that the girl "knows far better than he that she is "nobody's meat"". She has discarded the role of sacrificial victim along with her shawl, and is clear in her acceptance of her own sexuality"⁷⁹⁴. However, for her claim to have credit it is necessary to explain how the girl abandoned an initial phase when she is frightened and

⁷⁹⁴ Maggie Anwell, "Lolita Meets the Werewolf: 'The Company of Wolves'", quoted in Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*, 149.

constrained and began wanting her fair share of sexual pleasure. In the same manner Sarah Gamble overlooks the clear display of fear and simply argues that the girl finds the solution to her problem “by running towards, rather away from, the sexual threat”⁷⁹⁵. Fear is the starting point for the girl’s change in behaviour. There are therefore two distinct moments concerning the girl’s reaction to the fact that sex was very likely to take place. One must seek the reason for the change.

The girl found herself in the situation that it was up to her to determine in which terms the sex was going to happen. She could either enjoy it or become a victim. However, I feel that her free contribution to the sexual act was not as much a decision but a simple matter of the heart because on looking through the kitchen window at the wolves howling miserably she understood their sad nature. It was a choice based on sympathy and understanding:

Snow half-caked the lattice and she opened it to look into the garden. It was a white night of moon and snow; the blizzard whirled around the gaunt, grey beasts who squatted on their haunches among the rows of winter cabbage, pointing their sharp snouts to the moon and howling as if their hearts would break. Ten wolves; twenty wolves – so many wolves she could not count them, howling in concert as if demented or deranged. Their eyes reflected the light from the kitchen and shone like a hundred candles.

It is cold, poor things, she said; no wonder they howl so. (BC, 117)

The profound grief verges on insanity providing for the girl an image of these creatures which diverges from that of the blood-thirsty predator. The girl is in the same position as the bride preparing for her nuptial experience and who had also recognised the “fearful resonance” and “inherent sadness” of the howls of the wolves outside her window mourning their beastly condition. But the bride’s reaction is unlike that of the red-clothed girl; she remains indifferent to their suffering, identifies them as creatures in need of expiation and cursed with such a terrible nature that only death can release them:

There is a vast melancholy in the canticles of the wolves, melancholy as infinite as the forest, endless as these long nights of winter and yet that ghastly sadness, that mourning of their own, irremediable appetites, can never move the heart for not one phrase in it hints at the possibility of redemption; grace could not come to the wolf from its own despair, only through

⁷⁹⁵ Sarah Gamble, *Angela Carter: Writing from the Frontline*, 135.

some external mediator, so that, sometimes, the beast will look as if he half welcomes the knife that despatches him. (*BC*, 112)

There are marks of religiosity in this discourse which conceives salvation only in the form of a sacrificial death. This is not the other girl's approach. She refuses to sacrifice the wolf either in order to save him or herself; the knife will remain in the basket not because she is afraid of him now but because that is not the kind of blood she wishes to run. She will rescue him from his condition through love, not by death, and in that manner pushes aside the concept of self-sacrifice as well. The moment symbolising that rejection is the removal of the red hood: "She closed the window on the wolves' threnody and took off her scarlet shawl, the colour of poppies, the colour of sacrifices, the colour of her menses, and, since her fear did her no good, she ceased to be afraid" (*BC*, 117)⁷⁹⁶. Here Carter comes dangerously close to suggesting that not being afraid was not the best response but the only thing she could do, as if there was no option except to surrender. However, the situation is not put in those terms anymore. With the removal of the red shawl begins her strip-tease as a form of mating ritual whereby she will transform the threnody sung for him (and his male friends) into their (his and hers) wedding melody. With their union "[e]very wolf in the world now howled a prothalamion outside the window as she *freely* gave the kiss she owed him" (*BC*, 118. Italics added). Moreover Carter did know that rape was not inevitable since her version is informed of the folkloric origin wherein the girl cunningly asks to relieve herself, goes into the woods, unties the rope which was connecting her to the wolf and runs off. The story of the wolfish groom attests to her knowledge of this story.

It seems that by linking the object to menstruation, therefore to the assumption of her sexuality, the girl would necessarily be accepting a sacrifice inherent to femininity. That is the reason behind the girl's decision to undress herself: to reject the sacrifice. Moreover, by throwing the clothes into the fire she is volunteering to share his fate. If a werewolf's clothes are burnt he cannot be saved from that condition; in the same manner, when the girl offers herself to him, her body cannot be immaculate ever again. On burning her clothes she is embracing her sexuality and therefore she strips him too and burns his clothes so that he has to accept his as well. *She* makes them equal though in the eyes of the world they are condemned: "The flames danced like dead souls on Walpurgisnacht and the old bones under

⁷⁹⁶ One of the versions collected by Charles Joisten in the fifties attributes the girl's name to a poppy she used in her hair. See Jack Zipes, *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, pp. 4-5.

the bed set up a terrible clattering but she did not pay them any heed” (BC, 118). Her grandmother reproaches them below, perhaps out of sheer jealousy. In this respect Aidan Day affirms: “What Carter is doing in this retelling is taking the idea of equality of libidinal impulse in human beings to ground a representation of human beings’ interaction that escapes the Sadeian model of fuck or be fucked. The opposition of subject versus object, active versus passive, is transcended so that each individual in the encounter may be at once both”⁷⁹⁷.

Empowered with the knowledge of the wolves’ weakness hidden behind their aggressive behaviour she finally understands she is nobody’s meat. She is as strong as he is and he as vulnerable as she supposedly was. So she can laugh in his face, rip his clothes and burn them; he will not hurt her because she can love him even in all abjectness, as Sierva María and Delaura loved one another: “She will lay *his fearful head* on her lap and she will pick out the lice from his pelt and perhaps she will put the lice into her mouth and eat them, as he will bid her, as she would do in a savage marriage ceremony” (BC, 118. Italics added). The ending of “The Company of Wolves” is the same as that of “The Tiger’s Bride”, marked by the possibility of being devoured, the imminent rape turned in her favour, her fear lifted, his installed and the final revelation of the girls’ animal selves.

“The Company of Wolves” does present an invigorating reworking of the Little Red Riding Hood tales by freeing the girl from many of the stereotypes associated with women’s supposed faults and (lack of) mobility in social and interpersonal relationships. The text is a treatise on the democratic access to sexual politics and practices where women have as much right to aggressiveness as men to gentleness. However, can it be said that it is successful in demythologising female typecasting? The virgin spills her blood (willingly or not) and the wolf is saved; is not that a representation of a redeeming virgin? The wolf rests his head on her lap and she cares for his physical well-being, her touch surely transmitting her affection for him. In her lap he feels secure and at peace with himself (as much as she does with him) because she has provided him with the means to resolve his conflicting selves: “See! sweet and sound she sleeps in granny’s bed, between the paws of the tender wolf” (BC, 118). Bearing in mind the above quotation as well, is not this a depiction of the healing, reconciliatory mother who teaches how to love and comforts him like a child snuggled up in her lap? She even takes on the task of cleaning his body. Furthermore, in the screenplay Carter goes as far as to say that

⁷⁹⁷ Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*, 148.

she takes the wolf's head in her arms "maternally"⁷⁹⁸. In "The Company of Wolves" the love of a woman becomes a saving device for a man who cannot save himself, unable to love as bravely as she does. But in the end, is not this form of love, that apparently only women are capable of giving, a consolatory nonsense too, one endlessly repeated in literature and almost indisputable in people's minds? This reasoning thus questions Margaret Atwood's postulation that Carter thrusts aside consolatory nonsense such as pornography and the mythologisation of motherhood. There is an implicit admittance though that Angela Carter's final result was not as extreme as she claimed in her inflammatory discourse on mythological nonsense. Readers must negotiate with that as well because Carter "proceeds to provide us with consolations of another kind, and she does so through the folktale form, which is about as close to myth as you can get. In other words, to combat traditional myths about the nature of woman, she constructs other, more subversive ones"⁷⁹⁹. Were they consolatory, they would have to be Bettelheimian tales. They are not consolatory, or at least, not so much that the new subversive myths of women satisfy completely. Precisely because they are subversive they are disturbing both for the male and female reader who have difficulty in accommodating to a new model capable, for instance, of murder. It is also due to this aspect that critics become divided as their criticism reflects their degree of identification as individuals.

In "The Werewolf" Carter presents a de-sexualised re-invention of the tale where, by removing male intervention, the text is made to represent a dialogue of feminist discourse with its own internal dilemmas, particularly as far as female violence is concerned, or perversity, as Makinen puts it. However I see more issues in this debate than Makinen perceives. It is clearly a story of female confrontation with male sexuality as well as its own. It is even mostly about that theme as Neil Jordan's film goes on to suggest. But Angela Carter, who wrote the script for the film and was obviously aware that cinema is an artistic means operating differently from literature, did not pass on in the same manner or integrally all that was contained in the short fiction. What was elided was something darker, more mysterious and perhaps not meant to be fully understood: the combination of a self-reliant girl who is also a murderess and a girl indulging in her sexual appetite shadowed by the suspicion of rape.⁸⁰⁰ This has to do with the fact that Angela Carter was a marginal writer. She was, in Sarah

⁷⁹⁸ Angela Carter, "The Company of Wolves" (screenplay), *The Curious Room: Collected Dramatic Works*, 241.

⁷⁹⁹ Margaret Atwood, "Running with the Tigers", 122.

⁸⁰⁰ With respect to the film Carter comments: "The wolves represent lots of things, though basically they are still libido in the movie. But they change in meaning throughout the movie. It's not my movie,

Gamble's words, "primarily concerned with maintaining *a sceptical, interrogatory position* on the periphery of dominant cultural attitudes and conventions [...], *operating from the edge of consensus views of any kind*, specifically, the conception of history as 'grand' or 'master' narrative, conventional social codes regulating propriety and 'women's space', and the categorisation of any cultural product, especially literature, into 'high' and 'low' forms"⁸⁰¹. But Sarah Gamble also identifies a problem that seems to be precisely that surrounding the wolf stories:

Setting yourself against convention is all very well, but Carter was also not unaware of the dangers inherent in the cultivation of a marginalised position or perspective. The trouble is, of course, that existing on the peripheries of anything involves performing and extremely delicate balancing act between inclusion and exclusion, and this echoed in the way Carter's fiction persistently concerns itself with the evocation of boundaries and borderlines, precariously suspending itself at the very point at which one state, condition, place or mode merges into another.⁸⁰²

I would agree with Linden Peach for whom the wolf stories "invite a number of different and even, competing, readings" favouring neither Makinen's view of beasts as a metaphor for female libido nor Duncker's interpretation of them as men's beastly behaviour for the simple reason that the two perspectives can be held together⁸⁰³. And Peach continues: the stories "are not an exploration of women's sexuality but of the ways in which men have sought to control that sexuality, of both how men and women need to reconfigure their sexualities, and of the commodification of women as 'flesh'"⁸⁰⁴. To conclude, I would like to stress the importance of the dialogical principle in this process and which is inherent to Cristina Bacchilega's words: "In whatever form of performance, its [the tale's] 'violently sexual' latent content escapes identification with heterosexual seduction or rape, and reaches for a woman-centered reciprocal dynamics of storytelling. It explodes into voices"⁸⁰⁵.

after all, it's filtered through another sensibility which has a good deal in common with mine but is quite different in many respects. [...] The reason why the girl is pounced on by the wolves at the end is [that it needed] an 'extraordinary image' - an image of repression being liberated by libido". She adds that the film, presumably like the tales, is not meant to give definite solutions: "On the whole I am very happy with it [the film]. Its purpose and meaning are not intended to be clear. I'm not sure of its meaning". John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, 84 and 85 respectively.

⁸⁰¹ Sarah Gamble, *Angela Carter: Writing from the Frontline*, 3-4. Italics added.

⁸⁰² Ibid., 5.

⁸⁰³ Linden Peach, *Modern Novelists: Angela Carter* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1998) 33.

⁸⁰⁴ Loc. cit.

⁸⁰⁵ Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*, 70.

4.11. *Wolf-Alice*

Free in a deadlock; the wolf-girl as alternative of a consciousness beyond Lacanianism through abjection and the grotesque

[A]lthough a culture, like a text, exists to make sense of life, the heart of the one, as of the other, resides precisely in those points where they resist meaning.

Gilbert D. Chaitin, *Rhetoric and Culture in Lacan*, 7-8

If the tone of *The Bloody Chamber* could be described as mysterious and even obscure, leading to such disparate interpretations, “Wolf-Alice” takes those characteristics to their limits. In most other stories characters or events are borrowed from familiar contexts either from the fairy tale or the folktale. In this case, however, the male protagonist is a werewolf with vampiristic traits and the female protagonist a cross-breed of a literary character, Lewis Carroll’s Alice, and a wolf but unlike previous examples one that could have been drawn from medical manuals and not from the collective body of folkloristic superstition. The story is completely new but also inspired by superstition and legend. “Wolf-Alice” works as a final tale unsettling us from our old convictions to which we might be still clinging, even after the disconcerting tales preceding it. This turn on the part of Angela Carter serves two purposes: the first is to release the reader and perhaps even the author herself from the fairy tale and folktale now that they have been re-addressed and refashioned. At some point one must be left alone to continue one’s own deconstructions. Secondly, “Wolf-Alice” represents the abandonment of the dialogue with Bruno Bettelheim in favour of a fresher psychoanalytical and sociological view which Angela Carter seems to regard as more advantageous to her fiction. I speak of the theories of Jacques Lacan.

Turning away from the myth of the lycanthrope according to which humans, with great frequency male adults, are transformed for a given period into wolves, the author presents an example of hybridisation which, though having a corporeal consequence, has its origins in cultural and social differentiation. Wolf-Alice is not a fantasy creature but the fictional representation of a phenomenon of rare occurrence: the survival in the wild of babies or infants deprived of human contact and allegedly reared by animals. Throughout the centuries numerous cases have been recorded: the Hesse Wolf-Child (1344), the Lithuanian Bear-Child (1661), the Salzburg Sow-Girl (1830s), and the Teheran Ape-Child (1961). The very epithets they bore disclose the ease with which they could be pushed into a process of enfreakment. Feral children are therefore closely related with freak-show exhibits such as Krao (1876-1926), supposedly from Laos, Jo-Jo the Poodle Man (1870-1903) from Russia and Lionel the Lion Man (1890-1930/2) born in Poland, and Julia Pastrana herself. All of them started their “careers” as children and though they observably differ from feral children in that they were the products of some pathology, they nevertheless shared in stimulating curiosity and enthusiasm on the part of the public and even the scientific community, which particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century was fascinated by these case studies and was, therefore, as vulnerable to romantic explanations as the wide public was to the impresario’s marketing devised to construct from scratch the history of their valuable goods. Photographs of Krao, for instance, placed her in an “exotic” environment and her past was adjusted to be wondrous and adventurous while at the same time satisfying a Victorian self-image of superiority and search for knowledge. She was supposedly snatched away from a tribe of ape-people living in the forests of Laos. The tribe still lived in trees and was trapped in “primitivism”. The paradigmatic example of their uncivilised existence was that they had no fire and so had to consume raw meat. “Luckily” for Krao and her family they were captured and ended up in the court of the king of Burma where one Carl Bock negotiated her journey to Europe.

The same sort of fabrication took place with Jo-Jo, also known as Dog-Faced Boy, reported to have been captured in the Russian forests like a wild child while in fact Jo-Jo had spent his childhood in fairgrounds where his father earned a living precisely as a freak, known in the business as *l’homme chien*. Likewise Lionel the Lion-Faced Man, who like Jo-Jo and Julia Pastrana, suffered from hypertrichosis lanuginosa, was reported to have been the result of a maternal impression as his mother allegedly had seen her husband being torn to pieces by a lion. His extraordinary condition took him to the world of spectacle at the age of four.

Both phenomena construed feral children and corporeal freaks as spectacles revealing the necessity for what Nigel Rothfels calls foundation or jungle narratives, narratives which reinforce the very principle of “civilisation” (to be understood as European and North American cultures)⁸⁰⁶. “Wolf-Alice” is therefore also a dialogue with scientific discourse, its debate on the frontiers of humanness with respect to physical normativism, behavioural patterns, and cultural structures. “Wolf-Alice” steps across to the other side where not just the Other but specifically the non-human lies.

The description of the wolf-girl stresses the sensorial and anatomical differences from a point of view which is not so much concerned with enhancing her beastly appearance but which is more pragmatic or precise when considering the life style of an *enfant sauvage*:

Her panting tongue hangs out; her red lips are thick and fresh. Her legs are long, lean and muscular. Her elbows, hands and knees are thickly callused because she always runs on all fours. She never walks; she trots or gallops. Her pace is not our pace.

Two-legs looks, four-legs sniffs. Her long nose is always a-quiver, sifting every scent it meets. With this useful tool, she lengthily investigates everything she glimpses. She can net so much more of the world than we can through the fine, hairy, sensitive filters of her nostrils that her poor eyesight does not trouble her. Her nose is sharper by night than our eyes are by day so it is the night she prefers [...].

Wide shoulders, long arms and she sleeps succinctly curled into a ball as if she were cradling her spine in her tail. Nothing about her is human except that she is *not* a wolf; it is as if the fur she thought she wore had melted into her skin and become part of it, although it does not exist. (BC, 119. Italics in the text)

The approach to cases of feral children has invariably been involved in controversy, with the medical class divided on the subject. In 1792 Robert Kerr translated Carl Linnaeus’s *Systema Naturae* (1758), a principal study on the matter, but viewed the cases as fabrications. This was a fairly common reaction: in 1940 Robert Zingg deemed in an article in *The American Journal of Psychology* that the study made by the naturalist Johann F. Blumenbach in 1811 was inadequate. From the 1830s onwards experts such as K. A. Rudolphi and Sir Edward Tylor imposed their view that feral children were either frauds or children with severe mental

⁸⁰⁶ See Nigel Rothfels, “Aztecs, Aborigines, and Ape-People: Science and Freaks in Germany, 1850-1900”, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York UP, 1996) pp. 169 and 170.

disease. Even Levi-Strauss agreed with this view in his *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949). If indeed it appears that some children suffered from mental and physical disabilities (Dina Sanichar of Sekandra, 1867; the Lucknow Child, 1954; and the first Uganda Monkey-Child, 1982), which might explain their subsequent abandonment by their parents, the pattern definitely cannot be applied to all cases. Some were runaway children from abusive homes or got lost in the confusion of war. One has to conclude that the fact that they survived is indicative to some extent of their innate intellectual skills.

For my study it is not necessary to establish the veracity of the cases or the consistency of medical reports. It suffices to acknowledge that feral children do exist as a social phenomenon even if not as medical facts. Still, it is meaningful that the issue is far from reaching a conclusion four hundred years after Phillipus Camerius's *Operae horarum subcisivarum, sive, meditationes historicae auctiores* (1609), the first study on the subject, was published.

Following Linnaeus's categorisation Wolf-Alice is an embodiment of *Homo Ferus*: she is *tetrapus*, *mutus* and *hirsutus*⁸⁰⁷. The first two characteristics are more common than the third. Rousseau recounts, rather insubstantially, on the case of the two Pyrenees boys seen running down the mountains on all fours in his *Discourse on the Origin of Human Inequality* (1754), but quadrupedal running is found in other cases such as the girl of Champagne (1731), found up in a tree, Tissa (1973, a monkey-girl from Sri Lanka), John of Uganda, who at the age of three fled from his father's murderous violence and lived for another three years with monkeys (1991), all wolf-children, dog-children (Kunu Masela, Kenya, 1983; Ivan Mishukov, Moscow, 1990s; Alex Rivas, Chile, 2001; Mowgli, Romania, 2002), and obviously all gazelle-children (1946, in the desert between Syria and Iraq and 1961, Spanish Sahara).

