

**Postmodernism in Angela Carter's Short Fiction: A
Žižekian Approach**

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**Tese de doutoramento dirixida por: Dra. Laura María Lojo
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Departamento de Filloxía Inglesa e Alemá

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Asdo: Laura M^a Lojo Rodríguez

Asdo: Jorge Sacido Romero

In loving memory of my grandparents Carmen Navarro, Cristalina Zorelle,

Jesús Losada, and Jesús Pérez, and my great uncle Antonio Zorelle



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Abstract:

The aim of this dissertation is to contribute to the academic dispute over the emancipatory potential of Angela Carter's fiction by examining the way in which her short fiction re-imagines and either reproduces or subverts the ideology at work in patriarchy. The relevance that the category "postmodernism" has had for the critical reception of Carter's work determines this dissertation's three-part structure. The first part provides an overview of the standard theoretical perspectives that define postmodernism as a frame of ideas and as a literary practice and that, as such, have had a direct influence on the assessment of the political potential of Carter's fiction. Part II focuses on Slavoj Žižek's non-standard account of postmodernism, an approach that reasserts the subversive character of postmodernist cultural productions. Part III analyses a corpus of seven short narratives from Carter's four collections and examines the extent to which Žižek's unorthodox view of postmodernism sheds new light on the emancipatory potential of their representation of social reality, sexual difference and the human condition.

Resumo:

O obxectivo desta tese é contribuír á disputa sobre o potencial emancipador da obra de ficción de Angela Carter examinando como a súa narrativa curta representa e ou ben reproduce ou ben subverte a ideoloxía patriarcal. A relevancia da categoría "posmodernismo" na recepción crítica da obra de Carter determina a estrutura tripartita desta tese. A primeira parte proporciona unha panorámica das perspectivas teóricas estándar que definen o posmodernismo como un marco de ideas e como unha práctica literaria e que, como tales, teñen tido unha influencia directa na avaliación do potencial político da obra carteriana. A segunda parte céntrase na concepción non estándar do posmodernismo proposta por Slavoj Žižek, unha aproximación que defende o carácter subversivo das producións culturais posmodernistas. A terceira parte deste estudo analiza un corpus de sete relatos curtos das catro coleccións de Carter e explora en que medida a visión žižekiana non ortodoxa do posmodernismo permite clarificar o potencial emancipador das súas representacións da realidade social, da diferenza sexual e da condición humana.

Resumen:

El objetivo de esta tesis es contribuir a la disputa sobre el potencial emancipador de la obra de ficción de Angela Carter examinando como su narrativa breve representa y o bien reproduce o bien subvierte la ideología patriarcal. La relevancia de la categoría "posmodernismo" en la recepción crítica de la obra de Carter determina la estructura tripartita de esta tesis. La primera parte proporciona una panorámica de las perspectivas teóricas estándar que definen el posmodernismo como un marco de ideas y como una práctica literaria y que, como tales, han tenido una influencia directa en la evaluación del potencial político de la obra carteriana. La segunda parte se centra en la concepción no estándar del posmodernismo propuesta por Slavoj Žižek, una aproximación que defiende el carácter subversivo de las producciones culturales posmodernistas. La tercera parte de este estudio analiza un corpus de siete relatos breves de las cuatro colecciones de Carter y explora en qué medida la visión žižekiana no ortodoxa del posmodernismo permite clarificar el potencial emancipador de sus representaciones de la realidad social, de la diferencia sexual y de la condición humana.

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INTRODUCTION

Of all the figures in the canon of late twentieth-century British writers, Angela Carter stands as one of the most imaginative, thought-provoking and critical voices. The variety and scope of her writing is breathtaking: from 1966 until her death in 1992, she published three collections of short stories, nine novels, four collections of children's stories, a work in verse, four radio plays, two film scripts, a book-length essay, two collections of critical essays, two scripts for television documentaries and a large amount of journalism. She also translated Charles Perrault's *contes* and edited two collections of fairy tales for Virago. A fourth collection of short fiction was posthumously published in 1993.

As a writer, Carter was not only prolific; she was also highly idiosyncratic. Words like “versatile”, “supple” and “eclectic” are now part of the Carterian critical idiom. “Hyperbolic”, “excessive” and “extreme” are also terms used by commentators to describe her poetics. In an interview published in 1985, John Haffenden admitted to Carter that he believed she did “embrace opportunities for overwriting”. “Embrace them?” Carter replied, “I would say I half suffocate them with the enthusiasm with which I wrap my arms and legs around them” (Haffenden 1985: 91). Carter's style is exuberant indeed, vivid and sumptuous in detail. When reading her fiction one is bombarded with imagery that acutely stimulates the senses, producing both pleasure—in its depiction of embellished figures coupled with words evoking scents and melodious sounds in a sometimes lyrical, sometimes opulent way—and utter revulsion and horror—with the representation of bizarre, violent and nauseating scenes paired with terms that convey strident noise and unbearable stench.

Carter's *oeuvre* also proves to go to extremes in its use of allusion, which includes references to texts that played a pivotal role in the configuration of Western culture such as the Bible, Greco-Roman mythology, Medieval romances and folktales, Shakespeare's plays, eighteenth-century British novels, Perrault's and the Grimm's fairy tales, de Sade's work, British Romantic poetry, Edgar Allan Poe's tales, Charles Baudelaire's poems, Lewis Carroll's novels, British science-fiction novels from the 1960s, mainstream Hollywood films, the theories of Walter Benjamin, Mikhail Bakhtin, Theodor Adorno, Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, and even cookery books, among many other sources. "What wasn't an influence? Carter took all in" wrote Ali Smith in her enthusiastic introduction to the new edition of *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, a turning-point in Carterian criticism originally published in 1994 (Smith 2007: 4). Carter's intertextual practice unsettles generic boundaries and challenges the long-held distinction between "high" and "popular" culture, an intention she underscored in the interview with Haffenden:

I think I must have started very early on to regard the whole of Western European culture as a kind of folklore. I had a perfectly regular education, and indeed I'm a rather bookish person, but I do tend to regard all aspects of culture as coming on the same level. (Haffenden 1985: 84)

Along with her hyperbolic diction and her extensive use of allusion, a feature stands as characteristic of Carter's poetics: the predominance of the fantastic over the realist as the stuff of her fiction. Both her tales and her novels are located in settings including remote upland villages whose inhabitants "have cold weather, they have cold hearts", as the narrator of Carter's well-known tale "The Werewolf" informs us (Carter 1995 [1979]: 210); the fairground, a world in which individuals and puppets perform different roles with the help of strings, make-up and costumes; fairy tale-like woods in which wolves howl around and metamorphoses take place;

and enclosed claustrophobic dwellings, from decadent mansions to decrepit urban homes, which hide appalling secrets. The anti-realist character of Carter's fictional universe is sharpened by the omnipresence of mirrors and layers of clothing through which characters shift their identity—and on some occasions their own skin—as if they were playing roles in a theatre. Yet in all these locations without exception, such a spectacular parade of surfaces is shattered by the violent eruption of blood, bodily remains and other material residues. And this imaginative—at times exquisite, at times outrageous—prose is very often infiltrated by humorous and matter-of-fact comments.

Carter's anti-realist mode and extreme style led some readers to dismiss her work as politically evasive, a criticism she was well aware of. In the interview with Haffenden, she acknowledged the risk of misunderstanding her textual practice as completely divorced from social issues:

[t]his is a very real risk, very tricky. Obviously the idea that my stories are all dreams or hallucinations out of Jung-land, or the notion that the world would be altogether a better place if we threw away rationality and went laughing down the street [...] that's all nonsense. I can see how it must look to some readers. (Haffenden 1985: 85)

Towards the end of her life, Carter further insisted that there is no inherent paradox between her mannerist and anti-realist poetics and her political engagement:

'I've got nothing against realism' she said [...] as if tired of having to explain. 'But there is realism and realism. I mean, the questions that I ask myself, I think they are very much to do with reality. I would like, I would really like to have the guts and the energy to write about, you know, people having battles with the DHSS, but I haven't. I've done other things. I mean, I'm an arty person. OK, I write overblown, purple, self-indulgent prose – so fucking what?' (Carter quoted in Smith 2007: 8)

Carter's stress on the political function of her literature is well documented. In several essays and interviews, she portrayed herself as a "demythologiser", a

writer engaged in investigating the role of myths and imagination in the constitution and subversion of a given *status quo*. In her oft-quoted essay “Notes from the Front Line”, Carter answered “Well yes; of course” to the question “do I situate myself politically as a writer?” and explained that she was “consciously concerned” with investigating:

[t]he social fictions that regulate our lives [...] therefore, I become mildly irritated, (I’m sorry!) when people, as they sometimes do, ask me about the ‘mythic quality’ of the work I’ve written lately. Because I believe that all myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice. I’m in the demythologizing business. (Carter 1997 [1983]: 37-38)

Of all the “fictions that regulate our lives”, Carter was particularly concerned with investigating “the nature of [her] reality as a *woman*. How that social fiction of [her] ‘femininity’ was created, by means outside [her] control, and palmed off on [her] as the real thing” (38, emphasis in original). In her intention to explore and debunk the myths that sustain patriarchal sexual politics, Carter admittedly sided with feminism: “The women’s movement has been of immense importance to me personally”, she notes, “and I would regard myself as a feminist writer, because I’m a feminist in everything else and I can’t compartmentalize these things in one’s life” (37).

Despite Carter’s unambiguous statements that her writing *is* political and feminist, numerous critics have questioned and a few others objected to these claims. The academic dispute over the emancipatory potential of Carter’s fiction is the point of departure of this dissertation. Carter’s most reputed commentators have foregrounded what they receive as a contradiction between Carter’s defence of art as political and the hyperbolic style of her fiction, its anti-realist mode and its characteristic conflation of dazzling spectacle and abhorrent materiality (Britzolakis

2000 [1995]: 174, Easton 2000: 7, Gamble 2006: 15, Munford 2006: 2, Tonkin 2012: 2).

Since I first read “The Bloody Chamber” (1979) being an undergraduate student, my interest in Carter’s fiction has resided in her excessive poetics. I do agree with Carter’s claim that the use of a highly aesthetised and non-realist prose does not thwart the intention of investigating ideology or as she puts it, “the social fictions that regulate our lives”. On the contrary, as a PhD candidate in the field of literary theory and criticism, I have been concerned with “the ideology of the aesthetic” (Eagleton 1990), that is to say, with examining the potential of imagination —of literary imagination in particular— to create, reproduce, legitimate and subvert any ideological frame. As Terry Eagleton has it:

Literature is one of the most revealing modes of experiential access to ideology that we possess. It is in literature, above all, that we observe in a peculiarly complex, coherent, intensive, and immediate fashion the workings of ideology. (Eagleton 1978: 100)

The aim of this dissertation is to contribute to the academic dispute over the political potential of Carter’s fiction by exploring and assessing the way in which her short fiction re-imagines and either reproduces or subverts the ideology at work in patriarchy. The theoretical framework that sustains my examination of Carter’s representation of the workings of patriarchal ideology is the work of Slovenian psychoanalytic philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek, particularly his formulation of the distinction between modernism and postmodernism as cultural paradigms. Žižek’s definition of postmodernist art in terms of “an *over-identification* with the domain of imagination” and representation of the limit of reality —what he terms the sublime Thing— as an obscene nauseating excess appears to be in accordance with Carter’s imaginative prose and its characteristic representation of disgusting matter at the heart of a dispersion of highly stylised

surfaces (Žižek 1999b: 122, emphasis in original). Žižek's account of postmodernist aesthetics further proves to be relevant to approach the significance of Carter's fiction because the critical reception of her work has gone hand in hand with its categorisation as postmodernist literature. The philosophical and aesthetic affinity of Carter's narratives to postmodernism is a commonplace in literary studies. Companions and anthologies of postmodernism list Carter among the writers that most readily exemplify postmodernist writing practices. Major theorists of postmodernist aesthetics such as Brian McHale, Linda Hutcheon and Aleid Fokkema have also resorted to Carter's work to formulate and illustrate the main characteristics of their object of study (McHale 1987: 20-21; Hutcheon 1989: 8, 29-31, 141-146; Fokkema 1991: 165-180).

With Žižek's reassessment of postmodernism as the main tool of analysis, this dissertation is to be located among those studies of Carter's fiction that, influenced by theories which question, object to or applaud postmodernism's emancipatory potential, provide an assessment of its political validity. My first contact with Žižek's account of postmodernism dates back to my participation in a research project during the period 2008-2011 on modernism and postmodernism in the English short story, funded by the Galician Regional Government and supervised by Jorge Sacido Romero. This project's conclusions were published in *Moving across a Century: Women's Short Fiction from Virginia Woolf to Ali Smith* (2012), edited by Laura M^a Lojo Rodríguez and whose fourth chapter sketches a reading of Carter's short fiction in the light of Žižek's formulation of the distinction between modernism and postmodernism. This chapter is the seed of this dissertation. I have subsequently explored Žižek's approach to postmodernism and its implications for the critique of ideology and the conception of sexual politics.

But my exploration turned to be more complex than expected as Žižek employs throughout his work the category “postmodernism” in two distinct and opposite ways. On the one hand, as a reformulation of the most widespread use of term which refers to anti-Enlightenment critical stances —and its corresponding assemblage of aesthetic practices— whose hallmark is that the text is the limit of representation, there is nothing outside the text or discourse on which to found epistemology and ethics because all texts are seen as perpetually referring to other texts. For the purpose of description I refer to this first use as the standard, canonical or orthodox conception of postmodernism. Yet, on the other, in a sense discernible very early in Žižek’s work which refers to a philosophical and aesthetic stance at odds with standard postmodernism. In Žižek’s opinion, Lacanian psychoanalysis is the only postmodernist theory because it affirms the Real as the inherent limit of representation, the central impossibility around which any discourse is structured (Žižek 1991: 143). Postmodernist cultural productions would then be those works that evoke the (Lacanian) Real in the paradoxical presence of nauseating life-substance at the heart of a surface of apparently free-floating discursive constructions.

Žižek’s inconsistent use of the category of postmodernism does not entail, in my opinion, a contradiction in his argumentations. His late adoption of the standard sense of the term derives from an attempt to criticise its very theoretical assumptions and ethico-political implications. Žižek’s non-standard, non-canonical or unorthodox view postmodernism, in fact, radically redefines the standard debate on the significance and political potential of postmodernism and provides, therefore, a new theoretical angle to approach Carter’s work as postmodernist fiction and to ultimately reassess its political validity.

The relevance that the standard and non-standard conceptions of postmodernism have had and may potentially have for the critical reception of Carter's work determines this dissertation's three-part structure. Part I scrutinises the influence that the standard conception of postmodernism as a cultural paradigm has had in the categorisation and assessment of Carter's work as postmodernist fiction. Chapter 1 provides an overview of theories that conceive of postmodernism as a new phase in contemporary history in which the foundations of modernity are repudiated as reactionary and superseded by what is hailed as anti-foundationalist thinking. I briefly sketch here the basic premises of anti-foundationalist discourses—normally termed poststructuralist theory—across the fields of philosophy, literary theory, social theory, ethics and politics. Statements by Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Judith Butler, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Braudillard, Donna Haraway, Emmanuel Lévinas, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, are opposed to critical voices of poststructuralist anti-foundationalism, namely Jürgen Habermas, Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton and Christopher Norris alongside feminist critics like Seyla Benhabib, Sabine Lovibond and Patricia Waugh. I later proceed to explain how this repertoire of conflicting discourses has served as the main theoretical framework for a body of texts that define postmodernism as an aesthetic practice. Ihab Hassan, Brian McHale, Linda Hutcheon and Aleid Fokkema stand among the critics who have isolated a number of literary features that in turn have been discussed as either subverting or reproducing hegemonic discourses.

Chapter 2 examines how Carter's reviewers and critics have been influenced by postmodernism as a framework of ideas and as a literary practice in their categorisation of Carter's fiction as postmodernist and the concomitant favourable

or negative assessment of its political implications. I specifically address three areas of contention among Carter's scholars which arise from such a categorisation. The first disagreement relates to Carter's heavily stylised décor and her play of surfaces, which some critics receive as detrimental to her professed investigation of social reality. Another troublesome aspect pertains to Carter's reworking of traditional patriarchal forms, notably the fairy tale and pornography, whose ideology, some critics believe, Carter's fiction inevitably reproduces. The third feature that has led to conflicting critical responses is directly related to Carter's use of allusion, most notoriously, her deployment of Sadeian motifs and characters, particularly her demolishing of the myth of motherhood and her depiction of female characters that enjoy being victimised. To close chapter 2, I refer to a third stance of Carter's scholars who, doubtful of standard postmodernism's political potential, reject the term to approach the aesthetic and the political significance of Carter's work.

Part II focuses on the theoretical framework that sustains my approach to Carter's work, that is, Žižek's non-standard account of postmodernism. Chapters 3 and 4 articulate the contours of Žižek's non-standard conception of postmodernism by drawing a parallelism between his account of the break between modernism and postmodernism and the distinction he establishes between two stages in Jacques Lacan's thinking. Given the importance of the late stage of Lacanian theory in Žižek's critical assumptions, these chapters revise some key psychoanalytical concepts such as enjoyment or *jouissance*, desire, drive, fantasy, *objet petit a*, gaze and voice *qua* objects, phallus or Master Signifier, big Other, superego, the three intertwined orders of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real, and the main modalities of the subject's relation to symbolic authority and to enjoyment, namely hysteria, perversion and psychosis.

Chapters 5 and 6 deal with the relevant consequences that Žižek's non-standard view of postmodernist thinking and art has in the conceptualisation of the subject, ideology, sex and sexuality as well as with Žižek's related perspective on ethics and politics. Postmodernism, in Žižek's unorthodox view, constitutes a subversive stance because its characteristic conflation of artificial surfaces and disgusting materiality exposes how any configuration of signifiers/images/appearances/surfaces paradoxically creates reality's insurmountable limit —the prohibited Thing— which it pretends to conceal. Žižek identifies this postmodernist gesture with the Lacanian notion of “going through the fantasy” and its subversive lesson resides, he argues, in conceiving of the unrepresentable or the impossible as the retroactive product of the possible. The unrepresentable does not precede symbolisation —the process through which reality assumes form— but is the necessary excess/leftover that surfaces feign to conceal in order to constitute —and potentially change— the contours of reality as symbolically/ideologically constituted.

Part III is the core of this dissertation as it analyses seven short narratives from Carter's four collections in the light of Žižek's account of postmodernist art and his concomitant assessment of postmodernist thinking as subversive. My choice of the primary corpus has been determined by formal and thematic factors. I have chosen Carter's short fiction as the object of study because, given its form as condensed narrative, it is in this genre in which Carter's blending of dazzling surface and nauseating materiality is more markedly evident. Writers and critics agree that Carter's unique diction is best experienced in her short stories. In the introduction to the complete collection of Carter's stories *Burning Your Boats*, Salman Rushdie asserts that “the best of her, I think, is in her stories. Sometimes, at

novel length, the distinctive Carter voice, those smoky, opium-eater's cadences interrupted by harsh or comic discords, that moonstone-and-rhinestone mix of opulence and flim-flam, can be exhausting" (Rushdie 1995: ix-x). Carter herself acknowledged that short narratives are an adequate arena to explore the way in which imagination constitutes and may subvert the myths which, in turn, regulate societies. As she put it the "Afterword" to *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces* (1974), her first collection of short fiction: "The limited trajectory of the short narrative concentrates its meaning. Sign and sense fuse to an extent impossible to achieve among the multiplying ambiguities of an extended narrative" (Carter 1995 [1974]: 459).

The reason why I narrowed down the scope of this dissertation to seven tales is the reference that each of them makes to the topic of the Fall of man in *Genesis*, a narrative whose imagery has played a primordial role in the configuration of the fantasy frame that constitutes Western culture. The myth of the Fall into evil, which explains the human condition as the unfortunate break from a preceding state of Good, goes hand in hand with the mystification of the womb —and, by extension, of the female body— as the realm of eternity or paradise lost. This myth, Carter thoroughly argues in *The Sadeian Woman*, is the anchor of patriarchal sexual politics because it has grounded and still grounds two opposite identities that legitimate women's oppression: Eve or the disobedient woman, held responsible for all the misfortunes suffered by mankind, and (the Virgin) Mary, the locus of redemption as it represents absolute obedience and purity.

Each of the chapters that compose part III analyses one of the seven tales selected except for chapter 12, which focuses on the two tales that re-imagine the figure of Lizzie Borden, the most famous parricidal woman in American history. As

suggested in their respective titles, every chapter examines the extent to which Carter's tales, in a postmodernist manner, "go through the fantasy" that gives shape to the reality of the social settings they depict and thus lay bare their inconsistencies, hence their subversive potential while remaining highly stylised literary art. Chapter 7 investigates whether "Reflections", a tale collected in *Fireworks*, traverses the fantasy of the romantic self as the masculine subject whose imagination has the power to synthesise his self and his feminine natural surroundings in the transcendental realm of the poetic symbol. "The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter", another tale included in *Fireworks*, is the focus of chapter 8. This chapter explores the way in which social relationships in a primitive upland village are configured on the basis of the capital punishment of incest. "Penetrating Into the Heart of the Forest" further tackles the motif of incest and situates it at the heart of the myth of the Fall, a strategy that chapter 9 examines to assess whether Carter's tale reproduces or subverts *Genesis's* ideological assumptions.

Chapter 10 deals with "The Bloody Chamber", the tale that gives title to Carter's best known collection of short fiction, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979). The focus of analysis here is Carter's postmodernist deployment of fairy tale imagery in the genre's most popular ideological fantasy: the tale's happy ending in marriage. "Wolf-Alice", the story that closes *The Bloody Chamber*, addresses the question of the nature of the human condition by representing a feral girl's coming of age. Chapter 11 explores the way in which "Wolf-Alice" imagines the process of subject formation drawing on Žižek's definition of the postmodernist subject as the constitutive obverse of the subject of the Enlightenment. My analysis of "The Fall River Axe Murders", included in Carter's third collection *Black Venus* (1985), and of "Lizzie's Tiger", collected in *American Ghosts and Old World*

Wonders (1993) closes part III. Chapter 12 examines Carter's postmodernist reworking of Lizzie Borden's murder case in the light of the ideological framework at work in late nineteenth-century Fall River, a Puritan capitalist community in which respectable women were conceived to be the "angels in the house".

My Žižekian analysis of Carter's tales provides answers to the aforementioned areas of contention in Carter studies, which derive, I argue, from the categorisation of her fiction as postmodernist. As the dissertation closes, I take a position in the dispute over the emancipatory potential of Carter's writing and provide an assessment which complicates the standard debate on the distinction between modernism and postmodernism. Most importantly, a Žižekian approach to the tales here analysed proves to expand their significance and open up a new line of research in Carterian studies. The conclusions derived from my research constitute an adequate point of departure to explore the extent to which the rest of Carter's short stories and her nine novels provide a subversive critique of patriarchal ideology.

PART I
POSTMODERNISM AND ANGELA CARTER'S
FICTION



CHAPTER 1

POSTMODERNISM AS A PERIOD TERM AND AS A LITERARY PRACTICE: AN OVERVIEW

Without any doubt, postmodernism is a slippery and controversial term that has led to a vast amount of theoretical and critical work across various fields. Among all the periodising terms used to account for a change in a given context, postmodernism proves to be particularly difficult both to define and use to describe cultural productions for at least two reasons: first, the term is associated to works that deliberately resist definition of any kind, productions that undermine any attempt at meaning-fixation by promoting self-contradiction or paradox, as Linda Hutcheon plainly puts it: “Postmodernism [...] is like saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said” (Hutcheon 1989: 1). Second, the definition of postmodernism, more than the theorisation of other periodising concepts in the history of ideas, has been inseparable from a simultaneous assessment of the aesthetic, epistemological and socio-political implications of such definition from two opposing —critical and supportive— perspectives. “Postmodernism”, Hutcheon admits, “is not so much a concept as a problematic [...] no one seems to be able to agree, not only in the interpretation, but often on what cultural phenomena are to be interpreted. Nevertheless, we seem to be stuck with the word” (15).

This chapter does not aim to provide a comprehensive and definitive account of this problematic but rather attempts to outline the main philosophical, ethical, political and aesthetic premises of theorists and commentators whose contributions can help understand the categorisation and critical reception of Carter’s work as postmodernist fiction.

1.1. Postmodernism as Period Term

Despite the difficulties in defining postmodernism as an epistemological and cultural paradigm, all commentators agree in highlighting a common denominator: for all forms of postmodernism enlightened modernity stands as a negative point of reference.¹ Postmodernism appears to be characterised by a radical break with the foundations of the Enlightenment project; its belief in the social progress of all humanity through the actualisation of the universal ideal of reason that went hand in hand with the consecration of the subject as a free autonomous self is denounced by postmodernist thinkers as illusory and alienating, as a way to hide and perpetuate the real oppression of individuals.

Postmodernists, on the contrary, deny any claim to absolute knowledge. For them, there is no possible view or position outside language, discourse or power and, as a consequence, knowledge is always contingent. Any attempt to true knowledge is seen as reactionary and susceptible to be dismantled. Such anti-foundationalist position radically changes the theorisation of the subject and subsequently affects the conception of art, ethics, politics and history. Postmodernism is thus characterised by a profound anti-humanism; the individual is no longer seen as a free autonomous self but a construct, a site produced by competing and unstable discourses. An ethical subject, therefore, is not an individual that assumes a stable identity but, as I will later on explain drawing on Emmanuel Lévinas's work, is one who identifies with an "Other" that eludes

¹ In part II I present Slavoj Žižek's view of postmodernism as exceptional. While in some works he employs the widespread view of postmodernism as a counter-Enlightenment tradition, notably in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues On The Left* (2000), a book he co-authored with Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau, where, as I will note later in this chapter, Žižek is very critical of postmodernist identity politics, he elsewhere proposes a rather striking view of postmodernism as a radicalisation of Enlightened modernity; in this exceptional view, Žižek categorises Derrida and Foucault as "still structuralists", the only poststructuralist being Jacques Lacan (Žižek 1991: 143). Žižek's non-standard statements on postmodernism, and the way it is to be distinguished from modernism, frame my reassessment of Carter's work as postmodernist fiction.

rational explanation. According to this view, artistic products no longer aim at codifying and communicating a message but, through what has been termed “self-conscious reflexivity”, should exhibit the textual mechanisms at work in the construction of ever contingent —and thus deconstructable— meaning. The political implications of the postmodern turn are best perceived in what has been consolidated as identity politics or politics of difference, which often involves the celebration of difference and the assertion of context-specific identities while denouncing as ideological, and thus retrogressive, any attempt at positing universalising notions of the subject.

In the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* (2004), Steven Connor singles out two concepts to characterise the changes that postmodernist theory has detected in contemporary politics and culture, namely “delegitimation” and “dedifferentiation” (Connor 2004: 3). By “delegitimation” Connor means a radical resistance to any type of ideological claim; the only position susceptible of being legitimised or authorised is, as it were, a non-ideological relativist stance. “Dedifferentiation” is the result of a promotion of difference and a simultaneous rejection of fixed differentiated positions, discourses or fields. In fact, Postmodernism is commonly characterised by its unsettling of the differences between genres —the already quoted distinction between high and low culture— disciplines —the quintessentially modern distinction between epistemology, ethics and aesthetics— ontologies —the long-held distinction between reality and fantasy, between history and fiction, and between past and present— and identities —differences of gender, sex, class, race and nationality. “Dedifferentiation” was a term also used by Scott Lash in his 1990 sociological analysis of postmodernism as a cultural paradigm. Contrary to the process of

differentiation at work in the course of cultural modernisation, postmodernisation, Lash argues, is a process of “de-differentiation” (Lash 1990: 11) that operates in four interrelated components. The first component concerns the relation among types of cultural product (aesthetic, ethical and theoretical); in postmodernism “the aesthetic realm begins to colonize both theoretical and moral-political spheres” (11). The second component refers to the relation between the cultural and the social which in postmodernism, as I have just noted, is characterised by “the partial breakdown of the boundaries between high and popular culture and the concomitant development of a mass audience for high culture” (11). The third component that Lash distinguishes is postmodernism’s “cultural economy” which in his view is also de-differentiated:

On the production side is the famous disintegration of the author celebrated by poststructuralists or alternatively the merging of author into cultural product as in the late 1980s biographical novels or performance art from Laurie Anderson or Bruce MacLean. On the consumption side, de-differentiation takes place in, for example, the tendency of some types of theatre since the mid-1960s to include the audience itself as part of the cultural product. (11)

The fourth component, “the most important perhaps” in Lash’s view, is “the *mode* of representation” (12, emphasis in original), the relationship between the roles of signifier, signified and referent, which enables him to establish a clear distinction between realism, modernism and postmodernism. In an ideal type of realism, Lash contends, cultural forms are seen as signs that unproblematically represent reality, “realism takes neither representation nor reality as problematic” (13). “*Modernism*”, however, “*conceives of representations as being problematic whereas postmodernism problematizes reality*” (13, emphasis in original). In other words, the signifying process, the relation between signs and referents is rendered problematic in modernism. In contraposition, what is problematised in postmodernism is reality itself, which is posited as inseparable from, rather a

product of, the signifying process. In the postmodernist regime of signification, the space of the referent is invaded by the signifier or image, “put[ting] chaos, flimsiness, and instability in our experience of *reality* itself” (15, emphasis in original).

One of the chief “problematizers” of reality was Jacques Derrida, whose theory of Deconstruction is widely seen as one of the pillars of poststructuralist or postmodernist thinking. Derrida’s starting point is his critique of logocentrism, a term he himself coined to refer to what he saw as a misguided Western belief in the presence of a reality —*logos*— that is expressed and known through language. Simultaneously drawing on and rejecting structuralism, Derrida claims that there is no direct, natural link between signs and referents because referents are utterly absent. The meaning of signs, therefore, is the unstable product of what he calls *différance*, a process of differentiation and deferral of formal elements or signifiers:

[t]he movement of signification is possible only if each so-called ‘present’ element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element [...] constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not. (Derrida 1996 [1967]: 32)

The most direct implication of *différance* is that language is a fundamentally unstable system of signification and thus an apparently coherent text can always be undone. Because we rely on language in articulating our perception of reality, knowledge is inherently unreliable and open to deconstruction. In fact, Deconstruction, Derrida’s reading practice, aims at bringing to light the contradictions and inconsistencies within a text while at the same time exposing the rhetorical operations that construct fixed —and thus false— meaning. Deconstruction also affects radically the status of the subject, which Derrida sees as lacking a stable identity because it is wholly constructed in and “subject” to

language. “There is nothing outside-text” as Derrida puts it (Derrida 1976 [1967]: 158).

Derrida’s theory of *différance* is closely related to the concept and practice of intertextuality in literature, whereby literary texts —and texts of any kind— are defined and analysed as dynamic sites in which relational processes disseminate endless and very often contradictory meanings, subverting therefore the New Critical conception of the literary text as a self-sufficient unit of meaning. As is well-known, the term intertextuality was first used by Julia Kristeva in her 1966 essay “Word, Dialogue and Novel” where, in line with Derrida’s notion of text, she defines the literary word as “an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point, as a dialogue among several writings” (Kristeva 1980 [1966]: 65) and intertextuality as “a mosaic of quotations”: any text is the absorption and transformation of another (65). “The notion of *intertextuality*”, Kristeva writes, “replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*” (66, emphasis in original).

Kristeva acknowledges her debt to Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogic concept of the self and language in her theorisation of intertextuality: “Bakhtin situates the text within history and society, which are seen as texts read by the writer, and into which he inserts himself by rewriting them” (65).² Kristeva’s reading method fuses literary analysis with linguistic, social and historical scrutiny, effectuating the

² Bakhtin’s dialogic view of the self parallels a dialogic conception of language, which can be seen as a major antecedent of poststructuralist theories of language, knowledge and the subject. For Bakhtin, the self is not a unitary being but is formed by a differential relation between three elements: a centre (I-for-itself), what is not centre (the-not-I-in-me) and their relation (Holquist 1990: 29). Likewise, language for Bakhtin is not a monological and closed structural system —as it was conceived by Saussure— but a dynamic system in constant dialogue with other socio-historical elements and factors at work in speech acts. Every speech act, in Bakhtin’s view, is irreducibly polyphonic, made up of a multiplicity of voices that compete to produce meaning.

previously noted postmodernist de-differentiation between disciplines, an analytical stance she terms “translinguistics” (37).

Together with the abandonment of the notion of the text as a self-contained and closed unit of signification, some of the most immediate consequences of Kristeva’s notion of intertextuality and of Derrida’s textualism are the undermining of the authority of the artist, the desertion of any attempt to represent the world outside language, and the freedom of the reader/spectator to interpret the text independently of any intentions that the author might have had. Such implications appear to be captured in Umberto Eco’s oft-quoted statement from his *Postscript* to his best-selling novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980): “I rediscovered what writers have always known (and have told us again and again): books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told” (Eco 1983 [1980]: 20). An intertextual view of the text, reality and the subject was also held and taken to the extreme by cultural critic Roland Barthes as he proclaimed “The Death of the Author” in an essay by the same title:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing any single ‘theological meaning’ (the ‘message of the Author God’) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash [...] by refusing to assign a ‘secret’, an ultimate meaning, to the text, (and to the world as text) [Literature] liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is in the end to refuse God and its hypostasis- reason, science, law. (Barthes 1977 [1967]: 147)

For Barthes, the author cannot claim any authority over his or her work because, in a way, his or her authority does not exist prior to or outside language, or, better still, textuality; intertextual writing is what determines what an author writes: “The writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings [...] in such a way as never to rest on any one of them” (146). This does not mean that the individual writer does not exist, but rather

that the idea of the omniscient author has “died” to give way to the text as a free play of signifiers in an ever unaccountable and infinite web of intertexts, or as he had earlier put it in *The Pleasure of the Text*, the intertext is “the impossibility of living outside the infinite text” (Barthes 1975 [1973]: 36).³

If for Derrida and theorists of intertextuality “there is nothing outside the (inter)text”, for the French philosopher and social critic Michel Foucault there is nothing outside discourse. Foucault was not so much interested in the analysis and deconstruction of texts as in the investigation of how power mechanisms operate in the construction and deconstruction of discourse. In Foucault’s writings, power stands as an unstable and never-ending force that produces knowledge by fixing meanings in discourse. Knowledge, in turn, is a way to define and categorise individuals and serves either as a means of social control or as a vehicle for emancipation. The subject in Foucault’s theory has no inherent identity but is constructed through the interplay of power and discourse. Differently put, the individual is subject-ed to identities or “subject positions” that he or she pleurably believes to be part of his or her own nature:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. (Foucault 1980: 119)

Foucault’s account of the effects of power on individuals recalls Louis Althusser’s definition of ideology and his concept of interpellation, which explains how ideology constitutes individuals as subjects by addressing them a certain role or “subject position” which they unconsciously and pleurably assume to be part

³ Barthes dramatised his rejection of the authority of the writer and concomitant celebration of intertextuality in his autobiography *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975), where he systematically substitutes the first person pronoun ‘I’ with the third person pronoun ‘he’ or with his initials “R.B.”

of their own nature (Althusser 1971: 173). Althusser's ultimate definition of the subject —“a subjected being who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission” (182)— verges on determinism as he cannot conceive of the subject outside ideology. Foucault, aware of this sort of determinism in his definition of the subject as wholly constructed by power, modifies his definition of both subject and power in his late essay “The Subject and Power” (1982). Here Foucault clearly argues that power ultimately inheres in the subject, even in individuals that are powerless: “Something called Power, with or without a capital letter, which is assumed to exist universally in a concentrated or diffuse form, does not exist. Power exists only when it is put into action” (Foucault 1982: 219). Foucault further claims that power does not exist without freedom: “Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free [...F]reedom must exist for power to be exerted [...It is] its permanent support since without the possibility of recalcitrance power will be equivalent to physical determination [...T]he power relationship and freedom's refusal to submit cannot therefore be separated” (221). It is such a notion of freedom that enables Foucault to postulate a double view of power: it may work both oppressively, privileging and marginalising identities, and in a productive and liberating way, deconstructing old identities and constructing new ones.

Drawing on Foucault's theory of subject, power and discourse, Judith Butler stands as one of the main poststructuralist thinkers who reformulates gender and sexual identities as provisional discourse constructions. Gender, Butler contends in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), is not a natural category with essential attributes but a contingent role repeatedly and ritualistically performed by individuals who, through interpellation, pleurably and

unconsciously believe it to be part of their own nature. Any attempt to formulate a fixed identity of any kind is, in Butler's view, misguided: "The effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms" (Butler 1990: 13).⁴ Butler questions and reassesses the tendency in feminist theory to embrace the essentialist category of Woman as opposed to that of Man in order to confront patriarchal oppression. She claims that the feminist stance that identifies all men as the oppressor and condemns female individuals who engage in heterosexual practices "mimics the strategy of the oppressor" and ultimately proves to be complicit with the very same matrix it attempts to denounce and subvert (18). On the contrary, Butler renounces and denounces any attempt to constitute the subject as a homogenous entity made up of fixed identities: "There is no identity behind the expressions of gender, that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (25). Butler argues for a free and endless dissemination of discursively constructed gender roles or subject positions, reliant and forever open to interpretation and "resignification" and best perceived in drag, the practice of imitating or performing gender:

In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself —as well as its contingency. Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary. In the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity. (Butler 1990: 175, emphasis in original)⁵

⁴ Butler is referring here to patriarchal heterosexist discourse or what she often terms as the "heterosexual matrix" (1990: 45-91) which, to constitute and perpetuate the power of the heterosexual male excludes identities, "the constitutive outside" (1993: 44-45, 188, 197), as unnatural and abnormal practices.

⁵ "Resignification" is a term Butler repeatedly employs throughout her work to refer to what she reads as the emancipatory potential of the integration within discourse of previously excluded sexual practices.

Butler concludes *Gender Trouble* with a chapter “From Parody to Politics” in which she proposes parodic practices—including drag—as the main strategy to endlessly denaturalise and resignify identities and therefore emancipate individuals (181-190). Butler’s proposal derives from her poststructuralist assumption that the “natural” is “fundamentally uninhabitable” (186), which implies a de-differentiation between the natural and the artificial, body and discourse.

In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler further de-differentiates and delegitimises the distinction between gender and sex, body and performance arguing that discourse precedes matter in determining “what bodies matter” as suggested in her title. Departing from texts by Plato, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Luce Irigaray on the formation of bodily boundaries and matter in general, Butler reasserts her Foucauldian view of discourse and power not only as oppressive but also liberating in its deconstruction and reconstruction of identities.

French philosopher Jean François Lyotard stands as another major representative of postmodernist thinking. Drawing on Derridean and Foucauldian assumptions of language, discourse and subject, Lyotard diagnoses the “postmodern” age as a time experiencing a crisis of legitimation, an era in which the “master narratives” —major Western texts, including the philosophy of Kant, Hegel and Marx, which argued that history is progressive and that knowledge can be emancipatory— have lost their credibility. In *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), widely seen as a landmark of postmodernist theory, Lyotard defines the “*postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard 1984 [1979]: xxiv, emphasis in original). Lyotard argues that we can no longer have faith in what modern metanarratives hailed as universal values: justice, peace, progress and rational consensus; the many wars and bloody ethnic conflicts that took place in the

course of modernity evince, in Lyotard's view, the falsity of those ideals. By contrast, Lyotard hails anti-foundationalism or the decline of metanarratives as desirable and liberating. Such a decline, in Lyotard's view, gives rise to the development of "small narratives", context-specific systems of beliefs that individuals subscribe to in order to achieve particular short-term objectives, being always aware of their relative and provisional legitimation.

The subject in Lyotard's thought, therefore, is not seen as an individual in control of language and knowledge but is rather a node at which different small narratives intersect. Lyotard opposes postmodern art to modern works on the basis of their opposing relations to what late eighteenth-century philosophers like Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant termed the "sublime", an object which defies representation and thus produces:

[a] pain, a kind of cleavage within the subject between what can be conceived and what can be imagined or presented. But this pain in turn engenders a pleasure, in fact a double pleasure: the impotence of the imagination attests *a contrario* to an imagination striving to figure even what cannot be figured [...] This dislocation of the faculties among themselves gives rise to the extreme tension (Kant calls it agitation) that characterizes the pathos of the sublime, as opposed to the calm feeling of beauty. At the edge of the break, infinity, or the absoluteness of the Idea can be revealed in what Kant calls a negative presentation, or even a non-presentation. (Lyotard 1993b: 250)

Both modern and postmodern art, Lyotard argues in his 1983 essay "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?", approach the notion of the sublime yet, whereas modern works reduce the sublime to some consistent form to offer the reader or viewer pleasure and solace and thus to reinforce the subject, postmodern works "[put] forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable" (Lyotard 1993a [1983]: 46). Postmodernist works produce unease in presenting the

incommensurability between representation and reality, between language and world, between “the concept and the sensible” (46), an unease that Lyotard finds politically emancipatory:

Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of a desire for a return to terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honour of the name. (46)⁶

Despite reaching epistemological and aesthetic conclusions similar to those from poststructuralist theories —meaning fixation is coercive, truth is a matter of interpretative and ever provisional consensus, and only those aesthetic products and readings that resist interpretation may be progressive— Lyotard’s conception of language and art appears to be opposed to the view held by Derrida and proponents of intertextuality. Whereas the latter proclaim that language and texts constitute the world, Lyotard bases its anti-foundationalism on his belief that language cannot articulate the world, a paradox that in the view of Aleid Fokkema, one of the major commentators of literary postmodernism, lies at the heart of the postmodern paradigm as a whole (Fokkema 1991: 67).

Jean Baudillard is another French thinker included within the repertoire of theories that construct postmodernism as a period term. He is widely acknowledged as a *provocateur* of French social theory who advocated for extreme versions of postmodernism that celebrate a widespread problematisation of reality in contemporary culture. In Baudillard’s view, society at the turn of the twentieth century was undergoing a process of de-differentiation between reality and

⁶ Lyotard argues that the price paid for modern representations of the sublime —which totalise it into an illusory sign— is terror: “the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one” (Lyotard 1993b: 46).

simulation. As he describes it in *Simulations* (1983), the contemporary world is experiencing a “fourth stage” in the history of the image in which visual products precede and displace empirical reality (Baudillard 1983: 11). Matter, in other words, is annihilated and we are left with nothing but what he terms “the hyperreal” (25), a fantastical state in which images only represent themselves bearing “no relation to any reality whatever: it [the image] is its own pure simulacrum” (12). Baudillard uses Disneyland as an example of the attempt to conceal such hyperreal status:

Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the real and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle. (Baudillard 1983: 25)

Once diagnosed this hyperreal state of the present-day world, Baudillard wrote three striking articles in 1991, the time of the Gulf War, where he argued that the war as we received it did not happen but was merely a simulation produced with the help of mass media and new technologies.⁷ Despite Baudillard’s bleak account of the present state of society, with no Real to represent or distort, he, in a way akin to Butler’s notion of subversive parody, celebrates the hyperreal as fundamentally parodic, a world of competing simulations in which “a non-intentional parody hovers everything” (50). He further interprets hyperreality as a product of capitalism, whose pervasive commodification of goods has radically destroyed material reality:

⁷ The articles were first published in the French newspaper *Libération* and British paper *The Guardian* between January and March 1991 and then collected in the book *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

For finally, it was capital which was the first to feed throughout its history on the destruction of every referential, every human goal, which shattered every ideal distinction between true and false, good and evil, in order to establish a radical law of equivalence and exchange, the iron law of its power. (Braudillard 1983: 43)

Braudillard's account of hyperreality also affects the status of the subject. In line with poststructuralist theories of the subject as decentered and discursively constructed, Braudillard defines the subject as "pure surface" (37) and celebrates this conception as "a liberated man [...] not the one who is freed in his ideal reality, his inner truth" but the one "who changes spaces, who circulates, who changes sex, clothes and habits, according to fashion rather than morality" (96).

Perhaps the most radical example of the postmodernist de-differentiation of reality and hyperreality, matter and technology, is Donna Haraway's post-human conception of the subject as exposed in her essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" (1991). In line with Braudillard's conception of hyperreality, Haraway argues that late twentieth century society is a "mythic time" (Haraway 1991: 149) in which the distinction between imagination and material reality has been dissolved; "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" and individuals are:

[c]himeras, theorized, and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. This cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation. (Haraway 1991: 150)

Divisions of sex, class, race and the distinction between human and animal are also demolished in Haraway's ontology:

The cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed. Far from signaling a walling off of people from other living beings, cyborgs signal disturbingly and pleasurably tight coupling. Bestiality has a new status in this cycle of marriage exchange (152)

Haraway's cybernetic anti-humanism relies on a deliberate dedifferentiation and subsequent delegitimation of any attempt at fixing identity and knowledge; as Haraway puts it in referring to our present postmodern age:

I do not know of any other time in history when there was greater need for political unity to confront effectively the dominations of "race", "gender", "sexuality", and "class". I also do not know of any other time when the kind of unity we might help build could have been possible. None of "us" have any longer the symbolic or material capability of dictating the shape of reality to any of "them". Or at least "we" cannot claim innocence from practicing such dominations. (157)

Haraway advocates for "the confusion of boundaries" as epitomised by the cyborg and calls for "responsibility in their construction" (150). Without advancing the difficult ethical and political questions that Haraway's manifesto raises, I would argue at this point that what Haraway entices us to do—to embody her ideal of the cyborg—appears to be the opposite of what she defends. I believe the cyborg *is* in itself a fixed identity that stands for non-identity and thus is liable to definition. Haraway does define the cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" that is "resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity" (149, 151).

More influential than Haraway's manifesto has been the work of French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, best known for his defence of ethics as a confrontation with radical alterity. In *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (1961) Levinas delegitimises the philosophical fields of epistemology and ontology arguing that any attempt to understand and know truth is inevitably unethical because it turns the Other—what is not "I"—into a fixed and totalized object of knowledge, deprived of its Otherness. In line with Lyotard's rejection of Western metanarratives, Levinas attacks Western philosophy, in its privileging of ontology and epistemology over ethics, as a "philosophy of power [...and] injustice" (Levinas 1991 [1961]: 46). He instead argues for an abandonment of any pursuit of

knowledge and an endorsement of what he considers first philosophy, that is to say, ethics. The main ethical principle for Levinas is to treat the Other in its absolute otherness, renouncing any type of interpretation when approaching “it” as an entity similar to us or sharing any of the rational notions we use to make sense of the world. In short, Levinas’s stance entails a denial of the principle of common humanity and a celebration of an ever unaccountable alterity; as such, it partakes of the anti-foundationalism and anti-humanism characteristic of postmodern thought.

The postmodern turn in theory, here explained as a process of simultaneous dedifferentiation and delegitimation of disciplines, identities, discourses and ontologies, had a direct effect on politics. The last decades of the twentieth century saw the emergence of diverse and at times conflicting political stances that were directly informed by this first archive of discourses on postmodernism. Despite encompassing divergent positions such as the anti-politics of Braudillard’s followers, New Age spirituality, the New Left advanced by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and “identity politics” or “cultural politics”, postmodern politics is characterised by an abandonment of the modern belief in the notion of the subject as a free agent ready to negotiate, define, implement, question and change universal rights and values. Informed by postmodernist theory and its maxim that no position outside language and discourse is tenable, the most affirmative forms of postmodern politics —the New Left and cultural politics— have embraced difference and otherness as the bases of social progress. As Mouffe puts it in “Radical Democracy: Modern or Postmodern?” (1988):

[Enlightenment universalism] has become an obstacle in the path of understanding those new forms of politics, characteristic of our societies today, which demand to be approached from a non-essentialist perspective. Hence, the necessity of using the theoretical tools elaborated by the different currents of what can be called the

postmodern in philosophy and of appropriating their critique of rationalism and subjectivism. (Mouffe 1988: 33)⁸

In the same vein, Laclau defends “the abandonment of the myth of foundations [...] because there is no extradiscursive reality that discourse may reflect” (Laclau 1988: 79). “Humankind”, Laclau continues:

[h]aving always bowed to external forces —God, Nature, the necessary laws of History— can now, at the threshold of postmodernity, consider itself for the first time the creator and constructor of its own history. The dissolution of the myth of foundations —and the concomitant dissolution of the category ‘subject’— further radicalizes the emancipatory possibilities offered by the Enlightenment and Marxism. (Laclau 1988: 79-80)

The turn to a postmodern logic in politics leads, in other words, to cultural politics: a form of politics in which individuals disregard political, social and economic issues included in the “modern”—and thus “essentialist” or “universalising”— category of class and assume multicultural identities constructed in opposition to the norm— white heterosexual man. As its name indicates, cultural politics involves the dedifferentiation of politics and culture, or, in Slavoj Žižek’s words, “the culturization of politics”, a process whereby “political differences, differences conditioned by political inequality, economic exploitation, and so on, are naturalized and neutralized into cultural differences, different ways of life, which are something given, something that cannot be overcome, but must be merely tolerated” (Žižek 2008c: 660).

The postmodernist emphasis on difference and resultant dedifferentiation and delegitimation of fixed meaning, identity and subject, prompted a fierce reaction from theorists and critics who saw the postmodernist turn not only as a

⁸ Mouffe is referring to social movements from the 1970s and 1980s that challenged any form of dominant political identity by vindicating difference (of race, gender, sex, nationality, and so on) as the main political category.

retrogressive position but also as a process deriving from and complicit with late twentieth century global capitalism.

In “Modernity —An Incomplete Project” (1980) Jürgen Habermas counters postmodernist claims that the Enlightenment project is over by arguing that “instead of giving up modernity and its project as a lost cause, we should learn from the mistakes of those extravagant programs which have tried to negate modernity” (Habermas 1993 [1980]: 106). Habermas laments the history of exploitation and social injustice that pervades modernity which, in his view, was provoked by individuals who actualised an instrumental model of reason defined in terms of an egoistic and domineering subjectivity. But these ills, he contends, should not cancel the project of enlightened modernity as a whole. He thus favours the continuity of modernity by redefining the subject in terms of communicative reason.

In *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984), Habermas argues for a “form of social interaction in which the plans of action of different actors are coordinated through an exchange of communicative acts, that is, through a use of language orientated towards reaching understanding” (Habermas 1984: 44). Habermas’s legitimation of consensus as the basis for the construction of discourses that may enable progressive and emancipatory action radically challenges postmodernist anti-foundationalism and its legitimation of unrepresentability.

Fredric Jameson also opposes postmodernism as a cultural dominant, lamenting its repudiation of modern epistemology and what he diagnoses as its concomitant sheer depthlessness. In “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Capitalism” (1984), Jameson regrets the collapse of four modern oppositions or “depth models” in postmodernism:

The dialectical [opposition...] of essence and appearance (along with a whole range of concepts of ideology and false consciousness which tend to accompany it); the

Freudian model of latent and manifest, or of repression (which is of course the target of Michel Foucault's programmatic and symptomatic pamphlet *La Volonté de savoir*); the existential model of authenticity and inauthenticity [...] and finally, latest in time, the great semiotic opposition between signifier and signified, which was itself rapidly unraveled and deconstructed during its brief heyday and in the 1960s and 1970s. (Jameson 1993 [1984]: 70)

The most immediate result of the abandonment of depth models is, he argues, that "depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces (what is often called intertextuality is in that sense no longer a matter of depth)" (70). Jameson reads postmodernist depthlessness as an effect of the processes of commodification that dominate all spheres of life in the present (third) stage of the history of the capital. He further contends that postmodernism is complicit with late capitalism in social injustice for it hinders any chances of emancipatory political action in its annihilation of any sense of self (71), history (74), meaning (84-88) and place (80-84). Accordingly, postmodernist art no longer signifies but nostalgically scavenges signifiers from past texts in processes that Jameson terms "pastiche" and "collage" (73). Jameson is careful to distinguish both processes from "the more readily received idea of parody": pastiche, unlike parody, does not have any satiric intention or ulterior motive; it is "blank parody", an impulse "devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists" (73-74).

Following Jameson's critique, Eagleton rebukes postmodernist aesthetics claiming that its characteristic "meaninglessness", as opposed to the meaninglessness of avant-garde culture, impairs our capacity to think, articulate and actualise possibilities for a better society (Eagleton 1985: 70). Christopher Norris is also very critical of the ethical and political implications of postmodernism's skepticism about the possibility of knowledge and truth. "I think that the current fashionable anti-Enlightenment rhetoric," Norris writes in an essay published in

2000, “such as we find in Lyotard, this kind of rather facile, sweeping dismissal of Enlightenment values is both ethically disastrous and politically retrograde” (Norris 2000: 57). Norris sees such a postmodernist pluralist stance and its defense of tolerance for difference as deeply problematic. He agrees that we should be tolerant with difference and acknowledge that one’s ideological position is not the only possible viewpoint; yet, the implications of an extreme postmodernist skepticism are, Norris argues, as lamentable as those of dogmatic and egotistic rationality:

There are problems when one tries to follow this programme [tolerance] through its ultimate (postmodernist) conclusions. What are we to say, for instance, when confronted with Holocaust deniers who claim either that the Holocaust never happened or that reports of it were greatly exaggerated? [...] Are we simply to say, with Lyotard, that there is just no deciding the issue here since the parties to this particular dispute are applying utterly disparate criteria of truth and narrative accountability? (Norris 2000: 58)

Some examples of extreme postmodernist skepticism are to be found in Braudillard’s previously noted declaration that “the Gulf War did not take place” or in Paul Feyerabend’s view of fascism as an “inclination” that is neither good nor evil in *Farewell to Reason* (1987), a work which, as its title suggests, celebrates the abandonment of enlightenment values and consensus:

Now one thing should have been clear: fascism is not my cup of tea [...W]e have an inclination- nothing more. The inclination, like every other inclination, is surrounded by lots of hot air and entire philosophical systems have been built on it. Some of these systems speak of objective qualities and of objective duties to maintain them. But my question is not how we speak but what content can be given to our verbiage. And all I can find when trying to identify some content are different systems asserting different sets of values with nothing but our inclination between them [...]if inclination opposes inclination then in the end the stronger inclination wins. (Feyerabend 1987: 309)

Approaching today’s armed conflicts with dozens of casualties every day in terms of hyperreality or reading contemporary practices like stoning adulterous women to death, genital mutilation and so on, as a matter of “relative inclinations”, is not only symptomatic of what Jameson calls “the waning of affect” (1993 [1984]:

69) but certainly stands as a disturbing position, perverse even. As Norris has it: “If you think about the racial, ethnic, religious and ideological conflicts that are raging all around the world at this moment then you may find reason to reject such a view” (Norris 2000: 81). This criticism of extreme relativism leads Norris to dismiss Levinas’s foundation of ethics on incommensurability or absolute difference contending that:

Very often these conflicts come about because human beings are successfully indoctrinated with a notion of radical otherness, that is, an incapacity to recognize other people *as* human beings on account of some ethnic, religious, cultural or linguistic difference. It is possible; it is terribly possible, for whole populations or ethnic groups to be swung into this way of thinking, to simply discount those others from the realm of humanity, to see them as utterly incomprehensibly different or alien to themselves. (81)

In the apparently irresolvable debate on the political potential of postmodernism, there is a third stance of scholars like Andreas Huyssen (1984), Hal Foster (1985), and Scott Lash (1990) who, aware of the risks implicit in postmodernist extreme relativism, validate its questioning of cultural discourses and its deconstruction of those that prove to be oppressive. Hence, they posit a distinction between “easy” or “reactionary postmodernism” and “progressive postmodernism”. Huyssen dismisses the “easy postmodernism of the anything goes variety” and calls for a repoliticisation of postmodernist culture, what he terms as “a postmodernism of resistance” which “will always have to be specific and contingent upon the cultural field within which it operates” (Huyssen 1984: 31).

Likewise, Foster recognises the political potential of a postmodernism of resistance as opposed to the “false normativity” of a reactionary postmodernism. A “resistant postmodernism”, Foster contends:

[is c]oncerned with a critical deconstruction of tradition, not an instrumental pastiche of pop or historical form, with a critique of origins, not a return to them [...I]t seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliation. (Foster 1985: xi-xii)

Sociologist Scott Lash, whose notion of postmodernist dedifferentiation was previously quoted, counters Jameson's condemnation of the postmodernist "regime of signification" (Lash 1990: 4) arguing that the prevalence of images over the written text does not cancel out interpretation. Quite the contrary, images and their relations, in Lash's view, do signify and demand "a highly rationalist pursuit, either aesthetically or theoretically, to try to make some sense of it" (14).

Slavoj Žižek is similarly critical of an ethical and political stance based on pure difference and extreme relativism. Yet, contrary to Huysen's and Foster's defense of a repoliticisation of culture as the basis of a resistant postmodernism, Žižek analyses such a move as ultimately reactionary. In *Contingency, Hegemony and Universality*, a collaborative book with political theorists Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau, published in 2000, Žižek —*contra* Laclau— denounces postmodernism, "the new world of dispersed multiple identities, of radical contingency, of an irreducible ludic plurality of struggles" (Butler et al. 2000: 90) as an agent in the perpetuation of liberal capitalism given the fact that "its proponents, as a rule, leave out the resignation at its heart—the acceptance of capitalism as 'the only game in town', the renunciation of any real attempt to overcome the existing capitalist regime" (95). Despite admitting the great merit of repoliticising domains previously considered apolitical, Žižek contends that postmodern or identity politics is at length a retrograde form of politics because it:

[d]oes *not* in fact repoliticize capitalism, because *the very notion and form of the 'political' within which it operates is grounded in the 'depoliticization' of the economy*. If we are to play the postmodern game of plurality of political subjectivizations, it is formally necessary that we do *not* ask certain questions (about how to subvert capitalism as such, about the constitutive limits of political democracy and/or the democratic state as such...) So again, apropos of Laclau's obvious counter-argument that the Political, for him, is not a specific social domain but the very set of contingent decisions that ground the Social, I would answer that the postmodern emergence of new multiple political subjectivities certainly does

not reach this radical level of the political act proper. (Butler et al. 2000: 98-99, emphasis in original)

The reason why, for Žižek, the postmodernist culturalisation of politics — and its defense of plural and contingent positions— is not inimical to capitalist interests and exploitation is elucidated in a 2008 article “Tolerance as a Political Category”. Here Žižek clearly states that the ostensibly non-ideological tolerance of multiculturalist post-politics is purely ideological and works in the service of liberal capitalism because the latter is not a contingent context-specific system, just as postmodernist positions attempt to be. Capitalism, Žižek reiterates, is effectively universal:

Capitalism is not just universal in-itself, it is universal for-itself, as the tremendous actual corrosive power that undermines all particular lifeworlds, cultures, traditions, cutting across them, catching them in its vortex. It is meaningless to ask the question, Is this universality true or a mask of particular interests? This universality is directly actual as universality, as a negative force mediating and destroying all particular content. (Žižek 2008c: 672)

Žižek also argues that “the cultivation of tolerance as a political end” not only entails a depolitisation of capitalism, “a rejection of politics as a domain in which conflict can be productively articulated and addressed, a domain in which citizens can be transformed by their participation” (660), but often leads to the dangerous and perverse “impasse of tolerating intolerance”:

Liberalist multiculturalism preaches tolerance between cultures while making it clear that true tolerance is fully possible only in individualist Western culture and thus legitimating even military interventions as an extreme mode of fighting the other’s intolerance (662).

Very recently, in “Stop 3” from his 2014 *Event*, Žižek has noted how the ongoing renunciation to the notion of the subject as a free responsible agent still stands today as an effective ideological supplement to capitalism’s global expansion. Here Žižek does not explicitly refer to postmodernist thought and its

conception of the subject as a decentred discursive mechanism but rather highlights two positions, brain sciences and Buddhism, which, despite appearing to be radically opposed in their insight, are linked in their conception of the subject as a selfless being, either as a pure effect of neuronal processes or as *anatman* —in Sanskrit “not-self”— the Buddhist doctrine of the subject’s inexistence. “Today”, Žižek contends,

[p]eople are no longer psychologically able to cope with the dazzling pace of technological development and the social changes that accompany it. Things move too fast [...] one more and more lacks the most elementary ‘cognitive mapping’ needed to grasp these developments. The recourse to Taoism or Buddhism offers a way out of this predicament which works better than a desperate escape into old traditions: instead of trying to cope with the accelerating pace of technological progress and social changes, one should [...] let oneself go, drift along while retaining an inner distance and indifference towards the mad dance of accelerated progress, a distance based on the insight that all this social and technological upheaval is ultimately a non-substantial proliferation of semblances [...] (2014a: 66)

The same holds today for the aftermath of Brain Sciences: “Brain sciences are telling us that the notion of self as a free autonomous subject is a mere user’s illusion, that there is no self” (66). Once established this homology, Žižek signals at the impasses that affect the obliteration and objectification of human agency by Buddhism and brain sciences respectively. In analysing the goal of the former, the event of attaining absolute happiness in *Nirvana*, Žižek “stumble[s] upon” a fundamental ambiguity apropos the subject’s very intervention in its self-obliteration:

How are we to distinguish happiness achieved by hard work, discipline and meditation from happiness achieved by magic pills if there is no immanent distinction in the quality of happiness? [...] If happiness can be generated through chemical means (pills), is it still a true Enlightenment, an authentic Spiritual Event? (73-74)

A comparable deadlock is discerned in brain sciences’ claim that our self-perception as responsible agents is a necessary illusion. This very claim, however,

as well as scientific knowledge as a whole, emerges from the experience of oneself as a free rational agent. “In short”, Žižek affirms, “we should never forget that the scientific image of man as a neurobiological machine is the result of collective scientific practice in which we act as free rational agents” (45). The link between Buddhism and brain sciences on the basis of their renunciation of the subject as a free agent can be extended to the outcome of the poststructuralist project, the gesture through which the subject recognises in its forever provisional and illusory position the workings of power and discourse. Žižek concludes the chapter by arguing that any attempt to dispose of responsibility and conceive oneself as an unfree object ultimately fails at the level of practical and ethical life:

[y]es, we are doomed. Fate pulls the strings, every manipulator is in his or her turn manipulated, every free agent who decides his or her own fate is deluded—but to simply endorse and assume this predicament of helplessness in the face of greater forces is also an illusion, an escapist avoidance of the burden of responsibility. (75)

As I will further explain in part II, Žižek finds in Lacanian Psychoanalysis an indispensable point of reference for any emancipatory politics in the face of today’s global capitalism and its subjugation of individuals throughout the world. The starting point in Žižek’s ethico-political stance is an insistence on the unconditional autonomy of the subject, on accepting that, as individuals, we are ultimately responsible for our actions, our being-in-the world, which includes the construction of any given socio-economic system— in Lacanian terms, of any given “symbolic field”:

Is this not why psychoanalysis is exemplary of our predicament? Yes, we are decentred, caught in a foreign cobweb, over-determined by unconscious mechanisms; yes, I am ‘spoken’ more than speaking [...] but simply assuming this fact (in the sense of rejecting any responsibility) is also false, a case of self-deception. Psychoanalysis makes me even *more responsible* than traditional morality does; it makes me be responsible even for what is beyond my (conscious) control. (75-76, emphasis in original)

Crucial for the argument developed in this dissertation is the fact that this negative view of postmodernism constitutes one of the two senses in which Žižek uses the term “postmodernism” throughout his career. In his second and more original usage, postmodernism means something very different from, rather opposed to, the anti-foundationalist and anti-humanist theories so far exposed: it refers to Lacanian Psychoanalysis as a theoretical stance that affirms a Real as the central impossibility around which any discourse is structured (Žižek 1991: 143). Postmodernist cultural products, according to this exceptional view, would then be those works that, in over-approaching the surface/image/appearance/discourse render visible a disgusting crawling life—the Real invading the signifier. What this overproximity reveals, as will be further argued, is a fundamental ambiguity that pertains to the notion of the Lacanian/postmodernist Real: it is not that the signifier—surface/screen/image/appearances—is an insurmountable obstacle that makes the Real utterly inaccessible or uninhabitable, as representatives of standard postmodernism would have it. The Real is also and primarily the signifier itself, the screen/image/surface/appearance that always-already distorts our perception of reality creating the illusion of the Real as “something-in-itself”, something hidden behind/beyond. Postmodernism, in Žižek’s unorthodox view, shows us that if we subtract the hindrance of the signifier, we find nothing; the coordinates of reality and the self disintegrate. It is in the light of this non-standard account of postmodernism that I will analyse Carter’s short fiction.

To conclude my account of the critical responses to the first archive of discourses on orthodox postmodernism, it is worth noting the position of some feminist critics who, in line with Norris’s and Žižek’s arguments, regretted postmodern anti-foundationalism and anti-humanism because, in their view, it

eventually disabled any theory of agency necessary to enact a move into political action. Such is the argument of Sabine Lovibond who, in her 1989 essay “Feminism and Postmodernism”, regards the Lyotardian pleasurable legitimization of local and provisional narratives as an inherently reactionary position capable of provoking “a terrible pessimism” (Lovibond 1993 [1989]: 408). She therefore formulates an alternative to this kind of pessimism:

I suggest [...] that feminists should continue to think of their efforts as directed not simply towards various local political programmes, but ultimately towards a global one- the abolition of the sex class system, and of the forms of inner life that belong with it. This programme is ‘global’ not just in the sense that it addresses itself to every corner of the planet, but also in the sense that its aims eventually converge with all other egalitarian or liberationist movements. (It would be arbitrary to work for *sexual* equality unless one believed that human society was disfigured by inequality *as such*). (Lovibond 1993 [1989]: 408, emphasis in original)

Patricia Waugh, despite acknowledging how useful postmodern questioning of oppressive discourses has been, also believes that postmodernist relativism may deprive feminism of its emancipatory potential. In “Modernism, Postmodernism, Feminism: Gender and Autonomy Theory”, she contends that feminism:

[h]as finally to resist the logic of its [postmodernism’s] arguments or at least to attempt to combine them with a modified adherence to an epistemological anchorage in the discourses of Enlightened modernity [...] feminism cannot sustain itself as an emancipatory movement unless it acknowledges its foundations in the discourses of modernity.” (Waugh 1992: 189-190)

In a comparable vein, Seyla Benhabib argues that postmodernism’s “foundations” are neither a philosophical nor a political ally for any feminist emancipatory action. Benhabib isolates in postmodernist anti-foundationalism and anti-humanism the “death” of what she sees as three necessary concepts, namely the subject, history and metaphysics. In line with detractors of postmodernist anti-humanism, “the death of the autonomous, self-reflective subject, capable of acting on principle”, Benhabib contends, precludes the possibility of articulating subjectivities, necessary for the actualisation of historical progress (Benhabib 1995:

29). “The death of history” in turn effaces any perspective of social emancipation while “the death of metaphysics” truncates any possibility of “criticizing or legitimizing institutions, practices and traditions other than through the immanent appeal to the self-legitimation of “small narratives” (29). Benhabib, in this light, sees postmodernism as incompatible with:

[t]he feminist commitment to women’s agency and sense of selfhood, to the reappropriation of women’s own history in the name of an emancipated future, and to the exercise of radical social criticism which uncovers gender in all its endless variety and monotonous similarity. (29)

In the midst of this debate on the philosophical, ethical and political implications of standard postmodernism, some cultural critics have isolated a number of aesthetic devices and literary techniques which, as I will expose in the next chapter, provide a canonical framework of reference for the categorisation and assessment of literary texts as postmodernist.

1.2. Postmodernism as Literary Practice

This section examines a body of discourses that define postmodernism as a literary practice and, as such, have been influential on the categorisation of Carter’s fiction as postmodernist and on the concomitant favourable or negative assessment of its political value. Ihab Hassan, Brian McHale, Linda Hutcheon and Aleid Fokkema stand among the theorists who have identified a number of literary strategies that, in promoting a self-conscious endless play of empty signifiers, deconstruct, dedifferentiate and delegitimize foundational notions of language, reality, self, literature, history and politics. Hutcheon herself explicitly acknowledges her debt to poststructuralist theory in such an enterprise: “It is difficult to separate the de-doxifying impulse of postmodern art and culture from the deconstructing impulse of what we have labeled post-structuralist theory” (Hutcheon 1989: 5).

Ihab Hassan was one of the first critics to announce and promote postmodernism in literature.⁹ In his well-known essay “Toward a Concept of Postmodernism”, Hassan sets out to account for the aesthetic implications of postmodernism. He draws a table (1987: 91) in an attempt to establish schematic differences between modernism and postmodernism across the fields of “rhetoric, linguistics, literary theory, philosophy, anthropology, psychoanalysis, political science, even theology” and drawing on “many authors —European and American— aligned with diverse movements, groups and fields” (92). Although he is well aware of the limitations inherent in defining both phenomena in terms of clear-cut dichotomies, Hassan contends that all the rubrics in the column referring to postmodernism point to a tendency towards “indeterminacy”, a neologism he coined to amalgamate what he posits as two “central, constitutive tendencies in postmodernism: one of indeterminacy, the other of immanence” (92).¹⁰

Indeterminacy, in Hassan’s view, designates a will to “unmake” —an urge to dismantle or undo fixed meanings, categories or disciplines, and in turn emphasise radical contingency— which encompasses “a dozen current terms [...] decreation, disintegration, deconstruction, decenterment, displacement, difference, discontinuity, disjunction, disappearance, decomposition, de-definition, demystification, detotalization, delegitimation— let alone more technical terms referring to the rhetoric of irony, rupture, silence” (92). Indeterminacy is the result of “that immanence called Language”, the status of human beings as language

⁹ Hassan’s first work in this respect was *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (1981) where he advanced the same definition of literary postmodernism gathered here: postmodernism as an intensification of a “will to unmaking”. In other works such as *Paracriticisms* (1975) and *The Right Promethean Fire* (1980), Hassan engages in an examination of postmodernism in contemporary culture, notably the role of science in a postmodern age, and develops a “multivocal” style of critical writing, using collage and typographical invention to match his object of study.

¹⁰ Hassan coined this term in a 1977 essay entitled “Culture, Indeterminacy and Immanence: Margins of the (Postmodern) Age” in *Humanities in Society* 1.1 (1977-78): 51-85.

animals who constitute themselves and the world by signs of their own making or, as Hassan puts it, “the capacity of mind to generalize itself in symbols, intervene more and more into nature, act upon itself through its own abstractions and so become increasingly, im-mediately its own environment” (93). Such postmodernist pantextuality thesis or privileging of language as the alpha and omega of being at the expense of language-independent reality leads to the aforementioned deconstruction, dedifferentiation and delegitimation of modern systems of categories:

The public world dissolves as fact and fiction blend, history becomes derealized by media into a happening, science takes its own models as the only accessible reality, cybernetics confronts us with the enigma of artificial intelligence, and technologies project our perceptions to the edge of the receding universe or into the ghostly interstices of matter. (93)

Indeterminance in aesthetics, and in literature in particular, becomes manifest in the adoption of open, provisional, unstable and playful forms, “a discourse of ironies and fragments, a white ideology of absences and fractures, a desire of diffractions, an invocation of complex, articulate silences” (93-94). In an essay titled “Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective”, Hassan includes indeterminacy and immanence in a list of eleven postmodern “definiens” (1987: 173). Another feature included in the list is “fragmentation”, which Hassan defines as the obverse of totalisation or synthesis of any social, epistemic or poetic form and which is made manifest in strategies and forms like “montage, collage, the found or cut-up literary object [...], metonymy [and] schizophrenia” (168).

“Decanonization” appears in the list as a feature that Hassan equates to Lyotard’s delegitimation of metanarratives and resultant favouring of small narratives (169). “Self-less-ness” and “depth-less-ness” are also included as quintessential postmodernist traits which refer to the loss of the subject in the play

of language, “diffus[ing] itself in depthless styles, refusing, eluding interpretation” (169). “The Unrepresentable” is another *definiens* of postmodernist aesthetics that Hassan derives from Lyotard’s definition of postmodernist art and which is presented as analogous to Kristeva’s concept of the “abject”, “[t]hat which, through language, is part of no particular language [...] that which, through meaning, is intolerable, unthinkable” (Kristeva quoted in Hassan, 170). “Irony” or suspensive reflexiveness is defined too as a typically postmodern strategy which promotes contingency, absurdity and indeterminacy by expressing the “search of a truth that continually eludes [the mind]” (170).

More postmodernist traits that Hassan singles out are “hybridization”, the “de-definition” or deformation of genres which engenders equivocal modes through parody and pastiche (170), and “carnivalization”, a concept coined by Bakhtin to refer to the ludic, comic and provisional reversal of reality which for Hassan —and for Bakhtin, as I will show in the next few pages— carries a promise for social renewal (171). Hassan closes his list with two concepts closely related to carnivalisation: “performance, or participation”, whereby the individual endlessly performs provisional selves to avoid a lapse into —what Hassan sees as— regressive solipsism or narcissism” and “constructionism”, the affirmation in art of the main maxim of postmodernist thinking: that reality (and self) is a textual construction which involves the right of any truth claim to be questionable and accepted (171-172).¹¹

¹¹ Hassan lists as examples of indeterminacy in literary theory Mikhail Bahktin’s dialogic imagination, Roland Barthes’s *textes scriptibles*, Wolfgang Iser’s literary *Unbestimmtheiten*, Harold Bloom’s misprisons, Paul de Man’s allegorical readings, Stanley Fish’s affective stylistics, Norman Holland’s transactive analysis and David Bleich’s subjective criticism (1987: 168). To exemplify his already commented notion of immanence Hassan addresses Braudillard’s affirmation of pure and empty form as the real in contemporary society (1987: 172-173).

If Hassan articulates the tendencies constitutive to postmodernist literary texts and lists its most characteristic “definiens”, it is Brian McHale who provides a comprehensive repertoire of literary strategies and techniques that dramatise those tendencies in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987). In line with Hassan’s notion of postmodernist “indeterminance” and with the whole pantextuality thesis of the first archive of discourses on postmodernism, McHale puts forward a hypothesis whereby he distinguishes modernist from postmodernist literary texts in terms of two distinct “dominants”. The dominant of modernist fiction is “*epistemological*”, McHale suggests, modernist literary texts are cognitive, focused on the pursuit of knowledge, asking questions such as:

‘How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?’¹² Other typical postmodernist questions might be added: What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?; How does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower?; What are the limits of the knowable? And so on. (1987: 9, emphasis in original)¹³

Postmodernist literature in McHale’s account evinces a radical change of dominant. Postmodernist texts are no longer concerned with epistemological issues but employ strategies and techniques that engage and foreground “post-cognitive” or “ontological” questions:

‘Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?’ Other typical postmodernist questions bear on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects, for instance: What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted and how do they differ?;

¹² McHale quotes these questions from Dick Higgins’s *A Dialectic of Centuries* (1978:101), in which Higgins draws a comparable distinction between cognitive and postcognitive art.

¹³ McHale takes the term “dominant” from Roman Jakobson to mean groups of features which are neither exclusive to nor all that can be found in a given work but which are given relevance over other elements, or as McHale puts it quoting Jakobson: “the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure” (McHale 1987: 6).

What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, or what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? And so on. (McHale 1987: 10).

After formulating his thesis, McHale goes on to assemble a catalogue of literary strategies of —to use Hassan’s expression— “world’s making and unmaking” which he groups into two discernible categories: strategies that dramatise conflicts among two or more worlds, thus questioning and undoing the boundaries between them; and metafictional strategies that destabilise the boundaries between fiction and reality by foregrounding the very textual processes operating in the construction of the work itself.¹⁴

McHale includes Angela Carter’s novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman* (1972) as exemplary of strategies from both categories. First, he detects in Carter’s early novel a dramatisation of the ontological confrontation of worlds inherent to the fantastic and to science fiction in postmodernist literature. McHale opposes the postmodernist fantastic with a modern or traditional use of the genre, best theorised by Tzevan Todorov in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1973). Todorov defines the fantastic genre as encompassing literary texts that stage an epistemological approach to the world by fostering “hesitation or ‘epistemological uncertainty’” over two antithetical explanations of (only one)

¹⁴ McHale’s thesis that modernist and postmodernist literary texts share strategies which they use for opposing functions—epistemological and ontological, respectively—is the main assumption of Theo D’haen’s account of postmodernist fiction in “Postmodern Fiction: Form and Function” (1987). D’haen identifies in both modernist and postmodernist literary texts “blanks” that blur a unified notion of (meta)narrative, questioning the significance of narrator, characters, plot, fictive reality and reader. Whereas the outcome of modernist blanks is “the emergence, via the metanarratives appealed to, of a more coherent, sensible, unified and whole world potentially present beyond the real and fragmented world Modernist man finds himself living in” (D’haen 1987: 147-148), the blanks in postmodernist texts “explode the very same metanarratives enabling any such meaning to arise” (148). This explosion or blockage of meaning is significant for D’haen; it is symptomatic of how the reader’s period and society “project and perpetuate their view on ‘reality’, and therefore, of themselves, and of the intrinsic arbitrariness of the means they [postmodernist texts] use to do so” (148). Postmodernist texts, in other words, refer to themselves as “narratives” or textual constructs.

reality: “the natural [and...] supernatural explanations, [...] the uncanny and the marvelous” (McHale 1987: 74). In Todorov’s own words:

In a world *which is indeed our world* [...] there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one or two possible solutions [...] The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous [...] The possibility of hesitation between the two creates the fantastic effect. (Todorov 1973: 25-26, emphasis in original)

Todorov’s definition of the fantastic, in McHale’s view, does not fit his account of postmodernist fiction because it never questions the existence of a given world but simply problematises its interpretation. The postmodernist fantastic, by contrast, problematises a given world by (re)presenting a plurality of other possible worlds which interpenetrate thus dramatising “a face-to-face confrontation between the possible (the ‘real’) and the impossible, the normal and the paranormal” (75). Such confrontation also involves hesitation; not hesitation between the uncanny and the marvelous but ontological uncertainty “between this world and the world next door” (75). McHale singles out two rhetorical strategies at work in postmodernist fantastic fiction to intensify ontological uncertainty: the strategy of “contrastive banality”, which consists of portraying characters that fail to be amazed by unreal happenings, and the strategy of “resistance of normality”, whereby characters appear as resisting against what they perceive as paranormal or unreal (76).

Carter’s *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, McHale contends, stands as a good example of “resistance of normality” in its staging of a war between the resistant official forces of an unnamed city and the “diabolical” Dr Hoffman’s “guerrilla” which, as the narrator and protagonist of the story, Desiderio, informs, “filled it [the city] with mirages in order to drive us [citizens] all mad. Nothing in the city was what it seemed —nothing at all! Because Dr Hoffman, you

see, was waging a massive campaign against human reason itself” (Carter 1982 [1972]: 11). The result of “the Hoffman effect” (13) was a pervading dissolution of the distinction between reality and fantasy with dramatic consequences: many of the characters feel “trapped in some downward-drooping convoluted spiral of unreality from which [they] could never escape. Many committed suicide” (20). The faction of characters “resistant” to Dr. Hoffman’s unreal apparitions is headed by the Minister of Determination, an empiricist who:

[b]elieved the criterion of reality was that a thing was determinate and the identity of the thing lay only in the extent to which it resembled itself. He was the most ascetic of logicians but, if he had a fatal flaw, it was its touch of scholasticism. He believed that the city—which he took as a microcosm of the universe— contained a finite set of their combinations and therefore a list could be made of all possible distinct forms which were logically viable. These could be counted, organized into a conceptual framework and so form a kind of check list for the verification of all phenomena. (McHale 1987: 24)

McHale further categorises Carter’s novel as postmodernist in literalising what he reads as an irreducible contingency at the heart of the war between empirical reality and Doctor Hoffman’s pleasurable illusions. Such contingency is expressed by means of what McHale terms “postmodernist allegory” or “allegory against itself” (140, 143). Just as he did in defining the fantastic genre in postmodernism, McHale establishes a distinction between traditional or modern allegory and its postmodernist counterpart. A text is allegorical in the traditional sense when it is made up of at least two levels of signs—literal and metaphorical—that work to express a coherent message; in postmodernism, on the contrary, allegory works against itself to cancel any fixed meaning and subsequently promote radical contingency. In Carter’s novel the two levels are easily detectable: the agonistic war between the city and Hoffman’s guerrilla is the literal level that refers to a philosophical conflict between an enlightened view of reality and a celebration of

entropy and the pleasure principle. However, in McHale's opinion, the novel neither favours any of the factions nor allows definite interpretation:

Carter [...] deliberately spoils her lucid allegory of 'fantasy vs. reality' [and] reveals through her hero Desiderio that each deuteragonist [Hoffman and the Minister] in fact possesses the characteristics that ought to belong, according to the logic of the allegory, to the other: in the empiricist Minister, Desiderio discerns an unruly Faustian impulse, a strain of imaginative overreaching (at the service of everyday reality, of course), while Hoffman, he discovers, is really a colorless empiricist, a Gradgrind. In short, what had been posed as a polar opposition proves to be a complex interpenetration. (McHale 1987: 144)

What stands as a potentially significant paradox is received by McHale as a deliberate use of postmodernist allegory to dissolve meaning into indeterminacy, a strategy in which one might "suspect an element of parody" (144). Allegory in postmodernism works "against itself" (143) effectuating a "parody of allegory" or "allegory reflecting upon allegory", inducing an undecidability between meanings at both literal and tropological level whose underlying message is the omnipresence of free-floating signifiers, "the textuality of the text. If you ask what is the 'realist' level of an allegorical text, the answer —upon which allegory [...] never ceases to insist— can only be the words on the page in front of you" (146).¹⁵ Such an answer appears to be at odds with Carter's self-declared intention of "investigating the fictions that regulate our lives" (Carter 1997 [1983]: 36), her professed demythologising project, through what she terms "speculative fiction" (Katsavos 1994 [1988]: 14), or as she affirmed in the Afterword to *Fireworks* when explaining why she decided to write "tales" instead of stories: "though the play of surfaces never ceased to fascinate me, I was not so much exploring them as making abstractions from them, I was writing, therefore, tales" (Carter 1995 [1974]: 459).

