Shadow Unbound

Disrupting taboos and acknowledging the shadow through the

cathartic experience of negative empathy

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To Marco,

who loved art's beauty as much as its shadow.

Whose shadow was more than his sensitive soul could bear.

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ABSTRACT

Negative empathy is an aesthetic experience that combines a drive towards emotional proximity with such unsettling feelings as revulsion and distress. The conflict resulting from the clash between pleasure and inner resistance the subject experiences with negative empathy, naturally induces ethical concerns and moral conundrums.

Starting from Theodor Lipps' primeval outline of the negative empathic experience, this thesis pinpoints and illustrates the formal and conceptual features of negative empathy, tracing its origin back to affect theory and corroborating Suzanne Keen's claim that negative emotions, more than positive ones, considerably affect readers' involvement and empathic participation in fictional situations.

In line with Georges Bataille's assertion that, "if literature stays away from evil, it rapidly becomes boring," this inquiry focuses on cathartic identification to outline how negative feelings and the fascination for evil within the aesthetic literary experience allow for the disruption of Freudian taboos and the acknowledgement of Jungian shadow.

Through the analysis and comparison of literary passages that span from drama to fiction, and from poetry to screenplay, this dissertation shows how negative empathy's intrinsic cathartic potential is able to stir a subject's strong emotional response and empathic involvement, thus enhancing non-mainstream art reception.

Keywords: negative empathy, catharsis, affect theory, freudian taboos, jungian shadow

[LD] – Introduction

If you have ever rooted for the villain, or been fascinated by an immoral, despicable fictional character, or, even, an unsettling, oppressive atmosphere, then you might have ended up questioning your own tastes and aesthetic reactions, perhaps even feeling a little guilty for wanting so bad that said negative character succeeded or got away with their cruel actions. If this is the case, you have experienced *negative empathy*. A still emerging field of research, negative empathy is an aesthetic experience that can be provoked by the most varied forms of art (literature, drama, film, painting, performance art, TV series, etc), and that, by its own nature, sets off questions of morality and triggers philosophical ethical reflections.[1]

Although research and academic debate on negative empathy have covered little ground so far, the discourse on empathy has long been at the centre of critical theory and literary studies. In particular, the investigation has focused, over the years, on how empathy affects human social behaviour, given also its correlation with neuroscience and the relevance of mirror neurons in cognitive processes. Whether empathy could foster prosocial behaviour is an argument that has been thoroughly researched and widely debated,[2] with positive conclusions supported by a multitude of scholars in psychology,

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[1] According to Ercolino and Fusillo, "The history of the arts is full of characters, figures, performances, objects, compositions, and spaces that have a negative connotation or that evoke a primary violence, elements with which readers and spectators establish a specific type of empathetic relationship that is both ambivalent and destabilising, inspiring attraction and repulsion all at once. (…) We will call this relationship *negative empathy* and will consider it as a specific aesthetic experience that tests the limits of art consumers' capacity to take an ethical stance and art's potential to provoke moral reflection on the fate of collective life." Ercolino, Stefano and Massimo Fusillo, *Negative Empathy - The Point of View of Evil* (Milan: Bompiani, 2022), 9-10.

[2] Especially by literary scholar Suzanne Keen in *Empathy and the Novel* (London: OUP, 2007).

sociology and literary studies,[3] notwithstanding the insufficient scientific evidence to definitively corroborate the claim. As reported by Stefano Ercolino in the introduction of *Negative Empathy - The Point of View of Evil*, however, "after decades of consensus (within academia as well as in public discussion) on the cognitive and prosocial value of empathy, its epistemological and ethical valence has recently been subject to debate."[4] The counterargument against the tenets of empathy's beneficial social repercussions sees in Canadian American psychologist Paul Bloom one of its major opponents. According to Bloom's *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion,*[5] thinking that empathy makes us better people is a misconception. On the contrary: empathy can be deleterious. Due to its irrational, capricious nature and the fact that it appeals to our prejudices, empathy would represent one of the leading motivators of inequality and immorality in society. If we want to make the world a better place, Bloom asserts, then we are better off without empathy:

> Empathy has its merits. It can be a great source of pleasure, involved in art and fiction and sports, and it can be a valuable aspect of intimate

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3 For further information, see: Spinrad, Tracy L. & Nancy Eisenberg, "Empathy, Prosocial Behavior, and Positive Development in Schools" in *Handbook of Positive Psychology in Schools,* ed. Michael J. Furlong, Richard Gilman, & E. Scott Huebner (London: Routledge, 2014) 90-106; Johnson, Dan R., "Transportation into a story increases empathy, prosocial behavior, and perceptual bias toward fearful expressions," *Personality and Individual Differences*, 52 no. 2 (January 2012): 150-155. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S019188691100451X; Knafo, Ariel, & Salomon Israel, "Empathy, prosocial behavior, and other aspects of kindness" in *Handbook of temperament,* eds. Marcel Zentner, & Rebecca L. Shiner (New York: The Guilford Press, 2002) 168–179; Decety, Jean et al., "Empathy as a driver of prosocial behaviour: highly conserved neurobehavioural mechanisms across species," *Philosophical transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological sciences* vol. 371,1686 (January 2016): 20150077. https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2015.0077; Armstrong, Kim "'I Feel Your Pain': The Neuroscience of Empathy," Association for Psychological Science, December 29, 2017, https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/neuroscience-empathy; Eisenberg, Nancy & Richard A. Fabes, "Empathy: Conceptualization, measurement, and relation to prosocial behavior," *Motiv Emot* 14, (June 1990): 131–149. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00991640.

4 Ercolino, and Fusillo, *Negative Empathy - The Point of View of Evil*, 10.

5 Bloom, Paul, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016).

relationships. And it can sometimes spark us to do good. But on the whole, it's a poor moral guide. It grounds foolish judgments and often motivates indifference and cruelty.[6]

Basing his argument on surprising scientific findings, Bloom shows how empathy distorts our judgement, leading to irrational and unfair political choices — causing, in brief, the worst decisions made by individuals and nations alike.[7]

Whilst to this day the role of empathy in human behaviour and social life is still controversial and, as we have seen, at the centre of a rather turbid quagmire, there is little doubt about the harmful effects brought about by lack of empathy. In his thought-provoking account of the extent to which genes can affect human personalities and behaviours within the nature vs nurture debate, British epidemiologist and science writer Tim Spector apprises us of a shocking revelation: "there is a close overlap between lack of empathy and being both a victim and perpetrator of abuse."[8] It may be no surprise that scientific evidence gathered through surveys and twin studies shows that having zero empathy prevents male offenders, child abusers and adult rapists from relating to their victims or feeling remorse. What strikes us is, rather, that "up to 70 per cent of borderline personality disorder cases, who are often very low in empathy scores

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[6] Ibid., prologue.

[7] For more information on the argument against empathy, see: Prinz, Jesse, "Against Empathy," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* vol 49 no. 1 (September 2011): 214-233. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2011.00069.x; Batson, C. Daniel, et al., "Immorality from Empathy-Induced Altruism: When Compassion and Justice Conflict," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* vol 68 no. 6 (1995): 1042–1054. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.68.6.1042; Batson, C. Daniel & Laura L. Shaw, "Evidence for Altruism: Toward a Pluralism of Prosocial Motives," *Psychological Inquiry*, vol 2 no. 2 (1991): 107–122. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli0202_1; Cialdini, Robert B. et al., "Reinterpreting the Empathy–Altruism Relationship: When One Into One Equals Oneness," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol 73 no. 3 (1997): 481–494. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.73.3.481; Hoffman, Martin L., "Empathy and moral development," *The annual report of educational psychology in Japan* 35 (1996): 157-162. https://doi.org/10.5926/arepj1962.35.0_157.

[8] Spector, Tim, *Identically Different: Why You Can Change Your Genes* (London: W&N, 2013), 145.

themselves, report having been sexually abused."[9] What emerges from Spector's extensive study on the subject, in fact, is that "some of the susceptibility genes for being a bully, oddly, are also those that predispose to being a victim, not only of physical bullying but also of sexual abuse."[10] Useless to say that in the light of such astonishing — and quite thorny — news, societies shut the doors to open dispute. "The idea that victims are in some way genetically pre-programmed is not something we as individuals or as societies like to admit or discuss,"[11] Spector says, and with good reason. In line with such contention and Freud's perspective on civilisation,[12] modern societies are saturated with taboos and allow little room for unhindered reflection upon human inherent evil.

Now that the heft of both empathy and lack of empathy, along with their behavioural, moral and social implications have been presented, it is time to introduce the concept of negative empathy. In Ercolino's words, negative empathy is to be understood as

> a high-level form of empathy (…)[,] a potentially regressive aesthetic experience, consisting in a cathartic identification with negative characters, which can be either open to agency (indifferently leading either to pro or antisocial behaviour), or limited to the inner life of the empathising subject.[13]

If empathy refers to our capacity to step into another's shoes and feel what they feel, negative empathy combines such drive towards emotional proximity with a simultaneous, recoiling process of revulsion. The uncomfortable feelings aroused by the clash between pleasure and inner resistance the subject

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.,134.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Freud, Sigmund, *Totem and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2012).

[13] Ercolino, Stefano, "Negative Empathy. History, theory, criticism," *Wiley Orbis Litterarum*, 73 no. 3 (2018): 243, https://doi.org/10.1111/oli.12175.

experiences with negative empathy, naturally induce ethical concerns and moral conundrums.

The first chapter of this dissertation will retrace and examine negative empathy's features and conditions, as well as its foundation, grounded in affect theory. To do so, I will start my inquiry from Theodor Lipps'[14] formulation of empathy and primal outline of negative empathy and analyse Hans Robert Jauss'[15] theories of cathartic identification and aesthetic enjoyment, which set the parameters within which aesthetic pleasure can occur. The much debated concept of catharsis will therefore be explored, in particular through Girard, Bernays and Halliwell's ritual, therapeutic and aesthetical interpretations, respectively. I will then consider the narrative techniques instrumental in eliciting empathy in readers of fiction according to Suzanne Keen; Stephen Greenblatt's concept of strategic opacity as premise for readers/viewers' active participation in developing negative empathy; Katherine Tullmann's take on the sympathy for the devil phenomenon, which explains the audience's appreciation for villains; and the ultimate definition of negative empathy Ercolino and Fusillo give in their monograph on the subject.[16] In order to reach a better understanding of the mechanism underlying negative empathy, the inquiry will focus on Canadian philosopher Brian Massumi's affect theory explained in *Parables for the Virtual*,[17] linking the specific concept of affective escape to Greenblatt's aforementioned notion of strategic opacity. Finally, I will analyse David Miall's argument on affect as a model of response to stories through the properties of self-reference, anticipation and domain-crossing, and

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[14] Lipps, Theodor, *Scritti sull'Empatia* (Nocera: Orthotes, 2020); Lipps, Theodor, "Empatia e Godimento Estetico," *Discipline Filosofiche*, XII no. 2, (2002) 31-45, 10.1400/190151.

[15] Jauss, Hans Robert, "Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics," *The Kenyon Review,* 5 no. 3 (1983): 117–20, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4335391.

[16] Ercolino and Fusillo, *Negative Empathy - The Point of View of Evil*.

[17] Massumi, Brian, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smvr0.

Menninghaus' (et al.) extended study of the Distancing-Embracing model of enjoyment to illustrate how negative emotions in art reception translate into pleasure, thereby solving the apparent paradox at the centre of negative empathy.

In the second chapter of this thesis, the cathartic power of negative empathy will be analysed in connection to Freud's theory of taboos as prerequisites for civilisation, and Jung's concept of shadow as stepping stone for individuation. While for the former sublimation is a mature defence mechanism that deflects socially unacceptable drives into acceptable acts of higher social value, and is therefore to be understood as a sign of civilisation, for the latter sublimation cannot stem from repression of drives through will. Rather, it involves the acknowledgement of unconscious processes whose creative power fuels personal growth. We will see how the horrifying force of Freudian primal taboos — parricide and incest — can be disrupted and sublimated to aesthetic pleasure by the cathartic experience of negative empathy through the analysis of specific passages from Ágota Kristóf and Ian McEwan's novels *The Notebook, The Proof, The Third Lie*, and *The Cement Garden* respectively, as well as Angela Carter's short fairy tale *The Snow Child*.

After comparing and contrasting the Freudian and Jungian conceptions of the unconscious and sublimation, we will delve deeper into Jung's analytical psychology, and linger, in particular, on the two possible outcomes the acknowledgement of the shadow entails within the individuation process: falling victim to it — that is, identifying with it — or raising it to consciousness and integrating it with the ego. Jung holds that for the shadow to become conscious, a person needs to recognise the dark aspects of their personality as present and real. Ideally, the conscious personality and shadow should find a way to live together, but because the shadow as archetype represents a moral problem, it challenges the whole ego-personality. Most people are afraid of their shadow, and certain features of the shadow offer indeed obstinate resistance to moral

control;[18] this can lead to repression, which does not, however, represent a valuable option. The less embodied the shadow is, the darker and denser it gets, and when the unconscious gains the upper hand, its valence increases proportionally. According to Jung, a person who is controlled by his shadow always falls into their own traps and lives below their own level.[19]

Wilde's decadent hero Dorian Gray will be presented as perfect exemplification of failure in integrating the shadow. As soon as he becomes aware of it, Dorian identifies with his shadow, thus falling prey to its relentlessly corrupting power. Conversely, William Blake's poem "The Human Abstract" makes room for a positive acceptation of the shadow, which, Jung insists, is not to be conceived merely as a heavy burden. Confronting and ultimately integrating it does bring some benefits. As the founder of analytical psychology puts it, willingness to descend into one's own darkness sets in motion a process of renewal and rebirth.[20] It is the only way through which the individual discovers the relativity of good and evil, and comes to accept themselves as whole. Blake's complex cosmogony and mystical writings, seemingly grounded in this very idea, allow the reader to envision evil not only as a human, rather than natural, trait, but also as a component of the divine dimension. "Without contraries is no progression," Blake famously writes, suggesting that evil is as necessary as good so much so that even divinities are endowed with it.

In this view, not only does the shadow have the power to revitalise and embellish human existence, in spite of its being regarded as inferior, primitive, maladapted and childish, but integrating the unconscious by reincorporating

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[18] Jung, Carl G., *Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 9 (Part 2): Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*, eds. Gerhard Adler & R. F. C. Hull. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 9, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hhqh6.

[19] Jung, Carl G., *Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 9 (Part 1): Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, eds. Gerhard Adler & R. F. C. Hull. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 123.

[20] Jung, Carl G., *Mysterium Coniunctionis: An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy*, ed. Hull, R. F. C. (London: Routledge, 1963), 334, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315725338.

the shadow into one's personality produces a stronger, wider consciousness than before.[21] "Only in this way can one be freed from the collective norms and expectations of one's psyche to become the person one really is",[22] Jung concludes, placing the power to transcend evil entirely within human reach and responsibility. If Freud viewed sublimation as a solution to acquiesce civilisation, Jung envisages it as the alchemic operation at the base of the path into self-knowledge — the *Nigredo* step through which the Magnum Opus is initiated and spiritual transmutation can advance toward completion.

Liberation from collective reins, acknowledgement of the coexistence of good and evil within the self, achieving an ever higher level of consciousness — much seems to be at stake when the shadow is unleashed from social constraints and is free to come to light. Here lies the importance of the aesthetic dimension. The convoluted nature of the negative empathic experience constitutes, in today's victim-mystifying, sensationalism-seeking and overly politically correct Western societies, a burning issue. In an age when, in Giglioli's words, 'the victim has become the hero of our time,'[23] human eternal fascination with evil, blurred lines and the forbidden encapsulated by taboos has become a thorny question. According to Giglioli,

> being a victim gives us a status. It forces other people to listen to us. It encourages and supports recognition while powerfully generating a sense of identity, justice and self-esteem. It immunises from criticism, guarantees innocence beyond any reasonable doubt. How could the victim be guilty, and indeed responsible for something? They do not play, they are played. They do not act, they suffer. The victim lives with a sense of absence and request, weakness and claim, and with the desire to have and to be. We are

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[21] Jung, *Psychology of the Transference*, 238.

[22] Kotzé, Zacharias, "Jung, Individuation, and Moral Relativity in Qohelet 7:16-17," *Journal of Religion and Health*, 53, no. 2 (April 2014): 511- 519, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24485101.

[23] Giglioli, Daniele, *Critica della Vittima. Un Esperimento con l'Etica* (Milano: Nottetempo, 2014), 9.

not defined by our actions, but by what we have suffered, by what we could lose, and by that which others have taken from us.[24]

The issue, here, is self-evident: accountability. If one feels entitled to be a victim, then they can no longer be held responsible not only for their actions (or inaction), but also for their reactions. All is warranted — yet, this leaves little power to the self.

The problem with victim-worshipping societies is not just conceptual. It is also factual, and considerably affects the dissemination of information and knowledge. In spite of technology's almightiness, accuracy is harder and harder to reach. Even scientific data hardly make it past deeply rooted cultural and social bias. When updated surveys with stricter criteria reported lower rates of PTSD in veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan than previously observed, suggesting a large overestimate of diagnosed victims, researchers leading the surveys and authors trying to post the new results received hate mail and death threats — Spector reports in his scientific inquiry on 'bad genes.'[25] "In our modern Western culture sadly it has become very difficult to report openly that estimates of any statistics of disability, obesity, cancer, sexual group or harm of any kind are lower than previously believed.[26]

In the light of these premises — in a society where information is largely biased and misleading, common morality is pervasive and conformist righteousness rules, where can human abiding fascination for evil be channelled? How can one's repressed surface? A possible answer, this dissertation claims, is in the protected, judgment-free aesthetic realm, through the cathartic experience of negative empathy.

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[24] Ibid.

[25] Spector, Tim, "Bad genes," in *Identically Different: Why You Can Change Your Genes*.

[26] Ibid., 139.

« It is amazing how complete is the delusion that beauty is goodness. »

Lev Tolstoj

1. SOLVE

1.1 Convulsive beauty

French philosopher Georges Bataille believed that, "if literature stays away from evil, it rapidly becomes boring."[27] Bataille expands that, surprisingly as it may seem:

> Literature has to deal with anguish, and that anguish is based on something that is going the wrong way, something that no doubt will turn into something very evil, and when you make the reader in front of the possibility of a story with an evil ending for the characters he is concerned about (…) – when the reader is in that unpleasant situation, the result is a tension which makes literature non boring.[28]

In other words, if the reader does not fear for their hero, they are not compelled to keep reading. The element of anguish Bataille highlights in this passage is, as we will see, a key feature of negative empathy. It is also the leitmotif of the philosopher's daring radical opinion on literature and its indisputable entanglement with evil. In *Literature and Evil*,[29] Bataille writes that:

> Literature is either essential or nothing. I believe that the Evil – an acute form of Evil – which it expresses, has a sovereign value for us. But this concept does not exclude morality: on the contrary, it demands a 'hypermorality'.

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[27] Bataille, Georges, "La Littérature et le Mal" par Georges Bataille, interview by Pierre Dumayet, INA.fr, May 21, 1958, video, 1:13, https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclaire-actu/video/i00016133/georges-bataille-a-propos-de-son-livre-la-litterature-et-le-mal.

[28] Ibid., 1:30.

[29] Bataille, Georges, *Literature and Evil* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2012), preface, Kindle.

> Literature is communication. Communication requires loyalty. A rigorous morality results from complicity in the knowledge of Evil, which is the basis of intense communication.
>
> Literature is not innocent. It is guilty and should admit itself so.

What Bataille seems to pinpoint in this passage is not that the writer should become a perpetrator of evil in the world, but rather that they should *represent* evil in order to produce a certain radical response in the reader. This means, according to Melanie Nicholson, "pushing written language beyond all limits of bourgeois acceptability, as well as creating images that produce shock and disgust, all of which should lead to a reevaluation of the very notion of 'good' and 'evil'."[30] Evil should therefore be taken as a valuable element of human experience and expression insofar as it serves to excavate "the fetid ditch of bourgeois culture".[31] In reference to the impactful image of an eye slit open in Luis Bruñuel's film *Le Chien Andalou*, Bataille comments that such images of evil[32] compel us to understand "to what extent horror becomes fascinating, and how it alone is brutal enough to break everything else that stifles."[33]

Could Bataille be hinting at a cathartic role of literature, then? As reported by Greenwood, according to Bataille, literature is to be understood as "the modern inheritor of sacrificial religion. As such, he insists, it brings us into contact with that sovereign part of man which social interdicts and taboos hold in check but which we experience in an act of violent transgression."[34]

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[30] Nicholson, Melanie, "Alejandra Pizarnik, Georges Bataille, and the Literature of Evil," *Latin American Literary Review* 27, no. 54 (1999): 9. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20119809.

[31] Stoekl, Allan, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939. Volume 14 of Theory and History of Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 43.

[32] What Bataille means by 'evil' encompasses obscenity of language and image, perverse sexuality, violence perpetrated against others, self-mutilation, suicide, blasphemy, fascination with death and material decomposition in its morbid and putrefying aspects. (Ibid.)

[33] Ibid., 19.

[34] Greenwood, Edward, "Literature: Freedom or Evil? The Debate between Sartre and Bataille," *Sartre Studies International* 4, no. 1 (1998): 17. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23512891.

Fascination, Greenwood continues, is therefore "reserved for all that tramples taboos in an act of violent rupture which Bataille consistently affirmed as the prime mode both of knowledge and of experience."[35] In brief: that which produces aversion — or even horror — in the reader is 'of sovereign value' in art and literature, for it contributes to expanding human knowledge of evil, which, in turn, fosters the 'hypermorality' the French philosopher emphatically refers to.

In the long history of Western literature, knowledge has always been inextricably bound to evil – Doctor Faustus and Dante's Ulysses teach us, among countless other literary instances. But here the focus is not on the Manichean struggle or on a patronising claim of art's righteousness and didactic role. Bataille's argument brings evil and the knowledge of evil at the very heart of the aesthetic experience. If we were to condense the gist of *Literature and Evil* into one single sentence, we could say that the task of literature, imagination and dream is to fathom the depths of the abyss of Evil.[36] Hyperbolic as it may sound, this conception reshaped the post-war aesthetics under the spur of Surrealism.

Naturally, one could argue that the world is marred by so much evil already, that art should offer refuge, reassurance and comfort, rather than extra evil to deal with. As Banti points out in *Wonderland*[37] — a work based on the culture industry theory envisioned by the Frankfurt School — that is precisely the purpose of mainstream art: a dualistic system in which positive cultural values confront negative ones through the traditional opposition hero-villain and a repetitive narrative structure with preordained developments whose invariable redundancy makes fruition a plain, though complacent experience. The pleasure offered by mainstream products therefore derives from confirmation, rather than

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[35] Ibid., 19.

[36] Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, chapter 1.

[37] Banti, Alberto Mario, *Wonderland. La Cultura di Massa da Walt Disney ai Pink Floyd* (Bari: Laterza, 2017), 12-13.

novelty.[38] Familiarity wins over excitement charged with preoccupation; anticipation, utmost control over the situation and illusory, false suspense gain the upper hand over real tension and genuine concern about the success — or failure — of the character endangered by evil at the centre of Bataille's conception.

Far from being perceived as lacking, mainstream narratives' predictability meets the favour of readers and spectators alike, who can thus indulge in the hectic pace and captivating lure of the story without the slightest worry.[39] Knowing beforehand where the plot is headed invites them to relax and ushers them in a comfortable, passive reception. As Adorno and Horkheimer harshly put it, no independent thinking must be expected from the audience: "the product prescribes every reaction (...). Any logical connection presupposing mental capacity is scrupulously avoided."[40] The critical theorists of the Frankfurt School believed, in fact, that the phenomenon of mass culture implies that all forms of popular culture belong to a single culture industry whose capitalist purpose is to ensure the unceasing obedience of the masses to the interests of the market.