Another customary characteristic of feral children that Wolf-Alice displays is sensorial hypersensitivity, particularly her sense of smell⁸⁰⁸. Misha DeFonseca of Jewish origin was lost during World War II and from the age of seven to eleven he lived by himself in the forest where he survived by eating berries and raw meat. At times he joined packs of wolves which

⁸⁰⁷ These were the three characteristics that singled out *homo ferus*. The other categories of Homo were *monstruosus*, *afers*, *americanus*, *europaeus* and *asiaticus*. Linnaeus considered in *Systema Naturae* some of what came to be classic cases: Jean de Liège, the Lithuanian Bear-Boy, the Hesse Wolf-Boy, the Kranenburg Girl, the two Pyrenees Boys, Wild Peter of Hanover and the Savage Girl of Champagne. Hairiness is probably the influence of the medieval legend of the hirsute wodevose or wild man of the woods, a legendary creature linked to the Erl-King.

⁸⁰⁸ A heightened sense of hearing usually accompanies the sharp sense of smell (Victor de Aveyron, Kamala and Amala) but there is no mention of it here. Another interesting detail is that many feral children, and particularly wolf-children, also have sharp eyesight even at night (Amala, Kamala, the girl of Champagne and also Kasper Hauser) but that is not the case with Wolf-Alice.

probably explained his extraordinary vision, hearing and sense of smell. Jean de Liège is also reported to have been able to smell his warden's presence at a great distance as well as fruit and roots. The Indian Kamala was able to smell food from any point of the orphanage garden which was over three and a half acres wide. Smelling is, at any rate, a common approach of wild children to objects.

The cause of feral children's muteness and locomotion on four members can be attested for by motives other than life in the wild while hairiness can be interpreted as merely very long hair combined with the impression of darkness of skin due to exposure to the sun and dirt or by pathologies such as hyperchosis lanuginosa. It is no wonder then that for one reason or the other Wolf-Alice was taken for a wolf cub by the hunters who found her. In any of the cases, hirsutism is an anatomical characteristic previously assigned to feral children like Jean de Liège (1644), the second Lithuanian Bear-Child (1669), the Kranenburg Girl (1717), the wild boy of Kronstadt (1784) Goongi, a bear-child (1914), the Burundi Monkey-Boy (1973)⁸⁰⁹, and John of Uganda, among other examples. In the case of hirsute freaks some were indeed extremely hairy (Lionel, Jo-Jo and Julia Pastrana) but others, like Krao were not as much as the touched-up prints led to believe.

There is not scientific agreement over whether a human child ever was or could be nurtured and brought up by some other animal, not even in the case of Kamala and Amala, the wolf-girls of Midnapore, India, though it is a fairly recent case dating back to 1920. Only one, not wholly reliable, witness attests to their being reared as wolf cubs. However, there seems to be no doubt as to their "wild" behaviour. They drank water in the manner of wolves, crouched to eat, chased domestic chickens and even consumed decomposing meat⁸¹⁰. Wolf-Alice's character displays many of the characteristics observed in wolf-children with a variable degree of reliability in relation to their animal up-bringing. The examples that I mention next are all of Indian origin except when otherwise indicated: the Texas Wolf-Girl (early nineteenth century), the Midnapore sisters, the Hasunpur boy, Ramu (1954), Djuna (1960s, Turkmenistan), Rocco, (1971, Italy), and Shamdeo (1972). They shared a resemblance in appearance (matted hair, long fingernails, dark skin, sharp teeth) and behaviour (pleasure in the company of animals of the dog family, night activity, bird hunting and even earth eating).

⁸⁰⁹ The boy got his epithet from his apish behaviour and not from his animal experience as he always lived among humans. His condition was entirely pathological.

⁸¹⁰ Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, 158.

In the late fifties Bruno Bettelheim himself wrote on the subject of Kamala and Amala and argued against their improbable survival in the wild. Instead he attributes their acute sense of smell and hearing, muteness and preference for uncooked meat to prolonged abuse:

It seems to be the result of some persons' – usually their parents' – inhumanity and not the result, as it was assumed, of animals' – particularly, wolves' – humanity. To put it differently, feral children seem to be produced not when wolves behave like mothers but when mothers behave like non-humans. The conclusion tentatively forced on us is that, where there are no feral children, there are some very rare examples of feral mothers, of human beings who become feral to one of their [autistic to begin] with children.⁸¹¹

What stands out in Bettelheim's comment is the equation of "feral" behaviour with violence and the responsibility of the child's injury attributed to the mother. He is careful to avoid the word "animal" to describe the parents', and specifically the mothers' actions and prefers the expression "non-humans" but the comparisons within the sentence do give support to the reading of "feral" mothers, or parents, as synonymous with aggression.

But in "Wolf-Alice" the possibility of blaming the parents and particularly the mother, reinstating Freudian doctrines, is avoided by not bringing them into the frame of the story. What Carter is interested in in creating a feral child is similar to what has motivated other writers and which Leslie Fiedler sees as "a symbol of their [the writers'] own alienation, or simply of the impossibility of distinguishing reality from illusion, of knowing the true identity of anyone"⁸¹². Fiedler's remark describes aptly the bottom line of "Wolf-Alice" and even of the whole collection but in addition to being the product of the restlessness of the intellectual the tale is also the expression of the female adolescent's search for an identity.

Before the girl's journey begins she is entirely in harmony with *Mother Nature*. She is still one with it, in a state of complete abject non-differentiation. Hence, she is like, in behaviour and appearance, her wolf mother: if nothing in her is human she can easily lend herself a wolfish self. The bliss is then shattered by a drastic separation: the mother is savagely killed (abjected) by hunters (the personification of male violence) and she is brought to "civilisation", the world of humans which is, of course, a masculine world. Wolf-Alice is dragged into time, the universe Father Time rules. It is a severe contrast with her previous

⁸¹¹ Bruno Bettelheim, *American Journal of Sociology* (1959) quoted in Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, 159.

⁸¹² Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, 159.

experience: “Like the wild beasts, she lives without a future. She inhabits only the present tense, a fugue of the continuous, a world of sensual immediacy as without hope as it is without despair” (*BC*, 119)⁸¹³.

The initial experience of history brings only despair and the figure of the wild mother, connected with bodily necessities and sensations, is replaced by a sanitised version of motherhood but one which is only an instrument of the Symbolic:

She spent her first days among us crouched stockstill, staring at the whitewashed wall of her cell in the convent to which they took her. The nuns poured water over her, poked her with sticks to rouse her. Then she might snatch bread from their hands and race with it into a corner to mumble it with her back towards them; it was a great day among the novices when she learned to sit up on her hind legs and beg for a crust. (*BC*, 120)

The narrator situates her/himself on the side of those who have already been “civilised” but the apparently irrevocable character implied in the opposition “primitive”/“civilised” as parallel to “inferior”/“superior” is deconstructed by the sarcastic image of a girl unloved, treated and trained like a dog, an animal whose servitude towards “Man” is well-known and which not only ardently desires to be let into “his” world but which is also happy to beg for the privilege. This mechanism of repression is presented by Carter precisely in the same terms as García Márquez in *Del amor y otros demonios* but whereas the former constructs the girl as an example of processes of maturity and the social integration of human and more specifically female experience, García Márquez makes Sierva María the symbol of resistance to imperialist forces exerted for instance, through education.

Sierva María could never be forced to fit the straitjacket of values from the centre, Spain, and in the same way Wolf-Alice learned a few manners but they were as meaningless as are the tricks dogs perform. The superficial effect of education is easily broken when she is asked to support the murder of her mother:

They found that, if treated with a little kindness, she was not intractable. She learned to recognize her own dish; then, to drink from a cup. They found that she could quite easily be taught a few, simple tricks but she did not feel the cold and it took a long time to wheedle a shift over her head to cover up her bold nakedness. Yet she always seemed wild, impatient of restraint, capricious in temper; when the Mother Superior tried to teach her to give thanks for

⁸¹³ Notice the relevance of this fact also in “The Lady of the House of Love”.

her recovery from the wolves, she arched her back, pawed the floor, retreated to a far corner of the chapel, crouched, trembled, urinated, defecated – reverted entirely, it would seem, to her natural state. (*BC*, 120)

After a mere nine-day period the convent decides Wolf-Alice brings shame upon the holy institution and despatches her to the Duke's castle since there she can do no harm; he already lives as an enemy of God. The two remain totally indifferent to each other's presence and do not even maintain a conversation, let alone share moments of any form of intimacy. She is focused on making the adjustments begun as a result of her brief period of socialisation and of the transformations she observes on her body. He is either sleeping or out on his cannibalistic escapades. Not even the fact that he is the lord of the house and she his maid installs a master/servant logic. The Duke ignores her, perhaps in the manner that lords are myopic towards servants' lives as individuals, but the point is that he makes no requests to, demands on or reproaches toward her. Wolf-Alice is free to discover herself without interference.

The distance between them is also that between medical science and legend making the two such an odd pair. However, if feral children still face serious scepticism on the part of some anthropologists and sociologists who see the phenomenon as either a fraud or medically explainable, then werewolves were once, like vampires and witches, part of a dangerous reality which gradually diluted into myth. Both belong therefore to the realms of both illusion and reality and each is unable to be extricated from the other. To use Leslie Fiedler once again, the Duke and Wolf-Alice demonstrate how difficult or even impossible it is to establish anyone's identity when it is always already subject to phenomena of mutability and progress. The Duke, for instance, is not as different from Wolf-Alice as one at first supposes. He is an old, lonely man, tired of the battles of his life: "The Duke is sere as old paper; his dry skin rustles against the bed sheets as he throws them back to thrust out his thin legs scabbed with old scars where thorns scored his pelt" (*BC*, 120). At night he desecrates tombs and eats human carrion: "they say you might easily find him, if you had been foolish enough to venture out late, scuttling along by the churchyard wall with half a juicy torso slung across his back. The white light scours the fields and scours them again until everything gleams and he will leave paw-prints in the hoar-frost when he runs howling round the graves at night in his lupine fiestas" (*BC*, 121). But despite his decayed body, on moonlit nights he wakes with splendid energy, taken over by an insatiable hunger:

At night, these huge, inconsolable, rapacious eyes of his are eaten up by swollen, gleaming pupil. His eyes see only appetite. These eyes open to devour the world in which he sees, nowhere, a reflection of himself; he passed through the mirror and now, henceforward, lives as if upon the other side of things. (*BC*, 120-1)

This voracity is uncommon in an individual of advanced age and is in contrast with Wolf-Alice, so young she was taken for a cub, and who, on being “deposited” at his mansion “settled down on her hunkers with that dog’s sigh that is only the expulsion of breath and does not mean either relief or resignation” (*BC*, 120). This apparent apathy, a characteristic that feral children display, extends to the casual attitude with which she sweeps away the human bones of his meals. After all, her family and kindred were wolves, not people. If the werewolf bears resemblance with the Countess of “The Lady of the House of Love” in being “inconsolable” and unable to resist appetite, Alice is an animal-like, young version of the Countess’s mute servant.

Like the wolf of “The Company of Wolves” the Duke is a synecdoche as his whole self is reduced to his enormous appetite. In that sense he is a parody of male voraciousness as he is of the figure of the werewolf: old, mutilated, fragile even contented with feeding on dead flesh and not attacking live human beings. But he is not, as Aidan Day mistakenly argues, a parody as a composite of man and wolf⁸¹⁴. The passage that Day refers to clearly states that “his [the Duke’s] transformation is their [*the wolves*] parody” (*BC*, 121. Italics added). Hence, had he been a wolf, he would have been expelled from the pack not because he is a parody of wolfishness but because his mutation and ability to cross to a different sort of existence are not available to them. His very existence recalls their limitations. But he is obviously up to a point a wolf and one of them too, and the passage an allegory to the reaction of the human social body.

Rejection is what the Duke suffers on the part of fellow humans and would suffer if he tried to join a pack. Thus his being an utter outcast is the consequence of the community/ies’ view of him and not the application of his will as he was born a werewolf. Wolf-Alice, on the contrary, is rejected by humans but welcome among beasts. Not wanted or loved by anyone, the Duke violently re-organises all types of desire in the form of his unappeasable hunger. It is not a coincidence that among all his prey it is the bride that stands

⁸¹⁴ Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*, 163.

out. Victor Frankenstein's monster also envisaged his salvation from the torment of human ostracism or aggression in the form of a female companion, and failing to get one he directs his rage towards Frankenstein's. The Duke does not turn his rage but only his attention to the bride's corpse.

To Aidan Day, not reflecting in the mirror is a sign of the Duke's non-humanness which he associates with the violence of his hunger. But Carter is patently careful in avoiding the description of atrocities which would break the possibility of sympathy towards him. There is no mention of infliction of pain or aggression towards anyone precisely because he has made himself immune to emotion. Violence towards live victims would be an expression of his desire for revenge and a demonstration of some sort of emotion towards humans. So when it is said that "nothing can hurt him since he ceased to cast an image in the mirror" it is understood that he has retreated to a universe of his own which is located on the other side of the mirror (BC, 120). There he is safe from attitudes that previously hurt him: rejection, abandonment and disdain. Jacques Lacan posits with respect to this subject: "Aggressivity is intimately linked to identification, notably in paranoia, where the subject's persecutors may turn out to be those with whom he had once identified himself: the other we fear is often the other we love"⁸¹⁵. So the werewolf withdraws from this potentially paranoid cycle. Humans he has chosen neither to hate nor love. If his eyes appear to devour the world, they are merely the expression of the eagerness with which he looks for a place there and a meaning for his double self. Moreover, the metaphor of hunger also applies to the fury with which he searches for a "reflection of himself", that is, either an object that satisfies his aspirations or a being like himself. Before Wolf-Alice's arrival the Duke cannot see his reflection in the world simply because there is no one similar. In that world he can cast no reflection in the mirror and only by crossing over, on the other side, will he find someone.

The Duke becomes what Aidan Day calls a "parodic distillation of the effective inhumanity of the Cartesian paradigm" whose referential patriarchal absolutes also appear in other works by Angela Carter (the Count in *The Infernal Desire Machines*, and the Marquises of *The Sadeian Woman*, Master in the story with the same title, and "The Bloody Chamber")⁸¹⁶. Strangely enough, Day only refers to the characteristics he sees as inhuman when they are synonymous of something vicious, thus annulling the filter that separates the Duke's actions

⁸¹⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Jacques Lacan: The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. and commented Anthony Wilden (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, [1968] 1981) 161.

⁸¹⁶ Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*, 165.

from *effective* heartlessness; his all-consuming drive and the deathliness associated with it are not expressions of his viciousness. My view diverges from Day's as I see a contradiction in his reasoning that "deathliness of that drive is figured in "Wolf-Alice" by the fact that the Duke sustains himself by eating corpses"⁸¹⁷. The contradiction is that the Duke's feeding habits cannot be interpreted as inhuman, that is, as cruelty since the victims are dead; they can only be interpreted as non-human. The Duke is a parodic distillation of other sadists insofar as he is devoid of sadistic impulses while maintaining the shell of a sadist. Precisely to spare himself the cruelty of humanity – the human community – he has positioned himself on the side of the emotionally numb which explains why he was blind to Wolf-Alice's presence. His consuming drive and the voraciousness it suggests are instead the revelation of a craving for something absent, a lack, and a representation of death feeding on itself like Erisicton on his own body.

The Duke's relation with the mirror and the existence of this lack opens up the possibility of a Lacanian reading which has been suggested in several arguments that I have already put forth. Angela Carter was most likely familiar with Jacques Lacan's paper "Le Stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je, telle qu'elle nous est révélée dans l'expérience psychanalytique" which was first published in 1949 but which had already been delivered at the Marienbad Congress in 1936. The first English translation appeared only in 1977, two years prior to the publication of *The Bloody Chamber* and of *The Sadeian Woman* where the *Écrits* appear in the bibliography. Though *The Bloody Chamber* has been viewed as a critical response to Bettelheim, its final tale presents instead a dialogue with another psychoanalytical approach, which Angela Carter, with her customary rebellious spirit, does not accept at face value.

The mirror appears connected both with the Duke and the girl though it assumes a different relation with each. Wolf-Alice's encounter with the mirror does not intend to fictionalise the moment described in a Lacanian perspective as the transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic order. Firstly because Lacan formulates the mirror stage to take place approximately between six and eighteen months, therefore it is an inappropriate theory to read the transformations in an adolescent in strictly psychoanalytical terms. The interpretation of a foregrounding transition remains useful though. Secondly, because as Anthony Wilden points out, the mirror stage is a purely structural and relational concept and

⁸¹⁷ Loc. cit.

as such it does not simply take place in a given moment in time⁸¹⁸. Nevertheless, it is precisely as such that it proves useful for Carter who prolongs the Imaginary period by means of the wild-child strategy. In the Imaginary order the subject, for a subject s/he already is for possessing capacities though yet undeveloped⁸¹⁹, cannot distinguish its somatic self from the world around it, that is, the subject does not distinguish its body from the other objects in the world and particularly from its mother's. The mirror stage plays a significant role in breaking this totality. Wilden describes it thus:

Through his perception of the image of another human being, the child discovers a form (*Gestalt*), a corporeal unity, which is lacking to him at this particular stage of his development [...]. Lacan interprets the child's fascination with the other's image as an anticipation of his maturing to a future point of corporeal unity by identifying himself with this image. [...] [T]he central concept is clear: this primordial experience is symptomatic of what makes the *moi* an Imaginary construct. The ego is an *Idealich*, another self, and the *stade du miroir* is the source of all later identifications.⁸²⁰

The mirror stage is therefore vital in bringing about the ego, "a sedimentation of idealised images"⁸²¹. There is no reason not to assume that the mirror stage could start to operate in individuals allegedly reared by animals, in confinement, or absolute separation from human contact only when they are brought to the emblematic institution of the Symbolic: civilisation. Thus Wolf-Alice's flirting with the mirror could be that of an infant or of a wild-child of any age:

First, she tried to nuzzle her reflection; then, nosing it industriously, she soon realized it gave out no smell. She bruised her muzzle on the cold glass and broke her claws trying to tussle with this stranger. She saw, with irritation, then amusement, how it mimicked every gesture of hers when she raised her forepaw to scratch herself or dragged her bum along the dusty carpet to rid herself of a slight discomfort in her hindquarters. She rubbed her head

⁸¹⁸ See Jacques Lacan, *Jacques Lacan: The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, p. 174.

⁸¹⁹ See Jacques Lacan, "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytical experience", *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan and commented by Anthony Wilden (New York and London: Tavistock/Routledge, [1966] 1977) p. 1.

⁸²⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Jacques Lacan: The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, 160. Italics in the text.

against her reflected face, to show that she felt friendly towards it, and felt a cool, solid, immovable surface between herself and she – some kind, possibly, of invisible cage? In spite of this barrier, she was lonely enough to ask this creature to try to play with her, baring her teeth and grinning; at once she received a reciprocal invitation. She rejoiced; she began to whirl round on herself, yapping exultantly, but, when she retreated from the mirror, she halted in the midst of her ecstasy, puzzled, to see how her new friend grew less in size. (BC, 123)

Undoubtedly there is a stress on the animalistic behaviour related to no self-recognition, the establishment of social bonds through smell and touch, and animal hygiene, which considering she is human becomes another grotesque reference. Following her removal from the wild and the murdering of her mother, Wolf-Alice's sense of wholeness was shattered and the mirror provides a means of re-configuring the world through the body. Wilden speaks of a self-image of dismemberment and of its relation with the mirror stage: "Lacan regards the *stade du miroir* – a vision of harmony by a being in discord – as at the origin of the phantasy or dream of the *corps morcelé*. The image of the 'body in bits and pieces,' or as put together like a mismatched jigsaw puzzle, is one of the most common phenomena in our normal dreams and phantasies"⁸²².