¹⁵ Susan Rubin Suleiman overtly endorses McHale's categorization of Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* as quintessentially postmodernist. In "The Fate of the Surrealist Imagination in the Society of Spectacle" (first published in 1994), Suleiman argues: "If McHale is right that such questions are implicit in all postmodernist fiction, then *Doctor Hoffman* is the very model of the genre, for it explicitly thematises those questions and uses them as major plot elements." (Suleiman 2007: 118).

Affirming the textuality of the text in the face of an ultimately unaccountable Real is also the aim of heteroglossia, a third postmodernist strategy of which Carter's novel is again cited as an example (McHale 1987: 166-175). McHale considers Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia or plurality of competing discourses as a primary means of projecting the ontological confrontation of worlds that defines postmodernist fiction. As earlier advanced, Bakhtin's concept was a major source of inspiration in Kristeva's formulation of intertextuality as both notions entail a polyphonic conception of language whereby every linguistic utterance or text contains a multiplicity of voices/texts that compete to produce meaning and/or worlds. McHale admits that such plurality of voices/texts, the "interweaving and juxtaposing of a variety of languages, styles, registers, genres, and intertextual citations" exists in both modernist and postmodernist works but the effect it produces is completely different (166). Whereas in modernist texts "their heteroglossic form is held in check by a unifying monological perspective [...to integrate] multiple worlds of discourse into a single ontological plane", postmodernist texts avoid keeping heteroglossia under control to subvert the meaning/world conveyed by each voice and subsequently assert the fundamental indeterminacy of the text (166).

In McHale's view, the best example of the operation of postmodernist heteroglossia is what Bakhtin denominated —and celebrated as transgressive— the carnivalesque in fiction. In *Rabelais and His World* (first translated into English in 1968), Bakhtin re-examines the series of novels *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by French Renaissance writer François Rabelais in search of forms or subtexts that were disregarded in official readings because they directly derive from the unofficial folk tradition of carnival. Bakhtin sees a socially subversive ritual in

European carnival practices like “comic verbal compositions” and “genres of billingsgate” (Bakhtin 1984b [1968]: 5). Carnival offers, according to Bakhtin:

[a] completely different, non-official, extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations [...that] built a second world and a second life in which all medieval people participated more or less, in which they lived during a given time of the year. (6)

During carnival individuals from different social strata meet in such a way that hierarchies, norms and standards are destabilised and rendered ineffective. The provisional world of carnival is thus one governed by a logic of reversal, “of the ‘inside out’ (*à l’envers*), of the ‘tum-about’, of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings” (11). Carnival, in short, is the parodic or satirical double of normative society whose subversive force, Bakhtin argues, resides in the laughter “of all people”; not “an individual reaction to some isolated ‘comic’ event” but laughter “directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants” (11). Carnival laughter, moreover, is radically ambivalent, “it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives” (11-12). McHale sees postmodernist fiction as a direct heir of Bakhtinian carnival and proceeds to characterise the formal features of postmodernist texts which are in close affinity with carnivalised literature.

First, he highlights the “typically postmodernist” generic and ontological heterogeneity, “where the official genres are unitary, both generically and ontologically, projecting a single fictional world; carnivalized literature interrupts the text’s ontological ‘horizon’ with a multiplicity of inserted genres- letters, essays, theatrical dialogues, novels-within-the-novel, and so on” (McHale 1987: 172).

Next, McHale isolates a repertoire of carnivalesque *topoi* which include typical plot types, locations, character-types and the modes of the grotesque and the

abject (172). The characteristic carnivalesque plot is that of the picaresque story in which the rogue-protagonist starts an ontological quest which leads him or her to the world limits, epitomised by carnival contexts like “circuses, fairs, sideshows and amusement parks” or even to other worlds, “he [the *pícaro*] visits heaven, hell, or other planets and engages in ‘threshold dialogues’ with inhabitants of those worlds”, a cast of characters which includes outcasts, freaks, and monstrous beings who destabilise normative social categories and are at once fascinating and disgusting (174). In such extreme circumstances, the protagonist undergoes extreme experiences with his or her body —sexual excesses, dismemberment, excesses in ingestion and defecation— and mind —hallucinations, madness and fear— that transgress social and bodily limits as well as the boundaries between reality and fiction, human and inhuman.

This is the terrain of the grotesque and the abject, two modes constitutive of the carnivalesque in literature and of which, McHale contends, Carter’s *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* also stands as a prime example (174). McHale does not provide an analysis of the novel to sustain such categorisation; nevertheless, the inclusion of the carnivalesque —and its constitutive notions of the grotesque and the abject— within his catalogue of postmodernist literary strategies has had a big influence, as I will show in the next chapter, on Carter’s commentators.

Bakhtin situates the grotesque at the heart of carnival; in his reading of Rabelais he opposes the term “grotesque realism” to high literary forms of Classical Renaissance and defines it as any literary form that through carnival laughter changes one’s perception of bodies: “The people’s laughter which characterized all forms of grotesque realism from immemorial times was linked with the bodily

lower stratum. Laughter degrades and materializes” (Bakhtin 1984b [1968]: 20). Degradation in turn involves “coming down to earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time” (21). The grotesque, in other words, confronts readers with the paradox of birth implicit in death, renewal in disintegration, best captured in the positive and festive (re)presentation of the grotesque body as an incomplete metamorphosis of death and birth.

For the purpose of description, Bakhtin confronts the grotesque body with the classical concept of the body, a completed deathless unit which:

[is s]hown from the outside as something individual. That which protrudes, bulges, sprouts or branches off (when a body transgresses its limits and a new one begins) is eliminated, hidden, or moderated. All orifices of the body are closed. The basis of the image is the individual, strictly limited mass, the impenetrable façade. The opaque surface and the body's "valleys" acquire an essential meaning as the border of a closed individuality that does not merge with other bodies and with the world. All attributes of the unfinished world are removed, as well as all signs of its inner life. (Bakhtin 1984b [1968]: 320)

The grotesque body, according to Bakhtin, is not a closed or completed whole; it is:

[u]nfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking or defecation. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body (26)

Bakhtin further opposes the positive presentation of bodily elements in grotesque realism with the negative overtones they acquire in what he calls the “post-Romantic” grotesque. In contrast with grotesque images characteristic of medieval carnival, which are “absolutely fearless and communicate this fearlessness”, the body in the post-Romantic grotesque is associated with alienated and inhuman figures that “usually express fear of the world and seek to inspire their

reader with this fear” (39), repressing therefore the body’s regenerative and thus ambivalent significance.

Julia Kristeva’s definition of the abject in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* stands in close affinity with Bakhtin’s concept of the grotesque in carnival: it is “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 1982: 4). Many critics suggest that Kristeva’s concept is an extension of Bakhtin’s theory viewed through the lenses of Lacanian Psychoanalysis (Vice 1997: 163). Kristeva, in fact, associates the abject with the semiotic or the “chora”, the material pre-symbolic realm in which the child is postulated to exist before he becomes a symbolic or speaking being. As he or she enters the symbolic realm, the child is taught to disavow the semiotic—a process Kristeva terms “primal repression” (Kristeva 1982: 11)—and assume the symbolic mandate or what Bakhtin termed the classical body, which, according to Kristeva, is manifest in normative cleanliness, symbolic bodily boundaries, how to eat and how to dispose of bodily waste. The abject, however, does not disappear completely but erupts in different bodily forms and practices that threaten to collapse the symbolic boundaries of self and (m)other. The subject who confronts abjection undergoes an ambivalent experience of simultaneous enthrallment and horror, fascination and nausea.

Kristeva’s concept is evocative of what Lacan terms *jouissance*—translated into English as “enjoyment”—precisely what the subject must foreclose if he or she is to become a social/speaking being; Kristeva explicitly addresses such an association: when she writes of the abject that “one does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [*on en jouit*]. Violently and painfully. A passion” (9) Potentially abject bodily forms include the margins of the body, the womb, food

and excrements and death. The margins and protuberances of the body are read by Kristeva as sites of the abject that subjects strive to keep clean and proper because the “marginal stuff” that issues from them may threaten the body’s (and the self’s) symbolic completeness.

Among the various forms of bodily waste, menstrual blood is interpreted by Kristeva as that which “threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference” (71). The womb, the site of menstrual blood, is for Kristeva a primary realm of abjection, a “desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body” that in evoking the ambivalent link between childbirth and death, destabilised the boundaries between self and (m)other, inside and outside, life and death (54).

Kristeva further associates the action of consuming and disposing of food with the action of giving birth; in this light, the distinction between what is edible and what is not reinforces the separation of self and (m)other. Abjection erupts when these boundaries are not respected; thus, the reversal action of eating or delighting in excrement parallels actions such as cannibalism or incest which disintegrate the contours of the subject. The utmost form of abjection for Kristeva, “the most sickening of all wastes”, is the corpse, “the place where I am not and which permits me to be” (3).

Kristeva concludes her book by emphasising the “powers of horror”, the transgressive and subversive force of encountering the abject. In the present times of the “Crisis of the Word” (208) or delegitimation of logocentrism and master narratives, Kristeva, in line with standard postmodernist thinkers and just as she had proclaimed in formulating the concept of intertextuality, calls for “build[ing] up a

discourse around the braided horror and fascination that bespeaks the incompleteness of the speaking being” (209). A privileged domain or “signifier” for doing so, in Kristeva’s view, is literature because it:

[d]ecks itself out in the sacred power of horror, literature may also involve not an ultimate resistance to but an unveiling of the abject: an elaboration, a discharge, and a hollowing out of abjection through the Crisis of the Word. (208)

Put differently, the expression of literature’s capacity to undo itself and thus dramatise the ever contingent unrepresentable or abject *qua* dissolver of boundaries of any kind is the ultimate source of ethics in Kristeva’s work. I find it important at this point to advance a distinction to which I will later return: the differentiation between Kristeva’s concept of the abject and the concept *jouissance* in late Lacanian theory as understood by Slavoj Žižek. In line with his non-standard account of postmodernism, Žižek conceives of enjoyment not so much as a horrifying presence *external* to the symbolic that forever threatens to disintegrate the latter’s consistency and, as a result—as Kristeva argues apropos of the abject—holds the promise of creating reality and the subject anew. Paradoxically, Žižek contends, enjoyment in the form of a revolting amorphous presence is *internal* to symbolic reality and thus sustains its contours; the abject is the underside of reality and of the subject’s (symbolic) identity. On this account, identifying with the abject *qua* horrifying substantial outside is not, in Žižek’s opinion, the ultimate ethical act. What he proposes instead is to “traverse the fantasy”, to be aware of the paradox that enjoyment and the symbolic are two sides of the same coin, two slopes of one and the same entity, an entity which, in a further twist that will be elucidated in the ensuing chapters, Žižek correlates with “pure subject” (Žižek 1991: 143; 1992a: 128, 136-37; 1999a: 122-23; 2007: 57; 2014a: 28, emphasis mine).

Just as Kristeva, Linda Hutcheon, one of the most influential commentators of standard literary postmodernism, legitimates too contingency and boundary dissolution in art, a position which derives from the poststructuralist assumption that the real is always already inaccessible and thus any attempt at representing reality and the self is necessarily false and must be provisional. Hutcheon opens *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) by locating such an assumption at the heart of postmodernist culture:

Willfully contradictory [...] postmodern culture uses and abuses the conventions of discourse. It knows it cannot escape implications in the economic (late capitalist) and ideological (liberal humanist) of its time. *There is no outside*. All it can do is question from within. (Hutcheon 1988: xiii, emphasis mine)

This is a thesis to which she returns in the first chapter of *Postmodernism and Politics*: “Underlying the notion of a postmodern process of cultural de-doxification is a theoretical position that seems to assert that we can only know the world through a ‘network of socially established meaning systems, the discourses of our culture’” (Hutcheon 1989: 7).¹⁶ In line with McHale’s distinction between modernist and postmodernist fiction, Hutcheon opposes both tendencies in terms of function rather than of form; formal devices like allusion, parody and self-reflexivity or metafiction function in modernism and earlier periods within the history of literature first to de-doxify and then re-doxify notions of self, reality, literature and history, among other concepts. In postmodernist literature, on the contrary, these same formal devices work to avoid re-doxification and promote paradox, or as Hutcheon puts it:

¹⁶ De-doxification is the term Hutcheon uses to refer to the process of unsettling the “doxa”, any accepted belief and ideology, and promoting uncertainty and dissent. As such, it stands in close affinity with concepts such as deconstruction, de-mystification and de-legitimation.

What I call postmodernism in fiction paradoxically uses and abuses the conventions of both realism and modernism, and does so in order to challenge their transparency, in order to prevent glossing over the contradictions that make the postmodern what it is: historical and metafictional, contextual and self-reflexive, ever AWARE of its status as discourse, as a human construct. (Hutcheon 1988: 53)

In other words, whereas modernist works exhibit a logic of “either/or”, pursuing conceptual differentiation and conventions, postmodernism “partakes of a logic of both/and”, enhancing contradiction (49). In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, she states that the paradoxical mode of postmodernism is “unavoidably political”, one of “complicity and critique, of reflexivity and historicity, that at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth century world” (Hutcheon 1989: 1, 11). In saying this, Hutcheon is consciously going against a stand of critics which, as explained in the previous section, read postmodernism as disqualified from political involvement. “What this study of the forms and politics of postmodern representation aims to show”, she writes “is that such a stand is probably politically naive and, in fact, quite impossible to take in the light of the actual art of postmodernism” (3). Hutcheon is referring to Jameson’s dismissal of postmodern empty parody or “pastiche” as both apolitical and ahistorical and the concomitant “death of the autonomous coherent subject” as well as the already commented problematic relation between feminism and postmodernism given the latter’s rejection of any definite theory of human agency.

Hutcheon argues that postmodern parody is neither nostalgic nor de-historicising but operates in a process of self-conscious intertextuality that Hutcheon terms “historiographical metafiction [...] a double process of installing and ironizing [...] how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference” (93). Put

differently, “[postmodern] parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies” (101). But this, Hutcheon notes, does not equal regression; parody “may indeed be complicitous with the values it inscribes as well as subverts, but the subversion is still there” (106).

In line with Judith Butler’s and Jean Braudillard’s respective views of parody as a politically emancipatory strategy, Hutcheon insists that postmodernist parody politicises literature in de-doxifying any stable notion of history, fiction and subject. Intertextual parody or “historiographic metafiction” challenges the boundaries between history and fiction by implying that “like fiction, history constructs its object, that events named become facts and thus both do and do not retain their status outside language” (74). The latter, according to Hutcheon, does not mean that the past is purely textual but that can only be known to us through textual traces: “past events are given *meaning*, not *existence*, by their representation in history” (78, emphasis in original).

Hutcheon reads Angela Carter’s short story “Black Venus” (1985) in the collection of the same title as an epitome of historiographic metafiction because it stands in “paradoxical complicitous critique” (146) with the texts it refers to, namely Charles Baudelaire’s journal, poems and biographical data—in all of which Jeanne Duval, Baudelaire’s mistress and muse, is represented (or constructed) as an obscure object of desire. Carter’s story, in Hutcheon’s view, parodies Baudelaire’s patriarchal and imperialist discourse and promotes paradox as she juxtaposes the poet’s construction of woman as a voiceless erotic object with Duval’s colonial self-representation, which culminates in her final return to the Caribbean after Baudelaire’s death to live as a successful businesswoman. Such an ending is further read by Hutcheon as a parody of racist discourse as Duval’s return to the West

Indies “reverses the associations of this trip’s direction —it is the ‘slavers’ route after all” (144).

Hutcheon uses another of Carter’s short stories, “The Loves of Lady Purple” from her earlier collection *Fireworks* (1974) to illustrate the de-doxification of gender in postmodernist fiction. In presenting the life-like marionette Lady Purple as the incarnation of its puppet master’s sexual fantasies, Carter’s “text reveals that women (as prostitutes, in particular) are never real, they are but representations of male erotic fantasies and of male desire” (30). Hutcheon further interprets the story’s ending —Lady Purple sucking her master’s breath in a kiss that turns her into a flesh and blood woman— and the narrator’s final question: “Had the marionette all the time parodied the living or was she, now living to parody her own performance as a marionette?” (Carter 1995 [1974]: 51) as a dramatisation of Braudillard’s notion of the hyperreal or reality as a constituted by pure simulacra:

[a]s Carter’s story suggests, there is a more basic objection to [Braudillard’s] assumption that it is (or was) ever possible to have unmediated access to reality: have we ever known the ‘real’ except through representations? We may see, hear, feel, smell and touch it, but do we *know* it in the sense that we give meaning to it? (Hutcheon 1989:31, emphasis in original)

“The Loves of Lady Purple”, therefore, stands for Hutcheon as an epitome of postmodernist fiction not only in its questioning of representation and knowledge of reality but especially in its problematising of reality —woman in this case— itself.

Another major commentator of literary postmodernism who resorted to Carter’s fiction to formulate the features of her object of study was Aleid Fokkema. In *Postmodern Characters: A Study of Characterization in British and American Fiction* (1991), Fokkema examines a number of literary texts in English categorised as postmodernist to formulate a descriptive model of character in this literary

period. Her view of postmodernism is not identical to that of canonical studies like McHale's and Hutcheon's, which in treating postmodernism as a cross-cultural phenomenon ignore, in Fokkema's opinion, the significant differences among postmodern texts (1991: 173). Fokkema sees postmodernism as a plural phenomenon and so argues that her conception of characterisation in postmodernist literature is not unified either (50, 170). She begins her study by contrasting the conventions of characterisation in realist and modernist literature with those of postmodernism in a way that evokes Scott Lash's distinction among these three cultural paradigms. In realist texts the relation between characters and the reality represented is unproblematic, the realist character has "the function of enhancing the text's veracity, in order to support its representational claims [...] it behaves, thinks, dresses and functions roughly according to ways that are present in the culture in which the realist text originates" (46).

Character in modernism undergoes a "radical shift": the relation between characters and reality is problematised as the text reveals the complexities and contradictions of the individual character or ego. "But these complexities", Fokkema contends, "do not result in the disintegration of character [...T]he modernist text concentrates on this ego to explore the complexities of the still unified self without foregrounding the difficulties of (re)presenting a self" (46-47).

In postmodernist texts characterisation problematises the notion of the subject *qua* definite self; postmodern characters do not have a stable or single self but exist as subjects in language or discourse, consisting of a cluster of interchangeable identities. In Fokkema's own words "character is either controlled by an anonymous language system, or is liberated in its linguistic dispersal, experiencing 'true' existence within language" (46). Fokkema soon remarks that

this corresponds to the canonical view of postmodern characters and argues that not all postmodernist texts present such radical break with earlier conventions of characterisation.

Fokkema uses Angela Carter's work, particularly her 1984 novel *Nights at the Circus* to evince a representation of the debate over the epistemological, aesthetic and political value of standard postmodernism (1991: 154-169). "Carter's fiction, which initially bewildered many critics but is included in the postmodern canon with increasing confidence", Fokkema writes, "reveals a keen awareness of the structuralist and poststructuralist debate. This novel [*Nights at the Circus*] is remarkable in that it *critiques* the poststructuralist idiom, instead of mimicking it" (154, emphasis in original). The novel's powerful defence of the body and individuality in the portrayal of characters subverts, in Fokkema's reading, the poststructuralist assumption that subject and reality are constructed in language. Carter's experimental style does not disintegrate the subject; "the sheer physicality of the characters of *Nights* makes it impossible to speak of them as a collection of voices" (175).

While acknowledging that Carter's novel is "deeply postmodern" because it promotes difference, plurality and contingency as the basis for the constitution of subjects as well as a condition for social progress, Fokkema distances it from textualism arguing that it does not privilege discourse over matter; Carter's characters are neither mental concepts nor discourse constructs but "loc[i] where body and self intersect" (169). To signify, characters in *Nights at the Circus* need not only the presence of a signifying system, Fokkema argues, but also the presence of an Other in all its physicality.

The use of Carter's fiction by preeminent commentators to formulate the most distinctive traits of postmodernist literature is a clear evidence of the relevance of the term to approach the significance of Carter's work. As already advanced in the introduction to this dissertation, the tension among theoreticians and cultural critics over the ethico-political validity of postmodernism as a philosophical stance and as an aesthetic practice is also discerned among commentators of Carter's work. The following section provides an overview of the reception of Carter's writing as postmodernist fiction, focusing on two distinct lines of criticism: on the one hand, critics who, following the assumptions of detractors of standard postmodernism, see Carter's endorsement of postmodernist aesthetics as incompatible with her professed feminist stance; on the other hand, scholars who, supportive of postmodernism's political potential, praise Carter's textual practice as ethically and politically progressive. I will also include the perspective of a third group of critics who, suspicious of poststructuralist postulates, either avoid or altogether reject the term "postmodernism" to categorise Carter's fiction.

CHAPTER 2 THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF ANGELA CARTER'S WORK AS POSTMODERNIST FICTION

Before examining how the discourses on postmodernism as a period term and as a literary practice have influenced the reception of Carter's fiction, I find it important to reproduce Carter's own comments on the anti-foundationalist and anti/post-humanist textual turn that defines the postmodernist paradigm.

Before the 1980s, Carter had clearly asserted the speculative or epistemological impulse of her fiction, an assertion which stands at odds with McHale's categorisation of her work as dramatising the ontological "dominant" in fiction. As already advanced, by "dominant" McHale means —quoting Roman Jakobson— "the focusing component of a work of art [...which] rules, determines and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure" (McHale 1987: 6). It is worth recalling Carter's view of art as expressed in *The Sadeian Woman* (1979), where she states that unless an artist assumes art to have the function of, among others, "*knowing* the world", his or her productions are irredeemably "relegated to a kind of rumpus room of the mind and the irresponsibility of the artist and the irrelevance of art to actual living becomes part and parcel of the practice of art" (15, emphasis in original). During the 1980s, when postmodernism was consolidated as a concept to designate a new climate of ideas in contemporary culture, Carter exposed her views on the phenomenon in three different interviews.¹⁷

¹⁷ Steven Connor locates the middle 1980s within the second stage in the development of postmodernism as a period term, what he terms as a stage of "synthesis" of separate accounts of the concept from different fields (architecture, literature, philosophy, sociology, etc). "From the middle of the 1980s onwards", Connor argues, "these separate accounts began to be clustered together — most notably in the superb synopsis and synthesis provided in Fredric Jameson's landmark essay 'The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism'" (Connor 2004: 2).

Contrary to the poststructuralist assumption that there is no reality to represent or misrepresent outside discourse, Carter asserted in an interview with Olga Kenyon that she did think that “the body comes first, not consciousness” some much so that she “often shatter[ed] pure evocative imagery with the crude” (Kenyon 1992: 33). This assertion is in tune with Fokkema’s emphasis on the body in Carter’s characterisation and especially with Žižek’s unorthodox account of postmodernist cultural productions as those in which raw materiality erupts at the heart of highly stylised surfaces. Despite the recurrent presence of cultural references in her fiction, or as Rebecca Munford puts it, her “promiscuous use of citation” (Munford 2006: 2), Angela Carter grew to a certain skepticism as to the epistemological implications of the theory of intertextuality. In her interview with John Haffenden, Carter acknowledged her change of mind regarding an intertextual view of the world:

I had spent a long time acquiescing very happily with the Borges idea that books were about other books and then I began to think: if all books are about books, then what are the other books about? Where does it all stop? Borges is happy with the idea of a vast Ur-book, which is a ridiculous proposition [...] Books about books is fun but frivolous. (Haffenden 1985: 79)

Less than a year after this interview, Carter again noted her distrust of postmodernist approaches that absolutely negate the possibility of access to anything that is not the signifier. She admitted in an interview with Kerryn Goldsworthy that:

I thought that writing, all fiction really, was about other fiction. That there was no way out, really, of this solipsism, that books were about other books [...] But then I began to ask myself, if all books are about other books, what are the other books about? [...] And one is forced to answer, after a while, of course the Ur-book is really Life, or The Real World. (Goldsworthy 1985: 5)

Carter argued instead that postmodernists were “sort of tap dancing on the edge of the abyss” (6). Irrespective of what she articulates in her fiction, Carter’s

stance as expressed in her non-fiction work and interviews assumes the existence of a real(ity) besides the (inter)text which, as exposed in the introduction to this study, she professedly sets out to investigate. A number of Carter's scholars, however, have confidently located her work within standard postmodernism and, depending on the ideological stance they assume, have read it as either/both retrogressive or/and progressive.

There is a considerably high degree of overlap between the techniques that define postmodernist literature and Carter's textual practice. In fact, the traits outlined in the introduction to this thesis as characteristic of her fiction are easily translatable into postmodernist jargon: Carter's highly stylised prose has been read as literalising the postmodernist "play of surfaces" and concomitant de-differentiation of reality and fiction, of matter and discourse; the conflation of several layers of meaning in and throughout her works could be seen as exemplary of postmodernist allegory or "allegory against itself" (McHale 1987: 143) promoting paradox and contingency of meaning; her exuberant use of allusion paired with humorous comments appears to be in close affinity with "historiographic metafiction" or "intertextual parody" (Hutcheon 1989: 93, 101) working in the service of her demythologising project or deconstruction of master discourses; the genre hybridity exhibited in her texts has been received as a dramatisation of a postmodernist de-canonisation and dismantling of the boundaries between high and mass culture; and the characteristic theatricality in her construction of settings and characters appears to materialise a carnivalised view of the world and the subject.

As an author, Carter began to receive scholar attention in the late 1980s. Prior to this period, criticism of Carter's fiction was limited to some newspaper and

magazine reviews. This, however, does not mean that Carter was either ignored or unpopular at the time; she gained recognition at the beginning of her writing career when her second and third novels, *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) and *Several Perceptions* (1968), won two major literary prizes.¹⁸ Carter, nevertheless, soon distanced herself from the British literary scene and moved to Japan in 1969. This new period far from her home country paralleled a more experimental stage in Carter's writing career during which she published *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972), an allegorical and crude novel that was received with incomprehension and disdain among reviewers and critics (Sage 2007b [1994]: 32).¹⁹ Her next novel, *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), equally allegorical and experimental, was not appreciated either.²⁰

In 1979, when Carter published her book-length essay *The Sadeian Woman* and her collection of stories that revisit traditional fairy tales, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, critical attention to her work was notably incremented, but it was not until her untimely death in 1992 that her fiction attained the present level of fame. Sarah Gamble locates the advent of what she calls "Carter studies" in the year 1994 when Carter's friend Lorna Sage published the first book-length study of Carter's life and work in the Northcote House "Writers and Their Work" series, and edited the collection of essays *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela*

¹⁸ In 1967, Carter won the John Llewellyn Rhys prize with *The Magic Toyshop* and *Several Perceptions*, and won the Somerset Maugham Award in 1968.

¹⁹ Carter lived in Japan from 1969 to 1972, a period which, according to Lorna Sage "had been her rite of passage" after which she "seem[ed] to have exorcized her fear of freakishness and made it writable" and "discovered and retained a way of looking at herself and other people as unnatural" (2007b: 24, 27, 28). Japan was also the place where she fully embraced feminist politics: "In Japan" Carter wrote later in *Nothing Sacred* (1982), "I learnt what it was to be a woman and became radicalized." (1992: 28).

²⁰ Sarah Gamble quotes two interviews in which Carter linked the decline in popularity she experienced in the early seventies with the publication of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*: "Interviewed by *The Guardian* [...] in 1979, she described it as a 'magnificently commercially unviable' book, an opinion which did not change. Less than one year before her death she reiterated her point, calling it 'the novel which marked the beginning of my obscurity. I went from a very promising young writer to being ignored in two novels.'" (Gamble 2001: 70)

Carter (Gamble 2001: 8).²¹ It was also the year in which the University of York organised the first academic conference on Carter; the papers there presented were the seed for a 1997 volume of essays edited by Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton.

The interest aroused by Carter's work immediately after her death is signaled by Lorna Sage in her introduction to *Flesh and the Mirror*: "We're told by the President of the British Academy, Sir Keith Thomas, that last year alone — 1992-1993— there were more than forty applicants wanting to do doctorates on Carter, making her by far the most fashionable twentieth-century topic" (Sage 2007a [1994]: 22). Lindsey Tucker edited what became the third critical collection on Carter in 1998, in which essays are organised in terms of genre (novels and short stories). Some of the essays contained in this volume were later republished in a 2000 volume edited by Alison Easton, which aims to explore the evolution of Carter studies.

The late 1990s also witnessed the publication of two monographs, one by Alison Lee (1997), which examines Carter's novels and non-fiction work, and another by Aidan Day (1998), which reads Carter's novels as grounded in the values of Enlightenment rationality. New studies on Carter were published in the course of the 2000s, particularly a monograph by Charlotte Crofts (2003), which concentrates on Carter's writing for radio, film and television, and two monographs by Sarah Gamble (2001, 2006), the first examining the critical reception of Carter's work—including Carter's own assessment of her role as a writer—and the second drawing on Carter's work to explore her engagement with gender and class issues. The 2000s also saw the publication of four comparative studies in which Carter's

²¹ Lorna Sage was also the first scholar to interview Carter in 1977, an interview that "probably constitutes the first published academic assessment of her work" (Gamble 1997: 3)

fiction is read alongside the work of Kathy Acker (Pitchford 2002), Jeanette Winterson (López 2007), Christina Stead (Seliniadou 2008) and Michèle Roberts (Gruss 2009) and two collections of critical essays, one edited by Danielle M. Roemer and Christina Bacchilega (2001), which investigates Carter's approaches to the fairy tale genre, and another edited by Rebecca Munford (2006), in which Carter's intertextuality is studied in terms of textual procedures and socio-historical contexts.

In more recent years, a new collection of essays has been published (Sonya Andermahr and Lawrence Philips 2012), which evaluates Carter's legacy as a feminist and postmodernist writer from various theoretical perspectives, as well as monographs by Dani Cavallaro (2011), which explores the thematics and imagery of Carter's fiction and non-fiction work, by Maggie Tonkin (2012), which examines the influence of decadent literature on Carter's fiction, and by Rebecca Munford (2013), which concentrates on Carter's engagement with the European Gothic tradition in her representation of female figures and gender relationships. The last book-length study published up to now is Eliza Claudia Filimon's *Heterotopia in Angela Carter's Fiction: Worlds in Collision* (2013), whose approach to Carter's fiction, as the title suggests, is informed by a concept appropriated from cultural geography: "heterotopia", a postmodernist trait which Filimos defines as "the juxtaposition of things not usually found together and the confusion that such representations create" (Filimon 2013:20).²²

As earlier noted, a dispute over the ethico-political potential of Carter's work can be discerned among the scholars who contributed to these studies. Most of

²² Heterotopia was coined by Foucault in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1970) to refer to ambiguous, contradictory spaces made up of elements which are, in themselves, incompatible (Foucault 1991 [1970]: xviii). Foucault takes René Magritte's paintings as exemplary of this concept because they create spatial and temporal confusion by combining elements which are not usually found together (Foucault 1983).

them find a potential dissonance between what they read as postmodernist traits in Carter's fiction and Carter's self-professed political engagement, particularly her commitment to effective feminist politics. At least three areas of contention can be isolated in this respect. Firstly, the heavily stylised *décor* of Carter's short stories and novels and her experiments with surface and fantasy scenarios have been received as apolitical, drawing attention to the text's many discursive games and mechanisms while disregarding extra-discursive reality. In the aforementioned interview with Carter, John Haffenden brought out the potential opposition between mannerism and politics in her work:

I know that you find it fundamentally important to have an intelligent awareness of society, and yet the highly stylized and decorative apparatus of your novels might appear to be disengaged from the social and historical reality you want to illuminate. (Haffenden 1985: 85)

To which Carter replied:

Yes, this is a very real risk, very tricky. Obviously the idea that my stories are all dreams or hallucinations out of Jung-land, or the notion that the world would be altogether a better place if we threw away rationality and went laughing down the street [...] that's all nonsense. I can see how it must look to some readers. (85)

Carter was aware of the risk of misunderstanding her textual practice as completely divorced from social and political issues and was quick to remark that her use of ornament, fantasy and laughter by no means attempted to do away with the "real world". On the contrary, fantasy and imagination were far from being divorced from everyday reality; they were an essential part of it or as her friend Lorna Sage puts it reporting Carter's own remarks: "Fantasy was an everyday, *domestic* business, she'd say" (Sage 2007a [1994]: 21, emphasis in original). Or as she put it in an interview with Olga Kenyon: "Remember there's a materiality to symbols and a materiality to imaginative life which should be taken quite seriously" (Kenyon 1992: 33).

Secondly, when categorising Carter as a postmodernist writer, critics highlight her exuberant use of intertextual references, Carter's engagement with texts deriving from an almost exclusively male strand of Western writers being particularly problematic. Their negative reception of Carter's style and use of allusion has been directly informed by readings of literary postmodernism as a reactionary tendency. Contrary to Kristeva's celebration of "books about other books", literary texts as dynamic sites that construct, deconstruct and reconstruct meaning in relation with other texts, detractors of Carter's work condemn such dissemination of meanings as both shallow and subordinate to late capitalism.

As will be shown in the course of this chapter, these same critics have also expressed a profound distrust of Carter's experiments with traditionally reactionary forms, notably of her professed demythologising of fairy tale archetypes and pornographic scenarios. Carter's detractors are very suspicious of revisions of past forms, which they see as monolithic and trans-historical structures, so that any attempt at rewriting them inevitably entails a reproduction and perpetuation of the ideology these forms originally validated. Carter's risky use of traditionally patriarchal literary forms in her investigation of the social relations between men and women is the third and perhaps the major source of disagreement among feminist readers of her work. Such contention was accentuated during Carter's lifetime with her study of the Marquis de Sade's female characters, which she opens with a steadfast defence of the emancipatory potential of pornographic literature.

In her essay "Angela Carter's *The Sadeian Woman*: Feminism as Treason" (2000), Sally Keenan distinguishes three reasons why Carter's study left anti-pornography feminists shocked, making them fiercely dismiss Carter's arguments as deeply reactionary. The first area of disagreement is Carter's suggestion that

women, in masochistically enjoying identification with images of themselves as victims, are complicit in their own oppression (Keenan 2000: 39). Another aspect that many feminists saw unacceptable was Carter's demolishing of the myth of motherhood along with all its constitutive ideals like the womb as the realm of eternity and women as essentially nurturing, peace-making and corruptless beings as well as her recuperation of de Sade's own demystification of motherhood and exposure of the central role of sexuality in the perpetuation of the *status quo* (39-40). The third reason of dissent that Keenan identifies is closely related to Carter's attack on the Mother myth; it is "her challenge, albeit an oblique one, to the revisionary psychoanalytic theories of the French feminists, in whose work during the 1970s, motherhood and the maternal body assume a crucial significance in a whole variety of ways" (40).

The criticism of anti-pornography feminists was based on the premises of French feminist theorists and the akin assumptions of second-wave feminist literary critics like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's in their seminal 1979 work *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). Their claims can be roughly summarised into two main postulates: first, sex exists prior to language, discourse or power and so women should strive to actualise their feminine essence outside patriarchal forms and scenarios because there is no way to subvert power from the inside. Second, the realm outside the language-power compound where women can find their essence and be empowered is the body, to which women can give voice by means of what Hélène Cixous terms *écriture féminine* ("women's writing"). In her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), Cixous contends that:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies— for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history— by her own movement [...] I

write this as a woman, toward women. When I say “woman”, I’m speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history. (Cixous 1976: 875-876)

Women’s writing as described by Cixous needs to explore the feminine “continent”, “the fantastic tumult of her drives” (876) darkened, demonised and repressed by the discourse of men and, in so doing, it must abandon phallogocentric discourse and rational logic.

Put differently, women’s writing, according to Cixous, can never be theorised, enclosed and coded for that would mean subjecting it, as it has been done for centuries, to the law of the inherently patriarchal signifier: “Beware, my friend, of the signifier that will take you back to the autonomy of a signified!” Cixous warns women, “beware of diagnoses that would reduce your generative powers” (892). One of the privileged experiences where woman’s energy unleashes its potential is the relation with the mother in terms of “intense pleasure and violence”; not the “overbearing, clutch mother” but, instead:

[w]hat touches you, the equivocal that affects you, fills your breast with an urge to come to language and launches your force; the rhythm that laughs you; the intimate recipient who makes all metaphors possible and desirable; body (body? bodies?), no more describable than god, the soul, or the Other; that part of you that leaves a space between yourself and urges you to inscribe in language your woman’s style. In women there is always more or less of the mother who makes everything all right, who nourishes, and who stands up against separation; a force that will not be cut off but will knock the wind out of the codes. (882)

In a later essay, Cixous again endorses a return to the mother’s body as a source of women’s writing, a realm where the feminine essence, suppressed by phallogocentric syntax, can be recuperated and used to empower women:

There’s tactility in the feminine text, there’s touch, and this touch passes through the ear. Writing in the feminine is passing on what is cut out by the Symbolic, the voice of the mother, passing on what is most archaic. The most archaic force that touches a body is one that enters by the ear and reaches the most intimate point. This innermost touch always echoes in a woman-text. (1981: 54)

Cixous's concept of women's writing goes very much in the same direction of Kristeva's notion of the semiotic —the pre-symbolic state of symbiosis with the body of the mother— and her postulation of the abject as a realm of subversion. Repressed by the child as he or she subjects to the regulations of the symbolic order or what Lacan calls the "Name of the Father" (Žižek 1992a: 124), the semiotic is evoked in some feminist texts in forms of abjection, of which closeness with the mother's body and a desire for incest stand as prime examples.

Belgian psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray also argues that women, to write subversively as women, should explore the mother's body and reproduce "the imaginary and the symbolic of intrauterine life and of the first bodily encounter with the mother" (Irigaray 1991: 39). Carter's feminist position as expressed in *The Sadeian Woman* and as dramatised in her fiction stands radically at odds with French feminists' celebration of the pre-symbolic maternal body *qua* source of women's empowerment. For Carter, on the contrary, the aggrandisement of the maternal and concomitant definition of a feminine essence as opposed to a male essence is a myth which ironically contributes to perpetuate the polarised view of gender difference that sustains female oppression. The possibility of women's emancipation requires, in Carter's view, the demythologising of all the myths of female and male essences. For her, not only women but any individual, irrespective of his or her sex, is responsible for social progress. Carter is thus very critical of *écriture féminine*, women's writing about exclusively feminine experience and addressed only to a female audience. In this respect, she overtly argues that:

[i]f women allow themselves to be consoled for their culturally determined lack of access to the modes of intellectual debate by the invocation of hypothetical great goddesses, they are simply flattering themselves into submission (a technique often used on them by men). All the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsenses; and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth, anyway. Mother goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods. If a

revival of the myths of these cults gives women emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life. This is why they were invented on the first place. (Carter 2009 [1979]: 4-5)

In her enterprise of de-mythologising social myths, Carter proposes the troublesome figure of “the moral pornographer”, who:

[m]ight use pornography as a critique of current relations between the sexes. His business would be the total demystification of the flesh and the subsequent revelation, through the infinite modulations of the sexual act, of the real relations between man and his kind. Such a pornographer would not be the enemy of women, perhaps he might begin to penetrate the heart of the contempt for women that distorts our culture even as he entered the realms of true obscenity as he describes it. (22)

Carter uses de Sade’s fiction as a point of departure of her investigation of the relationships between the sexes because in “turning the unacknowledged truths of the encounters of sexuality into a cruel festival at which women are the prime sacrificial victims when they are not the ritual murderess themselves”, he unconsciously became a women’s “ally”, satirising the ideological assumptions underlying mythic notions of femininity as well as unmasking the real obscenity and violence that lie underneath many of the ideals, institutions and taboos of a patriarchal world (24).

Carter’s defence of the progressive potential of pornography along with her polemical study of de Sade’s works and the deployment of Sadeian characters and scenarios throughout her fiction was severely contested by the most prominent anti-pornography campaigners like Susanne Kappeler and Andrea Dworkin, whose widely read *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* has been received as an implicit attack to *The Sadeian Woman* (Rubinson 2005: 158). Dworkin considers Carter’s study of de Sade “a pseudofeminist literary essay” (Dworkin 1989: 84) and particularly condemns her reading of the Rose Keller affair whereby Keller’s denunciation of de Sade’s abuses is celebrated as a successful vengeance of a

member of the third state against the rich (Carter 2009 [1979]: 31-33).²³ Dworkin argues that Carter's sexist reading of the affair favours de Sade's version and hence trivialises and denies the true brutal assault de Sade committed against a helpless prostitute, "Sade the Victim is writ large; Sade's victims are written out" (83). In line with Dworkin's criticism, Susanne Kappeler has stated that Carter's appropriation of de Sade, "the multiple rapist and murderer", in particular her assertion and dramatisation of women's unacknowledged complicity in their own victimization, is inimical to women's emancipation (1986: 133).²⁴

Nicola Pitchford has considered this debate among feminists over pornography—which started in the late 1970s and continued through the 1980s—a debate about postmodernism, "a site at which feminism and postmodernism diverge" (Pitchford 2002: 153). Put differently, Pitchford argues that the opposing camps on the debate over pornography and feminism have been informed by the dispute among feminists over the political potential of postmodernism. Anti-pornography feminists are influenced by the conception of gender held by anti-postmodernist feminists, who favour a universalising notion of the subject as a free autonomous agent and locate the concept of woman and feminist actions outside power and hegemonic discourses.

On the contrary, postmodernist theorists like Judith Butler see gender and sex as performances produced by discourse and power and reproduced and

²³ The Rose Keller affair was a court case in which de Sade was involved in 1768. Rose Keller was a thirty-six-year-old widow of a pastry cook who denounced the Marquis for having kidnapped and later whipped her. Sade's version, according to Carter, was that "he had indeed hired her and whipped her but he said that Rose Keller had known perfectly well he did not intend to sweep his house, as she claimed, and they had agreed beforehand she would go off with him for a session of debauchery" (Carter 2009: 32-33).

²⁴ Kappeler is referring particularly to Carter's vilification of the "woman-as-victim" archetype embodied by de Sade's Justine in *Justine, or the Infortunes of Virtue* (1791). As will further explained, Justine is, in Carter's view, partially responsible for her infortunes.

perpetuated through relationships among individuals. Postmodernist feminism thus locates social progress—including the emancipation of women— within power, in the potentially endless capacity of power to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct artificial identities. It is in this debate on sex as either a natural or a discursive category where I locate the third area of contention when approaching Carter’s work as postmodernist: the political implications of the carnivalesque in Carter’s fiction, particularly Carter’s use of spectacle or theatricality, the grotesque body and parodic laughter in her construction of settings, characters and plots.

2.1. “Woman as a Figure of Speech?”: The Critical Reception of Angela Carter’s (Inter)Textual practice.

This section addresses the dispute among scholars over the political value of postmodernist literary techniques in Carter’s representation of the subject and the relationship between the sexes. I will carry out a systematic survey of the criticism which, influenced by the standard definition of postmodernism as a frame of ideas and as a literary practice, considers Carter’s fiction as either/both a successful deconstruction of retrogressive discourses or/and a reactionary reproduction of those very discourses she professedly attempted to demythologise.

The title of this section refers to the subject of the debate signaled by Pitchford between feminist detractors and supporters of postmodernism (2002: 153). “Woman as a Figure of Speech” refers to the position maintained by critics who, endorsing poststructuralism, contend that portraying the subject and sexual identities as ever deconstructable rhetorical constructs is the only progressive way to dismantle reactionary discourses and practices.

Against this line of thought, I will bring together readings by anti-postmodernist critics who, assuming the premises of French feminism and anti-pornography scholars, refuse to see Subject and Woman as merely figures of speech and endorse an exploration of femininity—or woman’s essence—outside rational discourse. Such an overview of critical responses to Carter’s fiction encompasses conflicting answers to two of the three areas of contention delineated above: the extreme style or “play of surfaces” of Carter’s short stories and novels and its reworking of traditionally patriarchal forms—notably the fairy tale and pornography—and of earlier texts deriving from the Western male canon, particularly Carter’s resort to Sadeian motives and figures in her construction of characters.

One of the earliest detractors of Carter’s representation of sexual relationships in fiction was Patricia Duncker. In “Re-Imagining the Fairy Tale: Angela Carter’s *Bloody Chambers*” (1984), Duncker applauds Carter’s “lavish and ornate style” in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979) as potentially subversive but expresses a profound mistrust of Carter’s experimentation with fairy tale elements to represent relationships between the sexes (Duncker 1984: 12). If literature is to be progressive, Duncker contends, it needs to avoid “the infernal trap” inherent in traditionally reactionary forms like pornography and the fairy tale, “which fits the form to its purpose, to be the carrier of ideology”, an ideology that consolidates an ideal of woman as a helpless individual, at the same time fearful of and masochistically enthralled by a powerful male aggressor (6). For Duncker, it is not possible to effectively undermine patriarchal identities and hierarchies if one revisits the fairy tale because, in her view, the power of the form is greater than the

power to subvert its implicit ideology. She consequently blames Carter for “choos[ing] to inhabit a tiny room of her own in the house of fiction”:

[t]hat space [the fairy tale] has always been paralyzing, cripplingly small [...Women] cannot fit neatly into patterns of modern Cinderellas, ugly sisters, wicked stepmothers, fairy god-mothers, and still acknowledge our several existences, experienced or imagined. We need a space to carve our own erotic identities, as free women. (12)

A similar argument is put forward by Marxist intellectual Robert Clark in his oft-cited negative reading of Carter’s fiction in “Angela Carter’s Desire Machine” (1987). Clark begins his essay asking “to what extent the fictions of Angela Carter offer their readers a knowledge of patriarchy—and therefore some possibilities of liberating consciousness—and to what extent they fall back into reinscribing patriarchal attitudes” (Clark 1987: 148). He concentrates his analysis of on two of Carter’s novels—*The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) and *The Passion of New Eve* (1977)—and on her short story collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979), and concludes that Carter’s writing is often reactionary, “a feminism in a male chauvinist drag” (158) because “her primary allegiance is to a postmodern aesthetics that emphasizes the non-referential emptiness of definitions” (158). Drawing on Fredric Jameson’s critique of depthless pastiche in postmodernist art as a fundamentally evasive strategy as well as on second wave and anti-porn feminists’ attack on pornography as an essentially patriarchal and retrogressive form, Clark is very critical of Carter’s style, her use of allusion and allegory, and her depiction of male-dominated sadomasochistic practices as a site of desire and fear for female characters. He interprets Carter’s novels, particularly *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, as a prime example of postmodernist allegory or what Brian McHale termed “allegory against itself” (McHale 1987: 140, 143). “Each chapter of *Dr. Hoffman*”, Clark contends:

[c]onstitutes an elaborate parodic animation of its intertextual resources, but a parody that has no discernible point of departure or arrival and seems always to verge on pastiche. At odd moments Carter's writing points to itself as an empty stylization [...] The assumption is, as Fredric Jameson has observed, that there is no longer any 'outside', any positive knowable [...] reality or metanarrative on the basis of which one can develop critique. But this lack of metaposition has damaging consequences for allegory, since allegory by nature implies a level at which coherent meaning will be discovered. (Clark 1987: 156)

Contrary to McHale's validation of Carter's parody of allegory (McHale 1987: 143), inducing indeterminacy of meaning while pointing to the status of the text as a compendium of free floating signifiers, Clark laments Carter's commitment to postmodernist anti-foundationalism and foregrounding of the empty surface, which, in his view, "precludes an affirmative feminism founded in referential commitment to women's historical and organic being" (Clark 1987: 158). Clark's assessment, just as Duncker's and anti-porn feminists', rests therefore on an anti-postmodernist view of gender and texts. He further criticises Carter's mannerist style as assisting the process of meaning depletion which impairs any reasonable and effective critique of patriarchy:

The brilliant and choice lexicon, the thematization of surfaces and odors, of beauty, youth and power, the incantatory rhythms and tantalizing literariness, are strategies that bind the reader poetically, give the illusion of general significance without its substance, and put the reason to sleep, thereby inhibiting satire's necessary distancing of the reader from both the text and the satirized illusions. (158-159)

Clark, like Fredric Jameson, sees this deadening of criticism as a product of and agent in late capitalism and associates Carter's strategy with the techniques of advertising, arguing that both use empty signifiers to elicit readers' "fascination with style and its exploitation of desire" (159) while cancelling their capacity to produce moral and political judgment.

Avis Lewallen (1988) reiterates Duncker's and Clark's claims that, in spite of her good intentions, Carter's representation of sexual relations reproduces a sexist ideology. Although she favours Carter's frequent ironic comments "which

both acknowledge patriarchal structures and provide a form of critique against it”, Lewallen ultimately finds Carter’s use of pornography and the fairy tale elements in her fiction as “politically untenable” (1988: 147, 149). Lewallen is especially critical of Carter’s construction of femininity in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* for she reads the female protagonists in the collection as embodiments of Sadeian women, either Justines —sexual victims— or Juliettes —sexual aggressors— caught within the reactionary dualism of being a masochist or a sadist. Just as Clark, Lewallen dismisses Carter’s lush and playful prose, the “surface gloss and shimmer” of her stories because, in her view, it “can manipulate us into sympathizing with masochism or choosing between rape and death” (154).

Perhaps the fiercest condemnation of Carter’s representation of sexual relationships comes from feminist writer Nicole Ward Jouve. In “Mother is a Figure of Speech...”, an essay included within 1994 collection *Flesh and the Mirror*, Ward Jouve criticises Carter’s representation of the mother as a rhetorical construct and sides with French feminist critics, who passionately defend motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship as the source of emancipation for women. She first finds Carter’s celebration of de Sade’s demolition of the mother “figure” in *Philosophy in the Boudoir* (1795) profoundly disturbing and later notes how in Carter’s stories and novels “mothers or grandmothers [...] are speedily and neatly disposed of” or assume masculine, non-motherly qualities:

[t]he girl’s mother in *The Bloody Chamber* is a tiger-shooting, horse-riding, pistol-wielding heroine who takes over from damsel-saving Western cowboys and the brothers of the Perrault tale, bumping off Baddie Bluebeard in the nick of time. As for Mother in *The Passion of New Eve*, though outwardly she conforms to the Patriarchal Goddess pattern of the Mary Daly or pre-Minoan variety [...] she is also a cosmetic surgeon and mad futurist dictator [...] No other writer I can think of has so repeatedly and passionately jostled against what feminists call ‘biological essentialism’. (Ward Jouve 2007 [1994]: 170)

As she opposes Carter's rejection of the exploration of the maternal as the ultimate aim of the feminine writing, Ward Jouve wonders:

What if, instead of being emancipatory, the downgrading and refusal of motherhood was the ultimate in phallocracy, the perpetuation of women's subjection? What if the counter-view- to be found in some called French Feminism- was right? [...] Does she [Carter], in her rejection of the mother, produce another form of suppression? My feeling is that she does. That she needed to do it, because she had such accounts to settle with the mother" (175-176).²⁵

Carter's rejection of the mother is further explained by Ward Jouve as a result of her assumption of postmodernism *qua* epistemology and aesthetic practice: "If the word [postmodernism] hadn't been around", Ward Jouve contends, "someone would have had to invent it for Angela Carter" (163). She resolutely dismisses Carter's claim, as exposed in *The Sadeian Woman*, that technological advancement has assisted the ongoing process of women's emancipation:

Techniques of contraception and surgically safe abortion have given women the choice to be sexually active yet intentionally infertile for more of their lives than was possible at any time in history until now [...T]he introduction of contraception is part of the change in the position of women over the last two centuries. (Carter 2009 [1979]: 123)

On the contrary, Ward Jouve argues:

The idea that I live in a postmodern world does nothing for me. I do not believe that technology is woman's great ally, as Carter has claimed, nor that artificial reproduction is going to liberate me (helpful as contraception is). (Ward Jouve 2007 [1994]: 180)

Her essay concludes with a stark defence of a quest for the mother as the route feminists should follow towards liberation, a position which I believe

²⁵ Ward Jouve interprets elements of Carter's life as a possible reason for her attack of the figure of the mother. She particularly signals the problematic relation Carter had with both her mother and her grandmother, as expressed in "The Mother Lode", an autobiographical essay Carter published in *News Review* in 1976. Ward Jouve even mentions an encounter between Cixous and Carter as symptomatic of the latter's hatred for the mother figure:

I once introduced Angela Carter to Hélène Cixous in London —they were doing a *mano a mano*— and Carter professed terror at the encounter. I now wonder whether her terror had something to do with coming face to face with what she attacked" (Ward Jouve 2007 [1994]: 177).

reinforces a view of sex based on strict binary oppositions, reproducing, as a result, the same patriarchal matrix it claims to subvert:

I see our relation with the mother as our attempt to navigate between our need for closeness and our need for independence. The father is consciousness, and what structures the need [...] Desire for the mother fuels us. The father compels us, and enables us, to let go. The mother is earth, water. Materiality, feeling. The father is air, fire. Thought, inspiration, light. The mother is what enables me to think my relation with the earth. The father with the sky. I don't care two-pence about binaries. Or hierarchies [...] There is no model of creation that humans have invented, artistic or otherwise, which is not in some way bisexual [...] If there is creation, the mother is there somewhere. If I wish to exterminate her, tear her to pieces, it's because she's there. If I am here, it's because she's been there. (180-181)

An essay by Robin Ann Sheets, published earlier in 1991, also examines Carter's depiction of sexual relations in both *The Sadeian Woman* and "The Bloody Chamber" but the conclusions reached are completely opposed to those of Ward Jouve's. Sheets reads both Carter's study and tale in relation to the feminist debates on pornography here reviewed, particularly those addressing sadomasochism and motherhood in the representation of female characters. Drawing on arguments from both detractors and advocates of pornography, Sheets concludes that Carter's use of pornographic scenarios in "The Bloody Chamber" paradoxically "align[s] her with the antipornography feminists who have been among her most vehement critics" because the story celebrates motherhood as a site of female liberation while portraying male sexuality as death-oriented (642). Sheets conducts her reading of the story against three hypotexts that have historically reinforced patriarchal gender roles and thus assisted women's oppression:

(1) the fairy tale of "Bluebeard" and the interpretative traditions surrounding it during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; (2) pornographic fiction, especially *Justine* (1791), the Sade novel Carter describes as "a black, inverted fairy tale" (SW, p. 39); and (3) Freud's theory of female development, which is, according to Carter, an account "of such extraordinary poetic force...that it retains a cultural importance analogous... to the myth of the crime of Eve" (SW, p. 125) (Sheets 1991: 642)

Sheets opposes the narrator of “The Bloody Chamber” to Sade’s Justine, the personification of virtue *qua* masochism, a female character whose *raison d’être* is to embody the patriarchal ideal of the perfect woman: “to be the *object* of desire [...] to be defined in the passive case” (Carter 2009 [1979]: 88). “In contrast”, Sheets writes, “the protagonist of ‘The Bloody Chamber’ learns that she is not a perfect woman; she has the right to act, to experience the consequences of her decisions, to learn from error” (Sheets 1991: 650). Jean-Yves, the sympathetic blind piano tuner with whom the narrator and her mother eventually lead a quiet life in Paris, far from the Marquis’s castle, is received by Sheets as further signaling a subversion of the notion of sexuality based on male domination. Although his relation to the narrator does not appear to have a sexual dimension, Sheets invites us to interpret Jean-Yves’s presence as a promise of sexual relations outside of the victim-victimiser —sadist-masochist— patriarchal pattern: “Perhaps if Carter were to continue the story, she would develop a male sexuality centered on smell, touch, and sound; indeed, this is already implicit in Jean-Yves’s extreme sensitivity to music” (655). What leads Sheets to conclude that Carter’s story does “deconstruct, debunk, and demystify pornography” (656) is the presence of the narrator’s mother, a strong figure whose spirit drove the narrator “to know the very worst” (Carter 1995 [1979]: 131) —to discover the bloody chamber where her husband, the Marquis, stores the remains of his three former wives, all brutally murdered— and who eventually saves her daughter from certain death at the hands of the Marquis.

Contrary to anti-pornography readings of the story, which dismiss Carter’s professed demolition of the Mother myth, Sheets reads the narrator’s mother as a successful reconceptualisation of motherhood, the mother as:

[a]n independently existing subject, one who expresses her own desire. The mother in “The Bloody Chamber” has experienced autonomy and adventure in the world;

she has also acted according to her desires, having “gladly, scandalously, defiantly” married for love (*BC*, p. 2). Carter seems to anticipate the recent work of women filmmakers and critics who believe that “some part of Motherhood lies outside of patriarchal concerns...and eludes control.” (Sheets 1991: 654)

Sheets’s celebration of the story’s ending as a feminist restitution of the mother-daughter bond *qua* source of female liberation has been shared by many Carter scholars.²⁶ Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, in an essay that immediately precedes Ward Jouve’s in the collection *Flesh and the Mirror* (1994), claims too that Carter’s exploration of sexual relations in *The Sadeian Woman* and in her tales from *The Bloody Chamber* subverts the Sadeian oppressor-victim dialectic. Contrary to Sheets’s approach, however, Atwood opposes Carter’s stance to anti-pornography feminists and to the strand of feminist theory that maintains that women are essentially different from men. The latter, Atwood contends, proves to be reactionary because, in postulating women as “essentially other, but better: group-minded, sensitive and caring consensus builders”, it perpetuates the same gender dichotomy which has for long sustained patriarchal oppression (Atwood 2007 [1994]: 137). Women, in other words, are essentialised as morally superior beings who “because of the lamb-like nature of their superiority [...] need protection from men”, who are in turn defined as naturally predatory, the inflictors of suffering. “It is Carter’s contention”, Atwood writes,

[t]hat a certain amount of tigerishness may be necessary if women are to achieve an independent as opposed to a dependent existence; if they are to avoid —at the extreme end of passivity— becoming meat. They need, in their own self-interest, to assimilate at least some of Juliette’s will-to-power. (137)

²⁶ My analysis of the mother-daughter bond in “The Bloody Chamber”, as developed in chapter 10, will counter such concluding remarks. Drawing on both Slavoj Žižek’s Lacan-inspired theory of perversion, I will postulate the bond subject-(m)Other as a source of entrapment for both the narrator and the Marquis.

Carter's progressive portrayal of female characters in *The Bloody Chamber*, according to Atwood, does not lie in favouring Juliette, woman-as-predator, over Justine, woman-as-prey; both roles are two sides of the same coin, "both halves [have been] entirely constructed by men" (134). Carter's subversion of sexual dichotomies rests, Atwood argues, on her postmodernist "denaturing" of women and men, exposing that the sexual qualities that characters assume are ideological constructions. Atwood's point is reiterated by Nanette Altevors, whose short essay "Gender Matters in *The Sadeian Woman*" (1994) constitutes a blunt defence of Carter's attack of essentialist definitions of women. "[Carter's a]ttack on myth", Altevors contends, "is peculiarly timely, given the overwhelming success of the recent best-seller *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, which celebrates precisely what Carter in 1978 referred to as the 'most insulting mythic redefinition of myself, that of occult priestess'" (Altevors 1994: 20).

With Carter's study in mind, Atwood analyses the tales collected in *The Bloody Chamber* in terms of the opposition predator/tiger and prey/lamb and concludes that:

[l]ambhood and tigerishness may be found in either gender, and in the same individual at times. In this respect, Carter's arrangements are much more subject to mutability than are de Sade's [...] Carter [...] celebrates relativity and metamorphosis and 'the complexity of human relations'. (138)

In line with the poststructuralist conception of gender and sex as discursive constructs, Atwood reads Carter's tales as progressive given their deconstruction and reconstruction of artificial sexual identities. Surprisingly, however, Atwood closes her essay with a celebration of Carter's late aggrandisement of motherhood, which somehow stands at odds with the argument she has utilised in her defense of the feminist potential of Carter's tales. In her reading of Carter's three versions of the Cinderella story in "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost", collected in *American*

Ghosts and Old World Wonders (1993), Atwood locates the source of Ashputtle's liberation from her stepmother and eventual becoming of a grown-up woman in the spirit of her dead mother—in very much the same way as Sheets reads the figure of the mother in “The Bloody Chamber”.²⁷ The story's ending, Atwood argues, is “all right” for the mother's ghost, who:

[g]ets a rest from mothering [...] has done her job: she has weaned her child away from her, as she would have done anyway had she remained alive, and helped her to achieve autonomous adulthood. That is the happiest ending she can imagine; that, and her own well-deserved ‘sleep’. (Atwood 2007 [1994]: 149-50)

The ending is also “all right”, in Atwood's view, for Ashputtle, who “has played both lamb and tiger, but at the end she is neither [...] only human, part of that complexity, that mixed blessing which Carter valued above the ‘consolatory nonsense’ of [...] spurious archetype” (150). In celebrating the mother's role in this story, Atwood seems to disregard that it is “the man” Ashputtle goes with, “an occasion for contest” against her stepmother (149), who “gave her a house and money” to do all right (Carter 1995 [1993]: 396). Atwood does not consider either the third part of this text, in which the ash girl, urged by her mother's ghost, reproduces the latter's life actions perpetuating, therefore, a fixed identity via matrilineal descent.

Other scholars who have read *The Bloody Chamber* collection as progressive on the grounds of its postmodernist representation of sexual relations are Merja Makinen and Christina Bacchilega. Makinen's essay “*The Bloody Chamber* and the Decolonisation of Feminine Sexuality” examines Carter's re-writing of reactionary fairy tales alongside her foregrounding of violence and

²⁷A shorter version of “Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost”—titled “Ashputtle” and corresponding to part 2 “The Burned Child”—was originally published in *The Virago Book of Ghost Stories* (1987).

eroticism in the deconstruction of feminine sexuality. Against anti-postmodernist critics who argued that Carter gets locked into retrogressive sexism in using the fairy tale and pornography, Makinen contends that neither the fairy tale nor any literary genre are universal, unchangeable forms. In line with the theory of intertextuality, Makinen stresses the power of retelling to potentially undermine any text's, including fairy tales', original ideological assumptions, a view shared by Carter herself in her introduction to *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1990):

[t]he term 'fairy tale' is a figure of speech and we use it loosely, to describe the great mass of infinitely various narrative that was, once upon a time and still is, sometimes, passed on and disseminated through the world by word of mouth [...Fairy tales are] stories without known originators that can be remade again and again by every person who tells them, the perennially refreshed entertainment of the poor. (Carter 2005 [1990]: xi)

Makinen finds in "The Company of Wolves" from *The Bloody Chamber* the most straightforward example of Carter's subversion of fairy-tale misogyny. She quotes the narrator's account of the female protagonist's reaction to the (were)wolf's oft-quoted reply "All the better to eat you with" to "What big teeth you have!" as an unequivocal instance of Carter's deconstruction of the fairy-tale ideal of femininity as passive:

The girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody's meat. She laughed at him full in the face, she ripped off his shirt for him and flung it into the fire, in the fiery wake of her own discarded clothing. (Carter 1995 [1979]: 219)

Whereas female curiosity is punished in earlier versions of Red Riding Hood, it stands in "The Company of Wolves" as a source of subversion.²⁸ Straying

²⁸ Charles Perrault's version of the story is invoked in "The Company of Wolves" through extensive use of symbols, characters, lines and events; yet, it is in Neil Jordan's film *The Company of Wolves* (1984), based on the three wolf stories from *The Bloody Chamber*, where Carter—who co-wrote the film script together with Jordan— makes direct reference to Perrault's text. At the very end of the film, Rosaleen, the protagonist, recites Perrault's moral, captured elsewhere in the frequently-cited interdiction "Don't stray from the path":

Little girls, this seems to say:
Never stop upon your way;
Never trust a stranger friend

from the path and following her curiosity leads Carter's protagonist to discover that the idea of the wolf/man as an essentially predatory beast to fear is a spurious archetype, as false as the idea of woman as an essentially fearful prey: "She will lay his fearful head on her lap [...] See! Sweet and sound she sleeps in granny's bed, between the paws of the tender wolf" (Carter 1995 [1979]: 220). Makinen argues that such reversal of sexual roles and subsequent depiction of a female character as sexually active recurs in all the tales from the collection. She further notes the role played by postmodernist strategies like irony and indeterminacy in assisting Carter's demythologising or "decolonization" of sexual identities. "I want to argue", Makinen writes, "that Carter's tales do not simply 'rewrite' the old tales by fixing roles of active sexuality for their female protagonists—they 're-write' them by playing with and upon (if not preying upon) the earlier misogynistic version" (Makinen 2000: 24).

Put differently, the progressive potential of Carter's fiction, in Makinen's view, lies not so much in establishing new role-models for women and men to follow, but rather in foregrounding meaning questioning and resistance, and promoting, in line with Brian McHale's and Hutcheon's account of postmodernist literature, radical contingency at the heart of identity construction and fixation.²⁹ In

No one knows how it will end.
As you're pretty, so be wise
Wolves may lurk in every guise
Now, as then, 'tis simple truth:
Sweetest tongue hides sharpest tooth. (Perrault 1969 [1697]: 29)

²⁹ Makinen explains that she has chosen *The Bloody Chamber* to analyse Carter's use of violence as a potentially feminist strategy because the collection is midway the savage analyses of patriarchy in her 1960s and 1970s novels which foreground numerous rapes and other forms of physical and sexual abuse of women—and the later novels of the 1980s and early 1990s, in which the focus is on mocking and reversing various cultural stereotypes (Makinen 2000: 21-22).

this respect, Makinen positions herself with Atwood *contra* Lewallen and Duncker, arguing that denying the existence of masochism and sadism in women's psychosexuality would "surely [...] incarcerate women within a partial, sanitized image only slightly less constricted than the Victorian angel in the house" (28). This is precisely Carter's point when accounting for her selection of stories by and about women in *Wayward Girls and Wicked Women: An Anthology of Subversive Stories Edited by Angela Carter* (1986): "Very few of the women in these stories", Carter writes in the Introduction to this anthology, "are guilty of criminal acts, although all of them, to my mind, are, or have the potential to be *really* evil" (Carter 1986: ix, emphasis in original). Carter laments women's reluctance to see themselves as potentially amoral beings and criticises the tendency among women's writers to be:

[k]ind to women. Perhaps too kind. Women, it is true, commit far fewer crimes than men in the first place; we do not have the same opportunities to do so. But, from the evidence of the fiction we write, we find it very hard to blame ourselves for those we commit. We tend to see the extenuating circumstances, so that it is difficult to apportion blame, impossible to judge —or, indeed, to acknowledge responsibility and then take up the terrible burden of remorse as it is summed up in Samuel Beckett's phrase, 'my crime is my punishment'. (Carter 1986: ix)

After noting how inimical it is for women to assume the role of the morally superior sex and thus elude responsibility for acts of any kind, Carter explains that she has selected the stories because their protagonists,

[e]ven if they do not prosper exceedingly, at least contrive to evade the victim's role by the judicious use of their wits, and they share a certain cussedness, a bloodmindedness, even though their stories are told in an enormous variety of ways and come from all over the world. (Carter 1986: xi)

Despite the above said, Makinen is quick to note that if masochism were "the only representation of female sexuality, [she] would be up in arms against its enforcement of Freudian views" (32). Such remark is stated in reference to "The Bloody Chamber", particularly to the narrator's disquieting revelation to the piano

tuner that her attraction towards the Marquis was, from the very beginning, propelled by her awareness that the latter would mean her own destruction. “But it is only one of ten tales, ten variant representations”, Makinen observes, “[m]oreover, the protagonist retracts her consent halfway through the narrative, when she realizes her husband, Bluebeard, is planning to involve her in real torture” (32). “The Bloody Chamber” is one of ten tales indeed, but it is by far the longest and the one that opens the collection and gives it a title. In chapter 11, I will question Maniken’s conclusion that, after discovering the bloody chamber, the narrator’s “craving” for her husband disappears “with the help of an ineffectual blind piano-tuner and her avenging mother” (33). Rather than disappearing, the narrator’s “craving” for the Marquis seems to have given way to a mood of nostalgia palpable at the tale’s ending and which, as I will later argue, propels the very act of narration.

In *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (1999), Christina Bacchilega devotes a chapter to discuss how Carter’s revisions of “Red Riding Hood” —her three “women-in-the-company-of-wolves” tales from *The Bloody Chamber*: “The Werewolf”, “The Company of Wolves” and “Wolf-Alice”, and Neil Jordan’s film *The Company of Wolves* (1984)— stand as prime examples of postmodern rewritings that deconstruct the ideological assumptions of their source texts and construct empowering possibilities for women. Countering Duncker’s, Clark’s and Lewallen’s negative political assessments of Carter’s recourse to the fairy tale, Bacchilega shows how Carter’s works both subvert the sexual stereotypes fixed and perpetuated by “the fairy tale as institution” and expose what these versions repressed in their aim to educate upper middle class

girls “in the propriety of keeping their place as ‘angels of the home’” (Bacchilega 1999: 59). As Carter herself puts it in the interview with John Haffenden:

My intention was not to do ‘versions’, or as the American edition of the book said, horribly, ‘adult’ fairy tales, but to extract the latent content from the traditional stories and use it as the beginning of the new stories. (Haffenden 1985: 84)

Carter’s intention to bring out what the institutionalisation of stories silenced was again noted in a later interview: when asked by Kerry Goldsworthy if she was writing fairy tales, Carter replied: “Not really. I was taking the latent image —the latent content of those traditional stories and using that; the latent content is violently sexual. And, because I am a woman, I read it that way” (Goldsworthy 1985: 10). Bacchilega highlights a number of postmodernist strategies that Carter uses to debunk the ideological implications of the two most popular versions of Red Riding Hood —Charles Perrault’s (1697) and the Brothers Grimm’s (1812). First, Bacchilega underscores performance as a prime characterisation technique in all the three tales: Carter’s consistent use of metamorphosis as a process whereby female and male characters shift identity as they change garments, make-up and skin, challenges patriarchal ideology by exposing that sexual identities are the effects of rhetorical practices —storytelling in this case— that work in the service of a particular network of power relations.

The process of storytelling itself together with allusions to previous versions of Red Riding Hood and to other tales from the collection are highlighted in Carter’s wolf tales and notably in the Jordan film she co-wrote to foreground the textual processes operating in the construction and deconstruction of contingent meaning. Carter’s work displays a Chinese-box or “story-within-and-against-other-stories” technique which, in Bacchilega’s opinion, not only subverts traditional fairy tale ideology but turns the female voice into an active storyteller who explores

identity issues and materialises alternative endings: “like the tales, the movie revalues female blood [...]n this Chinese-box narrative, the girl actively and critically participates not only in the process of (primarily women’s) storytelling, but in the related determination of choices” (Bacchilega 1999: 67-68). Sarah Gamble’s more recent reading of *The Bloody Chamber* in a 2008 essay shares common ground with Bacchilega’s arguments as she praises Carter’s stories:

[a]s largely successful exercises in the deconstruction of a form that has become appropriated by those who have a vested interest in upholding the status quo [...] In doing so, Carter uncovers a deeper, more subversive history of the fairy tale, bringing to the surface not only what Warner terms its ‘harshly realistic core’ but also ‘the suspect whiff of femininity’ from which it has never been completely disassociated’. (Gamble 2008: 27)

Robert Rawdon Wilson also challenges negative readings of Carter’s collection as postmodernist fiction. Drawing on Hutcheon’s notion of historiographic metafiction—which, as seen in the preceding chapter, defines postmodernist texts as paradoxically inscribing and subverting the ideology of the texts they refer to through self-conscious metafictional strategies—Wilson discusses “The Lady of the House of Love” as an epitome of postmodernist literature. Carter’s story, Wilson contends, admits two mutually exclusive readings. It can be read both as an artful text “that promotes pastiche at the expense of parody and that actively displaces historicity by the play of random stylistic allusion [...] display[ing] surely the ‘waning of affect’ that Jameson laments” and can also be received as a text that “for all that it is formally decontextualized and transnational in its orientation [...] clamorously proclaims its recognition of context, its historicity” (Wilson 1989: 105-106). Wilson begins his analysis by discussing how Carter’s story plays with surfaces, showing a certain flatness that fits the postmodernist criteria of literature. He highlights the story’s extreme style, its elaborate literariness, its coded phrases in French, its playful reprisal of motifs from

medieval texts, vampire folk tales, fairy tales and Gothic literature, and the narrator's frequent ironic comments that reverse and parody those very intertextual frames.

Although Carter's formalist text appears "hostile to 'real' human issues, such as history and temporality", Wilson urges us to read Carter's crafty allusions and ironic comments in light of the context in which the story is obliquely set (112). First, he reads the arrival of the young English officer to the "House of Love" in Transylvania—the traditional locale of the vampires—as conveying "the contrast between English 'rationality' and Eastern European superstition", an opposition reinforced by the mode of transportation that the young Englishman uses: the bicycle, an emblem of England's advanced and industrial power at odds with the ruinous interior of the house (109).

The House of Love stands, in Wilson's view, not only as an emblem of an archaic system of belief but as an ultimate refuge of the social system that preceded bourgeois capitalism, that is, feudalism. The House's host, the lady-vampire, gives body to feudal relations of subordination and subservience as she appears as completely subordinated to the power of a tradition—symbolised by the uncanny portraits of her ancestors—which forces her to murder what she loves most. The story's ending, however, deconstructs the opposition between the modern bourgeois system and the old feudal order on the basis of liberating reason versus oppressing unreason: the soldier's attempt to bring the Lady of the House into the light of reason—he intends to take her to a doctor to cure her from what he diagnoses as photophobia and nervous hysteria—turns her into corpse: "I will vanish in the morning light; I was only an invention of darkness. And I leave you as a souvenir the dark, fanged rose I plucked from between my thighs, like a flower laid on a

grave. On a grave” (Carter 1995 [1979]: 208). The protagonist’s words appear as an omen of the deadly future that awaits the soldier as he embarks with his regiment for France. The imminent outburst of World War I, one of the bloodiest conflicts in the history of humanity largely because of great technological advances in firepower, hints the irrational horror resulting from an actualisation of rational ideals. Carter’s story, in Wilson’s view, resists definition or meaning fixation of any kind and promotes indeterminacy and dissent, the only legitimate political and ethical position for supporters of canonical postmodernism.

Wilson’s conclusion is also reached by Lucie Armitt (1997) and Anny Crunelle-Vanrigh (2001), whose respective essays on *The Bloody Chamber* discuss the way in which the collection’s postmodernist form and structure contribute to this anti-foundational reorientation. Against Makinen and Bacchilega, who regard *The Bloody Chamber* as a collection of subversively revised fairy tales, both Armitt and Crunelle-Vanrigh contend that Carter’s stories are not fairy tales at all: “Quite clearly”, Armitt writes, “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” (Armitt 1997: 88). Crunelle-Vanrigh also opposes the fairy tale’s closure, its movement “from an initial, pernicious metamorphosis to a stable identity that must and will be reached or recaptured” to Carter’s collection, which “stubbornly moves round, from stability to instability, undermining the closed binary logic of fairy tale and eventually substituting *différance* for *différence* or difference” (Crunelle-Vanrigh 2001: 128-129).

Both scholars regard the stories in the collection as comprising a single narrative that, tackling various social issues —notably the issue of gender—

exceeds definition of any kind through overt and excessive self-consciousness. Such excess, in Armitt's reading, is captured by the figure referred to in the title: "What if we read the word 'chamber'", Armitt suggests,

[n]ot as a room, but as a vase or a vessel for carrying liquid? In this case the blood is the liquid with which the vessel is filled (indeed the substance that gives the vase its definition). The associated excesses are those of overspill, not those which threaten containment. In this case it is not the chamber that contains and thus constraints the woman (who then becomes a terrified victim), but the woman herself who takes control of the vessel of excess. (Armitt 1997: 92)

Armitt reinforces her argument through reference to the motifs of the frame and the portrait, which work in this short story collection to foreground the tension between containment and overspill of signifiers. In other words, signifiers that recur in the collection are in flux; from tale to tale, symbols, character types and motifs experience compulsive metamorphoses that frustrate any attempt at meaning fixation:

[t]hese narrative metamorphoses and the metamorphic forms they depict work to destabilize each other from within. It is not simply that the eponymous Lady of the House is a metamorphic character within the frame of her own text but that, beyond the limits of that frame, she crops up in the guise of the eponymous Tiger's Bride and/or the wolf's love in "The Company of Wolves". Similarly, it seems that there is really only one central male protagonist who, beginning as a lion, passes through a variety of predatory masculine metamorphoses before ending up as a wolf who is simultaneously both man and woman. (96-97)³⁰

³⁰ In my analysis of "The Bloody Chamber" in chapter 10, I also make use of the motif of the frame/container to read the figure of the bloody chamber in the eponymous story. Yet, unlike Armitt's interpretation, this figure seems to stand as both container/frame and framed content indexing an antagonism which I associate with Žižek's account of how postmodernist art—in his non-standard view of postmodernism—effectuates "radical desublimation": unlike realist and modernist art, postmodernist art fills the empty place of the Sublime—the chamber—with the nausea of the abject—blood—showing that what appear to be two distinct entities are the obverse and the reverse of one and the same entity; both container and content are strictly correlative (Žižek 2000a: 25-40).

Crunelle-Vanrigh's analysis of Carter's reworking of Madame de Beaumont "Beauty and the Beast" in "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" stands in close affinity with Armitt's reading:

The meaning of "Courtship" is constructed through a process of referring to other texts. Coming from, and pointing back and forward, to other stories, if only one signifier in the process of referring to other, absent signifiers. There is a constant interplay, a game of *différance* in which the meaning of "Beauty and the Beast", which Madame de Beaumont had intended as fixed and self-constituted, is now made volatile, permanently deferred, as we move from tale to tale of changing forms and metamorphosis. (Crunelle-Vanrigh 2001: 139).

Carter's use of the logic of *différance* is read by Crunelle-Vanrigh in the light of Levinas's notion of radical alterity and of French feminism's location of women's essence in the ever unaccountable female body. Such Otherness, Crunelle-Vanrigh argues, is captured in the figure of "Wolf-Alice", the protagonist of the story that closes the collection and brings together the signifiers Carter disseminated in the previous stories:

[Carter] splits open closed texts and revels in what she finds there, blood, scars, perversion. She puts her dialectic of repetition and difference at the service of a revaluation of the marginal that is the feminine, sabotaging —as she would— patriarchal structures and phallogocentrism, indulging on the fantasy of an undecidable being, the wolf-girl, both animal and woman, Carter's most mysterious representative of female Otherness. (Crunelle-Vanrigh 2001: 142)

The revaluation of the female body and subsequent representation of femininity as an ever unaccountable Other is also the main argument that Jean Wyatt (2000) develops to celebrate Carter's fiction as "perform[ing] an important service for women" (Wyatt 2000: 62). Like Crunelle-Vanrigh, Wyatt reads the presence of a wolf-girl —not the protagonist of "Wolf-Alice" but the creature that Peter, the seven-year-old protagonist of a later story "Peter and the Wolf" from the 1985 collection *Black Venus*, encounters on three occasions— as the embodiment of a feminine essence repressed by phallogocentric discourse, dramatising, therefore, the *écriture féminine* French feminists so passionately defended. The story itself is

interpreted as a revision of what Carter considered one of the most insidious patriarchal narratives: Freud's theory of castration and subsequent definition of women as castrated beings.³¹ "The social fiction of the female wound", Carter writes in *The Sadeian Woman*:

[t]he bleeding scar left by her castration [...] is a psychic fiction as deeply at the heart of Western culture as the myth of Oedipus, to which it is related in the complex dialectic of imagination and reality which produces culture. Female castration is an imaginary fact that pervades the whole of men's attitude towards women and our attitude to ourselves, that transforms women from human beings into wounded creatures who were born to bleed. (Carter 2009 [1979]: 26)

In Freud's narrative of sexual difference, the child —either boy or girl— enters the realm of desire by assuming a sexual identity rooted in an anatomic fact: either having or not having the penis, the latter (mis)recognised as an emblem of power or phallus. The boy experiences "castration anxiety", a fear of having his genitalia disfigured or removed, and, as a consequence, renounces his mother's love to identify with the authority of the father *qua* possessor of the phallus. The girl's reaction to this same (mis)recognition is "penis envy", which leads her to accept the "limitations" of her physiology and assume a feminine identity as object of masculine desire.