The culture industry theory delineated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*[41] identifies in the masses a tendency in manufacturing consensus as opposed to the traditional critical function of culture — thus smothering art's intrinsic power to question and defy the existing order. Adorno and Horkheimer criticise the extortionate nature of cultural economies as well as the apparently inferior products of the system, arguing that mass-produced entertainment aims, by its

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[38] Ibid., 12.

[39] Ibid., 13.

[40] Adorno, Theodor W. & Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 109.

[41] Ibid.

very nature, to appeal to vast audiences spanning from high to low brow.[42] The essay does not suggest that all products of this system are inherently inferior, only that they have replaced other forms of entertainment without properly fulfilling the important roles played by the now-defunct sources of culture.[43] In capitalist society, mass cultural production encourages the audience to settle for impoverished, rigid, conformist cognitive structures. Precisely because it is programmatically built on a sterile model, such system is exhausted from the very beginning, devoid of potential for innovation nor subversion whatsoever — a dead end only intended for palliative consolation against the hardships underlying life's complexity. Since dwelling in the mainstream conception of art would kill curiosity and the strive for fulfilment at the root of Jungian psychoanalytic theory, this thesis will steer away from the closed system of the easily available but shallow mainstream culture. It will rather take on Bataille's stance and unfold from the belief that "literature and art, for all their co-option by the machinery of global capitalism, still trumpet proudly the autonomy of their power to transgress."[44]

In line with Bataille's ground-breaking focus on the visceral, the erotic and primeval enmeshment of good with evil, André Breton, forerunner of the Surrealist movement, avows: "la beauté sera convulsive ou ne sera pas"[45] [Beauty will be convulsive or not at all], thus summarising the combination of attraction and repulsion at the core of Surrealism. This quote will guide us through negative empathy and the controversial fascination it exerts. We will now delve into how art's convulsiveness impacts the human emotional sphere.

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[42] Durham Peters, John, *The Subtlety of Horkheimer and Adorno* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 68.

[43] Ibid., 70.

[44] Greenwood, "Literature: Freedom or Evil? The Debate between Sartre and Bataille," 19.

[45] Breton, André, *Nadja* (Paris: Gallimard French, 1972), 161.

1.2 Aesthetic empathy: feeling into inanimate objects

In this section, we will trace the history and developments of aesthetic empathy, viz. empathy for inanimate objects that belong in the artistic sphere. Notwithstanding the fact that sympathy as earlier and more sentimentally connoted version of empathy germinated around the mid-18th century, owing to the theories purported in David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful,* and Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* — based on the former moral postulates by the Earl of Shaftesbury and Francis Hutcheson — the word 'Einfühlung' ('feeling into', later translated in English as 'empathy') was coined by German philosopher Robert Vischer in 1873. The diffusion of the term gained momentum thanks to German philosopher and psychologist Theodor Lipps, who, unlike his predecessors, used the notion of *Einfühlung* to explain not only how people understand the mental states of other people, but also how they experience inanimate objects.[46] From translating Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* into German, Lipps had learned the concept of 'sympathy' as a process that allows the contents of "the minds of men" to become "mirrors to one another."[47] But Lipps' conceptualisation of empathy goes beyond intersubjective relationships. Considered one of the most important representatives of the psychology of aesthetics, Lipps conceived three fundamental sources of knowledge: perception, introspection and empathy. Empathy is understood as a phenomenon involving both cognition and affect, and is primarily defined as the "objectification of myself in an object that is different from me."[48]

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[46] Gallinat, Jürgen, Andreas Heinz, & Christiane Montag, "Theodor Lipps and the Concept of Empathy: 1851–1914," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 165 no. 10 (November 2008): 1261, https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.2008.07081283.

[47] Hume, David, *A Treatise of Human Nature,* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 365.

[48] Lipps quoted by Ercolino in *Negative Empathy*, 24.

Lipps particularly focused on aesthetic objects, considering them as 'quasi-subjects' that are able to start a cognitive and emotional loop in which the observer and the external world come to form a *fusional unity* characterised by a twofold movement: on the one hand, the objectification of the self, and on the other hand the subjectification of the world.[49] For Lipps, the unconscious process of *Einfühlung* is based on a 'natural instinct' or on 'inner imitation,'[50] which could also be regarded as a resonance or an 'auto-activation' [*Selbstbethätigung*]. Such resonance takes place when a subject establishes a relationship with an object and experiences, in that specific object, "a particular activity or modality of self-activation as something that *belongs* to that object."[51] According to Lipps, empathy therefore incorporates movement or activity, which is tied to the observed object because it is derived and inseparable from it.[52]

Such experience of fusional unity and self-activation (namely, empathy) is subject to a bifurcation. It can take on a positive connotation, when the aforementioned activity underlying the subject-object fusional unity is welcomed without friction, thus entailing a feeling of accord. Conversely, the empathic experience can take on a negative significance when the activity triggered by self-activation is met with conflict by the subject. For Lipps, the feeling of accord is a feeling of pleasure (*Lust*) toward the object, since the subject freely and willingly consents to the fusional unity ignited by the empathic experience.[53] This is called 'positive empathy' or 'sympathetic empathy'.[54] The feeling of conflict, on the contrary, is the result of a sort of

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[49] Ibid.

[50] Gallinat, Heinz, & Montag, "Theodor Lipps and the Concept of Empathy: 1851–1914," 1261.

[51] Lipps, Theodor, "Einfühlung und ästhetischer Genuß," *Die Zukunft* 54 (1906): 106, quoted in Ercolino, "Negative Empathy. History, theory, criticism," 244.

[52] Berleant, Arnold, *Art And Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 16.

[53] Ercolino, *Negative Empathy*, 26.

[54] Lipps, "Einfühlung und ästhetischer Genuß," 107.

resistance against what is perceived as an 'enemy request'[55] by the object, which causes unpleasure (*Unlust*) and generates interior detachment in the subject.[56] This experience is negative empathy. In the former case, the object appears beautiful and is apprehended in a positive manner due to its life-affirming character. Lipps construes this experience of beauty as "objectified self-enjoyment", since we are impressed by the "vitality" and "life potentiality" that lies in the perceived object.[57] The life-affirming aspect is particularly relevant and will play a pivotal role in affect theory, as this thesis will illustrate further on. In the latter case, the object is perceived as ugly.

According to Lipps, only positive empathy can be considered authentic empathy, as it allows the fusional unity — "the complete cognitive and affective interpenetration"[58] — between empathising subject and empathised object to take place. Negative empathy, on the other hand, entails no connection, but rather a *partition* of the unitary self, from which the awareness of a multiplicity of individuals arises.

At this point, for the sake of our inquiry on the characteristics of the aesthetic dimension of negative empathy, a distinction between regular objects and aesthetic objects has to be made. If, for regular objects, beauty (positive empathy) and ugliness (negative empathy) coincide with an affirmation and a negation of life in the empathising subject respectively,[59] when it comes to aesthetic objects, Lipps' analysis takes a substantial turn. Authentic negative

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[55] Ibid.

[56] Lipps, Theodor, Leitfaden der Psychologie, 3rd partially rev. ed. (Leipzig: Verlag von Wilhelm Engelmann, 1906), 229, quoted in Ercolino, "Negative Empathy. History, theory, criticism," 245.

[57] Lipps, "Einfühlung und Ästhetischer Genuß," 100–114; Lipps, Theodor, "Einfühlung, Innere Nachahmung und Organempfindung," *Archiv für gesamte Psychologie* 1 (1903): 465–519, translated as "Empathy, Inner Imitation and Sense-Feelings," in *A Modern Book of Esthetics* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), 374–382; "Empathy," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed January 16th, 2023, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/empathy/.

[58] Ercolino, *Negative Empathy*, 26.

[59] Ibid., 27.

empathy seems impossible when a subject enters an aesthetic relationship with objects, for essentially two reasons: (1) the aesthetic nature of the object protects us from its very negative content, and (2) the artistic representation of the negative would in the end affirm the positive, in that it would bring its human dimension to the fore. This would allow the empathising subject to feel a positive, life-affirming drive, which would ultimately cause negativity to be perceived as beautiful.[60]

Although, for these two reasons, Lipps discards the possibility for negative empathy to apply to the aesthetic realm, what results from the conversion of negative feelings into beauty cannot be said to equate positive empathy. In other words, artistic representation does not simply turn any negative empathic reaction into beauty and pleasure. The vestiges of the resistance a certain aesthetic object encounters in the subject somehow persist. Feelings of pleasure and sublime appreciation overlap, yet they do not erase the conflict or bridge the interior detachment resulting from the negative empathic experience. A shred of unpleasure remains, albeit buried by the reaffirmation of the positive. For this reason, contrary to Lipps' assertion, we will continue to use the term 'negative empathy' also in relation to the aesthetic sphere.

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[60] Ibid., 27-32.

Lipps' great contribution to the definition of negative empathy[61] can therefore be summed up as follows. To quote Ercolino, negative empathy is:

> a specific empathic response to objects and people generating (1) *conflict*, (2) *unpleasure*, (3) *interior detachment*, (4) *intersubjective awareness*, and (5) a *judgment of ugliness*. Moreover, with specific reference to aesthetic objects, it would seem that negative empathy *regresses* because of (1) the *protective character* and (2) the *sublimating nature* of the aesthetic experience. [62]

The *sublimating power* of artistic representation (which we will later analyse more thoroughly in relation to *catharsis*) can, in other words, make negativity beautiful, thus turning the otherwise ugly and repulsive experience of negative empathy into a pleasurable one.

The following passage of DeLillo's *Falling Man* provides an example of this theory:

> The windblast sent people to the ground. A thunderhead of smoke and ash came moving toward them. The light drained dead away, bright day gone. They ran and fell and tried to get up, men with toweled heads, a woman

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[61] The notion of negative empathy intended by Lipps was in modern times opposed by the concepts of "empathic distress" and "personal distress" put forth by Martin Hoffman and Nancy Eisenberg, respectively. What sets apart Lipps' idea from the more psychologically based takes of Hoffman and Eisenberg is the fact that the latter ascribe empathy to an experience of cognitive and emotional *proximity*, rather than fusional unity. For more information on Hoffman and Eisenberg's theories, see: Hoffman, Martin L., *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 63-110; Eisenberg, Nancy and Natalie D. Eggum, "Empathic Responding: Sympathy and Personal Distress," in *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy* eds. Jean Decety and William Ickes (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 71-83; Eisenberg, Nancy et al., "Empathy-related Responding and Cognition: A 'Chicken and the Egg' Dilemma," in *Handbook of Moral Behavior and Development, vol. 2: Research* eds. William M. Kurtines and Jakob L. Gerwirtz (Hillsdale: Erlbaum, 1991), 65-66; Eisenberg, Nancy, & Richard A. Fabes. "Empathy: Conceptualization, Measurement, and Relation to Prosocial Behavior." *Motiv Emot* 14 (June 1990): 131–149, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00991640; Eisenberg, Nancy and Janet Strayer, "Critical Issues in the Study of Empathy," in *Empathy and Its Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 3-13.

[62] Ercolino, "Negative Empathy. History, theory, criticism," 246.

blinded by debris, a woman calling someone's name. The only light was vestigial now, the light of what comes after, carried in the residue of smashed matter, in the ash ruins of what was various and human, hovering in the air above. (...) He could not find himself in the things he saw and heard. Two men ran by with a stretcher, someone facedown, smoke seeping out of his hair and clothes. He watched them move into the stunned distance. That's where everything was, all around him, falling away, street signs, people, things he could not name.

Then he saw a shirt come down out of the sky. He walked and saw it fall, arms waving like nothing in this life.[63]

The scene here portrayed by DeLillo is a chaotic spectacle of destruction, narrated in shocked despair, following the fall of the Twin Towers on 9/11. The harrowing cityscape is outlined through the eyes of traumatised Keith Neudecker, a lawyer who worked in the southern tower and managed to escape the collapsing building in the immediate aftermath of the attack. Located at the end of the novel, this passage brings out once again the crisis of signification that permeates the entire narrative since its very first lines — as if language falls apart along with the most prominent icons of the Manhattan skyline. Within such apocalyptic scene, dominated by suspension of meaning, the attacks produce a rupture in time and space that severs the continuity between identity and memory and destabilises the relationship between language and reality at once. The protagonist appears to be here experiencing a sort of aphasia: whilst he stares into the distance, Neudecker feels that something is missing from the scene around him ("he could not find himself in the things he saw and heard"), that words somehow seep away, no longer making sense ("things he could not name").

Although speechlessness, anguish and dejection pervade the description and lure the reader into a state of dismay, they do not hinder their appreciation

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[63] DeLillo, Don, *Falling Man* (London: Picador, 2007), 246.

and consequent pleasure. On the contrary, they activate in the subject the aforementioned life-affirming drive. Pleasure is thereby the result of an impeccable, compelling prose, as well as of the vulnerability and striving for survival highlighted by the salient human dimension of the text.

Yet, there seems to be more to it. In order to achieve a fusional unity with Keith Neudecker, the reader has to imagine themselves in the character's shoes — or, to pretend to be Keith for the sake of *feeling with* him. Identification and empathy are tightly intertwined. With identification always comes a vicarious experience: to identify, in fact, is to initiate a "substitutional emotional activity,"[64] which implies the projection of our self into someone else — or, in this case, into an aesthetic object.

1.3 Cathartic identification

In *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*,[65] Hans Robert Jauss sets out five models of identification within the aesthetic experience. (1) *Associative identification*: an aesthetic behaviour that realises itself in "assuming a role in the closed, imaginary world of a play in action,"[66] thus doing away with the dichotomy actor-spectator. It requires a readiness in the viewer to put themselves into another's role — in a nutshell: role-taking. (2) *Admiring identification*: an aesthetic attitude of admiration prompted by the perceived perfection of an aesthetic object, which transcends the subject's expectation in the direction of the ideal (usually a hero, saint or sage).[67] This kind of identification presupposes a more marked subject-object separation than the

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[64] Bley, Edgar S., "Identification: A Key to Literature," *The English Journal* 34, no 1 (1945): 26. https://doi.org/10.2307/806995.

[65] Jauss, Hans Robert, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

[66] Ibid., 164.

[67] Ibid., 168.

previous model. (3) *Sympathetic identification*: "the aesthetic affect of projecting oneself into the alien self, a process which eliminates the admiring distance and can inspire feelings in the spectator"[68] that will lead to compassion for the suffering hero. (4) *Cathartic identification*: an aesthetic attitude that detaches the spectator from the real world and places them "into the position of the suffering hero, so that his mind and heart may find liberation through tragic emotion or comic relief."[69] (5) *Ironic identification*: a critical identification, prone to be "subsequently refused or ironised."[70]

It appears immediately evident that, when it comes to negative empathy and negative feelings are thereby at stake, the most relevant model recognised by Jauss is cathartic identification. The concept of catharsis first appeared in Aristotle's *Poetics* as part of the definition of tragedy: an imitation of an action "with incidents arousing pity and fear, whereby to accomplish its catharsis for such emotions."[71] As the *thelos* of tragedy, catharsis refers — within the classic Aristotelian context — to two processes. On the one hand, it indicates medical 'purgation,' in line with the healing and curing effects of expulsion and evacuation of harmful elements (namely, getting rid of disturbances by removing their causes). On the other hand, catharsis may denote 'purification' — that is, within a religious frame of reference, cleansing the spirit and sublimating emotions in order to prepare for or to achieve a state of exaltation.[72] From the combination of the former medical take with the latter religious one, originates an aesthetic definition of catharsis, rendered in Shaper's words as follows:

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[68] Ibid., 172.

[69] Ibid., 177.

[70] Ibid., 181.

[71] Aristotle. "Poetics" (transl. by I. Bywater), in *The complete works of Aristotle: The revised Oxford translation vol. 2*, eds. J. Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 2316–2340.

[72] Schaper, Eva, "Aristotle's Catharsis and Aesthetic Pleasure," *The Philosophical Quarterly (1950-)* 18, no. 71 (1968): 132. https://doi.org/10.2307/2217511.

A release from unwanted and painful emotions or passions is achieved through stimulation of the same or similar emotions, bringing about an emotional climax unbearable for long, and therefore discharging itself when a certain pitch is reached. The resulting peace and calm is said to be pleasurable. Thus seen, 'catharsis' is a psychological concept.[73]

It is clear, then, that the role played by catharsis in art reception is pivotal not only because it allows negative emotions such as 'pity and fear' to take on pleasurable aesthetic connotations, but also because it sets in motion a psychological process that encompasses both the conscious and unconscious[74] dimensions of the feeling subject.

In a passage of the *Politics*, Aristotle mentions that he intends to give a full explanation of catharsis in the second part of the *Poetics*, but, in the end, that second part was never written and the explanation never arrived.[75] A great deal of attempts at explaining what Aristotle meant by 'catharsis' has been made by philosophers and philologists alike for over two millennia. Among the many interpretations of catharsis's cryptic though possibly multifaceted nature, three main functions appear particularly pertinent to negative empathy: the ritual, the therapeutic and the aesthetical.[76]

According to French philosopher and anthropologist René Girard, catharsis fulfils a sociological urge, whereby tragedy comes to embody the cathartic social function traditionally reserved to violence. Girard's rather radical take on violence, in fact, prescribes that, if channelled against a 'scapegoat' (or *pharmakos*), violence can overcome its pathological essence and work as 'remedy' (or *phármakon*) that purges the community of mimetic aggressiveness.

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[73] Ibid., 135.

[74] As "unwanted and painful emotions or passions" are often relegated to the unconscious, as we will see more in depth in the next chapter of this thesis.

[75] Young, Julian, *The Philosophy of Tragedy. From Plato to Žižek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 26-27.

[76] Ibid., 26-34.

Seeing a mimetic continuity between sacrificial acts in the real world and tragic spectacles in fictional representations, Girard's hypothesis envisions tragedy as springing from mythic and ritual forms.[77] In describing the tragic effect in terms of catharsis, according to Girard, Aristotle asserts that "tragedy can and should assume at least some of the functions assigned to ritual in a world where ritual has almost disappeared."[78] The death of ritual, in this view, brings about the birth of tragedy in the sense that tragedy re-presents in artistic fictions what rituals previously enacted in real life.[79] As a result the most outstanding value of catharsis lies, for Girard, in its power to restore the health and well-being of the community.[80]

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[77] Nidesh Lawtoo, "Violence and the Mimetic Unconscious (Part One): The Cathartic Hypothesis: Aristotle, Freud, Girard," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 25 (2018): 165. https://doi.org/10.14321/contagion.25.2018.0159.

[78] Girard, René, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 290.

[79] Lawtoo, "Violence and the Mimetic Unconscious (Part One)", 166.

[80] Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 290.

In line with ancient Greek medicine, in which the physical and the spiritual were intertwined,[81] German philologist Jacob Bernays expanded on catharsis' therapeutic definition. Basing his argument upon Aristotle's ritual/musical conception of catharsis illustrated in *Politics*,[82] Bernays redefined catharsis as "a removing or alleviation of an illness by means of some medical therapy — a purgation [*Linderung der Krankenheit*]."[83] In this medical interpretation, catharsis excites states of physical frenzy, thus purging what Bernays calls the

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[81] Greek medicine was deeply enmeshed in spirituality, intended as a blend of philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, physics, pharmacology, music and religion. Illness was initially regarded as a divine punishment, and healing as a gift from the gods. Later on, attempts to identify the material causes for diseases, rather than spiritual ones, intensified, though the two tendencies would never be entirely separated. An example of the blurred distinction between the physical and spiritual worlds in Greek medicine is the figure of Asclepius, a mythical hero and god of medicine, considered to be the son of Apollo, a dispenser of healing and a highly skilled practical doctor at once. Asclepius' rod, a snake-entwined staff (similar to the Caduceus, but with only one snake), remains a symbol of medicine today. Another interesting indicator of the entanglement of medicine and spirituality rests on the figure of Apollo himself — god of music, harmony, light and healing. Healing, in this context, is not only to be understood as physical rebalancing of Hippocratic humours, but also as an achievement of the initiate's spiritual journey, which is encapsulated by the first of three Delphic maxims inscribed in the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo in Delphi: "Know thyself" [γνῶθι σεαυτόν, transliterated: *gnōthi seautón*]. The maxim is also known in its extended version: "Know thyself and you shall know the universe and the Gods," whose attribution, however, is to this day uncertain (amongst potential sources are Socrates, Pythagoras and Heraclitus). This concept will be particularly relevant in Jung's analytical psychology and, more specifically, in the role Jung assigns to the unconscious. As we will see more in depth in the next chapter of this thesis, according to the Swiss psychoanalyst, one can find true realisation and reach full individuation only by confronting their shadow, thereby making their unconscious conscious. Pinch, Geraldine, *Handbook of Egyptian Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Mitchell-Boyask, Robin, *Plague and the Athenian Imagination: Drama, History, and the Cult of Asclepius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Wilkins, Eliza G., *The Delphic Maxims in Literature* (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 1994).

[82] Speaking of the effects of music, Aristotle writes in *Politics* 8.7: "For feelings such as pity and fear, or, again, enthusiasm, exist very strongly in some souls and have more or less influence over all. Some persons fall into a religious frenzy, and we see them restored as a result of the sacred melodies — when they have used the melodies which excite the soul to mystic frenzy — we see them restored as though they had found healing and purgation (*katharsis*). Those who are influenced by pity or fear, and every emotional nature, must have a like experience, and others insofar as each is susceptible to such emotions, and are all in a manner purged and their souls lighted and delighted." Aristotle, *The Politics* and *The Constitution of Athens*, ed. Stephen Everson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 205.

[83] Jacob Bernays, "Aristotle on the Effect of Tragedy," trans. Jennifer Barnes, in *Oxford Readings in Ancient Literary Criticism,* ed. Andrew Laird (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 165.

"unbalanced man" of affective pathologies.[84] Bernays' theory became particularly influential owing to his nephew by marriage: no less than the forefather of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud.

In collaboration with the physician and experimental psychologist Joseph Breuer, in fact, Freud took catharsis a step further into the medical sphere, elaborating a psychoanalytic 'cathartic method' to cure pathologies that were considered to be generated by repression (mainly, hysteria). Freud and Breuer's method was strongly based on Bernays' ultimate definition of catharsis:

> *katharsis* is a term transferred from the physical to the emotional sphere, and used of the sort of treatment of an oppressed person which seeks not to alter or re-press [*zurückzudrängen*] the oppressive element [*beklemmende Element*] but to excite it, to draw it out [*hervortreiben*], and thereby to effect a relief.[85]

The very birth of psychoanalysis, and, consequently, of Freud and Breuer's cathartic method appears to originate from a philological interpretation of Bernays' take on catharsis. The most far-reaching ramifications of this contingency stretch all the way to the so-called discovery of the true unconscious. Possibly. What is certain, though, is that the theory of the unconscious was initially based on a cathartic hypothesis, later turned into a repressive hypothesis.[86] The *Zurückdrägung* introduced by Bernays in his formulation of catharsis essentially became the Freudian key concept of repression. According to Freud's cathartic method, repressed traumas can be awakened by means of hypnosis or speech and, through the transformative power of catharsis, a discharge of accumulated "strangulated affect"

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84 Lawtoo, "Violence and the Mimetic Unconscious (Part One)", 169.

85 Bernays, "Aristotle on the Effect of Tragedy," 167.

86 Lawtoo, "Violence and the Mimetic Unconscious (Part One)", 170.

[*eingeklemmten Affecte*][87] can take place, thereby relieving the patient from their long buried psychological burden. In this sense, the Freudian postulation of the unconscious cannot be disentangled from the cathartic method. It is mainly thanks to Freud that the notion of 'catharsis,' when invoked outside of specialised academic circles, is generally associated with Bernays' medical sense of purgation of psychic pathologies, which allows for an *unconscious* discharge of violent affects with therapeutic effects.[88]

So far, we have seen how Girard is concerned with the catharsis of violent ritual frenzy, whereas Freud engages with the catharsis of violent psychic pathologies. Both accounts can be ascribed to a function of purgation (rather than purification), thus remaining in line with the medical genealogy (as opposed to the religious one). On the contrary, contemporary commentators of the Poetics have taken on a sceptical disposition toward medical (or pathological) standpoints on catharsis.[89] Stephen Halliwell, British classicist and academic, rejects the purgation hypothesis, claiming that it is a "falsification of Aristotle's position and of the larger philosophical psychology that underpins it."[90] Instead, Halliwell stresses the aesthetic properties of Aristotle's account of catharsis with relation to what he calls "emotional understanding." Subverting the notion of unconscious therapy upheld by Freud and Bernays, Halliwell maintains that

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[87] Freud, Sigmund, & Joseph Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 2 (1893–1895), ed. and trans. J. Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955), 16.