By looking at one's own image in the mirror one glimpses therefore the possibility of corporeal unity. Wolf-Alice's first experience however, is that of an animal because, as Lacan explains, the animal, unlike the human child, is unable to recognise the reflection as an image of itself⁸²³. However, eventually she does. The very recognition though creates an alienated subject (a *moi* different from *je*), as the child is faced with a double. Though the mirror stage is preponderant in the emergence of subjectivity, it is only achieved at the cost of creating a loss. Here lies Lacan's conception of lack and desire:

⁸²¹ I am using an expression by Yannis Stavrakakis. See Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) 17.

⁸²² Jacques Lacan, *Jacques Lacan: The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, commented by Anthony Wilden, 174. Italics in the text.

⁸²³ Neither Victor d'Aveyron nor Kaspar Hauser was ever able to recognise the image in the mirror as their reflection. I use them here since they are viewed as the emblems of the isolation and confinement types of wild children. Kamala of Midnapore is usually seen as the paradigm of the third type, living among animals. There was an extraordinary case in the United States analogous to Kaspar's which has also been widely mentioned. It dates to the seventies when a girl, Genie, spent over thirteen years either harnessed to a potty seat so that she could only move her feet and hands or placed in a straitjacket-like garment and laid down in a baby's crib surrounded by wire above and on the sides.

It is in this erotic relation, in which the human individual fixes upon himself an image that alienates him from himself, that are to be found the energy and the form on which this organization of the passions that he will call his ego is based.

This form will crystallize in the subject's internal conflictual tension, which determines the awakening of his desire for the object of the other's desire: here the primordial coming together (*concourse*) is precipitated into aggressive competitiveness (*concurrence*), from which develops the triad of others, the ego, and the object.⁸²⁴

Thus postulated the conception of desire intertwines with the Girardian view wherein desire for a given object is directly linked with the desire of others. The lack, a symptom of the loss of unity with the world and the mother, can be overcome, and even in this case only in part, through the acquisition of language which conveys a new sense of universality. The symbolic, and its exemplary process that is language learning, enables a return to the universal⁸²⁵. Universalisation though is not without risks as it tends to converge with a male perspective ("man" standing for people) and thus, paradoxically, becomes in the end an exclusionary process⁸²⁶. More poignantly, Lacan follows a principle of oculo-centrism, which is so say that by basing the construction of identity on vision instead of the other senses, it necessarily views the female body as an incomplete, castrated being as opposed to the phallically empowered male one.

Among the traits that point to Wolf-Alice's Imaginary existence at the outset of her adventures in beingness are the absence of time and language:

In the lapse of time, the trance of being of that exiled place, this girl grew amongst things she could neither name nor perceive. How did she think, how did she feel, this perennial stranger with her furred thoughts and her primal sentience that existed in a flux of shifting impressions; there are no words to describe the way she negotiated the abyss between her dreams, those wakings strange as her sleepings. (BC, 122)

By not learning some sort of language, Wolf-Alice interrupts the process of subjectivity as Lacan saw it. There are three moments in the mirror-stage, or, as Lacan puts it, experiences in the development of the temporal dialectic that forms the individual into

⁸²⁴ Jacques Lacan, "Aggressivity in psychoanalysis", *Écrits: A Selection*, 19. Italics in the text.

⁸²⁵ See Jacques Lacan, "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytical experience", p. 2.

⁸²⁶ See Gilbert D. Chaitin, *Rhetoric and Culture in Lacan* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) p. 6.

history⁸²⁷: insufficiency, anticipation, and alienation, referring respectively to the lack of motor control and the child's vision of its fragmented body originating a primordial discord⁸²⁸, the jubilation of reconstructing itself through an *imago* which enables the child to build a luring phantasy of totality, and the alienating assumption of an identity which is never faithful to the body of the child since it does not correspond in size and because the reflection is an inversion. In other words, "*méconnaissances* [misrecognitions] that constitute the ego, the illusion of autonomy to which it entrusts itself" is at the root of the emergence of identity, which in the Imaginary order is an ego in the form of *Idealich* resulting from a specular experience and which in the symbolic order evolves into full subjectivity⁸²⁹. The subject acquires therefore a notion of identity which at the imaginary level is manifestly deficient so it is pushed into linguistic representation, hence into the Symbolic, as a means to surpass the deficit.

Wolf-Alice however seems to combine imaginary and symbolic characteristics, that is, she learns time but not language, and though she experiences the *jouissance* of gazing at her own reflection, when she realizes it is not an Other but a double of herself, she is not alienated. The complexity of these assertions and the discrepancy they offer in relation to the psychoanalytical register they maintain a dialogue with require a more detailed discussion.

Wolf-Alice begins to have a notion of time when she begins to menstruate and once she understood "the circumambulatory principle of the clock" it "transformed her vague trip on time" (*BC*, 123). She never learns what it is or what it means but she immediately tries to find an explanation based on her knowledge of the world. She imagines that a wolf living in the moon had descended to nibble her genitals to show his affection. Thus she associates the bleeding with the moon, which with time she will learn to use as a calendar to know when the menses would appear, and with sexual activity. Both reasonings, if reasonings they can be called, are in fact related to menstruation. In a first stage however, she is simply occupied with dealing with the mess because, quite meaningfully, she had been taught shame:

The flow continued for a few days, which seemed to her an endless time. She had, as yet, no direct notion of past, or of future, or of duration, only of a dimensionless, immediate moment. At night, she prowled the empty house looking for rags to sop the blood up; she had

⁸²⁷ Jacques Lacan, "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytical experience", 4.

⁸²⁸ Loc. cit.

⁸²⁹ Ibid., 6. Italics in the text.

learned a little elementary hygiene in the convent, enough to know how to bury her excrement and cleanse herself of her natural juices, although the nuns had not the means to inform her how it should be, it was not fastidiousness but shame that made her do so. (*BC*, 122)

While the Duke is engaged in his expeditions for dead meat, Wolf-Alice has her own to carry out: to roam the Duke's "bloody chamber" looking for rags left distractedly around and which belonged to the corpses (*BC*, 123). Wolf-Alice's cleaning her blood with pieces of old shrouds is therefore not only an image of the circularity of life and death but more specifically an infusion of life, through her fertility, into the Duke's death-like existence⁸³⁰. It is during one of these expeditions that she finds a mirror and a scene allegorising the *stade du miroir* is staged.

The mirror stage is a threshold beyond which lies the Symbolic but the latter can never be definitely or objectively separated from the Imaginary. The Imaginary intrudes through dreams for instance and reanimates the impression of a fragmented body, which Lacan sees manifested in Bosch's fantastic somatic creations. The Imaginary is therefore responsible for the surfacing of aggressivity and the conceptualisation of a subject that is always alienated⁸³¹. According to Wilden, the Imaginary is "the area of the biological maturation through perception" and he adds that for Lacan, "the Imaginary relationship, of whatever kind, is also that of a lure, a trap"⁸³². Wilden corroborates my own view with respect to the Imaginary being present until the biological process of maturation through perception is concluded, that is, that Wolf-Alice dwelled in the Imaginary until she was brought to the company of humans and more specifically until she sees herself in the mirror and recognises the reflection as an image of her body.

Another relevant point that this passage raises is that the Imaginary has to be abandoned in favour of the Symbolic so that the maturity process is undertaken and subjectivity developed. Delusion and paranoia are states indicative of the return of the

⁸³⁰ For an elaboration of the theme of menstruation in Angela Carter's work see Maria Aline Salgueiro Seabra Ferreira, "Human Animals, Animal Humans: Feral Women in Angela Carter's Fairy Tales" (forthcoming).

⁸³¹ Yannis Stavrakakis, in *Lacan and the Political*, says: "the anticipation of synthesis, can never really eliminate the real uncoordination of the body of the infant, it can never erase the external and alienating character of its own foundation. This ambiguity is never resolved. One important consequence of this is that narcissism starts appearing in a different light, as constituting the basis of aggressive tension: the imaginary is clearly the prime source of aggressivity in human affairs". Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, 18.

⁸³² Jacques Lacan, *Jacques Lacan: The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, commented by Anthony Wilden, 175.

repressed Imaginary. This particular feature of the theory has been widely challenged by feminists who conclude that if the journey away from the mother's body into the father's house is the only possible developmental subjectivity in a Lacanian perspective, hence an integrated, communicating, stable subject can only exist within a patriarchal framework. The Imaginary is a lure, a trap, unreal since only the Symbolic has at its disposal the linguistic mechanisms to construct the Real out of selected pieces of "reality" combined in such a way as to mean something. But to Wolf-Alice that was an experience of perfect happiness because she was beyond consciousness while immersed in timelessness and organic boundlessness. The mirror presents physically and metaphorically a barrier. Moreover, the surface is disagreeable: cool, solid and fixed so that she cannot remove it to one side. Once "with us", she must face herself, the Other that she ignored existed. The Symbolic cannot be deterred though the subjectivity it imposes, swarming with firm rules and restrictions, is devoid of the warmth of blissful communion with the world as a whole.

Wolf-Alice's view on the matter goes against Lacan's liberating leap unto the Symbolic. The other self that appears in the mirror, representing the self created by the Symbolic offering a solution of reconstruction of the *corps morvelé*, is trapped inside an invisible cage. In this perspective, the Symbolic is as much a trap as the Imaginary. Perhaps even more so. At first the mirror provides the expected Lacanian emotional and psychological reaction; the emergence of the first conscious memory is that of the loss of the mother's body: the warmth of cinders "brought her foster mother's belly out of the past and printed it on her flesh" (BC, 124). The mirror and her menses have led to a sense of time and differentiated bodies making Wolf-Alice miss, quite meaningfully, her mother's belly in particular. This primary experience is one mostly of pain and creation of difference, a difference that from this point onward has its source in Wolf-Alice herself. She becomes the centre, or point of reference in the world, quite similarly to the change of perspective occurring in adolescence:

She howled a little, in a firmer, deepening trajectory, to obtain the inscrutable consolation of the wolves' response, for now the world around her was assuming form. She perceived an essential difference between herself and her surroundings that you might say she could not put her *finger* on – only, the trees and grass of the meadows outside no longer seemed the emanation of her questing nose and erect ears, and yet sufficient to itself, but a kind of backdrop for her, that waited for her arrivals to give it meaning. She saw herself upon it and her eyes, with their sombre clarity, took on a veiled, introspective look. (BC, 124. Italics in the text)

This is the description of Wolf-Alice's own metamorphosis from a wolfish being to a human one, denoted in the capacity for introspection and attribution of meaning emanating from her self. The world as such is devoid of meaning. The change is symbolised in the image that is made and that she makes of her body: once she used her forepaw to scratch herself (a purely instinctive, physical action) but now she cannot "put her *finger* on" the reasons for the difference she has developed towards the world (the expression reveals both the humanisation of her body and the existence of a language which is not strictly denotative, that is, putting the finger on as synonymous with distinguishing or defining). Because she is still in transition, and she will stagnate in that transitional state and not move to a Symbolic level, her eyes make a reading of the world and of herself as part of it as ambiguous; her views are necessarily marked by a "sombre clarity". Wolf-Alice's difference is not, however, precisely that of regular human maturation nor is that of the Duke, who "believes himself to be both less and more than a man, as if his obscene difference were a sign of grace" (*BC*, 124). Wolf-Alice's experience in front of the mirror could be seen as the discovery of her own grace:

She would spend hours examining the new skin that had been born, it seemed to her, of her bleeding. She would lick her soft upholstery with her long tongue and groom her hair with her fingernails. She examined her new breasts with curiosity; the white growths reminded her of nothing so much as the night-sprung puff balls she had found, sometimes, on evening rambles in the woods, a natural if disconcerting apparition, but then, to her astonishment, she found a little diadem of fresh hairs tufting between her thighs. She showed it to her mirror littermate, who reassured her by showing her she shared it. (*BC*, 124)

A very adequate characterisation of Wolf-Alice's experience of mirror-looking has been used by Lacan to describe the child's discovery of its image in the mirror: "a flutter of jubilant activity"⁸³³. This feeling is akin to another taking place with the inauguration of adolescence, a second moment of bodily disintegration and re-assemblage when the mirror plays once again a preponderant role. Carter has Wolf-Alice condense both moments in one precisely because they share so many features. Robyn Ferrell acutely notes that the mirror-stage gives way to the discovery of love (of the other, then of oneself) and of the outset of knowledge. The Imaginary is therefore the order of the relations between the ego and objects,

which can be either love-objects or conceptions. She continues: “In knowledge no less than in love, it is identity that is negotiated – a risky business, the penalty of which is bodily disintegration”⁸³⁴. It is in the axis of love, knowledge and bodily break-up that the formation of the ego during the mirror stage can, at least fictionally, be set during adolescence. Consider this passage where another of Carter’s self-discovering adolescents, Melanie in *The Magic Toyshop*, discovers the materiality of her body through touch and gaze:

The summer she was fifteen, Melanie discovered she was made of flesh and blood. O, my America, my new found land. She embarked on a tranced voyage, exploring the whole of herself, clambering her own mountain ranges, penetrating the moist richness of her secret valleys, a physiological Cortez, da Gama or Mungo Park. For hours she stared at herself, naked, in the mirror of her wardrobe; she would follow with her finger the elegant structure of her rib-cage, [...] and she would draw down the long line from breast-bone to navel (which was a mysterious cavern or grotto), and she would rasp her palms against her bud-wing shoulderblades. And then she would writhe about, clasping herself, laughing, sometimes doing cartwheels and handstands out of sheer exhilaration at the supple surprise of herself now she was no longer a little girl.

She also posed in attitudes, holding things. Pre-Raphaelite, she combed out her long, black hair to stream straight down from a centre parting and thoughtfully regarded herself [...].⁸³⁵

Behaving in a similar manner to Melanie who wrapped net curtain around her head to make herself look like Cranach’s Venus or around her body to imitate wedding night gowns, Wolf-Alice draws out the ball dresses once worn by the Duke’s mother and “rolled on suave velvet and abrasive lace because to do so delighted her *adolescent* skin” (BC, 124. Italics added). Wolf-Alice enjoys sharing the pleasure she draws from dressing herself with adult female clothes with her friend in the mirror but inevitably she finds out it was a mere “ingenious variety of the shadow she cast on sunlit grass”, that is, only a double (BC, 124). Though tears come to her eyes, marking her gradual movement towards human behaviour, nevertheless “her relation with the mirror was now far more intimate since she knew she saw herself within it” (BC, 124). In this respect Elizabeth Grosz compares chimpanzees’ and human children’s

⁸³³ Jacques Lacan, “The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytical experience”, 1.

⁸³⁴ Robyn Ferrell, *Conceptions of Freud and Lacan* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996) 72.

⁸³⁵ Angela Carter, *The Magic Toyshop* (London: Virago, [1967] 1981) 1.

reactions; unlike the former, “the child retains its fascination with the image, indeed even intensifies it, when it learns of its representational status. [...] The child joyously celebrates the recognition of its specular image or the form of others”⁸³⁶. However, this first jubilant moment already anticipates the collapse of the specular formation of the self. Notably this does not happen to Wolf-Alice who thus avoids posterior alienation. Not only that, but it articulates a form of resistance to Lacanian alleged phallogentrism and thus elaborates a pro-feminist response. In Madan Sarup’s words, the phallus is “a signifier for the cultural privileges and positive values which define male subjectivity within patriarchal society but from which the female subject remains isolated”⁸³⁷. Because she avoids language she avoids the Oedipal complex which appears in the Symbolic, thus castration.

These issues are equally relevant in “Peter and the Wolf”. “Peter and the Wolf” is a short story which, had it been included in *The Bloody Chamber*, would fit in the spirit of collection. There are several reasons for this: it is also a re-telling of a tale brought to a wider public through Prokofiev; as in “The Werewolf” the wolf is a female and Granny is put to play a crucial role where previously she was either secondary or inexistent; as in “Wolf-Alice” the wolf-mother is shot to death; and the foot appears as a connecting element with “The Company of Wolves”. But the prime reason is of a cultural and psychoanalytical nature. As Jean Wyatt has very cleverly noted, “Peter and the Wolf” is a response to Freud’s conception of the castrated woman, that is, to his own fictionalisation of the trauma of little Hans, and possibly even to the Wolf-Man case which Freud published under the title “An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works” (1917-1919). Given that Bettelheim is a neo-Freudian, Carter’s subversive views in *The Bloody Chamber* are, logically, as much a reaction to Bettelheim as to Freud though one should keep in mind the reservations put forward by Jack Zipes of Bettelheim’s ab/use of the theories.

However, as Jean Wyatt is also careful to comment, because Freud’s formulation of the castrated woman relies on mutilation and organic inferiority justifying cultural inferiority and these are concepts picked up by Lacan and reformulated into a presence/absence dichotomy, Lacan should also be included in the discussion. Carter fights against the two psychoanalysts by glorifying the materiality of the female genitalia of a girl who, like Wolf-Alice, was reared by wolves and then brought back to society, albeit a rural society:

⁸³⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990) 36.

⁸³⁷ Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988) 29.

[Peter] was not conscious of his own fear because he could not take his eyes off the sight of the crevice of her girl-child's sex [...]. It exercised an absolute fascination upon him.

Her lips opened up as she howled so that she offered him, without her own intention or volition, a view of a set of Chinese boxes of whorled flesh that seemed to open one upon another into herself, drawing him into an inner, secret place in which destination perpetually receded before him, his first, devastating, vertiginous intimation of infinity.⁸³⁸

Through Peter, her cousin, it is suggested that “the vision of real difference, taken in without denial or defensive categorization, opens the mind to the previously unsignified, springing the subject free from established categories of thought”⁸³⁹. Correctly Wyatt reads that the tale, by constructing female sexuality in positive terms and in merely constructing an economy of desire which is not male, devalues phallogocentric meanings and institutions. Hence, on seeing his cousin again in the wild after the escape her wolf family perpetrated, and which recalls the final scene of Neil Jordan's *The Company of Wolves*, Peter decides to abandon the phallogocentric representations which he desired to belong to and master: Catholicism and Latin.

In my view, “Peter and the Wolf” evolves from a conflict with Lacanianism in a measure identical to that found in “Wolf-Alice” and which also concerns the mirror phase. Though it narrates the reverse story of “Wolf-Alice” (not being touched by the cultural imprint of civilizational thought) it discloses the same encounter of the wild woman with her image, only this time, the mirror is the river and the psychoanalytical readings conducting the individual to the Symbolic are annulled:

She could never have acknowledged that the reflection beneath her in the river was that of herself. She did not know she had a face; she had never known she had a face and so

⁸³⁸ Angela Carter, “Peter and the Wolf”, *Black Venus*, 57. Notice the re-appearance of the Chinese Boxes motif, this time standing for the complexity of feminine sexuality represented in the layers of flesh. For a full exploration of the theme of the grotesque in “Peter and the Wolf” see “Desire and the Female Grotesque in Angela Carter's ‘Peter and the Wolf’”. Betty Moss defends the thesis that in this tale Carter presents a construction of the female body not in terms of Lacanian Lack but instead Hélène Cixous's void of potentiality. The female sexual organs not only come into view but they are made to represent not Lack but, in a manner in which one can see similarities with a Bakhtinian ideology of the grotesque, as Abundance. Betty Moss, “Desire and the Female Grotesque in Angela Carter's ‘Peter and the Wolf’”, Danielle M. Roemer and Cristina Bacchilega ed., *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale*.