Wyatt argues that Carter's "Peter and the Wolf" both challenges and subverts Freud's foundational narrative by articulating female genitalia as a material presence on Peter's second encounter with the wolf-girl. After Peter's father traps her and takes her into "Granny's house", the wolf-girl starts howling for the wolves she has been separated from:

Peter's heart gave a hop, a skip, so that he had a sensation of falling; he 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, that was perfectly visible to him as she sat there square on the base of her spine [...] The boy could see her intimacy clearly, as if by

³¹ Wyatt lists a series of Freud's essays which, in her view, endorse a definition of women as castrated (Wyatt 2000: 60).

its own phosphorescence. 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. (Carter 1995 [1985]: 287)

Having quoted this passage from the story, Wyatt contends that Carter “answers Freud’s ‘no thing’ with a complex whorl of fleshy things, his ‘nothing’ with a material ‘infinity’” (Wyatt 2000: 61). She further argues that Peter’s vision of the wolf-girl’s sex does not reduce female difference to phallogocentric logic in order to exert control and oppression over it. On the contrary, Wyatt interprets Peter’s reaction in line with Levinas’s notion of the ethical subject: he renounces any type of interpretation when approaching the girl’s radical otherness. Peter’s last encounter with the wolf-girl on his way to the seminar seven years later —this time with little cubs suckling her breasts— is again read by Wyatt as a liberating moment that leads the protagonist to question Catholic doctrine, whose construction of gender differences is analogous to castration theory:

He enters a world unmapped by linguistic and doctrinal meanings, a world wide open to his discovery. Carter’s story suggests 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. (Wyatt 2000: 61)

As I will argue in chapter 11, Wyatt does not seem to consider that the state of ecstatic freedom Peter experiences at the encounter proves to be but a momentary scene interrupted by the wolf-girl’s sudden escape. Furthermore, the memory of such intense visionary experience is left behind and darkened as Peter, “under a cool rational sun [...] determinedly set[s] his face towards the town and tramped onwards, into a different story” (Carter 1995 [1985]: 291). Wyatt’s interpretation of “Peter and the Wolf”, nevertheless, has been recently endorsed by Hope Jennings

(2012), who praises the story as a subversive rewriting of the myth of the Fall from *Genesis*:

[Carter's t]ext present the Fall as a form of grace, as opposed to sin, overturning much of the rationale underpinning the myth in a way that allows for a productive alliance between the sexes based respect rather than repression of sexual differences (Hope 2012: 167)

Drawing on Kristeva's reading of the story of Adam and Eve as an essentially patriarchal discourse that represses the female flesh in enforcing the "Word of God" (a phallic economy), Hope, in line with Wyatt, reads the wolf-girl as "truly 'other'" (168) and Peter as a boy who:

[d]oes not appropriate that story [the wolf-girl's] or try to impose his own meaning onto its strangeness [...he] transgresses the boundaries of established orthodoxies and/or myths, in order to find a new way of seeing and relating to the irreducible differences of the other" (170).

In the same essay Hope reads "Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest", an early story included in Carter's first collection *Fireworks* (1974), as dramatising a complete collapse of the myth of the Fall. Madeleine and her twin brother Emile's exploration of the forest, which figures as a maternal fleshy space away of their father's house, stands, in Hope's analysis, as a liberating move that gives the protagonists access to what their world prohibits: each other's flesh. "In overturning the myth of original sin", Hope observes, "the text explores through the unsanctioned desires of incest, as both a literal and metaphorical device, the possibilities of sexual relations operating outside the law." (Hope 2012: 173). Both Wyatt's and Hope's positive assessments of Carter's representation of sexual difference stand in close affinity with Cixous's defence of a return to the Mother's body and Kristeva's legitimation of the abject as the ultimate realm of subversion.

Again, in chapter 11, I will oppose Hope's reading of "Peter and the Wolf" as a tale enacting a Levinasian encounter with unfathomable Otherness as well as a

revalorization of female flesh and her account of “Penetrating into the Heart of the Forest” as a dramatisation of the collapse of the myth of the Fall. Drawing on Žižek’s account of the “radical desublimation” at work in postmodernism and his striking rethinking of the myth of the Fall (Žižek 2000a: 25-40, 2014a: 33-76), I will argue that Hope’s conclusion rather re-sublimates difference and a belief in woman as the female other, a move that may prove to reinforce the binary oppositions at work in the ideology it attempts to subvert.

Another recent study by Jessica Tiffin (2009) approves Carter’s reworking of earlier texts, particularly the use of fairy tale elements in *The Bloody Chamber*. Contrary to feminist readings such as Wyatt’s or Hope’s, however, Tiffin argues that the subversive potential of Carter’s writing does not reside in demystifying phallic discourses to expose and aggrandise the repressed maternal *qua* women’s true essence. The emancipatory component of Carter’s texts lies instead in their endless deconstruction of what Tiffin conceives as discursively constructed sexual identities. Interestingly enough, Tiffin’s assumption of a poststructuralist stance leads her to regret what she receives as a regression to “structuralist determinism” in Carter’s use of fairy tale elements towards the end of her writing career. Tiffin particularly laments “the more straightforward, less multivalent reworking of the fairy tale in ‘Ashputtle or The Mother’s Ghost’” (Tiffin 2009: 71), which, *contra* Atwood, she sides with anti-postmodernism and anti-porn feminism:

The tale’s discursive, analytic narrative voice offers precisely what *The Bloody Chamber* refuses to provide: an explicit and authoritative feminist interpretation of the traditional tale [...] Carter seems to abandon the richer possibilities of *The Bloody Chamber*’s complex symbols in this tale, offering instead the kind of radical feminist rewrite which echoes the anti-fairy tale rhetoric of Dworkin. (Tiffin 2009: 72)

Tiffin concludes her reading of Carter’s reworking of the fairy tale suggesting that such change in style between *The Bloody Chamber* tales and

Carter's "Ashputtle" was a response to the acrimonious attack the former engendered. Like Tiffin, many scholars have endorsed a poststructuralist view of sexual difference to approach Carter's use of the carnivalesque mode, a postmodernist trait that has now become almost mandatory in any critical reference to Carter's fiction and which stands as the main focus of the next section.

2.2. "Woman as Spectacle?": The Critical Reception of Theatricality and the Carnavalesque in Carter's Fiction.

In a 1995 essay —later reprinted in Alison Easton's collection (2000)— Christina Britzolakis singles out spectacle as the most central theme in criticism of Carter's writing and argues that its various modes —drag, masquerade, cross-dressing, travesty and the burlesque— constitute a strategy of characterisation consistently used in Carter's texts with a double purpose: first, to represent sexual identities as artificial roles discursively constructed and second, to foreground radical contingency at the heart of the relationship between sex and physiology (Britzolakis 2000 [1995]: 173).

Carter's novels and short stories are populated with characters who, in a series of either supernatural, surgical, or theatrical metamorphoses appear to dismantle normative gender boundaries and ostensibly give body to what postmodernists hailed as the endless capacity of discourse to integrate abnormal practices —or what Judith Butler termed "constitutive outside" (Butler 1993: 44-45)— and reconstitute identity. "[For] many of Carter's most recent critics", Britzolakis argues:

[h]er theatricalism, which dates back to her earliest work, has emerged, often by way of this body of 'gender performance' theory as synonymous with her self-proclaimed 'demythologizing' project, the project of 'investigating' femininity as one of the 'social fictions that regulate our lives.' (Britzolakis 2000: 173-174)

To evince Carter's endorsement of a postmodernist view of the self *qua* performance, Britzolakis quotes a passage from *Nights at the Circus* (1984) which describes what Walser, a skeptical young American reporter who travels to Europe to investigate the case of marvellous Fevvers, "the most famous *aerialiste* of the day", and her "notorious and much-debated wings, the source of her fame" (Carter 1984: 3-4), felt when encountering his double in the mirror:

When Walser first put on his make-up, he looked in the mirror and did not recognize himself. As he contemplated the stranger peering interrogatively back at him out of the glass, he felt the beginnings of a vertiginous sense of freedom [...] Walser's very self, as he had known it, departed from him, he experienced the freedom that lies behind the mask, within dissimulation, the freedom to juggle with being. (Carter 1984: 92)

Although the motif of the mirror will be further elaborated in subsequent chapters, I find it important at this point to disagree with Britzolakis's interpretation of this passage. In looking at himself the mirror, Walser is not identifying with a mask, an objectification of his self as performative construct. Instead, he does not "recognize his self" and experiences vertigo, an extreme sensation that Žižek associates with an "encounter with the Real" of nothingness but inert matter and which reduces the subject to "pure gaze" or "gaze *qua* object":

[w]hen I find myself face to face with my double, when I "encounter myself" among the objects, when "I myself" *qua* subject appear "out there", what am I at that precise moment as the one who looks at it, as a witness to myself? Precisely the gaze *qua* object [...] The lesson of the dialectic of the double is therefore the discordance between eye and gaze [...] the point in the image which eludes my eye's grasp is none other than *the gaze itself*. (Žižek 1992a: 126-127)

From the late 1980s onwards, however, Carter criticism has, with a few exceptions, approached her staging of sexual identity as spectacle in the light of poststructuralist theory —notably of Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity as exposed in chapter 1 here— and has therefore celebrated it as an example of a progressive strategy working in the service of emancipatory politics.

One of the first scholars to examine and praise the role of spectacle in Carter's *oeuvre* was Paulina Palmer. Her 1987 article "From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman: Angela Carter's Magic Flight" discusses what Palmer interprets as a major shift in Carter's career concerning her representation of femininity as spectacle: a progression from an impulse to explore women's oppression as exemplified in the image of the puppet, which dominates Carter's early fiction until 1979, to a move towards a celebrationist and utopian mode that emerges in her later texts and is characterised by the presence of more affirmative female characters who take control of spectacle and exploit its emancipatory potential. The figure of the "coded mannequin, the metaphor employed by H el ene Cixous to represent the robotic state to which human beings are reduced by psychic repression" is replaced by images of "Fevvers' miraculous wings, which [...] make her body 'the abode of limitless freedom' [...] and] represent ideas of liberation and rebirth; they evoke, in Cixous words, 'the possibility of radical transformation of behavior, mentalities, roles, and political economy'" (Palmer 1987: 179-180).³² Palmer concentrates her discussion on *Nights at the Circus*, which she regards as an epitome of Carter's more affirmative mode, and proceeds to examine the nature of her revaluation of female experience. In so doing, she singles out Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque alongside the related literary strategies outlined by Brian McHale (1987: 166-75) as dramatising this shift.

Palmer first observes how Carter's use of allusion, an exercise present in her previous texts, operates in this novel in a typically carnivalesque manner: references to texts from high literature —Shakespeare, Milton, Poe, Ibsen and Joyce, to name just a few— are juxtaposed with voices from popular culture —the more exuberant

³² Palmer is quoting H el ene Cixous "The Laugh of the Medusa" in *New French Feminisms*. Eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron. New York: Schocken, 1981, p. 96.

and improper realm of the circus, the dazzling mode of late nineteenth century advertising and the sensationalist style of yellow journalism. “This medley”, Palmer writes, “unites the serious and the comic, the high and the low” in a way that destabilises and delegitimises typically modern generic boundaries and foregrounds, in consonance with a Bakhtinian notion of intertextuality, the endless capacity of a text to both assert and deny a multiplicity of competing voices.

This logic of hybridisation and de-differentiation characteristic of the carnivalesque, Palmer contends, works in *Nights at the Circus* to treat important political and ontological issues as it destabilises and delegitimises not only social hierarchies but also the long-held modern distinction between reality and fiction. Among the carnivalesque features and motifs in the novel, Palmer highlights the text’s emphasis on “the relativity of experience”, which is apparent in the introduction of utopian elements —the reference to taming tigers with music and Fevvers’ marvellous wings, which sustain the slogan in French with which she is advertised, “Is she fact or is she fiction?” (Carter 1984: 3)— in an otherwise oppressive environment, Colonel Keaney’s circus, which, with its rigid hierarchy of male performers, is read by Palmer as an effective symbol of patriarchy (Palmer 1987: 197-198).

Palmer further notes Carter’s exploitation of Bakhtin’s definition of the grotesque body in her construction of characters as a subversive strategy. The description of the clown “Buffo the Great” in the circus ring radically challenges the normative concept of the body:

The terrible Buffo, hilarious, appalling, devastating Buffo with his round, white face and the inch-wide rings of rouge round his eyes, and his four-cornered mouth, like a bow tie, and, mockery of mockeries, under his roguishly cocked, white, conical cap, he wears a wig that does not simulate hair. It is, in fact, a bladder. Think of that. He wears his insides on his outside, and a portion of his most obscene and intimate insides, at that; so that you might think he is bald, he stores his brains in the organ which, conventionally, stores piss (Carter 1984: 103)

If Buffo deconstructs himself physically, Walser and the ape-man appear to achieve the task mentally. Palmer reads both male characters as liberating figures indexing a move towards “a state of redefined masculinity” (Palmer 1984: 197); the ape man gives up his machismo and starts to learn gentleness while Walser’s mind becomes “‘a perfect blank’ in preparation for the subsequent reconstruction of his masculinity” (200). Yet, if there is a character that embodies the deconstructive force of the grotesque and the reconstructive impulse of spectacle, that is, in Palmer’s view, the novel’s protagonist, Fevvers. A figure of both extreme specularly and physical excess, Fevvers repeatedly constructs and deconstructs herself on stage as an unnatural compendium of provisional patriarchal stereotypes about women —“Angel of death”, “queen of ambiguities”, “spectacle”, “freak”. Her state of suspension during her flights and her fit of laughter with which the novel concludes are read by Palmer as emancipatory acts dramatising the subversive potential of the carnival’s parodic ambivalence:

The novel concludes aptly on a note of carnivalistic mirth. In the penultimate paragraph, Fevvers’ laughter is more than merely festive. As well as irreverently mocking the existing political order, it is socially and psychically liberating. Bakhtin’s discussion of the subversive potential of laughter helps to explicate its various levels of meaning. (Palmer 1987: 201)

Palmer claims that the promise of social and psychic renewal entailed in a carnivalisation of experience is not only envisaged at an individual level in *Nights at the Circus*, but also applies to the community. She cites a number of episodes from the novel focusing on female collectivity, a theme that, according to Palmer, has been either marginalised or ignored in Carter’s earlier works: the relationship between Fevvers and Lizzie, her foster-mother, is received as a one of friendship and political comradeship; the brothel where Fevvers spends her adolescence is

interpreted as “a miniature women’s centre, humming with feminist activity” and the journey into the Siberian wilderness of the female inmates and warders from Countess P’s asylum is celebrated as an escape from oppression to a pre-patriarchal realm (Palmer 1987: 198).

The most notable representation of female collectivity in the novel is to be found, according to Palmer, in the representation of the lesbian relationship between two circus performers, the princess of Abyssinia and Mignon, the ape-man’s wife. Palmer’s praise of this relation as prefiguring a new terrain outside masculine discourse recalls the avowal of some French feminists for an exploration of the feminine realm through women’s writing. As Palmer notes, “the relationship between the two women is presented in utopian terms. It is associated with the Orpheus-like capacity to tame wild beasts [in this case, tigers] with music” (168), a language in which, as expressed by the narrator of the novel, “they’d found their way to one another [as] beings who seemed [...] to transcend their individualities” (Carter 1984: 202-203).

In a similar vein, Keith Booker (1991) reads *Nights at the Circus* as an example of a transgressive use of the carnivalesque mode in late twentieth century fiction. Booker first approaches Bakhtin’s concept and Carter’s novel by drawing on Linda Hutcheon’s definition of postmodernist literature as inherently paradoxical or duplicitous, and examines how the novel promotes such duplicity through the use of carnivalesque elements. Like Palmer before him, Booker reads Fevvers as a personification of a carnivalesque amalgam of contradictory myths about woman, thus unsettling gender boundaries as well as the distinction between reality and fantasy. Booker reinforces the association between Bakhtin’s concept and Carter’s

text by underscoring the images of trickery and illusion that abound in the latter including:

[t]he Indian rope trick, a fake medium at a séance, a confidence man who makes and sells fake photographs of the dead to grieving relatives and a native Shaman who works miracles through no other power than the confidence of his constituents. (Booker 1991: 236)

This atmosphere, in Booker's opinion, heightens what he describes as an overall effect of "ontological uncertainty" (236), a description of *Nights at the Circus* very much in tune with Brian McHale's definition of postmodernist literature. Booker contends that the greatest source of transgressive power in the novel resides in the contradictory conflation of the carnivalesque and the abject — of dazzling spectacle and repulsive materiality— a description that stands in affinity with Slavoj Žižek's alternative description of postmodernist art but which, nevertheless differs in its ideological implications. Such a paradoxical combination is materialised, according to Booker, by Fevvers' presence as well as by the whole atmosphere at the circus, best captured in the descriptive passage Booker quotes:

The aroma of horse dung and lion piss permeated every inch of the building's fabric, so that the titillating contradiction between the soft, white shoulders of the lovely ladies whom young army officers escorted there and the hairy pelts of the beasts in the ring resolved in the night-time intermingling of French perfume and the essence of steppe and jungle in which musk and civet revealed themselves as common elements. (Carter 1984: 94)

Even if Booker notes, in line with theorists of the carnivalesque in literature, that *Nights at the Circus* admits two conflicting readings, both as a politically subversive novel "because it celebrates things that society repudiates as abject" and as a reactionary text, "being a mere strategy for the containment of the subversive energies of abjection by making it into a joke", he eventually sides with the first perspective arguing that the political specificity of the book —which he does not

specify— “makes it difficult to read either as a simple support for existing dominant ideologies which rest on closure and fixed meanings” (Booker 1991: 244).

Magali Cornier Michael (1998) also reads the carnivalesque elements in *Nights at the Circus* as a subversive postmodern strategy that strengthens Carter’s professed feminism. Her main argument is that Carter’s novel brings together two ostensibly opposite strands of feminism, namely, postmodern utopian feminism and the more politically engaged Marxist feminism. Fevvers and her foster mother Lizzie “serve, respectively, as mouthpieces for each of these two feminisms [...] the novel’s omniscient narrative voice strives to conjoin these two strands of feminism in order to posit a feminism that would be liberating while retaining a sociohistorical grounding” (Michael 1998: 206). Michael reinforces Palmer’s and Booker’s interpretation of extraordinary and carnivalesque elements, particularly of Fevvers’ indeterminate identity, as a challenge to fixed ontological boundaries: “The novel’s rejection of any neat demarcation between reality and fiction”, Michael notes, “functions as the pivotal strategy for undermining the Western conception of the subject and of traditional gender categories and for offering forms of liberating power” (208).

Despite this emphasis on the utopian potential of extraordinary forms, “the novel”, in Michael’s view, “never severs the connection between her [Fevvers’] exploits and the material situation” (212-213). In this respect, Fevvers’ relation with Lizzie is crucial: “as a staunch Marxist feminist and former prostitute, Lizzie keeps the novel’s focus from diverging too far from the economic aspects of material existence” (213). Through Lizzie’s voice, the novel criticises the ideological foundations of Western marriage —the traditional patriarchal dichotomy between wife and whore— and stresses the great physical effort and the economic interests

behind the amazing spectacle on the circus ring. Michael concludes her discussion underscoring the “balance” maintained in the novel between carnivalisation and materialism: “*Nights at the Circus* adopts Marxist feminism’s emphasis on the material situation, which utopian feminism tends to ignore; and it adopts utopian feminism’s creative and hopeful dynamism, which Marxist feminism often lacks” (224).

Although *Nights at the Circus* has been received as a quintessential example of the carnivalesque mode in literature, it is not the only work by Carter to have been read in the light of Bakhtin’s theory. Bakhtinian concepts of carnival and the grotesque alongside the notion of gender as performance have also been instrumental in analyses of gender issues in *The Passion of New Eve* (1977). This earlier novel stages the journey of the male English narrator, Evelyn, to a futuristic dystopian North America where he is captured in the desert by the women of Beulah—a female city—and taken to meet Mother, a self-designed individual who transforms Evelyn into a biological woman by two months of plastic surgery. Once renamed Eve, the narrator is forced to make love with his or her adolescent fantasy, Tristessa de St. Ange, an ageing silent film star who is revealed to be biologically male.

In “Angela Carter’s New Eve(lyn): De/Engendering Narrative” (1996), Alison Lee reads Eve(lyn)’s transexuality and Tristessa’s transvestism as personifications of Butler’s notion of “gender parody” and “drag” (Butler 1990: 181-190) and celebrates them as subversive strategies that reveal that the identity after which gender defines itself is a rootless, empty imitation, a performance imperfectly sustained. Lee opposes Eve(lyn) and Tristessa to Mother and Zero, two divine-like characters who, despite their self-construction through technical means

as exaggeratedly female and male respectively, do believe in the true essence of what their appearance conveys and tyrannically force others to reproduce fixed gender identities. On the contrary, the fluidity of identities and subsequent indeterminacy embodied by Eve(lyn) and Tristessa stands, in Lee's opinion, as a progressive practice because it urges readers to question gender as a naturally given category.

"Indeterminacy in *The Passion of New Eve*", Lee writes, "is a challenge to the reader to recognize where the ruptures occur, where centers cannot hold, and where ideological formations are undermined in the narrative" (Lee 1996: 239). In such fluidity and indeterminacy of identities, Lee further sees an openness to what Butler termed "resignification" (Butler 1990: 175), a constant challenge to patriarchal gender fixation: "It is the heteroglossia, the multiplicity, the undermining of binaries that makes a text like Carter's feminist in both its narrative structure and its story" (Lee 1996: 248).

Heather Johnson's "Textualising the Double-Gendered Body: Forms of the Grotesque in *The Passion of New Eve*"—first published in 1994—also argues for the progressive potential of Carter's treatment of Eve(lyn) and Tristessa as double-gendered bodies. Johnson contends that Bakhtin's two distinctive modes of the grotesque body—the utopian excess of the body in grotesque realism (Bakhtin 1984b: 26) and the disgusting body of the post-Romantic grotesque, which embodies a condition of social alienation (39)—are inscribed in the representation of the novel's central characters to parody and transcend normative definitions of gender.

Johnson first signals how experiences of the post-Romantic grotesque in the novel work to expose the appropriation of women *qua* spectacle as the basis of the

masculine subject's self-representation. She singles out two episodes in which first Eve(lyn) and then Tristessa experience revulsion and horror at the sight of their respective bodies as grotesque composites: "This composite image [the androgynous body] has the appearance of something that is unresolved and provokes a reaction in the viewer that strives to unify the obvious disparity, thereby rescuing it for their realm of the normal, the familiar" (Johnson 2000 [1994]: 131). The narrator's experience of her body as grotesque occurs when his transformation as a biological woman is complete: Evelyn responds to himself in horror "as if he had been modelled after a monster as hideously devised as Frankenstein" and intensifies this reaction of self-disgust "through a direct comparison to Mother's excessive body 'I would wince a little at such gross modulation of a flesh that had once been [...] the twin of my new flesh'" (Carter 2008 [1977]: 76-77). The second episode to dramatise the post-Romantic grotesque body is to be found, according to Johnson, in Zero's removal of Tristessa's gown on top of her beautiful glass palace—a metaphor of her fragile female identity—which reveals the presence of her hidden male genitalia. The horror Tristessa feels in exposing her femininity as manufactured spectacle is explicitly conveyed through a terrifying "wailing [which] echoed round the gallery of glass" (128). Yet what initially stands as a traumatic experience of identity disintegration is read by Johnson as the ultimate source of freedom in the novel.

In line with Bakhtin's definition of the grotesque body in realism as renewal in excess as well as with Julia Kristeva's emphasis on the "powers of horror" or subversive potential of an encounter with the abject, Johnson interprets Eve(lyn) and Tristessa's act of lovemaking—after Tristessa's glass palace is destroyed—as

literalising a postmodernist celebration of identity indeterminacy, or what she terms “chimera”:

The moment of sexual congress between the two hermaphroditic figures may be dismissed by some as a heterosexual fantasy of recuperated unity. Yet the celebration of the body and its transgression of gender boundaries is, I think, intended to espouse a positive reading of this image. The relocation of the chimerical, the hermaphroditic, within the realm of possibility, as a source of origin and a site for pleasure, is written in the bodies of these two characters. (Johnson 2000 [1994]: 133)

Johnson’s positive description of Eve(lyn) and Tristessa’s utopian contact — “they share this climactic dissolution of identity, making the shape of this one fabulous, mythic creature together.” (133)— is evocative of Palmer’s praise of the synthetic union of Mignon and Princess of Abyssinia in *Nights at the Circus*.

Lindsey Tucker, in the introduction to a collection of critical essays on Carter (1998) also chooses a lovemaking scene —this time from Carter’s last novel *Wise Children* (1991)— to exemplify Carter’s deployment of the carnivalesque mode to deconstruct normative sexual identities: “Dora and Peregrine’s lovemaking becomes the center of the comic celebration going on downstairs —literally [... They] remain true to their performative selves, becoming the main players in a fertility ritual” (1998: 20). Not all critics, however, share a positive reception of Carter’s use of the grotesque and the carnivalesque in her depiction of sexual relationships and the subject.

Lucie Armitt’s discussion of *The Passion of New Eve* in *Theorising the Fantastic* (1996) draws a parallel between the representation of sex as spectacle in the novel and its de-realisation of space; both postmodernist aspects, she argues, work to promote gender de-differentiation and ontological uncertainty, the same conclusion she reached in her reading of *The Bloody Chamber* (Armitt 1997: 88). Drawing on the work of Jean Baudillard and Donna Haraway, Armitt proposes that

The Passion of New Eve, with its spectacular topography and its half organic, half-cybernetic characters, displays a postmodern state of existence *qua* simulation that anticipates Braudillard's definition of the hyperreal (Braudillard 1983: 25) and Haraway's notion of the cyborg (Haraway 1991: 149). Contrary to Lee's and Johnson's readings, Armitt condemns as reactionary Carter's tendency to aestheticise horrible acts, her "random assemblage of images [...] can *only* be understood as being 'obscenely' on display, moving endlessly [...] across a surface where there is no control or stabilizing depth. Undoubtedly, then, this novel shares Braudillard's cynicism" (Armitt 1996: 172, emphasis in original). The novel's dismantling of the boundaries between material reality and simulacra is accentuated, Armitt argues, by the narrator's journey to Mother, a journey through the desert toward a "technological womb" (176) that gives birth to "New Eve" and renders him or her a "cyborg". In Armitt's words:

As Haraway tells us, organisms are not born; they are made in world-changing techno-scientific practices by particular collective actors in particular times and places. 'In the belly of the global/local monster [...] often called the postmodern world, global technology appears to denature everything, to make everything a malleable matter of strategic decisions and mobile production and reproductive processes' (Haraway 1991: 297). This is clearly the case surrounding New Eve's (re-)creation. (Armitt 1996: 176)

In addition, Armitt reads Eve(lyn) as a typical manifestation of the postmodern subject, a post-human hybrid that embodies what both Braudillard and Haraway hail as the emancipatory confusion of boundaries; a creature that deliberately de-differentiates and de-legitimatises the distinction between human and non-human, matter and machine, reality and simulation. Armitt's view of a hyperreal and cybernetic account of existence is much less optimistic: "*The Passion of New Eve* remains a dark, sinister, even dangerous book in terms of the nihilistic

(anti-)ideologies with which it plays. In that regard, Carter, like Haraway, leaves us with intriguing but worrying deconstructions of gender.” (179).

While I understand Armitt’s concern with the worrying ethical and political questions Braudillard’s and Haraway’s extreme anti-humanism raises, I cannot agree with her assessment of Carter’s representation of subject and existence as completely subsumed to pervasive hyperreality and cybernetics. Matter is too strong a presence in *The Passion of New Eve* —as it is in Carter’s work as a whole— to be read as annihilated by a random play of spectacular surfaces. Carter’s conflation of spectacle and matter, in my view, does not entail an evasion from reality but, as I will try to explain in subsequent chapters drawing on Slavoj Žižek’s alternative view of postmodernism—is a means of making symbolic reality more accessible by exposing the eruption of excessive nauseating matter as the retroactive product of symbolisation.³³

One of the first critics to question interpretations of Carter’s work in light of postmodernist notions of the carnivalesque and the grotesque was Mary Russo. As early as 1986, Russo pointed out the dangers that an endorsement to Bakhtin’s theory may entail for women: “The marginal position of women and others in the ‘indicative’ world makes their presence in the ‘subjunctive’ or possible world of the topsy-turvy carnival quintessentially dangerous” (Russo 1986: 217). Russo’s argument is that, during carnival time, women and other marginal identities are never the subject but always the object of spectacle and parody; their bodies are grotesquely exaggerated in a way that reinforces objectification and perpetuates

³³ Here I use the concept of reality in the Lacanian sense: “reality” refers to the symbolic register that structures our conception of the world around us and of our selves. Symbolic reality assumes form in an individual’s psyche as he or she erases or domesticates enjoyment and fixes his or her relation to the real with the help of fantasy.

patriarchal gender constructions. This is why, in her view, what postmodernists hail as the liberating potential of staging the grotesque may be “a specifically feminine danger” (213). Russo intensifies her argument in *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (1994) whose chapter six, “Revamping Spectacle: Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*” provides an analysis of Carter’s characterisation of women as spectacle.

Russo maintains that Carter’s novel “grotesquely de-forms the female body as a cultural construction” and does so to show that it can be endlessly (de)constructed rather than reconstructed (Russo 1998: 243). Such a tendency towards indeterminacy, best exemplified by Fevvers, is deeply ambivalent for it entails the risk of duplicating the very same categories it seeks to transcend. Russo concentrates her discussion on two dominant acts that characterise Fevvers’ presence, namely her theatrical pose as Winged Victory in the whorehouse where she spends her girlhood and her trapeze acts at the circus.

Contrary to interpretations of Fevvers as an affirmative figure “who will have wings and who will renew the world”, Russo maintains that her pose “reveals the constraints of the masquerade of femininity” as it reproduces the techniques of miniaturisation used in Victorian times to advertise commodities, “install[ing] the myth of femininity as virgin space in the displaced aura of the art work while suggesting the comfort of the already-used, the “sloppy seconds” of womanhood waiting, for a price, in the upper chambers” (233-234).³⁴

³⁴ To sustain her problematisation of the function of masquerade in representations of female characters, Russo signals the limitations of Mary Ann Doane’s second essay on the topic, in which the concept of masquerade appears as a way to expose and subvert patriarchal constructions of femininity. The theoretical drawbacks of appropriating Doane’s theory “as if it were the definitive answer to the constraints of gender (or worse, as if the dismantling of essentialist models of femininity could *tout court* dispel the effects of the imposition of gender, making feminism unnecessary)” are that it disavows the potential of the material female body as a site of political activism (Russo 1998: 235). Russo’s position, therefore, stands in close affinity with French Feminism’s revaluation of an essentially female body *qua* site of subversion.

Russo further interprets Fevvers' constant efforts to turn herself into fascinating spectacle as doubly reactionary: first, she reads Fevvers' state of suspension during her trapeze flights as a metaphor for identity indeterminacy, an epistemological position vulnerable, in her view, to ideological objectification. (240-241). Second, and more important in her opinion, Fevvers' reluctance to take a rest, even "filling intervals with somersaults" conceals facts that more evidently show power relations and oppression, namely labour and its bodily effects (241). Russo admits, however, that not all the voices in the novel "revamp spectacle"; in line with Michael's analysis of the novel (1998), she particularly highlights Lizzie's pragmatic remarks as a challenge to Fevvers' utopian discourse:

Lizzie undercuts the high-flying rhetoric of the new age woman while working behind the scenes to effect a revolution. Her own body is unfetishized. She exists unadorned as a kind of maid or sidesick in the drama of the star performer, but her work is nonetheless indispensable. (Russo 1998: 242)

To illustrate this antithesis Russo chooses a number of exchanges between these two characters, of which she especially highlights their different views on the future of women: Fevvers' emancipatory prospects towards the end of the novel — "the dolls' house will open, the brothels will spill forth their prisoners, the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world [...] will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed" (Carter 1984: 257)— are questioned by Lizzie, who replies "It's going to be more complicated than that [...] this old witch sees storms ahead, my girl. When I look to the future, I see through a glass, darkly. You improve your analysis, girl, and *then* we'll discuss it" (257, emphasis in original). Russo describes Lizzie's reply—including its allusion to Walter Benjamin's image of the angel of history to refer to the future as contained in the past—as a "cynical" and "extraneous" comment which reinforces the novel's inconclusiveness and thus endorses the postmodernist pantextuality thesis whereby

material reality is always already textualised and is therefore open to endless revision:

This exchange between Lizzie and Fevvers is, like anything in the novel, inconclusive. As Susan Suleiman has written, Carter's strategy '*multiplies* the possibilities of real narrative and of 'story,' producing a dizzying accumulation that undermines the narrative logic by its very excessiveness.' (Russo 1998: 244-245, emphasis in original)³⁵

While I find Russo's insistence on the risk implicit in a grotesque representation of femininity very valuable, I believe she underestimates Lizzie's final remark, which I find neither cynical nor inconclusive. What I find cynical is, on the contrary, Fevvers's vision of woman's absolute freedom paired with carnivalesque laughter, an attitude of ironic distancing from ideology which, in Žižek's opinion, constitutes "an ideological experience at its purest, its zero-level [...] at this moment of liberating laughter, when we look down on the ridicule of our faiths, we are pure subjects of ideology, ideology exerts its pure hold on us" (Žižek 2010: 3). Furthermore, in Žižek's view, Benjamin's thesis does not endorse a deterministic notion of history in which the future is always already part of a pre-existing past but foregrounds a subversive rethinking of these temporal categories: "this notion of past texts pointing towards the future", Žižek argues, "is grounded in Benjamin's basic notion of the revolutionary act as the retroactive dimension of past failed acts" (2014a: 116). When a new order emerges, it retroactively creates its own conditions of possibility; the past, in other words, is paradoxically the

³⁵ In his 1940 essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History", Benjamin uses the metaphor of a storm that blows in progress to register the idea that a historical moment, although always caught like "the angel of history" in the flow of past events and future change, can never offer a clear sight into the future:

A Klee painting named Angelus Novus [...] is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 1968: 257-258)

retroactive result of a contingent decision, but the moment this decision —or what Žižek calls “authentic act” (143)— is registered, it appears as if it always-already existed, as the present’s preceding cause.

To clarify this counterintuitive idea of the reflective character of historical progress, Žižek directly links it with Gilles Deleuze’s notion of “pure past”, an unaccountable eternal X which is forever “amenable to change through the occurrence of any new present” (140), with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s “Spirit” and its dialectical development (144) and with Lacan’s late redefinition of the Real as “the displacement of the negation from the ‘stops not being written’ to the ‘doesn’t stop being written’, in other words, from contingency to necessity”, a dimension clearly discernible in love: “falling in love is a contingent encounter, but once it occurs, it appears as necessary, as something towards which my whole life was moving” (145-146). I will come back to this notion of the Real in the ensuing chapters since it is the core of Žižek’s exceptional view of postmodernism and, therefore, plays a central role in my analysis of Carter’s short fiction as postmodernist.

Back to the function of spectacle and the carnivalesque in Carter’s fiction, it is worth exposing Britzolakis’s position as recorded in “Angela Carter’s Fetishism”, the essay with which this section opens. Britzolakis questions some discussions of Carter’s work that link her staging of femininity as spectacle with her professed demythologising project:

It seems to me far from clear whether these characters [Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* and the Chances in *Wise Children*], in exploiting the creative possibilities of illusion, do indeed escape objectification or whether they end up colluding in their own objectification. Is the spectacle of femininity a form of freedom or necessity? Moreover, how does it inflect the language of Carter’s novels, which is saturated with sensuous detail, with coruscating surfaces and ornate façades? (Britzolakis 2000 [1995]: 175)

Britzolakis reads Carter's use of masquerade and drag in her construction of female figures as literalising Karl Marx's theory of commodity fetishism and Walter Benjamin's related account of the status of artworks as phantasmagoria, both designating a process whereby the organic is exchanged for the spectral inorganic to displace and obscure real socio-economic relationships: "The female body has lost its aura of natural femininity and has become a commodity, made up of dead and petrified aspects, while its beauty has become of a matter of cosmetic disguise (make-up and fashion)" (177-178). In Britzolakis's opinion, one of the most straightforward examples of Carter's fetishisation of the feminine is to be found in a passage she quotes from Carter's early novel *Love* (1970), in which Annabel, an extremely sensitive art student who enjoys mystifying existence, turns herself into an *objet d'art* in front of her husband Lee Collins, a cynical sentimentalist—their names being a direct allusion to Poe's elegiac poem "Annabel Lee" (1849)—before she commits suicide:

He was so struck by the newly adamantine brilliance of her eyes he did not see they no longer reflected anything. With her glittering hair and unfathomable face, streaked with synthetic red, white and black, she looked like nothing so much as one of those strange and splendid figures with which connoisseurs of the baroque loved to decorate their artificial caves, those *atalantes composés* fabricated from rare marbles and semi-precious stones. She had become a marvelous crystallization, retaining nothing of the remembered woman but her form, for all the elements of which this new structure were composed had suffered a change, the eyes put out by zircons or spinels, the hair respun from threads of gold and the mouth enameled scarlet. No longer vulnerable flesh and blood, she was altered to inflexible material. She could have stepped up into the jungle on the walls and looked not out of place beside the tree with the breasts or the carnivorous flowers for now she has her own, omnipotent white queen and could move to any position on the board.

'Go away,' she said to Lee. 'Leave me alone.'

'Dear God,' said Lee, '*Le jour de gloire est arrivé.*'

Inevitably, he began to laugh at such a reversal for the revolution which he both feared and longed for had arrived at last and he was reduced to bankruptcy for there was nothing left to love for him in this magnificent creature. All would not, now, continue in the old style for she dismissed him without a blessing. (Carter 1987 [1971]: 104)

Britzolakis draws a parallel between Annabel's self-objectification and the characterisation of other Carterian heroines here examined who construct themselves as spectacle, namely Tristessa from *The Passion of New Eve* Jeanne Duval from "Black Venus", Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* and the Chance twins in *Wise Children*. Drawing on Joan Rivière's founding essay on gender performance, "Womanliness as Masquerade" (1929), in which exaggeratedly feminine behavior is equated to identification with a strong paternal gaze, Britzolakis contends that Carter's strategy of characterisation may potentially be a "regressive tactic":

'Gender performance', is therefore, I would argue, a double-edged sword in the analysis of Carter's work. It enables us to argue that Carter deploys masquerade-like tactics in order to expose the fictional and inessential character of femininity. But it also enables us to argue that she is at least equally engaged by the male scenario which lies behind, and is required by, the female scenario of the masquerade. (Britzolakis 2000: 184-185)

I agree with Britzolakis that some "feminine" masks expose how patriarchy constructs fantasmatic ideals of women as well as the socio-economic motivations behind such a construction. Yet I do not think that the technique in itself, the inconsistent adoption of masks, entails a risk of reduplication of patriarchal ideology. The reason that makes Russo and Britzolakis so suspicious of Carter's representation of the relationship between the sexes is, in my view, comparable to that which makes feminists feel outrage at Carter's use of pornography: it shows that individuals —both women and men— may enjoy an image of themselves as powerless and thus collude in their own oppression. As I will explain in subsequent chapters drawing on Žižek's Lacan-inspired account of masquerade and sadomasochist scenarios, the way Carter depicts woman as spectacle —or female characters' self-objectification— throws new light on the reasons why individuals, irrespective of their sex, may be enthralled —may find enjoyment— in such a process. Assuming such a pathological excess as inherent to being social subjects is

for both men and women, in Žižek's view and as I will develop in chapter 6, the first act of liberation (Žižek 1994: 147).

At this point, it is important to elucidate the distinction between the Marxian conception of fetish and the psychoanalytic conception. In the former, as Britzolakis explains, a fetish hides some positive reality—a given network of social relations; however, in psychoanalysis, as Žižek explains in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), “a fetish conceals the lack (‘castration’) around which the symbolic network is structured” (Žižek 1989: 49). It is in the light of the psychoanalytic notion that I will approach the centrality of spectacle in Carter's short fiction.

Carter herself quite explicitly expressed her views on both spectacle and carnival in her fiction and non-fiction work. Her essay-like short story “In Pantoland”, included in her posthumous collection *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* (1993), muses on Pantoland, “the carnival of the unacknowledged and the fiesta of the repressed, everything is excessive and gender is variable” (Carter 1995 [1993]: 383), a two-dimensional world in which individuals “in a number of guises” give body to double-sex, half-human, half-animal avatars, some of whom perform obscene actions.³⁶

“Do people still believe in Pantoland?” the narrator wonders towards the end, his reply humorously suggesting that a belief in this world of multiple illusions and transformations has very much to do religious faith: “If you believe in Pantoland, put your palms together and give a big hand to...If you *really* believe in Pantoland, put your—pardon me, vicar” (389, emphasis in original).

³⁶ “In Pantoland” was first published in *The Guardian* On December, 24, 1991. It is also included in *Shaking a Leg: Collected Writings*. London, New York: Penguin, 1998, pp. 393-399.

As the story closes, the narrator elucidates a perspective on carnival whereby its provisional transgression of established norms paradoxically sustains the *status quo*:

As Umberto Eco said, ‘An everlasting carnival does not work.’ You can’t keep it up, you know, nobody ever could.

The essence of the carnival, the festival, the Feast of Fools, is transience. It is here today and gone tomorrow, a release of tension not a reconstitution of order, a refreshment...after which everything can go on again exactly as if nothing happened.

Things don’t change because a girl puts on trousers or a chap slips on a frock, you know. Masters were masters again, the day after Saturnalia ended; after the holiday from gender, it was back to the old grind... (399)

Carter makes the same point in an interview with Lorna Sage, where she observed that:

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 question marks around the whole idea of the carnivalesque. I’m thinking of Marcuse and repressive desublimation, which tells you exactly what carnivals are for. The carnival has to stop. The whole point about the feast of fools is that things went on as they did before, after it stopped. (Sage 1992: 188)

Carter’s reflections on the political function of carnival stand in close affinity with Žižek’s account of transgression as the very support for the consistency of the Law, an ostensibly paradoxical reflection that I will develop here in chapter 5.

Before I conclude part I and concentrate on Žižek’s non-standard view of postmodernist art to reassess Carter’s categorisation as a writer of postmodernist fiction, I will briefly discuss in the next chapter an approach to Carter’s work that clearly complicates such a categorisation and accentuates the dispute over its political potential. I am referring to Aidan Day’s book-length study *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass* (1998) which, as the title indicates —and contrary to the readings outlined up to this point— rejects the term to describe Carter’s work and firmly situates it within the grounds of Enlightenment rationality.

2.3. Aidan Day's *The Rational Glass* (1998): Angela Carter as an Anti-Postmodernist Writer

The dominant critical construction of Angela Carter as a postmodernist writer has been questioned and challenged by few scholars, who have regarded postmodernist anti-foundationalism as essentially reactionary and thus intended to save Carter's work from charges of political evasiveness. Patricia Waugh—one of the first critics to argue that postmodernist relativism and anti-humanism may turn inimical to effective feminist action (Waugh 1992)—expresses doubts as to Carter's inclusion within the postmodernist literary canon. Although she admits that Carter's work is “overtly postmodernist in form” and “has been influenced by poststructuralist theory”, it “refuse[s] the impersonality central, in many different ways, to this [postmodernist] and other twentieth century theories” (Waugh 1989: 168, 30). Likewise, Lorna Sage avoids the term to describe Carter's writing “because it seems to me to convey a kind of terminal reflexiveness, a notion of fiction as a vacated fund-house, a spatialized model for narrative, which I don't think fits exactly” (Sage 2007b [1994]: 58).

Aidan Day is most explicit in his rejection of the category postmodernism in analyses of Carter's fiction. His main thesis in *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass* (1998) is that Carter offers throughout her fiction a critique of oppressive instrumental reason by using the discourse of reason. Carter's exploration of the politics of Western heterosexual identity is conducted, in Day's opinion, not in order to endorse anti-Enlightenment postmodernist thinking but to redefine the principles of Enlightenment modernity. “In her rationality”, Day contends:

Carter stands at odds with extreme postmodernism, not postmodernism as defined simply by formal textual features, such as pastiche, intertextuality and reflexiveness

[...] but postmodernism as defined also in a more philosophical sense [...] Carter stands at odds with this latter sense of postmodernism because the relativizing impulse of such postmodernism threatens to undermine the grounds of a liberal-rationalist, specifically feminist politics. Susan Rubin Suleiman has described Carter as a ‘feminist postmodernist’ (Suleiman 1994: 100). My study sees Carter’s fiction, principally because of its rationalist feminism, as fundamentally anti-postmodern. (Day 1998: 12)³⁷

Once formulated his thesis, Day sets out to examine in chronological order Carter’s novels and the short stories included in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) although he occasionally refers to stories included in other collections —“Master” from *Fireworks* (1974), “Black Venus” from *Black Venus* (1985) and “In Pantoland” from *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* (1993)— to reinforce his arguments. The piece that best illustrates the conflict between reason and postmodernism is, according to Day, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972). He begins his analysis by endorsing Carter’s own description of the book in a letter to Lorna Sage: “Angela Carter spoke of the book’s ‘dialectic between reason and passion, which resolves in favour of reason’” (Sage 2007b: 65). In this way, Day implicitly counters Brian McHale’s canonical reading of the novel as exemplary of postmodernist allegory, not favouring any of the factions but promoting ontological uncertainty (McHale 1987: 140-144).

For Day, it is not the novel as a whole but some of the characters’ perspective —Dr. Hoffman and his faction— that represents many features of postmodernism, a point he sustains in his discussion by establishing an analogy between Dr. Hoffman’s world-view and that maintained by John Fowles in his novel *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969):

John Fowles offers his world of relativized truths as preferable to an interpretation of the world which insists on the existence of absolute Truth. For he sees in a realm

³⁷ Day quotes Suleiman’s essay “The Fate of Surrealist Imagination in the Society of the Spectacle” from the first edition of *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*. Ed. Lorna Sage. London: Virago, 1994, pp. 98-116.

of truths the possibility of an existential freedom for individual human beings. Human beings can *choose* to live in different worlds, different value-systems [...] This, for Fowles, is true existential freedom. And since there is no one Truth, no single divine impulse behind human fictions, literary or larger, the choices are potentially infinite: any number of worlds can, in theory, be made. (Day 1998: 75, emphasis in original).

De-differentiation and de-legitimation of ontological boundaries, of the distinction between empirical reality and substanceless fiction, are also the principles governing Hoffman's world view, as he informs Desiderio towards the end of the novel: "I do not acknowledge any essential difference in the phenomenological bases of the two modes of thought [reason and imagination]" (Carter 1982 [1972]: 206). The universe Hoffman actualises by means of "gigantic generators" which "sent out a series of seismic vibrations" (17) is therefore one in which empirical coordinates like time and space dissolve, a state evocative of Braudillard's theory of hyperreality: "It seemed each one of us", Desiderio informs the reader, "was trapped in some downward-drooping convoluted spiral of unreality from which we could never escape [...] There was always the smell of dissolution in the air" (20-21). Day's interpretation of Hoffman as an "arch-postmodernist" (Day 1998: 68) is reinforced through reference to the peep-show and travelling fair proprietor, a former teacher of Hoffman, whom Desiderio encounters in his travels in search of the latter. Day reads the peep-show as a metaphor for the confusion of worlds Hoffman creates; the proprietor:

[k]eeps changing the pictures that he exhibits in his show. The principle underlying the changes he makes is random: the peep show proprietor is himself blind and has never seen the pictures [...] The lack of rules in peep-show and fair means that they run according to a dynamic that stands contrary to the Minister's belief in rules for distinguishing reality from unreality. The distinction is not meaningful to Hoffman, because the human imagination is so involved in constituting reality that it is invalid to separate the authentically real from the constructed. (76)

Yet the novel, in Day's reading, does not endorse such a state of absolute unruliness and ontological uncertainty. Desiderio's recollection of the conflict

between Hoffman and the Minister and his resistance to, and eventual destruction of, the Hoffman effect is read by Day as exposing the risks entailed in assuming postmodernist anti-foundationalism as a political position:

In the end, however, Desiderio doesn't go along with the idea that releasing the unconscious, enabling the imagination to actualize its longings and fantasies, is really some kind of liberation, a 'day of independence' which is to be celebrated [...] Time and again, in the chaos that has been let loose by Hoffman and his principle of actualized desire, there is not only promiscuous criminality, grotesquerie and violence, spiritual and physical, against the female. (81)

Drawing on Ricarda Schmidt's psychoanalytic account of the war between the Minister and Hoffman as "the war between the super-ego and the id" (Schmidt 1990: 56), Day contends that what actually lies behind Hoffman's appearance as an "absolute Permitter" —unleashing uncontrolled repressed desires— is the figure of a "great Forbidder":

The infinity of imagined or desired worlds, the true postmodern nightmare, was let loose by Hoffman even though behind that nightmare lay his original monomaniacal drive to control and direct fantasy. It is because of this paradoxical drive to direct the unleashed imagination that Desiderio calls Hoffman 'a hypocrite'. (Day 1998: 83)

Day's analysis of Hoffman's true nature and the postmodern nightmare he creates stands in close affinity with Slavoj Žižek's standard account of the postmodern condition as one characterised by "generalized perversion", in which the de-legitimation of any political position —or to put in Lacanian terms, of any ego-ideal— turns transgression into norm and individuals into instruments of the universal superego impossible injunction "Enjoy!" (Žižek 2001: 20). I will develop in detail Žižek's view in part II to subsequently ground my analysis of perversion in Carter's short fiction.

Apart from exposing the fatal effects of postmodernist relativism, Desiderio's eventual destruction of Doctor Hoffman and his choice of reason as a

way to set limits to uncontrolled fantasies are celebrated by Day as evincing Carter's redefinition of reason as a valuable political category. "If *Dr. Hoffman* seems to endorse reason in the name of 'the common good'", Day writes, "then we need to be precise about the kind of reason we are talking about." (Day 1998: 91). To elucidate such a redefinition of reason, Day resorts to *The Sadeian Woman* in which, he argues, Carter denounces the annihilating egocentricity at the heart of Cartesian reason and supports a model of reason based on reciprocity.

René Descartes's model of the subject of certainty as exposed in *A Discourse on Method* (1637) constructs the notions of self and non-self as mutually confirming opposites locked into a framework of regressive dualisms —reason and unreason, active-passive, subject-object. Such a model has sustained for centuries the power of the white heterosexual man —defined as an essentially rational subject— over individuals that do not fit this categorization, defined as the essentially irrational other. De Sade's heroines Juliette and Justine are read by Carter as extreme examples of each pole of the Cartesian paradigm: Juliette is a perfect libertine; despite being a woman, she embodies egomaniacal rationality constantly defining herself in contrast with an "other" which, so as to reaffirm her subjectivity, she views as devoid of self, as an object to abuse. Justine, on the contrary, adopts this very position of the selfless abused object. In identifying herself with the ideal of woman constructed by patriarchy, she aggrandises the dominating selves of her abusers or, as Day puts it, "she is the condition of their existence just as they are of hers" (Day 1998: 98).

Having exposed in detail the wrongs of Cartesian dualism, particularly how hostile its appropriation has been to women, Carter concludes her study, according

to Day, with a defence of a model of reason based on mutual understanding or intersubjectivity, implied by Carter's use of the word love:

In his diabolic solitude, only the possibility of love could awake the libertine to perfect, immaculate terror. It is in this holy terror of love that we find, in both men and women themselves, the source of all opposition to the emancipation of women. (Carter 2009 [1979]: 176)

It is in the light of his reception of *The Sadeian Woman* that Day celebrates the outcome of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* as an attempt to redefine reason and thus revivify the Enlightenment project, a position which he associates with Jürgen Habermas's stance in the debate on postmodernism:

Angela Carter's fictional depiction in *Dr. Hoffman* of Desiderio choosing 'reason' for 'the common good', and her attacks in *The Sadeian Woman* on 'rationality without humanism', fit into this notion of someone working with a model not incompatible with that developed by Habermas. It is a model that shadows Carter's investigation into the need for a rational appraisal of heterosexual identity in the novel that followed *Dr. Hoffman*, *The Passion of New Eve*. (Day 1998: 106)

Day's reception of *The Passion of New Eve* counters readings outlined on the previous section, particularly Lee's (1996) and Johnson's (2000) interpretations of the novel's ending— Tristessa and Eve(lyn)'s desert union followed by the latter's regression into a womb-like cave and eventual departure from America by sea— as dramatising the emancipatory potential of indeterminacy. Day argues instead that the novel's ending resists indeterminacy because it establishes a clear distinction between myth and irrationality, on the one hand, and history and rationality on the other: "The very closing sequence of *New Eve* is a conclusive, sustained piece of demythologization as Eve, taken by Lilith to a beach on the west coast, enters the cave by the sea to find Mother" (Day 1998: 126). Rational demythologisation in this last sequence operates, according to Day, in two related details: first, the decrepit grotesque woman that Eve and Lilith encounter on the beach stands as "a representation of Mother, now demythologized, secularized and

near extinction” (129). Second, Eve’s departure on board the old woman’s boat in return for the ingot of alchemical gold Evelyn —still a biological man— was given on his arrival in America is read as a “relinquishing to the past of the alchemical myth of the relations between the sexes, as well as a farewell to old images of women” (129). “The New Eve”, Day concludes:

[h]as yet to become genuinely new. But that is what, now free of old myths, she can become. The last line of the novel. Thus far spoken retrospectively by Eve, is spoken prospectively: ‘Ocean, ocean, mother of mysteries, bear me to the place of birth’ (*PNE* 191). No figure in *The Passion of New Eve* is a model either of femininity or of the ideal relation between the sexes. But the demythologizing sympathies of the book are with the rational disquisitions and conflicts of history. Only on the basis of those disquisitions and conflicts can a new condition be imagined. (Day 1998: 131)³⁸

The rational demythologising of old gender myths as the starting point for the construction of new emancipatory possibilities remains the motivating principle, in Day’s opinion, of *The Bloody Chamber*: “One of the morals of all these tales is that we have to strip away existing cultural definitions of sexuality in order to reach a base level from which to begin building representation anew” (147). In line with Margaret Atwood’s reading of the tales as subverting the dichotomy predator/tiger-prey/lamb characteristic of the patriarchal gender paradigm (2007 [1994]: 137), Day argues that Carter’s use of the image of the animal —felines and wolves— to figure female and male libido breaks with those very constructions of women as either libidinally passive or sexually devouring and of men as sexually active. *Contra* Atwood, however, Day argues that, in deconstructing patriarchal definitions of gender, Carter is not indulging in a view of sex as a discursive construction: “This

³⁸ Day quotes the novel’s last line from the 1992 Virago edition. In the 2008 Virago edition I quoted earlier page numbers do not change.

would be a postmodern perspective on the matter. But Carter's empirical materialism leads her to see both women and men as creatures of the flesh and as equally rooted in and driven by fleshly impulses" (Day 1998: 147). Among the libidinal impulses Carter represents in the tales, Day admits being troubled by the depiction of female enjoyment in the face of self-objectification, notably as exposed in the collection's title-story.

The representation of female characters as spectacle, in particular women's masochistic fascination of images of themselves as pornographic objects, is, as discussed in the course of this chapter, one of the main sources of dissent when assessing the political value of Carter's work. Day initially avoids assessment providing an argument that in a way seems to reproduce the very same gender dichotomy against which he situates Carter's demythologisation of gender differences:

As a man, I am not competent to judge the psychological veracity or otherwise of this image of positive female response to male pornographic attention [...] Again *as a man*, I think I am not an appropriate commentator on this particular matter. (Day 1998: 160, emphasis mine)

His reluctance to discuss Carter's use of pornography seems to be grounded in a belief in Women as essentially other, a view which stands at odds with Carter's own view of sexual difference as exposed in *The Sadeian Woman* as well as with Day's own redefinition of reason as a universal category. Day's objection to analyse a psychological fact appears to be in close affinity with Levinas's ethics and its refusal to rationally understand—which for Levinas means to oppress—the ever unaccountable Other.

Despite his initial reluctance, Day ultimately sides with critic Elaine Jordan (1992) in assessing the representation of female masochism as a progressive strategy. According to Jordan, acknowledging and recounting illicit and masochistic

impulses does not necessarily rehabilitate patriarchal attitudes but constitutes a valuable attempt to rationally understand their motivations. This is what the narrator of “The Bloody Chamber” appears to be doing when she recounts her pornographic-like experiences with her husband:

Carter’s writing may simply be consumed but can also produce wincing from this fascination of the girl with being acquired and seduced by a knowing powerful man who ‘wants her so much’[...] One feminist position is to condemn any truck with such available fascinations altogether. Another is to face the fascination —to spring forward *from* recoil, from wincing at an acknowledged desire. (*Who* is it that acknowledges? Either the sadistic or the masochistic subject, of whatever gender. To whatever degree [...]) Repeating and departing from the inheritance described struck me as a good account of the processes of Carter’s writing, and the strongest answer to the charge that she merely reinscribes patriarchy. Where else can you start from, if not from where you actually are? [...] Where we are may include fascinations from which a rational and ethical self recoils. (Jordan 1992: 124-125)

Day further reinforces his categorisation of Carter as an anti-postmodernist writer reading *Nights at the Circus* as a rational materialist critique and mockery of the principle of carnival. Day’s approach to the novel, therefore, stands at odds with the readings earlier delineated, which consider Carter’s text as exemplary of Bakhtin’s notion of carnival and assess it as either/both regressive or/and progressive fiction. Day begins his analysis signaling that too much emphasis on carnivalesque elements would obscure the novel’s adherence to a materialist examination of women’s oppression at a particular point in history:

[T]he danger with seeing the novel as formally entirely carnivalesque would, by definition, be that the novel then became thematically entirely carnivalesque and that it could be seen as endorsing an *unregulated* subversion of established codes and conventions, as legitimating chaos of relative perspectives. (Day 1998: 168-169, emphasis in original)

Day’s analysis barely considers the text’s carnivalesque features, such as grotesque and abject elements, but concentrates on what he reads as its reworking of a traditionally eighteenth century form, the picaresque, which, *contra* McHale’s view (1987: 174), Carter invokes not “to be parodied or to be relativized as a

narrative device” but to give expression to new ideas, particularly to re-write women’s history turning the text into a “her-storical novel” (Day 1998: 169). Day puts emphasis as well on the many political references and allusions to actual historical personages that set the story in a clearly discernible period in history: the very last year of the nineteenth century. “This is not a gratuitous or romantic choice of period”, Day contends, “Fevvers is associated with the issue of emergent women’s rights and the period of the late nineteenth century [...] was a critical phase in the dawning of consciousness and agitation for women’s rights” (172). The novel thus gives rational voice to women’s disempowerment and struggle before universal suffrage was granted, notably through the character of Lizzie, “the epitome of the English radical tradition” (174).

To conclude his analysis, Day reads the union of Fevvers and Walser as well as that of Mignon and the Princess of Abyssinia as emblematising Carter’s endorsement of a new model of reason based on reciprocity rather than on exclusion, transcending, therefore, traditional oppressive dualisms. In this light, Fevvers’ laughter in the closing paragraph of the novel is not received as literalising Bakhtin’s notion of laughter —an emblem of carnival’s parodic ambivalence. On the contrary, Day reads Fevvers’ laughter as prefiguring a victory to come in the history of Enlightenment feminism:

I read Fevvers’ laughter as, in part, the delight of the victor, the delight that Carter herself has retrospectively and that her character as prophetically, in knowing that the war for women’s rights, even if not ultimately won, would score up notable victories in the twentieth century. (194)

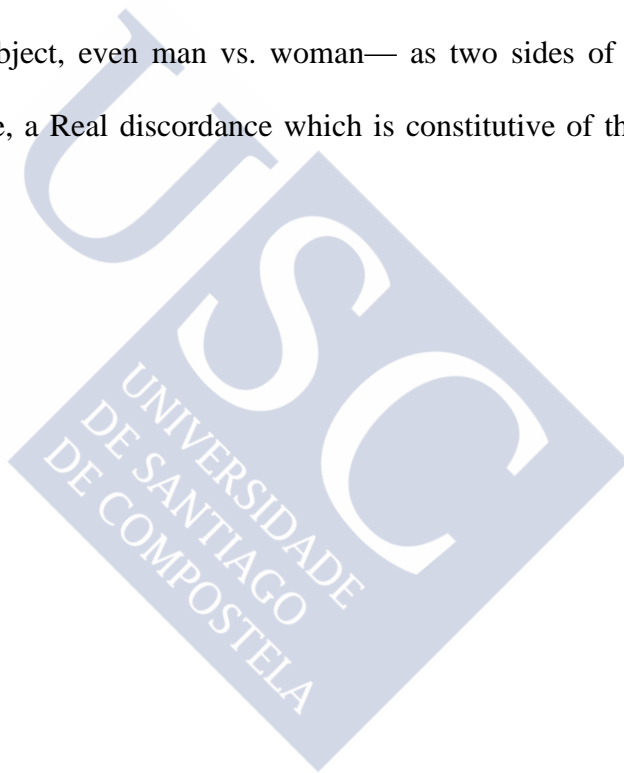
While I agree with Day’s thesis that Carter’s demythologisation of Western patriarchal discourses constitutes a rational exploration and critique of those very discourses, I do not endorse his steadfast rejection of the category postmodernism to approach Carter’s work. Day’s analysis builds upon an opposition between what he

conceives as two exclusionary relational operations: on the one hand, unregulated *différance* —at times provisional fixation— of free floating signifiers or substanceless surfaces and, on the other, a consensual fixation of signifiers to signifieds under the principle of communicative action or intersubjective use of language.

As explained in chapter 1, each operation enacts one philosophical position in the debate on —and simultaneous construction of the meaning of— postmodernism. The former dramatises post-Enlightenment anti-foundationalism and its de-differentiation and de-legitimation of the boundaries between signifier and referent, discourse and empirical reality. The latter, on the contrary, strives to retain and legitimise the rationally agreed distinction between material reality and discourse constructions. In siding Carter with anti-postmodernist discourses, Day's analysis minimises, in my view, the significance of a feature which, as noted in my introduction, I believe to be central in Carter's writing practice, namely the paradoxical co-dependence of fascinating theatricality —surfaces, words, images, layers, literary forms and texts— and excessive repulsive materiality. Such co-dependence, as already advanced, stands for many commentators as the main source of dispute in Carter studies concerning the political validity of her work.

Having exposed in the course of this chapter how standard discourses on, and assessments of, postmodernism have influenced the critical reception of Carter's fiction and strengthened the debate over its political potential, my aim from now on is to contribute to that debate addressing Carter's paradoxical conflation of excessive materiality and spectacular surface in the light of the theoretical perspective delineated in the next chapter: Slavoj Žižek's rethinking of the debate on, and definition of, postmodernism.

With Lacan's psychoanalysis as major theoretical framework, Žižek's approach, as I will explain on the following pages, undoes the opposition at the heart of the postmodernist debate between referent and signifier, empirical reality and virtual appearances, surface and depth. Such an opposition, he argues, is false, "either we have a fullness of reality outside the virtual universe, or there is no external reality and life is merely another window" (Daly and Žižek 2004: 98). Postmodernism, in Žižek's non-standard view, breaks out of this debate by exposing two ostensibly opposite categories —fantasy vs. reality, surface vs. materiality, subject vs. object, even man vs. woman— as two sides of the same entity affirming, therefore, a Real discordance which is constitutive of the subject and of (symbolic) reality.



PART II
SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK'S NON-STANDARD VIEW OF
POSTMODERNISM



After having exposed the dispute over the ethico-political value of postmodernism as a theoretical approach and as a literary practice together with how such a dispute has influenced the critical reception of Angela Carter's fiction, part II focuses on the work of contemporary Slovenian psychoanalytic philosopher and political thinker Slavoj Žižek. His non-standard account of postmodernist thinking and aesthetics redefines the standard modernism-postmodernism debate and, as such, may shed new light onto the categorisation of Carter as a postmodernist writer. The philosophical premises and ethico-political and aesthetic implications of Žižek's non-standard approach constitute the primary theoretical framework in my analysis of Carter's short fiction as postmodernist.

As noted earlier, Žižek employs "postmodernism" in two distinct ways. The first one corresponds to the most widespread use of the term, or what I have so far identified as "standard", "canonical" or "orthodox" postmodernism. In this first sense of the term and as earlier argued, postmodernism encompasses anti-Enlightened theoretical and critical stances whose hallmark is that reality is utterly inaccessible: "there is nothing outside the text", no foundation for the subject, and therefore knowledge, ethics and politics and texts in general are seen as perpetually referring to other texts. Standard postmodernist literature, accordingly, includes those works which adopt provisional forms and use metafictional strategies — notably irony and parody— to endlessly dismantle their meaning, de-differentiating stable distinctions in a double attempt to promote indeterminacy and to affirm the endless proliferation of signifiers as the ultimate source of emancipatory politics.

On the contrary, the second sense of postmodernism discernible in Žižek's work pertains to a philosophical stance and aesthetic practice radically at odds with standard postmodernism. In Žižek's striking thesis, Jacques Lacan's

psychoanalysis, read through the lenses of Hegel's dialectics, is "the only poststructuralist" —here used as synonym of postmodernist— theory available because it "affirms enjoyment as 'the Real Thing', the central impossibility around which any signifying network is structured" (Žižek 1991: 143). Postmodernist aesthetics would then apply more than to anything else to those cultural products that evoke the Lacanian Real in the paradoxical presence of nauseating life-substance at the heart of a spectacular surface of free-floating signifiers. Put differently, what distinguishes modernist from postmodernist aesthetics, in Žižek's non-standard view, is that while the former leaves the space of the sublime or absolute Thing empty —the chain of signifiers revolves around a central absence— the latter fills it with an obscene disgusting object.³⁹ What this paradoxical convergence reveals is that the notion of the Real does not refer to an unreachable realm outside or beyond an incomplete symbolic order. The Real is rather the constitutive inside of the symbolic; it is the retroactive product of symbolisation.

What stands as an apparent terminological incongruence in Žižek's work does not entail, in my opinion, a contradiction in his argumentations. As advanced in the introduction, such ostensible incongruence derives from Žižek's later adoption of the standard sense of the term in an effort to criticise its very theoretical assumptions and ethico-political implications. This, I believe, does not cancel the significance of his non-standard remarks on postmodernism which he passed in *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Žižek 1991: 145-46, 151), *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*

³⁹ Žižek adopts this term from Lacan's *Seminar VII*. "Lacan's usage", Sarah Kay informs (2003), "is indebted to Heidegger's essay 'The Thing', which describes the way in which a seemingly humdrum object can reveal from outside the structure of representation and disclose its cosmic relevance" (Kay 2003: 172). The Thing is the very limit of the symbolic, an object of pure semblance which, depending on its position with respect to the chain of signifiers, may cause either great fascination or strong revulsion.

(Žižek 1992a: 120-24), *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)* (Žižek 1992b: 1-5), *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (Žižek 1994: 113-17), *The Indivisible Remainder* (Žižek 1996: 202-03, 233), *The Plague of Fantasies* (Žižek 1997a: 309-10), *The Ticklish Subject* (Žižek 1999a: 315-16), *The Fragile Absolute or, Why Is The Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (Žižek 2000a: 25-39, 73-74), *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* (Žižek 2000b: 8, 24-25), *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (Žižek 2002: 9-10), *The Universal Exception* (Žižek 2006b: 52) and *In Defence of Lost Causes* (Žižek 2008: 26-35).

Despite the fact that this term recurs throughout his work, Žižek's non-standard account of postmodernism has been either disregarded or considered to be vague and incongruent by major commentators of his work. His emphatic critique of standard postmodernism has received far greater attention. Sarah Kay, for instance, argues that Žižek is often "inconsistent" in his use of periodising terms when analyzing cultural products; in particular she is critical of his recourse to "pre-modern", "modern" and "postmodern" as descriptive labels: "His use of history", Kay contends, "is always very broad brush, and he seems to be willing to flout as to invoke it when it suits his argument" (Kay 2003: 72). The emphasis of Žižek's non-standard account of the distinction between modernism and postmodernism, however, is not so much on history as on philosophy and aesthetics. As I will note in chapter 3, Žižek has argued more than once that such a distinction is not diachronic. Quite the contrary, postmodernism diachronically precedes modernism in the examples he gives to illustrate his non-standard approach.

Against Kay's view, I believe that the significance and implications of Žižek's non-standard remarks on the distinction between modernism and postmodernism should not be underestimated. A close inspection of these remarks reveals that such a distinction is described in very much the same terms, as I will expose in the ensuing pages, as a break that Žižek discerns between two stages in Jacques Lacan's career. The thesis I put forward, therefore, is that postmodernist thinking and art in Žižek's non-standard view parallels in its significance and implications late Lacan's thinking, particularly Lacan's reconfiguration of his notion of the Real, which admittedly constitutes one of the pillars of Žižek's philosophical and political theory.



CHAPTER 3
“THE SUBLIME AND OBSCENE OBJECT OF POSTMODERNITY”:
ŽIŽEK’S REDEFINITION OF THE MODERNISM-POSTMODERNISM
DEBATE

Žižek’s earliest non-standard account of the distinction between modernism and postmodernism is found in chapter 8 of his 1991 book *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, “The Obscene Object of Postmodernity” (Žižek 1991: 141-153). Žižek starts this chapter with a striking thesis:

When the topic of “postmodernism” is discussed in “deconstructivist” circles, it is obligatory [...] to begin with a negative reference to Habermas, with a kind of distancing from him. In complying with this custom, we would like to add a new twist: to propose that Habermas is himself a postmodernist, although in a peculiar way, without knowing it. (141)

To sustain this claim, Žižek sets out to redefine the standard opposition between modernism, “defined by its claim to a universality of reason, its refusal to the authority of tradition, its acceptance of rational argument as the only way to defend conviction, its ideal of communal life guided by mutual understanding and recognition” and postmodernism:

[d]efined as the ‘deconstruction’ of this claim to universality, from Nietzsche to ‘poststructuralism’; the endeavor to prove that this claim is necessarily, constitutively ‘false’, that it masks a particular network of power relations, that universal reason is as such, in its very form, ‘repressive’ and ‘totalitarian’; that its truth claim is nothing but an effect of a series of rhetorical figures. (141)

In Žižek’s view, this opposition is “simply false”, such a tension is not to be located between two distinct theoretico-critical approaches but within one single approach; it is an opposition that “has defined modernism from its very beginning” (141). “Is the genealogic unmasking of universal categories and values, the calling into question of the universality of reason”, Žižek contends:

[n]ot a modernist procedure par excellence? Is not the very essence of theoretical modernism, the revelation of the ‘effective contents’ behind the ‘false

consciousness' (of ideology, of morality, of the ego) [...]? Is not the ironic, self-destructive gesture by means of which reason recognizes in itself the force of repression and domination against which it fights? (141)

What has been described as standard postmodernism in chapter 1 does not entail, in Žižek's exceptional view, a break with the project of modernity but rather constitutes modernity's "immanent obverse" (141). Put differently, both the defence of the authority of universal reason and its rational critique are two sides of the Enlightenment project. In this light, Žižek locates the zenith of modernism's self-critical fulfillment in the work of the first generation of the Frankfurt school, represented by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) and by Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), particularly "in their unmasking of the repressive potential of 'instrumental reason', aiming at a radical evolution in the historical totality of the contemporary world and at the utopian abolition between 'alienated' life spheres, between art and 'reality'" (142).⁴⁰

Ironically, Žižek argues, it is Habermas who "breaks" with this utopian tradition and "belongs to postmodernism" by affirming that being fundamentally alienated is the only guarantee of emancipation: "[Habermas] recognizes a positive condition of freedom [...] in what appeared to modernism as the very form of alienation: the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere, the functional division of different social domains, etc." (142), a thesis he maintains in *The Universal Exception* (2006), where he affirms that "it is Habermas who is 'postmodern', in contrast to

⁴⁰ What Žižek refers to as the modernist aim to abolish the difference between alienated spheres of life is in close affinity with the process of "dedifferentiation" which, as seen in part I, both Scott Lash and Steven Connor highlight as a defining trait of postmodernism (Lash 1990: 11, Connor 2004: 3).

Adorno who, in spite of all his political compromises, remained attached to a radically Utopian vision of revolutionary redemption to the end” (Žižek 2006b: 52).

In terms of the mode of representation —the most important of the four components that Scott Lash uses to establish the triad realism, modernism and postmodernism (Lash 1990: 12)— both standard modernism and postmodernism, in Žižek’s view, are founded on the assumption that the referent is absent. For standard modernists, the referent is masked by the hegemonic chain of signifiers and can, therefore be “unmasked”. However, in standard postmodernism the referent in itself is inaccessible and thus signifiers freely revolve around its absence. In line with his thesis, Žižek redefines the distinction between structuralism and poststructuralism noting first that the latter has never been used in France as a descriptive term despite designating a strain of French theory, “[the term] is an Anglo-Saxon and German invention [...and] refers to the way the Anglo-Saxon world perceived and located the theories of Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, etc.” (Žižek 1991: 142). Contrary to this canonical categorisation, Žižek locates Deconstructionism firmly within modernism:

[Deconstructionism] presents perhaps the most radical version of the logic of unmasking whereby the very unity of the experience of meaning is conceived as the effect of signifying mechanisms, an effect that can take place *only insofar as it ignores the textual movement that produced it.* (142, emphasis mine)

It is only with the late Lacan that the “postmodernist break” takes place “insofar as he thematizes a certain real, traumatic kernel whose status remains deeply ambiguous: the real resists symbolization, but it is at the same time its own retroactive product” (142-143).⁴¹ Although in the next chapter I elaborate on the

⁴¹ As it will be exposed in the next chapter “late” refers to a shift in Lacanian theory marked by *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959-60) with which Lacan’s trajectory moved away from an emphasis onto the Imaginary and Symbolic registers toward a greater focus on the Real and other related concepts like *objet petit a*, drive, *sinthome*, fantasy and enjoyment.

notion of the Lacanian Real —arguably the most difficult and elusive concept in Lacanian theory— it is important at this point to clarify that this “real, traumatic kernel” should not be understood as a substantial realm preceding the order of the signifier and located in an ever-inaccessible outside or beyond. On the contrary, the Real is correlative to the symbolic, its negative condition of (im)possibility or retroactive product. “In this sense”, Žižek argues, “we could even say that deconstructionists are basically still ‘structuralists’ and that the only ‘poststructuralist’ is Lacan” (143).

Once formulated his thesis, Žižek resorts to cinema and to literature to exemplify how the postmodernist break with modernism is manifested in art. First, he analyses the effect of horror in Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow Up* (1966) and in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Lifeboat* (1944). The former, Žižek argues, is illustrative of modernism because it represents the sublime Thing, the fascinating object-cause around which the plot rotates, as a central absence: the protagonist, a successful London-based photographer, is attracted to a stain that appears on the edge of one of the pictures he has taken in a park; when he enlarges the picture, the stain turns into the contours of a body and so he rushes to the park in the middle of the night and sees the body there. Yet, as he returns to the crime scene the following day, he finds that the body has disappeared. Its absence boosts the protagonist’s interpretative desire: “How did it happen? Who did it? The key to the film”, Žižek writes:

[i]s only given to us, however, in the final scene. The hero, resigned to the cul-de-sac in which his investigation has ended, takes a walk near a tennis court where a group of people —without a tennis ball— mime a game of tennis. In the frame of this supposed game, the imagined ball hits out of bounds and lands near the hero. He hesitates a moment and then accepts the game [...] he makes a gesture of picking up the ball and throwing it back into the court. (143)

According to Žižek, this final scene has a very significant metaphorical function, “it indicates the hero’s consenting to the fact that the ‘game works without an object’” (143); put in structuralist terms, the chain of signifiers is set in motion by a primordial lack. On the contrary, *Lifeboat* displays the terrifying object directly: Žižek chooses a scene from Hitchcock’s film in which a group of Allied castaways experience horror when discovering that the person they have saved from a destroyed submarine is actually a German sailor, the enemy. The modernist way of filming this scene would be:

[t]o let us hear the screams for help, to show the hands of an unknown person gripping the side of the boat, and then *not* show the German sailor, but to move the camera to the shipwrecked survivors: it would then be the perplexed expression on their faces that would indicate us that they had pulled something unexpected out of the water [...] When the suspense was finally built up, the camera would finally reveal the German sailor. (144, emphasis in original)

Hitchcock’s procedure, however, is the exact opposite: the camera directly shows the German sailor climbing on board and saying with a smile “*Danke schön!*”, and does not show the horrified faces of the Allied castaways. “If this apparition provokes a terrifying effect, one can only detect it by *his* [the German sailor’s] reaction to the survivors’ reaction” (144). Here resides the ultimate postmodernist procedure: to directly display an ordinary object which, through the reactions of others “*reflecting themselves in the object itself*”, suddenly turns into a source of sublime terror (144, emphasis in original).⁴² This is “the obscene object” to which the title of Žižek’s chapter refers, an object that can function successively

⁴² In the “Foreword to the Second Edition” of *For They Know Not What They Do* (2008), Žižek also categorizes Hitchcock as “a postmodern director *avant la lettre*” on the basis of his procedure of treating the actor/agent —e.g. the German in *Lifeboat*— as “a baffled passive observer of the situation in which he is involved”; that is to say, as an object whose terrifying/fascinating effect is produced by the way the gaze (of other characters or of the camera) is inscribed on him (Žižek 2008b: xxxi).

as a disgusting leftover or as a sublime apparition: the difference is not substantial but strictly structural, and the effect the object produces depends on the position it occupies in the chain of signifiers. Such a postmodernist procedure, Žižek contends:

[is m]ore subversive than the usual modernist one, because the latter, by not showing the Thing, leaves open the possibility of grasping the central emptiness under the perspective of an ‘absent God’. The lesson of modernism is that the structure, the intersubjective machine is lacking [...] the postmodernist reversal shows *the Thing itself as the incarnated, materialized emptiness*. (144-45, emphasis in original)

In other words, what postmodernism signals as an “*inconsistency*” inherent to the symbolic order “is retroactively perceived by the modernist gaze as its *incompleteness*” (145, emphasis in original). Given the fact that Hitchcock precedes Antonioni in time, Žižek notes, the distinction between modernism and postmodernism is not primarily diachronical, as it stands in orthodox accounts of both cultural paradigms. Postmodernism may often—as the analysis of Antonioni’s and Hitchcock’s cinematic styles suggests—precede modernism in time, a point Žižek reinforces when reading Franz Kafka as postmodernist and James Joyce as “the modernist par excellence, the writer of the symptom [...] of the interpretative delirium taken to the infinite, of the *time* (to interpret) where each stable moment reveals itself to be [...] a ‘condensation’ of a plural signifying process” (145-146, emphasis in original).⁴³

Žižek counters modernist readings of Kafka, which stress how the sublime place of the law—represented by the Castle or the Court—stands as an empty place: “Bureaucracy would be a mad machine that ‘works by itself’, as in *Blow Up*, where the game is played without a body object” (146). What these readings miss,

⁴³ Žižek’s categorisation of Joyce as a modernist writer is also found in *The Indivisible Remainder* (1996: 202, 233).

Žižek contends, is that the place of the law in Kafka's fiction is always filled by "an inert, obscene, revolting *presence*" that takes the form of "corrupt civil servants" and "obscene judges glancing through pornographic books" (146, emphasis in original). Kafka's universe —just as the postmodernist universe as a whole— gets too close to the sublime Thing. This is linked to the Lacanian notion of "anxiety": what provokes anxiety is not the loss of the incestuous [sublime] object but, on the contrary, its very *proximity*" (146, emphasis in original).