[88] Lawtoo, "Violence and the Mimetic Unconscious (Part One)", 173.

[89] Ibid., 176.

[90] Halliwell, Stephen, *Between Ecstasy and Truth: Interpretations of Greek Poetics from Homer to Longinus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 237. Halliwell specifies that "there was no group of theatrical spectators who were actively seeking a cure for a psychological malaise. It was an error on the part of Bernays to ignore that difference, an error which allowed him to reduce both musical and tragic catharsis to a cure for pathological conditions." On top of pinpointing Bernays's philological mistake, Halliwell adds, on an even harsher note, that "to translate Aristotle's view of the essential emotional effect of tragedy on its audiences into a matter of therapy for the mentally oppressed or unbalanced is a travesty of the *Poetics*" (245).

what is at play in spectators' contemplation of aesthetic representations of violence is not a mindless unconscious process but, rather, a dynamic interplay between body and mind, affect and reason, or, to use more ancient terms, *pathos* and *logos* that are constitutive of tragedy qua mimesis of action.[91]

According to Halliwell, the cathartic power of Greek poetics lies in the delicate balance resulting from the combination of two complementary tendencies: emotional states of enthusiasm, entrancement or ecstasy (*pathos*) on the one hand, and rational concerns with truth, or reason (*logos*), on the other. This picture suggests that the capacity of catharsis to relieve pain is due to its bringing together excitement and understanding (that is, to cause an emotional, *affective understanding*) through, in Halliwell's words, a "dynamic interplay between body and mind".

In line with Nietzsche's account of the birth of tragedy[92] — a ceaseless oscillation between Dionysian and Apollonian principles, *pathos* and *distance*[93] — Halliwell surmises that what is ultimately at stake in catharsis is a "form of conversion of painful into pleasurable emotion within the contemplation of

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[91] Lawtoo, "Violence and the Mimetic Unconscious (Part One)", 177.

[92] In *The Birth of Tragedy* (London: Penguin Classics, 1994), Nietzsche argues that Greek tragedy arose out of the fusion of what he called Apollonian and Dionysian elements — the former representing measure, restraint and harmony (forces related to order and logic) and the latter unbridled passion (chaos and irrationality). The death of Greek tragedy would thereby be spelled by Socratic rationalism and optimism — namely, the triumph of the Apollonian over the Dionysian. In such predicament, the Apollonian aspect of human nature stands out as a defender against suffering. The primal unity of the Dionysian, in fact, would bring us into direct apprehension of the suffering that lies at the heart of all life, leaving rationality as the last outpost to ward off the pressing throes of an otherwise ill-fated conception of life.

[93] Nietzsche's image of a "pathos of distance" is a motif that features in the philosopher's later writings. It hints at the notion that certain values cannot originate in a community, but are created by a few gifted and lofty individuals. Here, *pathos* is associated to the Dionysian, an affective tension, whereas *distance* refers to the rationalistic clarity enacted by the Apollonian, inasmuch as under no circumstances can a logical consideration take place without a certain emotional distance from the observed object. The Apollonian force, in fact, is characterised by measured restraint and detachment.

mimetic simulations of reality."[94] And it is this very conversion, generated by the interplay of affective identification and aesthetic simulation, emotion and understanding,[95] that seems to be at the heart of what catharsis meant to Aristotle.[96] A conversion of painful, frightening, or repulsive into pleasurable, or fascinating — that is, of negative feelings into positive appreciation — is also at the root of negative empathy. What makes such conversion possible is, primarily, the discrepancy between reality and the aesthetic realm.

1.4 Beyond paradox: making negative emotions enjoyable

In *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, Jauss affirms that aesthetic enjoyment occurs in a state of balance between "disinterested contemplation and testing participation" as a mode of "experiencing oneself in a possible being other which the aesthetic attitude opens up."[97] What Jauss calls "the anthropological model of inner distance"[98] enables the possibility of aesthetically enjoying "objective negativities"[99] which initially seem non-enjoyable, such as the ugly, the horrible, the cruel, the deformed etc. As Jauss explains, "aesthetic pleasure can occur if it is not the objects in their shocking negativity but the pure function of the subject's own faculties as they are

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[94] Halliwell, *Between Ecstasy and Truth*, 31.

[95] In Nietzschean terms too, no artistic form can exist without the Dionysian-Apollonian interplay. Both aspects are necessary in the creation of art: without the Apollonian, the Dionysian lacks the form and structure to make a coherent piece of art, and without the Dionysian, the Apollonian lacks the necessary vitality and passion. Although diametrically opposed, the two forces are also intimately intertwined. Such dualistic interpenetration will impinge upon Jung's psychoanalysis in his theory of the reconciliation of opposites.

[96] Lawtoo, "Violence and the Mimetic Unconscious (Part One)", 178.

[97] Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, 32.

[98] A concept introduced by Hans Blumenberg in *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, trans. S. Rendall (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997).

[99] Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, 32.

affected by them that is being enjoyed."[100] Inner distancing eliminates the immediate relation to the presented object, thus working as a defence mechanism against tragic emotions. Such process allows the subject to enjoy an aesthetic experience even when negative emotions are triggered.

Freud, too, understood aesthetic pleasure in terms of connection between self-enjoyment and the enjoyment of what is other.[101] In this paradigm, aesthetic pleasure of identification stems from the relief and protection provided by aesthetic distance, as well as from a deep interest in the activity of the imagination.[102] The cathartic type of identification theorised by Jauss can thereby be traced, in Freud's words, as follows:

> The spectator in the theatre or the reader of a novel may "enjoy being a great man" and can surrender unhesitatingly to normally re-pressed feelings because [their] pleasure is predicated on aesthetic illusion, i.e., "[their] suffering is mitigated by the certainty that, firstly, it is someone other than [themselves] who is acting and suffering on the stage, and, secondly, that after all it is only a game, which can threaten no damage to [their] personal security."[103]

Yet, Freud adds more to it, bringing the doctrine of cathartic pleasure beyond tradition. According to the founder of psychoanalysis, aesthetic pleasure has the further-reaching function of "fore-pleasure," designed to make possible the release of still greater pleasure surfacing from "deeper psychical sources."[104] In

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[100] Ibid.

[101] Freud, Sigmund, & Henry Alden Bunker, "Psychopathic Characters on the Stage," *The Tulane Drama Review* 4, no. 3 (1960): 144–48. https://doi.org/10.2307/1124852.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Freud quoted by Jauss in *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, 33.

[104] Freud, Sigmund, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming". *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, Vol 9 (London: Hogarth, 1953-74), 153.

this view, aesthetic identification would work as a trigger, provoking an emotional discharge not only of the aesthetic tension the involved onlooker accumulated throughout the tragedy, but also of the spectator's own, personal, tension in resonance with that of the hero they identify with. In this case, such return of the repressed (now surmounted), would make catharsis a fundamentally regressive experience.

The conception of 'affective distance' as catalyst for aesthetic pleasure stirred by negative states of mind predates Freud, though. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Edmund Burke already introduced this fundamental condition as bedrock for the sublime to spring into action. Feelings of terror, anguish or agony can lead to a pleasurable experience provided that the subject is removed from their source and is, therefore, 'safe,' in a protected position. It would be hard, otherwise — that is, were the subject's life threatened, in any event in danger — to feel the delight (understood as pleasure combined with pain) originating from the experience of the sublime.[105]

The presence of a protective chasm between subject and object is a notion that has lived on and continues to find academic consensus to this day. American scholar Suzanne Keen, who conducted a broad research on fictional empathy,[106] agrees on Burke, Jauss and Freud's view when she writes that:

> the very fictionality of novels predisposes readers to empathise with characters, since a fiction known to be 'made up' does not activate suspicion and wariness as an apparently 'real' appeal for assistance may do. I posit that fictional worlds provide safe zones for readers' feeling empathy without

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[105] "[…] terror is a passion which always produces delight when it does not press too close." Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. A. Phillips (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1.14.

[106] Reported in: Keen, Suzanne, *Empathy and the Novel* (London: OUP, 2007).

experiencing a resultant demand on real-world action.[107] [...] Fiction does disarm readers of some of the protective layers of cautious reasoning that may inhibit empathy in the real world.[108]

Now that a 'safe distance' between the subject and the aesthetic dimension of the observed object has been ascertained as basic requirement for aesthetic catharsis and, consequently, negative empathy (the conversion of negative feelings into pleasure brought about by artistic representation), we can move on to examine the highlights, in Keen's study on empathy, that bear a greater relevance to negative empathy.

Albeit unable to find compelling scientific evidence to avail her thesis according to which literature promotes empathy, ultimately predisposing readers to altruism and prosocial behaviour, Keen provides an accurate account of the narrative techniques that elicit empathy in readers of fiction. Considering negative empathy as an *addition* to — or a richer, more complex version of — positive empathy, namely, an empathic response in which the drive towards fusional unity with an object typical of positive empathy, and so well described by Lipps, is opposed by an inner resistance in the subject, one could surmise that the narrative strategies identified by Keen are also valid for negative empathy. It is important to note that all the here presented empathy-arousing narrative techniques are aimed at ushering readers into character identification. Whether a reader's empathy or their identification with a character comes first is an open question: spontaneous empathy for a fictional character's feelings, in fact, could open the way for character identification.[109] Another critical element to consider is that, as Keen points out, "empathetic responses to fictional characters and situations occur more readily for negative emotions, whether or

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[107] Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, 4.

[108] Keen, Suzanne, "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," *Narrative* 14, no. 3 (2006): 207–36. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20107388.

[109] Ibid., 214.

not a match in details of experience exists."[110] One last precondition worth bearing in mind is that identification is usually *partial* and *selective*, as only minimal elements of identity, situation and feeling can be required for an empathic reaction to set off. This is particularly true for negative characters; as Berys Gaut argues in *Identification and Emotion in Narrative Film*,[111] the act of identification is *aspectual* and *intermittent*. One could identify perceptually (to see from a character's point of view), affectively (to feel what they feel), motivationally (to want what they want) or epistemically (to believe what they believe), yet neither one of these modes necessarily implies another. After all, if identification were global, it could not in practice occur. Identification with a character does not "require [...] to imagine being identical with that character."[112] It would be impossible to imagine oneself as possessing all the intrinsic properties of a character, and, obviously, "one picks on those characteristics that are relevant for the purpose of one's imagining."[113]

On such premises, the first empathetic narrative technique worth mentioning is an internal perspective. Unsurprisingly, adopting the narrator's perspective facilitates the reader's empathic reaction. This could be achieved through first person self-narration, figural narration (in which a 3rd person narrator reports only the focal centre of consciousness of a main character), or authorial (omniscient) narration, which exposes the characters' minds. "The psychic vividness of prolonged inside views"[114] helps readers develop an appreciation and an empathic response for characters lacking strong virtues. Narrated monologues are also reported to have a strong effect on empathy, for

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[110] Ibid.

[111] Gaut, Berys, "Identification and Emotion in Narrative Film," in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition and Emotion*, eds. Carl Platinga & Greg M. Smith (Baltimora: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 200-208.

[112] Ibid., 205.

[113] Ibid.

[114] Keen, "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," 219.

they provide "privileged information about a character's mind"[115] — soliloquies and asides in Shakespeare's plays corroborate such hypothesis rather evidently, making some of Keen's empathy-inducing tenets compatible with drama, too. Keen also adds that, within the category of first person narratives, much may vary, as "empathy may be enhanced or impeded by narrative consonance or dissonance, unreliability, discordance, an excess of narrative levels with multiple narrators [...] or an especially convoluted plot. Genre, setting, and time period may help or hinder readers' empathy."[116]

Narrative situation and focalisation, therefore, play a key role in determining the nature of the mediation between author and reader. Secondarily, a number of other elements of fiction are deemed to contribute to readers' empathy, such as the length of novels, genre expectations, vivid use of settings, metanarrative commentary, and aspects of the discourse that slow — or accelerate — readers' pace.[117] Among these, length appears to be a particularly relevant feature when it comes to negative empathy. Spending more time with a fictional character often means a more profound — and at times affectionate — knowledge of their personality, as well as — and more importantly — a better understanding of their motives. In *Affect and Narrative*,[118] David Miall suggests that characters' motives, rather than their traits, account for the affective engagement and self projection of readers into characters.

Another important factor at play is realism, meant as truthfulness, plausibility. Readers' judgements about the realism of characters have an impact on identification, and "the similarity of the reader to the character is widely believed to promote identification."[119] Also, suspenseful narrative situations

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[115] Ibid.

[116] Ibid., 215.

[117] Ibid., 216.

[118] Miall, David, S., "Affective Narrative: A Model of Response to Stories," *Poetics* 17, no. 3 (1988): 259-272. https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-422X(88)90034-4.

[119] Keen, "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," 127.

provoke physiological responses of arousal in readers, even when they disdain the quality of the narrative;[120] strong emotions in general seem to influence readers' involvement and empathic participation considerably. The reason for this will be explained thoroughly in section 1.7, within the discourse on affect.

After focalisation, narrative situation, plausibility and strong emotional charge comes style, or, more broadly, rhetoric. Needless to say, the way in which a character is presented, or a situation is narrated, regardless of its semantic content, is crucial to readers' affective reception. The persuasive and sensual potential of *lógos* is at the centre of Gorgias's *The Encomium of Helen*, where the Greek sophist presents his enticing theory of the power of speech. As Jauss notes, what Gorgias appears to be more concerned with is the "communicative function of the cathartic effect: the aesthetic enjoyment of one's own affects as they are stimulated by speech or poetry is the lure to let oneself be persuaded."[121] The 'aesthetic lure' here mentioned is connoted by a daunting ambivalence. The persuasive power of speech, attained by means of *lógos, pathos*, and *ethos*,[122] along with its capacity to create cathartic pleasure is so impactful, that it could charm the spectator into a well-intentioned disposition as much as lead them into evil.[123] This twofold fascination exerted by speech would act as "cathartic magic,"[124] and obtain upon the soul a similar effect to that of a *phármakon* on the body, thereby bringing Aristotle's purgation metaphor back into play.

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[120] Ibid.

[121] Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, 25.

[122] Rhetoric, or the art of persuasion, is, along with grammar and logic, one of the three ancient arts of discourse. It rests on three principles: (1) *lógos*, which appeals to the audience's reason, building up logical arguments; (2) *ethos*, which appeals to the speaker's authority and credentials, inducing the audience to trust them; and (3) *pathos*, which appeals to feelings, eliciting an emotional response in the audience.

[123] Ibid.

[124] Pinotti, Andrea, *Empatia. Storia di un'idea da Platone al postumano* (Bari: Editori Laterza, 2011), chap 8, Kindle.

Before proceeding to examine the content — that is, the very object of negative empathy, and the reasons behind our fascination for hideous characters or highly unsettling situations and atmospheres — we will show, through a practical example, how the so far seen formal aspects come into play in eliciting negative empathy in the most famous soliloquy from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.[125]

> Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
>
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
>
> To the last syllable of recorded time;
>
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
>
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
>
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
>
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
>
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
>
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
>
> Signifying nothing.[126]

The soliloquy is delivered by Macbeth immediately after he learns about Lady Macbeth's death, in the tragic hours predating his ultimate defeat and beheading by Macduff — much like the witches had predicted. At this point in the tragedy (act 5, scene 5), Macbeth's metamorphosis into a tyrant is well completed, and the reader/spectator's negative empathy for the tragic hero is declining along with Macbeth's mental health, being it inversely proportional to his ever growing senseless cruelty. Yet, this passage is so well built and rich in *pathos* that it cannot but elicit a peak of negative empathy and cathartic identification.

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[125] Shakespeare, William, *Macbeth*, eds. Sandra Clarke & Pamela Mason (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

[126] Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 287-288.

When dealing with drama, the narrative devices laid out by Keen to convey an internal focalisation are translated into different theatrical strategies, such as the soliloquy form. Soliloquies are especially designed to expose a character's internal perspective, to reveal their inner thoughts, to the point that they may as well appear even more persuasive than an authorial or figural narrator. During a soliloquy, a character is not only free to show their true intentions and vent their unrestrained feelings, but a special intimacy is established between them and the audience, who, although silent, become the character's ultimate confidant. Furthermore, as Helen Hackett explains in her book *English Renaissance Drama*,[127] soliloquies, along with disguise and asides, are the three principal means by which Shakespeare endows his characters with reality. By these techniques, the Bard uncovers the multiple layers of a character's being: "a public self which conceals a more private self, or selves, to which the audience is given privileged access."[128] Shakespeare uses each of these techniques with particular sophistication to simulate emotional and psychological depth as well as to draw the audience into complicity with villainous characters.

The accelerating pace of this passage creates an increasingly suspenseful and emotionally dense narrative situation. We have seen, yet again in Keen's theoretical approach, how strong emotions act as driving force for negative empathy to escalate. Here, the image cluster of time articulates a rhythmic acceleration through the following sequence of terms. Firstly, the triple repetition of "tomorrow" interspersed with 'and' simulates the ticking of a clock, thus setting a regular pace that makes the reader linger. The slow and measured rhythm, then, jumps from "day to day" (another repetition), to "the last syllable of recorded time." The focus shifts to the inflexibility of the past with "yesterdays" and then rapidly proceeds to the ephemerality of a "brief" candle, the fleeting shortness of an "hour," only to reach a sudden, abrupt closure ("no

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[127] Hackett, Helen, *A Short History of English Renaissance Drama* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

[128] Ibid., 102.

more"), which finally marks the threshold of oblivion and nothingness. Verbs also contribute to the quickening of the pace: at the beginning, tomorrow "creeps," then life "walks," a "poor player" epitomising the universal human fleeting condition eventually "struts" and "frets," almost desperate by now, only to reach the suddenly unmovable "signifying nothing" of the last, succinct verse.

As actor Ian McKellen comments in his analysis of the soliloquy,[129] the last word of each line encapsulates what the speech is about: "tomorrow, to day, time" highlight the passing of time; "fools, candle, player, stage, tale" suggest the illusion, the deceit of life and appearances mimicking reality (theatre); "fury" and "nothing" express closure, nihilism, oblivion.

At this point in the play, only two short scenes from the end, one has spent a rather great deal of time with Macbeth. The quantity of time we spend with a character, as explained before, plays an important role in understanding their rationale. Considering that *Macbeth*'s total word count amounts to 17,121,[130] and that Macbeth delivers almost a third of them (5,303 in total),[131] the reader/spectator has had, so far, a fair chance to enter the character's mind and actions. The motives behind his anguish and nihilistic despair are clear: Lady Macbeth is dead; Macbeth has not been sleeping for nights on end; his plan, driven by his unquenchable thirst for power, is failing miserably, and the doom foretold by the Weird Sisters is now reaching completion. The situation has plummeted. Macbeth's dream of glory is shattered, as the former Thane of Glamis frantically tries to make sense of time in a moment when there seems to be no tomorrow. Mourning the death of a loved one, striving for ambition and despairing for the ridiculous ephemerality and apparent meaninglessness of life

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[129] "Tomorrow, and tomorrow — Ian McKellen analyzes Macbeth speech (1979)", Youtube, accessed January 25, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGbZCgHQ9m8.

[130] As reported by "OpenSourceShakespeare," accessed January 25, 2023, https://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/plays_numwords.php.

[131] "Characters by Part Sizes," accessed January 25, 2023, https://www.shakespeareswords.com/Public/Characters.aspx.

are universally recognisable and relatable states of mind which make Macbeth hard to blame in the eyes of the audience. It is as if, all of a sudden, the fact that he has killed men, women and children takes a back seat, compared to the inner torment that is bringing the hero on the brink of dark oblivion. In addition to making Macbeth a truly tragic figure, such torment makes him human and plausible, thus untangling his persona from the stereotypical, flat features of 'the villain.'

If on the one hand emotional and psychological accuracy has to be achieved for the sake of truthfulness and relatability, on the other hand some information has to be withheld. As American author Stephen Greenblatt contends in his work *Will in the World*,[132] Macbeth is one of the many instances of Shakespeare's *strategic opacity*. Greenblatt theorises that the playwright

> found that he could immeasurably deepen the effect of his plays […] if he took out a key explanatory element, thereby occluding the motivation or ethical principle that accounted for the action that was to unfold. The principle was not the making of a riddle to be solved, but the creation of strategic opacity. This opacity, Shakespeare found, released an enormous energy that had been at least partially blocked or contained by familiar, reassuring explanation.[133]

In other words, there has to be an eerie or at least mysterious element missing from the picture.

As paradoxical as this theory may seem, it appears to work well for negative empathy, too. We will return on this point when we will examine the concept of affective escape. For now, it is worth noting that in *Macbeth*, the 'hole'[134]

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[132] Greenblatt, Stephen, *Will in the World* (London: The Bodley Head, 2016).

[133] Ibid., 323-324.

[134] That is, the missing information, or the 'dark hole' Greenblatt refers to in his book *Will in the World*, 354.

originates from the dark presence of the witches, who remain excluded from the play's epilogue, thus leaving the question about their agency on Macbeth's fate open. To sum up, so far, we have seen how perspective, narrative situation, emotional charge, accelerating pace, amount of time spent with the character, plausibility, relatability and opacity participate in the unleashing of negative empathy.

We will now take a look at the rhetorical power mentioned by Gorgias. The passage is in blank verse, except for the last line, which ends abruptly, as if the pentameter were incomplete, to reinforce the sense of emptiness the soliloquy leads us into. The repetitions ("tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow; day to day; out, out") of the first and second lines; the various alliterations ("petty-pace, dusty-death, poor-player, tale-told"), metaphors and simile (life as a walking shadow, a poor player, a tale told by an idiot; the world as a stage); the intratextual reference ("brief candle") pointing at the candle Lady Macbeth had previously been carrying in her sleep to light up the abyss of darkness she was drowning in; the implicit death of Lady Macbeth looming over the entire speech and foreshadowing Macbeth's own death, everybody's death — all these rhetorical figures partake in building up the pace, tension and meaning of the scene. They make up the 'cathartic magic' mentioned by Jauss and 'lure' the spectator into persuasion.

1.5 Why villains?

Now that we have seen the several structural and formal factors at play in prompting us to empathise — positively or negatively — with an aesthetic object (be it a fictional character, a narrative situation, an atmosphere, a song, an artwork, a picture, a performance, a TV series, etc.), however immoral, despicable or distressing this may be, it is time to shift our focus to the content, that is, the *essence*, of said aesthetic object. Although form and content are

inextricably interwoven and interdependent, two more content-related features should be added to the formulation of negative empathy in order to make it complete. One is *fascinating ambiguity* (and consequent stimulation of curiosity), and the other is *inner torment*.

Ambiguity already featured in Greenblatt's strategic opacity theory. The fact that some information is inaccessible, withheld from the subject; that clear-cut boundaries are blurred, and opposites mingle and blend, inevitably sparks the subject's interest and curiosity — especially considering society's restraints, promotion of exhaustive definitions, obsession for painstaking classification and stigmatisation of noncanonical, nonconformist views. Moreover, whilst in real life evil is normally ostracised and therefore less prone to investigation, fiction, as we have seen, provides a safe space to explore evil and other controversial matters, which could otherwise be dangerous to research outside the aesthetic world.