⁸³⁹ Jean Wyatt, “The Violence of Gendering: Castration Images in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*, *The Passion of New Eve*, and “Peter and the Wolf””, ed. Lindsey Tucker, *Critical Essays on Angela Carter*, 63.

her face itself was the mirror of a different kind of consciousness than ours is, just as her nakedness, without innocence or display, was that of our first parents, before the Fall. She was hairy as Magdalen in the wilderness and yet repentance was not within her comprehension.

Language crumbled into dust under the weight of speechlessness.⁸⁴⁰

The formulation of a consciousness and of a language which do not spring from the Symbolic is, in the end, the subversive comment Carter wishes to make in “Peter and the Wolf” and “Wolf-Alice”. The difference in the tales lies in that in the former case the girl does not leave the realm of the Imaginary and in the latter she is locked in the frontier. The reason for that difference refers to the change of the type of relationship that Wolf-Alice had with the wolves, a change that does not occur with the female wolf of the other story as it is she who howls for them to come to her rescue. On the contrary, Wolf-Alice becomes more and more distant from the wolves to whom she still sings but with “wistful triumph, because now she knew how to wear clothes and so had put on the visible sign of difference from them” (*BC*, 125). Though she once howled in the night to obtain a compassionate, familiar howl back, now it is she who desires to mark the difference between them because they pose a danger for her, precisely that of non-differentiation. Wolf-Alice feels empowered at this point, a power that she conquered single-handedly, the power of attributing meaning: “the landscape assembles itself about her, she informs it with her presence. She is its significance” (*BC*, 125). She is therefore “delighted with herself”, because she is positioned in a spatial field and within her body, but once she loses her tie with the wolves Wolf-Alice is ready to develop new forms of relationship which nonetheless have no place in terms of the Symbolic because she is irretrievably ambiguous since the wolfish quality cannot be definitely suppressed/repressed (*BC*, 125). Thus she is in need of someone as mixed as she is.

Wolf-Alice and the Duke are able to negotiate a life for themselves outside the Symbolic cage, one which enables them to preserve their animalistic, hybrid, and abjected qualities which could not have been possible in the context of a wider community constituted of regularly shaped and minded people. In this they utterly contradict Lacanian perspectives

⁸⁴⁰ Angela Carter, “Peter and the Wolf”, 60. Angela Carter keeps returning to the same themes and taking advantage of Christian motifs to corrupt them from within. See for instance her very interesting remarks on Mary Magdalene in Georges de La Tour and Donatello’s paintings and of the figure of Mary of Egypt where issues discussed throughout this study appear. They include martyrdom, asceticism, desire, sado-masochism, representation, and even hairiness. See “Impressions: The Wrihtsman Magdalene”, *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders*, pp. 140-146. I believe the quotation actually refers to this essay as Angela Carter’s dwells specifically on the issue of repentance.

that consider that “there is no separation between self and society. Human beings become social with the appropriation of language; and it is language that constitutes us as a subject. Thus, we should not dichotomize the individual and society. Society inhabits each individual”⁸⁴¹. The Duke and Wolf-Alice must therefore exist in an abject zone where their mere existence serves to establish the boundaries of the subjecthood of others. In Judith Butler’s words:

The abject designates here [in Lacan’s discourse] precisely those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject’s domain.⁸⁴²

The most significant point in “Wolf-Alice” is that it proves that abjection, though deemed unlivable, is, as Butler asserts, still inhabited by someone. The Duke and Wolf-Alice prove however that it is a liveable situation and, moreover, an alternative to the Symbolic barricade. It is a possible answer to the problems Butler makes out in Lacan: “the symbolic ought to be rethought as a series of normativizing injunctions that secure the borders of sex through the threat of psychosis, abjection, psychic unlivability”⁸⁴³. But though the text offers a dialogue with Lacan and even with other voices engaging conversation with Lacanian discourse, “Wolf-Alice” does not nonetheless set itself outside what Butler calls throughout the exclusionary matrix of the heterosexual imperative. This fact poses no difficulty for me insofar as Carter was able to achieve a different goal, that of revealing the possibility of non-patriarchal support, which she certainly did not mean to be the only one.

The price the Duke and Wolf-Alice pay for living in a zone of uninhabitability is utter social isolation and rejection; the gain is one another. In this story, as in “The Company of Wolves”, the alternative provided is that of love, once again made possible through the

⁸⁴¹ Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, 7.

⁸⁴² Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) 3.

⁸⁴³ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 14-15. Butler disfavours conceptions evolving from mental and social constructions for matter, that is, “*a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface*”. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 9. Italics in the text. This switch in terms of point of view devalues the construction of gender as derivative of a given interpretation of sex and allows instead an approach to sex as materiality which, to the extent to which it consolidates “the normative conditions” that brought it about, should be further studied.

female's bravery which follows the same pattern in both stories: a young woman, in the process of searching for herself, realises her goal through the salvation she grants to a lost, alienated male. That is the case of the Duke. While being chased by a hunting party wanting retribution for the assault on the bride's cadaver, he is shot:

Poor, wounded thing... locked half and half between such strange states, an aborted transformation, an incomplete mystery, now he lies writhing on his black bed in the room like a Mycenaean tomb, howls like a wolf with his foot in a trap or a woman in labour, and bleeds.

First, she was fearful when she heard the sound of pain, in case it hurt her, as it had done before. She prowled round the bed, growling, snuffing at his wound that does not smell like her wound. Then she was pitiful as her gaunt grey mother; she leapt upon his bed to lick, without hesitation, without disgust, with a quick, tender gravity, the blood and dirt from his cheeks and forehead.

The lucidity of the moonlight lit the mirror propped against the red wall; the rational glass, the master of the visible, impartially recorded the crooning girl.

As she continued her ministrations, this glass, with infinite slowness, yielded to the reflexive strength of its own material construction. Little by little, there appeared within it, like the image on photographic paper that emerges, first, a formless web of tracery, the prey caught in its own fishing net, then in firmer yet still shadowed outline until at last as vivid as real life itself, as if brought into being by her soft, moist, gentle tongue, finally, the face of the Duke. (*BC*, 126)

She pities him and his divided nature, still unaware that her nature is similar. They are united by blood, an abject substance: his bleeding wound and her menstruation. On the one hand, as Salman Rushdie notes, menstruation marks the discovery of a mystery inside her, so that in my view in the last tale the affirmative quality of "bloody chamber" is achieved⁸⁴⁴. On the other hand, in Christian mythology, women's menstruation was regarded as a wound that would bleed in all generations of women as reminder and punishment for the original sin for which Eve was deemed responsible. The pain and haemorrhage of labour were associated with it as well. The book had previously elaborated a picture of Wolf-Alice as a primate Eve, recalling another text by a Portuguese author, Eça de Queiroz's "Adão e Eva no Paraíso":

⁸⁴⁴ Angela Carter, *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*, intr. Salman Rushdie, xii.

She grew up with wild beasts. If you could transport her, in her filth, rags and feral disorder, to the Eden of our first beginnings where Eve and grunting Adam squat on a daisy bank, picking the lice from one another's pelts, then she might prove to be the wise child who leads them all and her silence and her howling a language as authentic as any language of nature. In a world of talking beasts and flowers, she would be the bud of flesh in the kind lion's mouth: but how can the bitten apple flesh out its scar again? (BC, 121)

Re-using the biblical scene and even borrowing its discourse, Carter envisages a new beginning where the Symbolic is not the only way to be, and other languages can exist, languages which could be called total because they are “spoken” by humans, animals and even plants. In the world Wolf-Alice inhabits later on “[m]utilation is her lot”, her destiny, because she cannot speak the language of the Symbolic (BC, 121). The inability to speak is a recurrent feature of wild children from Jean de Liège to Wild Peter (1724) who after almost seventy years in society could only articulate his own name and say “King George”, to the wolf-boy of Hasunpur, to Kamala who in nine years learned less than fifty words, to Isabel Quaresma, the Portuguese Chicken Girl who with the exception of her first year of life spent her whole childhood in a hen-coop until she was found aged nine (1970) and after approximately twenty years of treatment she still could not talk⁸⁴⁵, to Rocco, to the Kuano River-Boy from India (1973), and to Alex Rivas. Only a few exceptions are recorded: the Hesse wolf-child (1344) who after his return often stated his preference for the company of wolves, the Kranenburg girl (1717) who used sign language but could never learn how to speak, the girl from Champagne, later named Marie-Angélique Memmie Le Blanc (1731), Marcos Pantoja, another wolf-child abandoned in the forests of Southern Spain in 1953 where he lived in complete isolation for twelve years, Shamdeo who was only able to use sign language, and John of Uganda (a skilled singer, in fact). In all cases, at least as far as one knows, such children who could speak, already spoke before they were isolated, confined or living in the wild.

With a new beginning the wild child would emblematised a new figure, the wise child. The figure of a new woman seems necessary when considering that, in the Lacanian framework which I claim to be the backdrop of the short story, women tend to be left out of

⁸⁴⁵ There are other similar cases: in Australia in 1903 and in the 1990s Jesse Boy in the Filipinas. Aged two and already physically abused by his father Jesse was put in a henhouse where he spent seven months. After that period Jesse crowed, clucked and used his mouth as if it were a beak. A similar case was reported in the 1980s in China where a girl lived in a sty until she was nine but, unlike Isabel Quaresma, at thirteen she had, all things considered, a fairly good knowledge of language, including writing and was able to perform some housework.

the scheme of things and so it is only plausible that language learning be directly related with death originating in the mother. Death is “the fusion with the maternal object which was lost through the birth of the subject into language. For Lacan, the loss of this object is not the result of paternal or societal prohibition, but the unavoidable result of the fact that human beings are obliged to express their needs in language”⁸⁴⁶. Despite Lacan’s attempts to de-sexualise his theory of acquisition of beingness, there is no doubt that it presents problems for integrating women’s experience.

The above quoted scene is a re-invention of the birth of humanity along the lines of Bakhtinian liberation, complete with the grotesque image of our “holy” father and mother defecating. But for Angela Carter there is nothing sacred, fortunately. The question is put, however, whether this is Carter’s offering of a plausible, realisable condition when the metaphor is that of an idyll. In other words, one has to consider whether this is not a utopian alternative and that we cannot go back in time, now that we live in it, to change our genesis. This is the question the text itself puts in the final part of the transcription. Can women flesh out the wound they have allegedly imposed on humankind and which they themselves reinstate in menstruation and labour?

The final paragraph of the story employs the myths of Eve and Adam again to try to provide an answer. “Wolf-Alice” closes the book with the birth and tales of the passions of a new Eve, passions as probation and, at the end, as the discovery of love. As in previous stories, this form of love, far from being a romanticised one, represents the recuperation that was possible of an imaginary totality which I believe to be comprised in the title. “Wolf-Alice” can refer to the girl alone, an allusion to her double nature, or it can suggest the reclamation of a pre-Symbolic wholeness: not Wolf and Alice but Wolf-Alice. Their relation ignores frontiers such as those of humanity, animal, life, death, and propriety. In other words, it is only possible by living in the realm of abjection.

The tale that precedes it concluded with the exact same scene: a portrayal of our origins depicting Eve taking lice off her male who surrenders to her caring attention. It is no surprise that “Wolf-Alice” reveals the same dispute as “The Company of Wolves”, that is, first she is scared but she overcomes her fear obeying some maternal instinct as her animal-mother would have done, free from Lacanian presuppositions that presume the return to the mother’s body as lethal: she licks his body without disgust and restores him to life. Her wet tongue suggests not only the abjection of human fluids in contact with another person’s skin, but also,

⁸⁴⁶ Gilbert D. Chaitin, *Rhetoric and Culture in Lacan*, 6-7.

in my view, maternal warmth combined with eroticism. The reader is facing not a demythologisation of the maternal but yet another form of the myth. Margaret Atwood welcomes this form: “She [Wolf-Alice] licks him [the Duke] into a new being, as the tiger does the tiger’s bride; he welcomes human through love, as does Mr Lyon. But it is not sexual love that so transforms him, this time; instead it is a different kind of love: instinctual, merciful, maternal”⁸⁴⁷. The tales Atwood refers to are not, as I demonstrated, so linearly affirmative for the woman involved. Another consideration to bear in mind is that all the young women represent some sort of embodiment of feminine sexuality and of its reaction to the established patriarchal rule of their worlds. It would be problematic and even self-defeating then to close the collection having those girls, through Wolf-Alice, abandoning the purely sexual side of the issue and to resolve it into motherhood so stereotypically identified with natural instincts and pity. Moreover, if “Wolf-Alice” is a tale of sexual maturation as well as of development of the individual, the final scene must reflect the outcome of that process. In fact, the link with “The Company of Wolves” corroborates the closing scene of “Wolf-Alice” as a matrimonial ceremony: in the former there is mention of prothalamions and in the latter Wolf-Alice is attired with a wedding dress. Her image is strangely inspiring and recalls the grotesqueness of Sufiya when she comes to take Omar’s life away. Sufiya comes to meet Omar, who waits for her “like a bridegroom on his wedding night” and who then calls her “wife” for the first time (*S*, 286). Wolf-Alice and Sufiya are therefore modern versions of fairy tale animal brides.

Through Wolf-Alice the Duke regains his reflection which is not to recover him for the Symbolic. He is still a werewolf and no miracle was needed or wanted to change his condition. Wolf-Alice herself does not belong in it so she could not possibly show him the way even if she had wanted to; what she is able to do is to transmit to him how she was able to survive in her own world of impressions. Aidan Day interprets this as an alternative reason or rationality to Cartesian conceptualisation: “it is rationality which not only enables the girl to realise autonomous subjectivity but frees the man from definition as mere consumer and enables him to enter the representational realm of the genuinely human, which is here seen in terms not of exclusion but of mutual and reciprocal relationship”⁸⁴⁸. Day opposes therefore what he calls rational humanness to the incomplete humanity of those who maltreated them. Nevertheless, it is done at the expense of the mythologisation of motherhood, directly suggested twice in the passage (through the mention of labour and of the wolf-mother),

⁸⁴⁷ Margaret Atwood, “Running with the Tigers”, 132.

⁸⁴⁸ Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*, 166.

insofar as it is through Wolf-Alice's maternal fondness that this rational humanness comes about. Eventually, the reader is tempted to view Carter's demythologising mission not as a synonym of no-mythologisation, for in the end it proves impossible to achieve, but as a quest for proposals of re-mythologizing forms.

Like Carroll's Alice who crossed the looking-glass, Carter's crosses Lacan's mirror and deconstructs it from within by narrating a story where the formation of subjectivity is made possible in the Imaginary, or in Kristevan terms, in an abject zone embodied by the castle, an "exiled place" (BC, 122). Chaitin says that "[s]urvival depends on establishing a ground for representation by misrepresenting difference as identity. It is not so much alienation that constitutes the ego as it is the denial of that very process of alienation"⁸⁴⁹. Wolf-Alice contradicts Lacanian discourse by being a survivor and by representing difference as identity. Or perhaps Carter only takes Lacan's postulations of the individual who is necessarily alienated and divided a step further. Hence Carter's decision to interrupt Lacan's process of subjectivity: because even when it moves into the symbolic order, the identity of the subject is always already alienated. The union of the girl with the werewolf at least offers some sort of closure and Lacan does not; moreover, it is not because Wolf-Alice does not "speak" the language of the symbolic that she is silenced, another possible image of castration. Idealistically or not, Carter suggests instead that Wolf-Alice "speaks" another, more satisfying universal language, that of love⁸⁵⁰. She thus invalidates material Lacanian presuppositions which Madan Sarup expresses in this manner: "*There is no subject independent from language. [...]*

⁸⁴⁹ Gilbert D. Chaitin, *Rhetoric and Culture in Lacan*, 165.

⁸⁵⁰ I cannot aspire to discuss the terms through which the dispute between feminism and its relation with Lacanianism has developed. That enormous task falls outside of the scope of this work so here I have restricted myself to Angela Carter's text as one of the possible dialogues that women can establish with Lacan. For a synthesis of the debate see, among many other possible sources, Todd Dufresne ed., *Returns of the "French Freud": Freud, Lacan and Beyond* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996). See especially Tina Chanter, "Can the phallus stand, or should it stood up?", pp. 43-65, where she considers the pro-Lacanian material, in particular Jacqueline Rose's translation of the articles published by Lacan during the years of 1964 and 1980 when he had his school of psychoanalysis in Paris. They were collected and edited by Jacqueline Rose and Juliet Mitchell under the title *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*. The editors' introductions have become a reference in the field. Luce Irigaray is perhaps the most critical voice against Lacan. Irigaray questions whether the reliance on the phallus as a symbolic law is in fact an inherent condition of language or the result of patriarchal culture. One understands Irigaray's opposition when one comes across passages such as this: "The phallus is the privileged signifier of that mark in which the role of the logos is joined with the advent of desire. / It can be said that this signifier is chosen because it is the most tangible in the real of sexual copulation, and also the most symbolic in the literal (typographical) sense of the term, since it is equivalent there to the (logical) copula. It might also be said that, by virtue of its turgidity, it is the image of the vital flow as it is transmitted in generation". Jacques Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus", *Écrits: A Selection*, 287.

we all have to represent ourselves in language”⁸⁵¹. Further ahead she continues: “There is no subject except in representation, [...] [and] no representation captures us completely. I can neither be totally defined nor can I escape all definition. I am the quest for myself”⁸⁵². Carter goes against Lacanian negativism which has been expressed in depressing terms such as these:

a sense of defeat always accompanies the infant’s state of mind after the so-called *mirror phase*. The father’s Law that separates the child from the mother is interiorized as defeat, castration, and death. Whether historical or psychological, defeat is the bedrock of human experience, and loss is the sine qua non of the human condition. All people carry with them, not only the invisible stigmata of the primal repression but also the gnawing awareness of contingency, death, and finitude.⁸⁵³

Furthermore, the mirror is traditionally an instrument of illusion, and thus a *rational* glass is a parody of the very object. It is only the master of the visible, as the text informs us, and the visible is a convention. For how can a werewolf, a legendary being, cast a reflection if such creatures do not exist in reality? The answer is that Wolf-Alice has made him real but only by contouring rationality. As with Fevvers one is not meant to know whether the Duke is fact or fiction; the mirror can construct anything and anyone. As Robyn Ferrell has suggested, the mirror metaphor enables Lacan to elaborate a philosophy of subjectivity around its characteristics of the fictional, optical illusion and, meaningfully, the confidence trick. However, there is a handicap; the mirror cannot convey interiority, and the ontological processes resulting from the philosophical and emotional interaction between the exterior and the interior. It is merely a reflection, and as such not fluid. Crossing to the other side is impossible. Consequently, the only type of knowledge and love it allows to be grasped is an inverted version, which in the end contributes to the accumulation of more anxiety over the intangibility of truth⁸⁵⁴.

The expression “master of the visible” provides the clue with which I would like to close my discussion. On the one hand I would like to draw attention to its similarity to Lacan’s

⁸⁵¹ Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, 12.

⁸⁵² *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸⁵³ Ben Stoltzfus, *Lacan and Literature: Purloined Pretexts* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996) 71. Italics in the text.

⁸⁵⁴ See Robyn Ferrell, *Conceptions of Freud and Lacan*, p. 74.

own assertion that “the mirror-image [is] the threshold of the visible world”⁸⁵⁵. Hence, it is not by looking that one is closer to knowing who one is, rather to a source of alienation. The situation is not improved with the dominion of a certain linguistic discourse since it only reflects the images others have of us, one that can be conditioned by their affection for us. On the other hand, it picks up again the Master/Slave dichotomy which I referred to earlier and which Sarup recalls must be read against Hegel who also served as a source for Lacan’s conceptualisation of the mirror-stage. In a Hegelian logic, the master is he who forces a slave to work in order to satisfy his desire for an identity: “the Master demands recognition from the Slave but this is a self-defeating process. He feels threatened because recognition of himself depends exclusively on the Slave. [...] we would like to reduce others to an instrument - a mirror”⁸⁵⁶. Interestingly enough, Wolf-Alice goes to the Duke’s house precisely to work for him. But if it is the slave, Wolf-Alice, who confers on the Duke his identity (she becomes his mirror) and he depends on her to acquire meaning, this process is presented as positive and annuls his self-defeating attitude⁸⁵⁷.