Žižek provides the same account of the postmodernist break with modernism in chapter 4 from *Enjoy Your Symptom!* (Žižek 1992a): "Why Does the *Phallus* Appear?" (113-146) and in chapter 3 "Coke as *objet petit a*" and chapter 7 "Why is the Truth Monstrous?" from *The Fragile Absolute* (Žižek 2000a: 21-39, 69-81). What these chapters add to his non-standard account is a detailed explanation of how this paradoxical convergence of sublimity and obscenity in postmodernism relates to the concept of the Lacanian Real and how this procedure is made manifest in a radical mutation of the status of authority.

To understand the bulk of the first essay, one needs to be familiar with the Lacanian notion of the phallus, which, contrary to what may appear, does not simply refer to the male sexual organ nor stands as a symbol of virility. Phallus — also termed Master Signifier and empty/pure signifier— is defined by Lacan as an excessive insignia, fantasy object or fetish: an "organ without a body" that confers power to the subject who wears it generating the illusion that another hidden reality lies behind its excess (Žižek 1989: 172, 2007: 34, 116). On the basis of this notion of phallus, one can read the title of the 1992 chapter, "Why Does the *Phallus* Appear?" as indexing Žižek's non-standard definition of postmodernism: "In postmodernism, [the] apparition of the phallus is *universalized*" (Žižek 1992a: 129,

emphasis in original). Whereas in modernism the phallus objectifies an absence — the place of the sublime is empty— in postmodernism it “appears” in different modalities that range from:

[w]oman *qua* unfathomable element that undermines the rule of the ‘reality principle’ (*Blue Velvet*), through science fiction monsters (*Alien*) and autistic aliens (*Elephant Man*), up to the paranoid vision of social totality itself as the ultimate fascinating Thing, a vampire-like specter which marks even the most idyllic everyday surface with signs of latent corruption. (122)

Postmodernism thus accomplishes a gesture of desublimation that renders palpable the basic impasse or antagonism that affects the process of sublimation itself, namely the co-dependence or coincidence between the empty place of the sublime or phallus and the repugnant excessive element that fills this place. In contrast, modernism retains a minimum of sublimation in affirming the “symptoms” of any hegemonic discourse, some symbolic surplus that points to what has to be repressed so that the official discourse can establish itself as a false but effective totality. As Žižek puts it in *The Fragile Absolute*:

The point is not that there is simply the surplus of an element over the places available in the structure, or the surplus of a place that has no element to fill it out [this would be the point of modernism as defined by Žižek ...] an empty place in the structure would still sustain the fantasy of an element that will emerge and fill out its place; an excessive element lacking its place would still sustain the fantasy of an as yet unknown place waiting for it. The point is, rather, that the empty place in the structure is in itself *correlative* to the errant element lacking its place: they are not two different entities, but the obverse and reverse of one and the same entity [...] In other words, the paradox is that *only an element which is thoroughly ‘out of place’* (an excremental object, a piece of ‘trash’ or leftover) *can sustain the void of an empty place.* (Žižek 2000a: 27, emphasis in original)

Such a paradox explains why Žižek describes the postmodern relationship to the sublime and obscene Thing as “ambiguous” and “antagonistic”:

[In postmodernism, t]he Thing is not simply a foreign body, an intruder which disturbs the harmony of the social bond: precisely as such, the Thing is what ‘holds together’ the social edifice by means of guaranteeing its fantasmatic consistency [...] we abjure and disown the Thing, yet it exerts an irresistible attraction on us; its

proximity exposes us to mortal danger, yet it is simultaneously a source of power. (Žižek 1992a: 123)⁴⁴

In other words, the status of sublimity, which postmodernism renders visible, has the form of “a grimace of reality (as Lacan puts it in *Television*)” (140) or of “anamorphosis”: “The anamorphic distortion of reality [the “appearance” of repellent objects at the place of the sublime] is the way the gaze is inscribed onto the object’s surface” (116). Anamorphic distortions of reality, which may have an effect of sublime fascination or of disgusting horror, point towards the way the gaze is inscribed onto the object, making visible what Lacan calls *objet petit a* or “object cause of desire” and defines as:

[a virtual/psychic s]omething from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ. This serves as a symbol of the lack, that is to say, of the phallus, not as much but insofar as it is lacking. (Lacan 1998: 103)

Žižek borrows the notion of anamorphosis from Lacan’s analysis of Hans Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors* (1533), which exemplifies Lacan’s concepts of the phallus as empty signifier and that of the “object gaze” defined as the moment “when I ‘encounter myself’ among the objects when ‘I myself *qua* subject appear ‘out there’ [...] the unbearable experience to find oneself at the point of pure gaze [...] the point in the image that eludes my eye’s grasp” (Žižek 1992a: 126-127). In this painting:

[a]t the bottom [...] under the figures of the two ambassadors, a viewer catches sight of an amorphous, extended, ‘erected’ spot. It is only when, on the very threshold of the room in which the picture is exposed, the visitor casts a final lateral glance at it that this spot acquires the contours of a skull, disclosing thus the true

⁴⁴ In *The Plague of Fantasies* (1997), Žižek describes the postmodernist relationship to the Thing in very much the same terms: “the postmodernist attitude is characterized by the radical ambiguity of the subject’s ‘impossible’ relationship to the Thing—we derive energy from it but if we approach it too closely its lethal attraction will swallow us up” (Žižek 1997a: 309-310).

meaning of the picture—the nullity of all terrestrial goods, objects of art and knowledge that fill out the rest of the picture (Žižek 1991: 90-91)

The radical asymmetry which defines the process of sublimation in postmodernism is at work in the process of subject-formation as conceptualised by Lacan. The *objet petit a*, the black stain at the heart of reality which makes the object gaze visible is “‘the objective correlative’ of the subject himself [...] by means of anamorphic stains, ‘reality’ indexes the presence of the subject” (Žižek 1992a: 134, emphasis in original). Subject and object, therefore, are not external:

[t]he object is not the external limit with regard to which the subject defines its self-identity, it is ex-timate with regard to the subject, it is its *internal* limit—that is, the bar which itself prevents the subject’s full realization. (Žižek 2000a: 29, emphasis in original)

This explains Lacan’s formulation of anxiety as the unbearable effect produced by an overproximity to the Thing:

The black space of the Thing in itself is something extremely dangerous to approach—if one gets too close, “world” itself loses its ontological consistency, like the anamorphic stain on Holbein’s *Ambassadors*: when we shift our perspective and perceive it ‘as it is’ (as a skull), *all remaining reality loses its consistency and turns into an amorphous stain*. (Žižek 1992a: 137, emphasis in original)

The paradox of the subject is captured in the Lacanian formula of fantasy $\$ \diamond a$: “What we have here is [...] the two sides, the two ‘slopes’ of one and the same entity. The subject is ‘the same’, as the Thing [...] its negative (the trace of its absence) within the symbolic network” (137). To articulate this folding back or curvature constitutive of the subject, Lacan resorts to topological models that represent impossible spaces like the Moebius strip: subject and object are in the same place, but on opposite sides of the Moebius strip (Žižek 1992a: 137, 2000a: 28). If subject and *objet a* meet, the perspective openness of reality—in which the subject *qua* individual is a part—disintegrates. Such a curvature, asymmetry or

“impossible” self-identity which is constitutive of the subject, as I explain in greater detail in the next chapter, equals the Real in the Lacanian sense.

This conception of the Lacanian subject as constituted on the basis of a Real asymmetry helps Žižek expand on his non-standard account of the postmodernist break with modernism. In modernism the subject is conceived as radically external to symbolic reality, as belonging to a different ontological domain: “a monadic subject, desperate at his inability to establish contact with the world, condemned to solipsistic void” (137). The subject conceived as an empty place involves, in Žižek’s opinion, a minimum of substantial self-identity. “Herein resides”, Žižek contends, “the gap which separates [Derrida from Lacan]: for Derrida, the subject always remains substance, whereas for Lacan (as well as for Hegel) subject is precisely that which is not substance” (Žižek 2005a: 245). Žižek quotes a passage of Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* (1967) to sustain such a contention:

However it [the category of the subject] is modified, however it is endowed with consciousness or unconsciousness, it will refer, by the entire thread of its history, to the substantiality of a presence unperturbed by accidents, or to the identity of the selfsame in the presence of self-relationship. (Derrida quoted in Žižek 2005a: 245)⁴⁵

Derrida’s notion of the subject, in Žižek’s view, retains a minimum of sublimation; it is, in short, a “perspective illusion: what appears within modernism, as the limit impeding the subject’s self-expression”, that is, the insurmountable gap between the subject *qua* substance and the substanceless symbolic reality, “is

⁴⁵ Žižek quotes the 1974 edition translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, pp. 68-69.

actually *the subject himself*” (Žižek 1992a: 137, emphasis in original). The postmodernist break occurs:

[w]hen we pass from the ‘emptied subject’ to the subject *qua* the emptiness of substance (homologous to the reversal from matter *qua* substance which curves space into matter *qua* the curvature of space in the theory of relativity): in its most radical dimension, the ‘subject’ is *nothing but* this dreaded ‘void’— in *horror vacui*, the subject simply fears himself, his constitutive void. (137-138, emphasis in original)

The postmodernist subject, in other words, is defined by an irreducible paradox: “It exists only through its own radical impossibility, through a ‘bone in the throat’ that forever prevents it (the subject) to achieve full ontological identity” (Žižek 2000a: 28).

To illustrate how postmodernist art foregrounds this fundamental paradox inherent to the subject and to sublimity, Žižek singles out David Lynch’s cinematic work and a painting by nineteenth century artist Gustave Courbet: *L’Origine du Monde* (The Origin of the World) (1866).⁴⁶ Lynch’s films, particularly *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Wild at Heart* (1990), come too close to the place of Thing and stage the apparition of the phallus: “in Lynch’s ‘ontology,’ the universe is a palpitating slime that continually threatens to blow up the settled frame of everyday reality” (Žižek 1992a: 129). This is best perceived in *Blue Velvet*’s opening sequence when an object out of place in the frame of reality (a cut-off ear) turns into nauseating crawling life (ants swarming in the ear) as the camera approaches the object. In *Wild at Heart*, an exemplary scene in this respect is that including a close shot of a lit cigarette which then dissolves into destructive fire. “All that remains of diegetic [symbolic] reality”, Žižek writes, “is narrative fragments from all cinematic genres

⁴⁶ Very significantly, Courbet’s painting, which had disappeared for almost a century, was found among Lacan’s belongings after his death in 1981 (Žižek 2000a: 36).

[...] a patchwork designed to prevent us from ‘burning our fingers’ too much on the Real” (129). Žižek’s analysis of the style in Lynch’s films enables him to redefine Jean Baudillard’s concept of “hyperreality”, which, as noted in chapter 1, designates the condition of generalised simulation paradigmatic of contemporary society, a state in which empirical reality is inaccessible because it has been displaced by the image or spectacle (Braudillard 1983: 25).

Contrary to this diagnosis, Žižek stresses “the fundamental ambiguity of the image in postmodernism” (Žižek 1992a: 129), an ambiguity congruent with the fundamental antagonism at the heart of the subject and of sublimity. While Žižek agrees that the image is a virtual screen which enables the subject to maintain a distance from the Real, he nevertheless argues that this distance is not insurmountable; on the contrary, the more we approach the image’s “very obtrusive ‘hyperrealism’”, the more it:

[e]vokes the nausea of the Real [...] the reverse of ‘derealization’ is the hypersensitivity to reality as something that can hurt [...] as if the subject is reduced to a pure receptive gaze [or gaze *qua* object] because he is aware of how every encroachment upon the world, even the most benevolent, *cuts into* the world, hurts it. (Žižek 1992a: 129-130, emphasis in original)⁴⁷

“When we look at a thing directly in [symbolic] reality”, Žižek argues elsewhere:

[w]e do not see “it” —this “it” only appears when we look at the thing’s mirror image, as if there were something more than in reality, as if the mirror image can bring out that mysterious ingredient for which we search in vain in the object’s reality. (Žižek 2012: 662)

⁴⁷ Žižek makes the same claim in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002) apropos of the contemporary phenomenon of “cutters”, people who experience an irresistible urge to cut themselves with razors as opposed tabooed inscriptions on the body. While the latter stand for a “guarantee [of] the subject’s inclusion in the (virtual) symbolic order”, the action of cutting oneself constitutes “a desperate strategy to return to the Real of the body”. Thus, cutters, in Žižek’s view, exemplify a radical, at times nauseating, and “violent return to the passion for the Real” in which “the ‘postmodern’ passion for semblance ends” (Žižek 2002: 10).

It is only when we reduce an object to a surface—a reflection on a mirror, an image on a screen— depriving it of its depth and density that the impossible *objet petit a*, gaze *qua* object or pure self appears. Courbet's *L'Origine*, according to Žižek, also stages an overproximity to the sublime place of the Thing in exposing the torso of a naked and aroused female body and her genitalia:

Courbet accomplishes a gesture of radical *desublimation* [...] the reversal of the sublime object into abject, into an abhorrent, nauseating excremental piece of slime [...] with Courbet, the game of referring to the forever absent 'realist' incestuous object is over, the structure of sublimation collapses. (Žižek 2000a: 37-38, emphasis in original)

The lesson of Courbet's painting, as stated in Žižek's reading, is that of postmodernism: the paradoxical correlation of sublimity and obscenity reveals that there is no Thing behind the sublime appearance. If we come too close to the Thing, what we find it is its constitutive obverse, or the suffocating nausea of the obscene object. The sublime object and its leftover are not, as noted earlier, two distinct entities, but the reverse and obverse of one and the same entity.

The postmodern shift in the conception of sublimity, the subject and symbolic reality brings about a radical mutation in the status of paternal authority. Whereas modernism strives to affirm the subversive potential of the symptoms that undermine the phallus or symbolic authority—Lacan's "Name of the Father": the dead primordial father who returns as his name and establishes the Law through a collective prohibition of enjoyment— postmodernism makes the phallus appear and "*conceives [the father] as 'alive', in his obscene dimension*" (Žižek 1992a: 124, emphasis in original).⁴⁸ The status of the obscene father or "anal father", as Žižek

⁴⁸ It is important not to confuse "father" or "parental" with the standard meaning of the term, which obviously designates a male individual. Žižek's Lacan-inspired usage of the term refers to the male

also calls it, is identical to that of the obscene object that appears in the void of the sublime; the anal father is symbolic authority's and the subject's *objet petit a*, "a certain surplus [...] 'what is in the subject more than the subject himself', the part in himself that the subject must murder in order to start to live as a 'normal' member of the community" (125).

The "anal father", just as the sublime and obscene Thing, has a radically ambiguous status: it is simultaneously a "sprout of enjoyment", an intruder that disturbs the harmony of the social edifice and paradoxically, as the very obverse of authority, what guarantees the social edifice and its subjects' consistency. As such, when the anal father appears, it lays bare the Real impasse that defines the subject and symbolic reality. On this account, William Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (1602) is "effectively a postmodern work *avant la lettre*" because, in Žižek's reading, it outlines "the obscene underside that haunts the dignity of the Master-Signifier [phallus] from its very inception or the secret alliance between the dignity of the Law and its obscene transgression" (Žižek 2008a: 26). In articulating Žižek's non-standard account of postmodernism, I have delineated the contours of the concept of the Real in late Lacan's theory and its related notions of the subject and the symbolic order. In "Why Does the *Phallus* Appear?", Žižek describes the postmodernist break with modernism in very much the same terms as he describes elsewhere a break discernible in Lacan's career marked by *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959-60):

The theoretical antagonism [...] shifts from the axis Imaginary-Symbolic to the axis Symbolic-Real: the aim of the modernist 'symptomal reading' is to ferret out the texture of discursive (symbolic) practices whose imaginary effect is the

or female agent of symbolic authority, the bearer of the phallus, and as such, as I explain in the next chapter, castrated.

substantial totality, whereas postmodernism focuses on the traumatic Thing which resists [and sustains] symbolization. (Žižek 1992a: 123)

From *Seminar VII* onwards, Žižek argues, Lacan's focus shifts from the boundary between the orders of the Imaginary and the Symbolic to the boundary between the orders of the Symbolic and the Real, from the symptom to the *sinthome*, from desire to drive (e.g. Žižek 1994: 30, Daly and Žižek 2004: 65-67).⁴⁹ As earlier noted, the distinction between modernism and postmodernism proposed in Žižek's non-standard account parallels, in my view, the distinction between what Žižek identifies as two opposing stages in Lacan's theory. This explains why, in the rest of the chapters that compose part II, I intend to elaborate on Žižek's reading of late Lacan. This, in turn, is of help to grasp the implications of Žižek's non-standard account of postmodernism and provides key theoretical concepts for my own analysis of Carter's short fiction.

⁴⁹ Žižek opposes “symptom” —the focus of Lacan's early works—to *sinthome*— together with the Real, the core of Lacan's late theory. While the former is “a symbolic formation par excellence, a cyphered coded message which can be dissolved through interpretation, the *sinthome* is “symptom as real [...] a pathological formation which persists beyond [...] interpretation [...] and] fantasy [...] the only support of our being, the only point that gives consistency to the subject (Žižek 1989: 79-81).

CHAPTER 4
**“THE IMPOSSIBLE IS REAL”: ŽIŽEK’S NON-STANDARD APPROACH
TO LACANIAN THEORY**

Žižek’s approach to the concept of the Lacanian Real involves a radical redefinition of the notion of impossibility in keeping with the postmodernist reconceptualization of the subject, authority and the sublime. One of Žižek’s most explicit accounts of the Real as impossible is to be found in a book-length interview with Glyn Daly (2004) in which he makes clear the distinction between opposing stages in Lacan’s career and the diverse critical reception such a distinction has generated:

The usual perception of Lacan—and at the same time the usual criticism of Lacan—is that he remains too much of a transcendentalist. There are two different [...] transcendentalist tendencies that can be identified in Lacan. The first concerns the idea that we always live within the horizon of a certain symbolic order and that the latter functions as a kind of transcendental a priori. This is what the Lacan of the early 1960s would have claimed. The later moves away from this idea of an a priori which is the condition of possibility and, at the same time, the condition of impossibility, of the symbolic structure itself: for example, symbolic castration, the opening of a primordial lack, and so on. However, *I don’t think that this transcendental reading is the ultimate horizon of Lacan. This is a critique that I am developing now.* (Daly and Žižek 2004: 65-66, emphasis mine)

The standard reception of Lacan—and Lacan himself in his early writings—reads the concept of the Real as a transcendental impossibility, as a pre-symbolic or, in Freudian terms, pre-Oedipal state of union with the (m)other forever left behind with the entrance into the domain of language. In this light, the subject *qua* speaking being is “castrated” or “out-of-joint”, divided by the cut of language between his symbolic identity and his deadly longings for pre-symbolic undifferentiation.

Symbolic castration is thus understood as the subject’s traumatic passage from pre-symbolic wholeness into a state of alienation in the signifier. The object of desire, as a result, is turned into the, by definition, unattainable (incestuous) Thing and so every empirical object that the subject desires functions as a fetish, a merely

stand-in or precarious compensation for the loss of this primordial object. Just as in Žižek's non-standard definition of modernism, the notion of the Real presupposed in this standard reading of Lacan is impossibility *qua* absence; the Real as a void or primordial loss around which the symbolic order is structured. "I think I am partially co-responsible", Žižek admits:

[f]or the predominance of the notion of the Real as the impossible Thing: something that we cannot directly confront. I think that not only is this theoretically wrong, but it also has had catastrophic consequences insofar as it opened up the way towards this combination of Lacan with a certain Derridean-Levinasian problematic: Real, divinity, impossibility, Otherness. The idea is that the Real is this traumatic Other to which you cannot ever answer properly. But I am more and more convinced that this is not the true focus of the Lacanian Real. Where then is the focus? (66-67)

"*The point*", Žižek argues,

[i]s not that the Real is impossible but rather that the impossible is Real. A trauma, or an act, is simply the point when the Real happens, and this is difficult to accept. Lacan is not a poet telling us how we always fail the Real—it's always the opposite with the late Lacan. The point is that you can encounter the Real, and that is what is so difficult to accept. (70, emphasis in original)

The Real is not an impossible unsymbolisable exteriority preceding symbolisation and the subject but the constitutive distortion/abyss/hole/rift within the subject, a fundamental but inassimilable redoublement which, as seen in the previous chapter, separates the subject from itself and is constituted retroactively as the impossibility that disrupts the subject: at the moment of the subject's emergence, it appears as if the Real always already was. This is precisely how Žižek understands Hegel's "self-relating negation", a notion he equates to the genesis of the subject in Lacan's theory:

[f]or Hegel, there is no One at the beginning, every One is a return-to-itself from the two. The One to which one returns is constituted through return, so it is not that One splits into two —One is a Two of which one part is nothing [...] '*one should not begin with oneness and then pass to duality*' [...] Why not? Because the One is

only constituted through the passage to duality, through its division. (2012: 473, emphasis in original)⁵⁰

Žižek counters the standard commentary on Hegelian dialectics that starts with a positivity which precedes its negation; the starting point for Žižek is nothing, which through “the self-negation of nothing” creates something. This creative process which constitutes the subject through its very loss has been termed in Žižek’s last work to-date “absolute recoil” from German *Absoluter Gengenstoss*:

Absoluter Gengenstoss thus stands for the radical coincidence of opposites in which the action appears as its own counter-action, or, more precisely, in which the negative (loss, withdrawal) itself generates what it “negates.” What is found only comes to be through being left behind”, and its inversion (it is “only in return itself” that what we return to emerges [...])” are the two sides of what Hegel calls “absolute reflection”: a reflection which is no longer external to its object, presupposing it as given, but which, as it were, closes the loop and posits its own presupposition [...] the condition of possibility is here radically and simultaneously the condition of impossibility: the very obstacle to the full assertion of our identity opens up the space for it. (Žižek 2014b: 148)

Two considerations may help elucidate Žižek’s conception of the Lacanian Real as a distortion/division that both constitutes and divides the subject in a process of self-relating negation. The first is Lacan’s usage of the term “separate” as meaning both the action of separating/dividing as well as that of “engendering oneself, *se parere*”, an usage that fits Hegel’s positing of division as a creative process (Lacan 2006: 715). The second consideration concerns Jacques-Alain Miller’s distinction between lack and hole: “a lack is spatial, designating a void within a space, while a hole is more radical, it designates the point at which this spatial order itself breaks down (as in the ‘black hole’ in physics)” (Žižek 2012:

⁵⁰ Žižek is quoting Hegel’s *Vorlesungen ilber die Geschichte der Philosophie* (Werke, Vol. 18), Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1979, p. 450.

496).⁵¹ The Real is to be identified with the hole; it is not a lack which presupposes the existence of two entities but a vanishing point or abyss between two sides of one and the same redoubled entity. Herein lies, in Žižek's view, the difference between the logic of desire and the logic of drive: "Desire is grounded in its constitutive lack, while the drive circulates around a hole, a gap in the order of being" (496). Drive is a compulsive gesture whose goal is not to attain an inaccessible object but to repeat itself as a non-stop movement; drive finds satisfaction in failing to attain the object, a failure which enables the drive to continue: "The weird movement called 'drive' is not driven by the 'impossible' quest for the lost object; it is *a drive to directly enact the 'loss' —the gap, cut, distance-itself*" (497-498, emphasis in original). The drive was first hypothesised by Freud in trying to explain the functioning of the psyche in terms of the pleasure principle:

Freud became aware of a radical non-functional element, a basic destructiveness and excess of negativity that couldn't be accounted for. And this is why Freud posed the hypothesis of the death drive. I think that death drive is exactly the right name for this excess of negativity. This, in a way, is the big obsession of my entire work: this mutual reading of the Freudian notion of the death drive with what in German idealism is rendered thematic as self-relating negativity. (Daly and Žižek 2004: 61)

Žižek very often resorts to Hegel's metaphor of the "night of the world" *qua* radical negativity to elucidate the concept of the drive as the primordial gesture of self-relating negativity or separation from itself which constitutes the subject:

⁵¹ Žižek paraphrases Miller's distinction as recorded in "Le nom-du-pere, s'en passer, s'en server", excerpted at www.lacan.com.

The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity —an unending wealth of many presentations, images, of which none happens to occur to him— or which are not present. This night, the inner of nature, that exists here —pure self— in phantasmagorical presentations, is night all around it, here shoots a bloody head—there another white shape, suddenly here before it, and just so disappears. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye —into a night that becomes awful. (Žižek 1992a: 50)⁵²

It is in the context of the death drive *qua* self-relating negativity that Žižek approaches Lacan's well-known notion of *jouissance* or enjoyment, “the pleasure in pain”, the pleasure in “displeasure itself, in the never-ending, repeated circulation around the unattainable, always missed object” (48). *Jouissance* marks the origins of a child's psychic “se-paration” of one and nothing, surface and depth and other virtual oppositions that from then on structure its psychic life. It is no wonder, therefore, that drive circulates around corporeal sites such as orifices or cuts in the body's (virtual) surface —in psychoanalytic terms, erotogenic rims— that mark the newly formed borderline between inside and outside, sites of exchange between the subject and the world.

The postulation of the death drive as the genesis of the subject accomplishes a radical displacement of the classical Enlightenment conception of the direct passage from the savage pre-human being into human being or being of language. The passage from instinct to desire is not direct but mediated by the traumatic/primordial inhuman stage of the drive. “We cannot pass directly from nature to culture”, Žižek contends; “something goes terribly wrong in nature: nature produces an unnatural monstrosity and I claim it is in order to cope with, to domesticate this monstrosity, that we symbolize” (Daly and Žižek 2004: 65). The

⁵² Žižek is quoting Hegel's *Realphilosophie* of 1805-1806 from Donald Phillip Verene, *Hegel's Recollection* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), pp. 7-8.

subject can only come into being through this experience of the hole of radical negativity or what Žižek also designates as “the abyss of freedom”, “an excessive moment of ‘madness’ inherent to *cogito*”, “the passage through madness” or a “parallactic gap” (Žižek 1997b: 1-104, 1999a: 9, 34-41, 2006a: 7).⁵³

This “inhuman” excess is, Žižek argues, the *sine qua non* of the human condition: “We become ‘humans’ when we get caught into a closed, self-propelling loop of repeating the same gesture and finding satisfaction in it” (Žižek 2006a: 63). Yet the drive is a primordial dimension not only in the sense that it precedes desire or *logos* but in the sense that “it’s here all the time [...it] sustains us all the time, threatening to explode” (Daly and Žižek 2004: 65). This explains the paradoxical status of *jouissance*: “the trouble with *jouissance* is not that it is unattainable [...] but rather that one can never get rid of it, that its stain that forever drags along”; *jouissance* “permeates the letter” or signifier, it is “a bone in the throat” of the signifier which at once constitutes the subject and hinders its full self-expression (Žižek 2005a: 265, 1989: 77, 1992a: 138).

It is crucial to point out now how this radical gesture of self-relating negativity coincides, according to Žižek, with a primordial creation of a fantasmatic lack, a void that does not exist and as such is pure semblance: “For Lacan, creative sublimation and death drive are strictly correlative: the death drive empties the (sacred) Place, creates the Clearing, the Void, the Frame, which is then filled by the object ‘elevated to the dignity of the Thing’” (Žižek 2000a: 30). Put differently, the

⁵³ In *The Parallax View* (2006), Žižek, uses the term of the parallax to designate “the gap which separates the One from itself”. A parallax refers to “a shifting perspective between two points between which no synthesis, no mediation is possible. Thus there is no rapport between the two levels, no shared space although they are closely connected, even identical in a way, they are, as it were, on the opposed sides of a Moebius strip” (Žižek 2006a: 7).

irrepressible circular movement of the drive towards itself creates and sustains a virtual lack/negation which in turn creates the illusion of the object that once filled the lack but was lost. This loss that never happened is what subtracts the subject from itself, from its direct immersion in reality. Therein lies, as discussed in the previous chapter, the basic paradox or inconsistency pertaining to the notion of the subject: it recognizes itself the moment it loses itself; the subject, in other words, is constituted by a fundamental alienation, “se-paration” or rift:

The consistency of the Self is thus purely and entirely virtual; it is as if were an Inside which appears only when viewed from the Outside, on the interface screen: the moment we penetrate the interface and endeavor to grasp the Self ‘substantially’, as it is ‘in itself,’ it disappears like sand between our fingers. (Žižek 1999c: 312)

It is in the light of the death drive as the compulsive gesture that creates the virtual, non-existent Real rift/abyss constitutive of the subject that Žižek redefines the Lacanian concept of “castration”. Castration in late Lacan no longer means the separation of the subject from the (m)other as love object. This early version, as already noted, still conceives of the subject as substance distinguishable from its surroundings. Castration, instead, refers to the primordial virtual “cut” that separates the One from itself. Castration, in other words, is what has been described above as the primordial gesture of symbolisation which at once virtually folds matter into two sides: on the one hand, the self and, on the other, an organ without a body, what Freud termed “libido” and Lacan renamed “lamella”:

This lamella, this organ, whose characteristic is not to exist, but which is nevertheless an organ [...] is the libido. It is the libido, qua pure life instinct, that is to say, immortal life, irrepressible life, life that has need of no organ, simplified, indestructible life. It is precisely what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is subject to the cycle of sexed reproduction. And it is of this that all the forms of the *objet a* that can be enumerated are the representatives, the equivalents. (Lacan 1998[1964]: 196-197)⁵⁴

⁵⁴ When Lacan defines the subject as a being subjected to “the cycle of sexed reproduction” he does not refer to sex as a biological category. As I will explain in chapter 6, sex in Lacan belongs to the category of impossible Real inherent to/constitutive of symbolisation.

On account of this, the drive is conceptualised as a montage that stages a void; it follows the logic of sublimation or pure fantasy in the Lacanian sense: fantasy functions as a screen which generates the illusion that there is something to conceal and therefore safeguards the —spectral— consistency of the subject. The inexistence of the lack or loss which the drive incessantly marks has to be repressed; “primordial repression” is the basic operation of what Žižek calls the “fundamental fantasy [...] the fantasmatic core inaccessible to my conscious experience” (Žižek 1999c: 313).

It is in this light that Žižek provides a striking redefinition of the theological topic of *felix culpa* or the Fall of Man, which will prove to be very useful in my analysis of the reformulation of the original sin in Carter’s short fiction. Žižek identifies in the concept of the original sin, “the primordial pathological choice of the unconditional attachment to some singular object [...which] destroys the preceding indifference [...and] introduces division, pain and suffering”, the logic of the Freudian death drive and that of Hegel’s self-relating negativity (Žižek 2014a: 39). The “fall” enacted by Eve dramatises the path towards the human condition:

All one should do here to grasp the true situation is to bear in mind Hegel’s (rather obvious) point: the innocence of the ‘paradise’ is another name for animal life, so that what the Bible calls ‘Fall’ is nothing more than the passage from animal life to human experience proper. *It is thus the Fall itself which creates the dimension from which it is the Fall.* (42, emphasis in original)

Differently put, it is not that man falls from good into evil; in line with the status of the drive as the gesture that creates/stages a loss that never took place, it is with the “gesture” of the Fall that Good is retroactively created as a paradise lost. There is nothing previous to the Fall from which to fall; the Fall itself generates that from which we fall, or as Žižek succinctly puts it in relation to Hegel’s negativity:

[t]rue good does not arise when we follow our nature, but when we fight it [...] Hegel's point is that Good emerges as a possibility and duty only through this primordial choice of Evil: we experience Good when, after choosing Evil, we become aware of the utter inadequacy of our situation (46-47)

Accepting the Fall as the starting point which creates the conditions of the good and evil is crucial to avoid the perverse logic of religious fundamentalism, “one has to be careful here”, Žižek warns us, “not to succumb to the perverse reading of the priority of the Fall” whereby one causes evil so that evil can be overcome by one's struggle for the good:

[i]f we know that Evil is just a necessary detour on the path towards the final triumph of Good, then, of course, we are justified in engaging in Evil as the means to achieving Good. However, there is no Reason in History whose divine plan can justify Evil; the Good that may come out of Evil is only a contingent by-product. (42-44)

Another pivotal move Žižek accomplishes in his account of the genesis of the subject as a radical gesture of self-relating negativity—the drive creating the place that (psychically) separates subject and world—is his equation of such a gesture with a fundamental apperception, the act of attributing a perception to a non-existing, virtual perceiver:

[w]e should take the crucial step from the veil masking the Void to the gaze of the Other, the gaze as object: the In-itself beyond the veil, what the veil masks, is not some substantial transcendent reality but the Other's gaze, the point from which the Other returns the gaze. What I do not see in what I see is the gaze itself, the gaze as object. (Žižek 2012: 694)

This elucidates Lacan's thesis on the reflexive character of the drive as the stance of “se-parare” or “*se faire*”: “The visual drive is not the drive to see, but, in contrast to the desire to see, the drive to *make oneself* seen [...] Does not Lacan here point towards the most elementary theatricality of the human condition?” (694-695, emphasis in original). Our essential endeavour is not to look but to be part of a staged scene, to expose oneself to a gaze that does not exist but which, nevertheless,

sustains our virtual consistency; this is gaze *qua* object or pure subject, the impossible gaze that, as seen in the previous chapter, postmodernism renders visible in its staging of the obscene object at the sublime place of the Thing.

This brings us to what Žižek perceives as the true lesson of Lacan's famous concept of "the mirror stage" as articulated in his 1949 *écrit* "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience": the relationship between the ego —the self-conscious subject— and the ideal-ego or *imago*— the image on the mirror the subject (mis)recognises as its own stability— is not symmetrical; it involves the presence of a third element, a virtual gaze which is always already inscribed into the image itself as what I cannot see; "there certainly is in the mirror image", Žižek contends:

[‘m]ore than meets the eye,’ yet this surplus that eludes the eye, the point in the image which eludes my eye’s grasp is none other than *the gaze itself*: as Lacan put it, ‘you can never see me at the point from which I gaze at you.’ (Žižek 1992a: 127, emphasis in original)

Put differently and as earlier noted, the subject emerges the moment it loses itself in the image; the identification with the *imago* —an image on a screen/mirror— is strictly correlative to the acknowledgement of a virtual lack, what the image does not reflect. Just as the drive, the mirror image functions as a montage: it shows in order to conceal the fundamental apperception or separation that nonetheless constitutes the subject. Again, the difference between animals and humans acquires full significance here: an ape, for example, when confronted with a mirror —or any other reflective surface, does not see an image and thus the virtual gap that generates the distinction between surface and depth, outside and inside does not take place. The child, on the contrary, literally remains transfixed on the image and "falls into" the domain of the Imaginary-Real; the impossible gap/hole/abyss that separates subject and world happens. The creative function of

the image follows the ambiguous logic of the Lacanian formula of fantasy $\$ \langle \rangle a$; fantasy functions as a screen “hiding the fact that there is nothing to hide”; as such, it creates the gap between subject and object and simultaneously conceals it because the consistency of the virtual gap, and thus of the subject and of the object, depends on the repression of fantasy’s creative operation (Žižek 2007: 59, 2012: 691-94).

At this point, it is all-important to distinguish the Lacanian notion of fantasy from other conceptualisations of the term included in part I, particularly those by Todorov and McHale, which represent the standard modernist and postmodernist standpoints, respectively. Whereas Todorov’s standard modernist notion of fantasy problematises the realist distinction between empirical reality and virtual appearances by enacting events that cannot be explained through a realist logic (Todorov 1973: 25-26), McHale’s standard postmodernist approach undoes this very distinction by affirming that empirical reality is inaccessible so all that remains is a series of fantasy worlds or reflections as in an endless hall of mirrors (McHale 1987: 75-76).

In the light of Žižek’s Lacanian-based approach, what these versions of fantasy miss is the Real impossible discordance —gaze *qua* object— that fantasy at once generates and conceals to sustain the consistency of the subject and the world: were the discordance resolved, subject and world would vanish. “The fundamental Lacanian thesis of fantasy”, Žižek observes, “is that in the opposition between dream and reality, fantasy is on the side of reality: it is, as Lacan once said, the support that gives consistency to what we call reality” (Žižek 1989: 44).

Just as fantasy is instrumental in creating/concealing the impossibility constitutive of the subject, so it creates/seals the impossibility —*jouissance*— that constitutes symbolic reality, that is, the domain of desire. Both the subject and the

chain of signifiers at work in any given social community are thus constitutively split around a central impossibility which is retroactively posed as a disturbance. The subject's adherence to the law text, a series of norms and practices that render social coexistence possible, is necessarily propped by a double operation of fantasy which takes the form of the prohibition of impossible enjoyment. In other words, the installation of the law is founded on interdicting a feigned transgression: in prohibiting the impossible access to an object that does not exist, drive is transubstantiated into desire, non-meaning into meaning, fantasmatic absence into primordial theft. The subject, as a result, exchanges impossible enjoyment for "surplus enjoyment", an unsymbolisable spectral remainder that permeates the symbolic and which is represented in Lacan's algebra by *objet petit a*. This is the "object cause of desire", an invisible element or "*je ne sais quoi*" that can reside in any object, making it desirable if viewed from a distance or unbearable if one comes too close to it (Žižek 2006a: 18).

To clarify the double operation of fantasy at work in the constitution of the socio-symbolic order and of subjectivity *qua* symbolic identity —and simultaneous domestication of impossible *jouissance*— Žižek again resorts to Hegel's dialectical process, understood as a process of successive "*reflection(s)*", of double negation, "a negation of negation" or "appearance *qua* appearance" (Žižek 1999a: 122, 79, 196, emphasis in original). As noted above, primary negation or "night of the world" corresponds to the Lacanian drive, a compulsive monstrous circulation around a void of negativity that at once creates the latter and conceals its non-existence. Secondary negation, the advent of the *logos* or the domain of desire, "negates" or conceals the void by externalising it into master signifier or phallus: the prohibition of or inaccessibility to "nothing", to an object that *never* was. The

individual's submission to the phallus, as earlier noted, involves exchanging impossible *jouissance* for “surplus-*jouissance*” or *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire, the unsymbolisable inherent remainder of symbolisation, which, nevertheless, constitutes symbolisation's condition of (im)possibility.

Such an indelible remainder explains why, according to Žižek, in accounting for the genesis of the social subject, Freud felt the need to supplement the Oedipal myth with the mythical narrative of the primordial obscene father that “appropriates” —or steals— enjoyment as recorded in *Totem and Taboo* (1912) and whose murder establishes the law:⁵⁵

[t]he lesson of this myth is the exact obverse of that of Oedipus; that is to say, here, far from having to deal with the father who intervenes as the Third, the agent who prevents direct contact with the incestuous object (and so sustains the illusion that his annihilation would give us free access to this object), it is the killing of the Father-Thing (the realization of the Oedipal wish) which gives rise to symbolic prohibition (the dead father returns as his Name). (Žižek 1999a: 315)

This is precisely what Lacan's designation of the law as “Name-of-the-Father” conveys: it is not that the pre-existence of the law creates a transgression; it is rather that the simulation of a transgression creates the law. The actual prohibitory agency is not the living but the dead father, the father who, after having been murdered, returns as his Name: “What the matrix of *T&T* accounts for is thus the structural necessity of the parricide: the passage from direct brutal force to the rule [...] of the prohibitory Law, is always grounded in a (disavowed) act of primordial crime” (316). Paternal authority is therefore sustained by its very obverse, the primordial *jouisseur* that every subject must murder in order to become a “normal” member of the community.

⁵⁵ As is well known, the Oedipus complex marks a pivotal stage —the phallic stage— in the individual's psychosexual development: the child abandons rivalry with the father —renounces being the object of the mother's desire— and identifies with him as the bearer of the penis-phallus. This renunciation/identification is motivated by castration anxiety which in turn rests on a belief in the loss of the maternal phallus, a fantasmatic object that never existed and, as such, can be read as the *objet petit a* par excellence: a pure semblance that is fully present in its effects.

Yet for the successful functioning of authority and desire, fantasy conceals this paradoxical co-dependence by means of imposture, what Lacan terms “Master signifier”, “phallus” or “*point de capiton*”: the empty signifier or signifier without signified, an insignia that places the subject in the position of power but whose meaning is an enigma for the members of the community; “nobody really knows what it means, but each of them somehow presupposes that others know, that it has to mean ‘the real thing’” (Žižek 2000a: 115).⁵⁶ In its very indefinable presence, the phallus generates the illusion that an Other knows its meaning; this Other is what Lacan coined “*the subject supposed to know*” or big Other, a third non-existing gaze whose status is that of a subjective presupposition or pure semblance, “it exists only in so far as subjects *act as if it exists*” (Žižek 2007: 27, 10, emphasis in original). The submission to the phallus, therefore, follows the logic of “fetishistic disavowal”: “I know very well, but still...”; I know that bearing the phallus is a convention, yet I believe in the presence of an invisible Other materialised in the phallus itself (Žižek 1989: 12).

If the efficacy of the authority of the big Other is diminished, if the fantasy that domesticates our (impossible) access to *jouissance* does not work properly, the father-enjoyment or superego, as postmodernism teaches us in Žižek’s non-standard view, appears at the very site of the sublime law. As earlier exposed, the lesson derived from the apparition of the anal father at the place of the big Other —

⁵⁶ *Point de capiton*, translated by Žižek as “quilting point”, is a term coined by Lacan to refer to the point through which the subject is “sewn” into the chain of signifiers, it is the place of signifier without signified or signifier of pure difference, the phallus, which holds together the signifying “fabric” by fixing meaning in a retroactive way, “the effect of meaning is always produced backwards, *après coup*” (Žižek 1989: 113). The moment this signifier of pure difference encounters a signified, the nodal point gets undone so the whole symbolic tapestry, which includes subjectivity, disintegrates.

analogous, as seen in the previous chapter, to the apparition of an excremental leftover at the place of the sublime Thing, is twofold: first, this obscene apparition is not the Real Thing but a defensive strategy against the impossibility of *jouissance*; second, this apparition lays bare the necessarily inconsistent, loop-like structure of the law: on one side, the law equals the big Other, the agency regulating the subject's enjoyment; on the reverse of the law one finds the superego, the agency that bombards the subject with the impossible injunction to fully enjoy, "obscenely enjoying the subject's failure at complying with [...its demands]; the paradox of the superego is that, as Freud saw it clearly, the more we obey its demands, the more we feel guilty" (Žižek 2014a: 182).

Such a double lesson is the point of departure of Žižek's redefinition of hysteria, perversion and psychosis, three distinct pathological psychic forms that the subject's organization of *jouissance* may take. Given the presence of characters in Carter's fiction that display a problematic relationship with symbolic authority, I find it important to conclude this chapter with Žižek's very redefinition of these different subjective modalities.

Of all three, in Žižek's view, the hysterical position is only valuable in ethical terms. The hysteric is a subject that is precariously submitted to the big Other because he questions the position he occupies in the symbolic network. Žižek equates hysteria with "failed interpellation", the proof and effect of the subject's inability to fulfill the symbolic identification, constantly asking the big Other "why am I what I'm supposed to be, why have I this mandate? Why am I [a teacher, a master, a king ...]?" Briefly: 'Why am I what you [the big Other] are saying that I am?'" (Žižek 1989: 126, emphasis in original). In other words, the hysteric brings to the fore the *objet petit a* or *sinthome* "what is in the subject more than the subject

himself”, the invisible pathological excess that causes the subject’s entrance in the symbolic and that paradoxically prevents him to fully assume the symbolic mandate. Žižek, therefore, rephrases the hysterical question as follows: “which is that surplus object in me that caused the Other to interpellate me, to ‘hail’ me as... [king, master, wife...]?”. It is no wonder that one of the hysteric’s most distinctive traits is surplus *jouissance*, the ambivalent feeling of pleasure in pain: “hysteria is precisely the name for this stance of ambivalent fascination in the face of an object that terrifies and repels us” (Žižek 1999a: 249). As such, the hysteric is, in Žižek’s view, a truly ethical subject because, as I note in the next chapter, it points towards the Real discordance constitutive of both the subject and the symbolic order. Hystericisation, in other words, is the first step towards the awareness of the necessary impossibility of desire, towards the realisation that the big Other, the symbolic order itself, is also split by a fundamental impossibility, structured around a central virtual lack. “Without this lack in the Other”, Žižek contends:

[t]he Other would be a closed structure and the only possibility open to the subject would be his radical alienation in the Other. So it is precisely this lack in the Other which enables the subject to achieve a kind of ‘dealienation’ [...] the subject experiences that [...]the Other itself ‘hasn’t got it’, hasn’t got the final answer—that is to say, is in itself blocked, desiring; that there is also a desire of the Other. This lack in the Other gives the subject —so to speak— a breathing space, it enables him to avoid the total alienation in the signifier not by filling out his lack but by allowing him to identify himself, his own lack, with the lack in the Other. (Žižek 1989: 137)

If in hysteria the authority of the big Other is questioned, in psychosis it is disposed of or “foreclosed” (Žižek 2012: 667). The psychotic is a subject that refuses to submit to the symbolic mandate; he fails to exchange *jouissance* for surplus enjoyment or *objet petit a* and thus is not capable of desiring. The signifying chain is not “sutured” in psychosis; instead, the psychotic is left with free-floating signifiers that have no Master signifier, no quilting point through which to

differentiate from one another and produce meaning. Without the phallus *qua* empty signifier, the psychotic is interpellated not by the invisible agency of the big Other but by a gaze that acquires positive existence in visual and auditory hallucinations. In this respect, Žižek is careful to note that the counterpoint to the psychotic is not a subject who sees only what truly exists but a subject of desire that has contracted *jouissance* into *objet petit a*, the point in the image of reality where the subject himself is located as a disturbance or excess.

This conception of psychosis undermines the notion of the Cartesian *cogito* as the perceiving subject —*percepiens*— external to the perceived world —*perceptum*; “the proper ontological lesson of psychosis”, Žižek argues quoting Jacques-Alain Miller’s “The Prisons of *Jouissance*” (2009):

[i]s that the *percepiens* is not exterior to the *perceptum* but that it is included, that there is a being in the *perceptum* itself that is not exterior to it [...W]ith hallucinations, for example [...] it is not enough to say that the subject perceives what is not found in the *perceptum* or of only asking if the subject believes this, and of thinking that this is not consistent. Why doesn’t someone other than the subject experience it? [...] the condition of ‘the objectivity of reality’ [...] extorts that reality be a desert of *jouissance*. This *jouissance* is condensed in the *objet petit a* in such a way that the presence of the *percepiens* in the *perceptum* is correlative to what appears as an absence of surplus-jouir. (Miller quoted in Žižek 2012: 702-703)

The form of psychosis that Žižek most often discusses is paranoia, a state in which the subject’s foreclosure of the big Other takes the form of a belief in “the Other of an Other”, another agent who, “hidden behind the Other of the explicit social reality, controls (what appears to us as) the unforeseen effects of social life and thus guarantees its consistency” (Žižek 2012: 679).⁵⁷ Between the psychotic’s foreclosure of the big Other and the hysteric’s questioning of this very same agency stands a specific intermediate position, that of the pervert.

⁵⁷ As an instance of a paranoid “Other of an Other”, Žižek refers to the belief in the existence of an evil programmer behind the global computer network, an all-powerful agency that threatens us with digital identity erasure, thus depriving us of social existence, turning us into non-individuals. (Žižek 2012: 679)

In perversion, the subject claims direct access to the big Other; he does not believe in the existence of an invisible agency of the Law, he directly *knows* this agency exists and sees himself as its very embodiment. In inflicting pain to others, therefore, what the pervert is enacting, in Žižek's account, the law's very installation. Such a conception of perversion constitutes a radical reformulation of the standard definition of the pervert, as Žižek puts it:

According to the standard view, the perverse attitude as the staging of the 'disavowal of castration' can be seen as a defence against the motif of 'death and sexuality', against the threat of mortality as well as the contingent imposition of sexual difference: what the pervert enacts is a universe in which, as in cartoons, a human being can survive any catastrophe; in which adult sexuality is reduced to a childish game; in which one is not forced to die or to choose one of the two sexes. As such, the pervert's universe is the pure universe of the symbolic order, of the signifier's game running its course, unencumbered by the Real of human finitude. (Žižek 1997a: 46)⁵⁸

This standard definition of perversion, however, leaves out of consideration the condensation of *jouissance* or the presence of "surplus-jouissance" as constitutive of the law; in other words, this conventional formulation does not consider the superego that enjoys as the obverse of the agency that prohibits enjoyment, it "persists within the confines of desire, Law and finitude as the ultimate horizons of human existence" (46). As opposed to this, Lacan's claim in his 1963 *écrit* "Kant with Sade" is that below the manifest relationship between the pervert and his victim, there is another latent relationship: that between the pervert and the superego, as expressed in the matheme for perversion $a \langle \rangle \$$ (Lacan 2006: 653). The pervert is a subject that, ultimately, serves the superego; the truth of his sadistic acts is that of the "object-instrument of the [big] Other's enjoyment", his

⁵⁸ The standard definition of the pervert resembles Braudillard's conception of the "last" or "liberated man": a subject that plays with signifiers, the one "who changes spaces, who circulates, who changes sex, clothes and habits, according to fashion rather than morality" (Braudillard 1983: 96).

acts are a defense strategy against the traumatic truth that there is neither big Other nor superego and thus, that enjoyment is truly impossible. In Žižek's own words:

[t]he pervert directly elevates the enjoying big Other into the agency of Law [...] the pervert's aim is to *establish*, not to undermine, the Law [...] A] pervert fully acknowledges the obscene-*jouissant* underside of the Law, since he gains satisfaction from the very obscenity of the gesture of installing the rule of Law—that is, of 'castration' (Žižek 1997a: 47, emphasis in original)

That is the reason why Žižek associates perversion with masochism, the pervert “enjoys being tortured by the Law” (47): in adopting the position of the object of the superego's command, the pervert enjoys feeling guilty; guilt both justifies inflicting pain on others and sustains his fantasy that the law is “all”, fully constituted. The pervert disavows the Real impossibility constitutive of the subject and the symbolic.

Žižek's Lacan-inspired conception of the impossible *qua* Real as outlined in this chapter —of which postmodernism as a philosophical stance and as an artistic practice are informative in Žižek's non-standard view— has immense consequences for the conception of the critique of ideology and gender-related issues. Two central objectives, therefore, occupy the chapters that follow: to expand on Žižek's approach to ideology and its critique and to articulate the contours of his Lacanian-based conceptualisation of sexual difference.

CHAPTER 5 “RISKING THE IMPOSSIBLE”: ŽIŽEK’S REFORMULATION OF IDEOLOGY AND ITS CRITIQUE

Žižek’s account of the distinction between modernism and postmodernism on the basis of different conceptions of the Real and derivative formulations of the subject and society has implications for the definition of ideology and its critique. Žižek’s conception of ideology and his account of how the critique of ideology should proceed are firmly grounded in what I have designated as a postmodernist reformulation of the Lacanian Real *qua* impossibility. The Real in late Lacan, as seen in the previous chapter, is not defined as a transcendental a priori realm from which the subject is forever separated after his immersion in the symbolic domain. On the contrary, the Real, from Žižek’s postmodernist perspective, is to be conceived as a fundamental dissymmetry constitutive of both the subject and the symbolic order; the Real, in other words, is the vanishing point or fantasmatic abyss/loop/rift/obstacle that at once generates/results from the subject’s process of separation or self-relating negation.

Such a conceptualisation renders both the subject and the big Other as fundamentally inconsistent, barred: both exist on the basis of their very impossibility —the impossibility of achieving full ontological identity, of being “all”. This fundamental impossibility is precisely what drives the subject towards subjectivisation as a way of escaping such a condition: “‘Subjectivity’ is a name for this irreducible circularity, [...] a power which does not fight an external resisting force (say, the inertia of the given substantial order), but an obstacle that is absolutely inherent, which ultimately ‘is’ the subject itself” (Žižek 1999a: 159, emphasis in original).

In the interview with Glyn Daly, Žižek acknowledges a shift in his perception of the critique of ideology which I read here as analogous to the shift he discerns in Lacan's career pertaining to the conception of the Real and, by extension, to the postmodernist break with modernism. "I am no longer satisfied", Žižek tells Daly:

[w]ith my old definition of ideology where the point was that ideology is the illusion that fills the gap of impossibility and inherent impossibility is transposed into an external obstacle, and that therefore what needs to be done is to reassert the original impossibility. (Daly and Žižek 2004: 70)

Žižek's "old" definition of ideology was articulated in his first book in English, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), and was soon refined in *For They Not Know What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (1991) with a reconsideration of the vital role of enjoyment in the constitution and efficacy of any ideological edifice. As its title suggests, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* explains the fundamental operation of ideology in terms of a displacement of society's impossible harmony—the sublime Thing—into a fantasmatic object-impediment that thereby sustains the illusion that social totality can be reached if the impediment disappears. That is to say, a successful ideology translates impossibility into possibility, absence into loss or theft by means of projecting impossibility into some contingent other in such a way that the impossibility of social harmony appears retrievable providing this other is suppressed (Žižek 1989: 30, 222-223).

Žižek, in this early work, inverts the classical "false consciousness" thesis according to which ideology conceals or distorts an underlying social reality; what ideology conceals, on the contrary, is the very gesture of sublimation that constructs social reality as a unified whole: "The stake of social-ideological fantasy", Žižek argues, "is to construct a vision of society which *does* exist, a society which is not split by an antagonistic division, a society in which the relation between its parts is

organic, complementary” (Žižek 1989: 142, emphasis in original). To exemplify such an ideological operation, Žižek resorts on many occasions to the role of the conceptual Jew in anti-Semitism:

‘Jew’ [...] simultaneously denies and embodies the structural impossibility of ‘Society’: it is as if in the figure of the Jew this impossibility had acquired a positive, palpable existence —and that is why it marks the eruption of enjoyment in the social field. (142)

Contrary to the visible insignia or phallus that marks the place of ideological authority, the Jew’s defining feature in anti-Semitic ideology is *objet petit a*, a *je ne sais quoi* or fantasmatic trait that turns a common individual into a disturbing subject, e.g. the “thief of enjoyment” who definitely enjoys and hence transgresses the law’s very foundation. The criticism of ideology, in Žižek’s early conception, should proceed by “detect[ing] in any given ideological edifice the element which represents within it its own impossibility” (Žižek 1993: 143) and raise an awareness on the contingent character of this element —social group— that reifies society’s fundamental antagonism. Žižek further formulates ideological critique as a gesture of “‘going through’ the social fantasy”, of exposing how ideology conceals society’s very antagonism by feigning a disturbance in society’s very surface. On this account, Žižek equates the critique of ideology with the “identification with the symptom”:

[a]ll phenomena which appear to everyday bourgeois consciousness as simple deviations, contingent deformations and degenerations of the ‘normal’ functioning of society (economic crises, wars, and so on), and as such abolishable through amelioration of the system, are necessary products of the system itself— the points at which the ‘truth’, the immanent antagonistic character of the system, erupts. (Žižek 1989: 144)

Such a conception of the critique of ideology appears to be in close affinity with what Žižek described in later works, as seen in chapter 3, as the typically modernist procedure of “symptomal reading”, whose aim is to undermine the

consistency of the ideological fantasy by detecting in its margins “cracks” or symptoms of enjoyment. As Žižek puts it:

[c]onfronted with the totality, modernism attempts to subvert it by detecting the traces of its hidden truth in the details which ‘stick out’ and belie its ‘official truth’, in the margins which point toward what has to be ‘repressed’ so that the ‘official’ totality could establish itself—modernism’s elementary axiom is that details always contain some surplus which undermines the universal frame of the ‘official’ Truth. (Žižek 1992a: 120)

The most radical version of this modernist logic, Žižek contends two years after the publication of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, is deconstructionism, a critical procedure which, as noted earlier, asserts the contradictions of a given text to bring to light the rhetorical operations at work in the construction of fixed and thus false meaning (Žižek 1991: 142). As such, what Žižek terms modernist “symptomal reading” also appears to be evocative of other critical stances outlined in chapter 1 as representative of standard postmodernist thinking, namely Butler’s Foucault-inspired procedure of limitless “resignification”, understood as the perpetual process of integration within hegemonic ideology of ideology’s very “constitutive outside” (Butler 1993: 44-45, 188, 197), Lyotard’s delegitimation of totalising ideologies and subsequent legitimation of provisional context-specific systems of belief, Kristeva’s identification with the “abject” *qua* horrifying presence external to symbolic authority that forever threatens to disintegrate the latter’s consistency (Kristeva 1982: 208-209), Levinas’s ethics, with its endorsement of radical alterity as that which eludes rational explanation and, as Žižek’s explicitly argues in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Laclau and Mouffe’s embrace of difference as a symptom of society’s antagonism, of “the thesis that ‘Society doesn’t exist’, that the Social is always an inconsistent field structured around a constitutive impossibility, that every process of identification conferring

on us a fixed socio-symbolic identity is ultimately doomed to fail” (Žižek 1989: 142).

The weakness of these “modernist” conceptions of ideology and their critique, Žižek later admits, is that they are “the ultimate result of a certain transcendentalist logic” because, in line with the Lacanian orthodox *doxa*, impossibility is understood as an unsurpassable a priori void or primordial lack (Daly and Žižek 2004: 70). In a further and radical twist, Žižek detects in such a presupposition of a primordial void/antagonism “the ultimate ideological operation” (Daly and Žižek 2004: 70). What poststructuralism or what I have referred to as standard postmodernist theories celebrate as the subversive symptoms of any socio-symbolic network— namely, the grotesque, the abject, constitutive outside or Otherness— constitute, in Žižek’s view, the necessary excess that sustains the contours and efficacy of any symbolic edifice.

Differently put, ideological fantasy is at work not only in the feigning of the loss of the impossible Thing—in concealing society’s fundamental antagonism— but also, and especially, in the maintenance of a virtual distance from the impossible Thing by keeping it in focus; fantasy, therefore, functions as a virtual screen/frame on which the film/image of reality is shown while the impossible — *objet petit a* or gaze *qua* object— is not shown. In Žižek’s own words:

I am almost tempted to turn the standard formula around. Yes, on the one hand, ideology involves translating impossibility into a particular historical blockage, thereby sustaining the dream of ultimate fulfillment—a consummate encounter with the Thing. On the other hand [...] ideology also functions as a way of regulating a certain distance with such an encounter. It sustains at the level of fantasy precisely what it seeks to avoid at the level of actuality: it endeavors to convince us that the Thing cannot ever be encountered, that the Real forever eludes our grasp. So ideology appears to involve both sustenance and avoidance in regard to encountering the Thing. (Daly and Žižek 2004: 70-71)

Ideology, in this light, always already domesticates its own impossibility in such a way that what is impossible—in Lacanian terms, *jouissance*—both structures reality and establishes the very sense of what is considered possible. Ideology regulates this fantasmatic/virtual distance with the impossible as a way of avoiding its encounter. Therein resides the lesson of postmodernism in Žižek’s non-standard view and of the Real in late Lacan: the Thing can appear; the Impossible can happen and it is too traumatic to encounter. The distance/hole that separates the Thing or full enjoyment from social subjects is not ontological but virtual and thus changeable; such a distance stands as a necessary illusion that gives consistency to a given social structure and to subject *qua* social agent. The moment we come too close to the forbidden/fascinating place of the Thing, it turns into a horrifying object threatening to disintegrate the very frame of ideological reality. Put differently, the more we approach the sublime place of the Law or Master Signifier, the more palpable its latent constitutive transgression. Such a paradoxical conflation or “grimace of reality” (Žižek 1992a: 140), as earlier explained, lays bare the Real redoublement, hole, rift or impossible gaze that constitutes the subject and sustains the symbolic order.

What Žižek terms a “modernist” conception of the critique of ideology leaves out of consideration the fundamental role of *jouissance* in the constitution and sustenance of the *status quo*; *jouissance*, the impossible in symbolic reality is not “a substantial element disturbing the formal mechanism of symbolization but a purely formal curvature of symbolization itself” (Žižek 2012: 500). Such a redefinition of the impossible explains why, two years after the publication of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek felt the need to refine his perspective on ideology in *For They Know Not What They Do*, a book which, although at the time less

acclaimed than *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, offers, in Žižek's view, a more valuable insight. As he puts it in his "Foreword to the Second Edition":

There is one additional feature which makes *For they know not what they do* crucial: it establishes a critical distance towards some of the key positions of *The Sublime Object* [...] First, there is the philosophical weakness: it basically endorses a quasi-transcendental reading of Lacan, focused on the notion of the Real as the impossible Thing-in-itself; in so doing, it opens the way to the celebration of failure: to the idea that every act ultimately misfires, and that the proper ethical stance is heroically to accept this failure. (Žižek 2008b [1991]: xi-xii)

Apart from its philosophical weakness, the problem with Žižek's early perspective is that such an emphasis on impossibility *qua* inaccessible void feeds into a language of indeterminacy, undecidability, provisionality and delegitimation which stops short at the level of the ideologically impossible without ever attempting to reframe/re-screen or "risk" the impossible (Daly and Žižek 2004: 1-23). Such an enthusiasm for impossibility-in-itself leads to a type of politics in which any political gesture is always-already ironised and delegitimised by what poststructuralists hail as the ultimate subversive strategy: parody. This stance constitutes, in Žižek's view, the zero-level of ideology, an ultimately cynical standpoint that, in taking the impossible as a Real in-itself, discards ideology as a mere delusion and disregards the way in which ideology truly organises — prohibits, permits or commands— impossible enjoyment. Constructing/screening symbolic reality is correlative to constructing/screening the Real as impossible; in this light, it is therefore possible:

[t]o intervene in the Real through the symbolic. Ideology does not reside primarily in taking seriously the network of symbolic semblances which encircle the hard core of *jouissance*; at a more fundamental level, ideology is the cynical dismissal of these semblances as "mere semblances" with regard to the Real of *jouissance*. (Žižek 2012: 971, emphasis mine)

In view of this subtler approach, Žižek argues for a critique of ideology which examines how impossible enjoyment is organised in such a way that it

functions as the fantasmatic support of a given ideological system. This approach proves to be particularly useful to analyse how subjects are interpellated today by late capitalist ideology. Throughout his works, Žižek diagnoses social reality in contemporary Western liberal democracies as a “post-Oedipal permissive” order or as the reign of the superego, a world in which any form of symbolic authority is in decline (i.e. Žižek 1999a: 313-399). Freedom of choice has taken the place of the big Other and so “the subject experiences himself as freed from any symbolic constraints, lacking any internalized symbolic Prohibition, bent on experimenting with his life and pursuing his life project” (344). Paradoxically, however, the subject’s liberation from the constraints of authority, Žižek contends, generates impotence and harsher prohibitions:

Why does the decline of paternal authority and fixed social and gender roles generate new anxieties, instead of opening up a Brave New World of individuals engaged in the creative ‘care of the Self’ and enjoying the perpetual process of shifting and reshaping their fluid multiple identities? (341)

The answer is to be found in the inconsistent, reflexive or loop-like structure of the symbolic order. The renunciation to the authority of the big Other brings about the malfunctioning of the fantasy that gentrifies impossible enjoyment. This, in turn, gives rise, in Žižek’s diagnosis, to a number of masochistic tendencies that constitute a desperate attempt to avoid confrontation with the impossibility to enjoy, namely pathological narcissism, obsessional neurosis and paranoia. Pathological narcissism, to start with, is the most direct effect of what Žižek identifies as the “pleasure-seeking” official ideology:

Today [...] we are bombarded from all sides by different versions of the injunction ‘Enjoy!’, from direct enjoyment in sexual performance to enjoyment in professional achievement or in spiritual awakening. Enjoyment today effectively functions as a strange ethical duty: individuals feel guilty not for violating moral inhibitions by way of engaging in illicit pleasures, but for not being able to enjoy. (Žižek 2007: 104)

The pathological narcissist is a subject who, in disavowing the big Other's prohibition to enjoy, submits to a much more severe interdiction: the superego's prohibition not to enjoy. Given the fact that enjoyment is, by definition, impossible, the direct injunction "Enjoy!" is a more effective way to hinder the subject's access to enjoyment than the explicit prohibition to enjoy, which sustains the space for surplus enjoyment. The prohibition to enjoy, in other words, enables the subject to desire since it provides him a delusory explanation for why enjoyment is missing: "I could enjoy if only...". Once everything is permitted, by contrast, nothing is desired and the subject inevitably feels guilty for not being able to enjoy. It is in this light that Žižek reads the apparently contradictory Lacanian thesis: "If God doesn't exist, then nothing at all is permitted any longer. Neurotics prove that to us every day" (Lacan 1988 [1954-55]: 128). Neurosis, as noted above, is another subjective formation derived from the demise of symbolic authority and resultant "*superegoization*" of society (Žižek 1999a: 368, emphasis in original).

Žižek detects symptoms of neurosis in the present-day "culture of complaint" in which "far from cheerfully assuming the nonexistence of the big Other, the subject blames the Other for its failure and/or impotence, as if *the Other is guilty of the fact that it doesn't exist*" (361, emphasis in original). Personal freedom thus results in the subject's demand to the Other to intervene and compensate for his misery, a demand which, in turn, relieves the subject from real ethico-political responsibility. Žižek identifies the same neurotic symptoms in the incessant but false activity that characterises today's politics: people act not to change something but rather to prevent something from happening, so that no change takes place:

People intervene all the time, attempting to 'do something', academics participate in meaningless debates [...] those in power often prefer a critical participation to

silence —just to engage us in a dialogue, to make sure that our ominous passivity is broken. (Žižek 2007: 26-27)

A clear example of this false activity that predominates today is charity, the commonplace “ethical” response to poverty and oppression. In making regular donations to help victims of social destitution, Žižek contends, one is allowed to enjoy the position of the compassionate benefactor. Such a position, in turn, reinforces the roles benefactor-victim and absolves both subjects from the responsibility to think of the real socio-economic reasons behind destitution. Far from being an ethical act, charitable giving —and the pleasure derived from assuming the role of the philanthropist— is, in Žižek’s view, an ultimately perverse activity:

[t]he saintly figure who sacrifices himself for the benefit of others, to deliver them from their misery, secretly *wants* the others to suffer *so that he will be able to help them* [...] It is much more satisfying to sacrifice oneself for the poor victim than to enable the other to lose the status of a victim, and perhaps become even more successful than ourselves. (Žižek 2014a: 43, emphasis in original)

The third psychic tendency discernible in late capitalist, post-Oedipal societies is paranoia, a belief in an “Other of the (big) Other” which Žižek reads as a counterbalance to the cynical detachment from symbolic authority: “the typical subject today is the one who, while displaying cynical distrust of any public ideology, indulges without restraint in paranoiac fantasies about conspiracies, threats, and excessive forms of enjoyment of the Other” (Žižek 1999a: 362). One of the forms that this paranoid belief takes is the anal father or the obscene sexual harasser in what Freud termed the “False Memory Syndrome”: a fantasy formation that protects the subject from the impossibility of enjoyment as it “functions as the ultimate guarantee that *somewhere there is full, unconstrained enjoyment*” (Žižek 2000a: 75, emphasis in original). Along these lines, Žižek establishes a connection

between False Memory Syndrome and anxiety: Confronted with the suspension of the prohibition to enjoy, the subject generates the fantasy of the brutal *jouisseur* “to avoid anxiety generated by the fact that I *am* the direct (incestuous) object of parental desire; that I *desire* myself as such” (Žižek 1999a: 364, emphasis in original).

Put differently, the fantasy of the obscene father as the agency that fully enjoys prevents the subject from encountering itself among the objects, from coming too close to the object-cause of desire and finding himself conceived as Thing. It is along these lines that one should read the Lacanian-based distinction between anxiety and fear: in contrast with the standard reading, anxiety, as noted in chapter 3, does not emerge when the object-cause of desire is absent, but rather when it is too present, when we come too close to it. Fear is a different response; it is aroused not by a particular object but rather by an “irrepresentable ‘abstract’ void” behind the object (Žižek 1999a: 363).

Once I have gone over Žižek’s more nuanced conception of ideology and his diagnosis of the pathological responses that the decline of symbolic authority in present-day liberal democracies has given rise to, an important question to pose is whether it is possible to break out of the duality of symbolic prohibitions and the obscene superego injunctions. As suggested before, Žižek’s answer is an emphatic yes: “Precisely because of [the] internality of the Real to the Symbolic, it *is* possible to touch the Real through the Symbolic” (Butler et al. 2000: 121, emphasis mine). As one of Žižek’s favourite quotes from Wagner’s *Parsifal* has it, “the wound can only be healed by the spear that smote you”: the symbolic and the Real can only be reframed by the drive that enframes symbolisation in a process of reversal of “condition of impossibility” into “condition of possibility” (i.e. Žižek 1992a: 128,

1999a: 158). Žižek formulates the possibility of reframing the impossible Real and a given socio-symbolic order in the light of Lacan's concept of ethical "act" and, more recently, in terms of his own concept of "event". In an ethical act proper, according to Žižek, the subject follows the drive and painfully assumes "what is in him more than himself"; he, in Lacanian terms, "identifies with his *sinthome*", with the fantasmatic excess(es) that resists his full immersion in symbolic reality but which, nevertheless, is the very support of his reality and subjectivity.

It is important at this point to return to the aforementioned distinction between "symptom" and *sinthome*: while the former is a symbolic formation that conveys what the socio-symbolic order represses to constitute itself as a unified whole—and can therefore be dissolved through analysis—the latter is a remainder of symbolisation, a non-analysable excess that constitutes the condition of possibility for the subject and the socio-symbolic order. "Instead of dissolving his unique *sinthome*", Žižek contends, "the subject should become aware of it and learn how to use it, how to deal with it, instead of allowing the *sinthome* to determine him behind his back" (Žižek 2012: 967-968).

Along these very same lines, Žižek redefines his early formula of "going through the fantasy" as "*fully identify[ing] with the fantasy*" or "over-identifying with the domain of imagination" which "has absolutely nothing to do with the sobering act of dispelling the fantasies that obfuscate our clear perception of the state of things" but rather means "externaliz[ing ...] our imagination in its very inconsistency", experiencing that fantasy at once creates/conceals/seals nothingness (Žižek 2012: 967, emphasis in original, 1999b: 122-123). Traversing the fantasy, in other words, not only means exposing how ideological fantasy conceals society's irreducible impossibility, it rather means to overapproach the ideological fantasy or

image/screen that creates and structures impossible enjoyment as the first step to recreate and restructure reality and enjoyment. “The ethical duty of today’s artist”, Žižek contends, “is to stage fantasies that are radically desubjectivized, that cannot ever be enacted by the subject” (Žižek 2007: 57). This is precisely what postmodernist art accomplishes in Žižek’s non-standard view: in staging or bringing to light the virtual image/screen/surface that structures and sustains reality, postmodernism renders visible a black spot, vanishing point or excremental/monstrous excess which is none other than the subject’s gaze, gaze *qua* object or *sinthome*, a virtual impediment or impossible excess within the image/screen/surface that forever prevents the subject from achieving full identity but which, nevertheless, opens up the possibility of re-framing the fantasy and develop new forms of subjectivation and new socio-symbolic relations. That is to say, in actively assuming the *sinthome* as our constitutive non-assimilable excess, the fantasy coordinates that sustain reality and subjectivity can be radically changed or as Žižek puts it in his definition of an event, “a change of the very frame through which we perceive the world and engage in it [happens]” (Žižek 2014a: 10, emphasis in original).

Given the fact the symbolic field changes and with it “the parameter by which we measure the facts of change” (179), an event appears as not directly self-evident. Just as in Žižek’s account of the process of subject-formation or in his re-reading of the Fall in theology, the newly created impossible Real, Thing or “paradise lost” appears as if it always-already existed: the impossible Real is the necessary retroactive product of any act of (re)framing of symbolic reality. Therein consists Žižek’s definition of sex *qua* Real; sex designates neither an immutable biological fact nor a mutable set of symbolic constructions and exclusions; instead,

as I discuss in the next chapter, it is conceived by Žižek as symbolisation's inherent indivisible remainder, the necessary constitutive excess/leftover of any attempt on the part of the subject to symbolise his (non-)relationship with (impossible) enjoyment.



CHAPTER 6
“THERE IS A NON-RELATIONSHIP”: ŽIŽEK’S LACAN-BASED
CONCEPTION OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

Žižek’s postmodernist approach to Lacanian theory, particularly his reformulation of the Real in late Lacan as a virtual dissymmetry or excess/leftover of negativity inherent to symbolisation and constitutive of the subject has immense consequences in his conception of sexual difference. Such a conception, in turn, may shed new light on the representation of sexual relationships in Carter’s fiction; more specifically, it may offer a new perspective on Carter’s controversial use of Sadeian motives, her related use of spectacle, and her renunciation of motherhood and the exploration of the (maternal) body as the basis for women’s empowerment. Before discussing the implications of Žižek’s reformulation of the Lacanian Real on his account of sexuation, it should be noted again that neither Lacan nor Žižek conceive of sex as a biological category or as a definable set of cultural traits. When I refer to “masculine” and “feminine” positions in the ensuing discussion I mean two distinct psychic modes in which individuals, regardless of their biological sex, relate to the symbolic order and thus organise impossible enjoyment.

In *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (2012), Žižek discerns two main opposite approaches to sexual difference in Lacan’s theory which overlap with the two distinct stages in Lacan’s career as outlined here in chapters 3 and 4. Lacan’s early —and more orthodox— stage postulates sexual difference as a “differential” relationship structured around a definable axis: the presence or the absence of the phallus *qua* signifier of symbolic authority. Following this simple rule, “masculinity” encompasses those individuals who assume the position of having the phallus, while “femininity” refers to those

who, in not possessing the phallus, embody it. From *Seminar XX: On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge* (1972-73), Lacan, however,

[m]oves beyond his own earlier position which was, precisely a differential one: man and woman were opposed with regard to the couple being/having [...] Now [in *Seminar XX*] the phallic signifier is not the feature whose presence or absence distinguishes man from woman. (2012: 769, emphasis mine).

Lacan's early conception of sexual difference is still grounded in the Freudian narrative of the Oedipus complex as the agent of socialisation and its resultant association of the phallus with the male sexual organ. As such, it presupposes the Real as a pre-symbolic state which is forever left behind by the advent of symbolic castration or submission to the phallic signifier. As already advanced, the phallic signifier, in Lacan's early writings, necessarily throws the subject out-of-joint, imposes a cut that splits the individual between its symbolic identity and *jouissance* —understood at this stage as a longing for self-annihilation or union with the (m)other. Symbolic castration is ultimately propelled by a belief in the maternal phallus, the loss of an object that does not exist. As a result, the male child, for fear of losing his penis, renounces the mother as the object of desire and identifies with the father as the bearer of the phallus. The female child also abandons her longings for undifferentiation, but her submission to the paternal metaphor, on the contrary, takes the form of being the phallus: that is, she desires to be desired.

The notion of the Real that sustains Lacan's early configuration of sexuation presupposes a distinction, on the one hand, between the "pre-symbolic" male and female sexes and, on the other hand, between union and separation of the already-sexed child and the (m)other, between phallus-free *jouissance* and phallic desire. It is no wonder that, on account of this early conception, Lacan has been accused of phallogocentrism —of perpetuating a patriarchal heterosexist theoretical matrix—

by feminist scholars and proponents of queer theory. In particular, as outlined here in chapters 1 and 2, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler stand among those theorists who heavily draw on a criticism of Lacan's early account to articulate their own distinct views of sexual difference.

Cixous's and Irigaray's endorsement of women's writing as the means of subverting patriarchy and emancipating women is based on the postulation of a pre-phallic/pre-symbolic substantial realm from which individuals are primordially separated by (phallic) language and to which they can return to actualize their natural —feminine— essence.⁵⁹ The same holds for Kristeva's notion of the semiotic or extra-symbolic "*chora*" and her defence of the experience of the abject —the remains of the *chora* whose presence simultaneously produces nausea, horror and fascination— as a form of empowerment (Kristeva 1982: 208).

Butler's Foucauldian critique of Lacan, although radically opposed to French feminist theory in its approach to sex —which Butler conceives as a precarious and fluid symbolic set of identities imposed onto the fundamentally "unlivable" or "uninhabitable" body (Butler 1990: 186, 1993: 3)— also relies on differentiation between the symbolic order and its "constitutive outside", the latter referring to abject identities or practices which can be potentially integrated into the symbolic norm through a process of "resignification" (45-46, 180). In *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (2000) Butler expands on her criticism of Lacan's theory of sexuation, which in turn serves as a response to Žižek and to Laclau with whom, as noted earlier, she co-authored this book.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ As exposed in chapter 2, women's writing or "*écriture féminine*" is conceived as the textual exploration of the maternal body and subsequent reproduction of the experience of intrauterine enjoyment (Cixous 1976: 875-876; Irigaray 1991: 39).

⁶⁰ In reporting Butler's disagreements with Žižek, I follow Sarah Kay's "The Real of Sexual Difference: Imagining, Thinking, Being", a chapter included in her monograph on Žižek's work

Butler sets out to confront the Lacanian concept of the Real as impossibility/ineffability arguing that it forecloses the actualisation of what she reads as real, non-normative sexualities. “Who poses the original and final ineffability of sexual difference”, Butler asks, “and what aims does such a positing achieve? [...] Do we accept this description of the fundamental ground of intelligibility, or do we begin to ask what kinds of foreclosures such a positing achieves, and at what expense?” (Butler et al 2000: 145). As Sarah Kay concludes from this questioning, Butler understands the Real of sexual difference quite differently from Žižek, who, as stressed here throughout the preceding chapters, emphasises that:

[t]he real, for Lacan, is *not* a content and could never be recuperated as a content [...Butler] systematically reads the real as if it were the symbolic, and the symbolic as if it were the imaginary. At each stage she semanticizes Lacan’s thought, substituting symbolic difference with ideological content. (Kay 2003: 93, emphasis in original).⁶¹

In *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997), Butler semanticises the impossible or uninhabitable Real as the desire for the same-sex parent; what is primordially repressed or foreclosed in the constitution of the subject as a sexed being —what threatens thus to disintegrate symbolic identity— is not incest but homosexuality; in Butler’s own words:

If the assumption of femininity and the assumption of masculinity proceed through the accomplishment of an always tenuous heterosexuality, we might understand the force of this accomplishment as mandating the abandonment of homosexual attachments or, perhaps more trenchantly, *preempting* the possibility of homosexual attachment, a foreclosure of possibility which produces a domain of homosexuality understood as unlivable passion and ungrievable loss. (Butler 1997: 135, emphasis in original)

(Kay 2003: 73-101), and Jorge Sacido Romero’s essay in Galician focused on the Butler-Žižek debate on sexual difference (2007).

⁶¹ Contrary to Žižek’s usage, Kay systematically starts the Lacanian Real in lower case throughout her monograph on Žižek’s work.

Becoming sexualised within the heterosexist norm, Butler claims, requires foreclosing homosexuality as a precondition for normative desire in such a way that, once submitted to phallic identification proper, homosexuality appears as a psychosis-generating experience; both “men” and “women” alike feel “terror” at the prospect of homosexuality, a dread of “being in some sense a figure of monstrosity or abjection” (136). Butler’s affirmation of homosexuality as the unintelligible Real involves, in Jorge Sacido Romero’s view, a “*minimum* of differentiation”: the distinction between the male and female sexes needs to be presupposed in order to articulate same-sex and different-sex attachments. “Why does same-sex attachment”, Sacido Romero asks, “replace the attachment to the opposite sex as the primordially repressed ‘passionate attachment’ from which mental life emerges? (Sacido Romero 2007: 42 [translation mine]). This is precisely Žižek’s point when he claims that “sexual difference [in late Lacan] is not differential” (2012: 769). Sex *qua* Real is to be conceived as the foundational virtual redoublement/rift/abyss that, as seen in chapter 4 and according to Žižek, is integral to the experience of being human. Sexual difference, in other words, is not a differential relationship but a non-relationship that at once constitutes and splits any attempt at symbolising sex.

The most immediate conclusion to be drawn from this reformulation of sex *qua* Real is that Butler’s and French feminists’ approaches to sexual difference, in arguing for either a resignification of or a renunciation of the symbolic order respectively, paradoxically reproduce, in Žižek’s view, the same binary logic at work in Lacan’s early writings. As such, though apparently opposed, both stances reinforce the differential matrix in which patriarchal, heterosexist distinctions are grounded. They all seem to disregard Lacan’s late writings, particularly his account

of sexualisation in *Seminar XX*, which, as suggested above, is founded on his later formulation of the Real as the necessary virtual obverse or retroactive product of symbolisation.