Fascination, within the artistic sphere, normally results from a confluence of elements that seem at odds with one another. In her essay "Sympathy and Fascination,"[135] Katherine Tullmann delves into the so-called *sympathy for the devil phenomenon* (SDP)[136] to identify what sets such experience in motion and how. SDP refers to a "genuine psychological phenomenon that arises in the course of our engagement with fictions"[137] and that leads to pro-attitudes towards immoral or unlikeable fictional entities. Tullmann recognises that *fascination* is a pre-condition for such pro-attitudes, as it mediates our allegiance with morally perverse characters. Fascination, in fact, applies to admirable *and* vicious qualities alike. This is partly due to the fact that narratives are pre-focused in a way that predisposes the reader to respond in a particular way.

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[135] Tullmann, Katherine, "Sympathy and Fascination," in *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 56, no. 2 (2016): 115-129.

[136] A term coined by Carrol, Noël, "Sympathy for the Devil," in *The Sopranos and Philosophy*, eds. Richard Greene & Peter Vernezze (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), 121-136.

[137] Tullmann, "Sympathy and Fascination," 116.

Manipulative as this may seem, it is undeniable that readers are at the author's mercy, who can deliberately choose which facets of a character to show, thus steering our gaze towards determinate emotional and moral responses.

If we imagine a "bland, intellectually dull, physically unattractive, run of the mill, Satan,"[138] Tullmann argues, and not without reason, surely neither our curiosity nor our fascination will be aroused. But Milton's Satan, on the contrary, is intriguing, charismatic and admirable, to the point that we quickly grow eager to know more about him, as soon as we venture into *Paradise Lost*. Certain characters are so *alive*, so skilfully drawn, "acting within plausible and morally compelling plots, [that] they dramatise the profoundest parts of all humans, the parts most conflicted, most serious — the ones with the most at stake."[139] When this is the case, in Tullmann's words,

> we *pity* them or feel *compassion* for them when we learn about the awful things that happened in their past, or when other characters manipulate or exploit them. We are often *glad* when they succeed, and generally *disappointed* when they fail. Perhaps we recognise that our gladness or disappointment are, in some ways, perverse. We know that it might be inappropriate to feel sympathy for an immoral character, but we cannot help doing so.[140]

Following Tullmann's argument, three main features make an object fascinating. The object must be a *curiosity* — unusual, unique, different or exotic in some way — by any means out of our ordinary experience;[141] it must be *attractive*, either physically or mentally, and, lastly, it must be cognitively *interesting*. In other

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[138] Ibid., 123.

[139] This passage refers to Dostoevsky's "hideous, cynically innocent, unbelievably repellent, all-too-human" characters, in Wallace, David Foster, *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (London: Abacus, 2005), 265.

[140] Tullmann, "Sympathy and Fascination," 125.

[141] Ibid.

words, it must "inspire us to learn more about them, and we think that by doing so there will be some kind of payoff; we will gain some new experience, information or perspective on the world."[142]

Now, this may appear rather vague and generic. But two more factors intervene: what we are *not* shown about that character and what we would *not* normally expect from their villainous nature. We are once again led back to strategic opacity: the audience's attention is attracted towards the morally praiseworthy features of a person or character, thus shifting the focus away from that character's morally blameworthy features. The audience needs both primary information about the character's negative nature and an effective bait to distract their attention from the less-admirable aspects of the character's personality in favour of more laudable and relatable features that thereby mitigate the immoral component. In addition to that, they also need a 'way out', that is, something missing from the picture, which they can fill by means of their own imagination. This element, which implies a reader's active and creative participation, is particularly relevant in that it is what makes fascinating immoral characters complex and ultimately able to mismatch our expectations. For, as Wolfgang Iser writes, "a good literary work will usually frustrate our expectations."[143] Iser's theory of *implied reader* comes in handy to shed light on these last two factors at play.

According to the German literary scholar, when considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text, but also "the actions involved in responding to that text."[144] Iser suggests that said literary work can therefore be thought to have two poles: the "artistic" pole is the text created by the author, and the "aesthetic" pole refers to "the realisation accomplished by

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[142] Ibid.

[143] Iser, Wolfgang, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1974), 278.

[144] Ibid., 274.

the reader."[145] The literary work must lie "half-way between the two," and it comes into being only through the convergence of text and reader.[146] It is reading which brings the text to life; if the author were to present a story completely, the reader's imagination would have nothing to do. It is because the text has unwritten implications or "gaps"[147] that the reader can be active and creative, working things out for himself.[148] In this view, meaning is not an object to be found in a text, but an event of construction that occurs somewhere between the text and the reader.[149] Although a text is indeed a fixed world, meaning is realised by the way the reader connects the structures of the text to their own experience. Such element of ambiguity — the presence of wiggle room to formulate a personal interpretation — is essential to increase the reader's participation in building their own opinion of the character, filling the gaps with motives in resonance with their own, thus *projecting* themselves in the aesthetic object.

As Felski observes in *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, in fact, recognition — together with alignment, allegiance and empathy — leads to identification.[150] Recognising oneself in an aesthetic object means resonating, *attuning* with that object — being *attached* to it.[151] When a character, however immoral, shows the reader their inner torment, their weakness, if some information is missing, the reader will fill those gaps with rationale of their own making. This way, an

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[145] Ibid., 275.

[146] Ibid.

[147] This reminds of the "hole" in Greenblatt's theory.

[148] Mambrol, Nasrullah, "The Key Theories of Wolfgang Iser," published February 12, 2018, https://literariness.org/2018/02/12/key-theories-of-wolfgang-iser/.

[149] Schwáb, Zoltán, "Mind the Gap: The Impact of Wolfgang Iser's Reader-Response Criticism on Biblical Studies – A Critical Assessment," in *Literature & Theology*, 17, no. 2 (June, 2003), 170.

[150] Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, preface, Kindle.

[151] Ibid, chap. 1.

empathic connection is established, and the opaque nature of that character will allow the subject to indulge in a negative empathic response.

To conclude: uniqueness; a shift in perspective to elicit curiosity; gaps for the reader to fill and elusion of expectations — it is from such delicate balance that the cathartic power of negative empathy is unleashed. When Macbeth resolves he must have Banquo killed to prevent the Weird Sister's prophecy to become true, he does not simply give the order in a cold, detached way. He muses on the threat Banquo and his descendants pose to himself and his sovereignty:

> To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus:
> Our fears in Banquo stick deep,
> And in his royalty of nature reigns that
> Which would be feared. 'Tis much he dares,
> And to that dauntless temper of his mind,
> He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour
> To act in safety. There is none but he,
> Whose being I do fear; and under him
> My genius is rebuked, as it is said
> Mark Antony's was by Caesar. He chid the sisters
> When first they put the name of king upon me,
> And bade them speak to him. Then, prophet-like,
> They hailed him father to a line of kings.
> Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown
> And put a barren sceptre in my gripe,
> Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand,
> No son of mine succeeding. If't be so,
> For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind;
> For them, the gracious Duncan have I murdered;
> Put rancours in the vessel of my peace
> Only for them; and mine eternal jewel
> Given to the common enemy of man,

To make them kings, the seed of Banquo kings.

Rather than so, come fate into the list,

And champion me to th' utterance.[152]

We are first shown Macbeth's stifling dread for his once brother-in-arms, his fear to be less brave ("dauntless temper"), wise ("wisdom"), clever ("under him / My genius is rebuked") and therefore less worthy ("valour") — in a word, inferior to Banquo. Macbeth here discloses to the audience his terror of being alone and doomed to fall, since he is the last of his bloodline, unlike Banquo, he has no heirs (this psychological and biological terror is emphasised by two exceptionally strong words belonging in the reproductive semantic field: "fruitless" and "barren"). The grief, loneliness and hopelessness contained in the lines "Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown / And put a barren sceptre in my gripe" mark the apex of the inferiority Macbeth feels toward Banquo, who has, instead, "royalty of nature," and has been hailed "father to a line of kinds" by the sisters. Even more so, Macbeth fears he has stained his hands and conscience (giving his "eternal jewel," that is, his mortal soul, to "the common enemy of man," viz. the devil, thus showing that he is fully aware of the implications of his act) for nothing — or worse: for Banquo to succeed. This is unbearable; we perceive not only Macbeth's fear and anger, but also his shame for having defiled his own mind ("For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind," and in fact, from now on, Macbeth will rapidly lose his mental health) as well as his once pristine moral peace ("Put rancours in the vessel of my peace," which has already given way to excruciating agony and sense of guilt) of the soul and respect for his beloved king. Macbeth's despair is such that he eventually invokes fate and beseeches it to fight on his side against the likelihood of Banquo's sons taking over the throne.

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[152] Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 203-205.

In this passage, there is all we need to relate to and empathise with Macbeth's inner torment notwithstanding his being a murderer and quasi-tyrant. His relentless ambition, valiant feats on the battlefield and loyalty to the king and yet unquenchable thirst for power make him a rather unique (and controversial) character; a shift in perspective diverts our focus from his immoral qualities to the fact that he is, after all, human and therefore prey to fear, self-consciousness, jealousy, loneliness; by showing his weak spots (feeling of inferiority in relation to Banquo, manipulability with respect to Lady Macbeth and the witches), he eludes our expectations and, lastly, we are intrigued by some unresolved issues, some 'gaps' in the narrative: why do the Macbeths not have children? The fact that we do not precisely know the nature of Macbeth's previous friendship to Banquo prompts us to speculate on Macbeth's reasons to feel threatened by him and to develop this enmity in Banquo's regards. Also, why does Banquo not tell King Duncan about the prophecy to prevent his murder? Where does he lay his loyalty? He has, in Carol Rutter's words, "to beg the 'Merciful powers' to 'Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature / Gives way to in repose' (2.1.7-9) because he *needs* them restrained: he has been dreaming of witches (20)."[153] Why does Macduff not protect his family from slaughter, rather than fleeing on his own? Could he not imagine that his wife and children were in danger? How is it possible to trust a king (Malcolm) that proves his honesty by lying? And, obviously: how much does the prophecy affect Macbeth's actions? How much is he in control of his own fate? To what extent is he accountable for his deeds?

Much is left for us to conjecture. The missing pieces of information which allow negative empathy to arise, resonate with an analogous, inherent characteristic of affect: the fact that something in it remains unactualised, that

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[153] Rutter, Carol, in her introduction to Shakespeare, William, *Macbeth* (London: Penguin, 2005), lxvii.

something escapes. It is now time to take a step back from negative empathy to trace its origins to affect theory, and tackle the concept of affective escape.

1.6 Affective escape

Starting from principles of quantum mechanics (namely, the definitions of body, movement and the implied notion of superposition), Canadian philosopher and social theorist Brian Massumi gives a thorough account of what affect is and how it works in the first chapter of his publication *Parables for the Virtual*.[154] Drawing on the theories of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, whose collaborative work *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* Massumi has studied extensively and translated into English, the Canadian theorist builds an exhaustive argument on the autonomous, non-conscious, incipient nature of affect. Precisely because of its non-conscious quality, affect can be rather troublesome to grasp in practical terms. For this reason, Massumi chooses, as the title of his work suggests, *parables* — that is, the closest writing genre to example — to convey affect's *virtual* — i.e. real, but abstract — character. Here is how.

Once asserted that a body is such as long as it moves (movement) and feels (sensation), Massumi's purpose is to show how movement and its consequent sensation propel *change*. The first paradox we are faced with is positionality. If a body can be said to correspond to a precise site on a grid, to think of its positionality implies subtracting movement altogether from the picture. Were we to focus on a body's positionality, we would end up defining that body's movement in terms of beginning and endpoints, thus subordinating movement to the position it connects. In so doing, however, we would deprive movement of the notion of qualitative transformation, reducing it to mere 'displacement'.

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154 Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*.

We could therefore assert that considering positionality is misleading on the one hand, and that movement is, in fact, characterised by *indeterminacy* on the other. As a consequence, thinking a body in movement means accepting the paradox that there is an *incorporeal* dimension to it. Because movement is non decomposable (it cannot be broken down into beginning and endpoints, or we would nullify it), it can be said to consist in a *dynamic unity*. Metaphorically, it is possible to think of movement's dynamic unity as the quantum principle of superposition. In a nutshell, superposition is the ability of a quantum system to be in multiple states at the same time until it is measured.[155] In order for us not to disrupt the movement of a body, we can only think of it as in a state of superposition — that is, as occupying multiple positions at once. Yet, if we were to observe and measure that movement, we would have to stop it, interrupting it and therefore, basically, ending it. To express such conundrum in Bergson's words, we could say that whenever we try and stop the world in thought, we think away its unity, the continuity of its movements. We are looking at only one dimension of reality, when, in fact, reality is multi-dimensional.[156]

With movement, as anticipated before, comes *sensation*. Massumi equates sensation to intensity. American philosopher William James suggests that the vast majority of sensations are non-conscious, whereby non-conscious does not equal unconscious, in that repression does not apply to non-conscious perception[157] (though it surely does to unconscious perception). Now, the indeterminacy of movement and the intensity of sensation make up the virtual,

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[155] For further information on the subject, see the Schrödinger's cat experiment and, among others, the following works: Silverman, Mark P*., Quantum Superposition: Counterintuitive Consequences of Coherence, Entanglement, and Interference* (Berlin: Springer Science & Business Media, 2008); Griffiths, David J., *Introduction to Quantum Mechanics: Pearson New International Edition* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2013); Sakurai, J. J. & Jim Napolitano, *Modern Quantum Mechanics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) and "Parallel Worlds Probably Exist. Here's Why" on Youtube channel Veritasium, published March 6, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTXTPe3wahc.

[156] Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual,* 6.

[157] Ibid., 16.

incorporeal nature of affect. Indeterminacy and intensity can only be thought as *open systems*, which, as a consequence, imply a certain amount of ambiguity, abstraction and subjectivity. Going back to the title *Parables for the Virtual*, we are now able to understand Massumi's conceptual and semiotic choice. Examples are neither general, nor particular; they rather epitomise the general by means of a singular, particular manifestation. Likewise, concepts only acquire meaning when they are put in relation to other concepts; by themselves, they do not hold any fixed semantic content. That is why they are considered open systems, and, as such, are translated, respectively, into parables — exemplary formulations — and virtual figurations resulting from a body's fundamental incorporeality.[158]

After such a long premise, it is now possible to postulate a definition of affect. So far, it has been established that affect is an intensity, an autonomous reaction (as it does not depend on our will and, in a way, has a life on its own), that it is non-conscious (it predates cognition), non semiotically ordered and, consequently, non correspondent to qualification. Affect resists qualification because, although it is a static emotional state, it is so brimming with potential, that it comes to represent a state of suspense, of quasi-disruption.[159] The result of this in-between state is that affect is neither passive — as it is filled with motion — nor active, as the motion it implies "is not of the kind that can be directed toward practical ends."[160] Whilst affect is an unqualified intensity, not ownable nor recognisable, and therefore endowed with an autonomic nature, it can, nevertheless, lead to *emotion*. Emotion is, in turn, tied to subjective content deriving from personal experience, hence it can be defined as a qualified intensity, owned and recognised. What separates affect from its offspring — emotion — is the intervention of consciousness. Affect is too rich to be

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[158] Ibid., 21.

[159] Ibid., 26.

[160] Ibid.

expressed, for it contains infinite potential. It is overfull;[161] after a temporary, non-conscious gap in which affect takes place, consciousness is set in motion and, due to its subtractive, limitative power, it reduces affect's complexity into one, single, diversified emotional response. In the face of this process, we could add to affect's definition the fact that it is an *incipience*, the beginning of a selection, among "mutually exclusive pathways of action and expression, all but one of which will be inhibited, prevented from complete actualisation."[162] It is the point of emergence and the vanishing point of resonating levels delimited by binary oppositions. Lastly, Massumi leads us to the realisation that, by its autonomous nature, affect escapes confinement. It is "the simultaneous participation of the virtual in the actual and the actual in the virtual, as one arises from and returns to the other. (...) *Its autonomy is its openness.*"[163]

Pulling the strings of Massumi's argument means acknowledging the fact that emotions are the result and the most intense expression of affect's capture, in which something has escaped, has remained unactualised. In truth, everything but one single pathway has remained unactualised. Massumi argues that, if there were no escape, excess or fade-out,

> the universe would be without potential, pure entropy. (...) When the continuity of affective escape is put into words, it tends to take on positive connotations. For it is nothing less than the *perception of one's own vitality*, one's sense of aliveness, of changeability (often signified as freedom). One's "sense of aliveness" is a continuous, nonconscious self-perception.[164]

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[161] Evidence of this can be found in the two experiments reported in Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 28-29, which show that the time frame in which affect occurs measures 0.5 seconds.

[162] Ibid., 30.

[163] Ibid., 35.

[164] Ibid., 35-36.

At this point, if we regard the controversial aesthetic experience of negative empathy in terms of affect, the feelings of pleasure and fascination it stirs in the subject appear to make much more sense. Regardless of the qualification the emotions generated by affect take on in conjunction with the intervention of consciousness, the experience of affective escape invariably stimulates the subject's vitality — the "sense of aliveness" stressed by Massumi. To put it in simplistic terms: it does not matter whether the emotions we feel are positive, negative or mixed, as long as they are strong enough to make us feel roused and alive. This also provides an explanation to Keen's aforementioned claim that strong emotions seem to heavily influence readers' involvement and empathic participation. The stronger the affective charge, the more intense the cathartic release, the greater the final relief and thus the subject's participation and appreciation of the aesthetic experience.

One last thing to take into account in Massumi's analysis of affect is the power of speech, which brings us back to the section on Gorgias' rhetoric presented earlier in this thesis. In one of the experiments listed in the chapter "The Autonomy of Affect," it appears that linguistic expression can amplify the intensity of affect. In short, the experiment was run as follows. Groups of nine-year-old children were shown three versions of the same short film, depicting the story of a man building a snowman in his garden and taking it to the mountains before it melts. The first version was wordless; the second and third versions had voice-overs, instead. In the second version, the voice-over was *factual* — it added a simple step-by-step account of the action as it happened. The third version's voice-over was *emotional*, including, at crucial turning points, words connoting the sequence of images with emotional depth. When the children rated the three version on a scale of "pleasantness," it turned out that the first version was the most pleasant, slightly above the third, emotional one. The second, factual version, in turn, was rated as the least pleasant and least remembered. On top of that, when the subjects were asked to rate the short

film's individual scenes both on a "happy-sad" and "pleasant-unpleasant" scale, results showed that "sad scenes were rated the most pleasant; the sadder the better."[165]

This would seem muddling, unless we turn our attention to the affective aspect of the experience. The children equated arousal with pleasure. The non correspondence between quality and intensity is here outstandingly evident. When linguistic expression enters the picture, it interacts with the affective experience in two ways: resonance or interference. In the case of the factual description of the events taking place in the film, there is an overlapping, a doubling of the film's contents. Matter-of-factness dampens intensity, because it *interferes* with it in a redundant way. On the contrary, the emotional narration of the voice-over represents an addition to the images' effect, and thus enhances the affective experience by amplifying its intensity. What occurs in this instance is *resonation*.

In the light of these findings, a better understanding of the power of speech can be gained. In the aesthetic sphere, rhetoric can significantly impact a subject's empathic response and cathartic fruition of art. One last example will take us to a definitive formulation of the factors involved in negative empathy. Here is Robinson's last speech before being shot by his own — unmerciful and blackmailer — fiancé in Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night*. It is an inflamed speech against love in a desperate attempt to definitively reject and get rid of the woman, but also as an overt outlet of Robinson's own unbearable "private darkness"[166] — the bleak hopelessness arising from his irreversible proletarian condition. It is a scathing rebellion against the bourgeois idea of love.

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[165] Ibid., 23.

[166] Céline, Louis-Ferdinand, *Journey to the End of the Night* (Richmond: Alma Classics, 2012), 267.

"Wrong!" he shouted. "I've got plenty of courage, as much as you!... Only, if you want the whole truth... everything — absolutely everything! — disgusts me and turns my stomach! Not just you!... Everything!... And love most of all!... Yours as much as anyone else's! (...) All the sentiment you trot out to make me stick with you hits me like an insult, if you want to know... And to make it worse, you don't even realise it, you're the one that's rotten, because you don't understand!... You're satisfied repeating the rubbish other people say... You think it makes sense... People have told you there's nothing better than love, they've told you it'll go down with everybody, everywhere and always, and that's good enough for you... Well, I say fuck their love!... You hear?... Their putrid love doesn't go down with me... not any more! (...)

Why do you have to make love, considering all the things that are happening?... All the things we see around us!... Or are you blind?... More likely you just don't give a damn! You wallow in sentiment when you're a worst brute than anybody... You want to eat rotten meat?... With love sauce?... Does that help it down?... Not with me!... If you don't smell anything, it's your hard luck! Maybe your nose is stuffed up! If it doesn't disgust you, it's because you're stupid, the whole lot of you... You want to know what it is that comes between you and me?... All right, I'll tell you! A whole life is what comes between you and me... Isn't that enough for you?"[167]

After 400 pages of war trauma, infinite troubling adventures and frantic, yet unsuccessful endeavours to uplift his living conditions, we are driven to empathise with Léon Robinson — the protagonist's shameless foil and war companion — despite his immoral, wretched conduct. At this point in the novel, we have spent considerable time with him and his anguish, having met his character at almost every step of Bardamu's tormented existence. We know that he has suffered extreme poverty, probable shell shock, general failure in every enterprise he has undertaken. Not even his childhood was carefree, marred instead by repugnance and violence: "Robinson's childhood had been so dismal

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[167] Ibid., 400.

he didn't know what to say when he thought of it. (…) [H]e couldn't find anything, even in the far recesses, that didn't make him sick with despair; it was like a house full of repugnant, foul-smelling objects: brooms, slop jars, housewives and smacks in the face."[168]

One may certainly have a different, less cynic view of love. Yet, can we blame Robinson for being repelled by the very idea of love, in a world so deplorable and unjust that it makes love a commodity only reserved to the privileged? Is it really possible for him to *feel* love, "considering all the things that are happening" — war, misery, abjection? We know that Robinson has been recovering from sight loss due to the explosion of a booby trap in his face, during his attempt to kill Grandma Henrouille in exchange of money. It is ironical that he accuses his fiancé of being blind when the squalor of the world is so clear to him, even though he is visually impaired. Also, everyone knows at least someone who deludes themselves with "rotten meat with love sauce."

The pathos of Robinson's speech, his dire sincerity, his unassailable rhetoric, the fact that his condemnation is not only addressed to Madelon, but to the whole of humanity, especially the hypocritical cowards who refuse to acknowledge the truth simply because it hurts, have a powerful affective response in the reader, and stir strong emotions. Robinson comes to epitomise the underdog who refuses to accept the destiny of the oppressed life has reserved for him. It is instinctive to side with the downtrodden, knowing what they have been through. The reader is well aware of the darkness Robinson has experienced, both metaphorically and physically speaking (as a result of the explosion accident mentioned above):

He stretched his arms out in his darkness as fare as he could, as if he were trying to touch the end of it. He didn't want to believe it. His own private darkness. (…) He was crying. He too had come to the end. There was nothing

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[168] Ibid., 269.

more we could say to him. A time comes when you're all alone, when you've come to the end of everything that can happen to you. It's the end of the world. Even grief, your own grief, doesn't answer you any more (...).[169]

Robinson's speech conquers the reader's empathy because it complies with the three main factors that, according to Ercolino and Fusillo, cause negative empathy for a literary character: psychological depth, rhetorical ability and inner torment. We need the first to learn and understand the character's motives; the second to develop fascination and emotional engagement, and the third to empathise with their humanity and psychological complexity. To these, Greenblatt's strategic opacity can be added — a trait that amplifies the subject's curiosity and leniency, thus mitigating their judgement. There is, in fact, a delicate balance in how much the subject should know of the object: one must be able to comprehend the reasons behind a character's actions and mindset, yet something must escape knowledge in order to make room for mystery, ambiguity, mixed feelings as well as a fair share of unpredictability, which, as a result, makes the narration more intriguing and compelling. Moreover, deliberately withheld information on a character forces the reader to hypothesise, to make creative assumptions, thereby actively participating in the narration and bridging that strategic gap with their own personal contribution.