⁸⁵⁵ Jacques Lacan, “The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytical experience”, 3.

⁸⁵⁶ Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, 16.

⁸⁵⁷ The emphasis on the transformative force of work is not the same as the one presented in “Wolf-Alice” though work definitely is a vital step in the evolutionary process of Wolf-Alice from animal to human. Madan Sarup writes: “The Slave transcends himself by working, that is, he educates himself. In his work he transforms things and transforms himself at the same time. In becoming master of Nature by work, the Slave frees himself from Nature, from his own nature, and from the Master. It is because work is an auto-creative act that it can raise him from slavery to freedom. The future and history thus belong not to the warlike Master, who either dies or preserves himself indefinitely in ‘identity to himself’, but to the working Slave”. See Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, p. 22. Teresa Brennan discusses the topic briefly in *History after Lacan* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) 40.

4.12. Conclusion

Her interventions in horror writing supplant dehumanizing and oppressive social constructions, and offer an enthralling vision of permanent liberation from them. How? By insisting that we recognize the feared Other in ourselves, in all its cruelty as well as its beauty.

Gina Wisker, “Revenge of the living doll: Angela Carter’s horror writing”, 117

The collection represents therefore a journey of the progression of girls always marked by grotesqueness. But because the emblem of the grotesque is the bloody chamber, the quality of the grotesque accompanies the evolution of that chamber. The book opens and closes with bloody chambers. In the first case it is the traditional place of Bluebeard’s murders and in the second it refers to the Duke’s bedroom. There is undoubtedly a transformation of content which is not merely an inversion, a change from a room where women suffer into a room of a man’s misery, where a mirror reflects his emptiness. There is also a positive change, one that is associated forcefully with the grotesque. Despite the human remains lying about, the Duke’s castle has none of the goriness of a Gilles de Rais castle with which the initial castle can be identified with. Though the Duke’s place is a place of death and his chamber reminds us of an Iberian butcher shop (*BC*, 120), the bloody chamber of the last tale cannot be equated with that of the opening story. The chief difference is not the emancipation of women since in all of Angela Carter’s tales that is, however polemically, at least made a possibility if not exactly achieved. In “The Bloody Chamber” as in “Wolf-Alice” the female character is “saved” from the male threat. The prime distinction between the two tales resides in the males: in “The Bloody Chamber”, with a structure that is rebellious but still closer to the fairy tale structure, he cannot be redeemed and the woman can only be saved by his death but in “Wolf-Alice” he can through female intervention.

In spite of the problems that might be inherent in Carter’s view of a new world, at the very least it must be recognised it represents a constructive evolution away from mere obliteration of patriarchy into a negotiation in terms of politics of gender. Angela Carter’s

“intransigent, bloody-minded, mocking, self-conscious and excessive” writing has made it difficult to locate it within a single tendency, be it the Gothic, fantasy or other⁸⁵⁸. The concept that best comprises all those traits is the grotesque so that it is in a sense ironic that it is through the grotesque that she carries out that negotiation whose prime focus is, as Gina Wisker noted, home. Here lies Carter’s association with magical realism; fantasy does not belong to another world, it dwells in ours so that Carter’s writing is not escapist. Monsters live in our homes. Wisker’s own attempt at describing Carter’s writing is that it is “magical realism with a healthy dose of sexual politics” and all that we abject from home sweet home⁸⁵⁹. Accordingly in her short essay on the English publication of the German legends of the Brothers Grimm Angela Carter ponders that fairy tales sometimes collapse into matter-of-fact episodes, and, like pricked balloons, the magic inside simply seeps out⁸⁶⁰. What Carter has achieved with *The Bloody Chamber* conveys a similar effect: behind the magic, there are hard pieces of reality.

The measure of the grotesque is also reflected in the evolution of Carter’s writing. If one puts *Fireworks* (1974) in a dialogic relationship with *The Bloody Chamber* it becomes clear that the stories within the 1979 collection respond to the former. “Flesh and the Mirror” for instance is an earlier version of tales on the issues of women, carnality and mirrors⁸⁶¹. In that version the perspective is troubling and the discourse is more philosophical, identical perhaps to what one finds in *The Sadeian Woman*. That is the result of an earlier stage of the debate of the objectification of women both in Carter’s writing and in social and intellectual circles. The mirror is then a device through which women, rather violently or masculinely, construct men in terms of their own image and of their desires; it is therefore an instrument of dehumanisation:

The mirror distilled the essence of all the encounters of strangers whose perceptions of one another existed only in the medium of the chance embrace, the accidental. During the durationless time we spent making love, we were not ourselves, whoever that might have been, but in some sense the ghosts of ourselves. But the selves we were not, the selves of our own

⁸⁵⁸ Lorna Sage, introduction to *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, 1.

⁸⁵⁹ Gina Wisker, “Revenge of the living doll: Angela Carter’s horror writing”, 130.

⁸⁶⁰ See Angela Carter, “The German Legends of the Brothers Grimm”, *Expletives Deleted*, p. 35.

⁸⁶¹ Taking the same issues as the main themes of the tale one finds in *Fireworks* the short tale entitled “Reflections”. The remarks on its tone and approach apply as in the case of “Flesh and the Mirror”. However, the tale is more relevant *vis-à-vis* *The Passion of New Eve* and it not being at study here I will not develop this potential line of investigation.

habitual perceptions of ourselves, had a far more insubstantial substance than the reflections we were. The magic mirror presented me with a hitherto unconsidered notion of myself as I. Without any intention of mine, I had been defined by the action reflected in the mirror. I beset me. I was the subject of the sentence written on the mirror.⁸⁶²

The cryptic discourse articulates a hopeless feeling of relationships which are no more than the chance encounter between strange bodies. It is certainly a reflection of her personal experience at the time, namely the trip to Japan and her divorce, which justifies the emotional and existential emptiness of “Flesh and the Mirror”. But in the late 1970s she recovered and the publication of *The Bloody Chamber* brings with it the revelation that encounters with strangers need not be meaningless and futile. Thus in the emergence of love between Wolf-Alice and the Duke the mirror plays neither the role of pornographic tool nor is it the splitting device distancing and hurting people even further. Once liberated from rhetorical death-traps, humans, even creatures vaguely human, can aspire to being worthy of affection. The grotesque, which appears in *Fireworks* in a more diluted and negative pose, introduces in *The Bloody Chamber*, amidst blood and mutilation, an indisputable life-affirming hope. Thus my insisting on an in-depth reading of *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. A different proceeding can lead to conclusions such as Iwona Maria Kubacki’s for whom “The Bloody Chamber”, like Carter’s earlier works *The Magic Toyshop*, *The Passion of New Eve* and *The Sadeian Woman*, focuses on the negative side of carnival alone.

Another example corroborates this view. In *Fireworks* there is a story of yet another sadistic man who teaches the woman he actually bought, not so differently from the acquisition the little Marquise saw herself involved in, to eat meat. “Master” bears several points of connection with tales from *The Bloody Chamber* but since it is particularly relevant for “The Bloody Chamber” I will highlight only those aspects which gain a new significance when bearing this tale in mind. The opposition carnivore versus herbivore is literal as the Master teaches the Indian woman from a tribe in the Amazon forest whose only food was roots, to kill and consume cooked meat. The Master is a symbol of colonial deadliness, “[s]laughter [being] his only proclivity and his unique skill”, revealing a postcolonial awareness in Angela Carter’s writing characteristic of at least some of her fiction but in terms of this particular

⁸⁶² Angela Carter, “Flesh and the Mirror”, *Fireworks*, 64–65.

short story it is related more closely to “Our Lady of the Massacre”⁸⁶³. The Master kills everything in sight and transforms Friday, as she is literarily and aptly renamed, into a mass killer as well (Wolf-Alice is also compared to Friday, *BC*, 125). Nature is destroyed by his ferocious thirst for destruction and she rapes and corrupts successively. Eventually she realises he is death itself and she death’s apprentice. The corruption element in “The Bloody Chamber” is apparent in a cruder manner in “Master”. But if in the former tale the process is interrupted and the Marquise gains with the experience, in “Master” Friday is not deterred. Though the hunter seems aware he is creating a killing machine which will turn against him he has no more fear or respect than he previously had: “death had glorified itself to become the principle of his life. But when he looked at her, he saw only a piece of curious flesh he had not paid much for”⁸⁶⁴.

The Marquis and the Master resemble in their sadistic sexual abuse of women (the latter despising all living things), in that they re-create the women they acquire to keep them company according to that depraved principle, and in that they are consumed by a kind of madness symbolising their deviance. Friday, on the other hand, changes into a jaguar much like Sufiya and for similar reasons, and destroys the source of evilness implanted in her. In *The Bloody Chamber* there is no woman like Friday for she bears the imprint of negativity which is not in accord with the spirit of *The Bloody Chamber* where an affirming trait always exists. She is certainly not like the animal women of “The Tiger’s Bride”, “The Company of Wolves” or even “Wolf-Alice”; not even like the vampire Countess. In these women a form of goodness is preserved. She is instead an heir to the Marquis of the title story, and akin to the murderesses of “The Erl-King” and “The Werewolf” but much darker. Friday is a symbol of the worst consequences of male abuse of women who from continuous de-humanisation really become inhumane which is quite different from the simple non-moralising transformation into an animal. “Master” is thus representative of Carter’s own failure to see an escape from the patriarchal world of the time of the production of the tale. Her views in 1978-79 had certainly changed and in *The Bloody Chamber* she was able at least to formulate concepts of femininity that battled against the repression that defined women as worthless, or merely having the value of their flesh.

⁸⁶³ Angela Carter, “Master”, *Fireworks*, 73. “Our Lady of the Massacre” appears in *Black Venus*, pages 18-31.

⁸⁶⁴ Angela Carter, “Master”, 74-75.

The topic remained controversial enough so that in 1985 David Punter still maintained that in Angela Carter's novels (he does not refer to *The Bloody Chamber*) "the sexual act can be figured only as an instant emission, an eruption of desire so small and so unsatisfactory that it serves only to confirm the boundary between the genders and the incompatibility of desires"⁸⁶⁵. With novels that followed, namely *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*, this postulation is denied since a more affirmative view of sexuality and of feminine sexuality specifically is constructed, a tendency which begins to appear in *The Bloody Chamber*. That much is achieved, Gina Wisker insists, not by denying horror but by recognising it in our daily experience and in the relation it maintains with myth:

The human mind forces experience into familiar shapes so that it can comprehend it, but in so doing it simplifies into stereotype and myth, which themselves seem then to us to have safely embodied the less pleasant of those experiences, mental or physical, by objectifying and fictionalising them in this way. Stereotypes, myths and fictions are shorthand, but they exercise a control on the expressions and forms of the everyday world. Carter particularly intends to demythologise the fictions related to sexuality, and horror is one of her means. She exposes the relationship between sex and power, the erotic, the perverse; she digs behind the ostensibly comfortable and safe surfaces and shows up oppressions, reification, torture and dehumanisation lurking in the everyday. One way she does this is by re-examining and re-writing fairy-tales and myths, and another is to explore the incidents in which the everyday explodes, revealing the horrors which lurk behind it. ⁸⁶⁶

Sarah Gamble argues that the collection shows Carter's interest in predation as well as in "renegotiating the relationship between predator and prey"⁸⁶⁷. An example is given by the reinterpretation given of the same story, Beauty and the Beast, in "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" and "The Tiger's Bride" where in the former she is a daddy's girl, with the traditional fairy tale marriage and promise of domesticity. It is a "relatively tame rewrite", she says⁸⁶⁸. But in "The Tiger's Bride" the Beauty and the Beast is turned upside down and she becomes an animal.

What I have tried to demonstrate is that the same relationship is established between other tales which are less evidently linked. Moreover in the rewritings it is not just proved that

⁸⁶⁵ David Punter, "Supersessions of the masculine", 42.

⁸⁶⁶ Gina Wisker, "On Angela Carter", 245.

⁸⁶⁷ Sarah Gamble, *Angela Carter: Writing from the Frontline*, 133.

the prey and predator can swap places but that the very concept of predator and prey can be reformulated. Beauty as an animal in “The Tiger’s Bride” is not a carnivore but in the “The Company of Wolves” it is the girl who eats the wolf⁸⁶⁹. The wolf in “The Company of Wolves” is carnivorous (so there are only predators and no prey in the story, annulling the value of the concept itself which can only make sense in relation to the prey) but the Duke eats only dead flesh. In consequence, goodness and evil are also attributed to characters almost as a juggling game. The Marquis is sadistic, Mr Lyon tame, the Erl-King is good but unintentionally deadly and Wolf-Alice and the Duke are neither. The consequences in the end of exploring the grotesque to such an effect are extremely positive mainly because through Angela Carter’s writing the reader is given the opportunity to sink into her/his secret self and to imagine “a different kind of self-reflexivity, one pouring out of touch, *voive*, and blood”⁸⁷⁰:

Glittering, contradictory, intertextually familiar and playful, Angela Carter’s horror brings into the clear light of the semi-realistic domestic kitchen, the nasty thoughts, fears and nightmares lurking in the cellars of our minds. And she gives us something magical too. Hers is not the horror of the abyss: it is not ultimately a black vision, it’s too Rabelaisian for that, too funny and celebratory.⁸⁷¹

⁸⁶⁸ Loc. cit.

⁸⁶⁹ See John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, p. 83.

⁸⁷⁰ Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*, 66. Italics added.

⁸⁷¹ Gina Wisker, “On Angela Carter”, 247.

5. Conclusion

If I seem a little bizarre, remember the wild profusion of my inheritance... perhaps, if one wishes to remain an individual in the midst of the teeming multitude, one must make oneself grotesque.

Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 109



In the introduction to *Feminism, Bakhtin and the Dialogic* Dale Bauer and Susan Jaret McKinstry write that “[d]ialogism, Bakhtin’s theory about encountering otherness through the potential of dialogue, is central to feminism practice because it invites new possibilities for activism and change”⁸⁷². Though Angela Carter’s work continues to arouse controversy there is no doubt that her writing is dialogic both ontologically (it explores the multiple possibilities of being Other as much in oneself as in others) and in purpose (it instigates action and change). Dialogism becomes therefore part of Angela Carter’s particular type of feminist writing. In a similar vein, María del Mar Pérez Gil links Angela Carter’s specific modulation of magical realism to feminism. The dialogical nature of Carter’s writing is inferred from Pérez Gil’s words when she writes:

En su producción se rechaza cualquier tipo de jerarquía y se introducen multiplicidad de interpretaciones, puntos de vista, voces o géneros para profanar las categorías únicas y excluyentes. En la obra crítica y narrativa de esta escritora se desautoriza lo autoritario, se desmitifica el Mito, se deshace lo acabado, se destruyen los límites entre lo real y lo fantástico, se desafía lo sagrado y se desplaza lo oficial para introducir lo marginal y lo subversivo. La actitud desmitificadora de Carter se debe en gran parte a su ideología feminista. [...] El lenguaje en varias de las novelas ayuda a crear universos fantásticos, y dichas construcciones lingüísticas y subjetivas tienen la misión de revelar la forma en la que el ser humano inventa

⁸⁷² Dale Bauer and Susan Jaret McKinstry ed., intr. *Feminism, Bakhtin and the Dialogic* (New York: State University Press of New York, 1991).

verdades y sostiene creencias que tienen su origen en opiniones arbitrarias, relativas y momentáneas.⁸⁷³

The assertion that there is an affiliation between dialogism and feminism proves despite Bakhtin's blindness to women's literature (his defence of the novel as the most suitable means for polyphony makes it even stranger that he fails to mention great women novelists such as the Brontë sisters and George Eliot) and of the absence of women in the dialogical position Bakhtin aims to occupy in his own writing, that dialogism can be used to women and women writers' advantage. In other words, "to engage in a lively dialogue between the heteroglossic languages of Bakhtin and feminist theory" is not only possible but fruitful as a process which is forever incomplete and which women, as well as postcolonial writers, can participate in⁸⁷⁴. In this sense, voices and consciousnesses become involved in the dialogical construction of meaning, which could be associated with *differánce* (difference and deferment) depending on the socio-political conditions and motivations of that given moment in history. Gender relations must therefore be understood as social and emotional manifestations of consciousnesses which are by no means limited to these relations. A dialogical perspective enables us to read relationships and writing as part of consciousnesses in dialogue with themselves (gender, class and race as inter-dependent factors) and with other consciousnesses. Dialogical writers set those voices intercommunicating so that in the process the mechanisms of construction of subjecthood and their historical experience are revealed.

There was a dialogical premise behind this study which conditioned the selection of the literary texts. My goal was not to contribute to the debate over the relations between dialogism and feminism, at least not so much on a theoretical level, but instead to explore, in the spirit of Bakhtin in relation to Rabelais and Dostoevsky, how the dialogical principle and particularly the grotesque have been used by contemporary writers to uncover or to manifest their views on gender politics. I have striven therefore to maintain an open, anti-monologic approach by adopting a number of attitudes:

- The textual material that has been used has not been drawn from a single geo-political or literary source, and ranges, in fact, from "traditionally" imperialist centres to former colonised spaces. As postcolonial theorists have acknowledged, such terms have, in

⁸⁷³ Maria del Mar Pérez Gil, quoted in Fernando Galván, José Santiago Fernández and Juan Francisco Elices, *El realismo mágico en lengua inglesa: tres ensayos*, 14.

⁸⁷⁴ Karen Hohne and Helen Wussow ed., intr. *A Dialogue of Voices: Feminist Literary Theory and Bakhtin*, viii.

effect, lost their place and even more frequently, spaces and people, and consequently writers, have turned into hybridised products where the form of hybridism attests to a specific historical experience and individual relation to that experience. Nevertheless, I have tried not to fall in the pit of homogeneity of globalised literature but instead to disclose, through the grotesque, the particularities of the texts with reference to their aesthetics and ideals. Following an argument encapsulating a contradiction, Salman Rushdie asserts that India is multi-cultural and that simultaneously that it has no culture of its own⁸⁷⁵. “*Literature*”, he wrote, “*has little or nothing to do with a writer’s home address*”⁸⁷⁶. Though the assertion might sound too extreme for some, there is no doubt that the grotesque has this quality as well and that it can be found invading as well as leaking out of all homes of the writers of my study.

The dichotomy of centre and Other begins to fall apart when one considers Salman Rushdie and Ben Okri’s experiences, as well as Angela Carter’s life-changing stay in Japan. However, I aimed to create a balance through works by writers whose experience was not so heavily moulded by or directly exposed their concern with postcoloniality though their work is inflected with its dynamic. Such is the case of Githa Hariharan and Gabriel García Márquez, the latter providing in addition a dialogical crossing with a different form of postcoloniality conveyed through a different history and a different language.