“Sexuation”, Žižek argues, “is the price to be paid for the constitution of the subject, for its entry into the space of symbolization” (2012: 747). Being sexualised is strictly correlative to passing from instinct to drive, to the primordially repressed process of being separated, the gesture of self-relating negativity that at once constitutes and divides subject and/from world. Sexual (in)difference, in this light, is homologous to the virtual (in)difference or (non)relationship between subject and *objet petit a* as expressed in the Lacanian formula of fantasy $\$ \langle \rangle a$. This explains why Žižek replaces the well-known and polemical Lacanian dictum “there is no sexual relationship” with “there is a sexual non-relationship” (Žižek 2012: 796): the former, in line with Lacan’s early conception of the Real *qua* inaccessible beyond, presupposes the existence of two distinct entities forever separated by an insurmountable void; the latter, by contrast, posits the existence of two sides of one and the same entity that are “se-parated” by a virtual rift/difference in such a way that if the difference vanishes —if they directly relate to one another— they cease to exist. As Žižek has it:

‘[t]here is a non-relationship’ implies something much more radical: the positivization of the impossibility of the sexual relationship in a paradoxical ‘trans-finite’ object [*objet petit a*] which overlaps with its own lack or which is in excess with regard to itself. (796)

This means, therefore, that masculine and feminine are not two entities out-of-sync with one another but rather two reactive or secondary attempts to symbolise the unsymbolisable virtual rift that paradoxically enables their constitution. To put it differently, each sex is not opposed to the other sex but rather to itself, its full identity is, as it were, necessarily thwarted from within. In short, “sexual difference

is thus ultimately not the difference between the sexes, but the difference which cuts short across the very heart of identity of each sex, stigmatizing it with the mark of impossibility” (2012: 760). This brings us to the lesson of postmodernism in Žižek’s non-standard view: what appears as an obstacle to a relationship between subject and other, masculine and feminine, is paradoxically its condition of possibility: the (sexed) subject emerges through its very impossibility, the moment it loses itself.

Implicit in Žižek’s approach to the formulation of the Real of sexual difference in late Lacan is a radical redefinition of castration and the phallus. Castration no longer means separating the subject from the (m)other and setting desire in motion; it rather means separating the subject from itself and setting the drive in motion to perpetually mark such a virtual separation (incision/generation). This, as seen in the previous chapters, constitutes the subject’s fundamental fantasy or primordial repression; a gesture that is at once accomplished and concealed for the subject to constitute itself. In arguing for a redefinition of castration in late Lacan, Žižek departs from the Oedipal drama and adopts Lacan’s myth of the “lamella”, which, as noted in chapter 4, is developed in his *Seminar XI* (1964):

The lamella is something extra-flat, which moves like the amoeba [...] it goes everywhere. And it is something [...] that is related to what the sexed being loses in sexuality, it is, like the amoeba in relation to sexed beings, immortal —because it survives any division [...] This lamella, this organ, whose characteristic is not to exist, but which is nevertheless an organ [...] is the libido [...] qua pure life instinct. (Lacan 1998 [1964]: 196-197)

The lamella is the subject’s *jouissance* or libido, its indivisible remainder, *objet petit* or pure gaze: a fantasmatic excess/leftover that constitutes and simultaneously renders the subject split. As Lacan has it, the lamella does not exist; it is an organ of pure semblance that insists: it is pure drive, the uncanny too-muchness of life, a monstrous compulsion to mark the primordial rift, the inhuman

core of every human being. With this fantasmatic scission, as explained in chapter 4, natural instinct turns into drive and psychic life is thus born. The biological organism, as a result, undergoes a painful change: it is psychically fragmented into parts where the drive compulsively marks this new virtual separation of subject and world. In this light, a sexual identity is a mode of domesticating the drive and shaping desire through fantasy. As seen in chapter 4, when the subject enters the inconsistent domain of the big Other (and the superego), it submits to the phallus *qua* signifier of prohibitory authority and thus tames or organises impossible *jouissance*.

In *Seminar XX*, Lacan distinguishes two modes in which subjects, regardless of their biological sex, submit to the phallus and symbolise their (non-)relationship to (impossible) enjoyment: the masculine and the feminine sides in his “formulae of sexuation”. Žižek reads the masculine side in Lacan’s formulae as “all x are submitted to the function F” and the feminine as “non-all x are submitted to the function F”, with “x” standing for subjectivity, for subjects *qua* beings of language—and as such inherently split—and F standing for phallic function or symbolic authority (Žižek 1993: 56). Once having glossed Lacan’s formulae, Žižek argues that they should be read with care: assuming the masculine position as “all” does not mean being wholly integrated into the symbolic order, completely fitting into a consistent identity without remainder. Conversely, assuming the feminine position as “non-all” does not mean being partially integrated into the symbolic, with some substantial beyond that resists the symbolic mandate. “We would commit a fatal mistake”, Žižek contends:

[i]f we were to read such resistance as the effect of a preexistent feminine substance opposing symbolization, as if woman is split between her true Nature and the imposed symbolic mask. A cursory glance at Lacan's ‘formulae of sexuation’ tells us that woman's exclusion does not mean that some positive entity is prevented from being integrated into the symbolic order: it would be wrong to conclude, from

‘not-all woman is submitted to the phallic signifier’ that there is something in her which is not submitted to it. (57-58)

On the contrary, it is precisely because “all” of “man” *qua* symbolic identity is integrated into the symbolic that there must be an exception —*objet petit a*— or retroactive effect constitutive of this subjective position; and it is because the identity of “woman” is “non-all” that there is nothing in this position that is not caught in the symbolic order —no ineffable feminine secret— “woman” is immersed in the domain of language “*without exception*” (Žižek 2000a: 145, emphasis in original). This explains why the feminine subject in Lacan’s formulae needs to be distinguished from the concept of woman as enigma as it appears for instance in courtly love in the guise of the inaccessible and capricious Lady, in *noir* cinema in the shape of the lethal *femme fatale* or in some feminine stances as the unsymbolisable eternal feminine essence. These notions constitute, in Žižek’s view, masculine fantasies par excellence, the necessary exceptions —*objets petit a*— that ground masculinity as “all”.⁶²

Individuals who assume a masculine position, in this light, exchange impossible *jouissance* for surplus-*jouissance*, what Žižek also terms “*jouissance* of the drives” and defines as the “the closed, ultimately solipsistic, circuit of drives which find their satisfaction in idiotic masturbatory (autoerotic) activity, in the perverse circulating around *objet petit a* as the object of a drive” (143). The feminine subject, with no exception or *objet petit a* to ground her virtual consistency, organises impossible *jouissance* differently; this subject finds satisfaction in being talked about or looked at, that is, in utter alienation in the

⁶² Another fantasmatic figure that sustains the consistency of the masculine position is the aforementioned anal father, the obscene father-*jouisseur* from Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1912) whose murder founds the Law.

fantasmatic screen/image/surface that constitutes the big Other and simultaneously conceals its non-existence. This specifically feminine organisation of impossible enjoyment is termed by Žižek “*jouissance* of the Other” and is best perceived in the phenomenon of “feminine masquerade”, the gesture of assuming multiple symbolic masks behind which no consistent subjectivity can be identified. As such, the feminine subject is closer to the “night of the world” or pure subject —“the subject *par excellence*”, because its non-all position lays bare the primordial void or negativity which is inherent to being subject: what the symbolic masks/identities hide is “nothing or, at the most, nothing but the shapeless, mucoid stuff of life-substance” (Žižek 1994: 150, 1996: 160). In this very precise sense, one could argue that what distinguishes postmodernism from modernism in Žižek’s non-standard account is a distinctly feminine gesture: in coming too close to the luring and spectral screen/image/surface that structures symbolic reality and thus subjectivity, one finds “inert matter”, a nauseating obscene excess, an inconsistency that renders palpable the impossible “dreaded void”, pure gaze or gaze *qua* object which is the subject (Žižek 1992a: 137).

Along these same lines, Žižek reads as feminine what was defined in chapter 5 as the true “ethical act”. Unlike the transgression of the law’s prohibitions —an act that paradoxically sustains the socio-symbolic texture given the fact that the consistency of the law resides in its very transgression— or the psychotic “*passage ‘a l’acte*”— in which the Law is foreclosed— the feminine act “*obeys it [the law] thoroughly*”, adheres to the symbolic texture without exception, over-identifies with the symbolic fantasy and exposes it as inconsistent or non-all (Žižek 1994: 147, emphasis in original). “What is the act”, Žižek notes elsewhere, “[i]f not the moment when the subject who is its bearer *suspends* the network of symbolic

fictions which serve as a support to his daily life and confronts again the radical negativity on which they are founded” (Žižek 1992a: 53, emphasis in original). This momentary suspension of the symbolic fantasy, in turn, enables the subject to re-create the symbolic texture and thus re-screen the relationship with impossible enjoyment.

I may conclude this chapter on sexual (non-)difference *qua* Real with a reference to Žižek’s examination of a fantasy which still today sustains the consistency of the masculine subject and, as such, contributes to create a symmetrical patriarchal view of sexual relationships: “woman” as the sublime and obscene Thing. Throughout his work, Žižek analyses three prime examples of such a fantasy figure, namely the Lady in courtly love poetry, the *femme fatale* of *noir* films and the role of the sacrificial Mother. In “Courtly Love or Woman as Thing” (Žižek 1994: 89-112), Žižek establishes a homology between the construction of the ideal of woman as the beloved Lady and the constitution of the ideological fantasy or sublime Thing that sustains the impossible wholeness of any given socio-symbolic edifice. In medieval poems, the Lady is depicted by the lover-troubadour both as a fascinating, quasi-divine presence and as a monstrous lethal master that imposes impossible demands. What “elevates” a common woman “into the dignity of the Thing”, Žižek argues, is not a positive trait but the troubador’s very inaccessibility to the Lady.

The crucial point not to miss, as noted earlier with regard to the fundamental operation of ideology, is that this inaccessibility is not ontological: it is neither inherent to the woman herself nor to the place she occupies —the Thing is not impossible in itself. Such inaccessibility is rather of the troubadour’s own making. This creative gesture, in Žižek’s analysis, stands as the fundamental operation in the

construction of the Lady *qua* Thing. The poetic voice-lover creates and regulates the fantasmatic infinite distance towards the Lady by staging his servitude and continuously enacting artificial failures: “it is the servant, therefore, who writes the screenplay —that is, who actually pulls the strings and dictates the activity of the woman [dominatrix]” (92). As such, Žižek establishes a link between the lover’s sublimation of the Lady and perversion: the troubadour finds enjoyment in his tortuous submission to the superegoic Lady, which in turn both sustains the virtual gap that separates him from the Lady and prevents him from confronting the Real trauma of the impossibility to enjoy.

Among the modern versions of the courtly Lady, Žižek highlights the *femme fatale* in noir films, “the traumatic Woman-Thing who, through her greedy and capricious demands, brings ruin to the *hard-boiled* hero” (102). The “fatality” of the *femme fatale*, Žižek observes, depends on her relationship to the cruel tyrannical gangland boss who represents the underside of the law or father enjoyment. It is this obscene father, in Žižek’s view, that the *femme fatale* stands for and with whom the male protagonist truly identifies. If the hero eventually manages to overcome his attraction towards her —that is, if he domesticates impossible enjoyment— the socio-symbolic law is restored. Thus, neither the fantasy of the courtly Lady nor the *femme fatale* constitutes a threat to patriarchy; quite the contrary, they function, just as the anal father, as the fantasmatic exception that grounds the consistency of patriarchal ideology and its power relationships.

The third patriarchal idealisation of woman as Thing Žižek analyses is the sacrificial Mother or fake woman. In “The Thing from Inner Space” (2000), he draws a distinction between the feminine subject —as seen above, the subject who, in adopting various symbolic masks assumes and displays her constitutive void —

and the sacrificial maternal woman or what he calls following Jacques-Alain Miller (1997), “*la femme à la postiche*”, the fake, phony woman. Contrary to what the term suggests, the fake, phony woman is not a position assumed by a subject who indulges in masquerade but rather:

[t]he woman who takes refuge from the void in the very heart of her subjectivity, from the ‘not-having-it’ which marks her being, in the phony certitude of ‘having it’ (of serving as the stable support of family life, of rearing children, her true possession, etc.). (Žižek 2000c: 231-232)

The figure of the fake, phony woman gives the impression of being “all”, of having a “firmly anchored being”; her *raison d’être* is to appear as the calm and safe haven in which individuals can always take refuge. What is interesting about this ideal of woman, Žižek observes, is that, just as the courtly Lady and the *femme fatale*, it supports the male identity in patriarchy by standing as its —this time official— complementary opposite. The assumption of this role, as a result, creates a fantasmatic symmetrical view of the sexes. In contrast to this ideal, it is the feminine subject who, posing as a hysterical composite of semblances covering nothing —and thus flaunting her castration, poses a serious threat to patriarchy. Put differently, “the paradox”, according to Žižek:

[i]s that the more the woman is denigrated, reduced to an inconsistent and insubstantial composite of semblances around a void, the more she threatens the firm male substantial self-identity [...] and, on the other hand, the more the woman is a firm, self-enclosed substance, the more she supports male identity. (2000c: 233)

The problem with all these modalities of the patriarchal fantasy of Woman as Thing is that they provide, still today, the fantasy coordinates of the identity of many individuals —as either “masculine” or “feminine” subjects— which determine their sexual relationships. Opposing patriarchal domination, in Žižek’s view, inevitably entails undermining the fantasy-support of femininity and

masculinity, a hard and painful renunciation because it requires doing away with our symbolic identifications, what we unconsciously assume as the core of our being. Herein resides what Žižek sees as the truly ethical act: identifying with one's *sinthome*, with the inhuman excess or unsymbolisable core that, as the feminine subject shows in Žižek's conception of sexual difference, constitutes us as humans.

Zizek's conclusions appear to be in tune with Angela Carter's denunciation of "all the mythic versions of woman" as "consolatory nonsenses" in *The Sadeian Woman* (Carter 2009 [1979]: 5, emphasis mine). In particular, they shed new light on Carter's controversial demystification of the organs of reproduction, what she denounces as "the Mother myth", and with her proposal of the polemical figure of the "moral pornographer" to investigate why subjects may enjoy being victimised. Furthermore, Zizek's Lacan-based conception of sexual difference and subsequent formulation of the masculine and feminine positions on the basis of the subject's (non-)relationship to (impossible) enjoyment offer a new perspective to approach the use of spectacle paired with the presence of excessive nauseating matter in Carter's fiction.

The ensuing chapters provide an analysis in a selection of Carter's short tales of what Žižek identifies as distinctly postmodernist traits in his non-standard account. In each of the tales, in turn, Žižek's demystification of the patriarchal fantasies of man and woman together with his definition of the masculine and feminine subjects underpin my analysis of Carter's representation of sexual difference. The identification of distinctly postmodernist features in Carter's short fiction will also be analysed in the light of Žižek's conception of the critique of ideology as a process of "going through the fantasy". As expounded in chapter 5, the outcome of traversing the fantasy and identifying with one's *sinthome* or

constitutive excess of negativity renders palpable the inconsistency of our symbolic frame or picture of reality, a traumatic experience which, nevertheless, may enable the change/reframing of such a symbolic frame.



PART III
TEXTUAL ANALYSIS



Slavoj Žižek's non-standard conception of postmodernist theory and aesthetics may shed new light on the categorisation of Angela Carter as a postmodernist writer as well as on the dispute among Carter's scholars over the ethico-political value of her fiction. In the course of the ensuing chapters, my critical approach to Carter's narrative will try to demonstrate the extent to which Carter's characteristic artificiality in the construction of settings, characters and plots befits Žižek's account of postmodernist aesthetics in terms of an over-identification with fantasy—with the image/appearance/surface/screen that domesticates enjoyment and constitutes symbolic reality—and of an over-proximity to the sublime Thing—to the virtual object whose prohibition at once boosts symbolization and impedes the closure of the symbolic texture.

My Žižekian approach to Carter's fiction, therefore, needs to be distinguished from the readings reviewed in chapter 2, which ground Carter's postmodernism in her use of intertextual parody, in her foregrounding of an spectacular play of surfaces and in her adoption of the mode of the carnivalesque—and its related forms of the grotesque and the abject—and consequently either/both praise or/and dismiss her fiction as politically progressive—since it asserts ontological indeterminacy and thus favours an endless deconstruction and reconstruction of forever provisional identities—or/and retrogressive—because its emphasis on empty surfaces or signifiers, indeterminacy and delegitimation precludes any real chance of emancipatory political action.

Drawing on Žižek's late conception of the critique of ideology based on his redefinition of the Real in late Lacan, what these readings of Carter's literary practice miss is the truth of the signifier/surface/image/appearance/screen *as* signifier/surface/image/appearance/screen. That is to say, surfaces not only

structure and sustain the false consistency of symbolic reality, they also constitute what is conceived as impossible in (the symbolic frame of) reality, in Lacanian terms, impossible *jouissance*. The way to change reality and thus reframe the impossible is, as explained in the preceding chapters, to approach and intervene in the fantasmatic surface. This distinctly postmodernist procedure renders visible at the heart of the fascinating surface/image/signifier/appearance/screen an inassimilable excess which takes the form of disgusting matter, a monstrous character or a terrifying abyss. Such an excess, in Žižek's view, is none other than pure subject: the subject's gaze, gaze *qua* object or *sinthome*. As earlier discussed, coming too close to the fantasy frame of reality and assuming this non-assimilable, inhuman excess as the subject's own condition of possibility is the first step to change or reframe reality and develop new forms of subjectivisation and new socio-symbolic relationships.

This seems to be Carter's point when emphasising the subversive potential of late twentieth century "video-gadgetry": feature films, TV soap-operas and other audiovisual products that "do our dreaming for us"; in other words, that frame our imagination by creating the fantasmatic texture that teaches us how to organise enjoyment and how to desire (Carter 2005 [1990]: xxiii). Carter acknowledges that these audiovisual products, just as fairy and folk tales in previous historical stages, work in the service of a given ideological edifice, at once naturalising fantasmatic identities while concealing the true oppression of individuals.

Yet, in coming too close to the imagery they construct, one can encounter what is conceived to be impossible, "what is in (the fantasy of) me and of society more than myself and than society", and thus, although painfully, one may recreate the symbolic. "Within that 'video-gadgetry'", Carter argues, "might light the source

of a continuation, even a transformation, of story-telling [...] The human imagination is infinitely resilient, surviving colonization, transportation, involuntary servitude, imprisonment, bans on language, the oppression of women” (xxiii).

As earlier argued, Žižek’s conception of postmodernist art in terms of an overproximity to fantasy explains my choice of the primary corpus. I will concentrate my analysis of Carter’s fiction on seven “tales” from all her four collections because in the “tale”, as opposed to more extended narratives and in Carter’s view, the status of imagery (images, tropes, themes, settings and genres) as symbolic fantasies or artifacts is more markedly evident. As Carter puts it in her “Afterword” to *Fireworks* (1974): “The limited trajectory of the short narrative concentrates its meaning. Sign and sense fuse to an extent impossible to achieve among the multiplying ambiguities of an extended narrative” (Carter 1995 [1974]: 459). In this very same afterword, Carter explains that her short pieces are not short stories but tales; “formally”, she notes:

[t]he tale differs from the short story in that it makes few pretences at the imitation of life. The tale does not log everyday experience, as the short story does; it *interprets everyday experience through a system of imagery derived from subterranean areas behind everyday experience*, and therefore the tale cannot betray its readers into a false knowledge of everyday experience [...] Its style will tend to be ornate, unnatural — and thus operate against the perennial human desire to believe the word as fact [...] *it retains a singular moral function —that of provoking unease.* (459, emphasis mine)

Carter’s explanation of the form of the tale and of its moral function bears some resemblance to Žižek’s notion of “going through the fantasy” as the true ethical act, a gesture accomplished, for example, in the postmodernist overproximity to the sublime surface of socio-symbolic reality and subsequent staging of its underside: the obscene dream-like forms that at once sustain and disturb the fantasmatic consistency of everyday experience. In this light and as earlier explained, everyday reality has the status of an “appearance of an

appearance” or “a negation of a negation”, the fantasmatic result of a double operation of fantasy. This is the effect Carter seems to create in her tales by foregrounding artificiality. As it will be discussed in the analysis of the tales, Carter systematically produces an impression of artificiality or unreality by representing settings, characters and objects as parts of a stage set, of a *tableau vivant* (still life) or of a Grand Guignol, as reflections on a mirror or on other characters’ gaze, as shadows on a cave, as portraits on a canvas, as film scenes on a screen, or as printed words on a blank sheet of paper. Even the most natural settings are described as painted landscapes. Yet as one overapproaches —as some of her characters do— the heart of this apparently depthless surface, one confronts an unbearable excess, a source of inexplicable unease that takes the form of either monstrous matter or of a dark abyss that threatens to engulf the subject. Such an excess, drawing on Žižek’s Lacan-based conception of the Real and the of subject, hints at the presence of the subject as pure gaze, as the point of self-relating negativity or “night of the world” that forever eludes symbolisation but which is paradoxically its condition of possibility.

In many of Carter’s tales with an autodiegetic mode of narration, the narrator, male or female, experiences at some points in the narrative profound anxiety or what they term “vertigo” when they come too close to an object — character, place or thing— that initially produces irresistible attraction. An example of this encounter can be found in “Elegy for a Freelance”, the tale that closes Carter’s first collection of short tales, *Fireworks* (1974). The unnamed female narrator of “Elegy for a Freelance”, who recalls her life in a derealised and decaying London on the weeks before a *coup d’état* and outbreak of civil war, notes how she used to feel vertigo when contemplating the city, which “had never looked more

beautiful but [she] did not know, then, that it seemed beautiful because it was doomed” (Carter 1995 [1974]: 98). “I was quite helpless”, the narrator informs us:

[b]efore the attraction of gravity. I was overwhelmed. I became powerless [...] I wanted to jump; but I must not jump. Pallor, shallow breathing, a prickle of cold sweat—I exhibited all the symptoms of panic, as I did when I met X. *That* was like finding myself on the edge of an abyss but the vertigo that I felt then came from a sense of recognition. This abyss was that of my own emptiness; I plunged instantly, for my innocence was so perfect that I saw in this submission the height of sophistication. (98, emphasis in original)

Such a suffocating experience is described in very much the same terms as Žižek’s notion of “identification with the *sinthome*” or pure subject: “in its most radical dimension” he argues apropos of the subject in postmodernism, “the ‘subject’ is *nothing but* this dreaded ‘void’—in *horror vacui*, the subject simply fears himself, his constitutive void” (Žižek 1992a: 139-140). “Elegy for a Freelance”, as the title suggests, directly addresses X as narratee, a paranoid freelance assassin executed by the narrator herself, as well as by other members of a terrorist cell to which all belonged for having broken the rules of the cell. X embodies transgression itself, the cell’s and the narrator’s *objet petit a*, a traumatic excess that needs to be murdered for the cell to retain its illusory consistency. Paradoxically, however, this murder brings disorder to the cell until it eventually disintegrates.

Significantly enough, the killing of X coincides with a radical socio-symbolic change located in the background of the story: the collapse of the Capital—as the narrator hints when saying that “it was legal to own private property, to rent it out, in those days” (Carter 1995 [1974]: 96)—and the advent of a socialist military order embodied in the figure of the “commissar”, whose voice the narrator

reports through direct and indirect speech in search for answers.⁶³ The commissar, thus, stands as the narrator's new big Other or "subject supposed to know". The overproximity to the beautiful and invariably feminine surface of socio-symbolic reality and the subsequent "apparition of the Thing" as its unbearable obscene counterpart is a pattern repeated in all the stories to be analysed here. Carter's stories, as already noted, further resort to and rework the topic of the Fall in *Genesis* to depict such an encounter. My aim is to examine the extent to which characters and the narrative itself confront the impossible Real and traverse the fantasy that arranges *jouissance* and the self as a social/desiring subject in a number of six distinct social settings.



⁶³ "Commissar" designates "an official of the Communist Party in the former Soviet Union responsible for political education, especially in a military unit". (<http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/commissar>)

CHAPTER 7
GOING THROUGH THE FANTASY OF THE ROMANTIC SELF:
“REFLECTIONS”

“Reflections” (published in *Fireworks*, 1974) is a first person narrative that recounts the traumatic nightmare-like experience of going through a mirror and coming back from it, breaking the mirror into pieces. The story begins with the narrator’s calm stroll through a picturesque wood being disturbed by his stumbling upon a seashell concealed under the leaves. Such an unexpected encounter makes him *fall* and lose his walking stick, an event followed by the sudden apparition of a female wood ranger that forces his way into the house of an androgynous old creature.

Despite being very dense in symbols and in literary, mythological and philosophical allusions—in Marina Warner’s opinion, it is “one of Carter’s cloudier tales” (Warner 2007 [1994]: 261)—“Reflections” has hardly received critical attention. Among the essays, articles and monographs on Carter’s fiction, I could only find a few passing references to the tale, most of which emphasise its “postmodernist” indeterminacy or duplicity of meaning. Laura Mulvey, for instance, quotes “Reflections” as exemplary of the logic of hybridisation, of “the merging of the differences into one” that, in her view, recurs throughout Carter’s writing (Mulvey 2007 [1994]: 244). She particularly highlights the use of the motif of the mirror-image in this tale as “the separation of sameness into two” as well as the presence of the androgynous Tiresias as an instance of de-differentiation of sexes (244).⁶⁴

⁶⁴ What Mulvey terms “hybrid” can be read as one of the names for de-differentiation, what theorists of standard postmodernism as a period term and as literary practice consider to be one of the defining features of the cultural phenomenon (Haraway 1991: 149-150, Hassan 1987: 70).

Marina Warner also highlights the tale's inconclusiveness in what she interprets as an opposition between the narrator's final act —killing Tiresias and breaking the mirror into pieces— and Carter's use of ironic authorial comments:

[t]he iconoclasm of the protagonist when he desecrates and destroys the hermaphrodite idol does not win the author's whole-hearted applause. Even though his act rejects the deity's wholeness as a kind of tyranny, and stands for the energy of sexual difference (I think) and for the shaping of identity achieved by resistance, there is irony and sorrow in the last paragraph too. (Warner 2007 [1994]: 261)

Lorna Sage makes a more conclusive, and in my view more insightful, remark about "Reflections" when she describes it as an "inside-out pastoral" even if she does not develop the reasons for such a designation (Sage 2007a [1994]: 29). Pastoral is a term broadly referring to a mode of literature addressed to urban audiences in which shepherds' life is idealised as being in communion with the natural landscape. Judith Haber characterises the pastoral as a literary genre ultimately dependent on "absence, discontinuity and loss", whose goal is "the recovery of an Edenic past", a return to a harmonious pre-symbolic state of union or indifference with nature "by creating images of idyllicism in their works" (Haber 2006 [1994]: 1). "Reflections" opens with the narrator introducing himself as a wanderer in a highly stylised wood reminiscent of the picturesque landscapes that recur in nature poems from the Age of Sensibility (1740-1798) and from the Romantic period (1798-1824):

I was walking in a wood one late spring day of skimming cloud and shower-tarnished sunshine, the sky lucid if intermittently blue —cool, bright, tremulous weather. A coloratura blackbird perched on a bough curded with a greenish may-blossom let fall a flawed chain of audible pearl; I was alone in the spring-enchanted wood. (Carter 1995 [1974]: 81)⁶⁵

⁶⁵ I borrow these periodising terms from Aidan Day's *Romanticism* (1996). By "The Age of Sensibility" Day means a period ranging roughly from the publication of James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1726-30) and the death of Alexander Pope (1744) through to the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth. Day defines this period as a "pre-romantic" age characterised by "a recoil from Neoclassical 'correctness' towards a stress on spontaneity, towards an emphasis on humanitarian values and on the idea of original genius and the importance of the imagination" (Day 1996: 49). Among the representatives of the Age of Sensibility,

Raymond Williams categorises pre-romantic and romantic walk poetry as “neo-pastoral romance”, a new form of the pastoral in which the poet’s aim is to recreate an imaginary bond with nature to reassert his “natural” self *qua* synthetic humanitarian imagination as opposed to the anti-humanism of city life. “The description of nature”, in Williams’ words, “is absorbed into the essentially different world of an idealized romantic love” (Williams 1973: 22-23). This appears to be the poet-like narrator’s intention in “Reflections”: as he advances in the description of his surroundings, it is more and more evident that the landscape he is walking through is his artificial composition, a fantasy product or, more specifically, a reflection of his despairing solitude. Through his imagination, the narrator’s despair appears as transfigured into “last night’s rain”, which had “dowered [the wood] with the poignant transparency, the unique, inconsolable quality of rainy countries, as if all was glimpsed through tears” (Carter 1995 [1974]: 81).

In terms of Žižek’s Lacan-based notion of fantasy, the wood functions at the tale’s opening as a fantasy image/screen/frame that both conceals its creator’s despairing isolation and constitutes a pleasurable or “enchanted” semblance of union with the woods as the consoling love-object. The narrator’s process of fantasising is assisted by “luring music”, which takes the form of “a young girl’s

Day situates poets like William Collins (1721-59), Mark Akenside (1721-70), Joseph Warton (1722-1800) and William Cowper (1731-1800). The Romantic period is defined as a continuation of the Age of Sensibility in its aggrandisement of the imagination as man’s power to synthesise self and other (nature) in the transcendental realm of the poetic symbol. As is well-known, the major representatives of the Romantic canon in English literature are the “Big Six” poets: William Blake (1757-1827), William Wordsworth (1770-1850), S.T. Coleridge (1772-1834), Lord Byron (1788-1824), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) and John Keats (1795-1821) (Day 1996: xi).

voice, [...] a richly crimson sinuosity of a voice that pierces the senses of the listener like an arrow in a dream” (81). The image the narrator uses to depict the effect of the girl’s voice reinforces an interpretation of nature as the narrator’s love-object or object of desire since it stands, in my opinion, as a clear allusion to Cupid’s arrow, which arbitrarily wounds individuals with the ordeal of love.⁶⁶ This allusion therefore suggests that romantic love can both produce pleasure and pain; in Lacanian terms, the experience of love is that of *jouissance*.

The ambiguity that pertains to love and to the girl’s voice as love-object — both enhancing the narrator’s reverie and turning it into a violent psychic experience— seems to be reinforced by the choice of the adjectives “enchancing” and “luring”, which mean both to seduce and to entrap. Such ambiguity is evocative of paradoxical figures that have similar effects on the imagination/heart of Romantic poets. Coleridge’s Lady Geraldine in “Christabel” (1816) or Keats’s “Belle Dame Sans Merci” (1819) and “Lamia” (1819) are some examples of what Adriana Craciun terms the “fatal women of Romanticism”, beautiful evil ladies that use their powers of enchantment to ultimately destroy their lovers (Craciun 2003: 145).

The luring voice the narrator describes in “Reflections”, just as the *femme fatales* in romantic poems, could also be read as a version of the mermaid, a legendary aquatic creature of pure evil, half-woman, half-fish—in Greek mythology half-bird— whose enchanting voice would lure sailors soon-to-be-shipwrecked to nearby rocks (Coleman 2007: 946). These deadly female fantasies appear to be the obverse of the quintessential romantic representation of nature as

⁶⁶ As is well-known, Cupid in Roman mythology is the god of love or desire, whose counterpart in Greek classical mythology is Eros. Cupid is said to be the son of Venus and Jupiter and Psyche’s husband, and is often depicted as “a blind winged god, carrying a bow, who fires arrows into the hearts of those he wishes to become lovers” (Coleman 2007: 260).

the feminine other that stimulates and assists the construction of the romantic self as absolute imagination: a creative mind capable of synthesising self and other in the transcendental realm of poetry. In many romantic poems nature is given the form of the Lady to which the poet's imagination "marries" or of the Mother who "favours the poet's solemn song".⁶⁷

In this light, the constitution of the fantasy of feminine nature in romantic poetry could be read as following Žižek's logic of the sublime/obscene (Woman) Thing explained here in chapters 3 and 6. The deadly seductress is *objet petit a*, a figure of pure transgression or deadly *jouissance* that erupts the moment the poet comes too close to his fantasy of feminine loving nature. That the construction of nature in "Reflections" displays this very same logic seems to be proven by the fact that the girl's luring voice literally condenses *jouissance*: "She sang", the narrator says, "and her words thrilled through [him], for they seemed filled with a meaning that had no relation to meaning as [he] understood it" (Carter 1995 [1974]: 81). The

⁶⁷ These images are to be found in two poems often cited as representative of the idealization of nature as the feminine love object in romantic poetry, namely Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" (1802) and Shelley's "Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude" (1816). In the former, Coleridge constructs nature as the feminine object of desire with which the poet marries to fulfill his self as the artificer of a synthesis of self and other in poetry: "Oh Lady, we receive but what we give,/ And in our life alone does nature live;/ Ours is her wedding-garment, ours her shroud! [...] Ah! From the soul itself must issue forth/ A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud/ Enveloping the earth! [...] Joy, Lady, is the spirit and the power/ which, wedding nature to us, gives in dower/ A new earth and new heaven" (lines 47-9, 53-5, 66-9 in Coleridge 2001[1802]: 545-546). In "Alastor", Shelley addresses nature as a beloved unfathomable Mother in order to find guide and support in his imaginative enterprise: "Mother of this unfathomable world! / Favour my solemn song, for I have loved/ Thee ever, and thee only; I have watched/ Thy shadow and the darkness of thy steps,/ And my heart ever gazes on the depth/ Of thy deep mysteries" (lines 18-23; Shelley 2001[1816]: 825). It is important to note, in my view, that the poetic voice's longing for union with nature as female other is never fully satisfied in these poems or in romantic poetry in general. The symbolic fiction of the romantic self as absolute imagination is often undermined by a profound feeling of "dejection", a pain-in pleasure that, as I argue above, at times takes the form of seductive and deadly female figures.

narrator's description of the girl's voice constitutes a concise account of Lacan's neologism *jouis-sense* or "letter permeated with enjoy-meant", especially if we compare it with Žižek's definition: "the danger that lurks in music [...the] signing voice [that] cuts loose from its anchoring in meaning and accelerates into destructive self-enjoyment" (Žižek 2012: 672). The interpretation of the narrator's walk into nature as an instance of an overproximity to the Thing —what Žižek's posits as postmodernism's defining feature— is further strengthened by the words the girl's voice sings: "'under the leaves' and 'the leaves of life'", pointing thus to the "underside" of the picture/surface of nature the narrator has created (Carter 1995 [1974]: 81).

Very significantly, in the midst of his dream-like walk into nature or identification with his fantasy, the narrator stumbles with an "an object hidden in the grass" and *falls* (in)to the ground (81). Read in the light of Haber's definition of the pastoral as an attempt to recreate a lost union with Edenic-like nature (Haber 2006 [1994]: 1) and of Žižek's interpretation of the Fall as the genesis of the subject —as the primordial drive in Lacanian terms (Žižek 2014a: 33-56), the narrator's fall and subsequent nightmare-like experience will be revealed to effectuate a radical desublimation of the narrator's fantasy of nature as a sublime Edenic Paradise with which his self is in harmony. The concealed object enhances the atmosphere of unreality that the narrator's words have constituted because it turns out to be a seashell, an object out-of-place in the woods which, just as *objet petit a* in Žižek's theory, blurs the narrator's symbolic fantasy/picture of nature and renders it inconsistent. The effect of this encounter is described in the tale in a manner resembling the postmodernist approach to the anamorphic Thing: the shell produces indefinable fear and unease yet the narrator cannot help picking it up, a

gesture that happens to be incredibly difficult due to the “distilled heaviness of gravity [the shell contained] within:

I felt a shiver of fear for it was so very, very heavy and its contours so chill that a shock like cold electricity darted up my arm from the shell, into my heart. I was seized by the most intense disquiet. I was mystified by the shell [...] Yet I was so determined to wrench it from the ground that I clenched my muscles and gritted my teeth and tugged and heaved. Up it came, at last, and I rolled over backwards when it freed itself. (Carter 1995 [1974]: 81-82)

The shell is an inassimilable excess, a point of impossibility in the narrator's fantasy, or as Žižek's would have it, “what is in his fantasy more than his fantasy”, and, as such, its presence produces vertigo, a sensation of being on the brink of losing oneself. The shell is “an object elevated to the dignity of the Thing”, an everyday element turned into a fascinating sublime leftover and a horrifying excess because of the position it occupies in the symbolic frame. Put differently, the shell is endowed with what Žižek terms “aura” or what “envelops the object when it occupies a void (hole) within the symbolic order” (Žižek 2012: 696). In the narrator's words:

It *glimmered* through the grass like a cone of trapped moonlight although it was so very cold and so heavy it seemed to me it might contain all the distilled heaviness of gravity itself within it. I grew very much afraid of the shell; I think I sobbed. (Carter 1995 [1974]: 82, emphasis mine)

As the narrator holds the seashell in his hand, its impossibility is rendered more evident because it appears to be a reflection of the idea of shell as constituted in his picture of reality:

There was some indefinable strangeness in its shape I could not immediately define [...] When I looked at the shell more closely, I saw the nature of the teasing difference that had struck me when I first set eyes on it. The whorls of the shell went the wrong way. The spirals were reversed. It looked like the mirror image of a shell, and so it should not have been able to exist outside a mirror; in this world, it could not exist outside the mirror. But, all the same, I held it. (82)

This strange shell with its imponderable gravity could be read as the impossible abyss, a loop that connects the narrator's (symbolic) reality with its concealed underside or primordial level of fantasy, a virtual non-existent domain that the subject needs to exclude to constitute symbolic reality as a consistent whole. In line with the Lacanian formula of fantasy $\$ \langle \rangle a$, the presence of the shell *qua* object *a* indexes the presence of the subject as pure (virtual) void; the narrator's (symbolic) subjectivity is therefore rendered as a semblance or fantasy that hides this void. This explains why, in my view, the narrator asserts that "I was mystified by the shell" (Carter 1995 [1974]: 81).

Quite significantly in this respect, the moment the narrator encounters the shell/Thing and falls into the ground, he loses his walking stick, which I interpret as the phallus or master signifier, an insignia that confers the narrator symbolic identity as a wanderer, a nature lover or a romantic self. The walking stick as phallus places the narrator in a position of authority with respect to what he is not within his romantic fantasy-picture, an authority which acquires negative overtones as the narrator forces his way through the wood by "slash[ing] the taller grasses with [his] stick and now and then surprised some woodland creature, rat or rabbit, that fled away from [him]" (81).⁶⁸

⁶⁸ The image of the male solitary wanderer presiding over sublime landscape with his walking stick is reminiscent of the quintessential romantic painting: Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818). The narrator's gesture of "slashing" the grass with his walking stick acquires further significance if read in conjunction with "Master", the tale immediately preceding "Reflections" in *Fireworks*. In "Master", an unnamed English hunter destroys with a knife and a rifle the flora and fauna from the exotic places he explores —and with money enslaves and abuses a woman from the Amazonian rainforest. The protagonist of "Master", in my view, gives body to the conqueror or bearer of the phallus in the symbolic fiction that sustained British imperialism (Carter 1995 [1974]: 68-80).

The choice of the sea-shell as the impossible object that condenses *jouissance* is not arbitrary. Read in the light of the subtle mythological references included in the tale, the sea-shell partakes of the fantasy of woman/nature as sublime/obscene Thing in the narrator's world-picture. The shell belongs to the same domain as the girl's siren-like voice and it is also connected to heterosexual love since Venus —the goddess of fertility and Cupid's mother— is often portrayed as being born of a shell. The sea-shell itself recurs in the history of iconography as a signifier of the female genitals whose meaning encompasses birth and regeneration but also union with the (m)other and thus indifference or death of the self. In Lacanian terms, the shell as symbol thus confirms the fantasy of the "maternal phallus" or the loss of an object that never existed, a fantasy that at once sustains the masculine and feminine selves in patriarchy —leading to a symmetrical view of sexual difference— and threatens to destroy their fantasmatic consistency. This happens to be basis of Carter's claim when she asserts in *The Sadeian Woman* that:

[t]he social fiction of the female wound, the bleeding scar left by her castration [...] is a psychic fiction as deeply at the heart of Western culture as the myth of Oedipus, to which it is related in the complex dialectic of imagination and reality that produces culture. Female castration is an imaginary fact that pervades the whole of men's attitude towards women and our attitude to ourselves, that transforms women from human beings into wounded creatures that were born to bleed. (Carter 2009 [1979]: 26)

In line with this argumentation, the sudden appearance of the shell as Thing in "Reflections" suspends the effectivity of the stick/phallus and thus perturbs the illusory balance of the narrator's world-vision and by extension, his position of authority in such a vision. Despite momentarily "going through the romantic fantasy of his self/world/sexual difference", the narrator seeks to restore the balance of his worldview by assuming a new symbolic position, that of the rational self or

naturalist, a male individual that instead of loving nature, dissects it. “In spite of its [the shell’s] fabulous weight”, the narrator admits:

I decided to carry it through the wood for I thought I would take it to a little museum of the nearby town where they would inspect it and test it and tell me what it might be and how it would have arrived where I found it. (82)

This time, the narrator attempts to regulate the impossible by adopting what Žižek describes as the position of the scientist whose approach to/picture of existence requires the “delibidinalization of perception that Lacan renders in his code as extraction of the *objet petit a*” (Žižek 2012: 703). Put differently, the condition of “the objectivity of reality” extorts that reality should be devoid of impossible *jouissance*: what the scientific perspective leaves out of consideration is the presence of the subject-perceiver in the picture of the world he perceives or, as Lacan succinctly expresses it, “the picture is in my eye but me, I am in the picture” (Lacan quoted in Žižek 2012: 702). In this light, the narrator *qua* naturalist in “Reflections” strives to examine and appropriate reality without *jouissance*. His intention, however, is immediately truncated by the appearance of the singing girl who gives body to the reverse of the narrator’s fantasy of nature and of woman: the girl carries a rifle and a fires a bullet that, although it does not pierce the narrator’s heart—as Cupid’s arrow does in dreams—“burie[s] itself in the trunk of an elm-tree”, a symbol of male sexuality in many works throughout the history of English Literature (Carter 1995 [1974]: 82).⁶⁹

The girl’s rifle is designated as a new “phallus” (88) and, as such, it grants its bearer with authority: the girl, “a savage and severe wood ranger” with

⁶⁹ An example of the elm-tree as a masculine symbol can be found in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1590-96) which stages what perhaps stands as the dream-like woodland par excellence in English literature. In Act IV Scene I, Titania, Queen of the fairies, under the spell of a Cupid-derived magical juice, addresses her beloved Nick Bottom using an elm-simile: “Sleep thou, and I will wind thee in my arms / Fairies begone, and be all ways away. / So doth the woodbine the honeysuckle/ Gently entwist. The female ivy so/ Enrings the barky fingers of the elm./ O, how I love thee! How I dote on thee! (Shakespeare 2005 [1590-96]: 97).

“necromantic hair” further forces the narrator into his dream-like wood until they reach a gate, the threshold of a “graceful and dilapidated garden” in which “a short, crumbling flight of steps [...] led to a weathered front door, ajar like the door of a witch’s house” (83-84). The more the narrator penetrates into his fantasy of nature/woman, the more he encounters its obscene fantasmatic support or underside: the savage girl with a phallus and the witch are deadly figures that fit the patriarchal fantasy of the *femme fatale*.⁷⁰ The narrator’s approach to what he understands as a witch’s house makes him feel, once again, vertigo:

Before the door, I involuntarily halted; a dreadful vertigo seized me, as if I stood on the edge of an abyss. My heart had been thumping far too hard and far too fast since I had picked up the shell and now it seemed about to burst from too much strain. Faintness and terror of death swept over me. (84)

As the narrator enters the house, his feelings of horror and vertigo are supplemented by an over-stimulation of his senses —“choked air” conflates with “vicious odour”— in a manner reminiscent of Žižek’s description of an overproximity to the Thing or encounter with the Real (i.e. Žižek 2014a: 17-18). The centre of the house is a “large room, part drawing room, part bedroom” where the narrator finds a “crippled being”:

She, he, it — whoever, whatever my host or hostess may have been — lay in an old-fashioned wicker Bath chair beside a cracked marble fireplace bossed with swags and cupids. Her white hands finished in fingers indecently long, white and translucent as candles on a cathedral altar; those tapering fingers were the source of the bewildering muffler, for they held two bone needles and never ceased to move.

The volatile stitchery they produced occupied all the carpetless area of the floor and, in places, was piled up as high as the crippled knees of its maker [...] One of her profiles was that of a beautiful woman, the other that of a beautiful man. It is a defect of our language there is no term of reference for this indeterminate and indefinable beings; but, although she acknowledged no gender, I will call her ‘she’ because she had put on a female garment, a loose negligee of spider-coloured lace,

⁷⁰ The witch is a figure that recurs in folk-tale, fairy-tale and religious iconography worldwide as a devilish woman with supernatural powers to “bewitch” and destroy her victims. The witch is also often portrayed as a vampire that feeds on human flesh, particularly that of newborn babies. Throughout history, many women convicted of witchcraft were burned at the stake (Coleman 2005: 1103).

unless she, like the spiders, spun and wove her own thread and so had become clothed, for her shadowy hair was also the colour of the stuff she knitted and so evanescent in texture it seemed to move of its own accord [...] Her eyelids and the cavernous sockets of her eyes were thickly stuck with silver sequins that glittered in the strange, subaqueous, drowned, drowning light filtered through windows caked with grime and half covered by creeper, clairvoyant light reflected, with an enhanced strangeness, by the immense mirror in a chipped gilt frame hanging on the wall opposite the fireplace, it seemed the mirror, like the moon, was itself endowed with the light it gave back to us. (Carter 1995 [1974]: 85)

This long quotation —worth reproducing in full— condensates many of the features that characterise the spectral monstrous Thing that “appears in postmodernism” in Žižek’s non-standard view. This spectral monster is a “living dead” creature which embodies the “too-muchness of life”; it is *objet petit a* positivised, a fantasmatic unsymbolisable remainder of the very process of symbolisation which paradoxically sustains the consistency of the symbolic texture and whose paradigmatic example is the “phantom of the opera” from Gaston Leroux’s 1911 novel (Žižek 1992a: 113-146). The indefinable inhabitant of the house in “Reflections” appears to be a spectre: it is “white, translucent and shadowy”. Its “cavernous” eyes which do not see closely resemble the eyes of Leroux’s phantom, which are “so deep that you can hardly see the fixed pupils. All you can see is two black big holes, as in a dead man’s skull” (Leroux quoted in Žižek 1992a: 113). Žižek equates these unreflective eyes with gaze *qua* object, and the impossible spectral monster as a whole with the subject’s *objet petit a* or *sinthome*, “the ‘objective correlative’ of the subject himself” (Žižek 1992a: 134).⁷¹

⁷¹ In *Tarrying with the Negative* (1993), Žižek also resorts to the depthless eyes of a well-known fictional monster, Frankenstein’s creature from Mary Shelley’s novel (1818), to illustrate the presence of “pure gaze” *qua* postmodernist subject which “stains” and renders inconsistent the subject’s picture of reality: “This stain in the eye”, Žižek argues, “designates the left-over of something which had to be excluded so that what we experience as ‘reality’ gained its consistency. Its reemergence therefore vacillates the very coordinates of ‘reality.’ Already in *Frankenstein*, the impenetrable gaze of ‘depthless eyes’ is the feature which distinguishes the monster”. (Žižek 1993: 240).

The interpretation of the crippled being as the narrator's impossible condition of possibility is, from my point of view, doubly sustained in the description quoted above. First, this spectral creature is positioned at the heart of the house, which in religious and in Gothic imagery —the latter a prime source of inspiration in Carter's writing of the *Fireworks* tales as admitted in its "Afterword" (Carter 1995 [1974]: 459)— stands for the location of the self.⁷² According to Victor Sage in *Horror Fiction in the Protestant Tradition* (1988), "Christian iconography commonly represents the body metaphorically as the house or mansion of the soul"; the dark decayed house being, in Sage's view, the Gothic variation of this motif (Sage 1988: 1-3). In "Reflections", the place of the self is not empty but filled with this amorphous spectral apparition.

Secondly, the crippled being's compulsion to knit appears to literalise death drive or impossible *jouissance*, a non-stop circular movement around itself whose goal is to mark a non-existent gap or virtual negation that sustains the symbolic order as a "negation of a negation". In fact, what this spectre knits appears to be itself, "like the spiders, [...] for her *shadowy* hair was also the colour of the stuff she knitted and so *evanescent* in texture it seemed to move of its own accord" (Carter 1995 [1974]: 85, emphasis mine). This being could be thus read as the narrator's libido or lamella, an object of pure semblance that needs to be negated for the symbolic order (and the self) to be constituted as an illusory coherent whole.

The spectral creature itself informs that the impossible sea-shell found in the narrator's picture of reality came from a stitch it dropped: "Only one little stitch!

⁷² Among the writers from the Gothic tradition that influenced her writing, Carter highlights E.A. Poe (1809-1949) and E.T.A. Hoffman (1776-1822): "Though it took me a long time to realize why I liked them", Carter admits, "I'd always been fond of Poe, and Hoffman — Gothic tales, cruel tales, tales of the imagery of the unconscious — mirrors; the *externalized self*, forsaken castles; haunted forests; forbidden sexual objects" (Carter 1995 [1974]: 459, emphasis mine).

And I only dropped one little stitch!’ she moaned. And she bowed her head over her work in an ecstasy of regret” (86). Carter seems to be using the same metaphor that Lacan used to account for the constructed texture of (symbolic) reality: as explained in the previous chapters, the socio-symbolic order in Lacan’s theory is often represented as a tapestry of signifiers whose cohesion is guaranteed by a quilting point, an empty excess or *objet petit a*, the impossible point through which the subject is sewn into the symbolic (Žižek 1989: 113). Carter’s crippled creature also bears a close resemblance to G.K. Chesterton’s description of humans as opposed to animals in *Everlasting Man* (1925), a description Žižek quotes to exemplify the inhuman or monstrous spectral core constitutive of subjectivity: “The simplest truth about man”, Chesterton notes,

[i]s that he is a very strange being; almost in the sense of being a stranger on the earth. In all sobriety, he has much more of the external appearance of one bringing alien habits from another land than of a mere growth of this one. He has an unfair advantage and an unfair disadvantage. He cannot sleep in his own skin; he cannot trust his own instincts. He is at once a creator moving miraculous hands and fingers and a kind of cripple. He is wrapped in artificial bandages called clothes; he is propped on artificial crutches called furniture. His mind has the same doubtful liberties and the same wild limitations. Alone among the animals, he is shaken with the beautiful madness called laughter; as if he had caught sight of some secret in the very shape of the universe hidden from the universe itself. (Chesterton quoted in Žižek 2012: 414)

Despite witnessing the impossible, the narrator strives to accommodate it into his psychic frame by gendering the creature as a female—he insistently refers to it as “she” on the basis of the garment it wears—and by defining both the creature and the singing girl who forced him into the house as “harpies”, another mythological version of the patriarchal fantasy of fatal women that has recurred in literary works since classical antiquity.⁷³

⁷³ A harpy is often depicted as an evil monster with the body of a bird and a female head (Coleman 2007: 457).

The singing girl/bearer of the rifle turns out to be the creature's niece. Her name is Anna because "she can go both ways", the spectre says, "as, indeed, I can myself, though I am not a simple palindrome" (Carter 1995 [1974]: 86-87). Anna could be interpreted as embodying pure fantasy in the Lacanian sense, whose structure, Žižek argues, is that of a Janus face: "A fantasy is simultaneously pacifying, disarming (providing an imaginary scenario which enables us to endure the abyss of the Other's desire) and shattering, disturbing, inassimilable into our reality" (Žižek 2012: 689-690). One side of Anna is comforting —her sweet voice— and enhances the narrator's illusory picture of nature and of his self; the other side —as a severe hunter— is shattering indeed, and radically disturbs the narrator's ideal world-image. Anna's face is described by the narrator as possessing "absolute symmetry":

[e]ach feature [of her face] the exact equivalent of the other, so one of her profiles could serve as the template for both. Her skull was like a proposition in geometry. Irreducible as stone, finite as a syllogism, she was always indistinguishable from herself whichever way she went. (Carter 1995 [1974]: 90)

The narrator's description of Anna, in short, materialises the fantasy of woman as Thing and, as such, reasserts a symmetrical view of sexual difference for the narrator. The narrator's fantasy texture is disturbed, however, by the seashell that slipped from one side of fantasy to the other, "through the *hole* the dropped stitched made, because those shells are all so very, very heavy, you see", says the spectre (87, emphasis mine). The use of the term hole rather than gap or lack is, in my opinion, quite significant because it befits what I explained in chapter 4 as the Real in late Lacan. Unlike early Lacanian theory —and modernism according to Žižek's non-standard view— the Real in late Lacan is not an insurmountable gap that forever separates two entities but rather a vanishing point or hole between two sides of one and the same redoubled entity. This explains why, to sustain the

consistency of the narrator's fantasmatic reality, Anna rushes to recover the sea-shell and put it back to the place to which it belongs in the structure, that is, the underside of the narrator's symbolic order. To do so, the narrator informs us, Anna:

[b]ent and picked up the shell. She scrutinised the mirror and took aim at some spot within it that seemed to her a logical target for the shell. I saw her raise her arm to throw the shell into the mirror and I saw her mirrored arm raise the shell to throw it outside the mirror. Then she threw the duplicated shell. There was no sound in the room but the click of the knitting needles when she threw the shell out of the mirror. The shell, when it met its own reflection, disappeared completely.

The androgyne sighed with satisfaction. (86)

The mirror in the centre of the room helps restore the balance of symbolic reality and confirms the latter's status as that of a "reflection of a reflection" or as Žižek repeatedly puts in Hegelian terms "an appearance of an appearance" (i.e. Žižek 1999a: 196). In fact, to constitute symbolic reality —itself as tapestry— the crippled being makes use of two instruments: the mirror and the light that emanates from the fireplace located in the centre of the room. Just as in Lacanian theory, the reflection/imago that light produces on the surface of the mirror at once creates and conceals an impossible void, the "night of the world" or pure non-reflected gaze which *is* the subject —as opposed to the symbolic self *qua* reflection of a reflection (Žižek 1992a: 50, 134-140).

This may explain why the narrator, in the midst of the horror and bewilderment he experiences in such an unreal, nightmare-like environment, momentarily feels pleasurable relief as he sees the room reflected in the mirror: "How pleased I was to see my experiences had not changed me! Though my old tweed suit was stained with grass, my stick gone — left behind where I had dropped it in the wood" (Carter 1995 [1974]: 86).⁷⁴ Yet what happens next radically

⁷⁴ That the mirror —or any reflecting surface— is instrumental in generating the fantasy that creates reality and in concealing impossible *jouissance* or gaze *qua* object seems to be asserted in the following reflection articulated by the female narrator of "Flesh and the Mirror", another tale

undermines the narrator's belief in redoubled reflection —or symbol— as substantial fact, and produces again fear and anxiety. To the narrator's assertion that the shell disappeared through the mirror, the spectre soon replies: "No [...] it did not vanish in reality. The shell had not business in *this world*. I dropped a stitch this morning, only one little stitch [...] When it met its reflection, it returned to its proper place" (87, emphasis mine). The discourse of the crippled being appears to be thoroughly Hegelian: contrary to the narrator's perception of the creature as a "witch" or a "harpy" and as an "androgynous" because it has both "soft pale breasts" and an excess between its loins which the narrator interprets as "the phallic insignia of maleness", the being defines itself as a logical paradox:

‘She can’, said Anna, ‘go both ways, although she cannot move at all. So her power is an exact equivalent of her impotence, since both are absolute. But her aunt looked down at her soft weapon and said gently: ‘No, my darling, *absolutely* absolute. Potency, impotence *in potentia*, hence relative. Only the intermediary, since indeterminate [...] ‘You see, we must do away with you’, said the androgynous. ‘You know too much.’ (87, emphasis in original)⁷⁵

Such excessive knowledge, just as the excessive presence of the spectral shell in the dream-like wood, threatens to disintegrate the symbolic texture the spectre —which appears to befit the notion of sex *qua* impossible Real as explained in chapter 6— creates, serving as the impossible intermediary/vanishing point

included in *Fireworks*: "Mirrors are ambiguous things. The bureaucracy of the mirror issues me with a passport to the world; it shows me my appearance [...] Women and mirrors are in complicity with one another to evade the action I/she performs that she/I cannot watch, the action with which I break out of the mirror, with which I assume my appearance" (Carter 1995 [1974]: 70).

⁷⁵ The narrator also tries to make sense of the presence of the crippled being by resorting to Greek mythology: "She was Tiresias, capable of prophetic projection, whichever side of the mirror she chose to offer herself to my sight upon; and she went on knitting and knitting and knitting, with an infernal suburban complacency" (Carter 1995 [1974]: 90). In Greek mythology, Tiresias is a Theban blind prophet who was transformed into a woman for seven years after having separated two snakes that were mating and having killed the female snake. Tiresias was said to understand the language of birds and to communicate with the underworld, with the spirits of the dead. In Sophocles *Oedipus the King* (429 BC.), Tiresias reveals that Oedipus killed his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta (Coleman 2007: 966).

between the two spectral sides of the same entity: “In my intermediary and cohesive logic”, the spectre continues:

[t]he equivalences reside beyond symbolism. The gun and the phallus are similar in their connection with life — that is, one gives it; the other takes it away, so that both, in essence, are similar in that *the negation freshly states the affirmed proposition*. (88, emphasis mine)

This is an explanation that I believe stands in close affinity with Žižek’s account of the formation of self and world as a process of se-paration or self-relating negation (Daly and Žižek 2004: 61). It is at this point that I find it important to oppose Laura Mulvey’s steadfast interpretation of the creature as “the androgyne [which] inhabits the mirror world” and of the tale as foregrounding uncertainty between the multiple reflections/worlds the mirror projects (Mulvey 2007 [1994]: 244). This, in my view, is the narrator’s initial perspective, not the tale’s. The creature is *not* a reflection, it does *not* live inside the mirror but in “the half-way house between here and there, between this and that” (Carter 1995 [1974]: 89). As it informs the narrator, this indefinable creature is an intermediary impossible excess whose repetitive gesture —and here I am advancing the tale’s ending— sustains what the mirror reflects (symbolic reality) and its negative underside, where the shell comes from. Because of this excessive knowledge the creature reveals, the narrator is forced to traverse the mirror, which, rather than a hard surface, happens to “look like the surface of motionless water, or of mercury, as though it were a solid mass of liquid kept in place by some inversion of gravity that reminded [the narrator] of the ghastly weight of the shell” (Carter 1995 [1974]: 86).

The narrator’s experience of going through the mirror literalises, in my opinion, the act that Žižek describes as “going through the fantasy” and encountering one’s *sinthome*; “Reflections” dramatises, in other words, the reverse of the double process of constructing (symbolic) reality —and domesticating

impossible enjoyment, the process of constituting fantasy *à l'envers*. Significantly enough, the form the narrator's passage through the mirror takes coincides with the Freudian metaphor that Lacan uses to illustrate "the pure agency of the oral drive, closing upon its own satisfaction" and the status of the subject as self-relating negativity: a mouth kissing itself (Lacan 1998: 179). This metaphor illustrates the impossible process of subject formation in which the subject separates itself from itself and, in attempting reincorporation, returns this movement back to the body. In Carter's "Reflections", the narrator is forced to kiss his mirror image, an experience that produces such intense enjoyment that the narrator ultimately loses consciousness:

Out of rage and desperation, I advanced my own lips to meet the familiar yet unknown lips that advanced towards mine in the silent world of the glass. I thought these lips would be cold and lifeless; that I would touch them but they could not touch me. Yet, when my twin lips met, they cleaved, for these mirrored lips of mine were warm and throbbed. This mouth was wet and contained a tongue and teeth. It was too much for me. The profound sensuality of this unexpected caress crisped the roots of my sex and my eyes involuntarily closed whilst my arms clasped my own tweed shoulders. The pleasure of the embrace was intense; I swooned beneath it. (Carter 1995 [1974]: 88-89)

Such intense overproximity to and embrace with one's image, rather than producing an effect of "ontological uncertainty" between two distinct worlds — what stands, in Brian McHale's view, as the defining feature of postmodernism (McHale 1987: 75)— dramatises, in my opinion, what Žižek describes apropos of the ambiguity of the image in postmodernism as "the nausea of the Real" or "hypersensitivity" when one comes too close to an image or reflection (Žižek 1992a: 130). Once the narrator opens his eyes and recovers consciousness, he finds himself in the non-place where the sea-shell came from, namely "the Sea of Fertility" (Carter 1995 [1974]: 86). Contrary to what the term suggests, this Sea of Fertility has nothing to do with the Real in early Lacan theory or with what Kristeva terms

the semiotic “*chora*”, the pre-symbolic state of indifference from which the subject is forever separated by the advent of the symbolic (Kristeva 1982: 13). This Sea is a “reversed system” in which the “light [is] black” (Carter 1995 [1974]: 86, 89). As described by the narrator, this sea is the exact negative of the world he comes from, literally, in a way reminiscent of Hegel’s account of pure subject, it is “the night of the (symbolic) world”.

The use of the metaphor of the sea to refer to the reverse of the mirror image makes sense since light does not produce reflections at the bottom of the sea. The modifier “of Fertility” could be interpreted in the light of the spectre’s assertion that “the negation freshly states the asserted proposition” (88). In consonance with Žižek’s account of subject formation, this non-world is drive *qua* the source of logos, a virtual excess of negativity that *gives birth* to the subject and sustains the symbolic order by condensing impossible *jouissance*, what the subject needs to extract from the symbolic to constitute *itself* and the world as a coherent whole. In the narrator’s words:

My eyes took a little time to grow accustomed to this absolute darkness for, though the delicate apparatus of cornea and aqueous humour and crystalline lens and vitreous body and optic nerve and retina had all been reversed *when I gave birth to my mirror self through the mediation of the looking glass*, yet my sensibility remained as it had been [...] When the inside of my head could process the information my topsy-turvy senses retrieved for me, then my other or anti-eyes apprehended a world of phosphorescent colour etched as with needles of variegated fire in a dimensionless opacity. *The world was the same, yet absolutely altered*. How can I describe it ... almost as if this room was the colour negative of the other room [...] the exhalations of my breath were the same as the inhalations of my mirror anti-twin who turned away from me as I turned away from him, into the *distorted*, or else really *real*, world of this room beyond the mirror. (89, emphasis mine)

The relation between the two sides of the mirror in “Reflections” displays the same structure that Lacan used to account for his notion of barred subject, that of a Moebius strip. In line with the lesson of postmodernism in Žižek’s non-

standard view, the narrator's (reflection of the) world and this Sea of Fertility are not two opposed worlds, but the obverse and reverse of the same impossible, self-reflective entity. At this point in the tale, right after the narrator finds himself in the underside of his reflection of world, the plot goes backwards: the story repeats itself exactly in reverse. The narrator first turns from the mirror and starts moving backwards, following Anna "towards the path to the gate" with "the utmost exertion of physical energy and intellectual concentration, for gravity, beyond the mirror, was not a property of the ground but of the atmosphere" (91). Once in the "antithetical wood and [on the] sweet June day" for which "there is no language in this world to [...tell] how strange [...they] were for both had become the systematic negation of its others", the narrator systematically describes his experience as a distortion of his senses which takes the precise form of hearing with his eyes:

A visible silence, yes; for the dense fluidity of the atmosphere did not transmit sound to me as sound, but, instead, as regular kinetic abstractions etched upon its interior, so that, once in the new wood, a sinister, mineral realm of undiminishable darkness, to listen to a blackbird was to watch a moving point inside a block of delinquent glass. I saw these sounds because my eyes took in a different light than the light that shone on my breast when my heart beat on the other side of it, although the wood through whose now lateral gravity Anna negotiated me was the first wood in which I had been walking when I first heard sing. (91)

Žižek also resorts to the impossible image of "hear[ing] with your eyes" to articulate the experience of pure negativity, night of the world or absolute death that paradoxically constitutes the condition of possibility of the subject. When Žižek speaks of absolute death he does not mean physical death, but "death beyond the cycle of death and rebirth, corruption and generation":

Far more horrifying than to see with our ears —to hear the vibrating life substance beyond visual representation, this blind spot in the field of the visible— [Žižek contends] is to hear with our eyes, to see the absolute silence that marks the suspension of life. (Žižek 2012: 670-671)

What this horrifying experience reveals, as explained in the preceding chapters, is the illusion of the transparent self-presence of the speaking subject and the truth of the subject as a virtual emptiness or absolute self-relating negativity. The narrator's (non-)experience in the antithetical wood reaches a turning point when he arrives at the negative of the spot at which he had stopped his walk, the (non-)moment when he heard Anna's singing voice and stumbled with the (mirror image of) the sea-shell. In no time, Anna "unbuckled her uncouth leather belt [...], stepped out of her jeans [...and] raped [the narrator]": "I shouted and swore", the narrator tells:

[b]ut the shell grotto in which she ravished me did not reverberate and I only emitted gobs of light. Her rape, her violation of me, caused me atrocious physical and mental pain. My being leaked away from me under the visitation of her aggressive flesh. My self grew less in agony under the piston thrust of her slender loins as if she were a hammer and were forging me into some other substance than flesh and spirit. I knew the dreadful pleasure of abandonment. (Carter 1995 [1974]: 93)

At the heart of this non-world or fundamental level of fantasy that negates and constitutes the world of the narrator, he confronts the *psychic* experience of being raped, a most humiliating kind of violence that for both Carter and Žižek constitutes the subject's fundamental fantasy: what the subject, regardless of biological sex, necessarily disavows to constitute his/her self and the world around him/her. Rape *qua* fundamental inassimilable fantasy in no way legitimises actual physical rape but rather renders it the more violent; as Carter contends in *The Sadeian Woman*: "somewhere in the fear of rape, is a more than merely physical terror of hurt or humiliation —a fear of psychic disintegration, of an essential dismemberment, a fear of loss or disruption of the self" (Carter 2009 [1979]: 6). The paradoxical status of the fundamental fantasy, at once both inassimilable and

constitutive of subjectivity, explains in Žižek’s view, “the irreconcilable difference between psychoanalysis and feminism” when approaching the trauma of rape:

For standard feminism, at least, it is an axiom that rape is a violence imposed from without: even if a woman fantasizes about being raped or brutally mistreated, this is either a male fantasy about woman, or a woman does it in so far as she has ‘internalized’ the patriarchal economy and endorsed her victimization [...] From this perspective the split hysterical position of the woman is secondary, while, for Freud, this split is primary, constitutive of subjectivity [...] the problem with rape, in Freud’s view, is that it has such a traumatic impact not simply because it is the case of brutal external violence, but also because it touches on something disavowed in the victim. (Žižek 2007: 54-55)

Convinced as he is that Anna is a fatal harpy —rather than his own dream-like creation— and his rape Anna’s attempt to destroy him —instead of his fundamental unbearable fantasy, the narrator kills her with her rifle “shoot[ing] at the black sky while she straddled [him...]”. Now that the narrator understands the logic of this non-world, he moves forward to return through the mirror to his (symbolically constructed) world (Carter 1995 [1974]: 93). Back in the “decompression chamber” where the crippled being laments the death of her niece while “knitt[ing] on remorselessly”, the narrator breaks the being’s nose, a violent act that causes the mirror to break into pieces:

[the spectre] dropped her knitting as I crashed through the glass
through the glass, the glass splintered round me driving
unmercifully into my face
through the glass, glass splintered
through the glass —
half through (94)

Very significantly, the moment the spectre’s ceaseless knitting stops, the mirror “seal[s] itself into nothing but mysterious, reflective opacity” (94); in Lacanian terms, the moment the primordial drive stops, the reflections that constitute reality and its fantasmatic underside do not longer take place. As the narrator witnesses the spectre’s decay into lifeless matter—in psychoanalytic terms

“the inertia of the Real” (Žižek 2012: 161)— the spectre reveals itself to be the “ruins of time” (Carter 1995 [1974]: 95). The narrator, in other words, experiences history and change the moment he sees the inert remains of the spectre’s drive: the “dead leaves” of the “leaves of life” (95, 81). It is before collapsing that the spectre speaks for the last time:

‘Did you not realise who I was? That I was the synthesis in person? For I could go any way the world goes and so I was knitting the thesis and the antithesis together, this world and that world. Over the leaves and under the leaves. Cohesion gone. Ah! (95)

Despite having been revealed the truth about the spectre as the mediator between the Sea of Fertility or “night of the world” and symbolic reality or logos, the narrator’s self remains “undefeated” and insists on demonising the creature as “the bald old crone”. Only at the very end of his narrative, when he approaches the unreflective mirror, the narrator truly “traverses the fantasy of his romantic self” and acknowledges the inconsistency of himself as subject: “I held out my hands to embrace my self, my antiself, my self not-self, my assassin, my death, the world’s death” (95).

The fact that the narrator is telling this experience indicates that he has not undergone physical death; the act of narration itself rather suggests that such a traumatic experience of “going through the mirror” was a dream or a hallucinatory reverie, an interpretation that seems to be sustained if one reads “Reflections” in the light of one of the most recurrent intertexts in Carter’s writing, namely Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871). As earlier noted, it is in the fantasmatic texture of dreams or hallucinations that one encounters the traumatic Real: “It is not that dreams are for those who cannot endure reality, reality itself is for those who cannot endure (the Real that announces itself in) their dreams” (Žižek 2007: 57). In penetrating the heart of his dream, the

narrator encounters the spectre *qua* Real and “dies symbolically”. The narrator’s last words could be interpreted in the light of what Žižek terms “symbolic death” or “second death” and identification with the drive, that is to say, the disintegration of the symbolic frame that constitutes reality and that enables to create or “knit” reality anew (i.e. Žižek 1989: 145-70, 1992a: 141). Herein lies the lesson of postmodernism in Žižek’s non-standard view: the more one approaches the fantasy image that constitutes reality, the more its traumatic underside appears, what renders symbolic reality and the subject as inconsistent or barred, an inconsistency which, nevertheless, is condition of possibility of the process of symbolisation(s) and subjectivisation(s).

This Žižekian-based analysis of “Reflections” provides also, in my view, a point of departure for a new reading of *The Passion of New Eve* (1979) to be differentiated from the readings outlined in chapter 2, which either condemn (Armitt 1996: 150-182) or celebrate (Lee 1996: 238-49, Johnson 2000: 127-135) the novel for providing a poststructuralist depiction of sex and subjects *qua* social, performative constructs. Eve(lyn)’s “passion” through the American desert — a journey the narrator undertakes, in his words, “to find that most elusive of all chimeras, myself” (Carter 2008 [1979]: 38)— is marked by two climatic episodes which do reassert the artificial —thus fantasmatic— status of masculinity and femininity as sexual identities, namely the narrator’s painful non-recognition of *himself* after being biologically transformed from man to woman and the discovery of Tristessa Saint Ange’s concealed masculine organ.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ The meaning of “passion” in the novel as explained by Carter herself bears some resemblance with the meaning of *jouissance* in Lacanian theory as unbearable pleasure in pain. In a paper given at a conference on the Language of Passion at the University of Pisa in 1990, Carter emphasises the Latin root of the word passion and its relation to suffering and in this respect informs that “I wrote a novel some years ago with the title *The Passion of New Eve*. The ‘passion’ of the title refers not only to the erotic attraction between the two principal characters — a man who has been changed into a

Neither of these episodes, however, represents, in my view, a poststructuralist conception of sex and subject as performative constructs. After complete physical transformation from man to woman, the narrator, confronting the image of “her” new body, “does not find [her/him]self at all [...] the psycho-programming had not been entirely successful” (75). Confronted with what is in her new self more than herself, the narrator disconsolately undergoes what Žižek calls the “unbearable experience [of] find[ing] oneself at the very point of pure gaze”, that is to say, the appearance of an excess of negativity, which *is* the subject (Žižek 1992a: 126): “I have not yet become a woman”, the narrator says, “[a]lthough I possess a woman’s shape. Not a woman, no; both more and less than a real woman” (Carter 2008 [1979]: 83).

The character who incarnates Tristessa Saint Ange —itself a pure patriarchal fantasy of femininity in Hollywood cinema which, as such, sustains Eve(lyn)’s masculine self— also undergoes the traumatic experience of confronting what is in herself more than herself, her *objet petit a* as reflected on other characters’ gazes:

Out of the vestigial garment sprang the rude, red-purple insignia of maleness, the secret core of Tristessa’s sorrow, the source of her enigma, of her shame.

[Tristessa’s] wailing echoed round the gallery of glass as his body arched as if he were attempting to hide herself within himself, to swallow his cock within her tights; and when I saw how much the heraldic regalia of his sex appalled him, I thought that Mother would say he had become a woman because he had abhorred his most female part — that is, his instrument of mediation between himself and the other. (128)

Tristessa’s excessive inassimilable core or *objet petit a* is the other characters’ gaze of his penis, an object that needs to be concealed for the fantasmatic support of his symbolic identity as “Tristessa” to retain its consistency

woman, and a man who has elected to become a woman in appearance, Tristessa — but also to the process of physical pain and degradation that Eve undergoes in her apprenticeship as a woman” (Carter 1997: 592).

and efficacy in patriarchy. Once this excessive object is revealed, the character of Tristessa is described by the narrator in words that bear a close resemblance to Žižek's notion of pure subject or self-relating negation: "something that had chosen to call itself 'Tristessa', an anti-being that existed only by means of a massive effort of will and a huge suppression of fact" (129). Sex in *The Passion of New Eve* is not depicted as a differential relationship between two opposed identities but rather as the real excess or impossibility that splits each sexed being from itself. Sex *qua* Real impossibility is rendered visible, in my view, as the narrator confronts the strangeness of his new appearance on the mirror and as Tristessa confronts the excess of his penis reflected on the gaze of other characters.

The narrator's traumatic journey to and through the American desert in search of his self—a masculine self in love with the enigma of Tristessa or Woman *qua* Thing and by extension with his self as "man"—confronts him with the unbearable excess that constitutes his symbolic reality, "a strange experience" that, as he remembers it towards the end of his narrative, "confounds itself on a fugue" (191). The choice of the term "fugue" is significant here: meaning "flight" in Italian and referring to a form of music played as a prelude, the culmination of the narrator's traumatic experience could be read as "a prelude for a new flight", the start of a new process of fantasising and construction of (symbolic) reality anew. "We start from our conclusions", the narrator concludes (191), an assertion very much in tune with Žižek's account of the true "event" as an over-identification with fantasy: experiencing the impossible Real in fantasy is the first step to reframe the (im)possible (Žižek 2014a: 10).

Like "Reflections" and *The Passion of New Eve*, the next tale to be examined, "The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter", also stages an overproximity to

the fantasy frame or surface that constitutes the picture of reality that the narrator — and readers by extension— is contemplating, an experience which reveals a horrifying excess at the heart of such a reality, rendering it inconsistent. I will argue in the next chapter that such a revelation, despite producing a traumatic effect, potentially enables to reframe and re-constitute reality and its fantasmatic support.



CHAPTER 8
**GOING THROUGH THE FANTASY OF THE LAW OR “NAME OF THE FATHER”:
“THE EXECUTIONER’S BEAUTIFUL DAUGHTER”**

“The Executioner’s Beautiful Daughter” —another tale from *Fireworks* which Carter herself regarded as “the first serious short story I ever wrote” (Haffenden 1985: 90)— stages, *à la lettre* and in line with Žižek’s definition of postmodernism, the paradoxical co-dependence of the instauration of the Law —*qua* common shared renunciation of enjoyment— and its transgression —*qua* the act whereby the subject of authority (the bearer of the phallus) fully enjoys what the Law prohibits. In Žižekian terms, Carter’s tale “makes the phallus appear” as it shows at the very heart of the text of the Law or Name of the Father —the dead primordial father who returns as his name and establishes the Law through a collective prohibition of enjoyment— the eruption of father-*jouissance* or the “anal father” —the obscene father who definitely does enjoy (Žižek 1992a: 124). The law that regulates human interaction in the setting of Carter’s tale —a village “high in the uplands”— prohibits incest; “the punishment for incest is decapitation”, the narrator informs (Carter 1995 [1974]: 35, 40). The story begins with the executioner publicly beheading his own son for committing the crime of incest upon the body of his beautiful daughter and ends with the awful revelation that, when no villager is looking, the executioner rapes her in the same courtyard where he decapitated his son.

The opening of “The Executioner’s Beautiful Daughter” bears some resemblance to the beginning of “Reflections”: both start with a description of a highly artificial setting to which the narrator is approaching. Significantly enough, the narrator’s advancement towards the setting of each tale is motivated by music: in the tale now under scrutiny the narrator tells that he is “lured” by “baleful almost-

music” into the centre of the territory he is walking through, which happens to be a “village square” —the very place where the Law in this village is publicly enacted (Carter 1995 [1974]: 35). The use of the term “lured”, just as in “Reflections”, suggests the ambiguous character of the narrator’s approach to the place of the Law, as if the latter were permeated with excessive *jouissance* and thus standing for the narrator —like the shell at the heart of the wood in “Reflections”— as a source of both irresistible attraction and inexplicable terror. At the very opening of “The Executioner’s Beautiful Daughter”, however, one can detect two differences with respect to “Reflections”. In the former, the narrator is not a first person singular agent but systematically employs the first person plural pronoun: “Here”, the narrator begins, “we are high in the uplands” (35, emphasis mine). This mode of narration is termed by Uri Margolin “collective narrative agent” and fulfills, in his view, two main functions: first, to give a corporate voice to a collectivity to which the narrator himself belongs. Second, this narrative mode establishes a distinction between the reality of the enunciator and the reality of the enunciated since the addressed collectivity —which includes the narrator— “acts primarily as a witness, observer or mediating instance of the narrated system rather than as its main agent” (Margolin 1996: 121). The use of the adverbial “here” and of the present tense further approaches the collective narrative to the reality this agent witnesses and describes. The present tense is consistently employed throughout this narrative; there is only one instance in which the past tense is used and which precisely signals the collectivity’s entrance into the upland village, “lured” by “a baleful almost-music” as noted above.

In *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology* (1996) Monika Fludernik argues that the thorough use of the present tense in a fictional narrative serves to create an

effect of “ongoing commentary” as if the narrative agent were a scholar documenting the reality he investigates (Fludernik 1996: 252). This seems to stand in close affinity with Carter’s own definition of fiction as “a system of continuing enquiry” and as “an argument stated in fictional terms” (Katsavos 1994: 14, Haffenden 1985: 79). “The Executioner’s Beautiful Daughter” appears to consist solely of commentary; it contains no instance of direct or indirect speech. As the collective narrative subject advances in its description of the surroundings, it is more and more apparent that its position is that of a scientist exploring reality, a perspective which, as earlier advanced, requires a “delibidinalization of perception”, that is to say, the extraction of the collectivity as perceiver from the picture of reality they are examining (Žižek 2012: 703).

Unlike “Reflections”, the narrative agent in this tale is neither a “lover of nature” nor a “naturalist”; its object of study is not so much the natural landscape but the “culturescape”, the behaviour of the social beings that inhabit the remote village in which the tale is set. In short, the collective narrative agent appears to be an expedition of anthropologists. In this line, the second difference between “Reflections” and “The Executioner’s Beautiful Daughter” is the type of music that “lures” the narrative agent into the heart of its study object. This time, it is not sweet female singing but:

[t]he tuneless cadences of an untutored orchestra repercussing in an ecstatic agony of echoes against the sounding boards of the mountains, [...rustic bandsmen in the village square] twanging, plucking and abusing with horsehair bows a wide variety of crude stringed instruments. (Carter 1995 [1974]: 35)

Once in the middle of the village square, the narrative agent inspects the ground and detects traces of what the village community conceals by using “surfaces of years of sawdust”; the traces —which, nevertheless, cannot be completely covered— are remains of “blood shed so long ago it has, with age,

acquired the colour and texture of rust [...] sad ominous stains, a threat, a menace, memorials of pain” (35). In line with what Žižek categorises as a postmodernist depiction of any socio-symbolic texture, the village square contains in its underside a horrifying excess that stains the narrative agent’s perception of the community, an excess that, as we are about to learn, sustains the community’s very cohesiveness.