A final definition of negative empathy is summarised by Ercolino as follows:

negative empathy is an *aesthetic experience* that consists of a *cathartic empathising* with characters, figures, performances, objects, musical compositions, buildings, and spaces that have *both a seductive and disturbing* connotation, or ones that evoke a *primary and destabilising violence*, capable of triggering a profound *empathetic anguish* in the art consumer, and of asking them to undertake a *moral reflection* that pushes them to *assume an ethical position* (one that is not always determinable a

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[169] Ibid., 267.

priori, since it largely depends on those consumers' varied subjective reactions).[170]

In the face of all these aspects, a question arises. Could one argue that negative empathy allows to establish a tighter bond with aesthetic objects than regular empathy? The affective comprehension of a character appears more limited, when one stops at an empathic level, for that would always exclude the negative counterpart of that character's complexity. Incorporating the negative, on the other hand, expands the spectrum of comprehension, relatability and identification to a more all-encompassing scale. As we have seen, Keen argues that empathetic responses to fictional characters and situations are more likely to occur for negative emotions, irrespective of a match in experience.[171] Could it be that negative emotions foster a stronger fusional unity with the subject, contrary to what Lipps theorised? We will try to answer this question in the next chapter.

1.7 Consequences & applications: enhancing art reception

In *Affect and narrative: a model of response to stories*,[172] Miall argues that, in light of social cognition studies, affect is a "primary medium in which social episodes and information about the self are represented."[173] Affect, in other words, organises the resources of the self to interpret and supply meanings to a story. It supplies links between different parts of the narrative and sets an agenda of anticipated outcomes to guide the process of response. It does this,

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[170] Ercolino & Fusillo, *Negative Empathy - The Point of View of Evil*, 70.

[171] Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, xii.

[172] Miall, David S., "Affect and narrative: A model of response to stories," *Poetics* 17, no. 3 (1988): 259-272.

[173] Ibid., 259.

according to Miall, owing to three properties: (1) *self-reference*; (2) *anticipation* and (3) *domain-crossing*.

Comprehension and response to reading take place on two levels. What Miall calls the "primary code" consists in "relating the text to existing knowledge of the world, which can be described as codes, frames, schemata etc."[174] If this is insufficient, due to an ambiguous reading experience, or if there is conflict between schemata, a secondary, aesthetic code intervenes, which "represents the search for a more adequate framework for relating the given parts of the text."[175] This secondary code requires the reader's interpretative activity. Affect takes over when schemata are insufficient and the reader is in a state of uncertainty; they thus consult the affective significance of the situation for the self (*self-reference*). What happens next is that affect guides the formation of an adequate schema for the new affective response that fits the narrative. Affect can therefore be said to anticipate the development of schema-based understanding (*anticipation*). Lastly, if, as Miall reports, "the initial schemata of response to a narrative are proved inadequate, a search for alternative concepts beyond the domain of those schemata must be set in motion,"[176] in order to construct a more satisfactory interpretative framework in remote domains. In this sense, the process of affect is cross-domain, as concepts in the focal domain are reinterpreted according to concepts from a more remote domain (*domain-crossing*).

What emerges from Miall's analysis is that affect plays a major role in powering the reader's interpretative activity. This translates into a greater engagement and a more active participation in the aesthetic experience, as

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[174] Ibid., 260.

[175] Ibid., 261. Here, Miall also draws on Iser, Wolfgang, *The Act of Reading* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

[176] Ibid.

opposed to the passive fruition of predictable, reassuring, ready-to-consume, unambiguous mainstream narratives.

Another theory worth taking into account when it comes to affect and empathy is Higgins's self-discrepancy model, at the centre of which is the relation of the self to empathy. Most academic studies on empathy focus on how it facilitates altruism, thus prioritising potential prosocial applications over the nature of empathy per se. Paradoxically enough, however, there is a narcissistic, egoistic side to empathy that altruism-oriented researchers tend to fail to observe, and that Higgins's model, in turn, exposes. In "Empathy and the Self: Cognitive and Emotional Influences on the Evaluation of Negative Affect in Others,"[177] David Houston explores "one possible set of antecedents for empathy,"[178] employing Higgins's theory to point out the self-related nature of empathy and the egoistic concerns at the root of identification. Houston's definition of empathy consists of both affective and cognitive components: "a vicarious affective response to another's distress, combined with a cognitive awareness of the other's internal states,"[179] but he adds that "an individual's cognitive representations of the self and related affective states could influence how that individual responds to another's distress, particularly if such distress appears to be due to self-related factors."[180] Higgins's self-discrepancy model[181] provides a framework for examining the relation of the self to reactions and emotions in others. The model is based on the principle that people possess

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[177] Houston, David A., "Empathy and the Self: Cognitive and Emotional Influences on the Evaluation of Negative Affect in Others," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 59 no. 5 (1990): 859–868. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.59.5.859.

[178] Ibid., 859.

[179] Ibid. Here Houston quotes Hoffman's definition from Hoffman, Martin L. "Interaction of affect and cognition in empathy," in C. E. Izard, J. Kagan, & R. B. Zajonc (eds.), *Emotions, cognition, and behavior*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 103-131.

[180] Ibid., 860.

[181] Higgins, Edward T., "Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self and affect," *Psychological Review*, 94 (1987)*:* 319-340.

cognitive representations of three different aspects of the self. The *actual self* (1) is one's representation of the attributes that they believe to possess; it is a person's basic self-concept. The *ideal self* (2) is one's representation of the attributes that one would ideally like to possess (i.e., hopes, aspirations, wishes). The *ought self* (3) is the representation of the attributes that a person believes they ought to possess (i.e., duties, obligations, responsibilities).[182]

The ideal and ought selves act as *self-guides*, whereas a s*elf-discrepancy* occurs when attributes of the actual self fail to match attributes of the ideal or ought self-guides. As Houston reports, in a number of studies, Higgins and his colleagues found that "greater magnitude of self-discrepancy is associated with greater magnitude of emotional distress and different types of discrepancy are associated with different types of chronic negative emotions and symptoms:"[183] discrepancies between the actual self and ideal self lead to the absence of positive outcomes and are associated with *dejection-related* emotions; discrepancies between the actual self and ought self signify the presence of negative outcomes and are associated with *agitation-related* emotions.[184] Such discrepancies are termed *emotional vulnerabilities*, because they leave the individual vulnerable to a specific emotional distress. Regan & Totten claim that the sharing of emotional vulnerabilities increases empathy by enhancing an observer's perceived similarity to the target and by facilitating the observer's ability to view events from the target's perspective.[185] In other words: subjects tend to show greater empathy towards targets with whom they share the same kind of self-discrepancy. In the light of Higgins's theory and Houston's detailed

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[182] Ibid.

[183] Houston, "Empathy and the Self: Cognitive and Emotional Influences on the Evaluation of Negative Affect in Others," 860.

[184] Higgins, "Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self and affect."

[185] Regan, Dennis T. & Judith Totten, "Empathy and attribution: Turning observers into actors," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 32 (1975): 850-856.

account of various experiments on the matter,[186] self-referentiality seems to be at the core of identification processes and, consequently, empathic responses. Houston's study suggests that shared experience of distress seems to play a major role in eliciting a strong empathic bound than sympathetic abilities, accentuating yet again negative emotions' more substantial affective charge compared to positive ones. This could prove true for the aesthetic sphere as well. Cogent evidence of negative emotions' superiority in the engagement in and enjoyment of art can be found in Menninghaus's (et al.) *Distancing-Embracing model of the enjoyment of negative emotions in art reception*.[187]

In their compelling study, Menninghaus and colleagues address and shed light on the much discussed (apparent) paradox: "why are negative emotions so central in art reception far beyond tragedy?"[188] The widespread appreciation of art forms eliciting sadness and melancholy (mainly operas, poems, plays, music and films), horror (films and novels), and even disgust (especially photography and installation art) tells us that negative emotions play a truly pivotal role in contemporary art and entertainment. At the base of Menninghaus's argument is the principle according to which "exposure to artworks is widely believed to be driven by hedonic expectations and actual hedonic reward."[189] Only positive emotions, however, are known to support hedonic approach behaviour, whereas "negative affect primes avoidance, defensive action responses, or hostile approach behaviour. Self-sought hedonic exposure to negative emotions in art reception has therefore come to be called a 'paradox.'"[190] Moreover, psychological research suggests that negative emotions are more likely to

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[186] Reported in Houston, "Empathy and the Self: Cognitive and Emotional Influences on the Evaluation of Negative Affect in Others," 860-867.

[187] Menninghaus et al., "The Distancing-Embracing Model of the Enjoyment of Negative Emotions in Art Reception."

[188] Ibid., 1.

[189] Ibid., 2. For further information, see in-text references.

[190] Ibid.

induce high intensity of subjective feeling as well as to motivate sustained attention and privileged storage in memory:[191] exactly what arts strive for, according to poetics. It follows that negative emotions appear a perfect match to enhance art reception. Menninghaus's model aims at solving such paradox by tackling the question: how can the arts employ the potential of negative emotions to secure attention, intense emotional involvement, and high memorability without recipients experiencing the nonhedonic consequences of negative affect?[192] The answer to this intriguing question comes with two complementary processing factors.

The *Distancing* factor (1) consists of the cognitive schemata of art, representation,[193] and fiction, which modify the appraisal of negative emotions. These schemata keep negative emotions at psychological distance — a feature we have already encountered first in Burke ("terror is a passion which always produces delight when it does not press too close"), then in Freud ("aesthetic illusion"), in Jauss ("the anthropological model of inner distance") and, lastly, in Keen ("fictional safe zones"). Such distance, Menninghaus claims, safeguards "the hedonic expectations of art reception against being inevitably compromised by the experience of negative emotions."[194]

The second group of processing components, the *Embracing* factor (2), positively integrates the power of negative emotions to make art reception more emotional, intense, interesting, and, as a result, more rewarding. It includes five components [**Figure 1**]:

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[191] Ibid., 3.

[192] Ibid.

[193] By "representation," the model refers to "events or scenarios that are not co-extensive in time and/or space with what they represent." Representations therefore "support only *distanced*, *indirect*, and *incomplete exposure*. This should, in principle, work in favour of a psychologically more distanced response." Ibid., 7.
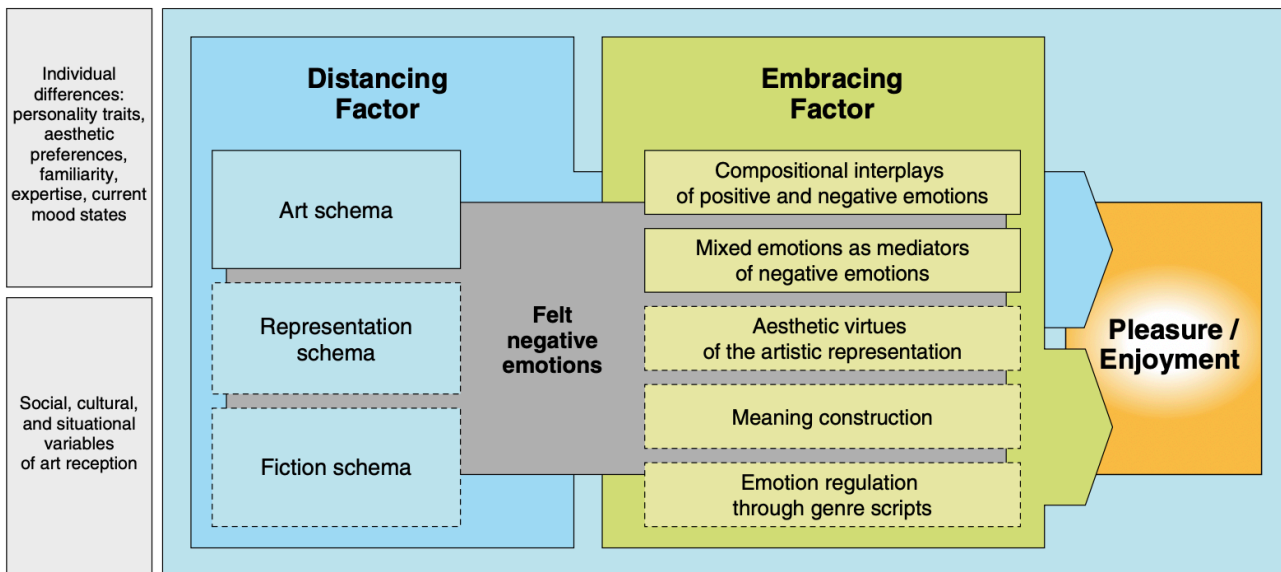
[194] Ibid.

Figure 1. Menninghaus et al., "The Distancing-Embracing model of the Enjoyment of Negative Emotions in Art Reception," 3. — Solid rectangles indicate the processing components that are always involved in making negative emotions enjoyable, whereas the dashed rectangles indicate components that are likely to be only occasional contributors to such enjoyment.

(1) compositional *interplays of positive and negative feelings* are hypothesized to render art processing richer in emotional variation and less prone to induce boredom than types of pleasure that involve exclusively positive feelings; (2) concomitant *mixed emotions* are hypothesized to serve as bipolar mediators for incorporating negative emotions into positive enjoyment; (3) *aesthetic virtues* of the artistic representation itself promote dimensions of liking and enjoyment, thereby creating a (more) positive environment for the processing of concomitant negative emotions; (4) processes of (symbolic) *meaning construction* can redeem negative emotions on the level of higher cognitive processes; and (5) the emotion-regulatory implications of particular acquired *genre scripts*, such as the power of the normative happy end of (prototypical) fairy tales, allow readers/listeners to go through the preceding dire situations of need and conflict in a less desolate way than could be expected in the absence of an established mental model of a fairy tale.[195]

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[195] Ibid., 3-4.

In the case of non-mainstream, non-mythical and non-folkloric narratives, and therefore in line with the purpose of this dissertation, the fifth component should be discarded in place of the suspense-inducing implications of surprise-arousing scripts, which further enhance negative affect's disruptive power. The eight components included in the model imply a variety of cognitive and perceptual processes occurring at different points before, during and after the exposure. Each component is hypothesised to exert specific emotion-regulatory/transformative effects on the processing of negative emotions;[196] at least one component of the Distancing factor and one component of the Embracing factor need to be combined to explain the pleasure deriving from negative emotions in art reception. Also, it is worth noting that the Distancing-Embracing model here summarised exclusively accounts for the immediate experiential correlates of exposure to artworks that elicit negative emotions. Short-, medium-, or long-term functional benefits for psychological well-being that might arise from experiences of this type — i.e., catharsis — are left out of the investigation. Menninghaus's model thereby comes to supply a valid answer to a question at the heart of this dissertation: how can negative feelings translate into pleasure?

It becomes clear that the Distancing factor constitutes the premise, the underlying foundation of the Embracing factor, which, similarly to the Magnum Opus in the Hermetic tradition — the alchemical process that transmutes lead into gold — sublimates negative affect into pleasure. We will dive deeper into this alchemical metaphor and the here unaccounted cathartic consequences of such transformation in the next chapter, through Jung's psychoanalytic theory of individuation process. For now, in view of Menninghaus's study, suffice it to recapitulate that, within the aesthetic domain, negative emotions increase: *emotional intensity*, *aesthetic enjoyment*, *sustained attention* and *memorability* of the artworks that elicit them.

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[196] Ibid., 4.

A concrete example of how the Distancing-Embracing factor works can be found in "Free Churro," the 55th overall episode of American animated TV series *BoJack Horseman*. An analysis of "Free Churro" will show how negative emotions enhance the viewer's appreciation of the episode and, consequently, its general reception. Specifically the 6th episode of the 5th season, "Free Churro" is written by *BoJack Horseman* series creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg and directed by Amy Winfrey. The peculiarity of this episode lies in the fact that, except for an initial cold open[197] flashback, it takes place in one long sequence centred on a 22-minute-long monologue delivered by the anthropomorphised horse protagonist BoJack at his mother's funeral. Will Arnett, who voices both BoJack and his father Butterscotch in the brief cold open, is the only voice actor to appear in the episode. In his long eulogy, BoJack struggles to talk about his mother, and does not hide the fact that he considers her guilty of his unhappy childhood. He therefore strays away from the dedicated commemoration a eulogy would suppose, repeatedly digressing into anecdotes, dark humour and the story after which the episode is titled: a Jack in the Box cashier who gave him a free churro when he mentioned Beatrice's death. The uninterrupted, "impassioned, blissfully self-centred and inappropriately hilarious eulogy"[198] takes place in one room, with BoJack standing behind a podium, and consists in three discrete camera angles that reflect the mini-stories within the episode, "where BoJack switches between talking about his mother, riffing on things and telling funny stories."[199]

By this 5th season, spectators are obviously well aware — and, in all likelihood, oddly appreciative — of BoJack's personality: that of a selfish,

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[197] A cold open, also called teaser sequence, is a narrative technique used in films and television to jump directly into a story at the beginning of the show, before opening credits and title are shown. In American television, this is often done for commercial purpose, on the theory that immediately involving the audience in the plot will prevent them from switching from a show during the first scenes.

[198] Sarto, Dan, "'BoJack Horseman Director Amy Winfrey Serves up a 'Free Churro,'" published August 26, 2019, https://www.awn.com/animationworld/bojack-horseman-director-amy-winfrey-serves-free-churro.

[199] Ibid.

egomaniac, self-destruction-prone, unsympathetic, substantially immoral former Hollywood star. They are also aware of BoJack's abusive and almost totally loveless childhood — that an only child blamed by both parents for their own unsuccessful, miserable existences — which provides a solid reason for the spectator's indulgence towards the antihero's blameworthy, though, for the most sympathetic, excusable behaviour. Negative empathy toward BoJack certainly serves as catalyst for the show's success: the protagonist's ambivalent effect on the audience — contemptible on the one hand, pitiful on the other — is clear since the very first episode of the series, when one is immediately plunged into BoJack's deplorable lifestyle as well as into his utterly joyless upbringing. What the audience appreciate the most about BoJack, though, is probably his genuine capacity to disrupt commonsensical attitudes and tabooed issues with his nihilistic, cynically funny outspoken assertions. The fact that BoJack is so shameless in articulating what most people probably feel but are unable to express due to religious, societal or self-imposed ethical restraints, is what makes him a hero of our hypocritically prude, overly politically correct time and a fearless herald of painful truths.

The cathartic power of the series lies in a perfect mixture of comedy and tragedy; as we have seen in Jauss' definition of cathartic identification, in fact, tragic relief and comic laughter are two sides of the same coin. *BoJack Horseman* combines both in an outstandingly powerful cathartic staging of life's meaninglessness, and loneliness resulting from human (and other-than-human, given most characters' animal features) unescapable inability to communicate. It is precisely in such lack of communication, disarmingly exacerbated in the face of death, that the strength of "Free Churro" lies. Considered by the series creator as the inverse of season 3 episode "Fish Out of Water," which is almost entirely silent and, similarly, hinges upon the impossibility to express one's remorse and truly communicate, "Free Churro" begins with a disheartening flashback in which Butterscotch vents his frustration and unhappiness upon a quiet, innocent

young BoJack on a drive home. In a soliloquy that brims with patriarchal stereotypical gender demands, homophobic clichés, and mortifying, abusive reproaches, Butterscotch blames BoJack and Beatrice for his own failure as a writer. After the theme, we are presented with the sequence that will dominate the entire episode: adult BoJack delivering an ironically poignant eulogy that has more to do with his own need to be seen and recognised by his mother and the world, than with paying tribute to her memory as the occasion would require. He immediately starts digressing:

Here's a story. When I was a teenager, I performed a comedy routine for my high school talent show. There was this cool jacket that I wanted to wear because I thought it would make me look like Albert Brooks. For months, I saved up for this jacket. But when I finally had enough, I went to the store and it was gone. They had just sold it to someone else. So, I went home and I told my mother, and she said, "Let that be a lesson. That's the good that comes from wanting things." She was really good at dispensing life lessons that always seemed to circle back to everything being my fault.

But then, on the day of the talent show, my mother had a surprise for me. She had bought me the jacket. Even though she didn't know how to say it, I know this meant that she loved me.

Now that's a good story about my mother. It's not true, but it's a good story, right? I stole it from an episode of *Maude* I saw when I was a kid, where she talks about her father. I remember when I saw it, thinking, "That's the kind of story I want to tell about my parents when they die." But I don't have any stories like that. All I know about being good, I learned from TV. And in TV, flawed characters are constantly showing people they care with these surprising grand gestures. And I think that part of me still believes that's what love is. But in real life, the big gesture isn't enough. You need to be consistent, you need to be dependably good. You can't just screw everything up and then take a boat out into the ocean to save your best friend, or solve

a mystery, and fly to Kansas. You need to do it every day, which is so... hard.[200]

As Emma Mason points out in her essay on the show, "Hollywoo[201] sanctions the public exhibition of negative affective states, but encourages only superficial responses to them that collapse under the pressure of real emotion and pain."[202] BoJack seems well aware, in this passage, that he has been mistaking TV fiction for reality due to a substantial lack of real, parental education. Even more than that, he "is consistently aware of the relationship between a hostile affective world and the reparative quality of sadness[;] (...) caught within a culture driven by an impossible ideal of happiness, BoJack struggles to communicate with others only when he refuses the sadness that would enable such connection."[203] The audience's empathy is gaining, at this point, more and more ground:

> When you're a kid, you convince yourself that maybe the grand gesture could be enough, that even though your parents aren't what you need them to be over and over *and over* again, at any moment, they might surprise you with something... wonderful. I kept waiting for that, the proof that even though my mother was a hard woman, deep down, she loved me and cared about me and wanted me to know that I made her life a little bit brighter. Even now, I find myself waiting.[204]

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[200] Bob-Waksberg, Raphael, *BoJack Horseman*, season 5, episode 6, "Free Churro." Aired September 14, 2018, on Netflix, 7:32-9:00.

[201] 'Hollywoo' is the parodic double of Hollywood in which the series is set, with all the inconsistencies, superficiality and shallowness that comes with it.

[202] Mason, Emma, "'How do you not be sad?': Sadness and Communication in BoJack Horseman," published November 23, 2020, https://post45.org/2020/11/how-do-you-not-be-sad-sadness-and-communication-in-bojack-horseman/.

[203] Ibid.

[204] Bob-Waksberg, *BoJack Horseman*, "Free Churro," 9:00-9:27.

Now, BoJack shows himself in all his vulnerability — the vulnerability of a son naturally in need of love, affection, and recognition, who has been let down by both parents multiple times. The spectator's empathy escalates, as BoJack's argument goes on through yet another digression:

> I have this friend. And right around when I first met her, her dad died, and I actually went with her to the funeral. And months later, she told me that she didn't understand why she was still upset, because she never even liked her father. It made sense to me, because I went through the same thing when my dad died. And I'm going through the same thing now. You know what it's like? It's like that show *Becker*, you know, with Ted Danson? I watched the entire run of that show, hoping that it would get better, and it never did. It had all the right pieces, but it just — it couldn't put them together. And when it got canceled, I was really bummed out, not because I liked the show, but because I knew it could be so much better, and now it never would be. And that's what losing a parent is like. It's like *Becker*. Suddenly, you realise you'll never have the good relationship you wanted, and as long as they were alive, even though you'd never admit it, part of you, the stupidest goddamn part of you, was still holding on to that chance. And you didn't even realise it until that chance went away.[205]

The parallel with Hollywoo's TV-obsessed world continues, contributing to reinforce BoJack's dejected, disenchanted vision of life:

> You can't have happy endings in sitcoms, not really, because, if everyone's happy, the show would be over, and above all else, the show... has to keep going. There's always more show. And you can call *Horsin' Around*[206] dumb,

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205 Ibid., 22:36-23:38.