- The novels and short stories have been selected also bearing in mind that both female and male writers needed to be represented not only to prevent a monologic approach on my part but also to investigate the level of multi-voicedness that writers invest their works with. In that respect, it can be said that Angela Carter’s short stories give voice to both genders and even to different sorts of masculinity and femininity shaped by different degrees and types of grotesqueness; in *Pinocchio in Venice* both Pinocchio and the Blue Fairy undergo extreme metamorphoses of grotesqueness; in *Shame* Sufiya is a grotesque figure whose silence is also a voice, the voice of the repressed, which makes her more effective as a symbol than Madame Koto who, being inappropriately, even unjustly marked at a later stage as grotesque, sets forth Okri’s difficulty in positioning women favourably in society and actively in politics. The only other noteworthy female character in *The Famished Road*, mother, confirms my assumption as she is so secondary her suffering is overlooked and her silence, unlike Sufiya’s, reveals acceptance. Sufiya and Okri’s mother can therefore be said to emblematised two oppositional forms of womanhood where the grotesque plays the most significant role in

⁸⁷⁵ See Salman Rushdie ed., intr. *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997*, p. xvii.

⁸⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, xv. Italics in the text.

setting them apart: the animalised, sexually free, violent woman versus the beautiful, oppressed, powerless mother and wife. The transformation of Azaro's mother into a political woman in *Infinite Riches* goes only to prove that both as a woman and as a poor person, she remains powerless to fight the injustices of everyday Nigeria. Nevertheless, though the grotesque can embody a form of liberation, two points cripple its effectiveness: Firstly Sufiya's grotesqueness is not innate; it is the expression of psychological and physical violence or a bucket of other people's shame, as Salman Rushdie puts it. Secondly the grotesque is subject to the seasonal quality of carnival, that is, it can only exist for a restricted period of time beyond which it becomes merely destructive.

- The carnivalesque-grotesque must be sought, according to Bakhtin, in the novel, thus the main corpus of my study has concentrated on this genre. The discourse of the novel is itself always in the process of becoming something else, a type of literary grotesque creature. The short story fits into the framework as a realisation of Bakhtin's idea of "novelising" all genres so as to resist to authority. As Diane Price Herndl has explained, Bakhtin's vision of the novel makes it an extension in contemporary literature of the festival of laughter and carnival:

The novel is able to resist hierarchy and achieve carnival laughter because of its "double-voicedness," its "dialogism". [...] Meaning is created not through a single voice, but in the interaction of voices – that is, in dialogue. [...] The novel, because it records ordinary speech (or at least attempts to do so), also participates in the interaction of voices. This may be done through many means, but as long as there is conflict in the novel between characters' voices or between the narrator's voice and the characters', there will be "heteroglossia," multiple voices expressing multiple ideologies from different strata of language-in-use. This always leaves the novel speaking more than one language.⁸⁷⁷

My focus has largely been on women's experience because the lower bodily stratum of the Bakhtinian ideology is personified by female bodies, the pregnant hags, which, as critics have gradually realised, institute a relationship between the two factors which cannot develop in relation with men's bodies. What is at stake and paraphrasing Ruth Ginsburg, is not the material bodily principle but a maternal bodily principle which explains the malleable

⁸⁷⁷ Diane Price Herndl, "The Dilemmas of a Feminine Dialogic", Dale Bauer and Susan Jaret McKinstry ed., *Feminism, Bakhtin and the Dialogic*, 9.

interpenetration of the theory of abjection⁸⁷⁸. Another reason for a weighty presence of the feminine in my work is that writers have been increasingly interested in women's issues probably due to the fact that recently, and particularly with the advent of feminist politics, women as well as men have begun to enquire about the roles and places each occupy and whether indeed there are such things as allotted gender parts. As women's significance in making history is gradually recognised, academics look back at the past and search for the presence of women in the history that has rubbed them out and try to unearth the impact of their being there. Writers have participated in the process and, realising that history is a construction based on selection, re-think and re-construct history presenting possibilities, and not necessarily theories, of how mechanisms of manipulation such as sacrificial victimisation work to make men and women alike cooperate in the repressive control of one of the genders. The grotesque emerges in this context as a favoured aesthetic and philosophy whose spirit encapsulates the intensity of the violent experience of women. However, being a spirit which dwells both in the terrible and the beautiful, its use reflects this ambiguity, that is, the grotesque woman might be admired for her strength, malleability, and ability to evolve but she might also arouse feelings of disgust and anger. At a deeper level, she might even reveal the writer's own ingrained pre-conceived patterns of accepted forms of femininity and masculinity which s/he had actually been trying to contradict.

This dilemma has also been in the background of Mary Russo's discussion on the matter. When carnival adopts, as it often does, a body to personify its riotous and transgressive energy it should be taken into account, as Mary Russo argues Bakhtin did not, that the body in question does not appear symbolically denuded, that is, that it already carries meaning. Race, class and gender are certainly among the characteristics any body is necessarily invested with. That being the case, when a woman's body is made the central focus of carnival spectacle those characteristics become part of the significance of carnivalesque degradation. It seems to me that the wider spectre of meanings was camouflaged in the purely carnivalesque-grotesque view because Bakhtin's models were not *real* people, but mere artefacts of old pregnant women. I must therefore agree with Mary Russo in acknowledging this deficiency of the Bakhtinian grotesque.

Nevertheless, this could not represent the end of the controversy of the carnivalesque-grotesque as I saw it. A series of factors still needed to be accounted for. Firstly, there is no doubt that the bodily grotesque has been extensively used in contemporary literature to render

⁸⁷⁸ Ruth Ginsburg, "The Pregnant Text: Bakhtin's Ur-Chronotope", 178.

an image of the empowered woman, as for instance, in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* with the character Fevvers or with Saleem in *Midnight's Children*. Secondly, the psychological grotesque, and particularly madness, seems unable to effect the same degree of transgressive energy, though when allied to the physical grotesque the combination conveys a more powerful effect. Bilquis is, in this respect, a prime example of the feeble results achieved through the creation of a primarily Kayserian grotesque. She is permanently terrified by the ghosts of her imagination, makes herself miserable and contributes with her silence or violence to the grotesque deaths of her two daughters. Thirdly and more importantly, it must be recognised that women may evince the desire to become the stars of the spectacle or to possess the ability to subvert the situation and, because they are subjects and not portable objects, to take advantage of the situation using the grotesque to formulate their version of themselves in the topsy-turvy world of carnival in which their sexual and gender specificity is part of a new set of meanings.

On drawing attention to Satyasama in *When Dreams Travel* I have tried to demonstrate how this gender-motivated subversion could work. The character is a fictionalised version of the anatomical freak, who entertained millions of European and American onlookers especially during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and of a magical realist non-dying creature. This ape-woman is alienated by her family and society who are frightened by but also attracted to not only her revolting appearance but also her singing. Though Satyasama is regarded as a retarded fool, this incomprehensible singing and her disregard for their power to destroy her terrify the Eternals. My argument is that her singing, which alternates with her silence, stands instead for an alternative language to the patriarchal and that her language does not incorporate violence. The reaction of the community to this revolutionary alternative which puts at risk the existing social structure is precisely to resort to violence to eliminate the threat. The grotesque thus changes its quality. From an initial form which was merely a condition, later on it is an effect of direct action. Submitted to incarceration and psychological violence, Satyasama, who had also been freakified as a sex slave, starts to lose her beautiful fur. Abuse gives her the appearance of a mistreated animal. The next step in producing the grotesque is her hanging and dismemberment but, as happens with Sufiya in *Shame*, though the grotesqueness is marked on Satyasama's body it shouts out the inner grotesqueness of the people who caused it and of the system that instigates it.

The novel offers Satyasama a counterpart, who is no other than the epitome of the female story teller, Shahrzad. Shahrzad speaks the language of power, the language that

guarantees her physical integrity, which is meant to induce the reader to believe that it equates with her appropriation of authority and, through it, her being spared the pains of grotesque-producing aggression. However, Githa Hariharan reinvents the story to reveal Shahrzad's own story to be a deceiving fallacy. She is immersed in grotesque fluids, her body dismembered and violated by her father's incestuous fantasies. Shahrzad's ambition to maintain her position as the amazing performer of the public story-telling spectacle, which she eventually loses anyway, forces her to self-sacrifice for there was nothing she would not do to gain, by association and not actually appropriating, access to authority. Shahrzad's intentions fail in the end because she tries to sustain a position of power in a masculine world which cannot accommodate a powerful woman. Having been disciplined to sacrifice herself for the benefit of a world that despises her, Shahrzad mistakenly thinks she can use her trained gift for martyrdom in her favour.

Githa Hariharan constructs two possible fates for Shahrzad, imprisonment and execution, and as the author does not feel there to be a symbolic difference between the two, neither is discarded; the image of the floating dismembered body of Shahrzad is unquestionably an image of her defeat and of the heartless violence exerted on women. The novel almost finishes with a taste of hopelessness as neither as producers of a new type, a more tolerant type of language, nor as collaborators in the perpetuation of male language identified with the word of the Father and the Law, can women aspire to survive (the physical grotesqueness symbolising the assault on the difference the gender poses) let alone to tell their own stories, to construct their own meanings and worlds. But because Shahrzad fades away into anonymity and gruesome death and Satyasama's model of love and speech lives on through another slave girl, Dilshad, Githa Hariharan leaves open the possibility for new attempts. One such attempt is no doubt *When Dreams Travel* itself.

By dramatising an extreme application of the manner in which women contribute to their own victimisation *When Dreams Travel* exposes the fierce quality of the system that is so vampiristically sustained. René Girard's insights into the subject of victimisation were groundbreaking for my understanding of many of the novels I proposed to study. He was able to theorise the mechanisms of this system, which he denominated sacrificial ritual. At the root of human social evolution Girard identified murder which has been successively re-enacted and controlled through two mechanisms: mimetic desire and surrogate victimisation. What Martha Reineke was able to demonstrate was that surrogate victimisation is a phallogocratic mechanism as its internal dynamic tends to victimise women. Not only is this mechanism not neutral as

René Girard claimed (because the set of characteristics the ritual victim displays is more likely to be embodied by women) but Reineke also demonstrated that even Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection invests femaleness with a cloak of shattering danger, making men fear them and making women afraid of themselves. The title of Kristeva's book supports the reason for this fear as it points to an exclusive feminine characteristic; the "horror" in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* is the mother. My analyses of the selected texts revealed not that Girard or Kristeva's hypotheses were unfounded but that they posed questions which the theorists had not themselves raised.

The most evident reason for studying *When Dreams Travel* and *Shame* jointly is that they both have as their main characters two animal women, which, in a postcolonial context must in itself deserve attention. But they are more intimately correlated insofar as through those characters the authors fictionalise the grotesque faces and violence of the sacrificial logic. Whereas Satyasama resists, one could almost say in the manner of Mahatma Gandhi and with a similar outcome, by not striking back, Sufiya performs the exact opposite reaction by spreading terror in the country. Moreover, the reader pities Satyasama and is enraged with the level of the injustice committed, thus turning her, in an extreme reading, into a modern martyr emblematising the agony of women in general but particularly in countries experiencing heights of religious fervour. The acceptance of martyrdom offers, as I referred to earlier in relation to Shahrzad, no consolation and creates instead a feeling of aversion towards women who cooperate in their own martyrdom, subvert its value as empowerment and even turn away from other women as their minds have been sadistically corrupted to fight for the honour of self-sacrifice.

Sufiya's increasing monstrosity, which is both physical and moral not only because she murders but because as Angela Carter claimed in *The Sadeian Woman* she is a *woman* who murders, has a direct relation with gender and this, in its turn, with shame through the introduction of the Bakhtinian element of carnivalistic rebirth of Sufiya's brother. Shame, which is also Sufiya's epithet, is a compound concept whose meaning is from the beginning differentiated from the Western idea. By forbidding Omar to feel shame, his three outlandish mothers deny him the tool with which he could feel embarrassment and the virtues of modesty and decency. But stressing the carnivalistic inversion, Omar's deficiency of *sharam* also induced a prohibition of "an ordained place in the world" (S, 9). Likewise, Sufiya's place in the world can never be found as her birth was a failure; she comes into the world to play

the roles of the dominant gender but fatally weakened by being of the “other” gender. Sufiya is a disappointment to her father and shame incarnate, literally her mother’s shame.

If Sufiya is uncontaminated by shame through the metaphor of stupidity (making her one of the various fools of the novel) Omar, a debaucher, is not at the other pole as, unlike the politicians of the novel, his actions are not generated by immoral purposes. Omar has an amoral self which no doubt can cause grief to others but that is not his intention. Sufiya makes a journey from shamelessness (birth) to shame (the immorality of her family is rejected by them and channelled to her, causing her emotional overload) and back to shamelessness (purifying explosion) but Omar’s path is a learning process of shame, the true acceptance of the burden of shame being precisely his not retaliating when Sufiya comes to release it. Omar’s victory is his death as in accepting his shame he proves his dedication to his animal wife.

I have argued that Sufiya’s grotesqueness, specifically her violence and metamorphosis, is integrated in a sacrificial logic that victimises women. Though Julia Kristeva argues that sacrificial logic is a pathological state of the Symbolic, which is always the indisputable condition of language and social development and which in its ideal form does not identify with any oppressive system (patriarchal domination is not denied but apparently the form the Symbolic assumes does not affect Kristeva’s overall opinion of its “essence”), Kristeva’s own theorisation of a subjectivity theory through abjection of the maternal also presupposes violence. What Kristeva defines as death-work is precisely the process whereby a violent separation from the mother’s body and its imposing status of non-beingness is carried out, making “the hope for rebirth [...] [to be] short-circuited by the very splitting: the advent of one’s own identity demands a law that mutilates” (*PH*, 54). The procedures of death-work are distinctly violent and they additionally include the permanent threat and nausea of self-abjection provoked whenever a thetic crisis emerges as a result of a boundary failure between the fragile Symbolic self and any non-authorized maternal element (as opposed to the sanitised version of the maternal). Death-work is thus endlessly repeated throughout one’s life for if a crack appears in the seamless surface of one’s constructed identity, allowing the grotesque body of the mother to come into view and re-enacting the conflicts with the female archaic, the “unnameable” or “the ‘other’ without a name”, the process of preservation of subjectivity is ignited through violence and the logics of prohibition and exclusion (*PH*, 58). The construction of subjectivity thus presupposes a sacrificial economy wherein the mother, and by extension all women as mothers *in potentia*, is obliterated. It must be concluded then, that underneath Julia Kristeva’s formulation of a sacrificial economy is a notion of self-sacrifice as

women, as reductionist personifications of motherhood, must themselves carry out this death-work and thus act against their mothers and themselves. Moreover, they accept their role in a process of social stability that depends on their scapegoating.

Sufiya's grotesqueness, however, is an effect of the girl's inability to perform the role of the scapegoat. Having been chosen as such, her transformation into a wild animal, both in the sense that it is aggressive but also in that it is free, represents more the appalling consequence of scapegoating than a willed getaway. Through the grotesque therefore, the disregarded standpoint of the old pregnant hag, or of the spanked Catchpole, or indeed of the scapegoat, is brought to our attention. It is not the case, however, of giving back the voice to the individual in a system that privileges social stability. It is, instead, the consideration of consciousnesses which have been overlooked in Bakhtin's formulation of a theory of carnival and even in Kristeva's defence of the Symbolic system and Girard's account of surrogate victimisation. These consciousnesses belong to the "Other", in the textual cases in question, women, the former colonised and even men who become alienated when they give in to maternal abjection. The dialogical activity of all the consciousnesses is indeed at the heart of the meeting point of abjection and the grotesque: "From one identity to another, unfinished like the novel itself, abjection is resorbed in the grotesque: a way of living it from the inside" (*PH*, 165).

My analysis of *Pinocchio in Venice* considers male surrender to the maternal matrix to a substantial extent. This novel therefore emphasises male physical grotesqueness in parameters parallel to Sufiya's (metamorphosis and loss of boundaries) and the maternal abject. However, in *Shame* another type of male grotesqueness is used to counterbalance Sufiya's character. Omar's characterisation accentuates the comic-grotesque more than Sufiya's does. Though Omar is physically grotesque due to his excessive weight which is represented allied with his moral faults, carnivalesque details are more abundant: his being born in a death-bed (reinstating the pregnant death motif), his first vision being of the Impossible Mountains (but in an inverted perspective), the garland episode, or the death of Raza Hyder's servant. However, the carnivalesque-grotesque is complemented with the element of the grotesque maternal, again in an evocation of the abject. Both hypnosis and vertigo are associated with his life-long fear of the frontier which can be linked to the mother's body, or, in his case, with the mothers' bodies. As Sufiya battled for her boundaries and lingered in states between Beauty and the Beast, Omar's vertigo symbolises the terrible influence of his eerie mothers and his constant fight against being lost in the abjection they are made to embody so intensely. The clear echo

that the last scene provides of *Frankenstein* as the monster comes to Victor Frankenstein and Elizabeth's wedding night is re-interpreted in the light of the element of abjection that is present in *Shame*. The groom is still the doctor and also a fiend and, in the sense that he helped create the physical monstrous creature and refused to destroy his creation's female companion (here the same character), he is the father. Concomitantly Omar dies in the hands of his creature as well. But though here the monster is also the bride in the end the outcome is similar: the bride is killed. Sufiya is therefore also a revitalization of the bride of Frankenstein that, like Elizabeth, is turned into a victim.

Her victimisation continues thus to be associated with femaleness. Sufiya's scapegoating implies the repression of the performance and practice of that very femaleness, creating an energy produced by frustration and causing a thetic crisis until abjection is finally installed. Sufiya is denied her place as a daughter, as wife, as a mother and even as a lover. Nullified, she can only dis-embody, that is, on metamorphosing into a beast and on embracing abjection she becomes not Sufiya at all but the embodied *principle* of violence. Lack of being activates the mimetic desire of becoming like the women surrounding her (in particular a mother like her sister and a lover like Shahbanou) which allied to the other mechanism of sacrifice at work, surrogate victimisation, triggers the chain of murderous violence that instead of protecting society at large devastates it.

The same pattern of the sacrificed woman in the name of social preservation turned into an animal appears in *Del amor y otros demonios*. The novel is also embedded with magical realism where postcolonial consciousness is presented through a simple means; the story is set in a period of colonial rule but it develops not according to the interests of imperialist thought but concentrates instead on the experience of one who in historical records has no voice: a girl. Through this novel Gabriel García Márquez recreates the brutal action of institutions that reinforce the economic and cultural dominance of the empire but he also questions the extremist position which reinstates this type of dichotomy of One/Other and rethinks it in terms of ambiguity.

Sierva María presents several characteristics common to Satyasama and Sufiya: their gender, their youth, alienation from family and society, the imposed adoption of the scapegoating role and, indeed, animal metamorphosis. Satyasama and Sufiya's use of language was a significant part of their characterisation; the former was deemed to have a child-like mind and control of language and the latter was actually given by the author a puerile intellect and therefore language. Though the novels dramatise an effort by authoritative forces to

infantilise women or to use infantilism symbolically these women are, in fact, quite young. The youngest of all is Sierva María, only twelve years old but whose experience is treated by the author and by the characters he creates as that of a young woman. The only angle that can be adopted secondarily in treating Sierva María as a child is solely that of child neglect and ill-treatment but not necessarily, for instance, that of sexual abuse as she displays the emotional maturity of a young woman.

Sierva María's temperament and her attitude towards language thus exhibit a common preoccupation but a different treatment of these themes. She is resilient and combative where Satyasama is placid and Sufiya involuntarily hostile; she is a polyglot who chooses the languages she wants to speak where Satyasama is silent and closed in the circuit of her own language and Sufiya linguistically impoverished. Before the crisis is installed in the colonial city where Sierva María lives, which takes the form of the Girardian epitome of the plague, the girl already stands out in terms of her poor education, close association with African culture and people, and unguarded behaviour. In terms of gender and social position she confirms Martha Reineke's arguments that mark the female as a primary victim. Sierva María has similarities with Angela Carter's animal women as well, particularly with Wolf-Alice, for her behaviour is animalistic. Not only is she associated with several animals but she also, and primarily, has an animal attitude towards her bodily functions as a consequence of a neglected education. This typically Bakhtinian trait is destabilized in the light of the social and religious codes regulating the body. As a result, the purely earthy, biological body is reinterpreted in moral terms and neutralised.