The “unmelodious music” that the orchestra produces is an announcement of the public reproduction of the Law which, as the narrative agent is about to witness, takes the “awful” form of a “spectacle of decapitation” (37). The tale’s representation of the execution of the Law as a spectacle appears to literalise Žižek’s explanation of the subjects’ adherence to the text of the Law as a process of exchange of impossible *jouissance* for surplus-*jouissance*: this horrifying spectacle is “the only entertainment the country offers” (35). For this exchange to be effective, a fantasy/screen operates to simultaneously conceal and create the non-existent transgression on which, nevertheless, the Law’s installation depends. As seen in chapter 4 of this dissertation, this operation is effectuated by an imposture or fetish, in Lacanian terms, the phallus or master signifier, which creates the illusion of the loss or theft of an object that never existed. The fantasmatic character of the Law in this upland village is rendered palpable by the elaborate theatricality with which the *spectacle* of decapitation is depicted. The narrative subject describes the prelude to the decapitation and the act itself as pure montage: in this village-theatre, the “wild mountain dwellers” are perceived by the narrator as pure surface, particularly as a “*tableau vivant*” (still-life) of spectators craving for a sublime and obscene performance:

[t]he *tableau vivant* before us is suffused with the sepia tints of an old photograph and nothing within it moves. The intent immobility of the spectators, wholly absorbed as they are in the performance of their hieratic ritual, is scarcely that of living things and this *tableau vivant* might be better termed a *nature morte* for the mirthless carnival is a celebration of death. (35)

In this photograph-like scene, there are two individuals that perform a different role and, as such, appear at its centre, on the stage: the executioner and the victim about to be beheaded. The way the latter is described is reminiscent of the sacrificial animal in primitive rituals in which, Michel Serres argues, the historical roots of tragedy are to be found: “the victim kneels. He is thin, pale and *graceful*. He is twenty years old” (Carter 1995 [1974]: 36, emphasis mine).⁷⁷ The use of the adjective “graceful” to describe the victim and transgressor of the Law is highly significant: it appears to be evocative of one of the paradigmatic present-day ceremonies heir to these primitive rites in which what is sacrificed is the supreme form of Grace. I am referring to the Christian Eucharist or Holy Communion: as is well-known, bread and wine at the altar are the substitutes during the Eucharist for the body and blood of Christ, the *Lamb* of God.

The use of “graceful”, in this light, implies a redefinition of the Law and its transgression in keeping with Žižek’s theorisation of the genesis of the social subject, particularly with his reformulation of the theological topic of the Fall: the pre-existence of the Law or Name of the Father does not create a transgression; it is rather that the simulation of transgression creates the Law. In theological terms, Fall itself creates the dimension from which to fall: Good does not precede evil; it is the retroactive product of the primordial choice of Evil (Žižek 2014a: 33-56). To sustain the illusory consistency of a community, nevertheless, fantasy needs to conceal this and so, the graceful victim is publicly punished/sacrificed with an axe, a phallic object which together with a black mask transforms its bearer, the executioner, into a symbol of power.

⁷⁷ In order to account for the origins of theatre in primitive ritual animal sacrifices, Serres brings to the fore the etymology of the word “victim”, from Latin *victima* literally meaning “a substitute” and of “tragedy” from Greek *tragos* meaning the goat that is sacrificed as a substitute (Serres 1995: 213)

Watched from afar and from below, the executioner appears as a sublime “object of fear”. To accentuate this effect during the performance of this brutal act, the executioner:

[a]dopts beside the block an offensively heroic pose, as if to do the thing with dignity were the only motive of the doing. He brings one booted foot to rest on the grim and *sacrificial altar* which is, to him, the canvas on which he exercises his art and proudly in his hand he bears his instrument, his axe.

The executioner stands more than six and a half feet high and he is broad to suit; the warped stumps of villagers *gaze up at him with awe and fear*. He is dressed always in mourning and always wears a curious mask. This mask is made of supple, close-fitting leather dyed of an absolute black [...] the hood of office renders the executioner an object. He has become an object who punishes. (35-36, emphasis mine)

The executioner *qua* bearer of the phallus literally stands as a master signifier or sublime object, an exception whose presence “quilts” the symbolic texture that regulates life in this community. For his performance to be an effective *point de capiton*, members of this social fabric need to “ignore the textual movement that produced [the point itself]” (Žižek 1991: 142, emphasis in original).

In the narrative agent’s words:

Nobody remembers why the mask was first devised nor who devised it. Perhaps some tender-hearted of antiquity adopted the concealing headgear in order to spare the one upon the block the sight of too human a face in the last moments of his agony; or else the origins of the article lie in a magical relation with the blackness of *negation* — if, that is *negation* is black in colour. (Carter 1995 [1974]: 36, emphasis mine)

The narrative agent’s “reflection” about the origins of the mask as phallus appears to literalise the message of the nightmare-like experience of the narrator in “Reflections”: the illusory texture of everyday socio-symbolic reality conceals and is sustained by a virtual excess of negativity — “The Sea of Fertility” — what Žižek terms the inhuman “night of the world” or the impossible Real. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that the spectacular surface that covers and creates the fantasmatic structure of this community is not pure but —as noted above when

underscoring the blood stains that the narrator detects on the square ground— is blurred by stains that render this social structure inconsistent. As the narrative subject's gaze approaches the sublime face of the executioner, one discovers that the black mask fails to completely cover what lies underneath. The closer the narrator looks at the underside of the sublime mask, the more it turns into an obscene excess:

[the mask] conceals his hair and the upper part of his face entirely except for two narrow slits through which issue the twin regards of eyes inexpressive as though they were part of the mask. This mask reveals only his blunt-lipped, dark-red mouth and the greyish flesh which surrounds it. Laid out in such an unnerving fashion, these portions of his meat in no way fulfill the expectations we derive from our common knowledge of faces. They have a quality of obscene rawness as if, in some fashion, the lower face had been flayed. (36)

In coming too close to the surface of the executioner, the tale effectuates what Žižek describes as the characteristically postmodern overproximity to the Thing, a gesture which simultaneously reveals the anamorphic status of the sublime and obscene object that sustains the (in)consistency of reality and renders the subject as pure gaze or gaze *qua* object. The obscene deformity of the executioner's face, in line with the nausea produced by the inertia of the Real, is the way the gaze is inscribed into the object's surface and as such indexes the presence of the subject in the fantasmatic picture of reality as an impossible virtual excess or leftover.

Another excess that perturbs the cohesiveness of this upland community takes the form of an auditory disturbance: right before the decapitation, in the midst of the “dramatic silence” that accompanies the courtyard spectacle, “only the ghost of a sound, a distant sobbing”, the narrative subject tells, “disturbs the moist air” (35-36). Although at that moment interpreted as “the ululation of the wind among the scrubby pines”, this “spectral” sound, the *objet petit a* in this symbolic edifice,

will be revealed to be the desperate cry of one of the two individuals from this community who know the way the Law is truly structured. This cry, however, does not prevent the official text of the Law from being enacted: “The victim kneels and lays his neck upon the block. Ponderously the executioner lifts his gleaming steel. The axe falls. The flesh severs. The head rolls. The cleft flesh spouts its fountains” (36). Such a horrifying scene is the source of the villagers’ enjoyment or, more precisely, the sphere of the “surplus-enjoyment” that the Law produces to guarantee individuals’ submission:

[t]he spectators shudder, groan and gasp. And now the string band starts to bow and saw again while a choir of stunted virgins, in the screeching wail that passes for singing in these regions, intones a barbaric requiem entitled: AWFUL WARNING OF THE SPECTACLE OF DECAPITATION. (36-37)

It is only once this awful spectacle terminates that the narrative agent reveals the text of the Law that regulates life in the village it is describing: “The executioner has beheaded his son for committing the crime of incest upon the body of his sister, the executioner’s beautiful daughter” (37). The prohibition of incest constitutes the first of the various points of agreement that enable me to postulate an analogy between the depiction of life in this fictional village and Sigmund Freud’s analysis of the psycho-social organization of primitive communities in *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (1912-13), one of the great landmarks in the history of anthropology.⁷⁸ Like Freud’s object of study, the socio-symbolic order of the tale’s setting is configured on the basis of an interplay between the capital prohibition of incest and totemism, the latter defined by Freud as a social system in which individuals’ roles and relationships are

⁷⁸ Freud chose as object of study the Australian aboriginal tribes that live in the interior of the continent and who, like the mountain dwellers of this remote village, “have to struggle against the hardest conditions of existence [...and] appear to be more primitive in all respects than those living near the coast” (Freud 2001 [1912-13]: 2).

established after a totem or fetish. A totem, in turn, is an object that serves as an emblem for:

[...]the common ancestor of the clan [...] it is their guardian spirit and helper, which sends them oracles and, if dangerous to others, recognizes and spares its own children. Conversely, the clansmen are under a sacred obligation (subject to automatic sanctions) not to kill or destroy their totem and to avoid eating its flesh (or deriving benefit from it in other ways). (Freud 2001[1912-13]: 3)

In “The Executioner’s Beautiful Daughter” the narrative subject informs that the villagers’ lives “are dominated by a folklore as picturesque as it is murderous”, practised by “rigid, hereditary castes of wizards, warlocks and shamans” whose esoteric power lies in a particular authority figure, namely “the person of the king [...] the nominal ruler who is “stripped of everything but the idea of an omnipotence which is sufficiently expressed by immobility” (Carter 1995 [1974]: 39). As if to externalize its fantasmatic omnipotence, such a symbol of social union hangs from the roofs of the villagers’ huts:

A stout ribbon binds him to the ceiling and he is inadequately supported in a precarious but absolute position sanctioned by ritual and memory upon his left wrist, which is strapped in a similar fashion with ribbon to an iron ring cemented into the floor. He stays as still as if he had been dipped in a petrifying well and never speaks one single word because he has forgotten how (39).

The totemic-like figure of the king appears to function as a fetish that hides nothing but generates the illusion that there is something to hide. This something that accompanies the belief in the totem is a myth that takes the form of a primordial transgression:

[The villagers] all believe implicitly they are damned. A folk-tale circulates among them, as follows: that the tribe was originally banished from a happier and more prosperous region to the present dreary habitation, a place fit only for continuous self-mortification, after they rendered themselves abhorrent to their former neighbours by the wholesale and enthusiastic practice of incest, son with father, father with daughter, etc. — every baroque variation possible upon the determinate quadrille of the nuclear family. In this country incest is a capital crime; the punishment for incest is decapitation. (39-40)

The belief in a non-existent transgression and the ignorance of the operation of the Law and desire renders the villagers of this community perturbed subjects fundamentally split between a horrifying fear of and an irrepressible longing for incest: “Daily their minds are terrified and enlightened by the continuous performances of apocalyptic dirges for fornicating siblings” (40). As noted in chapter 4, such a paradoxical feeling of simultaneous horror and attraction towards an act that never took place characterises what psychoanalysis diagnoses as obsessional neurosis, a pathological relationship with symbolic authority which, as the title of his study indicates, Freud equates to the interplay of totemism and taboo in the minds of “savages”. Neurosis is defined by Freud as a condition of “taboo sickness” in which the individual displaces his libido onto some external object—a fetish—which simultaneously turns into a prohibited or taboo object (Freud 2001 [1912-13]: 30). The paradoxical effect of this self-imposed prohibition is an engagement in incessant activity to avoid the encounter with this object of desire and horror.

As earlier advanced, Žižek notes that neurotics’ frenetic activity is a “false activity” that sustains the false consistency—and thus ongoing fixity—of a given socio-symbolic structure: “the typical strategy of the obsessional neurotic”, Žižek contends, is that “he is frantically active in order to prevent the real thing from happening [...] people do not only act in order to change something, they can also act in order to prevent something from happening so that nothing will change” (Žižek 2007: 26). In this light, the village portrayed in “The Executioner’s Beautiful Daughter” could be diagnosed as a community of neurotics. Despite repeatedly participating in the *jouissance*-generating spectacle of decapitation and daily engaged in “glum manual toil”, this is a community that does not change (Carter

1995 [1974]: 38). Villagers are trapped in “a universal Sabbath”, a suffocating cycle of stagnation that literally rots their bodies:⁷⁹

All, without exception, are filthy and verminous. His shaggy head and rough garments are clogged with lice and quiver with fleas while his pubic areas throb and pulse with the blind convulsions of the crab. Impetigo, scabies and the itch are too prevalent among them to be remarked upon and their feet start early to decompose between the toes. They suffer from chronic afflictions of the anus due to the barbarious diet — thin porridge; sour beer, meat scarcely seared by the cool fires of the highlands; acidulated cheese of goat swallowed to the flatulent accompaniment of barley bread. Such comestibles cannot but contribute effectively to those disorders that have established the general air of making unease which is their more immediately distinctive characteristic. (38)

Formally speaking, the depiction of the villagers’ bodies is evocative of Bakhtin’s notion of the “grotesque body” (Bakhtin 1984b [1968]: 26) and of what Kristeva terms “the abject” (Kristeva 1982: 4). Likewise, the description of the gruesome spectacle of decapitation together with the *jouissance* it produces bears some resemblance to Bakhtin’s account of the carnivalesque in fiction. The implications that those grotesque bodies and such a carnivalesque-like spectacle have on the minds and life of these villagers stand in stark contrast with the ideological implications that the carnivalesque and the grotesque/abject have in Bakhtin’s and Kristeva’s theory. Contrary to the claims of proponents of the grotesque/abject and the carnivalesque as progressive postmodernist strategies that render social norms ineffective in Carter’s fiction (Palmer 1987, Booker 1991, Michael 1998), the carnivalesque in this tale proves to be an experience of surplus-*jouissance* that monstrously sustains the Law and renders villagers more and more vulnerable towards their painful submission. The villagers not only ignore the

⁷⁹ The choice of “Sabbath” to refer to the way the villagers live is quite significant: from Hebrew “shabbāth”, it is a term that designates “the day of worship and rest for the members of some religious groups, especially Jews and Christians” and, as such, strengthens the atmosphere of paralysis that pervades the reality of this village.

(<http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/sabbath>)

structure of the Law, they also “do not know what they desire [...]their lusts exist in an undefined limbo, for ever in potential”. Their grotesque flesh, the narrative subject informs, is “tormented” and:

[b]etrayed eternally by the poverty of their imaginations and the limitations of their vocabulary, for how may one transmit such things in a language composed only of brute grunts and squawks [...] their secret, furious desires remain ultimately mysterious even to themselves and are contained only in the realm of pure sensation, or feeling undefined as thought or action and hence unrestrained by definition [...] these desires could hardly be said to exist. (Carter 1995 [1974]: 39)

The villagers, in Lacanian terms, are not fully desiring subjects; they seem to be caught into disorganised drives which find full expression as they witness the horrendous spectacle of Law. In line with Žižek’s conception of the critique of ideology as a process of over-identification with fantasy as the domain of imagination (e.g. Žižek 2012: 967), the narrative subject in Carter’s tale seems to suggest that only through language or the symbolic and its fantasmatic support may villagers be able to break out of such a grotesque, decaying existence. This interpretation seems to be in tune with Carter’s own remarks on the retrogressive potential of carnival and the grotesque as expounded in her essay-like tale “In Pantoland” (1993), previously quoted here in chapter 1:

The essence of the carnival, the festival, the Feast of Fools, is transience. It is here today and gone tomorrow, a release of tension not a reconstitution of order, a refreshment...after which everything can go on again exactly as if nothing happened.

Things don’t change because a girl puts on trousers or a chap slips on a frock, you know. Masters were masters again, the day after Saturnalia ended; after the holiday from gender, it was back to the old grind. (Carter 1995 [1993]: 399)

In this vein, the villagers’ grotesque bodies, far from contesting and dissolving the contours of normative bodies and subsequently liberating matter from oppressive discourse, accelerate the villagers’ physical decay and death and, by means of contrast, serve to reinforce the contours of the quintessential normative

body: “In this museum of diseases, the pastel beauty of Gretchen, the executioner’s beautiful daughter, is all the more remarkable” (Carter 1995 [1974]: 38).

Gretchen, the only character who is given a name in the tale and to whom the title refers, stands as the beautiful prohibited love-object, in Lacanian terms “an individual elevated to the dignity of the Thing”. Gretchen embodies the patriarchal fantasy of woman as Thing and so her status, as I will discuss from now on, both sustains and potentially threatens to disintegrate the socio-symbolic edifice that places her in such a position. At least three aspects appear to confirm Gretchen’s position Woman *qua* forbidden love-object. The first and perhaps most evident proof that the Law in this village defines Gretchen as an object/victim —depriving her of any sense of self and responsibility— is that, contrary to her brother, she is not punished after having committing incest.

Secondly, beauty, as the tale repeatedly emphasises, is the quality that sustains Gretchen’s position as the male fantasy of woman *qua* Thing. Throughout the history of aesthetics, the category of the beautiful has been systematically associated with femininity and its defining features, including compassion, gentleness, mercy and sympathy.⁸⁰ The constitution of the category of woman as

⁸⁰ Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), one of the landmarks in the history of aesthetics, contributed to associate beauty with femininity and naturalise such an association by defining beauty as a quality inherent to the object perceived, women in this case. “By beauty”, Burke writes, “I mean that quality or those qualities *in* bodies *by* which they cause love or some passion similar to it”. Burke further explains that the prime qualities of beauty are smoothness, unity and perfection, which in turn constitute a “principal cause of pleasure” (Burke 1990 [1757]: 103, 214, emphasis mine). Anne K. Mellor has extensively discussed how Burke’s categories of the beauty and the sublime, which he defines as a quality that produces “the strongest emotions which the mind is capable of feeling”, namely astonishment and “delightful horror” —*jouissance*, in Lacanian terms— (Burke 1990 [1757]: 53), have helped to support patriarchal sexual politics: “As he constructed the category of the beautiful, Burke also constructed the image of the ideal woman, as his illustrative remarks reveal, Beauty is identified with the ‘softer virtues’, with easiness of temper, compassion, kindness and liberality, as opposed to the higher qualities of mind, those virtues which cause admiration such as fortitude, justice and wisdom, and which Burke assigned to the masculine sublime [...] Beauty, for Burke, is identified not only with the nurturing mother but also with the erotic love-object, the sensuous and possessible beloved” (Mellor 1993: 108).

the morally superior sex has for centuries “relieved” biological women from ethico-political responsibility and decision-making and, as a result, has contributed to fixate patriarchy as the ruling socio-symbolic system. The choice of the name Gretchen further strengthens this interpretation and elucidates the type of patriarchal fantasy of woman this character incarnates. Gretchen was also the name given to the innocent and beautiful girl in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s two-part tragedy *Faust* (1808-32), whom the protagonist seduces with the help of Mephistopheles —a materialisation of Evil— and who is executed for having drowned —under the spell of Mephistopheles— the child she had with Faust.

Refusing to escape punishment as a symbol of repentance for an act she was spelled to commit, Gretchen saves her soul and enters Heaven. Eventually, Faust’s soul is redeemed by Gretchen’s intercession, a gesture that echoes the Virgin Mary’s intercession before God the Father to save the soul of Christian sinners and which, therefore, sustains a belief in the Fall as a the primordial transgression of Good and subsequent break with a pre-existing Paradise. *Faust*’s final scene has Doctor Marianus —a fervent devotee of the Virgin Mary or *Mater Gloriosa*— extolling different versions of biblical holy women for intercession: “Penitents, behold elated / The redeeming face; / Grateful, be regenerated/ For a life of grace. / That all good minds would grow keen / To serve thee alone; / Holy virgin, mother, queen, / Goddess on thy throne!” (lines 12096-103, Goethe 1990 [1808-32]: 503). Yet the *chorus mysticus*’ last words, which close the drama, appear to problematise Doctor Marianus’s —and the tragedy’s as a whole— celebration of the figure of the *Mater Gloriosa* as a source of redemption by using the word “lure” to designate her function: “What is destructible/ Is but a parable; / What fails ineluctably, / The undeclarable, / Here it was seen, / Here it was action;/ The Eternal-Feminine/ *Lures*

to perfection” (lines 12104-11, Goethe 1990 [1808-32]: 503, my emphasis). In foregrounding the paradoxical role of the luring “Eternal Feminine” or ideal of Woman as both redeemer and seductress, the *chorus mysticus* hints at the fantasmatic character of the “parable of perfection” as opposed to the Real character of “what fails ineluctably”, of “the undeclarable” which was “action” in the story. Put in Lacanian terms, *Faust*’s closing lines appear to bring to the fore the Real impossible that can happen, and that, in its very impossibility and imperfection, both sustains and potentially undermines what is believed/ known to be possible and perfect.

The narrative subject’s gradual approach to Gretchen in Carter’s “The Executioner’s Beautiful Daughter” also undermines the consistency of the ideal of the beautiful uncorrupted love-object she stands for and, by extension, the totality of the socio-symbolic edifice her presence as incestuous forbidden Thing sustains. After the execution of her brother, Gretchen “no longer sleeps soundly”; her *rest* is disrupted by the apparition of her brother riding “a bicycle interminably through her dreams” (Carter 1995 [1974]: 37). Not only her dreams but her everyday reality is disturbed by traces of her transgression of the Law, an act which, nevertheless, renders her an agent as opposed to the position she is forced to occupy in the community:

[t]he poor child crept out secretly, alone, to gather up the poignant, moist, bearded strawberry, his surviving relic, and take it home to bury beside her hen-coop before the dogs ate it. But no matter how hard she scrubbed her little white apron against the scouring stones in the river, she could not wash away the stains that haunted the weft and warp of the fabric like pinkish phantoms of very precious fruit. (37)

The blood stains on her apron are the tell-tale of Gretchen’s “fall” or violation of the Law; in Lacanian, terms, the stains are the *objet petit a*, *sinthome* or spectral indelible remainder which lays bare the inconsistency of Gretchen’s

symbolic “fabric”, including herself. The choice of the metaphor of the “precious fruit” to refer to the cut off head of the executioner’s son appears to reinforce a reading of the tale in the light of the theological Fall, with the severed head standing for Gretchen as the forbidden fruit. In line with Žižek’s reinterpretation, Gretchen’s “fall” appears to be the only act to change and create anew the conditions from which to fall; that is to say, Gretchen’s identification with her *sinthome*, with what she needs to foreclose to be wholly integrated in the village’s symbolic texture, seems to be the only source of resistance and change in this very texture which condemns villagers to a suffocating and painful existence.

Gretchen’s everyday reality is also pervaded by a mood of paralysis: she is daily engaged in a repetitive cycle of false activity which, from a distance, takes the form of preparing and serving breakfast for her father: “Every morning [...] she goes out to collect ripe eggs for her father’s breakfast” (37). As the narrative agent advances in its account of Gretchen’s everyday routine, it is more and more evident that such an ordinary action is stained by traces of latent corruption:

The executioner insists his breakfast omelette be prepared only from those eggs precisely on the point of blossoming into chicks and, prompt at eight, consumes with relish a yellow, feathered omelette subtly spiked with claw. Gretchen, his tender-hearted daughter, often jumps and starts to hear the thwarted cluck from a still gelid, scarcely calcified beak about to be choked with sizzling butter, but her father, whose word is law because he never doffs his leather mask, will eat no egg that does not contain within it a nascent bird. This is his taste. In this country, only the executioner may indulge in his perversities. (37)

Once again, the more the tale approaches the sublime figure of the executioner, the more its obscene underside appears. Considering the fact that the executioner never takes off his mask, “in case, in a random looking-glass or, accidentally mirrored in a pool of standing water, he surprised his own authentic face. For then he would die of fright” (36), he befits Žižek’s Lacan-based definition of the pervert as a subject who enjoys being the object-instrument of the Law’s

primordial *jouissance*. The enjoyment the executioner feels when eating nascent birds could be read as analogous to the enjoyment he feels when he beheads individuals. In inflicting indescribable pain to others, what the executioner is enacting, as noted here in chapter 4 apropos of perversion, is the very installation of the sublime and obscene Law. That the executioner fully acknowledges the obscene underside of the Law —the primordial transgression that founds and sustains the text of the Law— is revealed in the climactic scene that the narrative subject witnesses as it comes too close to the courtyard where the executioner beheads convicts:

[o]nly the executioner himself, because there is nobody to cut his head off, dare, in the immutable privacy of his leather hood, upon his blood-bespattered block, make love to his beautiful daughter.

Gretchen, the only flower of the mountains, tucks up her white apron and waltzing gingham skirts so they will not crease or soil but, even in the last extremity of the act, her father does not remove his mask for who would recognize him without it? The price he pays for his position is always to be locked in the solitary confinement of his power.

He perpetrates his inalienable right in the reeking courtyard upon the block where he struck off the head of his only son. (40)

In line with Žižek's non-standard definition of the status of the Law or Name of the Father in postmodernism, what "The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter" stages is the eruption of the anal father, the authority-figure that does enjoy at the very heart of the Law place. The executioner occupies the position of the sublime and obscene object of the Law, a position which is not absolute but precarious, as his fear to take off his mask indicates. The only disturbance, hole or vanishing point in the fantasmatic texture of the village's law is to be found in the narrative subject's gaze as well as in Gretchen's restless sleep: "That night", the tale closes:

Gretchen discovered a snake in her sewing machine and, though she did not know what a bicycle was, upon a bicycle her brother wheeled and circled through her troubled dreams until the cock crowed and out she went for eggs. (40)

The forms that the disturbance of the village's socio-symbolic "fabric" takes in Gretchen's reality and in her dreams are, in my view, very significant. Read in conjunction with the metaphor of the "precious fruit" that Gretchen "tastes" and safeguards under the earth's surface and with the villagers' ignorance—or lack of knowledge—of the Law's structure, the snake Gretchen discovers in her sewing machine stands as an explicit reference to the evil serpent that triggers Adam and Eve's Fall in the first book of *Genesis*.⁸¹ The image of her brother ceaselessly riding a bicycle in her dreams further appears to dramatise the effect of the drive or *sinthome* on the individual's psyche, whose identification, Žižek contends, constitutes the first step in the act of reframing the fantasmatic texture that sustains reality. As previously noted, the drive is to be encountered when one overapproaches one's dreams or fantasies, a painful experience which, nevertheless, may help recreate fantasy and reality. Such a recreation is what the bicycle as symbol appears to stand for; as Carter argued in an essay on surrealism: "the wheel [gives body to] the human ability to create the unnatural [...] The wheel imitates the physical function of motion but creates a form entirely independent of forms known to exist in nature. It was a product entirely of the imagination" (Carter 1997 [1978]: 510).⁸²

The two tales so far examined crudely expose the underside of the fantasy of the romantic self *qua* man in love with feminine nature, and of the Name of the Father as the generator and enforcer of Good *qua* legal behaviour, respectively. Both fantasies in turn partake of the narrative of creation in *Genesis*, whereby Good

⁸¹ As is well-known, the snake as symbol first appears in the Bible when it tempts Adam and Eve with the "forbidden fruit" from the "Tree of Knowledge", which in turn precipitates their Fall and expulsion from Paradise.

⁸² Carter highlights the fantasmatic status of the bicycle apropos of Guillaume Apollinaire's choice of this invention as exemplary of the term "surrealism" in the preface of *Les Mamelles de Tiresias* (1917).

is equated to a “natural” state of innocence whereas Evil stands as a succeeding break with or fall from such a state after following curiosity and choosing knowledge. If such an association with the theological topic of the Fall is hinted at with the narrator’s fall in “Reflections” and with the use of the motifs of the forbidden fruit and of the snake/temptress in “The Executioner’s Beautiful Daughter”, it is more overtly conveyed —and also turned upon itself— in “Penetrating Into the Heart of the Forest”, another tale included in *Fireworks* whose analysis is the focus of the next chapter.



CHAPTER 9
**GOING THROUGH THE FANTASY OF *GENESIS*: “PENETRATING INTO
THE HEART OF THE FOREST”**

The explicit allusions in “Penetrating Into the Heart of the Forest”, the fifth tale in *Fireworks*, to the Creation narrative in *Genesis* and the deriving Christian doctrine of the Fall or original sin have been foregrounded by the very few commentators of this piece (Tucker 1998: 5, Jennings 2012).⁸³ The tale follows thirteen year-old twins Madeline and Emile Dubois’s exploration of the tropical forest in whose margins the Edenic-like community where they were brought up is located. Upon reaching “the heart of the forest”, the twins encounter a tantalising fabulous tree from which Madeline takes a fruit, tastes it and hands it to Emile to taste; after this, “they kissed”; the story ends (Carter 1995 [1974]: 67). Obviously, the tale’s closing lines invite readers to associate Madeline and Emile’s act with Eve and Adam’s taste of the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge and their subsequent mutual shame of their nakedness. Madeline and Emile’s final kiss, however, seems also to be evocative of Gretchen and her brother’s apparent consummation of incest in “The Executioner’s Beautiful Daughter”, which had led to the execution of the latter—and to the concomitant reproduction of the Law in their remote village—and to Gretchen’s restless dreams.

Together with the allusions to the myth of the Fall, there are further similarities between “Penetrating Into the Heart of the Forest” and the other

⁸³ Hope Jennings’s analysis of Carter’s tale as a reworking of the Christian narrative of the Fall notes that neither in Books I nor III in *Genesis* are the concepts of the Fall or original sin mentioned; “this element”, she informs, “has been superimposed upon the Hebrew text by the New Testament. As a result, the Christian myth of the Fall has come to dominate our cultural perceptions of the Hebrew creation story in *Genesis*” (Jennings 2012: 174).

Fireworks tales hitherto analysed. Like “Reflections” and “The Executioner’s Beautiful Daughter”, the tale now under examination opens with a description of an artificial landscape that again appears to underscore the fantasmatic character of the community inhabiting such a setting:

The whole region was like an abandoned flower bowl, filled to overflowing with green, living things; and, protected on all sides by the ferocious barricades of the mountains, those lovely reaches of forest lay so far inland the inhabitants believed the name, Ocean, that of a man in another country, and would have taken an oar, had they ever seen one, to be a winnowing fan. They built neither roads nor towns; in every respect like *Candide*, especially that of past-ill fortune, all they did now was to cultivate their gardens. (Carter 1995 [1974]: 58).

In a manner resembling the operation of fantasy in Žižek’s theory, the natural location of this community—a lush valley surrounded by high mountains—functions as a protective fortress assisting the creation and safeguarding of the fantasmatic consistency of the reality frame that regulates human interaction in this setting. The picture of the world these woodlanders share does neither include the ocean—itsself evocative of images of sea travel and exchange and thus a means of encountering the unknown—nor other conventional forms of change that may threaten to disturb their ostensibly idyllic life.

The narrator is not a member of this community of gardeners. He is neither a wanderer or lover of nature nor an explorer of remote “culturescapes”, but a third person teller whose omniscient perspective thoroughly heightens the impression of artificiality that pervades the “whole region”. Already in the first paragraph, the narrator uses the intertext of Voltaire’s satirical *Bildungsroman Candide: or, Optimism* (1759) to establish an analogy between lifestyle in this community and *Candide*’s—Voltaire’s protagonist—endeavour to “cultivate [his little society’s] garden” after a series of disappointing and painful around-the-world adventures (Voltaire 2006 [1759]: 88). “To cultivate one’s garden” in *Candide* means to

engage in pleasurable activity in order to positivise one's rest or peace of mind, a process which simultaneously involves a repression of/alienation from any form of pain. This is the way of life that Candide, towards the end of the novella, emulates from a Turkic farmer, "a kindly old man who was taking the air at his door beneath an arbour of orange-trees" (87). Asked about the identity of a mufti who had just been strangled in urban Constantinople, the farmer's reply —later designated as the Turk— denotes utter indifference:⁸⁴

'I have no idea,' replied the fellow, 'and I never have known what any mufti or vizier was called. What you have just told me means absolutely nothing to me. I have no doubt that in general those who get involved in public affairs do sometimes come to a sad end and that they deserve it. But I never enquire what's going on in Constantinople. I am content to send my fruit for sale there from the garden I cultivate.' Having said this, he invited the strangers into his house. His two daughters and two sons offered them several kinds of sorbet which they made themselves [...] 'You must have a vast and magnificent property,' said Candide to the Turk. 'I have but twenty acres,' replied the Turk. 'I cultivate them with my children. Work keeps us from three great evils: boredom, vice, and need.' Candide, on his way back to his farm, thought long and hard about what the Turk had said, and commented to Pangloss and Martin: 'That kind old man seems to me to have made a life for himself which is much preferable to that of those six kings with whom we had the honour of having supper.' (87)

The Turk's self-imposed reclusion in a garden of his own making and concomitant disregard of social turmoil serves as a model for the little society that Candide and his fellows eventually set up to construct, a goal evocative of neo-pastoral poetry from the Age of Sensibility and from the Romantic period in which, as advanced here in chapter 7, idyllic scenes are depicted in an attempt to recreate a return to a lost harmony with nature. However, as Voltaire's text informs us in its last page, the structure of Candide's pastoral-like community is at times questioned

⁸⁴ In the former Ottoman Empire (1299-1923), a mufti was the leader of a religious community. Nowadays the term is used to refer to a Muslim legal expert and adviser on the law of the Koran. (<http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/mufti>)

by Pangloss —Candide’s mentor and philosopher— whose reflections bring to the fore how the experience of their “little society” as a meaningful Whole is dependent on the acknowledgement of preceding painful misfortunes:

‘[i]f you had not been given a good kick up the backside and chased out of a beautiful castle for loving Miss Cunégonde, and if you hadn’t been subjected to the Inquisition, and if you hadn’t wandered about America on foot, and if you hadn’t dealt the Baron a good blow with your sword, and if you hadn’t lost all your sheep from that fine country of Eldorado, you wouldn’t be here now eating candied citron and pistachio nuts.’ (87)

Pangloss’s remarks appear to be in tune with Žižek’s account of the notion of peace and Good as the retroactive product of primordial suffering and Fall, in Lacanian terms, symbolic reality and desire constitute a reactive attempt to precariously domesticate painful inhuman drive or impossible *jouissance* (Žižek 2014a: 46-47, Daly and Žižek 2004: 65). In fact, in Carter’s narrative *Candide* stands as a prime intertext in the narrator’s opening description of the community where Madeline and Emile have been raised. Just as in Candide’s “little society”, the inhabitants of this remote settlement wish to know nothing outside the world formed by “the groves that skirted those forests of pine in the central valley” and are only concerned about “the satisfaction of simple pleasure”. “In their self-contained quietude”, the narrator continues, “not a single exploring spirit had ever been curious enough to search to its source the great river that watered their plots or to penetrate to the heart of the forest itself” (Carter 1995 [1974]: 58). Yet, like the members of Candide’s idyllic community, the founders of this pastoral-like shelter had previously undergone severe suffering. They are told to have been:

[s]laves who, many years before, ran away from plantations in distant plains, in pain and hardship crossed the arid neck of the continent, and endured an infinity of desert and tundra, before they clambered the rugged foothills to scale at last the heights themselves and so arrive in a region that offered them in plentiful fulfillment all their dreams of a promised land. (58)

The allusion to the land promised by God to the Israelites in *Exodus* —a place also bordered by a river, the Euphrates, and the sea, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean— hints at the woodlanders’ mystification of the setting, a process that appears to be underscored by what I interpret as an implicit reference to *El Dorado*. Legend and *Candide*, among other literary texts, refer to *El Dorado* as a lost golden city located somewhere on the north-eastern coast of South America and bordered by Orinoco river. The location of this mythical city bears close resemblance to the community the ex-slaves in Carter’s tale created after having crossed Central America or “the arid neck of the continent”.⁸⁵ Just as in the tales examined in the preceding chapters, music assists such a creation: “Since the woodlanders could not live without music, they made fiddles and guitars for themselves with great skill and ingenuity” (59). Other everyday tasks the woodlanders perform include farming, cooking, tailoring and gardening:

They loved to eat well so they stirred themselves enough to plant vegetables, tend goats and chickens and blend these elements together in a rustic but voluptuous cookery. They dried, candied and preserved in honey some of the wonderful fruits they grew and exchanged this produce with the occasional traveller who came over the single, hazardous mountain pass, carrying bales of cotton fabrics and bundles of ribbons. With these, the women made long skirts and blouses for themselves and trousers for their menfolk, so all were dressed in red and yellow flowered cloth, purple and green checkered cloth, or cloth striped like a rainbow, and they plaited

⁸⁵ In the midst of their adventures all over South America, *Candide* and Cacambo wander into Eldorado, a geographically isolated utopia whose foundation, as an old man tells the wanderers, was preceded by great turmoil: “I am one hundred and seventy-two years old, and I learnt from my late father, who was a crown equerry, of the extraordinary upheavals that he had witnessed in Peru. This kingdom we are in now is the former homeland of the Incas, who most imprudently left it to go and conquer another part of the world and ended up being wiped out by the Spanish”. Contrary to the Incas who left their native home, the inhabitants that remained there “ordained [...] that no inhabitant was ever to leave our little kingdom”. Just as the woodlanders in Carter’s tale, the inhabitants of Eldorado “have managed to remain innocent and happy [...] since [they] are surrounded by unclimbable rocks and cliffs [...] and] have always *hitherto* been safe from the rapacity of European nations” (Voltaire 2006 [1759]: 43, emphasis mine). The old man’s praise of Eldorado’s innocent and happy seclusion stands in close affinity, in my view, to the old Turk’s self-imposed seclusion which towards the end of the novel is assumed by *Candide* as a philosophy of life. The use of the term “hitherto” in the old man’s account of Eldorado’s harmony, nevertheless, hints, in line with Žižek’s account of any socio-symbolic structure, at the community’s precarious fantasmatic character.

themselves hats from straw. They needed nothing more than a few flowers before they felt their graceful toilets were complete and a profusion of flowers grew all around them, so many flowers that the straw-thatched villages looked like inhabited gardens, for the soil was of amazing richness and the flora proliferated in such luxuriance that when Dubois, the botanist, came over the pass on his donkey, he looked down on that paradisaical landscape and exclaimed: 'Dear God! It is as if Adam had opened Eden to the public!' (59)

Geographical location, fertile soil, pleasant music and simple manual activity are the basic components of the bucolic surface that at once constitutes the coordinates of the possible in this Edenic-like community and establishes a distance from what is conceived to be impossible: "the settlements", the narrator reveals, "were just [...] prelapsarian villages where any Fall was inconceivable" (63). Already in the first two pages the narrator, in a postmodernist manner, exposes the double operation of fantasy at work in the constitution of the Creation narrative in *Genesis*, which regulates life in these villages. The woodlanders' maintenance of their peaceful existence is ultimately dependent on the self-imposed prohibition to approach an object that shapes the impossible. Just as in *Genesis*, what entails a spectral inassimilable excess or *objet petit a* in this village is a tree, which paradoxically sustains and threatens to disintegrate the community's symbolic texture. The ex-slaves that founded the village:

[p]lacked up in their ragged bandanas a little, dark, voodoo folklore. But such bloodstained ghosts could not survive in sunshine and fresh air and emigrated from the village in a body, to live only the ambiguous life of horned rumours in the woods, becoming at last no more than shapes with indefinable outlines who lurked, perhaps, in the green deeps, until, at last, one of the shadows modulated imperceptibly into the actual shape of a tree. (58)

To be part of the community, villagers knowingly engage in a montage that enables them to exchange impossible *jouissance* for pleasure; put differently, through the materialisation of a virtual distance to a non-existent object, the

villagers domesticate painful, compulsive drive into pleasurable, quiet desire not to desire:

Almost as if to justify to themselves their lack of a desire to explore, they finally seeded by word of mouth a mythic and malign tree within the forest, a tree the image of the Upas Tree of Java whose very shadow was murderous, a tree that exuded a virulent sweat of poison from its moist bark and whose fruits could have nourished with death an entire tribe. And the presence of this tree categorically forbade exploration even though all knew, in their hearts, that such a tree did not exist. But, even so, they guessed it was safest to be a stay-at-home. (59)

In Lacanian terms, this tree is “an ordinary object elevated to the dignity of the Thing”, a psychic surplus that objectifies villagers’ fundamental fantasy: what they are not ready to accept in reality, although their entire psychic life turns around it. The botanist Dubois’s arrival and permanent settlement into this ideal community reproduces its founders’ —and Candide’s— longing for a peaceful seclusion after a life full of travelling and suffering:

Dubois was seeking a destination whose whereabouts he did not know, though he was quite sure it existed. He had visited most of the out-of-the-way parts of the world to peer through the thick lenses of his round spectacles at every kind of plant. He gave his name to an orchid in Dahomey, to a lily in Indo-China and to a dark-eyed Portuguese girl in a Brazilian town of such awesome respectability that even its taxis wore antimacassars. But, because he loved the frail wife whose grave eyes already warned him she would live briefly, he rooted there, a plant himself in alien soil, and, out of gratitude, she gave him two children at one birth before she died.

He found his only consolation in a return to the flowering wilderness he had deserted for her sake. (59)

Life experience left Dubois with “a yearning for solitude and a desire to rear his children in a place where ambition, self-seeking and guile were strangers, so that they would grow up with the strength and innocence of young trees” (60). Dubois’s middle-aged goals together with the name he gave to his son recall Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s thinking, particularly his treatise *Emile, Or On Education* (1762). Rousseau’s five-book treatise develops a system of education that may enable the “natural” state of man —typified by innocence, gentleness and freedom— to be preserved in the face of civil vice and corruption. Rousseau’s conception of the

origins of man can be said to partake of the fantasy of the *Genesis* whereby innate innocence is told to have been fatally disrupted by evil; as Rousseau put it in *Emile's* opening paragraph:

Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things, everything degenerates in the hands of man. He forces one soil to nourish the products of another, one tree to bear the fruits of another. He mixes and confuses the climates, the elements, the seasons. He mutilates his dog, his horse, his slave. He turns everything upside down, he disfigures everything, he loves deformities, monsters. He wants nothing as nature made it, not even man himself. For him man must be trained like a school horse. (Rousseau 1979 [1762]: 37)

In line with Rousseau's endorsement of man's primordial innocence as opposed to the artificiality of over-rationalist citizens, Dubois languorously praises the qualities of this remote pastoral community while showing "a benign indifference towards by far the greater part of mankind — towards all those who were not beautiful, gentle and, by nature, kind" (Carter 1995 [1974]: 61). "Here", Dubois would say, "we have all become *homo silvester*, men of the woods [...] and that is by far superior to the precocious and destructive species, *homo sapiens* — knowing man. Knowing man, indeed; what more than nature does man need to know?" (61). Madeline and Emile's infant and pre-pubertal upbringing reproduce the premises of Rousseau's educational pattern, according to which individuals should be raised following "the path [nature] maps out for [every child]" (Rousseau 1979 [1762]: 47). Rousseau's construction of the meaning of nature involves the naturalisation of motherhood and domesticity *qua* inherently female virtues, which for Carter, as earlier noted, constitute the most effective patriarchal fantasy of woman (Carter 2009 [1979]: 135-159). "Let mothers", Rousseau claims:

[d]eign to nurse their children, morals will reform themselves, nature's sentiments will be awakened in every heart, the state will be repopled. This first point, this point alone, will bring everything back together. The attraction of domestic life is the best counterpoison for bad morals. The bother of children, which is believed to be an importunity, becomes pleasant. It makes the father and mother more necessary, dearer to one another; it tightens the conjugal bond between them. When

the family is lively and animated, the domestic cares constitute the dearest occupation of the wife and the sweetest enjoyment of the husband. Thus, from the correction of this single abuse would soon result a general reform; nature would soon have reclaimed all its rights. Let women once again become mothers, men will soon become fathers and husbands again. (Rousseau 1979 [1762]: 46)

Rousseau's fantasy of "natural education" further entails the (perverse) logic of not interfering with nature's laws even if they cause physical suffering and premature death:

[n]ature exercises children constantly; it hardens their temperament by tests of all sorts; it teaches them early what effort and pain are [...] Almost all the first age is sickness and danger. Half the children born perish before the eighth year. The tests passed, the child has gained strength; and as soon as he can make use of life, its principle becomes sounder. That is nature's rule. Why do you oppose it? Do you not see that in thinking you correct it, you destroy its product, you impede the effect of its care? (47)

Already a widower upon his arrival in the village, Dubois finds a surrogate mother for his children in the remote valley he chooses to inhabit: "The green world took them for its own and they were fitting children of their foster mother, for they were strong, lithe and supple, browned by the sun to the very colour of the villagers whose liquid *patois* they spoke" (Carter 1995 [1974]: 61). Dubois's Rousseauistic ideal nature as a protective maternal space follows, in my view, the logic of what Žižek designated as the fantasy of Woman *qua* the sublime and obscene Thing, the beloved object whose inaccessibility grounds the lover's subjectivity and prevents him from confronting the impossibility to enjoy (Žižek 1994: 89-112).

From Dubois's perspective, the Edenic-like valley stands as a substitute for his dead wife, whose absence, in turn, reinforces the ideal which she used to stand for: as quoted above, the narrator reveals that Dubois's wife was characterised by her frailty and her "grave eyes [that] already warned him she would live briefly" (Carter 1995 [1974]: 59). Although her death produced him pain, her disappearance appears to sustain the fantasy frame that both regulates Dubois's enjoyment and

constitutes his desire. That Dubois's dead wife conforms to the ideal of Woman *qua* Thing seems to be proven by the choice of his daughter's name. Madeline was also the name given to the beautiful undead sister in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), one of the most popular examples of the romantic fantasy of woman as the sublime and obscene love-object (Žižek 1991: 85). In line with Žižek's account of the anamorphic status of the Thing in postmodernism, Lady Madeline Usher's beautiful presence, regarded from a distance, produces an effect of sublime fascination and dread; yet, as the narrator and Roderick Usher, Lady Madeline's twin brother, overapproach her inert face, it turns into an obscene terrifying excess:

The disease which had thus entombed the lady in the maturity of youth, had left [...] the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death. (Poe 1986 [1839]: 151)

On the surface, Madeline and Emile's upbringing in the maternal valley dramatises the type of "natural" development that Rousseau advocates in his treatise, a stage in which humans are to be free from social restraints and authority:

Their father [...] gave them the run of his library and left them alone, to grow as they pleased. So they thrived on a diet of simple food, warm weather, perpetual holidays and haphazard learning. They were fearless since there was nothing to be afraid of, and they always spoke the truth because there was no need to lie. No hand or voice was ever raised in anger against them and so they did not know what anger was; when they came across the word in books, they thought it must mean the mild fretfulness they felt when it rained two days together, which did not happen often. They quite forgot the dull town where they had been born. (61)

Despite having been considered a major representative of the Enlightenment project, the philosophical and ethical implications of Rousseau's perspective, looking ahead, are reminiscent of the anti-Enlightenment, anti-epistemological turn that characterises Emmanuel Levinas's ethics as exposed here in chapter 1. In its delegitimation of rational knowledge and in its privileging of non-rational

sensibility, Rousseau's conception of the nature of man, notwithstanding their different formulations, appears to be in tune with the Levinasian notion of radical Otherness as a not-to-be-understood sources of ethico-political action. As advanced in chapter 5, Žižek holds that the delegitimation of any form of shared authority in Western liberal societies translates into a "post-Oedipal permissive order", a stage in history in which personal freedom paradoxically generates severe discontent and anxiety (i.e. Žižek 1999a: 313-399). In "cultivating" a Rousseauistic constraint-ridden and pain-free environment for his offspring, Dubois befits what Žižek designates —apropos of the character Roberto Benigni plays in his Holocaust film *Life is Beautiful* (1997)— as the post-Oedipal "maternal" parent, a protective figure who:

[s]uspends the agency of the symbolic Law/Prohibition — the paternal agency whose function is to introduce the child into the universe of social reality, with its harsh demands, to which the child is exposed without any maternal protective shield [...by] offer[ing] the imaginary shield against [such] traumatic encounter. (Žižek 2000a: 75, emphasis in original)

Contrary to Dubois's expectations, Madeline and Emile's carefree upbringing within the confines of the valley does not make them feel pleasurable tranquility but produces deep melancholy and a growing irrepressible desire to break out of the peaceful green world their father chose to inhabit: "[Dubois's] children", the narrator reveals, "saw [these quiet settlements] with eyes of pure nostalgia for lost innocence and thought of them only with that faint, warm claustrophobia which the word, 'home', signifies" (Carter 1995 [1974]: 63). Nostalgia, in turn, breeds an obsessive longing for what their father and woodlanders must ward off to sustain the consistency of their *homo silvester* paradise, namely *sapientia* or knowledge and the "malign tree" at the heart of the forest:

[n]othing but the discovery of the central node of the unvisited valley, the navel of the forest, would satisfy [Madeline and Emile]. It grew to be almost an obsession with them [...] when they spoke of the heart of the forest to their other friends, a veil of darkness came over the woodlanders' eyes and, half-laughing, half-whispering, they could hint at the wicked tree that grew there as though, even if they did not believe in it, it was a metaphor for something unfamiliar they preferred to ignore, as one might say: 'Let sleeping dogs lie. Aren't we happy as we are?' When they saw this laughing apathy, this incuriosity blended with a tinge of fear, Emile and Madeline could not help but feel a faint contempt, for their world, though beautiful, seemed to them, in a sense, incomplete — as though it lacked the knowledge of some mystery they might find, might they not? in the forest, on their own. (62)

Madeline and Emile's urge to *know* the forest led them to discover, at the age of thirteen and in a manner reminiscent of the Copernican revolution in the history of astronomy —and, by extension, of epistemology— that their house is not located at the centre of their world(view)/object of study but on its margins:

Long ago, in their room at home, they began work on a map of the forest [...]At first, in the centre of the map, they put their own thatched cottage and Madeline drew in the garden the shaggy figure of their father, whose leonine mane was as white, now, as the puff ball of a dandelion, bending with a green watering can over his pots of plants, tranquil, beloved and oblivious. But as they grew older, they grew discontented with their work for they found out their home did not lie at the heart of the forest but only somewhere in its green suburbs. They were seized with the desire to pierce more and yet more deeply into the unfrequented places and now their expeditions lasted for a week or longer. Though he was always glad to see them return, their father had often forgotten they had been away. (62)

The choice of the Copernican metaphor to refer to epistemological change is, in my view, quite significant since it proposes a conception of knowledge at odds with Dubois's negative perspective —which, as earlier noted, renounces epistemology on account of its obstruction of nature's inherent course. Just as Copernicus's discovery, Emile and Madeline's finding does not derive from the qualities inherent to the object of study—the celestial movements and the forest respectively remain the same— but from their discontent with their picture of the world. A negative excess/leftover at the heart of their picture of reality —the *unfrequented* places of the forest/universe— is what drives these subjects' curiosity,

a desire for knowledge which, although by definition unsatisfiable, opens up the possibility of developing new pictures of reality. Herein lies, in Žižek's view, the significance of Immanuel Kant's transcendental or subjective turn in philosophy, which Kant himself compared to Copernicus's achievement:

Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about them *a priori* through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. Hence, let us once try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition, which would agree better with *the requested possibility of an a priori cognition of them, which is to establish something about objects before they are given to us*. This would be just like the first thoughts of Copernicus, who, when he did not make good progress in the explanation of the celestial motions if he assumed that the entire celestial host revolves around the observer, tried to see if he might not have greater success if *he made the observer revolve and left the stars at rest*. Now in metaphysics we can try in a similar way regarding the intuition of objects. (Kant 1998 [1787]: 110, emphasis mine)

Contrary to detractors of Kant's analogy—who claim that Kant actually inverted Copernicus' heliocentrism by implying that objects of knowledge are constituted by or “move around” the knowing subject (Hanson 1959: 276), Žižek argues that Kant's—and Copernicus'—stress is not so much on the status of the object but on that of the subject of perception. “If one reads Kant's reference to Copernicus closely”, Žižek notes:

[i]t becomes clear that his emphasis is not on the shift of the substantial fixed center, but on something quite different— on the status of the subject itself [...T]he subject loses substantial stability or identity and is reduced to a pure substanceless void of the self-rotating abyssal vortex called ‘transcendental apperception’. (Žižek 2012: 631-632)

It is against the background of Kant's transcendental or desubstantialised subject that Žižek locates his definition of the subject in postmodernism as a rotary movement around itself *qua* emptiness, a repetitive failure or excess of negativity—in Lacanian terms, *objet petit a* or pure gaze—that drives symbolisation and curiosity but which, by definition, cannot ultimately be filled out by it (Žižek

1992a: 36-37).⁸⁶ “The problem”, Žižek argues elsewhere, “is that by ‘circulating around itself’ as its own sun, this autonomous subject encounters in itself something ‘more than itself’ a strange body in its very center” (Žižek 1991: 169).

In line with Žižek’s conception of ethics as a process of coming too close to the Thing —going through the fantasy— and identifying with one’s core of negativity or *sinthome*, enhancing curiosity and “provoking unease” through confrontation with what is in me and reality more than myself and reality are the two moral functions that Angela Carter attributed to fiction. In the interview with John Haffenden, Carter admits that she is a bit mistrustful of the moral function of literature in general and of the realist novel in particular, which “tell[s] people how to behave” (Haffenden 1985: 96). On the contrary, in her view, the moral function of fictional works “should not be hortatory in any way”; “I suppose”, she continues, “I would regard *curiosity* as a moral function” (96, emphasis mine).

Following curiosity and coming too close to the Thing —or heart of the fantasy of the forest— *qua* nurturing female (m)Other is the form Madeline and Emile’s process of maturation takes. An interpretation of such a process in the light of Žižek’s conception of postmodernist texts as those that stage an overproximity to the Thing or an over-identification with the fantasy which domesticates impossible *jouissance* and constitutes one’s worldview, seems to be sustained by the choice of the verb “penetrate”. To “penetrate” suggests intensity of sensation, even pain, when going through a certain surface or threshold, an experience evocative of *jouissance*. The verb “penetrate” further suggests an equation between this maternal

⁸⁶ Žižek locates the zenith of Kant’s transcendental turn in Hegel’s dialectical materialism, particularly in the latter’s equation of Kant’s *noumena* or unknowable Thing in itself with “the very negativity that defines the subject [...] the void of pure Self” (1992a: 37). As advanced in part II, Hegel’s formulation of the “night of the world” or the primordial gesture self-relating negativity as the genesis of the subject is one of the lessons of the distinctly postmodernist approach to the Thing or over-identification with the image/screen/frame that constitutes reality: the more we approach the Thing/fantasy that sustains (virtual) reality the more it turns into a nauseating excess that reduces the subject to pure gaze or virtual emptiness.

forest and the womb, a source of birth and death which for Carter stands as the ultimate patriarchal fantasy or sublime-obscene Thing (Carter 2009 [1979]: 123-127).

Madeline and Emile's need to "penetrate into the heart of the forest" is rendered more acute by their father's permissive attitude which, as earlier noted, generates growing discontent and melancholy. In a world of incuriosity and contentment, in which authority is in decline and prohibitions are not operative, nothing in reality is desired and thus an urge to approach the Thing —what simultaneously attracts and repels us— arises as one of the various desperate responses to avoid the Real impossibility to enjoy. According to Žižek, this explains Lacan's reversal of Dostoyevsky's well-known assertion that "If God doesn't exist, everything is permitted": as seen in chapter 5 of this dissertation, Lacan claims that "if God doesn't exist, nothing is permitted" because, given the impossibility to fully enjoy, if nothing is prohibited, nothing is desired (Žižek 2012: 80). Like Carter's tale, Žižek also resorts to and reworks the creation narrative of the *Genesis* to account for the paradoxical emergence of melancholy out of a stifling, psychosis-generating permissive environment —unbearable qualities that Carter's narrator suggests in his choice of terms like "warm claustrophobia" to refer to the twins' home and "rarefied" to describe the atmosphere pervading the whole valley, described in turn as "an abandoned flower bowl" (Carter 1995 [1974]: 63, 60, 58).

Contrary to the orthodox reading of the Fall, Žižek contends that:

[t]here is already in paradisaal satisfaction (in the satisfaction of the 'naïve' organic community) something suffocating, a longing for fresh air, for an opening that would break the unbearable constraint; and this longing introduces into Paradise an unbearable infinite Pain, a desire to break out - life in Paradise is always pervaded by an infinite melancholy. (Žižek 2000a: 88)

Significantly enough, Madeline and Emile's first incursions into the forest coincide in time with the onset of their puberty and first "awareness of one another's shapes and outlines", a discovery that "had made them less twinned, less indistinguishable from one another" (Carter 1995 [1974]: 65). During their childhood, "they resembled one another so closely each could have used the other as a mirror [...] their intimacy was so perfect it could have bred that sense of loneliness which is the source of pride", but as they turned thirteen, "for reasons beyond their comprehension", their intimacy became imperfect as their new awareness psychically separated them and bred a mutual longing to, in exploring the forest together all alone, approach one another:

Their companionship deepened since they had nobody but one another with whom to discuss the discoveries they made in common [...] They spoke of the adventure only to one another and did not share it with other companions who, as they grew older, grew less and less necessary to their absolute intimacy, since *lately [...it] had been subtly invaded by tensions which exacerbated their nerves yet exerted on them both an intoxicating glamour [...]* and when they bade their hosts goodbye, they knew, with a certain anticipatory relish, they would not see anyone else but one another for a long time. (60-61, emphasis mine)

The tensions Madeline and Emile feel are out of place in their father's *homo silvester* world of quiet innocence. Contrary to the rest of the villagers, who condensate tensions into the figure of the malign tree and keep them at bay "in the heart of the forest", the gradually less identical twins follow curiosity in an attempt to *know* or make sense of these tensions. Read in the light of Žižek's reinterpretation of the Fall and of sex as the Real and primordial psychic tension or rift inherent to being human, the state of *homo silvester*, defined by innocence and utter indifference towards others' pain and suffering, could be read as enacting animal life. Madeline and Emile's "fall" or "pathological choice of the unconditional attachment to some singular object" —one another and the heart of

the forest— enacts, in my opinion, the inhuman path towards the human condition or death drive in the grounds of which subjectivity and desire are constituted.

Five days into the (fantasy of the) forest, which progressively takes on feminine maternal features, Madeline and Emile experience hostility and pain for the first time in their (psychic) life:

Madeline stretched out her hand to pick a water-lily unbudding on the surface of the river but she jumped back with a cry and gazed down at her finger with a mixture of pain, affront and astonishment. Her blood dripped down on to the grass. 'Emile!' she said. 'It bit me!'

They had never encountered the slightest hostility in the forest before. Their eyes met in wonder and surmise while the birds chanted recitatives to the accompaniment of the river. 'This is a strange place', said Emile hesitantly. 'Perhaps we have found some kind of carnivorous water lily.' (63-64)

The choice of the water lily as an object that from a distance “looks perfectly white and innocent” but when approached turns into a “predator” that “unfurl[s] its close circle of petals” to show and use “a set of white perfect fangs” is doubly significant (Carter 1995 [1974]: 64). First, the antagonistic effect the water lily produces on the subject is reminiscent of the ambiguous status of the Thing in postmodernism: “We abjure and disown the Thing”, Žižek writes, “yet it exerts an irresistible attraction on us; its proximity exposes us to mortal danger, yet it is simultaneously a source of power” (Žižek 1992a: 123). Second, the flower recurs throughout the history of iconography as an ambiguous symbol of fertility, with its whiteness and beauty standing for the feminine virtues of innocence, purity and nurturance, while its long pistil, on the contrary, symbolises masculine sexual vigour.⁸⁷ In Christian imagery in particular, the lily, a symbol for the *Madonna*, also

⁸⁷ In ancient Egyptian imagery, the water lily or lotus is one of the manifestations of the Sun God, who, in a manner reminiscent of the creation narrative in the *Genesis*, had created life or light from chaos or darkness: “In Egyptian symbolism”, Lewis Spence informs us, the lotus “is to be found everywhere. From the cup of a lotus blossom issues the boy Horus, the ‘rising sun’, and again it is the symbol of resurrection, when Nefer-tem, crowned with the flowers, grants continuance of life in the world to come. On the altars of offering the blossoms were laid in profusion.” (Spence 1990: 299). Ancient Greek mythology also associates the lily with birth because the flower was said to be

represents the paradoxical belief in rebirth in death as it is commonly placed on the graves of young children and can be found as a symbol for the Cross in some Anglican churches in England.⁸⁸

Considering the significance of the lily as symbol, it is easy to establish an analogy between Madeline's painful contact with the flower and her coming of age or first menstruation. Such an analogy further reinforces my interpretation of the forest in the tale as the embodiment of the patriarchal fantasy of nature as the feminine other or Thing since for centuries, as Carter noted in *The Sadeian Woman*, menstruation has signified the female wound left after female castration or loss of the female phallus (Carter 2009 [1979]: 26), an object that never existed but whose spectral presence, I argue, sustains the patriarchal symbolic matrix at work in the narrative of *Genesis*, which Carter's community of *homo silvester* individuals reproduces.

Madeline's and Emile's reactions after the former comes too close to the water lily further strengthen a reading of the flower—and of the heart of the forest as a whole—as the fascinating/repellent Thing that from a distance reinforces their world view and when approached threatens to disintegrate their reality's basic coordinates. The water lily, in other words, inscribes in the fantasmatic picture of the forest what is more than the forest; in Lacanian terms, it indexes the presence of gaze *qua* object or pure gaze: Emile and Madeline *qua* pure subjects.

To Emile's enthusiastic suggestion to tell Father about their discovery of the carnivorous plant, Madeline, "her eyes still fixed on the predator as if it fascinated

created from the breast of Hera, goddess of fertility and both twin sister and wife of Zeus—the supreme God. In Roman mythology, Venus, the goddess of beauty, gardens and love, upon seeing a lily, was hold to be so jealous of its white loveliness that she caused a pistil to grow from its centre (Coleman 2007: 1077).

⁸⁸ Richard Harries contends that the Lily crucifix as symbol of rebirth in death derives from the medieval belief that the Annunciation of Christ and his crucifixion occurred on the same day of the year (Harries 2004: 77).

her”, replies that “[they] must not talk of the things [they] find in the heart of the forest. They are all secrets. If they were not secrets, we would have heard of them before” (Carter 1995 [1974]: 64). Madeline’s words, in turn, make Emile feel the same sensation of vertigo earlier described here as indexing the appearance of the phallus/Thing or pure gaze:

Her words fell with a strange weight, as heavy as her own gravity, as if she might have received some mysterious communication from the perfidious mouth that wounded her. At once, listening to her, Emile thought of the legendary tree; and then he realised that, for the first time in his life, he did not understand her, for, of course, they had heard of the tree. Looking at her in a new puzzlement, he sensed the ultimate difference of a femininity he had never before known any need or desire to acknowledge and this difference might give her the key to some order of knowledge to which he might not yet aspire, himself, for all at once, she seemed far older than he. She raised her eyes and fixed on him a long, solemn regard which chained him in a conspiracy of secrecy, so that, henceforth, they would share only with one another the treacherous marvels round them. At last, he nodded.

‘Very well, then,’ he said. ‘We won’t tell father.’ (64)

Madeline and Emile’s pact displays the logic of the double operation of fantasy at work in the constitution of the subject’s symbolic frame and subjectivity. The presence of the lily-Thing serves as a screen that at once creates and conceals the excess of negativity or virtual non-existing gaze constitutive of the subject. Second, such a screen needs to be kept at bay or in secret to sustain the subject’s symbolic identity understood as a virtual differential relationship with an Other, a twin sibling in this case. Since their puzzling encounter with the fascinating and horrifying lily-Thing, Madeline and Emile no longer sleep soundly. Even if after the bite, the lily concealed the horrifying excess at its core and returned to its ordinary appearance, such a traumatic excess, which I read as an inscription of their pure gaze or libido/*jouissance* in nature, reappears in Madeline and Emile’s dreams:

[t]hey slept less peacefully than usual for both were visited by unaccustomed nightmares of knives and snakes and suppurating roses. But though each stirred and murmured, the dreams were so strangely inconsequential, nothing but fleeting sequences of detached, malign images, that the children forgot them as they slept and woke only with an irritable residue of nightmare, the dregs of unremembered dreaming, knowing only they had slept badly. (64-65)

Very significantly, the awareness of such an excess, “what is in the forest more than the forest” makes Madeline and Emile feel shame for the first time in their lives. Shame, in Žižek’s view, is an indicator of humanity; it is a psychic and bodily reaction to the (virtual) leftover/excess of the process of symbolisation, to:

[t]hat strange body in my interior which is ‘in me more than me’, which is radically interior and at the same time already exterior and for which Lacan coined a new word, *extime* [..; it is what Plato termed] *agalma*, the hidden treasure, the essential object in me which cannot be objectivated, dominated [...]The Lacanian formula for this object is of course *objet petit a*, this point of Real in the very heart of the subject which cannot be symbolized, which is produced as a residue, a remnant, a leftover of every signifying operation. (Žižek 1989: 204)

The morning after their encounter with the lily-Thing, Emile:

[f]ound he could no longer ignore his sister's nakedness, as he had done since babyhood, while, from the way she suddenly averted her own eyes after, in her usual playful fashion, she splashed him with water, she, too, experienced the same extraordinary confusion. So they fell silent and hastily dressed themselves. (Carter 1995 [1974]: 65)

The reception of Madeline and Emile’s shame as indicative of the presence of this spectral surplus or *objet a* which grounds their process of subject-formation seems to be validated by the fact that their new aversion towards being seen in their nakedness is accompanied by enjoyment; the virtual object which produces shame also generates intense pleasure: “And yet the confusion”, the narrator reveals, “was pleasurable and made their blood sting” (65).

In a manner evocative of the narrator’s initial reaction to the encounter of the seashell/Thing which made him *fall* in “Reflections”, Madeline and Emile resort to “their erudite botanizing in order to pretend that all was as it had always been, before the forest showed its teeth” (65). Yet, the more they penetrate into their ordinary fantasy picture of the forest as a protective maternal shelter, the more the forest materialises the fascinating and horrifying excess the lily incarnated,

resembling again the unreal, nightmare-like wood the narrator-wanderer walked through in “Reflections”. “Now”, the path of the river, itself a symbol of fluidity and used by the woodlanders, together with the mountains, as the limit constituting their Edenic garden:

[I]ed them into such magical places that they found more than enough to talk about for, by the time the shadows vanished at noon, they had come into a landscape that seemed to have undergone an alchemical change, a vegetable transmutation, for it contained nothing that was not marvellous. Ferns uncurled as they watched, revealing fringed fringes containing innumerable tiny, shining eyes glittering like brilliants where the ranks of seeds should have been. A vine was covered with slumbrous, purple flowers that, as they passed, sang out in a rich contralto with all the voluptuous wildness of flamenco and then *fell* silent [...] when they had grown very hungry, they found a better food than even Madeline had guessed they might, for they came to a clump of low trees with trunks scaled like trout, growing at the water's edge. These trees put out shell-shaped fruit and, when they broke these open and ate them, they tasted oysters. After they consumed their fishy luncheon, they walked on a little and discovered a tree knobbed with white, red-tipped whorls that looked so much like breasts they put their mouths to the nipples and sucked a sweet, refreshing milk.

‘See?’ said Madeline, and this time her triumph was unconcealed. ‘I told you we should find something to nourish us!’ (65-66)

As they advance their way into the forest, the landscape more markedly materialises the fantasmatic Sea of Fertility, a virtual excess which, as its negative, “nurtures” the fantasy of the village that the twins left behind as an organic whole. Once at the very heart of this “enchanted forest”, Madeline and Emile encounter “a pool that seem to have no outlet or inlet and so must be fed by an invisible spring”; at the centre of this dark pool a graceful tree springs, which they identify with the embodiment of the belief in the malign tree that condenses the woodlanders’ pain:

As they stood hand in hand gazing at the beautiful tree, a small wind parted the leaves so they would see the fruit more clearly and, in the rind, set squarely in the middle of each faintly flushed cheek, was a curious formation — a round set of serrated indentations exactly resembling the marks of a bite made by the teeth of a hungry man. As if the sight stimulated her own appetite, Madeline laughed and said: ‘Goodness, Emile, the forest has even given us dessert!’ (66)

If the hallucinatory image of the fruit stimulates Madeline’s appetite, the sight of Madeline herself approaching the tree stimulates Emile’s *jouissance*:

She sprang towards the exquisite, odoriferous tree which, at that moment, suffused in a failing yet hallucinatory light the tone and intensity of liquefied amber, seemed to her brother a perfect equivalent of his sister's amazing beauty, a beauty he had never seen before that filled him, now, with ecstasy. (66-67)

Emile's perception of Madeline's taste of the fruit, his subsequent taste and their final kiss embodies, in my opinion, the act of traversing the fantasy of *Genesis* and identifying with one's *sinthome* or excess of negativity which is the *sine qua non* of being human. Differently put, just as in "Reflections" and "The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter", the act of kissing or approaching the surface of one's double could be read as dramatising the subject's psychic traumatic formation or separation, an instance of the inhuman drive or "fall" into the imperfect condition of being human. In line with Žižek's reinterpretation of the Fall as a radical gesture of self-relating negativity that constitutes the subject, Emile's new conception of his self as different from Madeline's entails a recognition of the latter and himself as imperfect beings:

The dark pool reflected her darkly, like an antique mirror. She raised her hand to part the leaves in search of a ripe fruit [...] It was so juicy the juice ran down her chin and she extended a long, crimson, newly sensual tongue to lick her lips, laughing.

'It tastes so good!' she said. 'Here! Eat!'

She came back to him, splashing through the margins of the pool, holding the fruit out towards him on her palm. She was like a beautiful statue which had just come to life. Her enormous eyes were lit like nocturnal flowers that had been waiting only for this especial night to open and, in their vertiginous depths, reveal to her brother in expressible entirety the hitherto unguessed at, unknowable, inexpressible vistas of love.

He took the apple; ate; and, after that, they kissed. (67)

After tasting the apple, it appears as if Madeline ceased to be the perfect embodiment of the eternal feminine, a "beautiful statue" or Woman *qua* Thing, a transmutation that in turn is perceived by Emile, as described by the narrator, as the opening of or fall into the "night", whose "vertiginous depths" reveal the

“inexpressible vistas of love”. Such a rewriting of the Fall befits Žižek’s rereading of *Genesis*, whereby, as earlier noted, eternity or the Paradise is:

[t]he ultimate prison, a suffocating closure, and it is only the fall into time that introduces Opening into human experience [...I]s Time not the name for the ontological opening? The Event of “incarnation” is thus not so much the time when ordinary temporal reality touches Eternity, but, rather, the time when Eternity reaches into time. (Žižek 2003: 14)

This Žižekian interpretation of Madeline and Emile’s Fall as the inhuman path towards humanity seems to be sustained by the narrator’s reference to the “*hitherto* unguessed at, unknowable, inexpressible vistas of love” as the product of the opening of such an “especial night” (Carter 1995 [1974]: 67, emphasis mine).

The expression the narrator uses to refer to Madeline’s new presence under the gaze of Emile is evocative of Saint Paul’s account of human perception in chapter 13 of his first epistle to the Corinthians, which covers the subject of love: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Corinthians 13:12).⁸⁹ Žižek resorts to the Paulinian notion of love or *agape* to desubliminate the Platonic *topos* of love as Eros, which Žižek defines as “the retroactive elevation of libido [...following] the introduction of Thanatos as a cosmic principle”, a gesture that takes the form of an attachment to “a beautiful form [...] the supreme Good beyond all forms” (Žižek 2003: 71, 13). This Platonic notion of love is in line with the myth of *Genesis* as it defines the Good as primordial and, in turn, contributes to perpetuate a patriarchal view of the Woman-Thing as the inherently good, inaccessible, inexpressible and unknowable object of love. By contrast, Žižek reads Paulinian love or *agape* as “*forsaking the promise of Eternity itself for an imperfect*

⁸⁹ I am quoting the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible.
(http://biblehub.com/parallel/1_corinthians/13-12.htm)

individual [...] of choosing temporal existence, of giving up eternal existence for the sake of love [...] the highest ethical act of all” (13, emphasis in original).

It seems Madeline and Emile love each other due to this imperfection or excess of negativity/darkness/ night; “only a lacking, vulnerable being”, Žižek contends, “is capable of love. The ultimate mystery of love, therefore, is that incompleteness is, in a way, higher than completion. On the one hand, only an imperfect, lacking being loves: we love because we do *not* know all” (115, emphasis in original). The way Madeline and Emile’s taste of the fruit is described could be equated to the act of “falling in love”, “the break par excellence, the mother of all breaks, the opening up of the possibility of new possibilities” (73). As advanced here in chapter 6, the further conclusion Žižek draws from equating the shattering experience of falling in love with the identification with one’s *sinthome*, unknowable Real X or virtual *je ne sais quoi* which at once constitutes and divides the (virtual) subject is that of sexuation:

[t]he Real (of a trauma) is also a “swerve,” a black hole detectable only through its effects, only in the way it ‘curves mental space, bending the line of mental processes. And is not sexuality (this Real of the human animal) also such a swerve? Here one should endorse Freud’s fundamental insight according to which sexuality does not follow the pleasure principle: its fundamental mode of appearance is that of a break, of the intrusion of some excessive *jouissance* that disturbs the ‘normal,’ balanced functioning of the psychic apparatus. (Žižek 2003: 74)

In Carter’s “Penetrating Into the Heart of the Forest”, Emile and Madeline’s coming of age or process of sexuation and differentiation coincides with their overproximity to the spectral Thing at the heart of the forest, whose view from a distance sustains the consistency of their father’s Edenic-like picture of reality but whose overproximity, in a postmodernist manner, renders visible the inconsistency of such a world view. The fantasy of the tree *qua* Thing under Madeline’s gaze and of Madeline *qua* beautiful Thing under Emile’s are eventually traversed as they are

revealed to be spectres, reflections of the way Madeline's and Emile's pure gazes —holes, rifts or negative excesses— are inscribed onto —stain— their respective views of reality, producing vertigo and *jouissance*. In turn, such a traversing or desublimation, in my view, hints at what Žižek designates as “the hidden perverse core” of the theological topic of the Fall:

[i]f it is prohibited to eat from the Tree of Knowledge in Paradise, why did God put it there in the first place? Is it not that this was a part of His perverse strategy first to seduce Adam and Eve into the Fall, in order then to save them? (15)

The perverse core grounding the narrative of *Genesis* and, by extension, the Platonic notion of love, which sustains the fantasy of Woman *qua* sublime and obscene Thing, is more explicitly explored in the tale examined in the next chapter: “The Bloody Chamber”, Carter's most popular and controversial text, which opens and gives title to her best known collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979).

Before concluding my Žižekian analysis of “Penetrating Into the Heart of the Forest”, I find it important to distinguish it from Hope Jennings's Kristevan reading of the same tale, already advanced here in chapter 2. Jennings also reads Madeline and Emile's taste of the apple from the tree at the heart of the forest as an instance of the “fortunate Fall” which “disrupt[s] the phallogentrism embedded in Genesis” (Jennings 2012: 172). The implications of Jennings's reading of the tale's disruption of the *Genesis*, however, stand at odds with my conclusions. Drawing on Žižek's notion of the Real as the spectral rift or abyss of negativity inherent to symbolisation and to the subject *qua* being that symbolises, I have interpreted Madeline's and Emile's “fall” as an instance of the subject's recognition of the Real abyss or spectral excess of negativity (“night of the world”) at the heart of its (symbolically constituted) subjectivity. On the contrary, Jennings, following

Kristeva's concept of the Real or "*chora*" *qua* pre-symbolic fleshy realm, reads the twins' fall as a "return to a fleshy origin that pre-exists father's law, initiating a discovery of their own flesh" (Jennings 2012: 172). Even if Jennings argues that the heart of the forest in Carter's tale stands for the unsymbolisable Real, this Real, like Kristeva's notion of the Real, appears to be symbolised in her reading as essentially feminine. In discovering "in his sister 'the ultimate difference of a femininity'", Jennings argues, "Emile figuratively opens up an alternative space in which the (maternal) flesh supersedes the demands of the paternal law [...] in privileging this maternal space, [Carter] exposes where the maternal and/or female body has been repressed by the patriarchal discourse" (172). Jennings's reading, in my view, disregards the fact that what *Genesis* represses, in Carter's tale what woodlanders erase or keep at bay from their picture of reality, does not exist. The heart of the forest *qua* Thing is a spectral excess/leftover of symbolisation which from a distance sustains the *Genesis* and the woodlanders' worldview but whose direct encounter renders it inconsistent and confronts Madeline and Emile with what is in them more than themselves.

The postulation of the maternal body as a realm external to the symbolic, reinforces, as I argued in chapter 6, the fantasy of Woman as the unsymbolisable Other and, by extension, a symmetrical view of the sexes which, in my view, reproduces the same binary logic at work in patriarchal heterosexist distinctions. If the fantasy of Woman/womb *qua* sublime and obscene Thing takes the form of the heart of the (maternal) forest into which Madeline and Emile "penetrate" and encounter their *sinthome*, in "The Bloody Chamber", as I note in the next chapter, such a fantasy is unsuccessfully reproduced by a gruesome fetish, a torture chamber at the heart of a rich Marquis's castle whom the female narrator decides to marry.

CHAPTER 10

GOING THROUGH THE FANTASY OF FAIRY TALE MARRIAGE: “THE BLOODY CHAMBER”

Like the three tales from *Fireworks* just examined, “The Bloody Chamber”, the tale that opens and gives title to Carter’s second collection of short stories (1979), befits Žižek’s definition of postmodernist writing in its staging of the unnamed narrator’s over-identification with the fantasy frame that constitutes and sustains her symbolic reality —“the unguessable country of marriage” in a “fairy tale castle”— and thus her desire —to become a marquise, the beloved wife and mother of marquises (Carter 1995 [1979]: 111, 112). Such a process confronts the narrator-protagonist with the apparition of the sublime Thing —“what is in her fantasy more than her fantasy”— *qua* obscene leftover, an encounter which, in line with Žižek’s account of the subject in postmodernism, renders palpable the horrifying excess of negativity at her heart.

Carter’s story reproduces the narrator’s memory of her first marriage: at seventeen, dazzled by the prospect of a luxurious life in a remote castle in Brittany the narrator, a talented pianist, decides to abandon her mother’s small apartment in Paris and marry “the richest man in France”, a Marquis many years her senior and widowed three times (Carter 1995 [1979]: 116).⁹⁰ Right after the marriage consummation, the Marquis pretends to be called away from the castle and, before leaving, he puts his new wife into a test of love. He entrusts her all the keys of the castle and asks her to “promise [him] that if [she] love[s] him”, she will not use:

[t]he key to [his] enfer [...] the key to a little room at the foot of the west tower, behind the still-room, at the end of a dark little corridor full of horrid cobwebs that would get into your hair and frighten you if you ventured there. (125)

⁹⁰ The word “Marquis” is consistently capitalised throughout the story.

The Marquis's secretive attitude and sudden departure awakens the narrator's "dark newborn curiosity", which eventually drives her to explore the forbidden room and discover the remains of her husband's three former wives, all of them brutally murdered (125). Horrified at what she sees in the Marquis's "bloody chamber", the narrator at once realises that she is to share the same fate; it is at this point that the rhythm of the narrative accelerates and draws the reader into suspense, wondering how she will survive in the end.

The plot of "The Bloody Chamber" is clearly reminiscent of Charles Perrault's *conte* "Bluebeard" from his collection *Stories and Tales of Past Times* (1697), "the first literary version of the Bluebeard tale", which Carter herself translated shortly before the publication of *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (Sheets 1991: 643).⁹¹ Such an intertextual relationship is explicitly established in Carter's tale when the narrator describes her memory of the Marquis as he is about to behead her for her betrayal: "And my husband stood stock-still [...] the sword still raised over his head as in those clockwork tableaux of Bluebeard that you see in glass cases at fairs" (Carter 1995 [1979]: 142).

Carter's choice of "Bluebeard" as prime intertext is highly significant: unlike most fairy and folk romances, which celebrate matrimony as the quintessence of individuals' fulfillment, Perrault's narrative brings to the fore the potentially murderous underside of the patriarchal fantasy of the happy marriage.

⁹¹ In 1976, Carter was commissioned to translate Charles Perrault's tales into English for Victor Gollancz. She translated a total of ten tales which were published in 1977 in the volume *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault*. A subsequent edition, *Sleeping Beauty and Other Favourite Fairy Tales*, which includes a translation of "La Belle et la bête" and "Le Prince chéri", came out in 1982 (Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère 2009: 2). Ute Heidmann and Jean Michel Adam have noted how Carter's rediscovery of Perrault's texts in her process of translation led her to explore, rather than subvert, Perrault's versions of folk tales and develop a "complex and productive dialogue" with him in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (Heidmann and Adam 2007: 182).

As Bruno Bettelheim has argued, “Bluebeard” represents a troubling plot side to “Beauty and the Beast” for it arouses disturbing anxieties about marriage, confirming a girl’s “worst fears about sex” (Bettelheim 1977: 306). In this light, Perrault’s story can be considered a precursor of the tradition of the female Gothic, which many critics identify with the work of late-eighteenth-century/early-nineteenth-century female writers like Ann Radcliffe and the Brönte sisters, and whose distinctive features include dark hidden chambers, premonitions of evil and a female protagonist who is both an active seeker of true love and the unfortunate victim of mysterious spectral threats (Joannou 2000: 90).

Despite “Bluebeard’s” apparent demystification of marital union, the tale’s ending —Perrault’s heroine is saved by her brothers, who kill Bluebeard, and later marries “an honest man who made her forget her sorrows as the wife of Bluebeard” (Carter 2011 [1977]: 8)— and its two *moralités* —paraphrased by Bettelheim as follows: “Women, don’t give in to your sexual curiosity; men, don’t permit yourself to be carried away by your anger at being sexually betrayed” (Bettelheim 1977: 301-302)— render the narrative, in my view, complicit with patriarchal sexual politics. In emphasising women’s curiosity as an objectionable trait, Perrault appears to legitimise the ideology of fairy-tale romance, particularly in its idealisation of the happy marriage as the enactment of the union with Woman *qua* beautiful, incurious and merciful love-object.