206 *Horsin' Around* is the sit-com that made BoJack famous in the 90s, when he was still young, naive, full of hope and striving for success.

or bad, or unrealistic, but there is nothing more realistic than that. You never get a happy ending, 'cause there's always more show.[207]

Yet, the real dramatic climax — the peak of misunderstanding and incompatibility between mother and son, is ultimately reached with the "I see you" anecdote. The last words Beatrice Horseman uttered before passing away have a bewildering effect on BoJack, who ponders for most of the monologue over all the possible meanings that unexpected "I see you" might have implied. Acceptance; simple recognition; a final moment of connection; a sort of threat; a mere objective statement; a delirious sign of her poor mental health; the acknowledgement of a shared painful condition — all viable options are dispelled when, digression after digression, it dawns on BoJack that raving, dying Beatrice was simply reading the ICU sign: Intensive Care Unit. So much for BoJack's last hopes of acceptance and recognition. The speech ends on a nihilistic, mournful note:

> My mother is dead, and everything is worse now, because now I know I will never have a mother who looks at me from across a room and says, "BoJack Horseman, I see you." But I guess it's good to know. It's good to know that there is nobody looking out for me, that there never was, and there never will be. No, it's good to know that I am the only one that I can depend on. And I know that now and it's good. It's good that I know that. So... it's good my mother is dead. (...) Beatrice Horseman was born in 1938, and she died in 2018, and I have no idea... what she wanted. Unless she just wanted what we all want... to be seen.[208]

The sharp irony of BoJack's conclusive realisation resonates and adds to that of the free churro episode: a cashier he had never met before, was kinder to him

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[207] Ibid., 20:57-21:16.

[208] Ibid., 23:35-24:30.

than his mother ever was. The sadness, disappointment and frustration raging inside BoJack strike the viewer through the blunt acknowledgement: "My mom died and all I got was a free churro."[209]

But this is not all. The ultimate scorn comes in the very last seconds, when BoJack, finally ready for a last goodbye, walks to the coffin, opens it and realises that he has been rambling in the wrong parlour, to an audience of geckos who have nothing to do with Beatrice Horseman. Credits break in and leave the viewer with the bitter, sudden awareness of yet another incomprehension, another demonstration of egoism, incompatibility, lack of care. There is no one to side with, in such drama. Nonetheless, it seems hard to despise BoJack, to condemn his striking imperfection and give up on his profound humanity. What we admire of BoJack, in the end, is the fact that he is not afraid to speak the truth, however painful it may be.

"Free Churro" shows not only that it is possible to keep the audience on the edge of their seat across a 20-minute-long, single-frame discomforting monologue, but also that its sorrowful content is successfully transformed into pleasure and appreciation, as a number of popularity rankings[210] of the show's best episodes demonstrate, where "Free Churro" invariably occupies a top three position.

"Free Churro" seems to perfectly comply with Menninghaus's claim that negative emotions induce intense emotional involvement, secure sustained attention and boost memorability, thus generally enhancing aesthetic enjoyment. The episode adheres to the Distancing factor's art and fiction schemata, as well as to at least three of the Embracing factor's components: (1)

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[209] Ibid., 22:10.

[210] Such as IMDb, Movieweb (https://movieweb.com/bojack-horseman-best-episodes-ranked/#ruthie-s4-e9), Collider (https://collider.com/best-bojack-horseman-episodes-according-imdb/#quot-free-churro-quot), CBR (https://www.cbr.com/bojack-horseman-imdb-netflix-best-episodes-imdb/#the-face-of-depression), Tilt (https://tilt.goombastomp.com/tv/the-10-best-bojack-horseman-episodes/), and Slashfilm (https://www.slashfilm.com/948186/the-best-bojack-horseman-episodes-ranked/), among others.

compositional *interplays of positive and negative feelings*, as BoJack's monologue stirs both positive enjoyment (his jokes are funny) and positive emotions such as sympathy toward his sad childhood, and negative feelings such as sadness, bitterness, anguish for life's meaninglessness and the inescapability of death — all of which make up emotional variation; (2) concomitant *mixed emotions*, as the viewer simultaneously experiences pity and contempt for BoJack, which complies with the incorporation of negative emotions into positive enjoyment; and the alternative fifth component, a surprise-arousing script, which induces suspense and baffles the spectator when their expectations of happy ending are not only not met, but they are also completely upended by a dispiriting finale.

In the light of all the so far examined theories, it is possible to assess that the role negative empathy plays in art reception, engagement and enjoyment is pivotal. Through its cathartic power, negative empathy's repercussions extend, as we have anticipated, beyond the aesthetic sphere, directly affecting the individual psychic dimension in ways that this inquiry can only assess by literary mediums. By virtue of the personal safety ensured by the fictional nature of artistic representations, and owing to the fact that "the arts clearly thrive on the human propensity *not* to consistently maintain a clear-cut distinction between imagination, fiction, and belief systems on the one hand, and reality on the other,"[211] in the next chapter we will come to terms with Mark Twain's assertion that "there is a charm about the forbidden that makes it unspeakably desirable."[212]

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[211] Menninghaus et al., "The Distancing-Embracing Model of the Enjoyment of Negative Emotions in Art Reception," 7.

[212] Twain, Mark, *Mark Twain on Common Sense: Timeless Advice and Words of Wisdom from America's Most-Revered Humorist* (New York City: Skyhorse Publishing, Inc., 2014), 31.

« Battle not with monsters, lest ye become a monster, and if you gaze long enough into the abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you. »

Friedrich Nietzsche

2. COAGULA

2.1 Releasing the repressed: aestheticising taboos for sublimation

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud argues that: "it is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilisation is built up on renunciation, how much it presupposes the non-satisfaction of powerful drives — by suppression, repression or some other means. Such 'cultural frustration' dominates the large sphere of interpersonal relations."[213] Owing to the fact that all civilisations have to contend with hostility, in order to serve the dual purpose of protecting human beings against nature and regulating their mutual relations,[214] individual liberty has to be reduced by the necessary restrictions an effective justice system inevitably entails. It is in the light of such compromise, that the paradox of love (and sexual drive) opens up: whilst in a civilisation love is essential for bringing people together, at the same time societies rely on laws, restrictions and taboos that try to suppress it. Although the love instinct (*Eros*) can be seized by society to bind its members together, an irreducible counterforce intrinsic in humankind, the aggressive — or destructive — instinct (*Thanatos*), opposes this tendency and must be either repressed or redirected against a rival culture. Civilisation therefore wields the power to curb and restrain these fundamental, complementary impulses. However difficult to accept, the human inclination towards death and destruction rests at the base of societal infrastructures, as the suppression of such instinct represents the very reason behind civilisation's need for restrictions.

Since the natural aggressiveness of the individual is suppressed by society, it is

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[213] Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), 49.

[214] Ibid., 39.

introjected, internalised, sent back to where it came from; it is directed against the individual's own ego. There it is taken over by a portion of the ego that sets itself up as the super-ego, (...) and is now prepared, as a 'conscience', to exercise the same severe aggression against the ego that the latter would have liked to direct towards other individuals. The tension between the stern super-ego and the ego that is subject to it is what we call a 'sense of guilt;' this manifests itself as a need for punishment.[215]

The super-ego punishes the ego both for committed transgressions (remorse) and for sins it has only fantasised about (guilt), as "even a person who has done no wrong, but merely recognises in [themselves] an intention to do wrong, may consider [themselves] guilty (...) — the intention is equated with the deed."[216]

It follows that guilt and repression of instinct are the price one pays in order to live in a harmonious community — to belong, that is, to a civilised society. "If civilisation imposes such great sacrifices not only on man's sexuality, but also on his aggressivity" Freud continues, "we are in a better position to understand why it is so hard for him to feel happy in it."[217] Often times, in fact, guilt is left unconscious and is experienced as anxiety or *discontent*[218] (hence the title of the work). To conclude, Freud reiterates that when an instinctual trend undergoes repression, its libidinal elements are turned into symptoms, and its aggressive components into a sense of guilt." Then, he wonders how the eternal battle between these heavenly powers will play out in mankind.

Before taking a closer look to repression, which will ultimately lead us to a better understanding of sublimation and, consequently, catharsis, it is worth summarising two fundamental principles upon which Freudian psychoanalysis stands: the division of mental life into consciousness and the unconscious, and

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[215] Ibid., 88.

[216] Ibid.

[217] Ibid., 74

[218] Ibid., 105.

the id, ego and super-ego set of concepts [**Figure 2**]. Consciousness is characteristically very transitory, as "an idea that is conscious now is no longer so a moment later, although it can become 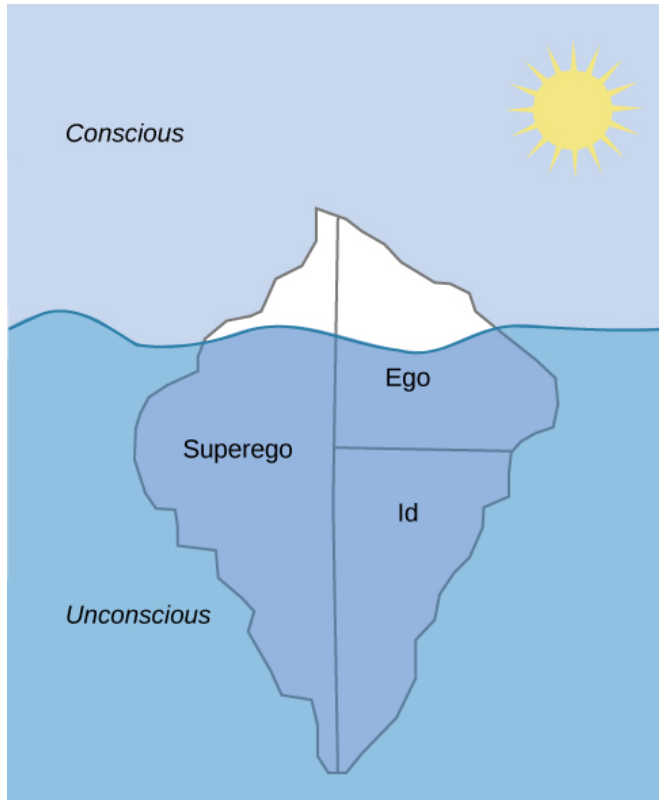so again under certain conditions (...). What the idea was in the interval we do not know. We can say that it was *latent*,"[219] meaning that it was capable of becoming conscious at any time, or it could also be called *unconscious*. The state in which the idea existed before being made conscious, is called *repression*, and Freud asserts that "the force which constituted the repression and maintains it is perceived as *resistance*."[220] The concept of unconscious is therefore obtained from the theory of repression, as the repressed serves as a prototype of the unconscious for

Figure 2. Structural iceberg — Topographical model of Freud's psyche activity. The iceberg theory is contained in: Freud, Sigmund, *The Unconscious – Standard Edition, vol 14* (London: Hogarth, 1915), 159-190.

psychoanalytical purposes. There are two kinds of unconscious: that which is latent but capable of becoming conscious (*preconscious*), and that which is repressed and not capable of becoming conscious in the ordinary way.

According to Freud, in every individual there is "a coherent organisation of mental processes"[221] called *ego*. The ego includes consciousness and the ability

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[219] Freud, Sigmund, *The Ego and the Id – Issue 12 of International psycho-analytical library* (London: Hogarth Press, 1927), 10.

[220] Ibid., 12.

[221] Ibid., 15.

to discharge excitations into the external world; it is "this institution in the mind which regulates all its own constituent processes, and which goes to sleep at night, though even then it continues to exercise a censorship upon dreams."[222] Ego, too, operates repression in its attempt to shut out certain trends in the mind, which, in turn, will exert a resistance against the ego. The *id*, on the other hand, is the part of the psyche where uncoordinated instinctual desires lie and where the pleasure principle[223] reigns supreme. The ego has the task to curb the instinctual tendencies of the id, and to impose the reality-principle on it; "the ego represents what we call reason and insanity, in contrast to the id which contains the passions."[224] The functional importance of the ego thus resides in the control it exerts upon the id, as Freud explains through the following metaphor:

> Thus in its relation to the id [the ego] is like a [person] on horseback, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse; with this difference, that the rider seeks to do so with [their] own strength while the ego uses borrowed forces. (…) Often a rider, if [they are] not to be parted from [their] horse, is obliged to guide it where it wants to go; so in the same way the ego constantly carries into action the wishes of the id as if they were its own.[225]

A third factor comes into play when a person feels guilty, bad, shameful or weak and therefore *compelled* to do something: the *super-ego*, which plays the critical and moralising role. The super-ego is an ideal ego (or *ego ideal*, viz. the

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[222] Ibid., 16.

[223] According to the American Psychological Association (APA) Dictionary, "The pleasure principle, in the classical psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud, is the psychic force that motivates people to seek immediate gratification of instinctual, or libidinal, impulses, such as sex, hunger, thirst, and elimination. It dominates the id and operates most strongly during childhood. Later, in adulthood, it is opposed by the reality principle of the ego." https://dictionary.apa.org/pleasure-principle, accessed March 1, 2023.

[224] Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 30.

[225] Ibid.

inner image of oneself as one wants to become) endowed with harshness and cruelty, by which it imposes on the ego a dictatorial *Thou shalt*. Freud purports that "the super-ego retains the character of the father, while the more intense the Oedipus complex was and the more rapidly it succumbed to repression (under the influence of discipline, religious teaching, schooling and reading), the more exacting later on is the domination of the super-ego over the ego — in the form of conscience or perhaps of an unconscious sense of guilt."[226] Its impulsive character manifests itself in the form of a categorical imperative.

This brings us back to the guilt and repression of instinct one feels as a consequence of giving up their individual freedom when agreeing on becoming part of a civilised society. Repression or denial are, according to the forefather of psychoanalysis, defence mechanisms the individual adopts to avoid knowing their unconscious motives and feelings. In Freud's psychoanalytic theory, in fact, the unconscious mind acts as a repository, a vessel of primal wishes and impulses kept at bay and mediated by the ego, under the guidance of the super-ego. It is, therefore, the place where our biologically based instincts (eros and thanatos) for the primitive urges for sex and aggression are stored, locked away from consciousness since they are so disturbing and threatening to our awareness, that they are unacceptable to our rational, conscious self. Because repressed material causes mental disturbances, the goal of psychoanalysis is to make the unconscious conscious through sublimation of the repressed, ultimately leading the patient to cathartic discharge, relief and thus healing.

According to Freud's psychoanalysis, sublimation is a mature defence mechanism in which socially unacceptable drives are transformed into socially acceptable actions or behaviour. Inasmuch as the process enables sexual instincts to be deflected into acts of higher social valuation, Freud believes that sublimation is a sign of civilisation, for it allows people to function normally in culturally acceptable ways. He therefore identifies it as "a particularly striking

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[226] Ibid., 45.

feature of cultural development, which makes it possible for the higher mental activities — scientific, artistic and ideological — to play such a significant role in civilised life."[227] What emerges from such analysis is a rather grim and demonised consideration of the unconscious, which will be harshly criticised and overturned by Jung's analytical psychology.

The civilisation-related constraints so far discussed from a Freudian angle, engender taboos — a concept Freud deals with in his controversial and hotly debated anthropological work *Totem and Taboos*. Starting from the assumption that "after all, taboo is not a neurosis but a social institution [*eine soziale Bildung*],"[228] Austrian psychologist reviews the prehistory and history of the most ancient tribes and civilisations, and draws on the theories of major anthropologists the likes of James George Frazer, William Robertson Smith, Johann Jakob Bachofen, Andrew Lang, and James Jasper Atkinson, as well as Charles Darwin, no less, to recognise in incest and parricide the only two universal taboos at the base of civilisation. Such assumption is the fruit of a speculation over the Darwinian theory of primal horde,[229] according to which in prehistory, humans lived in large groups — the simplest possible form of social formation — dominated by one older male, a tyrannical father, who was the only one entitled to possess all the females. Such "violent and jealous father," Freud writes, "keeps all the females for himself and drives away his sons as they grow up."[230] The sons hate their father, as he represents an obstacle, or rather *the* obstacle to their craving for power and sexual desires. At the same time, though, they love and admire him, as after all, he is their leader and point of reference. Eventually, hatred wins and the sons kill their father, thereby putting into effect

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[227] Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 49.

[228] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, chap 2, Kindle.

[229] This theory is described in Darwin, Charles, *The Descent of Man: And Selection in Relation to Sex* (United Kingdom, Murray, 1871).

[230] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, chap 4, Kindle.

their wish to identify with him — an affection that, according to Freud, had until then been repressed, "pushed under," but was nonetheless "bound to make itself felt."[231] It does so in a form of remorse, a sense of guilt. At this point, the image of the dead father undergoes a conversion in the sons' unconscious mind: it is idealised, heroicised and glorified to satiate the identification impulse. The father becomes a totem.[232] Under the spur of a 'deferred obedience' mechanism,[233] the young males

> revoked their deed by forbidding the killing of the totem, the substitute for their father; and they renounced its fruits by resigning their claim to the women who had now been set free. They thus created out of their filial sense of guilt the two fundamental taboos of totemism, which for that very reason inevitably corresponded to the two repressed wishes of the Œdipus complex. Whoever contravened those taboos became guilty of the only two crimes with which primitive society concerned itself.[234]

In his monograph *Taboo*,[235] Austrian-Hungarian ethnologist Franz Steiner analyses taboo as one of the major problematic terms of modern ethnography. The term, derived from Polynesian word 'tapu,' was adopted by Western scholars to refer to a generic set of ritual inhibitions governing the so-called 'savage

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[231] Ibid.

[232] A totem, according to Frazer, whose definition Freud reports in *Totem and Taboo*, "is a class of material objects which a savage regards with superstitious respect, believing that there exists between him and every member of the class an intimate and altogether special relation. The connection between a man and his totem is mutually beneficent; the totem protects the man, and the man shows his respect for the totem in various ways, by not killing it if it be an animal, and not cutting or gathering it if it be a plant. As distinguished from a fetish, a totem is never an isolated individual, but always a class of objects, generally a species of animals or of plants, more rarely a class of inanimate natural objects, very rarely a class of artificial objects." From Frazer, James George, *Totemism* (London: A. & C. Black, 1887), Kindle.

[233] Deferred obedience is a psychological phenomenon articulated by Freud, whereby a former rebel becomes subservient to the very rules and standards against which they had previously been rebelling.

[234] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, chap 4, Kindle.

[235] Steiner, Franz, *Taboo*, ed. Laura Bohannan (London: Routledge, 2004).

mind' of primitive societies. In short, for Steiner, taboo is concerned with: (1) social mechanisms of obedience with ritual significance; (2) specific restrictive behaviour in situations that are considered dangerous; (3) the protection of individuals exposed to such danger; and (4) the protection of society in general from those members who are endangered by taboo violations and are therefore considered, in turn, dangerous themselves. In Steiner's words, "taboo is an element of all those situations in which attitudes to values are expressed in terms of danger behaviour."[236]

According to the findings of Steiner's extended research in the field, it seems taboos have been brought to existence by an impulse to impose order. This theory perfectly fits both Freud's argument at the centre of *Civilisation and its Discontents*, and the relevance of the Oedipus complex as psychological combination of the two fundamental Freudian taboos[237] in producing an individual moral sense that dominates the conscious adult mind — the superego. To complete the picture, anthropologist and cultural theorist Mary Douglas traces taboos' ritual significance back to spiritual and religious motives; in her work *Purity and Danger*, Douglas sheds light on the differences between the sacred, the clean and the unclean in relation to order in secular and religious, primitive and modern life. In particular, Douglas deals with the threat taboos pose to common ideas of hygiene and purity, bridging the gap between past and present through a holistic approach that puts primitive and modern purity customs on equal footing. Douglas affirms, in fact, that

> dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is not because of craven fear, still less dread of holy terror. Nor do our ideas about disease account for the range of our behaviour in cleaning or avoiding dirt. Dirt offends against

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[236] Ibid., 21.

[237] Namely, parricide and incest, as previously reported.

order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment.[238]

To sum up: the origin of taboos dates back to the first, prehistoric human groups, and came to existence for the purpose of order. In a way, taboos prepared the ground for the advent of civilisation. With the rise of civilisation, individual freedom underwent restrictions in the name of the common good and taboos thereby consolidated. They survived over time and continue to be part of today's society, maintaining a strong connection with ideals of purity that have been and still are perpetuated and reinforced by primitive as well as modern religions. With demonisation of dirt and defilement, comes a stricter repression of the id. Inasmuch as taboos, in prehistoric and present societies alike, constitute a prohibition, taboo-related, instinctual pleasure-driven impulses of the id are buried ever deeper in the unconscious mind. When a subject comes across aesthetic representations of taboos, they are likely to feel enticed and inclined to pursue their curiosity. This brings us back to the protective character of the aesthetic experience. The subject's attention is captured; something, deep down in their unconscious quagmire, stirs and strives to surface; strong emotions are aroused — negative empathy is at play.

2.1.1 Parricide

In his article "Dostoevsky and Parricide,"[239] Freud argues that it is no coincidence that some of the greatest works of world literature — including *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, as well as *The Brother Karamazov* — all concern parricide. In Freud's psychoanalytical theory, the Oedipus complex is at the centre of individual growth and development from childhood to young adulthood, as

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[238] Douglas, Mary, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 2.

[239] Freud, Sigmund, "Dostoevsky and Parricide," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 26 (1945): 1-8.

one's mental health depends on a harmonious overcoming of the complex. If the Oedipus (or Elektra, the female equivalent) complex is not overcome, or trauma occurs in the process — this is the case, especially, when parental attitudes are excessively prohibitive or excessively stimulating — neurosis or other mental diseases are likely to manifest later on in adult life. It is worth bearing in mind that for Freud, the Oedipus complex only happens at a metaphorical, symbolic level; a child does not literally attempt at his father's life out of castration anxiety. The desire to kill one's father to protect (and sexually possess) one's mother bears a greater symbolic significance: that of becoming adult — that is, strong enough to defeat a grown man, the father — and sexually developed — physically able to possess the mother. In the following passage from Ágota Kristóf's *The Notebook,* the reader witnesses a literal and extremely brutal transposition of Freud's primal taboo. Twin brothers Lucas and Claus recount their childhood at their grandma's house in the city of K., an unidentified city in East Europe, during the war. They do so through a series of brief, factual entries in their notebook, which are presented to the reader in an unmediated way that bypasses the frame story of the novel, as if the reader, by accessing the notebook directly, were reading a true testimony. Such narrative form heavily intensifies the reader's involvement and emotional participation.

In the city of K., war has taken over, creating a parallel, 'otherly' world — some sort of dystopic disfiguration of the real world. Yet, no element suggests the unlikelihood or the unreality of such a setting. In this ambience of despair, abandon and hopelessness, the story of the twins unfolds and mesmerises the reader in a discomforting crescendo. The brothers' strategy to cope with their gloomy predicament (their father is off at war, their mother has abandoned them in K. under the supervision of their grandmother, who treats them like animals, and their living conditions are wretched) is an attempt at becoming emotionally numb. Once on their own, in fact, the twins must learn how to survive alone in the threatening wilderness: through hunger, dirt and cold, they are initiated into

the corruptions and horrors of a war-torn world.[240] Towards the end of the *Notebook*, the twins' father traces them down and pays them a visit at Grandmother's house, asking for help to cross the frontier. They instruct him on how to overcome the fence with two boards and cross the frontier at the right time, in between patrol rounds.

> "Go on, Father. We have twenty minutes before the next patrol arrives."
>
> Father puts the two boards under his arm, he moves forward, he places one of the boards against the fence, he climbs up.
>
> We lie face down behind the big tree, we cover our ears with our hands, we open our mouths.
>
> There is an explosion.
>
> We run to the barbed wire with the other two boards and the linen sack.
>
> Father is lying near the second fence.
>
> Yes, there is a way to get across the frontier: it's to make someone else go first.
>
> Picking up the linen sack, walking in the footprints and then over the inert body of our Father, one of us goes into the other country.
>
> The one who is left goes back to Grandmother's house.[241]

This passage is momentous in the narration, as it is the turn at which the "we" employed up to this moment gives way to a subject partition into two "ones." The twins have been a single authorial unity so far, yet they now split. What better event to mark their crossing the threshold of manhood? Having their father killed becomes a sort of initiation test into adult life, and they undoubtedly nail it.