The chief representative of the authority that is called to perform her neutralisation and to regain control over the rebellious body is the Catholic Church through the infamous action of the Holy Office. Making her a prisoner in a convent with the excuse of controlling a plague that never existed, the Church makes its own mark on the girl's flesh that accentuates her being different by displaying, as suggested by Girard, signs of *lack* of cultural and social differentiation (socialisation with the black Other, assimilation of their culture, and socially inappropriate freedom for a woman). As the sacrificial ritual is performed in a time of crisis, that is, of deficiency in establishing firmly the divisions that give meaning to social relations, Sierva María's body is used so that through the wounds that the Church itself produces some sort of differentiation is brought about. The paranoid fear of the plague is, however, meaningfully unsupported though another, hidden, deeper but deadlier threat does exist:

corruption and laxity of morality of the white “superior” and of the members of the Church itself.

In a way similar to Satyasama, to Sierva María are attributed the powers of the witch who through her singing causes the world’s evils and therefore the righteous arm of the Church is called to intervene, again, as had been the Department of Shame, Fear and Loneliness. Through the typecasting of the witch the mechanism of surrogate victimisation is put to work. In this context a mode of the grotesque comes about through abjecting methods. But the abject, present through illness, infectious fluids and blood, has its meaning subverted as it also possesses an affirmative side; Cayetano’s attendance of Sierva María’s wounds, their sharing the cleaning of the cell and especially his picking the parasites off her viscid body, originate the emergence of the couple’s romantic relationship. The relationship occurs at a moment of thetic crisis for Cayetano, who allows himself to indulge in the abject pleasures of grotesqueness. However, when Sierva María’s grotesqueness ceases to be identified with the sign of her human fragility and begins to be thought of as sinfulness, Cayetano retreats. The abject delights that the dog-woman could provide, which were not limited to sexual satisfaction but which, much more dangerously, also involved affection, are substituted with identity-threatening abjection.

Del amor y otros demonios, like *Shame* and *When Dreams Travel*, closes with the death of the young woman. The Church is not redeemed for after the intervention of the Bishop and of the Abbess only Cayetano embodied a shred of hope. As he too fails and retreats into the safe structure of a cruel Law by cowardly abandoning Sierva María to her certain death the book seems to end on a dark key. But García Márquez stages a carnivalistic twist, one more noticeable than Rushdie and Hariharan’s, in the motif of rebirth. The novel, whose beginning is in fact its end, confirms the pregnant death motif present in Sierva María’s corpse which had the strange appearance of a newborn baby. Many years later, when her body is exhumed, the miraculous growth of her hair in death attests to her sainthood (after all, only the other face of a witch, as people had said on the occasion of Sierva María’s birth) at the same time as it symbolises a rebirth and a continuation of the form of life she bravely fought for.

Though Bakhtin believed that the carnivalesque-grotesque in its superlative form had not survived in the twentieth century by reason of a severance from its popular origin, many critics who have embraced the ideal of the Bakhtinian principle insist that it has indeed endured by taking over different cultural compositions. David Danow alleges that Bakhtin’s formulation of the carnivalesque-grotesque can still be found in Latin American magical

realism; my choosing *Del amor y otros demonios* to include in my study on the grotesque was, in tune with Danow, to demonstrate that the carnivalesque-grotesque is thriving, at least in literature. Most, if not all, of Gabriel García Márquez's literary work is immersed in a magical realist aura which in each novel or short story is filtered in various degrees of intensity and variety. Danow also regarded that the gloomier version typified by the Romantic grotesque has not disappeared but has been revived in the literature of the Holocaust. Though Danow has posed a severe problem by not taking into account Bakhtin's negative criticism of the Romantic grotesque and by using the term "grotesque realism" precisely to refer to that type of the grotesque that Bakhtin frowned on, he is nevertheless substantially correct when he associates the Bakhtinian grotesque with Latin American magical realism. However, his direct identification seems to me too extreme for magical realism can exist without the Bakhtinian grotesque. Another point that I wished to make in relation to Danow's theory was that since magical realism is by no means a territory exclusive to Latin America and since it is so intimately related with the Bakhtinian grotesque, then my readings of other texts, especially of postcolonial literature, should take this association into consideration.

David Danow exemplifies the application of the carnivalesque-grotesque in Latin American literature with *El otoño del patriarca*, whose leading theme of tyrannical rule (in Gabriel García Márquez's words, *El otoño del patriarca* is a poem about the loneliness of power⁸⁷⁹) is common to *Shame* thus providing an exceptional means to expand the discussion to the wider context of postcolonialism. But whereas Danow concentrates on the carnivalesque-grotesque traits, in *Shame* those features alternate with grotesque realism as Danow saw it, that is, as a destructive force he relates to the Holocaust. When the subject is institutionalised repression, the presence of the dark grotesque is to be expected and, in fact, it seems to me already present in *El otoño del patriarca*. *Shame* therefore exhibits both types of the grotesque.

Grotesque realism in the Bakhtinian application of the term is drawn in *Shame* from history itself. Through the allegory of Peccavistan Salman Rushdie elaborates a new version of the political life of Pakistan. Its history, which was severely scarred by the rule of General Zia and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, is re-shaped into fiction through the misadventures of the two despots. The prime strategy that Rushdie uses is therefore that of the double, a carnivalesque characteristic through which the grotesque matures.

⁸⁷⁹ Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza and Gabriel García Márquez, *El olor de la guayaba*, 109.

Iskander Harappa is portrayed as a cynical, ambitious and corrupt politician in his handling of national and international affairs. He is depicted as addicted to the most shameful vices, particularly gambling and dissoluteness. Rushdie's device of the embroidered shawls illustrates brilliantly the various fronts that grotesque realism interpreted as ominous energy can assume. Most of them evoke the specific manoeuvres of Iskander Harappa's corrupt government though a few stand out for their graphic display of violence, exposure of the leader's insensitiveness and symbolic value. But the grotesque appears in *Shame* as more than symbolic imagery; it is in the very structure of the novel, establishing an undercurrent link of shames and bonds which inflate the apparently unrelated deaths with meanings which leak into them from other deaths.

The imagery of pregnant death that is so abundant in the novel (Nishapur's secret passages, the dumb-waiter, Omar's dream cell - or perhaps factual cell - Iskander Harappa's death-cell, the attic, and Good News's fertile womb) is sublimated in that it reproduces and adds new meaning to deaths which are never isolated. In this respect, Iskander Harappa's death is emblematic; Hyder's perverted revenge for the death of his son while still in the womb is to replicate that same death by having Iskander Harappa hanged as well. Simultaneously, Hyder's own daughter also hangs herself so that purposefully, and not accidentally as with her still-born brother, her children are killed. Hyder's end is therefore already contained in Iskander Harappa's execution as his lineage, both Sufiya and Good News, are bringers of death, the latter to Hyder's own grandchildren. The fact that a double execution is performed on Iskander Harappa and that he is already a corpse when he is hanged only supports the view that the cycle of pregnant deaths has a centrifugal effect but, as it broadens, it does not lose power and is instead nourished by the very destruction it precipitates on the way. This is, in my perspective, the justification for the nuclear bomb-like explosion at the end.

The use of the grotesque is thorough and effective. As Iskander Harappa's death is only the culmination of the debasing process he undergoes in jail, so Hyder has to be submitted to degradation before he is liberated into death. The quality of the degradation, again similarly to that of Iskander Harappa, is related with the form of his misdeeds. Hyder's notorious fault was his theocratic rule, also described in a carnivalesque-grotesque manner, but his less public fault, his private monstrous sin, was his misogyny which is designed to reflect a preconceived fault of Pakistani society as a whole. The nature of Hyder's degradation is therefore linked with his deprecation of women which resulted in the deaths, one

metaphorical and one factual, of his two daughters in the name of a son who never was. In the end, Hyder flees disguised as a woman but not just any woman; he is forced to put on the type of femininity his regime created: a veiled woman who was no less liable to the verbal abuse of men as the journey to the town of Q. proved.

Mary Russo's re-visitation of the theory of carnival and the grotesque through a gender-concerned point of view can thus be applied to Hyder's degradation and death. If indeed there is an intention of non-Bakhtinian degradation of Hyder's character through womanhood, the carnivalesque-grotesque moment recovers the dignity of women which had been poignantly removed at an early stage through another male double, Mahmoud the Woman.

In the closing scenes womanhood plays a regenerative function for men and perhaps for the novel itself. Not only does Bilquès participate actively in the fate of the couple, for it is through her intervention that Hyder survives the subsequent riots leading to the downfall of the political order, but for Hyder himself it is by putting on the veil, the sign of a woman's shame and also of death, that he can be reborn. The beautiful nakedness of his final moments and his execution by means of another representation of pregnant death establish therefore that it is only through his termination that his son's death can finally be avenged.

In the same line of thought, Hyder's journey to the land of the archaic mothers represents simultaneously the revenge of offended femininity, epitomised in the grotesque mothers, and a reconciliation with that same femininity. The reconciliation is acted out through abjection, of which the most distinctive element is indifferenciation. However, abject communion is always destructive and is once again materialised through dismemberment. Nonetheless, on emphasising the carnivalesque-grotesque traits of *Shame*, one cannot maintain that it belongs to a type of abject literature. It intersects with it, as magical realism does, but it displays regenerative counter-reactions to the totalitarian regime, to the theme of suffering-horror and to the apocalyptic finale. As Kristeva herself notes, carnival "does not keep to the rigid, that is, moral position of apocalyptic inspiration; it transgresses it, sets its repressed against it – the lower things, sexual matters, what is blasphemous and to which it holds while mocking the law" (*PH*, 205).

The same connection between abjection and dismemberment (and reassembly) is found in *The Famished Road*. The beggars and the spirits are presented in very similar terms which I have identified with the imagery of Boschian and Brueghelian paintings. Recalling the discussion at earlier stages of this study, the likeness between beggars and the spirits discloses

the proximity of polarities, in this case between actual extreme situations of poverty and the realm of magical realism. The realisation of this circumstance adds further evidence to the rootedness in reality of magical realism though what it reveals are layers or multiple forms of reality.

The spirits and the beggars bear the marks of the carnivalesque-grotesque with regards to multiplication, numerousness (their abundance in numbers contrasting with the scarcity of their means), mutability and dynamism. They arouse, in fact, the unsettling feeling of the carnivalesque-grotesque that is common to the Kayserian grotesque; their reality is implausible but palpable and shocking, albeit only insofar as the display of physical otherness does not belong to one's daily life. In other words, the degree of their grotesqueness and magical effect is not the same for someone living in a country devastated by continuous years of war, as frequently happens in "Third World" countries, and for a Western individual whose experience of an acute distinct corporeality results only from accidents and from increasingly fewer birth defects. Though both groups are described in a carnivalesque-grotesque manner, the tone leads me to believe that beggars and spirits alike are meant to appal the reader who can hardly be assumed to be the derelict Nigerian. Therefore the carnivalesque-grotesque, while maintaining the imagery, assumes the opposite effect Bakhtin supported for the medieval and Renaissance grotesque.

One reason that undermines the affirmative interpretation of the grotesque in this context refers to the fact that the beggars and the spirits in particular are embodiments of the gruesome consequence of violence through direct physical attacks or through prolonged insufficiency of a balanced diet and medical care. Considered in the light of Ben Okri's agenda denouncing the inefficiency of Nigerian politicians, these bodies need to horrify to direct attention at the quality of life of millions of Nigerians. They are therefore the face, or rather bodies, of the viciousness of those who are blind to people's suffering as well as the incarnation of those people.

However, in the process of performing his noble intentions, Ben Okri also uses the grotesque negatively. If the spirits and the beggars are embodiments of the people, Madame Koto is the personification of their enemies. Madame Koto's body is also grotesque but contrastive for she displays the excesses of the well-off. My reading of the character though offers a deeper insight. By dismantling the unproductive dichotomy as previously carried out in relation to the beggars and the spirits (regarded as the abusers and the abused), that is, by not considering Madame Koto *only* as the embodiment of a corrupt and wealthy class, through

the imagery of the pregnant death it is possible to interpret the character as a metaphor for the nation and the horrible *abiku* in her womb as the people. The change in perspective allows the responsibility for the country's wreckage not to be attributed to bad political management alone but to a generalised uncontrolled greed, a hunger of a different sort, which is, if indeed, balanced by apathy such as that of the dwellers in Azaro's compound. The image of failure and the suggestion of successive pregnant deaths (Madame's Koto's pregnancy and the blind old man's dream pregnancy) are a vision of the future of Nigeria, a future apparently only rich in deception, grief and hopelessness.

The grotesque is not used negatively only because it is largely deprived of a regenerative ability in spite of the profuse use of the theme of rebirth; the grotesque has an unconstructive impact because, unlike in *When Dreams Travel*, *Del amor y otros demonios* and *Shame*, it is constructed upon the female body and made to represent wickedness as an end in itself. What I set out to prove was that though in *The Famished Road* this aspect retains some of its ambiguity with *Songs of Enchantment* that fragile but extremely meaningful trait is dissolved. Moreover, as in *The Famished Road* it is possible to make a reading of Madame Koto within the scapegoating framework, thus dismantling the underlying structure of social survival, the substandard literary and reductive quality of *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches* cannot be considered in the same way. The characters lack psychological depth and become solely symbols. These symbols are largely grotesque and, also contributing negatively, they nevertheless work differently in the case of the blind wizard and Madame Koto. In fact, as Madame Koto was used to represent the boundless greed of the rich she was the target of her neighbours' loathing; however, the ghastly and mistakenly *male* representation of the hunger of death suffers no reproach from the people (whose voices are reduced in *Songs of Enchantment* in reverse proportion to the increase of mysticism).

Where *The Famished Road* can sustain up to a point the charge of pessimism by reason of its intercalation of defeating episodes with blissful moments of everyday experience, its sequel fails roundly. Azaro's actions emphasise even further his inability to retaliate against the powers of darkness and the photographer, he who exposes the evil within, has no significant counterpart in *Songs of Enchantment*; Madame Koto, who previously could be said to stand for the hard-working entrepreneur, is reduced to a malevolent mystical figure. In *Infinite Riches* her death at the end of the novel coincides with the long-delayed elections and with a mysterious and generalised healthiness and optimistic disposition. Madame Koto's death is received by the common people with resentment, people who could not forget her "relentless domination,

[...] her almost mythic tyranny”⁸⁸⁰. Azaro himself is included: “we did not weep and our faces were so hard that we began to look inhuman, mask-like”⁸⁸¹. But some of her earlier friends prepared a funeral feast “to celebrate the continuity of life, and the persistence of her myth”⁸⁸². This appears to reinstate the ambiguity of the figure but the improbable characterisation of the character in the sequels makes this an argument difficult to sustain. At an earlier stage, Madame Koto had been identified with a valuable idea of African myth; Madame Koto’s death becomes the condition for the birth of the nation but since people and even Azaro, their courageous defender, continue to despise her, they are also annulling the importance of myth in African cultures and thus undermining the success of the birth to come:

Madame Koto died and time changed. Her death altered our lives in ways we could never have foreseen. Her space was taken over by the vicious little monsters of this world: they fed on the myth of her great body. [...] The gates of our sleep burst open and a horde of previously sleeping demons crept into the world. They became real, and began to rule us.

The time of miracles, sorceries, and the multiple layers of reality had gone. The time when spirits roamed amongst human beings, taking human forms, entering our sleep, eating our food before we did, was over. The time of myth died with Madame Koto.⁸⁸³

The grotesque has therefore been a significant structural principle in shaping the many discourses of postcolonialism, all their languages and voices, and thus in contributing to the promotion of multiculturalism. However, the grotesque and its associated images and codes are not exclusive to postcolonial or even to magical realist literature. Reversal, metamorphosis, rebirth, corporeal grotesqueness both by excess as by default, maternal abjection and dismemberment make their appearance in other literary genres. *Pinocchio in Venice* is a novel permeated with all sorts of excesses and its investment in the grotesque is no exception. All scenes are entangled with some form of the grotesque, particularly with the carnivalesque-grotesque in its purest expression as it goes back to carnival itself; not the carnival of the folk people but the most popular carnival of our times in Europe, and through this setting characters are put in a recognisable topsy-turvy world but one which is stretched so as to lose

⁸⁸⁰ Ben Okri, *Infinite Riches*, 326.

⁸⁸¹ Loc. cit.

⁸⁸² Ibid., 327.

⁸⁸³ Ibid., 284.

sight of reality once again and to depart towards a dark fairy tale world. Though the grotesque promotes a particularly harmonious partnership with postcolonial literature, by looking at a novel such as *Pinocchio in Venice* it becomes clear that this is not a mutually dependent relationship as it can be used with more aesthetic purposes and not necessarily be involved in political agendas such as postcolonialism or feminism. That is not to say, however, that Robert Coover is unaware of those issues, as he in fact can resort to some of the themes for his own purposes, but he does not openly manifest any commitment with an ideology.

From the abusive and even frequently scatological language to the assumed opposition between the world of the academy (identified with Order) and the world of carnival, *Pinocchio in Venice* is astoundingly close to a fictional counterpart of Bakhtin's theorisation on the carnivalesque-grotesque, recalling one of Iwona Maria Kubacki's expressions on *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*, that they were "so thoroughly saturated with carnivalesque motifs that she [Angela Carter] might have written them with *Rabelais and His World* open on her lap"⁸⁸⁴. At times, though, *Pinocchio in Venice* becomes dissonant with the propagandised affirmative quality of the grotesque. Language carries aggressiveness along with a comforting sense of familiarity; beautiful Venice is denigrated and dangerous; Pinocchio's infantile gullibility is turned into weakness of character; and feminine gentility is metamorphosed into multiple types of mischievousness.

The novel incorporates the three forms of folk culture delineated by Bakhtin: comic verbal compositions, abusive language and (reproduction of) ritual spectacle instances which is an irony insofar as Coover appropriates them in a highly intellectual manner, thus maintaining the popular root in content but cultivating its distance in terms of form. Coover's style is a celebratory act of his own cultural and literary knowledge and thus, theoretically an impossibility for Bakhtin. However, Coover is not unprecedented for scholars and particularly clergymen have indulged in the pleasure of comic writing but they observed faithfully the premise that such work was a folkloristic piece in every aspect.

Among the many applications of the carnivalesque-grotesque sacred parody stands out: Pinocchio's degradation likened with Christ's suffering and the Blue Fairy with a monstrous personification of a figure recognisable as the Virgin Mary not only because of the religious references but mainly on account of the nature of her relationship with Pinocchio, making the final scenes more emphatically a play on the mythologisation of motherhood than perhaps on the holy figure herself. The connection with the Virgin Mary is indelible

nonetheless as she is the archetype of maternal tenderness, which is the aspect that Coover so systematically deconstructs throughout the novel by having the female figure embody several types of womanhood where all emanate innuendoes of maternal warmth. There is, in addition, the inclusion of a carnivalistic character who is openly a blasphemous and humorous representation of the Virgin.