As advanced in chapter 6 here, this concept of woman has been termed by Žižek, following Jacques-Alain Miller, “the fake woman” or “sacrificial (m)Other”, a subject who supports male identity in patriarchy by assuming the static position of perfect moral refuge (Žižek 2000c: 231). Such an idealisation of “woman” partakes of the logic of erotic love, defined as the subject’s attachment to “an object elevated

to the dignity of the Thing”, an Other that gives body to the ideal of supreme Good, what the subject, in order to constitute itself, has virtually separated from and whose inaccessibility holds the promise of self-fulfillment. Given the Thing’s inexistence, the accomplishment of such a promise, in Žižek’s view and as earlier noted, paradoxically involves the subject’s own disintegration (Žižek 2000a: 30).

Put differently, Platonic, fairy-tale love renders the beloved (m)Other as a sublime object whose inaccessibility, Žižek argues apropos of the status of the Thing in postmodernism, is dependent on the creation and concealment of the sublime object’s obscene underside, which, as explained in chapter 3 here, “appears” as the lover approaches it. For subjects who identify with the identity of “conceptual men” in patriarchy, such an obscene underside takes the form of deadly fatal women; for subjects whose ego-ideal is that of a “conceptual woman”, the underside of their sublime beloved is, as dramatised in Perrault’s and Carter’s narratives, an obscene *jouisseur* or anal father.

In “Bluebeard”, curiosity and the subject’s concomitant approach to the sublime (and obscene) beloved/Thing— is urged to be repressed. As such, Perrault’s narrative can be read as a variation of *Genesis*, which conceptualises the Fall as an undesirable and punishable break from a pre-existing state of Good.⁹² This intertextual connection is overtly established in “The Bloody Chamber” when Jean-Yves, a blind piano tuner whom the narrator befriends in the castle, compares

⁹² The intertextual relationship between Perrault’s “Bluebeard” and the creation narrative in *Genesis* on the basis of the fatal effects of following curiosity has been foregrounded by some commentators. Cheryl Renfroe argues that both Perrault’s and Carter’s stories have “strong associations with the biblical story of the temptation of Eve” (Renfroe 2001: 94). Marina Warner further associates the Fall and Perrault’s narrative with the Greek myth of Pandora’s box: “After Perrault, [the Bluebeard plot] often comes with a subtitle ‘The Effect of Female Curiosity’—or, in case we miss the point—‘The Fatal Effects of Curiosity’, to bring it in line with cautionary tales about women’s innate wickedness: with Pandora who opened the forbidden casket as well as Eve who ate the forbidden fruit” (Warner 1995: 244).

the narrator's entrance in the Marquis's secret chamber to Eve's disobedience: "Who can say what I deserve or no?", the narrator says in the face of her imminent punishment by decapitation: "You disobeyed him", [Jean-Yves] said. "That is sufficient reason for him to punish you." "I only did what he knew I would." "Like Eve," he said" (Carter 1995 [1979]: 140). In line with my Žižekian analysis of the three *Fireworks* tales so far discussed, the narrator's reflection constitutes a desublimation of the myth of the Fall: if access to the bloody chamber is forbidden, why did the Marquis/God give the narrator the keys to enter? As Žižek suggests in reference to God's prohibition to taste the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, the Marquis's test is a perverse stratagem to kill the narrator and avow the existence of the (non-existing) Thing that feigns and sustains the (in)consistency of his identity. Simply put, what is forbidden does not exist but its prohibition, staged with the help of a key, guarantees desire and thus safeguards the consistency of sexual/symbolic identities in patriarchy. In the narrator's own words:

I knew I had behaved exactly according to his desires; had he not bought me so that I should do 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 of 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 as himself, since that destiny was himself; and I had lost. Lost at the charade of innocence and vice in which he had engaged me. Lost as the victim loses to the executioner. (Carter 1995 [1979]: 137)⁹³

An interpretation of the bloody chamber as the sublime/ obscene Thing whose existence the Marquis simulates in order to sustain his subjectivity seems to

⁹³ The narrator's comparison of the Marquis to an executioner together with the words she uses to describe the scene in which she is about to be decapitated are clearly reminiscent of the dreadful spectacle of decapitation in "The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter". In both tales, the simulation of a transgression and subsequent punishment of the transgressor creates and perpetuates the Law, yet in "The Bloody Chamber", given the fact that the fourth wife/victim tells the story, "the blade did *not* descend, the necklace did *not* sever, [her] head did *not* roll" (Carter 1995 [1979]: 142, emphasis in original).

be reinforced by the narrator's reference to the myth of Pandora, a myth which also appears among the titles of the books and engravings that she browsed through at the castle's library. "Eliphas Levy; the name meant nothing to me", the narrator informs:

I squinted at a title or two: *The Initiation*, *The Key of Mysteries*, *The Secret of Pandora's Box*, and yawned. Nothing, here, to detain a seventeen-year-old girl waiting for her first embrace [...] Nevertheless, I opened the doors of the bookcase idly to browse. And I think I knew, I knew by some tingle of my fingertips, even when I opened that slim volume with no title on the spine, what I should find inside [...] the girl with tears hanging on her cheeks like stuck pearls, her cunt a split fig below the globes of her buttocks [...] while a man in a black mask fingered with his free hand his prick, that curved upwards like a scimitar he held [...] *The Adventures of Eulalie at the Harem of the Grand Turk* [...] Here was another steel engraving: 'Immolation of the wives of the Sultan'. I knew enough for what I saw in that book to make me gasp. (Carter 1995 [1979]: 120)⁹⁴

The books the narrator mentions and the engraved scene she describes constitute clear variants of what Žižek termed "a perverse reading of the priority of the Fall" whereby one causes evil as a means to struggle for the good (Žižek 2014a: 42). Differently put, the prohibition—materialised in objects like a box, a girl's vagina or a locked chamber—and the punishments—sexual abuse, immolation and decapitation—enacted in all these texts simultaneously create and render inaccessible the prohibited Thing which invariably takes the form of the female phallus, an object that does not exist but whose spectral presence sustains the

⁹⁴ In *Pandora's Box*, Eliphas Levi—pseudonym for Alphonse Louis Constant, French occult writer and ceremonial magician (1810-1875)—refers to the ancient Greek myth in which the supreme God Zeus sent Pandora to earth with a vase filled with curses in order to punish unruly men, Zeus calculated on her curiosity because she was unaware of what the vase contained. Pandora, like Eve in Christian iconography, was held responsible for looking inside the vase and thus bringing all evils into the world (Coleman 2007: 804). Kari E. Lokke compares the curiosity motif in Carter's tale and in *Bluebeard* to the Roman myth of Cupid and Psyche in which the latter is also put to a test of love she fails to withstand and thus she is punished and eventually forgiven (Lokke 1988: 12).

symbolic matrix and subjectivities at work in patriarchy. As Carter puts it in *The Sadeian Woman*:

The whippings, the beatings, the gougings, the stabbings of erotic violence reawaken the memory of the social fiction of the female wound, the bleeding scar left by her castration [...] It is a great shame that we can forbid these bleedings in art but not in real life, for the beatings, the rapes and the woundings take place in a privacy beyond the reach of official censorship. It is also in private that the unacknowledged psychological mutilations performed in the name of love take place. (Carter 2009 [1979]: 26)

The prohibition and creation of the Thing as the female phallus, which grounds Platonic love, casts flesh-and-blood women into two opposing identities that help naturalise and perpetuate their submission to men: the sacrificial mother or fake woman, who in embodying the Thing conceals its non-existence, and its underside, the fatal woman who, in over-approaching the Thing, must be punished.

The narrator's desublimation of the sublime (and obscene) Thing that sustains a symmetrical view of the sexes in patriarchy constitutes one of the major differences between Carter's story and Perrault's narrative. Turning the heroine into the narrator of the story —Perrault's tale employs a third person omniscient narrator— is one of the means through which Carter revisits and dismantles the myth of Woman *qua* Thing. However, this procedure, as advanced in chapter 2, stands as a major source of contention among the commentators of "The Bloody Chamber". Before addressing such a controversy, I find it important to note the most straightforward differences between Perrault's and Carter's texts as they have widely determined the critical reception of the latter.

Apart from their distinct narrative modes, "The Bloody Chamber" differs from "Bluebeard" in two major respects. First, Carter's text establishes a clear distinction between the two registers in which the story is set. References to the train, cars, the telephone and the stock market as well as the allusions to luxury

women's clothes designed by Parisian couturier Paul Poiret (1879-1944) and to composer Claude Debussy (1862-1912) set Carter's narrative in early twentieth century Paris. In this modern, bourgeois setting, the material conditions of the main protagonists are clearly different: while the narrator initially leads a quiet and humble life with her mother, "who beggared herself for love", and her old nurse in an everyday domestic environment, the Marquis, who is "as rich as Croesus" thanks to the valuables he inherited and his ability at the stock market, sustains a pre-modern, fairy tale-like castle in a coastal village in Brittany. (Carter 1995 [1979]: 111, 114).

The Marquis's remote castle as imagined by the narrator befits Žižek's definition of the Thing in postmodernism: on the surface and from a distance, the castle is described as if it were the limit of the narrator's imagination:

[the] pinnacled domain that [lies] beyond the grasp of [the narrator's] imagination ... that magic place [...] whose walls were made of foam, that legendary habitation in which [the Marquis] had been born. To which, one day, I might bear an heir. Our destination, my destiny. (112)

The Marquis's Castle, "at home at home neither on the land nor on the water" initially provides, I will argue in detail in the following pages, the fantasy coordinates for the narrator's desire (112, 117). Yet, as she approaches the opulent surface of this fascinating place—packed with *objets d'art* and luxurious materials like gold, rubies, fine glass, leather, muslin, mahogany and lilies—the narrator encounters the bloody chamber, an unimaginable excess, the obscene underside of the narrator's fantasy which threatens to annihilate her and renders palpable the inconsistency of the symbolic identity she assumes. The remains of the Marquis's murdered wives stand as the obscene underside of the fairy-tale ideal of women

which interpellates the narrator and teaches her how to desire. It is the ideal of the beautiful, innocent and virtuous princess or queen-to-be, which Carter describes as:

[t]he *object* of desire [...] 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. (Carter 2009 [1979]: 88, emphasis in original)

Besides exhibiting the remains of the Marquis's former wives, this monstrous chamber also includes archaic torture devices like the Iron Maiden, a rack and a wheel which point to the feudal order that reigns in the Marquis's remote village as opposed to the "more democratic" capitalist world of Paris and New York in which the Marquis's wealth also rules (Carter 1995 [1979]: 135). This feudal sovereignty is strengthened by the Marquis's hereditary title of nobility as well as by the type of domination he exerts upon the villagers: the housekeeper at the castle "[is] bond to his family in the utmost feudal complicity" and "the police, the advocates, even the judge", the narrator believes:

"All [might] be in his service, turning a common blind eye to his vices since he was milord whose word must be obeyed [...] Who, on this distant coast, would believe the white-faced girl from Paris who came running to them with a shuddering tale of blood, of fear, of the ogre murmuring in the shadows? Or, rather, they would immediately know it to be true. But were all *honour-bond* to let me carry it no further. (117, 133, emphasis mine)

Carter's portrayal of the Gothic castle and of its obscene ruler, however, clearly subverts its connotations as a site for social and psychological alienation — for a heterotopic place for "otherness", as Foucault would have it— by placing it at the heart of Western civilization: the Marquis feudal scenario is sustained by ruthless capitalism; he is "the richest man in France" thanks to his successful financial transactions in New York, which "involve several millions" (Carter 1995 [1979]: 122). Put differently, "The Bloody Chamber" is a postmodernist tale in positing a paradoxical co-dependence between feudalism and capitalism: at the very

centre of the place in which the most powerful speculator dwells, the narrator finds an obscene excess, the feudal torture chamber, which the Marquis has to conceal in order to retain the consistency of the *status quo* in which his economic power rules.

The second, and in Aidan Day's opinion, most "radical modification" of Perrault's story that Carter effectuates in "The Bloody Chamber" is that the role of the rescuer is not assigned to the narrator's brothers (Day 1998: 156). It is rather her mother, who alarmed by her daughter's spontaneous tears over the phone once the Marquis left the castle, takes a night train to Brittany and, with no taxis at the lonely halt upon her arrival, borrows a horse "from a bemused farmer" and gallops all the way up to the castle. She is let in by Jean-Yves and just in the nick of time, "without a moment's hesitation", raises her dead husband's antique revolver and puts a "single, irreproachable bullet" between the eyes of the Marquis (Carter 1995 [1979]: 143, 142).

With the Marquis dead and the contents of the bloody chamber "buried or burned, the door sealed", the narrator donates her wealth to charities and returns to the modest life she had led in Paris before the apparition of her first husband (143). This time, the third member of the narrator's domestic environment is no longer her old nurse—who, when the mother rushed to the castle, "was left scandalized at home" thinking she would "interrupt milord on his honeymoon", and "passed away soon after in such a sorry state of disillusionment"—but the blind piano tuner, with whom the narrator runs a little music school and whom "[her] mother loves as much as [the narrator] does" (143).

What the narrator explains as "the *maternal telepathy* that sent [her] mother running headlong from the telephone to the station after [the former] had called her, that night" (143, emphasis in original) and subsequent reinstatement of the mother-

daughter bond after the narrator's marriage ordeal, has been widely read as an unequivocal feminist statement against a brutal patriarchal order. For instance, Salman Rushdie, in his affectionate introduction to Carter's posthumous collection of short fiction *Burning Your Boats* (1995), notes that the death of the Marquis at the hand of a strong mother figure constitutes "a feminist twist: instead of the weak father to save, whom in the fairy tale, Beauty agrees to go to the Beast, we are given, here, an indomitable mother rushing to her daughter's rescue" (Rushdie 1995: xi).

In a similar vein, Kari E- Lokke and Aidan Day read "The Bloody Chamber" as a feminist rewriting of *Bluebeard*: "'The Bloody Chamber' ends as a feminist fairy tale should", Lokke writes, "with the rescue of the daughter by the strong and heroic mother" (Lokke 1988: 10). Similarly, Day contends that "[i]n this image of the rescuing mother, Carter usurps a masculine trope and puts it at the service of the feminine" (Day 1998: 156). Likewise, Sonya Andermahr, editor of the last collection of essays on Carter's fiction published to date, singles out Carter's tale as an example of the "rehabilitat[ion] of the mother figure [...] 'telepathically' intuiting her daughter's danger and riding to her rescue" (Andermahr 2012: 18).

Some feminist critics have expanded on the implications of Carter's use of a mother figure as an avenging rescuer. Drawing on Adrienne Rich's emphasis of the importance of the mother-daughter relationship for feminist writing, Ellen Cronan Rose maintains that the narrator's mother enacts:

[t]he most important thing one woman can do for another [...which is] to illuminate and expand her sense of life's possibilities [...] A mother 'who is a fighter' gives her daughter a sense of life's possibilities. Following her example, Bluebeard's widow and her 'sisters' in the stories that follow are enabled to explore life

possibilities, to develop into adult women by learning to love themselves. (Cronan Rose 1983: 222)⁹⁵

Cronan Rose concludes by arguing that the message Carter conveys in rewriting “Bluebeard” in “The Bloody Chamber” is that:

[f]emale development [...] has been distorted by patriarchy; that it is and must be grounded in the mother-daughter matrix; that it involves not only the discovery but the glad acceptance of our sexuality. That a woman who loves the woman who is herself has the power of loving the other person. And perhaps some day even patriarchy will ‘yield’ to that power. (227)

Patricia Duncker, who, as advanced here in chapter 2, is very critical with Carter’s representation of sexual relationships —a point to which I will return in the next few pages— nevertheless also praises the role Carter assigns to the narrator’s mother. “Here”, Duncker contends:

Carter is transforming the sexual politics of the fairy tales in significant ways. The mother of the Bluebeard’s bride never deserts her child [...] the bond between Mother and Daughter is never broken. Carter’s tale, perhaps unwittingly, carries an uncompromisingly feminist message; for the women’s revolution would seal up the door of the bloody chamber forever. (Duncker 1984: 12)

Very recently, Veronica L. Schanoes has read the psychic bond between mother and daughter in “The Bloody Chamber” as the point of departure of Carter’s “feminist project of fairy-tale reclamation”; “the protagonist’s bond with her mother”, Schanoes contends:

[a]llows her to thwart the repetition of spousal murder that the Marquis insists on re-enacting [...] the story’s] happy ending is not of a woman abandoning the family of her childhood in order to live happily ever after with a man, but of a woman able

⁹⁵ In emphasising the implications of the restoration of the mother-daughter relationship in “The Bloody Chamber”, Rose is quoting Adrienne Rich’s seminal work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1976).

to maintain her connection with her mother while also loving a man who is able to appreciate the artistry and musical skill of the daughter. (Schanoes 2014: 21)

Freud's Oedipal mode of social development has been addressed by some commentators of "The Bloody Chamber" to further sustain an interpretation of the tale's final restoration of the mother-daughter bond as a subversive feminist strategy. As explained in chapter 6, Freud's theory presupposes the existence of a pre-Oedipal—in Lacanian terms, pre-symbolic—state of union with the mother or primordial love object, which is disturbed by the entry of the father as the possessor of the phallus. The child's process of socialisation involves a belief in the mother's castration and subsequent submission to the paternal metaphor, which for male children takes the form of identification with the father while for female children means assuming the position of being the phallus, the object of desire.

On this account, Robin Ann Sheets, following psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin's urge to challenge Freud's Oedipal narrative, argues that the narrator's mother in "The Bloody Chamber" subverts the definition of the female as the castrated Other by appropriating the phallus, symbolised by her dead husband's revolver: "Through this witty and flamboyantly triumphant ending, Carter rewrites Perrault's fairy tale [...] and the Freudian account of female development" (Sheets 1991: 653). "The narrator's mother", Sheets continues:

[c]ertainly does not act like a wounded creature born to bleed. Indeed, her courage sustains the young bride who realizes that she has inherited her nerves and will from the mother who had defied the yellow outlaws of Indochina [...] Carter equips the mother with male and female Freudian symbols. (653)

A similar point is made by Maroula Joannou when arguing that Carter's story defies Freud's theory "in showing that the primal link to the mother is not broken by the child's separation". "[Carter's] use of the fantastic [maternal

telepathy] here”, Joannou argues, “articulates the importance of the mother-daughter relationship” (Joannou 2000: 97).

More recently, Selen Atkari has also read the character of the narrator’s mother as subverting the boundaries between men and women constructed by Freudian theory, of which, she argues, the conventional Gothic plot of Perrault’s “Bluebeard” stands as an example. Her argumentation, however, is opposed to Sheets’s: while the latter contends that “The Bloody Chamber” rehabilitates women as socio-symbolic, desiring subjects, the former, drawing on Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection and the maternal body as Real—as conceptualised in early Lacanian theory—and thus as a source of empowerment, argues that “its end glorifies the victory of the semiotic over the symbolic, bless[ing] the heroine and her mother with happy life ever after, as subjects in process” (Atkari 2008: 47-48). “Subjects-in-process” is a Kristevan term Atkari uses to refer to the state in which “the individual’s identity should reside on the threshold between the semiotic realm and the symbolic realm” (42). “Only then”, Atkari further argues, “the individual can become a subject-in-process who still remains on the condition that he or she carries the (m)other in himself or herself” (43).

Atkari’s approach is shared by Suzette A. Henke, who also reads the tale’s ending as a rehabilitation of the pre-symbolic realm, in her own words: “In the titular story, ‘The Bloody Chamber’, the infrangible bond of pre-Oedipal attachment eventually triumphs over the kind of Oedipal displacement demanded by the Western economy of exogamous marriage” (Henke 2013: 50). My Žižekian reading of “The Bloody Chamber” as a postmodernist story, advanced in the introduction to this chapter, opposes readings of the tale that interpret its ending as an unambiguous celebration of the restoration of the mother-daughter bond. More

specifically, given Žižek's reformulation of the Real in late Lacan as the retroactive product of symbolisation, the virtual excess/ leftover of negativity constitutive of the subject, I cannot agree with Kristevan approaches that celebrate the semiotic as an *a priori* feminine realm from which the subject was separated after his immersion in the symbolic, and to which he or she may return for emancipation. On the contrary, the narrator's mother, in my view, becomes the new the bearer of the phallus and, rather than opening a path towards the semiotic, she reinstates and safeguards the consistency of their symbolic matrix by murdering the Marquis and sealing his bloody chamber, the very excess of the symbolic.

Another main reason to revisit the interpretations of Carter's story delineated above derives precisely from what stands as a major source of dissent among commentators of "The Bloody Chamber" and of Carter's work as a whole. As noted in chapter 2, many critics have found the tale's eroticising of sadistic violence against women and the narrator's acknowledged enjoyment in being objectified and victimized profoundly problematic. "The Bloody Chamber" stands out as one of the narratives in which de Sade's influence on Carter is most palpable: the way the narrator refers to her husband —only mentioning his title, never his name— directly relates him, in my view, to the Marquis de Sade, particularly with the perverse libertines that populate de Sade's pornographic novels. Carter's Marquis is indeed a connoisseur of pornography, as the titles in his library confirm, and a sadist, as revealed in his sexual practices, which are best summarised by his favourite poet's statement: "there is a striking resemblance between the act of love and the ministrations of a torturer" (Carter 1995 [1979]: 130).⁹⁶

⁹⁶ This quotation is a direct reference to Charles Baudelaire's reflection: "L'amour ressemblait fort à une torture ou à une opération chirurgicale" ("The act of love strongly resembles torture or surgery") included in part III of "Fusées" ("Rockets"). "Fusées" was posthumously published in 1877 as the first part of Baudelaire's *Intimate Journals*.

Another reason to describe the Marquis as a libertine is the meticulous, hyper-rational way in which he sets his murderous plot in motion, arranging a spectacular setting that simulates a concealed/ forbidden (non-existing) Thing that in turn creates the transgression which sustains his Law.⁹⁷ In itself, the exhibition of the Marquis's sadism is not a source of controversy; what some commentators have found unsettling are three main aspects of the narrator's perspective. First, her recounting of those moments in which she found her pornographic objectification and degradation enthralling is seen as deeply problematic. The scene at the opera the day before her wedding includes one of the instants in which the narrator's enjoyment is more markedly evident. Wearing the luxurious ruby choker that belonged to the Marquis's female ancestors and that prefigures the destiny her husband has planned for her, the narrator:

[s]aw him watching me in the gilded mirrors with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh, or even of a housewife in the market, inspecting cuts on the slab. 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

(http://www.ebooksgratuits.com/pdf/ baudelaire_fusees.pdf)

⁹⁷ Robin Ann Sheets further strengthens the interpretation of the Marquis as a sadist by establishing an analogy between his secret chamber and the many torture rooms that appear in de Sade's *Justine* (1796), and that Carter also mentions in *The Sadeian Woman* as the place in which virtuous women are degraded: "the monk's pavilion, which is reached through a winding underground tunnel and filled with scourges, ferules, withes, cords, and a thousand other instruments of torture, and Roland's subterranean cave". Sheets argues that Carter's Marquis bears a close resemblance to de Sade's Comte de Gernande, "the aristocrat in *Justine* with straps to bind his wives and surgical devices to bleed them to death" because, unlike most libertines, both "are committed to torturing women within marriage" (Sheets 1991: 647-648).

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. (Carter 1995 [1979]: 115)

Second, the narrator's confession to the unnamed narratee that "in my heart, I'd always known [the castle's] lord would be the death of me" after entering the bloody chamber has also been received as an evidence of her undesirable masochistic position (136). Yet, it is the way she closes her narrative that has been noted by critics as the tale's most troublesome aspect. The narrator's account of her quiet present situation suggests nostalgia for her dead husband: "The castle is now a school for the blind, though I pray that the children who live there are not haunted by any sad ghosts looking for, crying for, the husband who will never return to the bloody chamber" and in the last lines she brings to the fore the heart-shaped indelible stain on her forehead transferred from the bloody key by the Marquis right before her failed execution:

No paint nor powder, no matter how thick or white, can mask that red mark on my forehead; I am glad he cannot see it -- not for fear of his revulsion, since I know he sees me clearly with his heart -- but, because it spares my shame. (142-143)

Bearing this permanent red mark, which the narrator compares elsewhere with "the cast mark of a Brahmin woman. Or the mark of Cain" (139), has been read by Patricia Duncker and by Avis Lewallen as a reactionary ending which colludes with patriarchy. Duncker observes: "She carries the mark of her complicity and corruption forever, the complicity of women who have been made in man's image, who have desired to be possessed [...] who meet the reward of that complicity" (Duncker 1991: 11). In a similar vein, Lewallen complains that "to be branded guilty, despite recognition of the manipulation to which she has been subject, seems somewhat unfair" (Lewallen 1988: 152).

Contrary to Duncker's and Lewallen's conclusion, I read the narrator's foregrounding of the tell-tale stain of her disobedience or evil mark as a subversive strategy. This red mark stands as a reminder of her curiosity or desire to explore both her desire and her enjoyment: the desire to embody the fairy-tale ideal of the perfect woman and the enjoyment she feels when she is objectified. Such an exploration is what Perrault condemns in his tale and what Carter praises, together with the "provocation of uneasiness", as the moral function of literary texts (Carter 1995 [1974]: 459, Haffenden 1985: 96).

On this account, Robin Ann Sheets compares the narrator's role as "active investigator, bringing light into the darkened corridors" with that of the heroines of "paranoid Gothic films" and insists that it is Carter's contention to emphasise that women should investigate why they find their objectification erotic (Sheets 1991: 652). "We cannot achieve freedom, according to Carter", Sheets notes, "until we understand our own historically determined involvement in sadomasochism" (657). Elaine Jordan further argues—in an attempt to save "The Bloody Chamber" from anti-pornography criticism and its claim that Carter's text reinscribes patriarchy—that understanding the paradoxical conflation of "attraction and recoil" that self-objectification in pornography entices is essential if women wish to counteract it: "One feminist position", Jordan explains, "is to condemn any truck with such available fascinations altogether"; another position, she adds:

[i]s to face the fascination, to —spring forward *from* recoil, from wincing at an unacknowledged desire. (*Who* is it that acknowledges? Either the sadistic or the masochistic subject, or whatever gender. To whatever degree [...] Where else can you start from, if not from where you actually are? [...] Where we are may include fascinations from which a rational and ethical self recoils. (Jordan 1992: 124-25, emphasis in original)

In the light of Jordan's contention, Carter could be read as taking on the role of "moral pornographer", a term which, as advanced in chapter 2 here, she coined in

The Sadeian Woman to refer to any artist who resorts to pornography in order to “force the reader to reassess his relation to his own sexuality, which is to say its own primary being, through the mediation of the image or the text” (Carter 2009 [1979]: 19). This process of reassessment, Carter further argues, may lead the reader to acknowledge “the real relations of man and his kind [...] penetrate to the heart of the contempt for women that distorts our culture even as he entered the realm of true obscenity as he describes it” (22). This is precisely what the narrator does when she penetrates the heart of her desire to embody the ideal woman in fairy tales, an ideal which turns out to be a horrifying and deadly excess. Žižek makes the same point apropos of Daphne du Maurier’s Gothic novels, particularly *Rebecca* (1938), which “stage[s] in a shamelessly direct way [...] the different figure of ‘feminine masochism’, of a woman enjoying her own ruin finding a tortured satisfaction in her subjection and humiliation” (Žižek 2005b). The painful staging of the obscene core of the subject’s fantasy is, Žižek contends, “the first act of liberation” as it renders visible the inconsistency of the fantasmatic Thing that regulates desire and domesticates enjoyment and thus enables the subject to create it anew.⁹⁸

Just as the forest in “Reflections” and in “Penetrating Into the Heart of the Forest”, the Marquis’s chamber-Thing constitutes an adequate symbol of the womb, an material object that, in patriarchy, gives body to a virtual forbidden domain that regulates relationships, that is to say, to the maternal phallus.⁹⁹ The womb, in

⁹⁸ Together with the enjoyment or pleasure-in-pain the narrator feels when being objectified, there are at least three features in “The Bloody Chamber” which directly connect the narrative to Du Maurier’s *Rebecca*. Both female protagonists marry a rich widower older than them who is unwilling to talk about his past. Like Rebecca, the Marquis’s third wife is said to have died in “a boating accident, at his home in Brittany. They never found the body” (Carter 1995 [1979]: 113). As the newlyweds in *Rebecca* arrive in the husband’s mansion, a housekeeper greets them but treats the new wife with disdain.

⁹⁹ Suzette A. Henke also has also the Marquis’s bloody chamber as a symbol of the womb (Henke 2013: 50).

Carter's opinion, is the Thing *par excellence*, an object sacralised as the place of eternity, of birth and death, by patriarchy and by anti-pornography critics alike, sustaining, as a result, a symmetrical view of sexual identities and concomitant oppression of women. As Carter wonderfully puts it in *The Sadeian Woman*:

[t]he womb [is] the 'inner productive space' [...] 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 [...] 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 [...] the womb is the First and Last Place, earth, the greatest mother of them all, from whom we come, to whom we go [...] the womb is the earth and also the grave of being; it is the warm, moist, dark, inward, secret, forbidden, fleshy core of the unknowable labyrinth of experience [...] in the beginning was the womb and its periodic and haphazard bleedings are signs that it has life of its own, unknowable to us. This is the most sacred of all places. Women are sacred because they possess it. (Carter 2009 [1979]: 123-125)

The logic behind the sacralisation of the womb as Thing partakes —as suggested in Carter's assertion above that "in the beginning was the womb"— of the logic behind an orthodox reading of *Genesis* whereby eternal Good or idyllic Eden precedes the Fall and human suffering. The first step towards the emancipation of women, Carter argues, is to demystify the ideal of Woman *qua* bearer of the womb-Thing, to free women from the "burden of overvaluation [of] the womb [...] the place on earth of the imaginary goddess" (126). Carter insists that the truth of the womb is:

[t]hat it is an organ like any other organ, more useful than the appendix, less useful than the colon but not so 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 to malfunction and cause sickness, pain and inconvenience. The assertion of this elementary fact through the means of a fictional woman involves an entire process of demystification and denial, in which far more than the demystification, the secularisation of women is involved [...] if the goddess is dead, there is nowhere for eternity to hide. The last resort of homecoming is denied to us, as if for the first time.

There is no way out of time. We must learn to live in this world, to take it with sufficient seriousness, because it is the only world we will ever know. (125-127)¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ My reading of Carter's desublimation of the womb as the sublime and obscene Thing in both "The Bloody Chamber" and *The Sadeian Woman* parallels Žižek's approach to Gustave Courbet's

My reading of the bloody chamber as the womb-Thing needs to be distinguished from Lucie Armitt's interpretation, which, as seen in chapter 2, posits the chamber as a symbol of the "excess or overspill of signifiers" which, not only in the tale, but in Carter's collection as a whole, frustrate any attempt at meaning and identity fixation (Armitt 1997: 92). I rather interpret the bloody chamber as the sublime/obscene Thing that, according to Žižek, characterises postmodernist fiction. The womb-Thing in patriarchy is the revered object that from a distance sustains the fantasmatic consistency of the system's symbolic edifice but when approached renders the system inconsistent as it turns out to be nothing, nothing but living flesh and dead meat. Such overproximity confronts the subject with its constitutive excess of negativity, *sinthome* or gaze *qua* object making him or her feel vertigo or the unbearable sensation of losing oneself.

Žižek's account of the status of the Thing and of the subject in postmodernism sheds new light on the reasons that move Carter's sadistic Marquis to compulsively repeat his murderous plot. Žižek's theoretical approach is also useful to understand the reason why the narrator decides to marry the Marquis and will also sustain my reading of the narrator's inquisitive attitude and the indelible stain on her forehead as signs of subversion.¹⁰¹

painting *L'Origine du Monde* (1867), which, as noted in chapter 3, stands for him as a quintessential example of postmodernist art (Žižek 2000a: 37-38).

¹⁰¹ There is a story in *The Bloody Chamber* in which the womb-Thing takes the form of a maternal forest at whose heart lives the Erl-King. This fantastic creature gives title to the tale itself, "The Erl-King", which, in a way reminiscent of "The Bloody Chamber", features an unnamed female narrator's overproximity to a dream-like forest to which she is irresistibly attracted. Like the Marquis in "The Bloody Chamber", the Erl-King turns out to be a deadly lover: first, he attracts young girls to his house by means of his enchanting music but, once he has had sex with them, he turns each into a singing bird and imprisons them in cages. The birds' song is what allows the Erl-King to enact the repetition his seduction plot. That the Erl-King stands as the sublime-obscene Thing—and the tale itself as a postmodernist narrative following Žižek's definition—seems to be proven by the narrator's admission that the Erl-King "came alive from the desire of the woods", a desire which in turn has been bred by the prohibition to explore the woods, as expressed in the fairy-tale caution "Erl-King will do you grievous harm" (Carter 1995 [1979]: 188, 197). Just as "The

The narrator and the Marquis share the same fantasy frame which teaches them how to organise enjoyment and how to desire: it is the matrix of Eros or Platonic love whereby the subject-lover is passionately attached to a perfect and inhuman (m)Other-Thing whose inaccessibility creates (and conceals) the (im)possibility of self-fulfillment through union. Such a notion of love, as explained in the preceding pages, is at work in most cultural products from different historical epochs, from *Genesis* to fairy tale tradition, from Mediaeval courtly love poetry to pieces by the Romantics and the Symbolists.

Perhaps the most evident proof that Eros regulates the protagonists' enjoyment is to be found in the narrator's references to Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde* (1857-1859), a text that, as is well known, grounds ideal love in death. In Žižek's opinion, Wagner's opera stands as a perfect example of the logic of sublimation behind the ideal of the Other *qua* Thing—in this case, Woman *qua* Thing in patriarchy. "Tristan's unconditional attachment, excessive attachment to Isolde (and vice versa)", Žižek contends, "[w]as the very form of his dis-attachment, of his cutting-off of all his links with the world and immersion into Nothingness. (A beautiful woman as the image of death is a standard feature of male phantasmic space.)" (Žižek 1999a: 107-108).

Bloody Chamber", "The Erl-King" closes with the scene of the villain's imagined murder. This time, it is not the narrator's mother who kills her sublime-obscene love object, but the narrator's imagination, in which the Erl-King is strangled and the girl-birds released. Quite significantly, it is a mother-like figure who commits such an act, as the words of the dead King reveal: "Mother, mother, you have murdered me!" (192). This, in my view, confirms the fact that the narrator's deadly attachment to the Erl-King, like the narrator's attachment to the Marquis in "The Bloody Chamber", is grounded in erotic love and its ideal of women as Mother, the possessor of the womb-Thing.

Put differently, Tristan and Isolde's love for one another involves "being attached to the other as a stand-in for Nothingness" or as Žižek puts it elsewhere as a "black hole", dead body or spectral presence that both sustains the consistency of the subject and threatens to engulf it (Žižek 1999a: 108, 1994: 92).¹⁰² When the narrator in "The Bloody Chamber" remembers the moment her mother appears at the castle to save her, she tries to imagine how the Marquis might have felt at such an unexpected apparition, which materialises the impossible in his (fantasmatic) frame of reality. It is then when she notes the influence of Wagner's *Tristan* on the configuration of her husband's worldview:

The Marquis stood transfixed, utterly dazed, at a loss. It must have been as if he had been watching his beloved *Tristan* for the twelfth, the thirteenth time and Tristan stirred, then leapt from his bier in the last act, announced in a jaunty aria interposed from Verdi that bygones were bygones, crying over spilt milk did nobody any good and, as for himself, he proposed to live happily ever after. (Carter 1995 [1979]: 142)

When recounting the eve of their wedding at the opera, the narrator also admits that the deadly passion contained in *Tristan*'s final aria —when Isolde sings over Tristan's dead body— sustains her love for the Marquis:

[the narrator's] heart swelled and ached so during the *Liebestod* that I thought I must truly love him. Yes. I did [...] How my circumstances had changed since the first time I heard those voluptuous chords that carry such a charge of deadly passion in them!" (114).

¹⁰² There is a reference in Carter's story to another quintessential example of the ideal of love in death in literature: Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) gives name to the cigars the Marquis smokes while he delays his first and last sexual encounter with the narrator: "I felt I felt a certain tension in the pit of my stomach, to be so watched in such silence. A match struck. He was igniting a Romeo y Julieta fat as a baby's arm. 'Soon,' he said in his resonant voice that was like the tolling of a bell and I felt, all at once, a sharp premonition of dread" (Carter 1995 [1979]: 116).

From German “Liebe” meaning love and “Tod” meaning death, the narrator’s enjoyment of the consummation of love in death matches her husband’s drive to enact it by marrying beautiful women and then murdering them. The first time the narrator attended a performance of Wagner’s *Tristan* was in her childhood, when she was taken by her father as “a birthday treat” to see the Marquis’s first wife, the opera singer, playing Isolde:

That sumptuous diva; I had heard her sing Isolde, precociously musical child that I was [...] My first opera; I had heard her sing Isolde. With what white-hot passion had she burned from the stage. So that you could tell she would die young. We sat high up, halfway to heaven in the gods, yet she half-blinded me. And my father, still alive (oh, so long ago), took hold of my sticky little hand, to comfort me, in the last act, yet all I heard was the glory of her voice. (Carter 1995 [1979]: 114)

From the way this scene is remembered, it becomes apparent that the image of the opera singer that at once embodies and creates the ideal of Woman *qua* Thing—whose love gains full significance in death—provides the fantasy coordinates that from then on will regulate the narrator’s enjoyment and desire. Her identification with such an ideal is strengthened, I argue, by the premature death of her beloved father:

[t]he gallant soldier never returned from the wars, leaving his wife and child a legacy of tears that never quite dried, a cigar box full of medals and the antique service revolver that my mother, grown magnificently eccentric in hardship, kept always in her reticule in case—how I teased her—she was surprised by footpads on her way home from the grocer’s shop. (111-112)

Reading her father’s disappearance in terms of the loss of a beloved other that enhances her belief in marriage as union with the impossible Thing may help understand why, besides the spectacular luxuries the Marquis uses in his seduction plot, the narrator decides to marry him. There are some aspects in the narrative that suggest an analogy between the narrator’s dead father and her first husband:

together with the enjoyment-generating experience of attending with each of them the performance of *Tristan*, the Marquis, like the father, is “older than [her], he was much older than [her]; there were streaks of pure silver in his dark mane” (112). The Marquis’s scent, furthermore, makes the narrator “think of [her] father, how he would hug [her] in a warm fug of Havana, when [she] was a little girl, before he kissed [her] and left [her] and died” and, most times, the Marquis addresses her as if she were a child daughter: “Have the nasty pictures scared Baby?” or “my dear one, my little love, my child, did it hurt?” (116, 120, 121).

If the memory of her dead father, embodied by the inaccessible Marquis — whose “true nature”, the narrator initially thinks, is concealed in the locked chamber (127)— stands as the narrator’s Thing, who or what is the impossible Thing that drives the Marquis to marry and enact the death of his wives? There are at least three aspects in the narrative that hint at the Marquis’s memory of his absent mother. First, the engagement ring which he gives to his wives-to-be and which, he exclaims when the narrator returns it to him, “will serve [him] for a dozen more fiancées” (141), suggests a matrilineal inheritance; its black colour —it is an opal— could be read as symbolizing the “black hole” or absence of his beloved which, as Žižek argues apropos of the empty place of the Thing, conceals its non-existence (Žižek 1994: 92). As if to exaggerate the opal’s obscenely large size, the Marquis has the narrator wear it outside of her glove (Carter 1995 [1979]: 116) and throughout most of the narrative, especially during the time the young bride has it in her possession, the ring is said to “glimmer”, “flash” or “simmer” (115, 116).

In line with Žižek’s definition of the sublime-obscene Thing, the ring is endowed with aura, what “envelops the object when it occupies a void (hole) within the symbolic order” (Žižek 2012: 696). The over-presence of the spectral Mother-

Thing which governs the Marquis's acts is further hinted by the character of the housekeeper, his foster-mother, who, the Marquis reveals to the narrator, "is as much a part of the house as I am, my dear" (117) and by the gruesome ruby necklace, "his wedding gift", which the Marquis makes the narrator wear in their most intimate encounters. As the narrator reveals, the necklace, which "clasped round [her] throat [...] like a precious slit throat", had belonged to the Marquis's mother and to his grandmother and its original use was to serve as a mark of a wound that never existed:

After the Terror, in the early days of the Directory, the aristos who'd escaped the guillotine had an ironic fad of tying a red ribbon round their necks at just the point where the blade would have sliced it through, a red ribbon like the memory of a wound. And his grandmother, taken with the notion, had her ribbon made up in rubies; such a gesture of luxurious defiance! That night at the opera comes back to me even now. . . the white dress; the frail child within it; and the flashing crimson jewels round her throat, bright as arterial blood. (114-115)

Considering Žižek's definition of the fetish as an "organ without a body", an excessive mark of an event that never took place or objectification of an absence (Žižek, 1989: 172, 2007: 34, 116), an analogy can be established between the choker and the gruesome bloody chamber *qua* mother-Thing, a forbidden zone the Marquis creates by filling it with the bodily remains of his wives and by locking it with a key. As Žižek's puts it in his account of "the constitutive role of the fetish", which creates the "empty forbidden zone" that in turn creates the illusion of the Thing that "once filled it but was lost":

[t]his mysterious zone is effectively the same as our common reality, and what confers on it the aura of mystery is the limit itself, that is, the fact that the zone is designated as inaccessible, prohibited [...] the zone is not prohibited because it has certain properties which are 'too strong' for our everyday sense of reality, it displays these properties because it is posited as prohibited. *What comes first is the formal gesture of excluding a part of the real from our everyday reality and of proclaiming it the prohibited zone.* (Žižek 2000c: 239, emphasis mine)

That both the choker and the opal ring work as fetishes which stand for what the Marquis truly loves but does not exist seems to be proven by the fact that on the climatic occasions the narrator wears them he lovingly reveres them. Before consummating their marriage, “he kissed those blazing rubies [...] He kissed them before he kissed [the narrator’s] mouth. Raptly, he intoned: ‘Of her apparel she retains / Only her sonorous jewellery’ (Carter 1995 [1979]: 121).¹⁰³ At the castle’s courtyard, before her failed decapitation, the Marquis “took [the ring from the narrator] *lovingly* and lodged it on the tip of his finger” (141, emphasis mine).

Despite sharing Platonic or erotic love as the fantasy frame that sustains their worldview and social relationships, the narrator’s and the Marquis’s subjective attitudes clearly differ. Drawing on Žižek’s definition of subjectivisation as the process whereby the subject —itself the impossible excess of negativity which is source and product of symbolisation— assumes a symbolic identity and domesticates impossible enjoyment, I may read the Marquis and the narrator as exemplary cases of perversion and hysteria, respectively.

A close inspection of the character of the Marquis reveals that he is a masochist pervert who willingly stages the absence of the Thing, a staging which in turn, as earlier noted, feigns the Thing’s existence and sustains the consistency of the Marquis’s self and worldview. There are at least three traits that have led me to

¹⁰³ This is a quote from Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal* (The Flowers of Evil) (1857), the Marquis’s favourite poet. They are the first lines of a poem entitled “Les Bijoux” (“The Jewels”) whose opening constitutes a clear instance of erotic love and its objectification of woman *qua* sublime/obscene Thing: “*La très chère était nue, et, connaissant mon coeur, Elle n’avait gardé que ses bijoux sonores*” (My darling was naked, and knowing my heart well, She was wearing only her sonorous jewels’) (lines 1-2, Baudelaire 2000 [1857]: 48).

diagnose the Marquis as a pervert in the Lacanian sense —a subject who, to conceal the inexistence of the Thing, acts as the object-instrument of the Other's *jouissance* and enjoys accomplishing its impossible demands, that is to say, sacrificing his wives.

The first evidence of the Marquis's perversion is to be found in the narrator's description of his face as if he were always wearing a mask. This is a feature which, together with the spectacular surface he constitutes to attract beautiful women and with the creation of "little museum of his perversity" (131), as the narrator calls the dreadful chamber, reinforces a reading of his world as a stage, a fetish that conceals that there is nothing to conceal:

[s]ometimes [his] face, in stillness when he listened to me playing, with the heavy eyelids folded over eyes that always disturbed me by their absolute absence of light, seemed to me 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. Or else, elsewhere. As though he had laid by the face in which he had lived for so long in order to offer my youth a face unsigned by the years.

And, elsewhere, I might see him plain. Elsewhere. But, where? (112-113)

The Marquis feels a compulsive need to create such a stage by filling it with the remains of what he loves, that is, his murdered wives, which, in this light, function as fetishes in the Lacanian sense. The castle as a whole, with its gruesome core, is the Marquis's main fetish and, as such, creates the illusion of the place of the Thing that, in turn, sustains the illusion that the Thing exists. In other words, the Marquis *qua* pervert enjoys both the absence of the Thing and his awful deeds, which result from submitting to an agency of his own creation, the superego. In all the story's key decisions and events, the narrator notes how her husband appears to be suffering, an indicator of his submission to the superego, which, as explained in chapter 4, makes the subject feel guiltier the more he or she submits to its impossible demands.

When the narrator accepts the Marquis's marriage proposal, she informs that "not one muscle in his face stirred, but he let out a long extinguished sigh" which made her think "how much he must want [her]!" (113). Upon the Marquis's return to the castle after the narrator's entrance in his forbidden chamber, the latter admits that:

[i]t seemed to [her] he was in despair [...] felt there emanate from him, at that moment, a stench of absolute despair, rank and ghastly [...]
'Oh, my love, my little love who brought me a white gift of music,' he said, almost as if grieving. 'My little love, you'll never know how much I hate daylight!'
Then he sharply ordered: 'Kneel!' (138)

Carter's own account of de Sade's libertines as perverts strengthens my interpretation of the Marquis as a subject who submits to the superego in order to avoid confronting the inexistence of the Thing. In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter argues that the libertine:

[i]s forced to invest more and more energy in [...] his rituals [,which] become more elaborate, his needs more abstract. The structure of his own invented reality hardens around him and imprisons him, The passions he thought would free him from the cage of being become the very bars of the cage that entraps him; he cannot himself escape the theatrical décor he has created around himself in order to give himself the confidence to immolate his victims [...] The libertines are indeed like men possessed by demons. (Carter 2009 [1979]: 175)

The Marquis ritualistic murders could be read as exemplary of what Žižek describes as the rituals of sacrifice, whose underlying logic, he argues, is perverse.

"Sacrifice", in Žižek's words,

[i]s the most refined way of disavowing [the inexistence of the Other], of acting as if one possesses the hidden treasure that makes one a worthy subject of love [...] the compulsion felt [by perverts] to accomplish a meaningless sacrificial gesture is that of the superego at its purest. (Žižek 2000c: 246-248)

The aim of the sacrifice, Žižek further contends, is to "interpose an object [fetish] between ourselves and the Thing" (248). By sacrificing his wives and displaying their remains in the secret chamber, the Marquis, in this light, manages

to create a distance with the non-existing Thing, avowing its existence through false absence. Yet, throughout this perverse montage, there is a moment in which, I argue, the Marquis's stage dissolves and thus he cannot avoid confronting the virtual abyss or excess of negativity at the heart of himself, what Žižek terms "pure subject" or that which the subject dreads but which paradoxically constitutes itself (Žižek 1992a: 137-138). It is when he has an orgasm that his mask appears to break into pieces or, as the narrator puts it:

[h]is deathly composure shatter[ed] like a porcelain vase flung against a wall; I had heard him shriek and blaspheme at the orgasm; I had bled. And perhaps I had seen his face without its mask; and perhaps I had not. (Carter 1995 [1979]: 121)

This interpretation of the orgasm as the pervert subject's confrontation with the abyss or excess of negativity at his core is in tune with Carter's description of the effect of orgasm on libertines:

[the libertine's] orgasms are [...] annihilating, appalling [...] the return to the self after such a crisis must be a lowering passage. Orgasm has possessed the libertine; during the irreducible timelessness of the moment of orgasm, the hole in the world through which we *fall* has opened [...] The annihilation of the self and the resurrection of the body, to die in pain and to painfully return from death, is the sacred drama of the Sadeian orgasm. (Carter 2009 [1979]: 175-176, emphasis mine)

Reading Carter's account of orgasm in the light of the Žižekian approach to the Fall—the Fall conceived as the true genesis of the subject, which retroactively creates the conditions from which we (have never) fall(en)—reinforces a reading of the Marquis's murderous plot as a defense strategy against the truth of the Fall, the painful path towards human experience.

Contrary to the Marquis, the narrator does not sacrifice what she most loves—the core of her desire—to create/fill in the empty space of the Thing. She does not enjoy serving as the object-instrument of the (m)Other's enjoyment; she rather seems to enjoy the process whereby she questions and investigates the logic behind

her erotic attachments and identification with the symbolic fiction of ideal Woman. As noted in chapter 4, Žižek associates the subject's enjoyment of questioning the Other and one's symbolic identity with hysteria (Žižek 1989: 126). The hysterical or feminine subject, Žižek argues, is any individual who approaches the impossible Thing that sustains his or her desire and, in line with postmodernist texts, brings to the fore the Thing's obscene underside, confronting as a result, "what is in him or her more than himself or herself", *objet petit a* or *sinthome*, its own core of negativity. During this process of hystericisation, of coming too close to the non-existing Thing, the subject feels surplus-*jouissance*, "hysteria", Žižek notes, "is precisely the name for [...] the ambivalent fascination in the face of an object that terrifies and repels us" (Žižek 1999a: 249). Surplus-*jouissance* is arguably the most distinctive effect the over-proximity to the Castle and to the Marquis produces on the narrator.

If in the preceding pages I noted how the castle befits Žižek's definition of the sublime and obscene Thing in postmodernism, the same could be argued about the wedding night and the Marquis himself. Even though her mother had told her "with all the precision of her eccentricity [...] what it was that lovers did" (Carter 1995 [1979]: 120), the narrator reveals us how she insisted in fantasising about the sexual act as if it were the culmination of self-fulfillment. The more the wedding night approaches the more the narrator "shiver[s] to think of *that*" (119, emphasis in original), an intense enjoyment which she foregrounds at the very beginning of her narrative:

I remember how, that night, I lay awake in the wagon-lit in a tender, delicious ecstasy of excitement, my burning cheek pressed against the impeccable linen of the pillow and the pounding of my heart mimicking that of the great pistons ceaselessly thrusting the train that bore me through the night, away from Paris, away from girlhood, away from the white, enclosed quietude of my mother's apartment, into the unguessable country of marriage. (111)

The sexual act is metaphorically envisaged in this beautifully-written opening paragraph: the red of the burning cheek, the virginal white of the soft pillow and the pounding of her excited heart in unison with the ceaseless pistons of the train. To accentuate the narrator's enjoyment at the prospect of their sexual encounter, the Marquis "voluptuously defer[s]" it by submitting the narrator to an obscene ritualistic disrobing which culminated in nothing:

He stripped me, gourmand that he was, as if he were stripping the leaves off an artichoke [...] 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 [...] 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. And I began to shudder, like a racehorse before a race, yet also with a kind of fear, for I felt both a strange, impersonal arousal at the thought of love and at the same time a repugnance. (118-119)

The sexual act the narrator had so intensely fantasised about turns out to be an obscene encounter, and painful experience which the narrator compares to an impallation and which, in a way prefiguring the torture instruments at the bloody chamber, makes the narrator lose consciousness (121). Excessive enjoyment, or an ambivalent feeling of fascination and repugnance, is what characterises the narrator's relationship with her husband before and after their marriage encounter: "I lay in bed alone. And I longed for him. And he disgusted me", the narrator admits right after her husband's sudden departure from the castle (125). The ambiguous status the Marquis occupies in the narrator's psychic frame is suggested by the symbol of the lily, which just as in "Penetrating Into the Heart of the Forest", produces both fascination and horror. The Marquis is explicitly associated with

white lilies: “I know it must seem a curious analogy, a man with a flower, but sometimes he seemed to me like a lily”, the narrator reveals:

Yes. A lily. Possessed of that strange, ominous calm of a sentient vegetable, like one of those cobra-headed, funereal lilies whose white sheaths are curled out of a flesh as thick and tensely yielding to the touch as vellum [...] The lilies I always associate with him; that are white. And stain you. (113, 119)¹⁰⁴

The castle’s main bedroom had been filled with white lilies, “more white lilies than [the narrator]’d ever seen in [her] life before [...] to greet the bride” (118) and their presence, making [the room] “look like an embalming parlour”, hints — just as the brutality of the sexual act itself— at the deadly outcome of the Marquis’s marriage plot (121).

Further evidence to sustain the interpretation of the Marquis as the phantom-like Thing in the narrator’s psychic frame or what Žižek terms the “anal father”, “the subject’s double” who “embodies what is ‘in [the subject] more than [the subject]’” (Žižek 1992a: 125) is provided by the vertigo she feels every time she confronts her husband’s regard. The first time she describes him, the narrator points out the oppressive heaviness that imbues the Marquis, “the imponderable weight of his desire was a force I might not withstand, not by virtue of its violence but because of its very gravity” (Carter 1995 [1979]: 113). Already at the castle, she again signals “gravity” as the feature that turns the Marquis into “a monstrous presence, heavy as if he had been gifted at birth with more specific gravity than the rest of us” (123). In each encounter with the Marquis, the narrator recognises more and more of her, and undergoes a suffocating sense of doubling. Such an intense process confronts her with the excess of negativity or gaze *qua* object at the core of herself. In their wedding’s eve at the opera house, for instance, the narrator reveals

¹⁰⁴ As earlier noted, the white lily has not only (and traditionally) stood for virginity and female purity, but has also been regarded as a token of revelation and enlightenment, as held by the Archangel Gabriel in the Annunciation.

how she “sensed in [herself] a potentiality for corruption that took [her] breath away” “for the first time in [her] innocent and confined life” when she saw the reflection of the Marquis on the mirror looking at her with “sheer carnal avarice” (115). This sense of self-doubling reappears when the Marquis gives his wife the keys to the locked rooms of the castle. At this very moment, the narrator expresses fear, not of the Marquis, but of herself:

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 description of me and yet, and yet —might he 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. (123–124)

Perhaps the closer the narrator gets to confront the abyss of negativity or excess at her core that resists full immersion in her symbolic reality is the moment the Marquis arrives in the Castle pretending that his business at New York has been called off. It is in this scene that the sublime presence of the Marquis turns for the narrator into an obscene, unbearable excess: “I felt”, she informs:

[t]here emanate from him, at that moment, a stench of absolute despair, rank and ghastly, as if the lilies that surrounded him had all at once began to fester, or the Russian leather of his scent were reverting to the elements of flayed hide and excrement of which it was composed. (138)

The reversal of the sublime Thing into an obscene leftover exerts on the narrator acute vertigo, or as she puts it: “[a] tremendous pressure [...] so that the blood pounded in my ears as if we had been precipitated to the bottom of the sea, beneath the waves that pounded against the shore” (138).¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ In “The Erl-King”, the narrator’s over-proximity to the heart of her desire, embodied by the deadly presence of the Erl-King, also produces a suffocating sense of self-doubling and annihilating vertigo. With words evocative of those by the narrator in “The Bloody Chamber”, the narrator in “The Erl-King” reveals that “[She is] not afraid of him; only afraid of vertigo, of the vertigo with which he seizes [her]. Afraid of falling down. Falling as a bird would fall [...] at the imperative of gravity” (Carter 1995 [1979]: 189). Like the gaze of the Marquis, the Erl-King’s regard confronts the narrator with the abyss or excess or negativity at her core: “Your green eye”, she confesses to the Erl-King, “is a reducing chamber. If I look to it long enough, I will become as small as my own

The narrator's over-identification with the fantasy of fairy-tale marriage — her overproximity to the sublime Thing in her psychic frame— befits Žižek's definition of the ethical act: she "risks the impossible" and renders palpable both the inconsistency of the fantasy coordinates that sustain her socio-symbolic identity — an innocent wife— as well as her *sinthome*, the fantasmatic excess or "rare talent for corruption" at her heart which finds no place in that identity. Such an unsymbolisable trait is eventually embodied by the indelible red mark the Marquis left on her forehead, the "tell-tale stain [...] with] the shape and brilliance of the heart on a playing card" or "mark of Cain", which the narrator "feels glad" her new lover, the piano tuner, cannot see because "it spares her shame" (138-140). In spite of the narrator's closing words, reading this mark or stain as the narrator's *sinthome* in the light of Žižek's account of ideology and subjectivity, proves to be a sign of subversion for at least three reasons. Firstly, as argued on the previous chapter apropos of Madeline's and Emile's shame at the heart of the forest, the narrator's excessive mark renders her an imperfect being, and such an imperfection constitutes, in my view, a desublimation of the patriarchal ideal of Woman as a perfect maternal refuge with which the narrator pleasurably identified.

Secondly and as earlier noted, the narrator's mark of shame problematises the ostensibly pacifying and quiet environment re-established by the narrator's mother which, despite having been interpreted as a return to a maternal pre-

reflection, I will diminish to a point and vanish [...] I shall become so small you can keep me in one of your osier cages and mock my loss of liberty" (191).

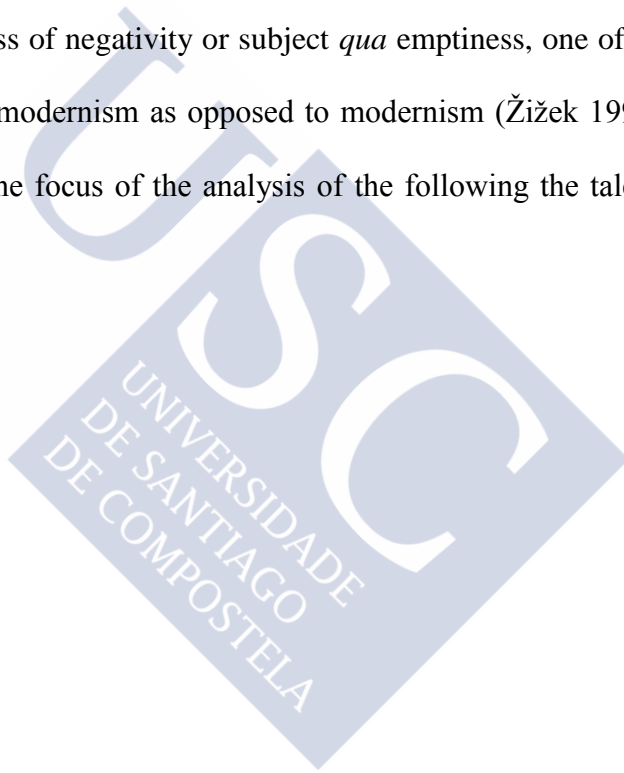
symbolic realm, I interpret as a restoration of the symbolic balance through murder and concealment of its obscene underside by using the revolver-phallus. The “quiet life” the narrator and her mother lead before and after the “apparition of the Marquis-Thing” is guaranteed by a gun, an excess which finds no place in such an idyllic surface and which is kept by her mother in her reticule. In a manner reminiscent of the idyllic, *jouissance*-free valley in which Emile and Madeline were brought up by her father, “the white, enclosed quietude of [her] mother’s apartment” is almost unsupportable for the narrator, who, following curiosity, decides to explore her desire, that is, “the unguessable country of marriage” and confront its inconsistency (111).¹⁰⁶

Finally, shame, drawing on Žižek’s approach to the Fall and as advanced in chapter 9, opens the path towards both the human condition and “Paulinian love”, “*agape*” or “true love”, and, therefore, demystifies Platonic or erotic love and the belief in the (m)Other as impossible eternal Thing in which it is grounded. *Agape*, Žižek contends “forsakes the promise of eternity”, clearly contained in the ideal of the womb as place of origin and end, “for an imperfect individual” (Žižek 2003: 13). This seems to be Carter’s point towards the end of *The Sadeian Woman* when she claims that the libertine’s incapability to confront his finitude or imperfection, to “forsake eternity for an imperfect being and choose temporal existence”, as Žižek would have it, impedes him or her to love. “In his diabolic solitude”, Carter writes:

¹⁰⁶ Just as in “The Bloody Chamber”, the (imagined) murder of the sublime-obscene Thing in “The Erl-King” will not lead to a pacifying closure; traces of the Erl-King will eventually be too present: his hair will be part of the newly repaired fiddle, which nevertheless will play “discordant music”, and the Real of enjoyment will remain in the shape of a stain: the narrator and the freed girls may bear “the crimson imprint of his love-bites on their throats” (Carter 1995 [1979]: 192), a sign of surplus-*jouissance* or trace of their entrapment in enjoyment which has to be domesticated to preserve their sense of self.

[o]nly the possibility of love could awake the libertine to perfect, immaculate terror. It is in this holy terror of love that we find, in both men and women themselves, the source of all opposition to the emancipation of women. (Carter 2009 [1979]: 176)

Even if the narrator appears not to assume her *sinthome* in the end —the excess at her core, which drives curiosity and stains her symbolic identity— the narrative’s foregrounding of the red mark is, I argue, a sign of subversion and clearly points, in a postmodernist manner, at the inconsistency of the sublime-obscene Thing that sustains any symbolic frame. Such an inconsistency, in turn, renders palpable the excess of negativity or subject *qua* emptiness, one of the traits Žižek uses to define postmodernism as opposed to modernism (Žižek 1992a: 137-138) and which will be the focus of the analysis of the following the tale, “Wolf-Alice”.



CHAPTER 11
GOING THROUGH THE FANTASY OF SUBJECT OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT:
“WOLF-ALICE”

“Wolf-Alice” is the tale that closes *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, bringing together many of the themes and motifs that Carter had disseminated in the collection and which would be later explored in subsequent tales, most notably the motif of the bloody chamber *qua* sublime and obscene womb-Thing. The title refers to the story’s central character: a pubescent girl “suckled by wolves” who is found and captured by some hunters in a den beside “the bullet-riddled corpse of her foster-mother”, a she-wolf (Carter 1995 [1979]: 221).

From the perspective of the narrative subject, a first person plural narrator who, just as in “The Executioner’s Beautiful Daughter”, is part of a collectivity of humans or speaking beings, Wolf-Alice stands as the *objet petit a* or excess of negativity in the narrative subject’s worldview: “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” (221, emphasis in original). This nothingness or unsymbolisable spectral excess that Wolf-Alice’s presence stands for in the narrator’s symbolic frame is suggested, in my view, in the title’s hyphen or minus sign; on this basis, Wolf-Alice befits Žižek’s definition of the postmodernist subject *qua* “the limit of the subject’s self-expression [...] the subject *qua* emptiness of substance [or] constitutive void”, which is expressed in the Lacanian formula of fantasy $\$ \langle \rangle a$ (Žižek 1992a: 137-138). As advanced in part II of this dissertation, this formula captures the fundamental paradox that pertains to Žižek’s Lacan-based definition of the subject: the subject is the same as its non-existence, “‘the same’, as the Thing [...] its negative (the trace of its absence) within the symbolic network” (137). In fact, Žižek also resorts to the motif of feral

children in order to exemplify the constitutive inhuman core of *cogito* or the subject of the Enlightenment, which in turn is often regarded as synonymous of the “human animal” or “person”. “Toward the end of the eighteenth century”, Žižek notes:

[t]he theme of the child living excluded from human community became the object of numerous literary and scientific texts: it staged in a pure, ‘experimental’ way the theoretical question of how to distinguish in man the part of culture from the part of nature [...] the Enlightenment project has gone wrong: the Enlightenment philosophers wanted to pour out of the bathtub the dirty water of corrupted civilization and retain only the healthy, unspoiled, natural child-ego, yet what they inadvertently threw out in the process was precisely the ego, so that they were left with the dirty water of the monster [...] monsters can be defined as the fantasmatic appearance of the ‘missing link’ between nature and culture, as a kind of ‘answer of the Real’ to the Enlightenment’s endeavor to find the bridge that links culture to nature, to produce a ‘man/woman of culture’ who would simultaneously conserve his/her unspoiled nature. (135-136)

In line with Žižek’s account of the tragic case of Kaspar Hauser, one of the most popular nineteenth-century children who grew up isolated from civilization, Wolf-Alice is a child who neither speaks nor has a sense of self, it is “a subject without the ego [...] bypassing the imaginary (mis)recognition which enables one to experience oneself as a ‘person’” (136, emphasis in original).¹⁰⁷ In the narrator’s words:

Could this ragged girl with brindled lugs have spoken like we do she would have called herself a wolf, but she cannot speak, although she howls because she is lonely [...] Two-legs looks, four-legs sniffs. [Wolf-Alice’s] long nose is always quivering, 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

¹⁰⁷ Kaspar Hauser was a young man of “stiff, unnatural gestures” who appeared in the streets of Nuremberg, Germany, on 26 May 1828. He was carrying a paper with his name and “his entire language”, Žižek explains, “consisted of the Lord’s prayer learned by heart and pronounced with grammatical errors, and of the enigmatic phrase ‘I want to become such a knight as was my father’, the design of an identification with an Ego Ideal”. When he learned to speak, he revealed that he had been brought up by a “black man” in a “dark cave” who eventually dressed him and took him to Nuremberg. Once “humanized”, he became a celebrity and the object of much research. On 14 December 1833, Kaspar Hauser was found mortally wounded; “on his deathbed, he announced that his murderer was the same ‘black man’ who had brought him to the central square of Nuremberg five years ago” (Žižek 1992a: 134-135).

does not trouble her. Her nose is sharper by night than our eyes are by day so it is the night she prefers. (Carter 1995 [1979]: 221)

When the tale opens, Wolf-Alice is not presented as a subject because she sees neither images nor darkness; this creature has not yet been transfixed by a reflection, a process which, according to Lacan, constitutes psychic life by creating the illusion of an Other from which the simultaneously created subject believes to be separated. Wolf-Alice has not yet “*fallen into*” the domain of the imaginary, she has not acknowledged the (virtual) distance, hole or gap that separates subject and object and generates the differences between surface and depth, inside and outside that structure psychic life. And so, in an attempt to imagine Wolf-Alice’s perspective, the narrator describes the trees and grass which surround the protagonist as “the emanation of her questing nose and erect ears” (Carter 1995 [1979]: 225). Not having yet confronted the virtual abyss or excess of negativity that se-parates (generates) self and other, something and nothing, Wolf-Alice, “like the wild beasts”, is portrayed as having no memory, no sense of time: “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” (221).

Removed from the den where she has been found beside the corpse of her wolf-mother, Wolf-Alice is taken to a convent in which attempts are made to civilise her. She learns “a few simple tricks” like “drinking from a cup, sitting up on her hind legs and cover up her bold nakedness” but when the Mother Superior tries to teach her to give thanks to God for having been rescued from the wolves, she does not go along with it, reverting instead “to her natural state”, crouching, trembling, pawing on the floor and defecating in a corner (222). After nine days, “this wonder and continuing embarrassment of a child” exasperates the nuns, who

“without a qualm”, decide to deliver her over to “the bereft and unsanctified household of the Duke” (222).

The Duke, like Wolf-Alice, is initially described in negative terms. He is “both less and more than a man, as if his obscene difference were a sign of grace” (226). Wolf-Alice’s new host lives all alone in a gloomy mansion and his existence oscillates between sleeping at daytime and feeding on human corpses from the local churchyard at night. The Duke does not have a sense of self, of place or of time; his eyes do not see images or darkness and, therefore, he does not “cast an image in the mirror” (222). “His eyes”, the narrator informs, “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” (222). Again, like his new guest, this unspecularisable vampire-like creature befits Žižek’s account of the pure subject—or the monster in postmodernism—as the reverse of the subject of the Enlightenment, an inhuman excess or *objet a*, which “cannot be mirrored”, which has no place in the community of social subjects but which, nevertheless, holds such a community together (Žižek 1992a: 126, emphasis in original).¹⁰⁸

The title of nobility this creature possesses—during the Middle Ages, in feudal monarchies, a Duke was the ruler of a province, standing above the other grades of the nobility— together with the role to which he is cast by the members of the village in whose centre his castle is located, enable a reading of “Wolf-Alice” as a postmodernist tale.¹⁰⁹ At the heart of the Law that regulates social interaction in

¹⁰⁸ Žižek interprets the figure of the vampire in cultural products as a materialization of the subject’s double or *objet petit a* as expressed in the Lacanian formula of fantasy $\$ \langle \rangle a$. The vampire is “pure subject”, the “unspecularizable” or “unfathomable X” that constitutes the subject—that *is* the subject—and, without which psychic life disintegrates (Žižek 1992a: 126).

¹⁰⁹ The etymology of the word “duke” further emphasises the ruling power this title confers. The term comes from French *duc*, itself from the Latin *dux*, “leader”, a term used in Republican Rome to

this religious rural community, the tale exhibits a creature that is conceived by its members as an “aborted transformation”, as a damned, werewolfish “corpse-eater, the body snatcher who invades the last privacies of the dead” and who, the villagers believe, has to be drowned in holy water (Carter 1995 [1979]: 223, 227). Contrary to this hegemonic religious-based perspective, which sanctifies corpses and water while demonising the Duke, the narrative subject approaches the latter in a half-tragic, half-humorous way and describes him as a hungry, thirsty and, above all, isolated creature that enjoys eating meat:

He is white as leprosy, with scrabbling fingernails, and nothing deters him. If you stuff a corpse with garlic, why, he only slavers at the treat: cadaver provençal. He will use the holy cross as a scratching post and crouch above the font to thirstily lap upon holy water. (223)

It is in the Duke’s unsanctified castle, most specifically in his “bloody chamber”, that Wolf-Alice will become a subject. Such a process, in turn, will propitiate the formation of the Duke’s self and, in a postmodernist manner, will desubliminate the villagers’ religious-based definition —and concomitant isolation— of both protagonists as damned creatures. In line with Žižek’s reformulation of the topic of the *felix culpa* as the painful genesis of the subject, Wolf-Alice’s process of subject formation is equated by the narrator with the “fall” into humanity, a view radically opposed to the nuns’ perspective, which partakes of an orthodox reading of the Fall as a lamentable loss of a primordial state of grace. “She grew up with wild beasts”, the narrator explains:

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 [...] 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

refer to a military commander without an official rank (particularly one of Germanic or Celtic origin), and later coming to mean the leading military commander of a province.
(<http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/duke?showCookiePolicy=true>)

impressions; there are no words to describe the way she negotiated the abyss between her dreams, those wakings as strange as her sleepings. The wolves had tended her because they knew she was an imperfect wolf; *we secluded her in animal privacy out of fear of her imperfection because it showed us what we might have been*, and so, although time passed, she scarcely knew it. Then she began to bleed. (224, emphasis mine)

Wolf-Alice's "fall" into humanity and the subsequent fall of the Duke appear to follow *verbatim* Žižek's Lacanian-Hegelian account of the emergence of psychic life as a process of self-relating negation or double operation of fantasy (e.g. Žižek 1992a: 50, 2014b: 80). Upon being deposited at the Duke's castle, Wolf-Alice's psyche is not yet formed; although she "settle[s] down" with a sigh, that sigh "is only the expulsion of breath and does not mean either relief or resignation" (Carter 1995 [1979]: 222). Because neither Wolf-Alice nor the Duke have an ego or self-image, they live "their separate solitudes", taking no notice of one another (225).

Various factors prompt the process through which Wolf-Alice and the Duke shrink from their "natural state" and become subjects of their own accord. The precondition for the emergence of Wolf-Alice's psyche, the narrator seems to suggest, is wonder or curiosity, a quality that connects her with one of her obvious namesakes, the protagonist of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871), along with Eve from *Genesis* and, less explicitly, with the female protagonists of the tales analysed so far. Still in her initial animal state, Wolf-Alice is characterised by a drive to "investigate everything she glimpses" with her poor eyesight as well as everything she sniffs with the overdeveloped filters of her nostrils.

The first sign of psychic life takes place when Wolf-Alice comes of age and has her first menstruation. The blood flow "bewilder[s] her" and such a reaction appears to be the first proof that the (virtual) rift between one and other, inside and

outside has occurred in her psyche (Carter 1995 [1979]: 224). Put differently, Wolf-Alice's reaction to her menstrual flow as an excess that needs to be stopped and covered is an indicator of the fact that the virtual void around which her body assumes form and becomes a unity has been formed.

The choice of the menarche as symbol of the excess that attests to the birth of the subject is highly significant. In itself blood is ordinary biological matter; what confers this element its excessive quality is the psychic rift, abyss or loop that se-parates blood (or other body waste like fluids or excrements) from the psychic *Gestalt* of the body. This "wound"/rift is what Lacan terms the Real, a virtual excess/leftover that is both the guarantee and the retroactive product of symbolisation, of the subject's conception of its own self and the world, or as Žižek's puts it, "the central impossibility around which any signifying network is structured" (Žižek 1991: 143). In short, the Real is the cut that wounds and creates the subject, by definition, a wounded or castrated animal.

Wolf-Alice's responses to the perception of her flood flow reinforce a reading of the emergence of her psyche in the light Žižek's subject-formation theory. Her first reaction is that of 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 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. (Carter 1995 [1979]: 224, emphasis mine)

As earlier noted, shame stands for Žižek as an indicator of humanity; it is a psychic and bodily reaction to the (virtual) excess/leftover of the process of symbolisation, to "that strange body in my interior which is 'in me more than me', which is radically interior and at the same time already exterior and for which

Lacan coined a new word, *extime* [...or] *objet petit a*” (Žižek 1989: 204). This point of the Real at the very heart of the subject which cannot be symbolised and which produces shame is correlative to a fundamental apperception: the creation of a virtual inexistent gaze which paradoxically *is* and creates the subject as a being looked at in the (spectacle of) the world, what Lacan terms “pure gaze” (Žižek 2012: 694).

In a new chapter of the expanded edition of *Enjoy Your Symptom*, published in 2001, Žižek compares the topological hole of the toilet sink, which helps us conceal excrements, with the Real loop that creates/redoubles reality. He further reminds us of Lacan’s claim that “we pass from humans to animals the moment an animal has problems with what to do with its excrements, the moment that waste turns into an excess that annoys the animal” (Žižek 2001b: 238). A similar function is performed by items of clothing, which stand as surfaces or screens that, in concealing, create what it is to be concealed. In a manner evocative of the shame felt by Adam and Eve after being expelled from (animal) Paradise, Wolf-Alice covers the body rift in which her psyche locates the excess with rags that she finds in the Duke’s chamber. In wearing them, the narrator argues:

[she] put[s] on the visible sign of her difference from [the wolves] She found towels, sheets and pillowcases in closets that had not been opened since the Duke came shrieking into the world with all his teeth, to bite his mother's nipple off and weep. She found once-worn ball dresses in cobwebbed wardrobes, and, heaped in the corner of his bloody chamber, shrouds, nightdresses and burial clothes that had wrapped items on the Duke's menus. She tore strips of the most absorbent fabrics to clumsily diaper herself. (Carter 1995 [1979]: 226, 224)

Correlative to the shame she feels at the sight of her blood flow stands the development of her capacity to speculate or use logic, during which her imagination—her first images—is formed:

She did not know what [the flood] meant and the first stirrings of surmise that ever she felt were directed towards its possible cause. The moon had been shining into

the kitchen when she woke to feel the trickle between her thighs and it seemed to her that a wolf who, perhaps, was fond of her, as wolves were, and who lived, perhaps, in the moon? must have nibbled her cunt while she was sleeping, had subjected her to a series of affectionate nips too gentle to wake her yet sharp enough to break the skin. The shape of this theory was blurred yet, out of it, there took root a kind of wild reasoning, as it might have from a seed dropped in her brain off the foot of a flying bird. (224)

When the flow ceases, Wolf-Alice forgets it and it is after its monthly return that the idea of time is formed. The way the concept of time emerges through a process of return in Wolf-Alice's psyche appears to dramatise Žižek's formulation of the paradox of time *qua* Real. In Žižek's view, time equates to the Real insurmountable psychic abyss into which the subject "falls" as it separates itself from itself. Like the emptiness created by the drive, time is the loop "produced and secreted" by repetition or return, the retroactive effect of a circular movement which, as it opens, appears as it always already existed (Žižek 2014b: 148). "Little by little", the narrator informs:

[the moon] reappeared. When it again visited her kitchen at full strength, Wolf-Alice was surprised into bleeding again and so it went on, with a punctuality that transformed her vague grip on time. She learned to expect these bleedings, to prepare her rags against them, and afterwards, neatly bury the dirtied things. Sequence asserted itself with custom and then she understood the circumambulatory principle of the clock perfectly, even if all clocks were banished from the den where she and the Duke inhabited their separate solitudes, so that you might say she discovered the very action of time by means of this returning cycle. (225)

As Wolf-Alice discovers the action of time she simultaneously constitutes her memory, which is made up of olfactory, tactile and visual images of her absent wolf-mother:

When she curled up among the cinders, the colour, texture and warmth of them brought her foster mother's belly out of the past and printed it on her flesh; her first conscious memory, painful as the first time the nuns combed her hair. 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. (225)

This gulf of absence or excess of negativity which separates herself from the wolves and produces pain paradoxically creates her self, dramatising, as a result, Žižek's paradoxical definition of the subject as the being that emerges through its very impossibility, the moment it loses itself (Žižek 2012: 694). It is the painful and traumatic (mis)recognition of this virtual distance that guarantees the consistency of Wolf-Alice's newly formed worldview:

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 [...] the landscape assembles itself about her, she informs it with her presence. She is its significance (Carter 1995: 225, 227)

The way reality assembles around Wolf-Alice is reminiscent of the Copernican metaphor Carter used in “Penetrating Into the Heart of the Forest” to account for the way symbolic reality forms by circulating around the vortex or excess of negativity that sustained Madeline and Emile's curiosity, that is to say, their desire to know or bring to light what their picture of the world did *not* include (Carter 1995 [1974]: 62). Put in Hegelian terms, this vortex at the heart of the subject is the “night of the world”, the “madness of reason” that threatens to engulf the reality frame but which, nevertheless, opens up the possibility of (re)framing reality (Žižek 1992a: 50).

The process through which Wolf-Alice's self and world are created is assisted by a mirror at the Duke's chamber. As explained in chapter 4, a mirror image in Žižek's Lacanian theory of subject-formation functions as a screen that covers/ creates nothingness. This creative function seems to be suggested in “Wolf-Alice” by the narrator's assertion that “the moon and mirrors have this much in common: you *cannot* see behind them” (Carter 1995 [1979]: 225, emphasis mine).

While prowling around the Duke's bedroom in search for fabrics to diaper herself, Wolf-Alice "bumped against that mirror over whose surface the Duke passed like a wind on ice" (224). Wolf-Alice's reaction, once more, dramatises another feature posited by Lacan in his so-called Mirror-Stage *écrit* (1949) as the *differentia specifica* between animals and humans: an animal, when confronted with a mirror, is said to perceive a hard obstacle, never a reflection, and ignores it. A child, on the contrary, sees an image and is transfixed by it. The Real impossible loop that separates perceiver and perceived is thus established. As the narrator reveals, Wolf-Alice does see a mirror reflection and pleasurably imagines that such a reflection is another creature with whom she strives to play:

First, she tried to nuzzle her reflection; then, nosing it industriously, she soon realised 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 against her reflected face, to show that she felt friendly towards it, and felt a cold, 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. (Carter 1995 [1979]: 224-225)

Having developed the capacity to reason, Wolf-Alice starts to speculate about the nature of the reflection she sees as she retreats from the mirror, "puzzled to see that her new friend grew less in size": she then "*wonder[s]* whether [on the mirror] she [sees] the beast who came to bite her in the night" (225, emphasis mine). The wonder she feels leads her to examine her own body, a gesture which in turn contributes to her psychic development:

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 puffballs she 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. (226, emphasis mine)

Wolf-Alice's speculative process reaches a turning point in her painful discovery that there is *nobody* behind the mirror, after which she draws the painful conclusion that the reflection she sees is just a reflection and, therefore, she is all alone. Such a discovery makes her cry for the first time:

This habitual, at last boring, fidelity to her very movement finally woke her up to the regretful possibility that her companion was, in fact, no more than a particularly ingenious variety of the shadow she cast on sunlit grass. Had not she and the rest of the litter tussled and romped with their shadows long ago? She poked her agile nose around the back of the mirror; she found only dust, a spider stuck in his web, a heap of rags. A little moisture leaked from the corners of her eyes, yet her relation with the mirror was now far more intimate since she knew she saw herself within it. (226)

Despite this painful discovery, Wolf-Alice's speculative process continues and propitiates a half-humorous, half-tragic event that culminates in the birth of the Duke's self-image. Behind the mirror at the castle's chamber, Wolf-Alice finds a wedding dress that belonged to one of the Duke's female ancestors. Fascinated by its appearance, she:

[e]xperimentally inserted her front legs in the sleeves. Although the dress was torn and crumpled, it was so white and of such a sinuous texture that she thought, before she put it on, she must thoroughly wash off her coat of ashes in the water from the pump in the yard, which she knew how to manipulate with her cunning forepaw. In the mirror, she saw how this white dress made her shine. (226)

The description of Wolf-Alice's experiment and final appearance with the wedding dress on —as reflected in the mirror— dramatises, in my view, the process through which the fantasy of Woman *qua* Thing is created. The wedding dress could be interpreted as the fetish that endows Wolf-Alice's image with aura and thus “elevates her to the dignity of the Thing” in a manner reminiscent of the way in which women are turned into spectral inaccessible love-objects in patriarchy. My

interpretation appears to be confirmed by the fact that the villagers that inhabit the religious community where the tale is set mistake Wolf-Alice for the spectre of a dead bride and thus run away horrified at the obscene incarnation of such a fantasy.