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[240] Kakutani, Michiko, "BOOKS OF THE TIMES; Vicious and Virtuous Twins in a Fairy Tale," *The New York Times*, September 24, 1988, https://www.nytimes.com/1988/09/24/books/books-of-the-times-vicious-and-virtuous-twins-in-a-fairy-tale.html.

[241] Kristóf, Ágota, *The Notebook, The Proof, The Third Lie* (New York, Grove Press, 1997), 182-183.

In line with the above mentioned symbolic reading of parricide, another point is to be considered. When one thinks of the most widespread allegorical signification of *the father,* religious belief immediately springs to mind, as for the three major monotheistic religions, humans are all God's sons. God is the almighty patriarch who holds in check the world as we know it and human life. Slaying one's father might therefore come to epitomise a disavowal of faith, too. By refusing to trust and be subservient to anyone other than themselves, the twins fully embrace adult life and all the hardships that come with it in a totally independent fashion. Even more so, despite having constituted a single unity for years, Claus and Lucas now willingly become two separate entities. Parricide is thereby assigned an even greater importance — it is the incipience of each twin's individuation process.

The foundations for negative empathy can here be identified in the internal, first person (though plural) focalisation, as well as in the crude way in which the twins' world is presented. In the eerie, surreal dimension of K., a small community whose natural order, and any kind of established ethical values have been uprooted by war, things do not — *cannot* — work as usual. The protagonists' highly debatable moral, or rather immoral, conduct is framed in such a blighted backdrop that the reader cannot but empathise with them, whom Žižek calls "ethical monster[s] without empathy, doing what is to be done in a weird coincidence of blind spontaneity and reflexive distance, helping others while avoiding their disgusting proximity (…) [in a] place in which sentimentality [is] replaced by a cold and cruel passion."[242] Lucas and Claus might appear immoral to the reader's standards, yet "they stand for authentic ethical naivety at its purest."[243] In such a twisted world, it is hard for the reader

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[242] Žižek, Slavoij, "Ágota Kristóf's The Notebook awoke in me a cold and cruel passion," *The Guardian*, August 12, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/12/agota-kristof-the-notebook-slavoj-zizek.

[243] Ibid.

not to endorse the twins' ethical choices, and Kristóf's prose plays a key role in this regard:

> Due to its eery, simplistic prose, *The Notebook* reads like a children's fairy tale, yet one filled with imagery of violence, cruelty, and sexual perversion. The twins are a reflection of the world to which they were born, one where Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil' is conjured in the most shocking ways. As each chapter progresses, we are carried on a journey, taken further into the realm of surreality, yet forced to confront the truth of what we witness. The twins' callousness stands as a metaphor for the darkest episodes of 20th century European history.[244]

2.1.2 Incest

Freud's *Totem and Taboo* opens with a striking title: "the horror of incest."[245] Although cousin marriages were historically normalised (and desirable) in Europe until recent times — especially for the sake of inheritance and succession — and are to this day still common in non-Western societies,[246] sibling incest has a longer history of prohibition and demonisation, from prehistoric tribes to modern developed countries.[247] Literature, on the other hand, brims with instances of sibling (or half-sibling) incest, from Arthur and Morgaine to Catherine and Heathcliff. For the reasons listed in chapter 1 of this

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[244] Lowe, Simon, "Ágota Kristóf's 'The Notebook' is a tale of twisted morality and survival during wartime," *The Calvert Journal*, June 11, 2021, https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/12848/agota-kristofs-the-notebook-bleak-novel-war-review-calvert-reads.

[245] It is the title of the work's first chapter. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, chap 1, Kindle.

[246] According to various studies [i.e. Bennett, Robin et al., "Genetic Counseling and Screening of Consanguineous Couples and Their Offspring: Recommendations of the National Society of Genetic Counselors," *Journal of Genetic Counseling* 11, no. 2 (2002): 97-119, 10.1023/A:1014593404915; and Dwyer, James, *Family Law: Theoretical, Comparative, and Social Science Perspectives* (Boston: Aspen Publishing, 2014), in some non-Western societies, marriages between close biological relatives account for 20% to 60% of all marriages.

[247] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, chap 1, Kindle.

thesis, even the horror of incest becomes more palatable when narrated in the pages of a fiction book — that is to say when it takes on an aesthetic value.

Here we are presented with one of the most disturbing literary depictions of sibling incest, from Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden*.

> We began a long investigation of each other's body. (…) It went on until I had my fingers in Julie's mouth counting her teeth and we began to laugh at what we were doing. I rolled on to my back and Julie, still laughing, sat astride me, took hold of my penis and pulled it into her. It was done very quickly and we were suddenly quiet and unable to look at each other. Julie held her breath. There was something soft in my way and as I grew larger inside her it parted and I was deep inside. She gave out a little sigh and knelt forwards and kissed me lightly on the lips. She lifted herself slightly and sank down. A cool thrill unfurled from my belly and I sighed too. Finally we looked at each other. Julie smiled and said, 'It's easy.'[248]

How does 14-year-old first person narrator Jack (yet again another instance of negative empathy-inducing focalisation, although in this case the narrating voice maintains an uninvolved, detached tone) end up having sexual intercourse with his older sister Julie? This passage constitutes the climax of an escalating, masterfully built tension that seems to be already in motion when the novel opens. What also seems already in motion at the very beginning of the narration is an unresolved Oedipus complex at its most extreme within the confined space of a highly dysfunctional family. "I did not kill my father, but I sometimes felt I had helped him on his way. And but for the fact that it coincided with a landmark in my own physical growth, his death seemed insignificant compared with what followed."[249] So much is condensed in these first few lines, that the reader's interest is immediately captivated — the narrator's already evident disturbed

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[248] McEwan, Ian, *The Cement Garden* (London: Vintage, 2004), 136-137.

[249] Ibid., 9.

personality and an unnervingly promising anticipation being the engine for the reader's immediate involvement.

Jack, 17-year-old Julie, 13-year-old Sue and 6-year-old Tom live with their parents in an isolated house somewhere in the decayed outskirts of an unnamed British city during the sweltering heat wave of summer 1976. Their emotionally detached father dies of a sudden heart attack while casting cement in the garden (hence the title) at the very beginning of the novel. Their mother starts to suffer from unexplained tiredness soon after. Without consulting a doctor for fear of social services being called in to take care of the children, Mother is first confined to bed, and then dies, leaving the children to take care of her corpse, the household and, ultimately, themselves. The siblings hide her body in a casket in the basement, which they fill with the cement left from their father's unfinished garden work. Despite the sadness caused by their mother's absence, the children are initially galvanised by the excitement and freedom of the new situation. Soon enough, however, the household descends into pure chaos, and the newly found freedom becomes nightmarish. Disorder, dirt, dysfunctional behaviours rule the rapidly deteriorating scene, which takes on more and more surreal, oneiric connotations. A dream-like Freudian dimension eventually kicks in: time seems to have stopped, the space the children inhabit descends into sheer seclusion, and any existing connection with the external world's regular pace is eventually severed. Anarchy gives way to absolute emotional disconnection:

'It's funny,' Julie said, 'I've lost all sense of time. It feels like it's always been like this. I can't really remember how it used to be when Mum was alive and I can't really imagine anything changing. Everything seems still and fixed and it makes me feel that I'm not frightened of anything.'

I said, (…) 'I feel like I'm asleep. Whole weeks go by without me noticing, and if you asked me what happened three days ago I wouldn't be able to tell you.'[250]

This brief dialogue precedes the sexual act that will bring the novel to conclusion. Space and gravity seem to dissipate, as Jack feels "weightless, tumbling through space with no sense of up or down."[251] As a disturbingly erotic tension grows, the Oedipal subtext obvious from the very first line of the novel becomes an actual enactment of the archetypal Freudian fantasy: through perverted undisciplined behaviour and utter indifference to any social norm, Jack has transferred his Oedipus longing to Julie. The tension builds up in an unsettling crescendo: "She began to edge further up the bed till her large pale breasts were level with my face. I touched a nipple with the end of my finger. It was hard and wrinkled like a peach stone. Julie took it between her fingers and kneaded it. Then she pushed it towards my lips. 'Go on,' she whispered."[252]

We have seen that suspenseful narrative situations provoke physiological responses of arousal in readers, even when they disdain or are distressed by the quality of the narrative. Another disturbing element in *The Cement Garden* is represented by the clash between internal (and therefore supposedly empathy-inducing) focalisation and Jack's "deceptively affectless monotone"[253] narration. His clinical, impersonal vocabulary, devoid of any but the most abstractedly expressed feelings reporting externalities, rather than emotions, undermines Jack's harrowing trauma only on the surface. The insecurity and desolation of Jack's mindscape following his mother's death is mirrored in the urban

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[250] Ibid., 134-135.

[251] Ibid., 135.

[252] Ibid.

[253] Dickson, Andrew, "Ian McEwan on The Cement Garden, sexual gothic and being in the 'toddlerhood of old age,'" *The Guardian*, January 26, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jan/26/ian-mcewan-cement-garden-sexual-gothic-old-age.

degeneration that surrounds the siblings' house. Likewise, the young teenager's alienation and emotional isolation brought about by mourning are rendered through the post-modern atmosphere of concrete wasteland that imbues the outer space. Only in such disconcerting scenario, could McEwan's gothic tale of unacknowledged child trauma and loss of innocence unravel.

Lastly, the trauma victims' incestuous attachment appears to work as a coping mechanism of a survival strategy in which the trauma of loss is transformed into the re-evaluation of cultural, sexual boundaries. The result is a shocking infringement of the primal taboo. If incest is overtly enacted, parricide is allegorically implied. Jack's father, in fact, suffers a deadly heart attack while heavy lifting a sack of cement, a task he had been advised against by doctors, due to a previously suffered heart attack, the narrator points out — adding, mischievously, "but I made sure he took as much weight as I did."[254] Jack, recruited by his father to help resurfacing the pavement of the backyard, had shortly before gone off to masturbate in the bathroom. Even more disturbingly, Jack spends more time describing the seminal fluid of his first ejaculation ("against the downy hairs, lying across the edge of concrete stain, glistened a little patch of liquid, not milky as I thought, but colourless. As I watched, it dried to a barely visible shiny crust which cracked when I flexed my wrist. I decided not to wash it away.")[255] than the position of his father's corpse: "my father was lying face down on the ground, his head resting on the newly spread concrete. The smoothing plank was in his hand."[256] While his father is left to do the heavy lifting on his own, which eventually kills him, Jack discovers his sexuality and enters adulthood with his first ejaculation. Tellingly, when he finds his father's dead body, Jack states: "I stared wonderingly, just as I had a few minutes

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[254] McEwan, *The Cement Garden*, 13.

[255] Ibid., 18.

[256] Ibid.

before,"[257] thus comparing the wonder at his father's death with that of his newly accomplished sexual development.

Another excruciatingly brutal literary instance of incest, this time between father and daughter, can be found in Angela Carter's short story "The Snow Child." In line with *The Cement Garden*'s gothic atmosphere, "The Snow Child" unfolds in a grim, disarmingly violent upsurge that, in barely two pages, takes the reader from a traditional fairy tale-like incipit to a totally unforeseen barbarous episode of paedo-necrophilia. A parody of famous Snow White folktale, "The Snow Child" is the shortest (approximately 500 words) story in Carter's Charles Perrault-inspired 1979 collection *The Bloody Chamber* and, in all likelihood, the most appalling. Much of the Distancing-Embracing model is at work in this brief, horrifying tale. All three schemata of the Distancing factor are involved — art, fiction and representation — whereas, among the components of the Embracing factor, figure: compositional interplays of positive and negative emotions (predominantly negative, though); mixed emotions as mediators of negative emotions; aesthetic virtues of artistic representation (Angela Carter's voluptuously gothic descriptive prose surely enhances the reader's aesthetic enjoyment),[258] and meaning construction. The entire collection, in fact, deals with issues of feminism, female sexual empowerment, disruption of traditional, gothic, patriarchal depiction of female victimhood, and metamorphosis in the complementary facets of anthropomorphisation and zoomorphisation. Yet, the 'emotion regulation through genre scripts' component is completely overthrown in favour of a ghastly conclusion:

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[257] Ibid., 19.

[258] Margaret Atwood comments that what Carter does is presenting a macabre painting, filled with gruesome and melancholy prose. "Not for her Hemingway's clean, well-lighted place, or Orwell's clear prose like a pane of glass. She prefers instead a dirty, badly-lit place, with gnawed bones in the corner and dusty mirrors you'd best not consult." Lee, Allison, *Angela Carter*, Twayne's English Authors Series, no. 540 (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997), 146.

Weeping, the Count got off his horse, unfastened his breeches and thrust his virile member into the dead girl. The Countess reined in her stamping mare and watched him narrowly; he was soon finished.

Then the girl began to melt. Soon there was nothing left of her but a feather a bird might have dropped; a blood stain, like the trace of a fox's kill on the snow; and the rose she had pulled off the bush.[259]

The power of the normative, prototypical happy ending of fairy tales is here reversed into a force that overwhelms the reader with horror — a horror they have by no means anticipated and which leaves them flabbergasted. It is as if Carter first set up a traditional fairy tale paradigm that deceivingly creates genre expectations only to brutally upset them with such a highly disquieting finale. To be fair, eerie elements that mismatch the conventional structure of folktales are consistently present during the entire narration, and can be detected since the very beginning of Carter's rewritings. In this case, the present tense of the tale's outset marks an immediate departure from the 'once upon a time' tradition. The story begins as follows:

Midwinter — invincible, immaculate. The Count and his wife go riding, he on a grey mare and she on a black one, she wrapped in the glittering pelts of black foxes; and she wore high, black, shining boots with scarlet heels, and spurs. Fresh snow fell on snow already fallen; when it ceased, the whole world was white. "I wish I had a girl as white as snow," says the Count. They ride on. They come to a hole in the snow; this hole is filled with blood. He says: "I wish I had a girl as red as blood." So they ride on again; here is a raven, perched on a bare bough. "I wish I had a girl as black as that bird's feathers."[260]

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[259] Carter, Angela, *The Bloody Chamber* (London: Vintage, 2006), 106.

[260] Ibid., 105.

Carter picks a few symbolic elements from the most commonly known version of the story, Perrault's — a translation of whose collection of traditional fairy stories, *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé*, Carter had published in 1977 — and re-stages them in a new, disturbing backdrop, thus imbuing them with new meanings. The combination of traditional and new, unfamiliar elements stirs in the reader the psychological experience of the *uncanny*. Perrault's opening reads:

> Once upon a time in midwinter, when the snowflakes were falling like feathers from heaven, a queen sat sewing at her window, which had a frame of black ebony wood. As she sewed she looked up at the snow and pricked her finger with her needle. Three drops of blood fell into the snow. The red on the white looked so beautiful that she thought to herself, "If only I had a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood in this frame." Soon afterward she had a little daughter who was as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as ebony wood, and therefore they called her Little Snow White.[261]

Carter keeps the temporal notion of midwinter, the weather condition of snow falling, and the queen character (turned into Countess), whose wish, however, Carter redirects to the male figure of the Count. The Count's desire is particularly relevant, for it conceals a startling ambiguity that, retrospectively, seems to forebode the deflowering of the child's dead body. His assertion "I wish I had a child as white as snow"[262] acquires the double meaning of possession both as a father and as a lover.[263] Likewise, immediately after the creation of the

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[261] Grimm, Jacob, Wilhelm Grimm, & Charles Perrault, *Snow White and Other Stories* (Tantor Media, Incorporated, 2012), Kindle, https://tantor-site-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/bonus-content/B0705_SnowWhiteUpdated/B0705_SnowWhiteUpdated_ebook.pdf.

[262] Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 105.

[263] Chainani, Soman, "Sadeian Tragedy: The Politics of Content Revision in Angela Carter's 'Snow Child,'" *Marvels & Tales* 17, no. 2 (2003): 224-225. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41388666.

Snow Child, the phrase "child of his desire" echoes that ambiguity, infusing it even more with a sexual connotation.

The emblematic triptych snow–blood–frame/raven, linked with the traditional folkloric white, red and black colour triad, except for the first item (snow), is transfigured into unnerving elements that immediately cast a gothic atmosphere onto the retelling: a hole filled with blood (a rather straightforward exemplification of a menstruating womb, representative of the accomplished female transition into sexual adulthood) and a raven. Ravens are traditionally associated with death and bloodshed (as they tend to feed on carrion), ill omen, witchcraft and the occult in general. Furthermore, the raven is perched on a "bare" bough — an adjective that conveys a sense of nakedness which anticipates the Snow Child's being "stark naked,"[264] but also a sense of emptiness intended as barrenness, and thus sterility.

Popular folktale leitmotifs are thereby combined with unfamiliar, strange and unsettling elements. According to Freud, the uncanny is "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar."[265] Moreover, the uncanny encompasses the idea of 'double'[266] in every shape and degree: "the constant recurrence of similar situations, a same face, or character-trait, or twist of fortune, or a same crime, or even a same name recurring throughout several consecutive generations."[267] In her topsy-turvy version of the Grimm's apparently innocent narrative, Carter skilfully creates an uncanny feeling which, in again Freud's words, "forces upon us the idea of something fateful and unescapable."[268] In "The Snow Child," typical elements of

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[264] Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 105.

[265] Freud, Sigmund, *The Uncanny* [1919], trans. Alix Strachey, https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf, 1-2.

[266] For an in-depth psychoanalytic study of the double, see: Rank, Otto, *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study*, trans. Harry Tucker (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971).

[267] Freud, *The Uncanny*, 9.

[268] Ibid., 11.

the Freudian Oedipal taboo (i.e. jealousy, untamed sexuality overtaking rationality and morality, incest) are interwoven with a cryptic narration that seems to embody the latent, rather than the universally acknowledged at the centre of classic fairy tales. Railing against Bruno Bettelheim's assertion that tales are "consoling"[269] to children as well as the well-established genre script of fairy tales, Carter, in *The Bloody Chamber* collection, unearths themes of rape, torture, incest, murder, cannibalism, and states: "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."[270] Carter makes clear that she took and used "the latent content of those traditional stories; (...) and the latent content is violently sexual."[271]

The elliptical brevity of "The Snow Child" makes its meaning extraordinarily concentrated. Each word of the opening has a potent weight that extends beyond univocal signification. "Midwinter" prepares the reader for a cold story, enacted by emotionally cold — ruthless — characters. Such immediate coldness also foreshadows death. "Invincible" identifies the thematic importance of power,[272] here personified by the Count, whereas "immaculate" hints at the unspoiled purity of the Snow Child. The phrase "The Count and his wife" is hierarchically ordered; the Count is introduced first and via his respectful title, whilst the possessive adjective introducing the Countess automatically identifies her as the Count's possession. The description of their outfits disseminates more ominous, disturbing details that captivate the reader's attention and increase the contrast, by opposition, with the child's "stark nakedness" that will soon follow.

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[269] Bettelheim, Bruno, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Penguin, 1991).

[270] Haffenden, John, "Angela Carter," in *Novelists in Interview* (New York: Methuen Press, 1985), 80.

[271] Simpson, Helen, "Femme fatale: Angela Carter's The Bloody Chamber," *The Guardian*, June 24, 2006, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/jun/24/classics.angelacarter.

[272] Cluley, Ray, "'The Snow Child' by Angela Carter," *This Is Horror*, April 16, 2014, https://www.thisishorror.co.uk/the-snow-child-angela-carter/.

The "pelts of black foxes" the Countess is wearing suggest her cunning, predatory nature, and her "high, black, shining boots with scarlet heels, and spurs" prophesy the violence she will inflict on the defenceless child. The tension thereby created in just a few lines builds up exponentially, engaging the reader through negative empathy.

The child's innocence is preemptively mirrored by the blank canvas formed by the snow ("Fresh snow fell on snow already fallen; when it ceased, the whole world was white"),[273] upon which the Countess stands out as "the black antithesis of her white surroundings, the surroundings that will spawn a child of nature, while the Count represents the 'grey' arbiter between these two extremes."[274] The child's "stark nakedness" points at both a pristine innocence and the obvious eroticism of lack of clothing. The Countess, fully dressed, appears, by contrast, not only lacking purity (she wears black pelts and black and red boots while riding a black mare; there is no trace of white colour in her persona) and erotic appeal, but also fecundity. She rather seems to resonate with the bare bough on which the raven is perched. This would also explain the reason why the child is born to the Count's creative imagination and desire, rather than the Countess's womb. Ironically, every attempt the Countess makes to get rid of the girl out of jealousy results in the Snow Child becoming more clothed at the Countess's own expenses, as the clothing comes directly from the Countess's body to emphasise how she is being replaced:[275] "the furs sprang off the Countess's shoulders and twined round the naked girl;" "Then her boots leapt off the Countess's feet and on to the girl's legs. Now the Countess was bare as a bone and the girl furred and booted."[276] Again, the Countess is associated with the adjective "bare" to underline her sterility, coldness and mature age.

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273 Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 105.

274 Chainani, "Sadeian Tragedy," 224.

275 Cluley, "'The Snow Child' by Angela Carter."

276 Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 105.

The girl's agency, on the other hand, is reduced to one, plain, fast-paced present tense sequence of actions which relentlessly lead to her gruesome death: "picks a rose; pricks her finger on the thorn; bleeds; screams; falls."[277] The girl's death triggers an abrupt mood shift from implied — the typical fairy tale symbolic code — to sexually explicit and disturbing — a twist that is not in the least fairy-tale-like. The total lack of erotic details and the girl's helpless vulnerability make the Count's sexual assault (the verb 'thrust' in the climax "thrust his virile member into the dead girl"[278] is unmistakably fierce) even more morally offensive, and a derisive "he was soon finished"[279] is the icing on a disarmingly repugnant cake that mocks male physical strength and virile power. After the desecration of her dead body, the child melts, her evaporation a suggestion that unbridled masculine power can take away not only women's control over their body and sexuality, but also their very identity.

The contingency of personal identity is indeed one of the central themes of Carter's writing. She explicitly viewed femininity as a "social fiction", part of a "culturally choreographed performance of selfhood."[280] As Carter writes in *The Sadeian Woman*, when the act of sexual intercourse is juxtaposed against the reality of patriarchal authority, then it is expelled from "the kitsch area of timeless, placeless fantasy and [moved] into the real world."[281] Sade's pornography greatly influenced Carter's writing in that it repeatedly presents a schema where "male means tyrannous and female means martyrised,"[282] and

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[277] Ibid., 106.

[278] Ibid.

[279] Ibid.

[280] Gordon, Edmund, "Angela Carter: Far from the fairytale," *The Guardian*, October 1, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/01/angela-carter-far-from-fairytale-edmund-gordon.

[281] Carter, Angela, *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (New York: Pantheon, 1979), 18.

[282] Ibid., 24.

Sade's pornographic fiction played a particularly important role, according to Carter, in offering an unprecedented portrayal of female sexuality as disentangled from reproductive function. The pornographic milieu thus conjoins the stepmother and child in a triangle of desire.[283]

Author Steven Swann Jones, who traced the evolution of the fairy tale from Boccaccio's *Decameron* to Maurice Sendak's 1963 illustrated children's classic *Where the Wild Things Are*, posits that fairy tales endure over the centuries, whether in oral or written forms, because they simplify the human experience into a form that anyone can recognise and enjoy[284] — children and adults alike. The clear and "artless simplicity"[285] of fairy tales' prose style, and their great variability, that is, the existence of uncountable versions, across cultures, of the same basic tale, would validate, according to Jones, a story's wide-ranging significance. Carter, too, recognises the broad-spectrum primeval power of fairy tales, which bear the important task of maintaining a lively connection with a remote past:

> For most of human history, 'literature,' both fiction and poetry, has been narrated, not written — heard, not read. So fairy tales, folk tales, stories from oral tradition, are all of them the most vital connection we have with the imaginations of the ordinary men and women whose labour created out world.[286]

Carter adds, with respect to her writing, that fairy tales deal with topics that many people choose to ignore, but that have existed, in collective imagination, since the dawn of time — such as incest, rape, and cannibalism. Because they

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283 Chainani, "Sadeian Tragedy," 221.