In the film of his life Pinocchio plays the star role; it is the presentation of a crucifixion and thus he is made to incarnate the role of Christ. But Pinocchio plays the part unwillingly and fights against being sacrificed by children who, in another carnivalesque twist, substitute the Romans and demonstrate enjoyment in the killing. Coover pays attention to the carnivalesque-grotesque quality of every detail; among the many of them are the voice of God/ringleader, Christ's cross/puppet string cross and the crucifixion of the two thieves (La Volpe and Gatto). The main strategy however consists in investing the event of the crucifixion with sexuality which derives from a common and unusual characteristic of both Pinocchio and Christ's birth, the fact that their conception was not the result of sexual intercourse. The matter in question is therefore not merely related to the internal structure of the novel (Pinocchio's sexual obsession with the Blue Fairy) but it also makes inferences external to the novel to do with the dogma of Mary's virginity. Similarly, Pinocchio's frantic desire to become human raises issues not only to do with freakishness and ambiguity but also with the theological reading of Christ's own human status.

The exuberant Madonna of the Organs presents a version of the Virgin Mary severed from the religious construction focused only on her virtues and concentrating instead on the "invisible" body of Christ's mother. In order to make the Virgin a fully corporeal being, Coover went beyond the outward appearance, which can only explore the limits of the ugly and the beautiful, and reconstructed the body from within, or rather, put into view the organic fragments that constituted her. The grotesque thus complements the carnivalistic quality through the anatomical and the visceral. But because the Madonna of the Organs is an androgynous entity and this approach to bodies views them merely as flesh, the overtly sexually-provoking parade of the Madonna draws the reading of the figure to the context of medical exploration (dissection and the appropriation of bodies in the visual and textual discourse of medicine) as well as of pornography. In these two instances the Madonna performs her role as expected, that is, dehumanised and de-individualised, as object of the diverse types of pleasure of the male onlooker. The bearded Madonna confirms therefore

⁸⁸⁴ Iwona Maria Kubacki, "Angela Carter's Feminist Grotesque", 19.

women's inability to be powerful agents on their own (not dependent on any male figure such as husband or son) but, at another level, the carnivalesque-grotesque character who is impersonated by a man, is the blasphemous expression of male eroticism regarding the holy figure; the Madonna becomes the manifestation of the sluttish side of women that men are culturally expected to appreciate. Her pleasure in offering herself as well as the riotous pleasure of the male crowd in being offered the body of the accessible woman are here presented in an extreme situation that makes clear the false premise of these assumptions. Once again confronted with a woman making a spectacle out of herself, Coover contributes with his own construction: men are not laughing at and through their gaze performing a violation of the woman's body; Coover dramatises instead, and deconstructs through the carnivalesque-grotesque, the mythologized icon of womanhood and motherhood.

The use of the grotesque and of the double-gendered body by Robert Coover in the specific instance of the Madonna of the Organs has as a consequence the denial of the myth of the rescuing Mother. Moreover, by recovering the mapping of the female body dismembered in the name of the life it carried in the womb as recorded in anatomical manuals where the male body continued to be the universal model, attention is drawn to the phallocratic discourse that characterised that scientific area. With a reading of the Madonna of the Organs as an anatomical figure from a medical manual, where women appear cut open only in reference with the specificity of their gender, one is traced back to *The Sadeian Woman* and once again to Angela Carter's sarcastic words on bodies and sex:

Consider the womb, the 'inner productive space', as Erik Erikson calls it, the extensible realm sited in the penetrable flesh, most potent matrix of all mysteries. The great, good place; domain of futurity in which the embryo forms itself from the flesh and blood of its mother; the unguessable reaches of the sea are a symbol of it, and so are caves, those dark, sequestered places where initiation and revelation take place. Men long for it and fear it; the womb, that comfortably elastic organ, is a fleshy link between past and future, the physical location of an everlasting present tense that can usefully serve as a symbol of eternity.⁸⁸⁵

However, the only truth about the womb is that "it is an organ like any other organ, more useful than the appendix, less useful than the colon but not much use to you at all if you do not wish to utilise its sole function, that of bearing children. At the best of times, it is apt

⁸⁸⁵ Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, 107-108.

to malfunction and cause sickness, pain and inconvenience⁸⁸⁶. Finally, through the Madonna a point is made which has gained increasing weight in postmodern debates, the issue that our identity, which is as much a cultural as a bodily construction, is shifting and is no longer safely contained within fixed parameters.

This earlier personification of the Virgin Mary is a contrast to the second one. Whereas the first is taken over by the festive spirit of the carnivalesque-grotesque, Mamma, with her emphasis on mutability and growth as with Mother in *The Passion of New Eve*, preserves the form of the carnivalesque-grotesque but its impact is upsetting because allied to those elements there is the fear of the abject body of the mother. Mamma is presented almost as a mythic, animalesque, archaic entity whose influence over her son is as enormous as her body. With the recognised danger she poses to his physical integrity (blindness/castration and dismemberment) she is undoubtedly the personification of Semiotic indifferenciation. The scene deals again with the myth of motherhood which is obliterated by Mamma's obliviousness to Pinocchio's feelings, by spreading terror, making her akin to an ancient mother goddess in being simultaneously an avatar of life and death. Despite her successive metamorphoses, each trying to seduce Pinocchio to take the attitude of her desire and leading to increasingly monstrous embodiments, Pinocchio continues in love with the Blue Fairy and with all the parts she represents as a woman. Even in her ultimate form, as a demonic female figure which could not be more different from the typified motherly woman, all his heart desires is to rest in her arms. Though the novel revives the *commedia dell'arte* characters and atmosphere, the closing triumph of the grotesque mother, the triumph of abjection over the Symbolic through incest can only present death. But death corresponds at the same time to the realisation of both Pinocchio and Mamma's yearnings. Nevertheless, Pinocchio's dismemberment and reduction to a phallic body used to provide sexual satisfaction to Mamma is an authoritative image of the defeat of the Symbolic regarded as a phallogocentric system, viewed as a mere tool in the hands of Mamma. The Symbolic is therefore deprived of its ability to repress, control and impose itself. It is taken light-heartedly when its influence is measured up against that of motherhood. The Symbolic thus becomes imperative to maintain the critique of Mamma for it constitutes the barrier against further mythologisations of motherhood as omnipresent might; to guarantee, as Angela Carter put it, that the "goddess is dead"⁸⁸⁷.

⁸⁸⁶ Ibid., 109.

⁸⁸⁷ Ibid., 110.

Angela Carter's connection with carnival appears to have increased over the years with *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children* though earlier tales such as "In Pantoland" which present stock characters of the English pantomime tradition (belonging to the same family as the *commedia dell'arte*) should not be overlooked. However, despite her prolific use of carnival her outspoken opinion established limits: "It's interesting that Bakhtin became very fashionable in the 1980s, during the demise of the particular kind of theory that would have put all kinds of questions around the whole idea of the carnivalesque [...]. The carnival has to stop. The whole point of the feast of fools is that things went on as they did before, after they stopped"⁸⁸⁸. Paradoxically, the overcharged finales of her last two novels with the carnival spirit indicate that the feast was not the end and that, in fact, nothing stayed as it was before. Carter took the exaggeration and spectacle to such limits that even Rushdie conceded that "[s]ome of her puddings are excessively egged"⁸⁸⁹.

Carter's specific relation with the grotesque has only more recently attracted the attention of critics and the study remains insufficient and fragmentary. Carnival had already been recognised as a major aesthetic and ideological force in Angela Carter's writing but her plunge into darker worlds has evinced disparate opinions⁸⁹⁰. From Lucie Armit's formulation of Gothic magical realism to Gina Wisker's domestic horror there was not a definitive recognition of or in-depth analysis which demonstrated the extent of the grotesque in Angela Carter's work or the specific mechanisms she put to work or even how they related to her interests.

The basis of *The Bloody Chamber* is the genre of the fairy tale. However, this influence affects Carter's stories more deeply than in terms of style, tone or character patterns. As Lorna Sage has noted, fairy tales "in their multiple reflections on each other, and their individual layerings of interpretation, exemplify *and unravel* something of the process by which meanings get written on bodies"⁸⁹¹. In the same manner, Angela Carter's stories, through what Lucie

⁸⁸⁸ Quoted in Lorna Sage, *Women in the House of Fiction: Post-War Women Novelists* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1992) 188.

⁸⁸⁹ Angela Carter, *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*, intr. Salman Rushdie, xiv.

⁸⁹⁰ Iwona Maria Kubacki is less enthusiastic than, for instance, Magali Cornier Michael in "Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*: An Engaged Feminism via Subversive Postmodern Strategies", Kate Webb in "Seriously Funny: *Wise Children*", Rory P. B. Turner in "Subjects and Symbols: Transformations of Identity in *Nights at the Circus*", Pauline Palmer in "From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman: Angela Carter's Magic Flight", or Ricarda Schmidt in "The Journey of the Subject in Angela Carter's Fiction".

⁸⁹¹ Lorna Sage, "Angela Carter: The Fairy Tale", Danielle M. Roemer and Cristina Bacchilega ed., *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale*, 74. Italics in the text.

Armitt has called narrative overspill, reflect each other but each reflection presents some new aspect or distorts some element.

When referring to gender exchange in terms of point of view whereby male fixity is replaced by an unpredictable and unstable female identity (an exchange from a monologic to a dialogical position, that is) Anny Crunelle-Vanrigh sees in operation a game of *différance* as not only is gender difference accepted but the new meanings are never definitive, that is, they are deferred. With respect to the Carterian Beauty and the Beast tales she writes: “The process of deferral thus established is reflected in the very process of Carter’s re-writing of Beaumont’s story and in making its modern avatar part of a larger series. Not one of the stories at play in *The Bloody Chamber* can be said to signify in itself, though it can be enjoyed on its own”⁸⁹². It is therefore my belief that the new meanings and identities travel back and forth and that the grotesque is at the heart of the quality of those meanings and identities as well.

The key role that this reasoning effects in reading Angela Carter’s short stories is evident when considering, for instance, the issue of rape. The whole controversy created around the last scene in “The Company of Wolves” is to a large extent derived from viewing it divorced from the other tales and even from the other major work published in the same year. The absolutist position of rape versus sexual emancipation establishes only a *cul-de-sac* binary. But bearing in mind Carter’s words in *The Sadeian Woman* about the female body, “The Company of Wolves” is not the only tale that needs to be taken into account. As I quoted earlier she wrote: “To be the object of desire is to be defined in the passive case. / To exist in the passive case is to die in the passive case – that is, to be killed. This is the moral of the fairy tale about the perfect woman”⁸⁹³. “The Company of Wolves” must therefore be read with the other tales in mind. “The Bloody Chamber” makes a literal dramatisation of that threat; “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” is divided in suggesting the domestic bliss resulting from the woman’s sexual submission and in implying the violent sacrifice underneath; “The Tiger’s Bride” and “Wolf-Alice” propose a departure from female passivity on the whole; “The Erl-King” discloses the criminal potential that lies in the despair of avoiding rape and thus replicates a system surviving on casualties whereas “The Werewolf” enacts the same logic but to another limit for it is not survival that is an issue but self-interest and pleasure in the kill; “The Snow Child” reveals the perversion of the dogma of the passive woman as object of desire and in fairy tale as the representation of the perfect woman (Patricia Duncker’s argument is terribly

⁸⁹² Anny Crunelle-Vanrigh, “The Logic of the Same and *Différance*: “The Courtship of Mr Lyon””, 139.

⁸⁹³ Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, 77.

undermined by this premise); and “The Lady of the House of Love” is the inverted reflection of “The Erl-King” where the woman dies anyway even if she did not kill/rape herself. But this dialogical spiral of the grotesque can be followed from “The Snow Child”, for instance, to “The Beautiful Executioner’s Daughter”, and from this we enter the Lizzie Borden cycle with “The Fall River Axe Murders” and “Lizzie’s Tiger”, bringing the thread back to the tigers in *The Bloody Chamber*. If, as Cristina Bacchilega argues in relation to the Little Red Riding Hood story, “Angela Carter’s postmodern rewritings are acts of fairy-tale archaeology that release this story’s many other voices”, it is equally true that each story’s voices release the voices of other stories, continuing “Carter’s critical dialogue with folkloric and literary voices from within the ‘Red Riding Hood’ tradition”⁸⁹⁴.

Rape constitutes only a part of Angela Carter’s involvement in the issue of pornography and, as in Robert Coover’s *Pinocchio in Venice*, pornography materialises according to the mis/rule of carnival through its transgressions, disregard for the Law, the inversion of roles between master and servant (refashioned as torturer and victim) and through spectacle. The notorious face of pornography related to the grotesque refers to degradation and raw corporeality. But whereas a conventional attitude towards pornography makes most feminists disapprove of it, Angela Carter proposes to re-read degradation in the Bakhtinian sense. But because the regenerative potential of Bakhtin’s ideology can only be subtracted within a “narrative spill” approach, when considered individually the tales might lead to quite a different deduction. Bacchilega thus reads “The Snow Child” from a perspective that uses the imagery of rebirth but not that of pregnant death: “The Snow Child” is “subjected to sexual intercourse while asleep/dead. But this rape brings no re-birth. As the Count satisfies his desire, the girl, whose living flesh never really was, melts back into her post-initiation symbolic ingredients – no snow, but a (black) feather, a bloodstain, and a rose”⁸⁹⁵. But on reading “The Snow Child” against the other tales, the quality of sexuality and degradation is changed.

As degradation is a process, it is with “Wolf-Alice”, the last tale, that the female character appears to embody fully and affirmatively the grotesque. Angela Carter’s deconstruction of the Lacanian mould by leaving Wolf-Alice to linger in abject indefiniteness and bliss is also the final deconstruction of the opening tale and of the mother/daughter dyad. The daughter who had pushed herself to marry to gain distance from her mother, their omnipresent tie through uterine invocations of the castle, their telepathic connection and,

⁸⁹⁴ Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*, pages 59 and 64 respectively.

⁸⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

most of all, the heroic rescue by the mother imply a parodic alternative to the classic fairy tale happy-end where the mother takes over the authoritative place of the Father. The parody is revealing of the potential trap of a purely feminist reversal as in the end “The Bloody Chamber” suggests a new family structure where the male companion is handicapped (probably even Symbolically) and the mother regains her influence in the household which clearly had never disappeared. With Wolf-Alice these dangerous implications are overcome as by being utterly grotesque the girl achieves an ambiguous but satisfying balance between the Symbolic and the Semiotic, an equivalent perhaps to the reading Kristeva makes of the female mystic, considered simply as “woman or abjection reconciled” (PH, 127).

In the tales of *The Bloody Chamber* the grotesque accompanies the process of constructing or altering meanings in a Bakhtinian sense, for instance also through metamorphoses, but also in a Kayserian one insofar as the world as it is known through fairy tales and which reflects our own has mutable signifiers in constant deferral. Angela Carter’s stories do present a world become estranged where our references in terms of gender and sexuality are reformed over and over again. In Robert Coover’s words, Angela Carter is in fact “an intransigent realist” for, as she argued in a letter she wrote to him, “a fiction absolutely self-conscious of itself as a different form of human experience than reality (that is, not a logbook of events) can help to transform reality itself”⁸⁹⁶. Carter’s writing is therefore part of her ideology on account of its denial to concur with an unjust reality.

In *The Bloody Chamber* Angela Carter uses the grotesque to articulate pairs (in Bakhtinian terminology they are carnivalistic pairs) such as female/male, reality/fantasy, animal/human, home/forest or castle, beauty/ugliness and to liberate them of what could become closed circuits. Because the grotesque, as the abject, is the frontier and the Other it is invested with signifying mobility. Jack Zipes has written that “reading Carter’s tales is like holding up a mirror to our faces, but it is a magic mirror in which everything is cross-dressed” but, I should add, each time one looks in the mirror there is a different form of ourselves being represented⁸⁹⁷. Carter’s mirror is also like Dorian Gray’s picture where our deepest psychological and ontological structures appear in full view and where the shape of the grotesque keeps changing.

⁸⁹⁶ Robert Coover, “Entering Ghost Town”, Danielle M. Roemer and Cristina Bacchilega ed., *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale*, 242.

⁸⁹⁷ Jack Zipes, “Crossing Boundaries with Wise Girls: Angela Carter’s Fairy Tales for Children”, Danielle M. Roemer and Cristina Bacchilega ed., *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale*, 165.



To assert that the grotesque faded away as a communal expression of the people appears to be too extremist an opinion to sustain. A number of factors must be kept in mind such as whether Bakhtin's idea of a cohesive body of the people actually existed in the medieval age as Michael Berrong argues it did not, and what does "people" mean in the era of late capitalism which so bluntly displays the economic differences between the wealthy developed nations and the impoverished rest of the world and which determines the patterns of the social fabric. Though a communal manifestation of the people (understood hierarchically as opposed to aristocracy and Church) no longer makes sense in most industrialised European countries, one can still witness attempts at preserving popular traditions related to local customs and religious beliefs. In addition, the people as Bakhtin considered them might be an image of the past in Europe but in Latin America or Africa, for instance, certain distinctions are still very much alive.

Nonetheless, the people, whatever that might be, has to be understood as a dynamic organism so that what Bakhtin defined as the carnivalesque-grotesque for medieval and Renaissance people could not possibly apply to other times or other places. The carnivalesque-grotesque was, furthermore, a phenomenon not just of "the people" but everyone's. As social mutability followed its course it was only natural that the form of the grotesque changed along with it and that other men and women were called or willing to participate. After all, carnival culture is a celebration of *all* people. That group has grown immensely larger to an extent that makes Geoffrey Harpham fear for the survival of the grotesque itself for in its impetus it runs the risk of exhausting itself. Nevertheless, contemporary writers are among the most enthusiastic new participants at the feast of the grotesque (and did not Bakhtin himself enjoy it through Rabelais so that we cannot even account for the historical exactness of the information contained in his texts?). Though only carnivalesque-grotesque performances would satisfy Bakhtin, nevertheless the *popular* origin of the texts in question is still in many cases discernible and even cherished. Robert Coover has used carnival-the-event to provide the carnivalesque atmosphere he desired for his novel; Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza speaks of Gabriel García Márquez's "soberba tradición del relato oral" present in language and in the

characterisation of people and places⁸⁹⁸; Rushdie claims that oral narrative, the pre-literary popular structure of story-telling is “a form which is thousands of years old, and yet which has all the methods of the post-modernist novel” making of the South Asian tradition of story telling a key influence on his writing⁸⁹⁹; Angela Carter has during all her experience as a writer made successive journeys back and forth between the “texts” that have been her main imaginative source, her *Ocean of the Streams of Stories*: “fairy tales, folktales, stories from the oral tradition, are all of them the most vital connection we have with the imaginations of the ordinary men and women whose labour created our world”⁹⁰⁰; and Githa Hariharan re-interpreted the classic *The Thousand and One Nights*, the quintessential reference of oral narrative not only because it is one of its themes but because it is also about the transition to the written word.

Though Bakhtin’s formulation of the grotesque remains an incredibly insightful and meticulous theory, he was unable to cope with a major contradiction his work posed: if the grotesque is characterised by its mobility, openness and tolerance it could hardly be expected to stay in the same form for a long period of time. It retains a malleability that is akin to magical realism. Following Fernando Galván, José Santiago Fernández and Juan Francisco Elices’s premise regarding magical realism, I also consider the grotesque not to be a genre on account of its fluidity, but that instead it is better described as a discursive mode⁹⁰¹. As such, it can travel through texts, times and genres. Undoubtedly one of the latest sites where the grotesque has comfortably settled and grown is postmodern literature by reason of its preoccupation with Otherness and its audacity in investigating the human condition, particularly through the novel which presents the best tools to develop the dialogical potential of the grotesque.

⁸⁹⁸ Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza and Gabriel García Márquez, *El olor de la guayaba*, 67.

⁸⁹⁹ David Brooks, “Salman Rushdie”, 59.

⁹⁰⁰ Angela Carter ed., intr. *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, ix.

⁹⁰¹ Fernando Galván, José Santiago Fernández and Juan Francisco Elices, *El realismo mágico en lengua inglesa: tres ensayos*, 11.

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