Wolf-Alice's painful process of subject formation coincides in time with the Duke's devouring of the corpse of the recently deceased bride that Wolf-Alice's presence is believed to embody. Interpellated by the symbolic edifice that sublimates marriage as the union with the Woman-Thing, the widower, aware that it was the Duke who ate the remains of his wife, "spen[ds] a long time planning his revenge" with the help of the community:

He filled the church with an arsenal of bells, books and candles; a battery of silver bullets; they brought a ten gallon tub of holy water in a wagon from the city, where it had been blessed by the Archbishop himself, to drown the Duke, if the bullets bounced off him. They gathered in the church to chant a litany and wait for the one who would visit the first deaths of winter. (227)

The widower's bullets wound the Duke, who would have been killed were it not for Wolf-Alice's "experiment" with the wedding dress and subsequent decision to explore the surroundings of the castle. Just as the villagers are persecuting the Duke, Wolf-Alice, with the white dress on, sets out to "investigate the odorous October hedgerows, like a *débutante* from the castle, delighted with herself" (226). The moment she hears "the crack of bullets, because they killed her foster mother", she starts to "run, run!" and thus, when the villagers see:

[t]he white bride leap out of the tombstones and scamper off towards the castle with the werewolf stumbling after, the peasants thought the Duke's dearest victim had come back to take matters into her own hands. They ran screaming from the presence of a ghostly vengeance on him. (227)

Such a humorous coincidence constitutes, I argue, a postmodernist desublimation of the community's sanctification of female dead corpses, a sublimation which partakes of the fantasy of Woman *qua* Thing, as suggested by

the symbolic position the wedding dress confers. Very significantly, bleeding will also prompt the formation of the Duke's psyche. Upon escaping the bullets fired by the young widower, the wound on the Duke's shoulder symbolically makes the creature "rise up like any common forked biped and limp distressfully on as best he may" (227). The Duke is from now on a:

[w]ounded 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. (227)

Like Wolf-Alice's process of subject formation, the emergence of the Duke's self-image—in Hegelian terms, the advent of *logos* and formation of the rational subject—results from the interplay of an open wound and the reflection produced on the mirror by the light reflected on the surface of the moon. This process of double reflection could be read as symbolic of the process of double negation—also termed "a reflection of a reflection"—which characterises the genesis of the subject in Žižek's theory. The light reflected on the surface of the moon reflected on the surface of the mirror duplicates and creates the image of the world and the self at the same time as it creates their constitutive obverse, that is to say, the virtual darkness of nothingness which is pure subject. "The lucidity of the moonlight", the narrator tells:

[I]t he mirror propped against the red wall; the rational glass, the master of the visible, impartially recorded the crooning girl [...] 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 a 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. (227-228, emphasis mine)

The tale's closing paragraph, quoted above, wonderfully dramatises in my view, the paradox pertaining to the conception of the Žižekian (postmodernist)

subject: the subject emerges the moment it loses itself; it is the “dreaded void”, the Real virtual excess of negativity or “bone in the throat of the signifier” that at once grounds symbolization and prevents it from achieving full ontological identity (Žižek 2000a: 28). In other words, the subject is constituted by a fundamental alienation in the image/virtual gestalt, it is “the prey” of a “fishing net” of its own creation as the narrator would have it; it is the paradox best captured in the Lacanian axiom: “the picture is in my eye but me, I am in the picture” (Lacan quoted in Žižek 2012: 702). The image the Duke now sees in the mirror, unlike Wolf-Alice’s first image, includes two reflections and thus two abysses: the Duke’s and Wolf-Alice’s “tender gravity”. The latter, upon hearing the sound of pain:

[p]rowled 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 cheek and forehead (227)

Like her foster-mother, who tended her because she “knew she was an imperfect wolf”, Wolf-Alice approaches and soothes the Duke’s pain as an “aborted transformation” (224, 227). As such, the tale’s final scene, apart from featuring the birth of the Duke’s self-image, dramatises, in my view, Žižek’s concept of *agape* or Paulinian love as opposed to erotic love. As noted in the preceding chapters, *agape*, choosing time and imperfection while giving up eternal existence, stands for Žižek as the “highest ethical act of all” because it desublimates the concept of the beloved Other as perfect Thing (Žižek 2003: 13). While the beloved Thing constitutes the inaccessible spectral limit that fixes socio-symbolic reality and perpetuates a series of related symbolic relationships —Woman *qua* Thing in patriarchy, for instance— the imperfect beloved, with its wound —as Lacan would have it, *sinthome* or Real impossibility— stands as the impossible condition of new possibilities, the “abyss

of freedom” which, as Žižek has repeatedly claimed, can potentially reframe reality and create new socio-symbolic relationships (i.e. Žižek 1997b: 1-104).

My Žižekian reading of “Wolf-Alice” needs to be distinguished from Levinasian and Kristevan interpretations of the tale which, as advanced in chapter 2 here, celebrate the birth of the protagonists’ selves as a revaluation of female flesh and blood repressed by patriarchal discourse (Bacchilega 1999: 67-68, Crunelle Vanrigh 2001: 142). These commentators posit Wolf-Alice’s body as the subversive, emancipatory site of Otherness or abjection where Wolf-Alice and the Duke as subjects are to be empowered. Veronica L. Schanoes has recently made the same point apropos of Wolf-Alice’s process of becoming human arguing that assuming the position of the mother as the loving Other is necessary in order to realise her humanity. In Schanoes’s own words: “[‘Wolf-Alice’] emphasises the importance of the mother-daughter relationships to the possibility of being human. In the final tale of Carter’s collection, identification with motherhood transforms the beastly into the human; becoming synonymous with becoming a mother” (Schanoes 2014: 21). As earlier argued, this revalorisation of the female body as the pre-symbolic realm partakes of the fantasy of Woman or the maternal as the Thing in which patriarchy is grounded. Together with my interpretation of “Wolf-Alice” as a dramatisation of the formation of the subject through a process of self-relating negation, there is further evidence in the tale that refutes these commentators’ approach. Despite displaying maternal qualities, Wolf-Alice’s foster mother was a wolf, *not* a human being. While and after she suckles Wolf-Alice, the latter is presented as not-yet a subject.

“Peter and the Wolf”, another tale by Carter which features a child suckled by wolves, also undermines a reading of the female, maternal body as a pre-

symbolic realm of subversion in Carter's usage of the motif of feral children. As advanced in chapter 2, "Peter and the Wolf", included in Carter's 1985 collection *Black Venus*, describes the three encounters of Peter, a child from "a small village on the lower slopes of the mountains", with her cousin, a girl a few months older than him who grows up with no human contact (Carter 1995 [1985]: 284). The pack of wolves which raise her is the same as that which devoured her parents the moment she was born:

There were traces of wolf-dung on the floor so [Peter's and girl's family] knew wolves had been in [the girl's] house but left the corpse of the young mother alone although of her baby nothing was left except some mess that showed it had been born (284)

It is with a wolf from this pack that Peter's cousin will have little cubs. Even though this unimaginable event has been celebrated by scholars as the representation of the Kristevan "*chora*" and of Levinasian Otherness, the realm of empowerment for subjects outside the oppressive phallogocentric discourse (Wyatt 2000, Hope 2012), Peter's cousin, as suggested in the title, does *not* become a subject. In line with the narrator's description of Wolf-Alice prior to her "fall into" her self-reflection, Peter's cousin does not "fall into the image"; on one occasion in which she approaches the river banks to drink, she does not see her own reflection in the water. As the narrator explains:

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 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 her speechlessness. (Carter 1995 [1985]: 290)

Peter, on the contrary, is a speaking being. He has fallen into the loop or excess of negativity which constitutes/is covered by his self-image and his

worldview. Peter's encounters with his cousin dramatise an overproximity to the sublime-obscene Thing, the spectral excess which is not inherent to the girl herself and which does not have a place in Peter's psychic frame. The unaccountable excess the feral girl's presence generates results from the inscription of Peter's gaze on her surface since she is an impossible object in his worldview. In line with Žižek's account of postmodernist fiction as staging a confrontation with the fascinating and repulsive Thing, Peter's regard of his cousin produces the "vertigo of freedom", which in turn brings to the fore his *sinthome*, an excess of negativity he cannot account for (291). The first time he saw his cousin among the wolves while herding goats up in the mountains, Peter was:

[s]o fascinated that he would have lost his flock, perhaps himself been eaten and certainly been beaten to the bone for negligence had not the goats themselves raised their heads, snuffed danger and run off, bleating and whinnying, so that the men came, firing guns, making hullabaloo, scaring the wolves away. (285)

Once the girl is captured and taken to the house of Peter's grandmother, the boy remains transfixed as he contemplates her cousin's vagina, which in turn, once again, makes him have "the sensation of *falling*":

[h]e 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, that was perfectly visible to him as she sat there square on the base of her spine. The night was now as dark as, at this season, it would go -- which is to say, not very dark; a white thread of moon hung in the blond sky at the top of the chimney so that it was neither dark nor light indoors yet the boy could see her intimacy clearly, as if by its own phosphorescence. It exercised an absolute fascination upon him. (287, emphasis mine)

The girl's vagina appears to be described as the black hole or Real negativity that sustains Peter's conception of the womb as Thing, a prohibited object endowed with aura and sacralised by the villagers —as well as by patriarchy and by some feminist critics— as the place of eternity and infinity:

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. (287)

Just as Carter does in *The Sadeian Woman* (1979) as well as in the tales hitherto analysed, “Peter and the Wolf” traverses the fantasy of the womb —and thus of woman— *qua* Thing by revealing that the wolf-girl has never been aware of the effect that her unacknowledged vagina has on Peter: as she calms after her traumatic seizure, Peter’s cousin “closed up her forbidden book without the least notion she had ever opened it or that it was banned” (Carter 1995 [1979]: 288). The wolf-girl eventually escapes back to the mountains with the help of wolves, which, like the imaginary Real in Lacanian theory, storm into the house and destroy everything they touch:

The door shook as the wolves outside jumped up at it and the screws that held the socket of the bolt to the frame cracked, squeaked and started to give. The girl jumped up, at that, and began to make excited little sallies back and forth in front of the door. The screws tore out of the frame quite soon. The pack tumbled over one another to get inside.

Dissonance. Terror. The clamour within the house was that of all the winds of winter trapped in a box. That which they feared most, outside, was now indoors with them [...] They left behind a riotous stench in the house, and white tracks of flour everywhere. The broken door creaked backwards and forwards on its hinges. Black sticks of dead wood from the extinguished fire were scattered on the floor (288)

Shortly after this devastating event, Peter’s grandmother dies due to an infection provoked by her granddaughter’s bite as she tried to tame her in the house. In an attempt to make sense of this series of tragic episodes which “disordered his sleeps”, Peter “ask[s] the village priest to teach him to read the Bible. The priest gladly complied; Peter was the first of his flock who had ever expressed any interest in learning to read” (289). As he reads the Bible, Peter is “consumed by an imperious passion for atonement”, blaming himself for having brought to his family

what he now sees as the incarnation of evil, that is to say, his cousin as the obverse of the sublime surface of woman *qua* Thing. In the narrator's words: "the fatal infection that had taken [his grandmother] out of the house" (289). Peter's decision to become a priest and "plunge into a world of penance and devotion" contrasts his grandmother's reaction to the girl's escape, after which, the narrator informs, the old woman could no longer pray (289-290).

When he turns fourteen, Peter sets off to the seminary in town to become a priest himself. On his way through the mountains, he encounters his cousin for the last time, now a grown-up with dangling breasts that suckle her little cubs. Upon seeing her, Peter:

[c]ould not help it, he burst out crying. He had not cried since his grandmother's funeral. Tears roll down his face and splash on the grass. He blundered forward a few steps into the river with his arms held open, intending to cross over to the other side to join her in her marvellous and private grace, impelled by the access of an almost visionary ecstasy. (290)

Peter continues his way to the town when he recovers himself but now he seems to have abandoned his intention to become a priest for "what would he do at the seminary, now? For now he knew there was nothing to be afraid of" (291). As he looks back at the mountain, although remaining exactly the same, it appears to him as totally altered:

[h]e ha[s] never seen it before as it might look to someone who had not known it as almost a part of the self, so, for the first time, he s[ees] the primitive, vast, magnificent, barren, unkind, simplicity of the mountain. As he sa[ys] goodbye to it, he s[ees] it turn into so much scenery, into the wonderful backcloth for an old country tale, tale of a child suckled by wolves, perhaps, or of wolves nursed by a woman. (291)

Peter's encounter with the unimaginable Thing in his worldview renders palpable the artificiality or fantasmatic character of such a view, which as the tale closes is described as acquiring a:

[f]lat, two-dimensional look [...] turning into a picture of itself, into a postcard hastily bought as a souvenir of childhood at a railway station or a border post, the newspaper cutting, the snapshot he would show in strange towns, strange cities, other countries he could not, at this moment, imagine. (291)

The overproximity to his cousin-Thing further renders Peter's self as pure artifice, "a pillar of salt" which may melt if he "looks back again", lying bare, therefore, the excess of negativity, pure gaze or nothingness which *is* pure subject in Žižek's theory (291).

Both tales dealing with feral children traverse the fantasy of the human being as a purely rational self and confront the reader with *jouissance*, the *sine qua non* of being human, the excess or leftover of the process of subjectivisation. Both tales also foreground the perverse effects that disavowing this "monstrous", unbearable excess in oneself, as villagers do, may bring about. Such a disavowal involves the creation of the sublime and obscene Thing, that is to say, the elevation of an object —female flesh in this case— into "the dignity of the Thing", an unbearable position of perfection which may turn its enforcers into perverts who enjoy inflicting pain on others for the sake of protecting the Thing's (inexistent) inaccessibility. The tales to be examined in the next chapter further dramatise the devastating effects of evacuating *jouissance* from reality and embodying the incestuous Thing. Lizzie Borden, the protagonist of both tales and occupant of the sacred place of the Thing, will be shown to turn into a paranoid, a subject whose psyche cannot contain the *jouissance* purged from reality, which eventually overflows and disintegrates her reality's very contours.

CHAPTER 12
**GOING THROUGH THE FANTASY OF THE “ANGEL IN THE HOUSE”:
“THE FALL RIVER AXE MURDERS” AND “LIZZIE’S TIGER”**

“The Fall River Axe Murders”, the tale that closes *Black Venus* (1985), and “Lizzie’s Tiger”, which opens Carter’s posthumously published collection *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* (1993), re-imagine the middle age and early childhood, respectively, of one of the most famous parricidal figures in the history of American folklore: Lizzie Borden. In August 1892, being thirty-two, unmarried and still living in her father’s house in Fall River, Massachusetts, Lizzie Borden was charged with the axe murders of her father and stepmother. Contrary to the official verdict acquitting her, the first person plural unnamed narrator in “The Fall River Axe Murders” never questions Lizzie’s guilt; his narration appears to be in accordance with the popular belief that convicted her and transformed her into a sadistic woman-monster, as expressed in the children’s rhyme attached to the story as an epigraph: “*Lizzie Borden with an axe / Gave her father forty whacks / When she saw what she had done / She gave her mother forty-one*” (Carter 1995 [1985]: 300).¹¹⁰

Carter’s tale, however, removes Lizzie’s gruesome act from the realm of the obscenely sensationalist and focuses on describing the daily routine at the Borden’s household. In fact, the tale closes right before Lizzie’s bloody outbreak; the parricide is never described directly but only prefigured in Old Borden’s decapitation of Lizzie’s beloved pet doves with the same axe with which he would

¹¹⁰ Lizzie Borden’s trial in New Bedford, Massachusetts—one of the most sensational of the era, heavily covered by the nation’s newspapers—ended in acquittal. In June 1893, less than a year after the murder, the jury took only an hour to unanimously decide that she was not a murderess. (http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1990-11-15/news/1990319193_1_lizzie-died-lizzie-borden-daughter-lizzie)

be hacked to death three weeks later. These appalling events stand as the culmination of a series of disgusting and nauseating practices which, in a postmodernist manner, go through the fantasmatic frame of the symbolic edifice that regulates relationships in Lizzie's domestic environment by rendering palpable its structural inconsistency. On the surface and from a distance, the Bordens appear as a family exemplary of the Puritan capitalist morality that governs the late nineteenth-century industrial town of Fall River. Lizzie's father stands as a respectable "self-made man" whose modesty and financial skills turned him from an undertaker into a successful property owner "halfway on the road to his first million" (307). Andrew Borden thus appears to embody the Puritan ideal of man as a human agent whose continuous and disciplined work paired with sobriety and restraint of pleasure translates into the accumulation of capital, a manifestation of God's spirit in the individual.

The Puritan sanctification of work and capital growth constitutes, in Max Weber's well-known thesis, one of the prime "formative influences of the ethic of modern capitalist culture, at least in the Anglo-Saxon world" (Taylor 1989: 226). Drawing on Weber's thesis of the connection between Puritanism and capitalism in the making of modern Western societies and subjectivities, Charles Taylor argues that the Puritan mystification of work and capital went hand in hand with the sacralisation of ordinary, domestic life and related sanctification of the role of women as domestic beings, men's moral refuge. Whereas in Catholic cultures, Taylor notes, the sacred usually arises in connection with priesthood or monastic life, the most ordinary tasks are hallowed in Puritan societies; in Taylor's words, "the highest life can no longer be defined by an exalted *kind* of activity, it all turns on the *spirit* in which one lives whatever one lives, even the most mundane

existence” (Taylor 1989: 224, emphasis in original). Lizzie and her older sister Emma appear to embody the Puritan ideal of woman as a domestic refuge, whose hegemonic form in late nineteenth-century capitalist societies was that of the “Angel in the house”, one of the variations of the Woman *qua* Thing motif—or what Žižek terms “fake woman” (Žižek 2000c: 231)— which defines female individuals as naturally innocent, pious and undesiring beings, their sole purpose in life being to soothe, flatter and comfort men. As Virginia Woolf put it in her 1942 address to the Women’s Service League, “Professions for Women”, “the Angel in the House” is a woman who:

[is i]ntensely sympathetic. . . . immensely charming. . . . utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family like. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draft she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it— she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace. In those days—the last of Queen Victoria— every house had its Angel. (Woolf 1942)¹¹¹

Lizzie and Emma’s existence is confined to their father’s house, a domestic space which they momentarily leave only to engage together in genteel tasks like teaching at the Sunday school and doing regular charity work. Very seldom do both sisters go together on “sour trips” that “end at the sour place from which [they...] set out” and during which “they must not get their hands dirtied or their dresses crushed by the world” (Carter 1995 [1985]: 314).

The more the narrator explores this ostensibly “clean” and harmonious Puritan environment, however, the more traces he finds of what this order/surface prohibits—and at the same time creates—to retain its illusory consistency. As the

¹¹¹ Woolf borrowed the term from Coventry Patmore’s famous nineteenth-century sentimental poem *The Angel in the House* (1854-1862), a paean to his long-suffering wife, Emily, who, as he saw it, epitomised the perfect woman. In this same address, Woolf contended that “killing the Angel in the house was part of the occupation of the woman writer” (Woolf 1942).

narrative progresses in the description of the Bordens' daily routine, the oppressive architecture of the house and the layers of garments its inhabitants wear increasingly turn their bodily presence into a nauseating excess. Such a suffocating pleasure-free existence in turn gives rise to more and more enjoyment or pleasure in pain, a process that culminates in a dreadful explosion of uncontrolled enjoyment, which, as the tale's title and epigraph advance, takes the form of Lizzie's bloody deed.

In line with Žižek's definition of postmodernist fiction as staging the codependence between the symbolic order and that which it necessarily evacuates/creates to function properly—that is to say impossible *jouissance*, Carter's tales revisiting the figure of Lizzie Borden show, as I will try to demonstrate in the course of this chapter, the devastating effects that the erasure of pleasure and concomitant generation of excessive enjoyment may bring about in individuals' experience of reality. In so doing, the tales desublimize the ideal of woman as the Angel in the House, whose full actualization propitiates Lizzie's psychotic experience and embodiment of the "angel of death" (Carter 1995 [1985]: 317), the deadly obverse of the Victorian archetype of the perfect woman.

"The Fall River Axe Murders" begins on August 4, 1892, early in the morning, with a God-like "furious sun, high in the still air" (Carter 1995: 300) which stands as a symbol of the big Other or spectral authority to which individuals submit in this Puritan capitalist community. Among the obligations Fall Riverians share, the narrator points out the distressful need to wear layers and layers of clothing even in the middle of a heat wave, a custom at odds with the more sensible way of dressing that the territory's former inhabitants had:

[Fall River's] inhabitants have never come to terms with these hot, humid summers—for it is the humidity more than the heat that makes them intolerable; the weather

clings like a low fever you cannot shake off. The Indians who lived here first had the sense to take off their buckskins when hot weather came and sit up to their necks in ponds; not so the descendants of the industrious, self-mortifying saints who imported the Protestant ethic wholesale into a country intended for the siesta and are proud, proud! of flying in the face of nature. In most latitudes with summers like these, everything slows down, then [...] the ultimate decade of the last century finds us at the high point of hard work, here; all will soon be bustle, men will go out into the furnace of the morning well wrapped up in flannel underclothes, linen shirts, vests and coats and trousers of sturdy woollen cloth, and they garrote themselves with neckties, too, they think it is so virtuous to be uncomfortable. (300)

The community's dress code seems to follow the same logic as the function of the screen/fantasmatic surface in the creation of the Thing. As Lacan would have it, these several layers of clothing, in covering the body, "elevate human flesh — notably female flesh— to the dignity of the Thing", turning it into a sacred object whose inaccessibility, just as in the tales so far examined, sustains the consistency of the individual's sense of reality and, as such, guarantees the well-functioning of socio-symbolic relationships. Yet, as earlier argued, these garments cannot fully cover the very object they mystify and so the more the narrator approaches the surface of these overdressed town dwellers, the more the sublime object that lies underneath turns into an abhorrent, unbearable excess. "If we have largely forgotten the physical discomforts of the itching, oppressive garments of the past and the corrosive effects of perpetual physical discomfort on the nerves", the narrator says to a contemporary narratee:

[t]hen we have mercifully forgotten, too, the smells of the past, the domestic odours — ill-washed flesh; infrequently changed underwear; chamber-pots; slop-pails; inadequately plumbed privies; rotting food; unattended teeth; and the streets are no fresher than indoors, the omnipresent acidity of horse piss and dung, drains, sudden stench of old death from butchers' shops, the amniotic horror of the fishmonger.

You would drench your handkerchief with cologne and press it to your nose. You would splash yourself with parma violet so that the reek of fleshly decay you always carried with you was overlaid by that of the embalming parlour. You would abhor the air you breathed. (301)

The unbearable effect physical matter produces on the narrator —and on readers— is not inherent to matter itself but appears to be the psychic retroactive product of the function of the garment/surface which, in constituting the contours of reality and the subject also constitutes what has no place in the reality frame, the impossible Real. The way the narrator foregrounds the repulsive excess at the heart of his object of scrutiny bears some resemblance to the manner in which everyday reality is depicted in David Lynch's postmodernist films: as the narrator/camera comes too close to the object observed, it turns into nauseating "palpitating slime that continually threatens to blow up the settled frame of everyday reality" (Žižek 1992a: 129). As advanced in chapter 3, the lesson behind this paradoxical convergence of artificial surface and abhorrent formless matter partakes of the lesson Žižek ascribes to postmodernist artworks: the contours of the frame which constitutes symbolic reality and subjectivities are constituted and sustained by the simultaneous creation and prohibition of an obscene excess. Such an excess, in other words, does not precede symbolisation, but is its necessary retroactive product.

The narrative mode in "The Fall River Axe Murders" —together with its atmosphere of stagnation and its dreadful climatic event—further recalls that in "The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter". The narrator in the tale now examined is also a first person plural agent who addresses a collectivity of subjects that do not belong to the community in which the tale's appalling events are set. The narrative subject systematically uses the present simple tense creating, as noted in chapter 8, an effect of ongoing commentary that matches Carter's conception of literature as "a system of continuing enquiry" and as "an argument stated in fictional terms" (Katsavos 1994: 14, Haffenden 1985: 79). As the narrative subject approaches the

Bordens' house in an attempt to speculate on the motivations of Lizzie's parricide, he informs that the unbearable pressure that Fall River's "dementing heat" and nauseating environment may have exerted on "us", is especially intensified in Lizzie's psyche the very morning when, "after breakfast and the performance of a few household duties", she "will murder her parents":

[she will] on rising, don a simple cotton frock —but, under that, went a long, starched cotton petticoat; another short, starched cotton petticoat; long drawers; woollen stockings; a chemise; and a whalebone corset that took her viscera in a stern hand and squeezed them very tightly. She also strapped a heavy linen napkin between her legs because she was menstruating.

In all these clothes, out of sorts and nauseous as she was, in this dementing heat, her belly in a vice, she will heat up a flat-iron on a stove and press handkerchiefs with the heated iron until it is time for her to go down to the cellar woodpile to collect the hatchet with which our imagination —'Lizzie Borden with an axe'— always equips her, just as we always visualise St Catherine rolling along her wheel, the emblem of her passion. (300-301)

The Bordens' household, in fact, takes to the limit the prohibitions imposed by Fall River's cultural and economic climate. Ruled by Lizzie's father, who "owns all the women [living there, namely Lizzie, Lizzie's sister Emma, Lizzie's stepmother and Bridget, the servant] by marriage, birth or contract" (301), the house stands as an adequate symbol for its dwellers' imposed condition of pleasure-free individuals.¹¹² In this prison-like house, "narrow as a coffin —[old Borden] used to be an undertaker", enjoyment is not only prohibited/generated by layers of suffocating garments but also by locked doors that, in the same way as in the Marquis's castle in "The Bloody Chamber", create what they conceal/prohibit:

One peculiarity of this house is the number of doors the rooms contain and, a further peculiarity, how all these doors are always locked. A house full of locked doors that open only into other rooms with other locked doors, for, upstairs and downstairs, all the rooms lead in and out of one another like a maze in a bad dream. It is a house without passages. There is no part of the house that has not been

¹¹² The narrator's reference to Andrew Borden as the possessor of all the women in the house echoes Freud's account of the primitive father of the horde who "keeps all the females for himself" and whose murder founds the Law (Freud 2001 [1912-1913: 164]). As noted in chapters 3 and 4, this is the father that, according to Žižek, appears in postmodernism within the realm of authority, the anal father or father-*jouissance* that fully enjoys the Law's very prohibitions (Žižek 1992a: 124-125).

marked as some inmate's personal territory; it is a house with no shared, no common spaces between one room and the next. It is a house of privacies sealed as close as if they had been sealed with wax on a legal document.

The only way to Emma's room is through Lizzie's. There is no way out of Emma's room. It is a dead end [...] the narrow house, the rooms all locked *like those in Bluebeard's castle*. (304, emphasis mine)

In the Bordens' daily routine of confinement, "time goes by and nothing happens" (Carter 1995 [1985]: 304). Under Andrew Borden's stifling control, women's existence is described as a nightmare of burial alive which matches Carter's previously quoted definition of the ideal of woman in fairy tales as individuals "d[ying] in the passive case [...] be[ing] killed" (Carter 2009 [1979]: 77). Even though Lizzie is thirty-two and Emma is well in her forties, "they remain in a fictive, protracted childhood". Lizzie's days, in particular, enact a repetitive cycle of tedious tasks that reinforce the house's intolerable atmosphere of entrapment:

Bureau; dressing-table; closet; bed; sofa. [Lizzie] spends her days in this room, moving between each of these dull items of furniture in a circumscribed, undeviating, planetary round. She loves her privacy, she loves her room, she locks herself up in it all day. (Carter 1995 [1985]: 315, 313)

Lizzie's compulsive tasks befit Žižek's account of neurotic or false activity, a series of repetitive actions that, as noted in chapter 5, individuals perform to prevent something from happening so that nothing takes place (Žižek 2007: 26-27). Lizzie's regular chores also include charity work, which she undertakes with the sole intention of "filling in time":

[Lizzie's] bedroom [is] also her sitting room and her office, too, for the desk is stacked with account books of the various charitable organisations with which she occupies her ample spare time. The Fruit and Flower Mission, under whose auspices she visits the indigent old in hospital with gifts; the Women's Christian Temperance Union, for whom she extracts signatures for petitions against the Demon Drink; Christian Endeavour, whatever that is —this is the golden age of good works and she flings herself into committees with a vengeance. What would the daughters of the rich do with themselves if the poor ceased to exist?

There is the Newsboys Thanksgiving Dinner Fund; and the Horse-trough Association; and the Chinese Conversion Association —no class nor kind is safe from her merciless charity. (Carter 1995 [1985]: 312-313)

The way the narrator describes the intrinsic motivation for charitable giving stands very much in tune with Žižek's condemnation of charity as an unethical and perverse response to social inequalities (Žižek 2014a: 43). Instead of eradicating poverty and concomitant social destitution, the true aim of charity, the narrator seems to suggest, is to preserve those social inequalities in order to sustain the privileged position of the rich, more specifically their daughters' false activity to fill in time, so that the *status quo* remains the same.

As if to further accentuate the effect of paralysis and claustrophobia the picture of Lizzie's reality produces, the narrator foregrounds the unbearable stillness that pervades the household in a way that recalls the picture of the villagers or *nature morte* in "The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter", which also revolved around a bloody execution: "still, all still; in all the house nothing moving except [...] stillness on the staircase. Stillness pressing against the blinds. Stillness, mortal stillness in the room below, where Master and Mistress share the matrimonial bed" (303). In this light, Lizzie's confinement may be read as reminiscent of Gretchen's horrifying circumscribed reality —as opposed to her troubled dreams— in the tale just mentioned. Just as Gretchen, Lizzie no longer sleeps soundly. "Look at the sleeping beauty!" the narrator exclaims, "the hem of her nightdress is rucked above her knees because she is a restless sleeper" (1995: 309). Lizzie's restless sleep disturbs the apparently immutable stillness of the household and thus stands as a first disturbance within an order which will be revealed as impregnated with the very enjoyment it seeks to erase:

Her bare feet twitch a little, like those of a dog dreaming of rabbits. Her sleep is thin and unsatisfying, full of vague terrors and indeterminate menaces to which she

cannot put a name of form once she is awake. Sleep opens within her a disorderly house. But all she knows is, she sleeps badly, and this last, stifling night has been troubled, too, by vague nausea and the gripes of her female pain; her room is harsh with the metallic smell of menstrual blood. (310)

Every member of the Bordens' household finds ways of enjoying the "burden" of Puritan capitalist restrictions in a such a way that the renunciation of pleasure turns into the pleasure of renunciation. Emma—who "is more mysterious than Lizzie, for we know much less about her. She is a blank space. She has no life"—appears to be the only character who does not indulge in enjoying repression (304). In fact, her escape from the intolerable heat in Fall River towards the pleasant breeze on the coast is what prevents her from being present at the house the very morning in which enjoyment or the unimaginable erupts in the form of her sister's slaughter. Lizzie, on the contrary, renounces pleasure for pleasure-in-pain and thus decides to stay home:

On this particular morning [...] one of the two Borden girls sleeps in their father's house. Emma Lenora, his oldest daughter, has taken herself off to nearby New Bedford for a few days, to catch the ocean breeze, and so she will escape the slaughter.

Few of their social class stay in Fall River in the sweating months of June, July and August but, then, few of their social class live on Second Street, in the low part of town where heat gathers like fog. Lizzie was invited away, too, to a summer house by the sea to join a merry band of girls but, as if on purpose to mortify her flesh, as if important business kept her in the exhausted town, as if a wicked fairy spelled her in Second Street, she did not go. (302)

Bridget, the Irish maid—in the narrator's opinion, "the only one in the house with any sense and that's the truth of it" (316)—at times disturbs the household's terrifying harmony with her "characteristic impetuosity [...] her temper is sometimes uncertain and then she will talk back to the missus, sometimes" (316, 302). Bridget's impatience, however, is effectively gentrified by the ideology that confines her to an insupportable existence as conveyed in the claustrophobic position in which she sleeps:

[s]he lies in her sticking flannel nightgown under one thin sheet on an iron bedstead, lies on her back, as the good nuns taught her in her Irish girlhood, in case she dies during the night, to make less trouble for the undertaker. (302)

In a manner that materialises Žižek's account of individuals' adherence to the Law as a process of exchange of impossible *jouissance* for surplus-*jouissance*, Catholic mechanisms of repression like chastity, poverty and confession become libidinally invested and guarantee Bridget's subjection. In fact, she finds delight in her "worldly goods", which include "a rosary of brown glass beads, a cardboard-backed colour print of the Virgin bought from a Portuguese shop, a flyblown photograph of her solemn mother in Donegal", as well as in confessing "her sin of impatience to the priest" (303). Bridget's pleasurable subjection to the ideal of sacrificial woman explains why, contrary to Lizzie, she always sleeps soundly:

[i]t is a joke between Bridget and her mistress that the girl could sleep through anything, *anything*, and so she needs the alarm as well as all the factory whistles that are just about to blast off, just this very second about to blast off... (303, emphasis in original)

The "Master and Mistress" of the house, as the narrator refers to Lizzie's father and to her stepmother, also sleep quietly; "back to back they lie", the narrator says:

You could rest a sword in the space between the old man and his wife, between the old man's backbone, the only rigid thing he ever offered her, and her soft, warm, enormous bum. Their purges flailed them. Their faces show up decomposing green in the gloom of the curtained room, in which the air is too thick for flies to move. (303, 309)

The breathless atmosphere of the room parallels the oppressive cultural climate in which they rule. Again, in a postmodernist manner, the narrator shows how in this ostensibly pleasure-free household the bearers of authority fully enjoy the lack of enjoyment. "They are living embodiments of the two of the Seven Deadly Sins", the narrator contends, "but he knows his avarice is no offence

because he never spends any money and she knows she is not greedy because the grub she shovels down gives her dyspepsia” (308). Abby, Andrew Borden’s second wife definitely enjoys ingesting food, her ceaseless and painful gluttony stands as another sign of obscene enjoyment in the midst of this suffocating household:

Bread, meat, cabbage, potatoes —Abby was made for the heavy food that made her [...] when she tackles a sticky brownie, oozing chocolate, then she feels a queasy sense of having gone too far [...] She weighs two hundred pounds. She is five feet nothing tall [...] the copious results of their purges brim their chamber-pots beneath the bed. It is fit to make a sewer faint. (308–309)

Old Border appears to be quite the opposite of his wife in his skinniness. His irrepressible drive for profit, however, is paralleled to her gluttony and is also described in obscene terms: it is “an orgy of investment”, materialised in repetitive neurotic-like actions that evoke the nausea of the Real:

At night, to save the kerosene, he sits in lampless dark. He waters the pear trees with his urine; waste not, want not. As soon as the daily newspapers are done with, he rips them up in geometric squares and stores them in the cellar privy so that they all can wipe their arses with them. He mourns for the loss of the good organic waste that flushes down the WC. (306-307)

Andrew Borden’s lust for capital “has melted off his flesh” (307). Capital is one of the spectral objects that, in line with Žižek’s definition of Capital as the Thing or *objet a* in capitalism, functions as the ultimate chimera that regulates Old Borden’s life. Another object that occupies the place of the sublime —and thus incestuous prohibited— Thing in Andrew Borden’s world is not his second wife, but his adored youngest daughter: “Do not think he has no soft spot”, the narrator notes:

[h]is heart and, more than that, his cheque-book —is putty in his youngest daughter’s hands [...] no extravagance is too excessive for the miser’s younger daughter who is the wild card in his house and, it seems, can have anything she wants, play ducks and drakes with her father’s silver dollars if it so pleases her. He pays all her dressmakers’ bills on the dot and how she loves to dress up fine! She is addicted to dandyism. He gives her each week in pin-money the same as the cook

gets for wages and Lizzie gives that which she does not spend on personal adornment to the deserving poor.

He would give his Lizzie anything, anything in the world that lives under the green sign of the dollar. (308, 314)

In Old Borden's reality frame, Lizzie stands as a fetish, a stand-in for a sacred beloved Thing he reveres and whose erotic-like attachment is marked by a gold ring he wears on his pinky. The ring is:

[n]ot a wedding ring but a high-school ring, a singular trinket for a fabulously misanthropic miser. His youngest daughter gave it to him when she left school and asked him to wear it, always, and so he always does, and will wear it to the grave to which she is going to send him later in the morning of this combustible day. (308)

In line with the status of the Thing in postmodernism, the ideal of woman that Lizzie epitomises in her father's Puritan and capitalist worldview will paradoxically prove to give body to the obscene excess that her father's rule prohibits—and thus creates—and which will give way to the order's very collapse. Abby's excessive presence is one of the factors that trigger Lizzie's and the household's disintegration. Lizzie's claustrophobic existence finds pleasure in assuming the position of object-love of her father's desire. This is why she "*loves* her father [...] the adoring father who, after her mother died, took to himself another wife [...who] oppress[es Lizzie] like a spell" (310, 314, emphasis in original). Just as in fairy tales, Lizzie's symbolic position turns her stepmother into a disruptive excess, a competitor for Father's love. In fact, it is on the two occasions in which Andrew Borden contravenes Lizzie's demands to apparently favour those of his wife that the outbreak of Lizzie's enjoyment occurs.

Traces of Lizzie's entrapment in enjoyment initially take the form of "somnambulist fits, occasional 'peculiar spells', as the idiom of the place and time called odd lapses of behaviour, unexpected, involuntary trances, moments of disconnection. Those times when the mind misses a beat" (311). In these strange

moments Lizzie no longer “feels [her]self” but embodies “what is in her more than herself”: a “*dark man, with the aspect of death upon his face*” whom, as she reveals to her friend Miss Russell, can be seen “outside the house at odd, at unexpected hours, early in the morning, late at night, whenever [she] cannot sleep in this dreadful shade” (310-311, emphasis in original).

It is during these trances that Lizzie is overwhelmed by enjoyment, what her symbolic identity as angel in the house forecloses in a manner that befits Žižek’s Lacan-based diagnosis of psychosis as the foreclosure of the Name of the Father or symbolic authority (Žižek 2012: 667). In the midst of her psychotic episodes, *objet a*, the spectral excess whose absence sustains the consistency of reality, acquires full presence, that is, materialises itself in Lizzie’s psyche in the form of a man whose appearance, significantly enough, bears close resemblance to the Portuguese and the Canucks, those “dark strangers” excluded from the privileged community of white Puritans in late nineteenth century Fall River (Carter 1995 [1985]: 306).¹¹³

The dark man Lizzie effectively sees is a paranoid delusion that makes her enact what Žižek terms the “*passage à l’acte*”, outbursts of destructive energy that dramatically shake the foundations of Lizzie’s symbolic reality and may eventually bring about its collapse (Žižek 1994: 77). Upon hearing Lizzie’s distressful report of the dark man’s apparition, Miss Russell, the narrator reveals, proves to be aware of the sick nature of Lizzie’s vision: “Miss Russell knew, she just *knew*, this dark man was a figment of Lizzie’s imagination” (Carter 1995 [1985]: 312, emphasis in original). Yet, the restrictions of the Puritan order she also inhabits prevent Miss Russell from taking action and thus avoiding the tragic outcome: “[Miss Russell]

¹¹³ “Canuck” is a slang term commonly used in the nineteenth century to refer to French-speaking Canadian. Nowadays it is perceived as insulting when used by non-Canadians or when referring specifically to French Canadians. But among Canadians, it is sometimes used as a neutral nickname or term of self-reference.
(<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/canuck>)

was embarrassed to mention the ‘peculiar spells’” (311). Instead, and in line with the angel-in-the-house role she pleurably assumes, Miss Russell “was kind and cast about ways to reassure [Lizzie]” (312).

The first psychotic breakdown Lizzie experiences takes place on an occasion in which she is left alone in the house with her older sister Emma after her father and his wife had taken an apparent romantic escapade to Swansea, whose actual purpose was for Old Borden “to ensure that [the] tenant [of a farm they owned there] was not bilking him” (304). Lizzie’s act takes the form of a burglary, its official version being that:

[while] the girls [were] asleep or otherwise occupied, some person or persons unknown tiptoed up the back stairs to the matrimonial bedroom and pocketed Mrs Borden’s gold watch and chain, the coral necklace and silver bangle of her remote childhood, and a roll of dollar bills Old Borden kept under clean union suits in the third drawer of the bureau on the left [...] Then the intruder pissed and shat on the cover of the Bordens’ bed, knocked the clutter of this and that on the dresser to the floor, smashing everything, swept into Old Borden’s dressing room there to maliciously assault the funeral coat as it hung in the moth-balled dark of his closet with the self-same nail scissors that had been used on the safe (the nail scissors now split in two and were abandoned on the closet floor), retired to the kitchen, smashed the flour crock and the treacle crock, and then scrawled an obscenity or two on the parlour window with the cake of soap that lived beside the scullery sink. (304-305)

The impact this intrusion has on Old Borden is so traumatic that it radically destabilises the foundations of the symbolic edifice in which he rules in a way that marks a prelude to the eventual parricide: “I cannot tell you what effect the burglary had on Borden”, the narrator notes, “it utterly disconcerted him; he was a man stunned. It violated him, even. He was a man raped. It took away his hitherto unshakeable confidence in the integrity inherent in things” (305). The devotion he feels for the most precious objects-fetishes in his domain, material possessions and Lizzie, drive him to intensify his already suffocating measures of protection:

After the burglary, the front door and the side door were always locked three times if one of the inhabitants of the house left it for just so much as to go into the yard and pick up a basket of fallen pears when pears were in season or if the maid went out to hang a bit of washing or Old Borden, after supper, took a piss under a tree.

From this time dated the custom of locking all the bedroom doors on the inside when one was on the inside oneself or on the outside when one was on the outside. Old Borden locked his bedroom door in the morning, when he left it, and put the key in sight of all on the kitchen shelf. (306)

It is the status of material possessions and Lizzie *qua* fetishes that leads Old Borden to mistake the intruder for an outsider and thus to locate the threat to his power in external sources: “He blame[s the burglary] on the Portuguese, obviously, but sometimes on the Canucks” (305). In a very postmodernist manner, however, the narrator reveals that the real menace to the Bordens household comes from its very inside, from the very incestuous prohibited object that authority reveres, that is to say, Lizzie. Drawing on Žižek’s distinction between modernist and postmodernist fiction on the basis of their different location of enjoyment with respect to symbolic authority, one could argue that “The Fall River Axe Murders” would be a modernist text if it placed enjoyment, and thus the threat to Andrew Borden’s position, outside the household —as Borden himself does— on the presence of the Canucks and the Portuguese or on some unaccountable external forces. Yet, as noted above, the real menace to Borden’s rule comes from the very heart of the household: the enjoyment that floods Lizzie’s psyche has been generated by the harsh prohibitions and symbolic positions the household rule enforces. The very moment the burglar vanishes, she inexplicably finds herself:

[i]n the middle of the sitting room [...] How had she got there? Had she crept down when she heard the screen door rattle? She did not know. She could not remember. All that happened was: all at once here she is, in the parlour, with a cake of soap in her hand.

She experienced a clearing of the senses and only then began to scream and shout.

‘Help! We have been burgled! Help!’ (305)

Lizzie’s sister, Emma, in her role of ideal Victorian woman, “came down and comforted her” and also “cleared from the sitting-room carpet the flour and

treacle Lizzie had heedlessly tracked in from the kitchen on her bare feet in her somnambulist trance” (305). For some years, Lizzie’s psychotic fits disappear. They reappear again the second time her father does not act as she pleases. As noted earlier, the event that triggers Lizzie’s parricide is Old Borden’s killing of the former’s pet doves whose caring constitutes the most notable source of pleasure for Lizzie in her middle age:

She loves small animals and birds, too, poor, helpless things. She piles high the bird-table all winter. She used to keep some white pouter pigeons in the disused stable, the kind that look like shuttlecocks and go ‘vroo croo’, soft as a cloud [...] She used to keep her pigeons in the loft above the disused stable and feed them grain out of the palms of her cupped hands. She liked to feel the soft scratch of their beaks. They murmured ‘vroo croo’ with infinite tenderness. She changed their water every day and cleaned up their leprous messes (314-315)

Yet Lizzie’s father cannot stand the pigeons’ noise, “it got on his nerves” so, three weeks prior to his murder, “he took out the hatchet from the woodpile in the cellar and chopped those pigeons’ heads right off, he did” (316). Driven by her uncontrollable gluttony, “Abby fancied the slaughtered pigeons for a pie”, a disgusting whim which, upon arriving home from one of her charity excursions, is received by Lizzie as a premeditated act of marital love and concomitant attack on her position as Father’s most beloved object:

[Lizzie] doesn't weep, this one, it isn't her nature, she is still waters, but, when moved, she changes colour, her face flushes, it goes dark, angry, mottled red. The old man loves his daughter this side of idolatry and pays for everything she wants, *but all the same he killed her pigeons when his wife wanted to gobble them up.*

That is how she sees it. That is how she understands it. She cannot bear to watch her stepmother eat, now. Each bite the woman takes seems to go: ‘Vroo croo.’ (316, emphasis mine)

After such a nauseating and traumatic event, Lizzie’s bad dreams and psychotic hallucinations return and start assuming form. The evening before the Bordens’ fatal day, Lizzie goes to the drugstore on the corner of the main street to buy poison:

[b]ut nobody would sell it to her, so she came home empty-handed. Had all that talk of poison in the vomiting house put her in mind of poison? The autopsy will reveal no trace of poison in the stomachs of either parent. She did not try to poison them; she only had it in mind to poison them. But she had been unable to buy poison. The use of poison had been denied her; so what can she be planning, now? (312)

Yet this plan, the narrator suggests, seems to be plotted in a psychotic trance for, after reporting it, he notes that “when [Lizzie] wakes up, she cannot remember her dreams; she only remembers she slept badly” (312). This conjecture seems to be sustained by the forwardness with which Lizzie performs the plan and by her agitated revelation to Miss Russell that “I am afraid ... that somebody... will *do* something” (310, emphasis in original). The tale closes instants before the execution. The suffocating atmosphere of stillness which throughout the narrative has helped create a terrifying sense of impending catastrophe reaches a climax with the narrator’s reference to Bridget’s clock “about to sound its own alarm”, which metaphorically announces the advent of “the angel of the death”, now “roost[ing] on the roof tree” (316-317). This is Lizzie possessed, a selfless automaton “with prominent eyes, yet veiled [...] fanatic’s eyes [...] so that it would not surprise you to learn that she is blind” (311, 314-315).

Carter’s re-imagining of the Borden’s murder case appears to dramatise the catastrophic effects that, in Žižek’s view and as earlier noted, the utter denial of pleasure and —by definition failed— attempt to embody the perfect Thing —the perfect Woman, in this case— may bring about. It leads to the overwhelming presence of *jouissance* in the subject’s psyche, that is, the subject turns to be submitted to the demands of an agency —the superego— that fully controls her drive to enjoy, a condition which disintegrates the shared contours of reality and the self, potentially leading to the collapse of the latter in a violent outbreak.

“Lizzie’s Tiger” immediately follows “The Fall River Axe Murders” in the linear progression of Carter’s short fiction as it opens her last collection *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* (1993). The story is set twenty-eight years before the Bordens’ murder, shortly after the death of Lizzie’s mother, and proves to be an attempt on the part of the first person plural narrator to imagine the constitution of Lizzie as a subject. The tale revolves around four-year-old Lizzie’s escape from her father’s home, at the time a very poor cottage on Ferry Street, to the spectacular realm of the circus, an overwhelming experience that culminates in Lizzie’s strange encounter with a caged tiger. The way Lizzie’s incursion into the circus is described, as it will be shown in the remaining pages, appears to befit Žižek’s account of the overproximity to the Thing and subsequent staging of the inconsistency of the symbolic frame in which she finds herself. Lizzie’s initial fascination with the image of the tiger shown in a poster that announces the circus turns into vertigo the moment she disobeys her father and:

[u]nobserved, she was off —off and away!— trotting down Ferry Street, her cheeks pink with self-reliance and intent. She would not be denied. The circus! The word tinkled in her head with a red sound, as if it might signify a profane church [...] Lizzie abandoned herself to the unpremeditated smells and never-before-heard noises -- hot fat in a vat of frying doughnuts; horse-dung; boiling sugar; frying onions; popping corn; freshly churned earth; vomit; sweat; cries of vendors; crack of rifles from the range; singsong of the white-faced clown, who clattered a banjo, while a woman in pink fleshings danced upon a little stage. Too much for Lizzie to take in at once, too much for Lizzie to take in at all — too rich a feast for her senses, so that *she was taken a little beyond herself and felt her head spinning, a vertigo, a sense of profound strangeness overcoming her.* (Carter 1995 [1993]: 323-324, emphasis mine)

The caged tiger that Lizzie encounters at the heart of the circus may be read as an embodiment of libido or *jouissance*, “what in is her self more than herself” or what one needs to domesticate to become a normal member of a symbolic community. This interpretation appears to be sustained by the analogy the narrator draws between women and domestic felines, that is cats, as well as by the implicit

reference to William Blake's well-known poem "The Tyger" (1794) —the sister poem of "The Lamb"— which, Carter argues in her 1978 essay "Little Lamb Get Lost", partakes of patriarchal dichotomy which naturalises women as "lambs" as opposed to potentially beastly men. In other words, the construction of the fantasy of the woman-lamb *qua* innocent, pleasure-free creatures assists the process of creating/taming the fearful "beast in man [...] something blind, furious, instinctual, intuitive, savage" excluded, therefore, from women's "nature" (Carter 1997 [1978]: 306, 308).

On leaving her father's house, little Lizzie is greeted by Ginger, "a dumpy, red-striped, regular cat of the small domestic variety" that prefigures the role of the angel in the house that will be enforced on the Borden girls as they grow up: "Emma, in a small ecstasy of sentimental whimsy presaging that of her later protracted spinsterhood, would sometimes call her Miss Ginger, or even Miss Ginger Cuddles" (323). In line with the feminine ideal that the cat embodies under Emma's gaze, "[it] put out a paw as Lizzie brushed past, as if seeking to detain her, as if to suggest she took second thoughts as to her escapade" (323). But fearless and firm Lizzie ignores Miss Ginger's presence and follows her way to the circus.

Lizzie is guided by a child-gang who, seeing her playing with their pet dog, mistakes her for one of them, children as they are of the Portuguese and French Canadians that moved to Fall River to work in the mills. As she arrives at the circus, Lizzie stands as "a stranger among these strangers" since her appearance differs from the dark foreigners that gather there. The circus's frenetic and fun atmosphere as a whole also bears little resemblance to the dull, pleasure-free environment of Father's home (324). Yet Lizzie is not afraid; she has not yet been fully subjected to the Puritan order that defines these strangers as a menace and

herself as a perfect “angel in the house”. And so Lizzie sets out to investigate the circus’s interior. Despite its apparent carnivalesque quality, with practices and grotesque bodies at odds with the Puritan ethics that rules capitalist Fall River, the circus is not a lawless realm of pure enjoyment but proves to have a rigid hierarchy with well-established limits. Its structure is constituted around the mystification of the tiger as the deadly Thing, an evil object of pure *jouissance* domesticated by the bearer of the whip-phallus, the tiger-tamer, to safeguard the circus’s well-functioning.

Yet, in a postmodernist manner and in line with Žižek’s use of the Lacanian conceptualization of enjoyment as the retroactive product of castration, the narrator will prove that the tiger’s position as an aggressive beast is not inherent to the creature but the effect of the use of the cage and the whip. It is through Lizzie’s overapproach to the animal that the tale desublimates the status of the tiger as the embodiment of deadly enjoyment by staging the unimaginable in the circus’s symbolic frame: the beast turning into a loving cat. As Lizzie sees the tiger:

[s]omething strange happened. The svelte beast fell to his knees. It was as if it had been subdued by the presence of this child, as if this little child of all the children in the world, might lead it towards a peaceable kingdom where it need not eat meat. But only ‘as if’. All we could see was, it knelt. A crackle of shock ran through the tent; the tiger was acting out of character.

Its mind remained, however, a law unto itself. We did not know what it was thinking. How could we?

It stopped roaring. Instead it started to emit a rattling purr. Time somersaulted. Space diminished to the field of attractive force between the child and the tiger. All that existed in the whole world now were Lizzie and the tiger.

Then, oh! then. . . it came towards her, as if she were winding it to her on an invisible string by the exercise of pure will. I cannot tell you how much she loved the tiger, nor how wonderful she thought it was. It was the power of her love that forced it to come to her, on its knees, like a penitent. It dragged its pale belly across the dirty straw towards the bars where the little soft creature hung by its hooked fingers. Behind it followed the serpentine length of its ceaselessly twitching tail.(328-329)

Lizzie’s wonder and overproximity to the tiger-Thing stages the impossible and momentarily suspends the efficacy of the symbolic frame that

encages/organises/keeps at bay and simultaneously creates (impossible) enjoyment. Considering the analogy between domestic cats and the role of the angel in the house established by the narrator, Lizzie's encounter also desublimates the Victorian ideal of woman as an essentially perfect undesiring creature and, in turn, the definition of man as an individual that rationally and efficiently controls his naturally masculine and destructive drive to enjoy. As Carter bluntly put it in the script she wrote for Neil Jordan's 1984 film *The Company of Wolves*, "If there is a beast in men, it meets its match in women too" (Carter quoted in Cheu 2007: 43) or, as Lacan would have it, *jouissance* or the "lamella" is the spectral inassimilable excess constitutive of any subject, be it biologically male or female. If this unsymbolisable excess is foreclosed, as it happens in Lizzie's adulthood, it may threaten to overflow reality and disintegrate its contours, including the subject.

Differently put, little Lizzie's encounter with the animal-Thing at the centre of the circus, traverses the fantasy of domestic cats as opposed to wild beasts, which I argue, the tale parallels to the opposition between "conceptual woman" and "conceptual men" in patriarchy, and, ultimately, to the opposition between wild animals and rational humans. As earlier noted, what this opposition disregards is the constitutive role of enjoyment—in Hegelian, of the inhuman abyss of negativity or "night of the world"—in the formation of psychic life. The inconsistency materialised in the tiger's reaction to Lizzie's presence, which may have opened a path towards the re-framing of *jouissance*, reality and subjectivities is suddenly concealed and cancelled by the performance of the tiger-tamer. His harsh whipping of the tiger together with his spectacular presence restores the fantasmatic coordinates of the circus's symbolic texture by generating the perverse illusion that

the tiger's beastly reaction is inherent to it, rather than a desperate response to senseless pain:

Crack! The spell broke.
The world bounded into the ring.
A lash cracked round the tiger's carnivorous head, and a glorious hero sprang into the cage brandishing in the hand that did not hold the whip a three-legged stool. He wore fawn breeches, black boots, a bright red jacket frogged with gold, a tall hat. A dervish, he; he beckoned, crouched, pointed with the whip, menaced with the stool, leaped and twirled in a brilliant ballet of mimic ferocity, the dance of the Taming of the Tiger, to whom the tamer gave no chance to fight at all (Carter 1995 [1993]: 329)

In a manner reminiscent of the fall of the axe in the dreadful spectacle of decapitation in “The Executioner’s Beautiful Daughter”, the fall of the whip at the centre of the circus’s ring in “Lizzie’s Tiger” creates the transgression —the tiger’s fury— which sustains the circus’s main show, “the (artificial) dance of the Taming of the Tiger” (329). In other words, it is not that the animal’s fury precedes the taming but, in line with Žižek’s postmodern account of the constitution of the Law as well as with his re-reading of the Fall of man, the violent process of taming creates the deadly excess it appears to tame. The tiger-tamer, however, conceals this logic and deceives the audience defining the tiger as:

[t]he veritable incarnation of blood lust and fury; in a single instant, it can turn from furry quiescence into three hundred pounds, yes, three hundred POUNDS of death-dealing fury [...] Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls [...] do not let the brute deceive you. Brute [the tiger] was, and brute it remains. Not for nothing did it receive the soubriquet of Scourge for, in its native habitat, it thought nothing of consuming a dozen brown-skinned heathen for its breakfast and following up with a couple of dozen more for dinner! (331-332)

The audience “bays” at the tamer’s discourse and violent performance, blindly believing his words and failing to perceive that his act is a montage that conceals the fact that it generates the very deadly fury the tamer tames. This is why the Canadian boy who protects Lizzie by separating her from the tiger the moment the tamer appears eventually tells her: “*Eh bien, ma petit! Tu as vu la bête! La bête*

du cauchemar!” (331).¹¹⁴ Ironically, however, this loving boy is eventually mistaken by the Puritan Anglo-Saxon audience for the beast he identifies in the tiger. As he lovingly lifts Lizzie and kisses her goodbye on her forehead while she “struggle[s] furiously and shouted to be put down” (331) the “remaining gawpers” suspiciously wonder: “What are they Canucks doing with little Lizzie Borden?” (331).

Lizzie, however, has seen more than the surface of the circus. Guided by wonder, she has explored the place and, instants before the awe-inspiring taming spectacle, she has found out that the individual who gives body to the sublime figure of the tiger-tamer is, unseen by the audience, an obscene little man who needs to get drunk to control his fear and who starts abusing her. Were it not for Lizzie’s temper, he might have accomplished an act whose effect would have “shaken us to the roots”, just as the tamer’s attack upon the tiger shakes Lizzie:

‘Small child,’ he said, and belched a puff of acidity into her face. Lurching a little, he squatted right down in front of her, so they were on the same level. It was so dark that she could see of his face only the hint of moustache above the pale half-moon of his smile.

‘Small girl,’ he corrected himself, after a closer look. He did not speak like ordinary folks. He was not from around these parts. He belched again, and again tugged at his trousers. He took firm hold of her right hand and brought it tenderly up between his squatting thighs.

‘Small girl, do you know what this is for?’

She felt buttons; serge; something hairy; something moist and moving. She didn’t mind it. He kept his hand on hers and made her rub him for a minute or two. He hissed between his teeth: ‘Kissy, kissy from Missy?’

She *did* mind that and shook an obdurate head; she did not like her father’s hard, dry, imperative kisses, and endured them only for the sake of power. Sometimes Emma touched her cheek lightly with unparted lips. Lizzie would allow no more. The man sighed when she shook her head, took her hand away from the crotch, softly folded it up on its fingers and gave her hand ceremoniously back to her. (325-326, emphasis in original)

¹¹⁴ So well, my little one, you have seen the beast, the nightmare beast!

The obscene underside of the circus's authority is crudely exposed. Even during the fascinating performance at the circus ring, the narrator, through Lizzie's gaze, detects underneath the tiger-tamer's colourful clothes, traces of the very enjoyment that he boasts domesticating. As he "knocked the tiger's nose with his whipstock, so that it howled with pain and affront", Lizzie "saw the secret frog he kept within his trousers shift a little" (330). In line with Žižek's definition of the pervert as the individual who "gains satisfaction from the very obscenity of the gesture of installing the Law", the tiger-tamer enjoys inflicting pain on the animal, which sustains his spectacle's illusory consistency and the position of authority he occupies within such an order (Žižek 1997a: 47).

Janet L. Langlois has read the narrator's reference to Andrew Borden's "imperative kisses" when describing the tiger tamer's obscene request to little Lizzie as holding possible father-daughter incest underlying Lizzie's case story. "Carter seems to be asking readers", Langlois argues, "the implication of such family dysfunction and sexual tensions" (Langlois 1998: 218). While no signs of the consummation of incest can be found in Carter's narrative, the position of the angel in the house Lizzie is shown to incarnate in her middle age does mystify her flesh as a prohibited incestuous object. Such a mystification, in turn, depletes Lizzie's body of *jouissance* and turns her psyche into a precarious container. *Jouissance*, as earlier noted, proves too great to be contained and eventually overflows Lizzie's psyche, who becomes a paranoid, believing she is being watched by the dark intruder who breaks into the household and kills her parents.

Carter's re-imagining of the Bordens' case story in both "The Fall River Axe Murders" and "Lizzie's Tiger" appears to be in accordance with Freud's

aetiology of psychotic paranoia, obsessional neurosis and hysteria as originating in the memory of a traumatic sexual experience in childhood. In his early paper, *Further Remarks on the Neuropsychoses of Defence* (1896), Freud uses the term “neuropsychoses of defence” to refer to psychopathic states whose genesis traces to episodes of sexual abuse similar to that experienced by little Lizzie at the the circus; in Freud’s words: “[T]hese sexual traumas must have occurred in early childhood (before puberty) and their content must consist of an actual irritation of the genitals (of processes resembling copulation)” (Freud quoted in Mollon 1996: 18). Freud argues that sexual molesting of children is not traumatic at the time it occurs; traumatic symptoms like paranoid hallucinations occur when a later trauma (after puberty) —in Lizzie’s case the departure of his father to Swansea with her hatred stepmother and his hacking of Lizzie’s pet doves— threatens to re-evoked the memory of the earlier assault.

In *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) Freud further discusses the pathogenic role of childhood sexual abuse and comments in passing that “a girl who was made the object of a sexual seduction in early childhood may direct her later sexual life so as constantly to provoke similar attacks” (Freud 1939: 75). He makes the same point in his posthumously published *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1940) when he argues that the excessive libido generated in those early sexual encounters may threaten to return as memories in adulthood which, if repressed —as in Lizzie’s case— may give rise to “the neurotic compulsion which will subsequently make it impossible for the ego to control the sexual function”, the result being either sexual inhibition or sexual perversion (Freud quoted in Mollon 1996: 49).

Carter’s Lizzie proves to be unable to control her repressed excessive *jouissance*, which bursts out the moment her pleasurable position as her father’s

devoted object appears to be denied. “The Fall River Axe Murders” and “Lizzie’s Tiger”, in re-imagining the way in which enjoyment is organised in Puritan capitalist Fall River at the end of the nineteenth century, seem to suggest, in line with Žižek’s account of the ethical act, the need to traverse the fantasy of the subject as a divine object, a token of God’s presence and acknowledge the “tiger”, the inassimilable excess of *jouissance* at its core. This impediment or “bone in the throat”, however, is, as advanced in part II, what paradoxically constitutes the subject and its reality; without this internal impediment, which *is* the subject, the subject’s sense of self and reality disintegrates (Žižek 2000a: 28). Such a constitutive impossibility or *sinthome*, furthermore, is in Žižek’s view, the individual’s subversive core, a traumatic excess which opens up the possibility of re-framing the fantasmatic texture of reality and develop new forms of subjectivation and new socio-symbolic relations. Conceiving of ourselves as imperfect or inconsistent beings, wounded by an unsymbolisable *sinthome* or abyss of negativity around which our spectral self and reality assume form proves to be the first step to avoid perversion —whereby a subject condenses imperfection on an object/symbol and enjoys inflicting pain on it as a purging act which feigns (conceals) his own (im)perfection— and psychosis —under which *enjoyment* materialises in the subject’s psyche through visual or auditory hallucinations and distorts his/ her sense of (symbolic, collectively shared view of) reality.

CONCLUSIONS

My Žižekian approach to Angela Carter's short fiction has both theoretical and critical value. The parallelism I established in this dissertation between Slavoj Žižek's unorthodox remarks on the distinction between modernism and postmodernism and the break he establishes between the second and third stages in Lacan's thinking uncovers from a new perspective the emancipatory potential of postmodernism as a cultural dominant and of Carter's work as postmodernist fiction. It has also served to bring to the fore and clarify Žižek's virtually ignored standpoint by opposing his Lacan-based conceptualisations of the subject, fantasy, reality, ideology, sex and *jouissance qua* Real to the arguments of major theorists whose work, as explained in part I, poses a conception of standard postmodernism as a framework of ideas.

The orthodox debate on modernism and postmodernism as cultural paradigms, which Žižek's theory helps redefine, has been pivotal to the configuration of the repertoire of texts that account for postmodernism as an aesthetic practice and that, as proven in chapter 2, have had a major influence on the critical reception of Carter's fiction and non-fiction work. Using Žižek's ideas as a set of analytical tools, I have tackled from a new perspective three areas of contention in Carter studies which stem from the commonplace categorisation of her work as postmodernist fiction and the related assessment of its emancipatory potential.

Thus, I have firstly addressed the critical rift concerning Carter's defence of art as political and her anti-realist poetics. More specifically, I have examined what scholars emphasise as a discrepancy between Carter's endorsement of the speculative or epistemological role of fiction as politically progressive —her self-

professed endeavour to investigate the “fictions that regulate our lives”— and the anti-speculative turn of postmodernist fiction which translates into a series of literary strategies that, as seen in chapter 2, appear to match Carter’s writing practice. The literary features on the basis of which Carter’s work is categorised as postmodernist include her highly stylised prose, her extensive use of allusion, her frequent ironic comments and the centrality of spectacle and the grotesque or the abject in her depiction of settings, characters and plots.

As a matter of fact, many critics have grounded the subversive character of Carter’s fiction in the adoption of these postmodernist features, which, in their view, cancel interpretation in an attempt to affirm the endless proliferation of signifiers and the pervading sense of ontological uncertainty. This assessment, in turn and as extensively noted, has been contested by two major critical positions: on the one hand, critics who, agreeing with such a categorisation of Carter’s fiction as postmodernist, nevertheless dismiss it as potentially retrogressive, since its emphasis on free-floating signifiers and indeterminacy, they argue, precludes any chance of real political action. On the other hand, a minor critical faction renounces such a categorisation on the basis of Carter’s endorsement of enlightened values — rational analysis and critique— to approach and re-imagine the foundations of Western culture.

The second area of contention here addressed pertains to the way Carter’s conflation of spectacular surfaces and sheer, nauseating materiality has been received by commentators. What some critics celebrate as Carter’s approval of the subversive potential of grotesque or abject bodies and the carnivalesque in fiction stands at odds with her insistent claims to demystify human flesh and her remarks on the retrogressive character of carnival. Problematic are also the conclusions

reached by proponents of women's writing and the related valorisation of the feminine maternal body: their celebration of what they interpret as Carter's affirmation of the non-castrated female body as a realm of subversion stands in contradiction with Carter's declared intention to demolish the myth of the womb as the realm of eternity, which, in her view, sustains patriarchal sexual politics. Carter's demystification of the womb entails her objection to the affirmation of motherhood as the experience in which women can be empowered, an objection which has been received with disdain by some feminist scholars.

Equally polemical and directly related to Carter's intention to explore and *know* the way in which ideas have conditioned the history of sexual relationships, is Carter's resort to pornography, the third area of contention here examined. Her study of de Sade's novels and her deployment of Sadeian motifs in her tales and novels have given rise to responses that fiercely condemn Carter's fiction as inimical to feminist politics. Among the Sadeian motifs at work in Carter's narratives, the one considered to be most problematic is the portrayal of female characters that masochistically enjoy their victimisation, a strategy which critics have rejected as a reactionary because it reinforces, in their view, patriarchal fantasies of and about women.

Žižek's non-standard account of the distinction between modernist and postmodernist thinking and aesthetics and what this account entails (as exposed in part II) have proved a valuable tool to address the aforementioned areas of dispute and thus to enrich the categorisation of Carter's fiction as postmodernist. His definition of postmodernist art in terms of an over-identification with imagination—with the fantasy frame that sustains the spectral contours of reality and the self by concealing/creating the impossible Real—and of the subsequent apparition of the

sublime Thing —the limit of reality and the self— as an obscene excess finds theoretical support in the formulation of the Real as impossibility in late Lacanian theory. Whereas modernist art, Žižek contends, leaves the place of the Thing empty on the basis of a conception of the Real as an unreachable or uninhabitable realm preceding the advent of language, postmodernism breaks with this framework of ideas by making the Thing appear as an obscene excess when one approaches the spectacular surface of images and signifiers that constitute reality. Such an apparition dramatises a conception of the Real as the necessary unsymbolisable disturbance that does not precede the symbolic but that is correlative to symbolisation and thus to subjectification. In Žižek's view, as I have emphasised throughout this dissertation, the Real is directly related to the subject precisely because the subject is a void caused by the pressure exerted by the Real upon the Symbolic —the realm of language he/she inhabits as a speaking being— and the Imaginary —the realm of specular identifications. The subject is what remains of the ego once it reaches the limit of self-expression and once he/she experiences the abyss/gap/loop separating him/her from an ideal. By permanently causing this imbalance the Real is what paradoxically constitutes the subject; it is the impediment that prevents the subject's full self-expression but that, as such, constitutes its contours.

The opposition between these two conceptualisations of the subject and the Real bring about two distinct perspectives on ethics and politics. Whereas modernism asserts the subversive potential of marginal spheres of enjoyment — which it conceives as external to symbolic authority and of which, I have thoroughly argued, concepts such as Kristeva's abject, Levinas's Otherness, Bakhtin's grotesque and carnivalesque and Laclau and Mouffe's difference stand as

different modalities— postmodernism places those excesses of enjoyment at the heart of the symbolic, positing them as the unacknowledged pillar that sustains symbolic authority.

Postmodernism, in this light, locates subversion in the acknowledgement of the inconsistent structure of symbolic reality —whose consistency is paradoxically sustained and threatened by enjoyment— or what Žižek terms as the traversing of the fantasy, the process whereby cultural products exhibit how any given configuration of surfaces/images/signifiers paradoxically creates the non-existent prohibited Thing that the latter feign to cover or keep at bay. Such a process, in turn, confronts subjects with their inhuman *sinthome*, a fundamental inassimilable core of negativity that prevents the closure of the symbolic texture and of the self, yet opens up the possibility of changing such a texture and imagining new socio-symbolic configurations. This, in sum, is the paradox expressed in the Lacanian formula of fantasy $\$ \langle \rangle a$, which at once “shields us from the Real and transmits it” (Kay 2003: 106) and whose traversal, Žižek argues, may restructure the contours of reality.

Carter’s conflation of artificial surfaces and nauseating obscene materiality befits Žižek’s account of postmodernist art as subversive because, as I have argued in my analysis of her tales in part III, it proves to go through the fantasmatic frame that constitutes reality and organises impossible *jouissance* in different psycho-social settings. That is to say, drawing on Žižek’s remarks, my examination of Carter’s short fiction has thoroughly proven how Carter’s fiction investigates and shows the way fantasy *qua* imaginary surface functions as a screen that at once conceals and creates the illusion that *some Thing* is lying behind. This screening

configures the psychic contours of reality (the possible) and *jouissance* (the impossible).

By coming too close to the artificial surface of fantasy and the Thing as its inherent limit, characters, narrators and readers of Carter's tales encounter an inassimilable obscene and nauseating excess/leftover, which produces a suffocating experience of vertigo, of losing oneself. Such an experience confronts them/us with the necessary obverse of the self, the unimaginable in oneself, which in my interpretation is equivalent to Žižek's definition of the subject in postmodernism as substanceless void of pure self-relating or "night of the world".

The sublime and obscene Thing that "appears" in Carter's tales is that of the womb as the realm of beginning and end, a prohibited incestuous (m)Other left behind at birth and which takes on different shapes: a feminine picturesque wood in "Reflections", Gretchen's body in "The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter", a lush tropical forest in "Penetrating Into the Heart of the Forest", the Marquis's chamber in "The Bloody Chamber", two feral girls in "Wolf-Alice" and "Peter and the Wolf" and Lizzie Borden's oppressed belly in "The Fall River Axe Murders". This myth sustains the fantasy of man as an imperfect being separated from a primordial state of union with the (m)Other and of woman as a perfect being relieved from responsibility and decision-making, a fantasy which, Carter contends, confines flesh and blood women to a death-in-life state.

The fantasmatic frame constituted around the womb-Thing is operative, I have concluded, in Lacan's early (modernist) conception of the Real as a pre-symbolic state of undifferentiation with the m(Other) as well as with the Levinasian valorisation of radical alterity and with the notions of the body as the realm of subversion held by French feminists, Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler. The

conclusion that derives from my Žižekian approach to these scholars' valuation of the non-castrated female body provides an answer to the controversy over Carter's renunciation to motherhood and the maternal body as a site of empowerment. This renunciation proves to be subversive because the aggrandisement of an unsymbolisable feminine material essence is the necessary excess/Thing which patriarchy creates to sustain the consistency and well-functioning of its symbolic relationships.

The mystification of the womb as Thing also finds metaphoric expression in a narrative that has played a fundamental role in the configuration of Western culture and which is a permanent textual reference in the tales I have examined. I am referring to *Genesis* and its formulation of the Fall of man as the unfortunate separation from a preceding state of Good or paradise lost. Both Žižek's theory and Carter's short fiction subvert this matrix of sublimation by exposing at the heart of sublime Goodness an obscene excess that threatens to—in "The Fall River Axe Murders" manages to—disintegrate the fantasmatic contours of reality that its prohibition creates and safeguards. The lesson behind the inconsistency of the sublime and obscene Thing which postmodernism and Carter's tales bring to the fore is that the Thing does not precede its prohibition/concealment/distancing or inaccessibility but it rather is the retroactive product of this operation. Simply put, surfaces/images/screens/appearances create the object they simulate to cover. In theological terms and as Žižek has it in his postmodernist reformulation of the Fall, Good does not precede evil, it is the retroactive product of a primordial choice of evil yet, once the choice/Fall happens, it appears as if Good always-already was. Žižek's redefinition of symbolic authority is in keeping with his re-reading of the

Fall: the pre-existence of the Law does not create a transgression, it is rather the spectacular simulation of a transgression that installs and sustains the Law.

I have shown in part III how Žižek's postmodernist premises constitute an adequate tool of analysis to reassess the representation of social relationships and sexual difference in Carter's tales. My examination has underscored the way in which Carter's narratives stage the evil core of authority or transgression that founds and sustains the Law: at the very heart of the place of the Law, the bearers of authority prove to be obscene figures that enjoy what the Law effectively prohibits. The executioner in "The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter", the Marquis in "The Bloody Chamber", and the tiger-tamer in "Lizzie's Tiger" have been read as anal fathers or perverts who definitely enjoy the horrifying performance of the Law's very installation. The fantasmatic frame that sustains the contours of reality in "Reflections", "Penetrating Into the Heart of the Forest" and "Wolf-Alice" is shown to be dependent on the virtual inaccessibility to an object elevated to the dignity of the Thing: a shell, a fruit tree and a pubescent girl's vagina, respectively. "The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter", "The Bloody Chamber" and "The Fall River Axe Murders" crudely expose that when an individual occupies the place of the Thing or sublime object, he or she may endure unimaginable pain and suffering, leading to pathological states which may range from excessive *jouissance* or masochistic pleasure in pain to paranoia. The Sadeian victim stands in both Carter's and Žižek's work as exemplary of an individual "elevated to the dignity of the Thing", an immaterial body "which endures all torments and survives with its beauty immaculate" and which, as such, befits Žižek's definition of the sublime object of ideology (Žižek 1989: 12).

The desublimation of the narrative of *Genesis* and its underlying mystification of the (m)Other or womb as Thing in Carter's tales further entails a subversive approach to the human condition, to sexual relationships and to love, which I have read in accordance with Žižek's own approach. Conceiving of ourselves as inconsistent beings, constitutively "castrated" or wounded by a spectral Real *sinthome* or excess of negativity is an emancipatory perspective. This, I have noted, is the lesson of postmodernism in Žižek's non-standard approach and constitutes the first step to dismantle the matrix of Platonic love and its derivative conceptions of woman: the maternal woman *qua* Thing, and woman *qua* obscene deadly excess, the *femme fatale*. Žižek's approach also runs counter to a view of sexual difference dependent on a set of anatomical features. It rather entails a conception of sex *qua* Real, that is to say, sex as the necessary impossible impediment that separates (generates) the subject from itself and constitutes the virtual contours of the self and "what is in the self more than the self", namely *jouissance*. Feminine and masculine positions do not necessarily match biological sex but refer to distinct psychic modes in which individuals organise impossible *jouissance*. This postmodernist approach to the subject and to sex further opens the path towards a new conception of love, namely *agape*, at odds with Platonic love. *Agape*, Žižek argues, entails the assumption of the lovers as imperfect beings, constituted by an inhuman, terrifying core at their hearts or what is in themselves more than themselves.

The tales here examined foreground the inconsistency of the human condition by staging an obscene excess or leftover at the heart of reality as well as by stressing an ineradicable disturbance within ostensibly peaceful environments and quiet characters. The presence of the crone at the heart of the woods in

“Reflections”, Gretchen’s and Lizzie’s troubled dreams in, respectively, “The Executioner’s Beautiful Daughter” and “The Fall River Axe Murders”, the narrator’s “mark of Cain”, which disturbs the happy ending in “The Bloody Chamber”, Emile and Madeline’s urge to explore the forest and the subsequent shame they feel at each other’s nakedness in “Penetrating Into the Heart of the Forest” and Wolf-Alice’s and the Duke’s presence in “Wolf-Alice” have been interpreted here as examples of such a subversive disturbance.

While the fantasy of the (m)Other as perfect, *jouissance*-free Thing underlies modes of psychopathology in Carter’s tales like neurosis, perversion and paranoia, the hysterical questioning of such a fantasy and concomitant exploration of/overproximity to the Thing, on the contrary, proves to be the painful yet subversive means to reframe the fantasmatic contours of reality and the impossible. I have further equated hysteria to uneasiness and curiosity, whose enhancement, in Carter’s view, constitutes the moral function of fiction. Drawing on Žižek’s view of ethics, I have read curiosity as the effect of the imperfection or *sinthome* that, although constituting humans as fundamentally alienated, dissatisfied or castrated beings stands as the precondition for progress and change, the Real impossible driving force of history.

This perspective, in turn, provides an answer to the controversy over Carter’s staging of female masochistic enjoyment and the polemical figure of the moral pornographer. Refusing to investigate the pleasure in pain women, and individuals in general, may feel at being victimised proves to be retrogressive because such a refusal, I conclude, reinforces a conception of women as inherently good individuals or *jouissance*-free beings. Conceiving of women as the morally superior sex precludes an investigation of the pleasure biological women —and

biological men— may feel at embodying this myth and of how this pleasurable mystification of the female body sustains patriarchal relationships.

The process of following curiosity, going through the fantasy frame of which reality and dreams are made of and confronting the impossible, what is in (the fantasy of) me and reality more than *myself* and reality, is what the tales here examined enact. This gesture is what ultimately justifies my Žižekian approach to Carter and to postmodernism and what leads me to assess the political potential of Carter's short fiction as progressive.

My approach, in turn, constitutes a valid point of departure for future studies that could aim to revisit the categorisation of Carter's fiction as postmodernist and to reassess its emancipatory potential. Žižek's non-standard account of postmodernism may shed new light, for instance, on the academic disagreement concerning the categorisation of Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* as postmodernist fiction, a novel that, critics agree, epitomises the standard debate on the distinction between modernism and postmodernism. Another interesting line of research could pertain to the analysis of *Love, The Passion of New Eve, Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children* as postmodernist novels on the basis of their use of spectacle and the related categories of the grotesque or the abject and the carnivalesque. Žižek's postmodernist conception of these categories as the unacknowledged support of a given ideological edifice may prove to be illuminating. Such a co-dependence between spectacular surfaces and grotesque or abject objects for the constitution of reality may further inform new readings of "The Loves of Lady Purple" and "The Lady of the House of Love", two tales that fall beyond the scope of this dissertation but that have been considered as

exemplary of postmodernist literature in their representation of sexual relationships, reality and the subject.

In sum, the present Žižekian approach to Carter's short fiction may constitute a new theoretical and critical line from which to reassess the categorisation of Carter's fiction as postmodernist and, by extension, to redefine the contours of the so-called debate on the distinction between modernism and postmodernism. By having done so, I believe that this particular approach further expands the significance of Carter's extreme prose and reasserts the emancipatory potential of her unique and powerful imagination.



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