284 Jones, Steven Swann, *The Fairy Tale: The Magic Mirror of the Imagination* (London: Psychology Press, 2002).

285 Tatar, Maria, *The Classic Fairy Tales: Text, Criticism* (New York: Norton, 1998), xi.

286 Carter, Angela, *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales* (London: Virago Press, 2005), xi.

stage the essence of human experience, fairy tales inevitably involve aspects of that experience that people cannot bring themselves to confess. We will learn more about the key role symbols embedded in fairy tales and myths play in making the unconscious conscious in the next section.

Far from Bettelheim's claim that the traditional Snow White tale "reassures the child that [they] need not be afraid of parental jealousy where it may exist, because [they] will survive successfully, whatever complications these feelings may create temporarily,"[287] Carter's story, by building up and then releasing an astonishingly unsettling cathartic tension, cautions the audience to beware of female repressed power as much as male violence, reiterating time and again, throughout the entire collection, that love is lethal.

2.2 Acknowledging the shadow

"One does not become enlightened by imaging figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious."[288] This famous quote by Carl Gustav Jung, founder of analytical psychology, encapsulates the concept of 'shadow' in Jung's psychological thought. Jungian alchemical notion of shadow stands in stark contrast to Freud's overall negative consideration of the unconscious. As we have seen, Freud conceives the id as a "psychical province that incorporates instinctual drive energies and (…) operates unconsciously, accords with primary process, and impels the organism to engage in need-satisfying, tension-reducing activities, which are experienced as 'pleasure,'"[289] thus hindering the progress and elevation of the conscious mind. Conversely, in Jung's method, the shadow acquires a more dignified significance that Jung surmises from his

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[287] Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, 195.

[288] Jung, Carl G., *Collected Works of C.G. Jung: Alchemical Studies (Volume 13),* eds. G. Adler, M. Fordham, & S.H. Read; trans. R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge, 1967).

[289] Lapsley, Daniel, & Paul C. Stey, "Id, Ego, and Superego," *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior, Second Edition* (December 2012): 396.

alchemical studies. Both Freud and Jung's methods aim at making the unconscious conscious in order to reduce internal conflicts that lead to emotional suffering, and at promoting a better individual understanding of the personality through different levels of awareness. However, whilst the Austrian psychologist is more concerned with keeping the id's primal urges at bay, bringing the ego to balance, alleviating symptoms, and helping the individual become less controlled by biological drives or demands of the superego, Jungian psychotherapy is built on the idea that the unconscious is a source of wisdom and guidance that can encourage psychological growth. Jung's analytical psychology places more emphasis on the urge of the individual's psyche to reach completion through the reconciling of opposites and clear self-awareness. Jung calls the means to achieve completion *individuation process* — a natural process in which the unconscious is made conscious and assimilated in the personality. Through individuation, a person changes their condition from undifferentiated wholeness to fully differentiation and fulfilment. Going back to the quote, in Jungian psychology, reaching the maximum natural expression of individuality, in a state of fulfilment or totality, equals becoming enlightened.

Before delving into the individuation process, it is worth exploring more in-depth the difference between Freudian and Jungian unconscious. Very early in his career, Jung became dissatisfied with Freud's explanation that "in the unconscious reposed the denied and repressed wishes of an individual."[290] Freud's definition only accounts for the *personal unconscious*. Jung adds to it another class of contents, which are not individual acquisitions, but rather present a mythological character and are therefore peculiar to mankind in general. This pattern, widespread among different peoples and epochs, Jung labelled the *collective unconscious*.[291]

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[290] Gras, Vernon W., "Myth and the Reconciliation of Opposites: Jung and Lévi-Strauss," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 42, no. 3 (1981): 471. https://doi.org/10.2307/2709188.

[291] Ibid.

An important premise to make when venturing into the Jungian unconscious is the massive *volume* it occupies in human psychic life, as opposed to the meagre, limited area Freud assigns to it in his iceberg. Jung, in fact, writes:

> Observation of conscious life persuades us that not only are unconscious perceptions and representations at times to be found in us, but that psychic life proceeds in that form most of the time, and only occasionally, at special points, does the agent within us reveal its presence directly, in appropriate images. Thus psychic life always goes far beyond the bounds of what is or may be present in us in the form of conscious contents or images.[292]

Jung uses the word "psyche" to denote the totality of all, conscious and unconscious, psychic processes. It involves three levels: consciousness, the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious.[293] Consciousness is only a small part of the psyche that "floats like a little island on the vast, boundless ocean of the unconscious which in fact embraces the whole world."[294] Defined as "the function or activity that maintains the relation of psychic contents with the ego,"[295] consciousness represents the part of the psyche that is primarily concerned with adaptation to external reality.[296] The unconscious is composed of two parts: the *personal unconscious*, which contains forgotten, repressed material and subliminal impressions and perceptions[297] — and which corresponds to Freudian conception of the unconscious — and the *collective*

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[292] Jung, Carl G., *On the Nature of the Psyche* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 90.

[293] Avens, Roberts, "The Image of the Devil in C. G. Jung's Psychology," *Journal of Religion and Health* 16, no. 3 (1977): 198. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27505406.

[294] Jacobi, Jolande, *The Psychology of C. G. Jung* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1962), 6.

[295] Jung, Carl G., *Collected Works of C.G. Jung: Psychological Types (Volume 6)*, eds. Gerhard Adler, Michael Fordham, & Herbert Read; trans. R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge, 1971), 421.

[296] Avens, "The Image of the Devil in C. G. Jung's Psychology," 199.

[297] Ibid.

unconscious, which does not include personal acquisitions, but only contents that are more or less common to all human beings.[298] Jung infers the existence of the collective — or *archetypal* — unconscious from myths and universal symbols. "From the dreams, fantasisings, and creative work of children, normal adults and asylum inmates, Jung uncovered the perplexing and inexplicable repetition of motifs from myths, fairy tales, or rituals of whose history their begettors were totally ignorant:"[299]

> to the degree that human brains are uniformly differentiated, the functioning thereby made possible is also collective and universal. This explains, for example, the interesting fact that the unconscious processes of the most widely separated peoples and races show a quite remarkable correspondence, which displays itself among other things, in the extraordinary but well-authenticated analogies between the forms and motif of autochthonous myths. The universal similarity of human brains lead universal possibility of a uniform mental functioning. This functioning is the collective psyche.[300]

Again in Jung's words, "The collective unconscious is the product of generations past, the deposit of the experiences to which our ancestors have been exposed: it contains the wisdom of ages, our innate potential, which emerges from time to time in the form of 'new' ideas and various creative expressions."[301] It consists of the sum of instincts and their spiritual correlates: the archetypes. Archetypes, which tend to emerge in dreams, fantasies and in myths and fairy tales found throughout the world, are "archaic vestiges of primitive modes of functioning

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[298] Ibid.

[299] Gras, "Myth and the Reconciliation of Opposites: Jung and Lévi-Strauss," 472.

[300] Jung, Carl G., *Analytical Psychology: Its Theory and Practice*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), 45.

[301] Jacobi, *The Psychology of C. G. Jung,* 10.

that may be manifested as conscious images, symbols, ideas."[302] According to Jung, insofar as archetypes are inherited with the structure of the brain, they constitute the deposit of mankind's typical reactions from primordial times to universal human situations, such as fear, the struggle against superior power, relations between sexes, etc.[303]

As manifestations of the collective unconscious, archetypes represent innate potentials that, through expression in human behaviour and experiences, can act as mediums to make the unconscious conscious and propel the individuation process. The shadow is one of the principal archetypes that make up the different stages of the individuation process, along with the *anima/ animus*, the Wise Old Man/*magna mater*[304] and the self.[305] The self, a midpoint between the ego and the unconscious, represents the synthesis between conscious and unconscious, when shadow and light are simultaneously perceived and the individual therefore sees true reality; it is the awareness that comes from acknowledging and accepting the shadow. Inasmuch as the shadow constitutes the first stage of the process, and the one more closely related to evil and negative feelings, this thesis's analysis will focus primarily on it.

Similar to Freud's id, the shadow is the sum of the unpleasant, animal-like qualities and insufficiently developed functions the ego refuses to recognise, disowns or rejects. It represents the contents of the personal unconscious, the things one denies, excludes, or represses during their life. As Roberts Avens puts it, the shadow is "that hidden, inferior, and guilt-laden part of personality whose ultimate ramifications reach back into the realm of our animal ancestors."[306]

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[302] Avens, "The Image of the Devil in C. G. Jung's Psychology," 198.

[303] Ibid.

[304] Jacobi, Jolande, *Complex, Archetype, Symbol in the Psychology of C. G. Jung* (London: Routledge 1959), 114.

[305] Jung, Carl G., *Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 7: Two Essays in Analytical Psychology*, eds. Gerhard Adler & R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[306] Avens, "The Image of the Devil in C. G. Jung's Psychology," 200.

Recognising and accepting the shadow is no easy task; the main risk the process of acknowledgement entails is to become identified with it and eventually fall under its spell. We will see both possibilities — successful acknowledgement and failure due to identification with the shadow — transposed into literature through the employment of negative empathy in the next two literary instances. Falling victim to the shadow is portrayed in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, while critical recognition of the shadow as constructive stage of self-knowledge can be found in William Blake's poem "The Human Abstract."

What sets the Jungian shadow apart from Freud's id is an idea of necessity: whereas the latter conceives the unconscious as a monster to be made known but also tamed, the former envisages it as a necessary stepping stone for the individual to reach realisation. For Jung, the shadow is not necessarily nefarious or intrinsically bad; it holds creative impulses and realistic insights, which are pivotal for individuation. "Insofar as it retains contact with the lost depths of the soul, with life and vitality, the shadow may provide hints for self-actualisation,"[307] Avens explains. "The man without awareness of his shadow," a statistically common occurrence, Avens adds, "is the man who believes he is actually only what he knows about himself (...)[—] the mass man who acts as if mistakes are committed by 'state' or 'society,'"[308] thus stripping themselves of any sense of accountability.

This chasm in the two psychologists' theories reveals how at odds they are on the concept of sublimation, too. In fact, Jung argues that Freud's opinion:

can only be based on the totally erroneous supposition that the unconscious is a monster. It is a view that springs from fear of nature and the realities of life. Freud invented the idea of sublimation to save us from the imaginary claws of the unconscious. But what is real, what actually exists, cannot be

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[307] Ibid., 201.

[308] Ibid.

alchemically sublimated, and if anything is apparently sublimated it never was what a false interpretation took it to be.[309]

On the contrary, Jung holds that, because the shadow is unavoidable, it only becomes dangerous to the extent that it is repressed.[310] The more an individual comes to assimilate and recognise the unconscious, the less dangerous it becomes. In this view, sublimation does not stem from restraint of drives through will (as Freud postulated, with the ego ruling over the id under the guidance of the superego), but comes from acknowledging the creativity of unconscious processes and learning how to work with them for the purpose of personal growth. Whilst Freud viewed sublimation as an operation of discharge and a solution to acquiesce civilisation, in Jung it becomes the alchemic operation of integration of the shadow into self-knowledge, a key step through which the Magnum Opus is carried out and spiritual transmutation is completed. In Jung's psychology, taboos give way to symbols, which, in turn, lead the self across the unknown lands of the collective unconscious and toward full differentiation as a unique individual.

In his letters, Jung harshly criticises Freud for obscuring the alchemical origins of sublimation in favour of an attempt to make the concept appear scientifically credible:

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[309] Jung, Carl G. *Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 16: Practice of Psychotherapy*, eds. Gerhard Adler & R. F. C. Hull (Princeton University Press; Princeton 1975), 328-9.

[310] In 1918, at the end of World War I, Jung wrote: "By being repressed into the unconscious, the source from which it originated the animal in us only becomes more beastlike, and that is no doubt the reason why no religion is so defiled with the spilling of innocent blood as Christianity, and why the world has never seen a bloodier war than the war of the Christian nations. The repressed animal bursts forth in its most savage form when it comes to the surface, and in the process of destroying itself leads to national suicide. If every individual had a better relation to the animal within him, [they] would also set a higher value on life. Life would be the absolute, the supreme moral principle, and [they] would react instinctively against any institution or organization that had the power to destroy life on a large scale." From: Jung, Carl G., "The Role of the Unconscious," in *Civilization in Transition, volume 20 of Bollingen Series*, eds. Gerhard Adler, Michael Fordham, & Herbert Read; trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton University Press: Princeton 1970), 21.

Sublimation is part of the royal art where the true gold is made. Of this Freud knows nothing; worse still, he barricades all the paths that could lead to true sublimation. This is just about the opposite of what Freud understands by sublimation. It is not a voluntary and forcible channeling of instinct into a spurious field of application, but an alchymical transformation for which fire and prima materia are needed. Sublimation is a great mystery. Freud has appropriated this concept and usurped it for the sphere of the will and the bourgeois, rationalistic ethos.[311]

If Freud regards sublimation as a mere defence mechanism to curb socially unacceptable impulses, Jung invests it with much greater importance, as transformation is at the centre of Jungian psychology. "*Sublimatio* is an alchemical process in which an ascending action results in change to a higher form. The alchemyst liberates the *anima mundi* imprisoned in matter. [Jung] sought the liberation of the world soul from the darkness of matter; i.e. the unconscious."[312] You cannot sublimate the unconscious, but you can sublimate submission to the unconscious. Through transformation, the ego frees itself from the dictatorship of archetypal powers and instead of compulsively following its fate, it maintains creative communication with it. The birth of the self thus results in complete alteration of one's attitude toward life and psychological freedom.[313] Rather than elucidating what is suppressed, sublimation works for Jung as a mystical process of ascension through which the ego re-connects with its autonomous, vital transformative source: unconsciousness.

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[311] Jung, Carl G., *C. G. Jung Letters, Volume 1*, eds. G. Adler, A. Jaffé & R. F. C. Hull (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1974), 171.

[312] Stern, Mark, Karen Gibson, & Donald Lathrop, *"Carl Jung and Soul Psychology,"* (New York City: Harrington Park Press, 1991) 112.

[313] Jacobi, *The Psychology of C. G. Jung.*

2.2.1 Identification with the shadow

The moment in which Oscar Wilde's decadent hero Dorian Gray acknowledges his shadow marks his free fall into moral corruption and sinful living. It happens immediately after his confrontation with and display of cruelty against the poor actress Sibyl Vane. Dorian comes back home, looks at the portrait — the object of his obsession — and, much to his horror, notices the picture has changed: a faint sneer has appeared at the corner of his mouth, marring the once pristine, unstained beauty of his painted double. This uncanny gothic element interrupts the so far realistic narration abruptly — the supernatural being crafted upon a narrative that could have otherwise been completely plausible. Yet, there seems to be little room for the reader's surprise, for the focus immediately shifts to Dorian's inner dilemma. As soon as he learns about Sibyl's suicide, he is thrown into a state of anguish and regret, although it is not clear whether he genuinely feels sorry for the girl's death or only dreads the disfiguring changes of his own image in the painting, now spoiled by the corruption of his soul. "The vicious cruelty that marred the fine lines of the mouth had, no doubt, appeared at the very moment that the girl had drunk the poison,"[314] he conjectures, musing over the nature of the enchantment to which the portrait might be subject. On the one hand, Dorian fears the sign of corruption now showing in the picture, yet on the other hand he strives to see the change "taking place before his very eyes, shuddering as he hoped it."[315] He is at once frightened and fascinated by his shadow. Afterwards, he seems moved at the thought of Sibyl's "childlike look and winsome fanciful ways and shy tremulous grace,"[316] but only for a brief moment — too brief, in fact. He immediately brushes away his tears "hastily" and looks again at the picture:

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[314] Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 90.

[315] Ibid.

[316] Ibid.

He felt that the time had really come for making his choice. Or had his choice already been made? Yes, life had decided that for him — life, and his own infinite curiosity about life. Eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins — he was to have all these things. The portrait was to bear the burden of his shame: that was all.

A feeling of pain crept over him as he thought of the desecration that was in store for the fair face on the canvas. Once, in boyish mockery of Narcissus, he had kissed, or feigned to kiss, those painted lips that now smiled so cruelly at him. Morning after morning he had sat before the portrait wondering at its beauty, almost enamoured of it, as it seemed to him at times. Was it to alter now with every mood to which he yielded? Was it to become a monstrous and loathsome thing, to be hidden away in a locked room, to be shut out from the sunlight that had so often touched to brighter gold the waving wonder of its hair? The pity of it![317]

Now that he has acknowledged his shadow, the time has come for Dorian to either embrace his own relentless corruption, or take responsibility and change his conduct in favour of a higher moral principle. Incapable of feeling accountable for his choices — a limit he will never manage to overcome — Dorian tries to justify himself by claiming, in one of his many inner monologues, that no one would "surrender the chance of remaining always young, however fantastic that chance might be, or with what fateful consequences it might be fraught"[318] and by questioning whether the situation is really under his control. Wilde's beautiful dialogic essayism, framed in a flawless speculative prose, lure the reader into empathising with Dorian's desperate longing for eternal youth. In a disconcerting epiphany, the protagonist comes to recognise the crucial role the portrait will play in his life: it "would be to him the visible emblem of conscience,"[319] and "the most magical of mirrors. As it had revealed to him his

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[317] Ibid., 90-91.

[318] Ibid., 91.

[319] Ibid., 79.

own body, so it would reveal to him his own soul." Such recognition marks the point of no return — that is, Dorian's complete identification with the shadow his portrait embodies. He falls prey to his own darkness within, as "[h]e drew the screen back into its former place in front of the picture, *smiling as he did so*,[320] and passed into his bedroom, where his valet was already waiting for him. An hour later he was at the Opera, and Lord Henry was leaning over his chair."[321]

Dorian's doom is ultimately sealed by the discovery of the "yellow book" — a gift from Lord Henry — which definitively steers his life towards depravity. Dorian thereby embarks in a transformative reading that will forever change the course of his Bildung. It is after becoming obsessed with the "poisonous book,"[322] in fact, that Dorian starts to experience greater sins and perversion, setting himself a new agenda: bringing to the world "a new Hedonism that was to recreate life, and to save it from that harsh, uncomely puritanism that is having, in our own day, its curious revival."[323] From this moment on, the young dandy will completely distort the central axiom of Walter Pater's manifesto of Aestheticism. According to Pater, beauty and passion should be pursued in an attempt at living life more intensely, as human existence is so short and ephemeral that "our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time."[324] Pater encourages his audience to experience as much as possible, to chase whatever enlarges oneself, whatever gives a sense of enhancement of both spirit and mind — whatever makes life more meaningful. Because, "to burn always with this hard,

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[320] My italics. He even smirks at his own malignity, a clear sign of self-satisfaction.

[321] Ibid., 91.

[322] Ibid., 106-107.

[323] Ibid., 111.

[324] Pater, Walter, "Conclusion," in *The Renaissance. Studies in Art and Poetry* [1893], ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1989), 190.

gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life."[325] In other words, Pater maintains that beauty serves as an antidote to life's swiftness.

Dorian, in turn, belittles and oversimplifies Pater's words, failing to understand the high purpose advocated by the founder of English Aestheticism. He mistakes beauty for pleasure and commits to devote his life to "exquisite"[326] sensations not so much in an attempt at making it more meaningful and worthwhile, but rather to escape, forget about its brevity. Compared to Pater's ideal, sublime Aestheticism, Dorian's Hedonism is vapid and shallow. This engenders a fundamental paradox in the young protagonist: he wants to devote his life to all kinds of pleasure to forget about the passing of time and ageing, yet he can never really enjoy new sensations with a free mind, as he is constantly preoccupied with the portrait. Rather than offering a way out of the tragedy of time, the portrait becomes a constant reminder of life's brevity — a beautiful, yet inexorable *memento mori*. Dorian develops a morbid obsession with it: he loves[327] and hates it at once, he thinks of it all the time, even when he is away from home, and is well aware that his destiny is intertwined with it — that it will bear the consequences of his passions.

A second paradox lies in the fact that while Dorian settles to turn his life into a work of art, a real work of art — the portrait — is becoming corrupted by his own hand in his room. He therefore decides to hide it in the attic. At this point, Dorian has embraced his selfish, evil nature and realises there is no going back: "But it was too late now. The past could always be annihilated. Regret, denial, or forgetfulness could do that. But the future was inevitable. There were passions in him that would find their terrible outlet, dreams that would make the shadow of their evil real."[328] Hiding something in the attic is a curious choice.

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[325] Ibid., 189.

[326] Significantly, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the adjective "exquisite" appears 28 times.

[327] He even kisses it.

[328] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 102.

Placing the portrait in the basement would have made more sense, also from a Freudian point of view,[329] as the tendencies the ego rejects in the name of the reality-principle are buried in the unconscious by means of repression. In the iceberg representation, low instincts that should be tamed occupy the lower level, deep down in the abyss of the unconscious, whist the top of the iceberg coincides with the conscious high principles of the superego. In this view, by taking the portrait to the attic, Dorian would be elevating his corruption to an ideal level, celebrating, in a way, his own depravation. Even more significantly, in Dorian's family house, the attic is the place where he used to play as a child. The location therefore comes to epitomise Dorian's lost innocence, but also a place where truth can be seen — from above, and through the pure, unfiltered eyes of childhood: "His own soul was looking out at him from the canvas and calling him to judgment."[330] By storing the picture in the attic, Dorian performs yet another act of perversion: he stains even the purity of his own childhood.

Dorian is now in love with corruption, and takes pleasure in contemplating the reflection of it in the painting:

> He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul. He would examine with minute care, and sometimes with a monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead or crawled around the heavy sensual mouth, wondering sometimes which were the more horrible, the signs of sin or the signs of age. He would place his white hands beside the coarse

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[329] This is a retrospective consideration, though, as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was first published in 1890 and Freud's psychoanalytic method was founded around 1895 with *Studies on Hysteria*, co-authored by physician Josef Breuer, and took hold after the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1899.

[330] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 102.

bloated hands of the picture, and *smile*.[331] He mocked the misshapen body and the failing limbs.

(…) [H]e would think of the ruin he had brought upon his soul, with a pity that was all the more poignant because it was purely selfish.[332]

Evil and pleasure are bound together in Dorian. The themes of the double and reflection reverberate through the entire novel as intertextual references to the Narcissus myth. Dorian encapsulates opposite elements: his beauty is pure, unspotted by the evils of the world, though his soul becomes more and more corrupted by evil as he gives in to the basest, immoral pleasures. This is mirrored in the portrait, where Dorian's doppelgänger suffers the visible consequences of his conduct.

At no time will Dorian repent and take real responsibility for his crimes. He will always, till the end, make excuses, minimise the impact of his actions. First, he blames his beauty for spoiling him:

[H]e loathed his own beauty (…)[;] it was his beauty that had ruined him, his beauty and the youth that he prayed for. But for those two things, life might have been free from stain. His beauty had been to him but a mask, his youth but a mockery. What was youth at best? A green, and unripe time, a time of shallow moods, and sickly thoughts. (…) Youth had spoiled him.[333]

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[331] My italics. Dorian looks at the signs of ageing with scorn, taking pride in his cheating the passing of time (although whether he should take credit for it is questionable). He even mocks the natural deterioration of his double's body, maintaining this smug, scornful smile all along his descent into evilness — an escalation of cruelty that will culminate with Basil's savage murder. This overturns, in the novel's continuous playing with doubles and mirrors, what young, still uncorrupted Dorian, out of anguish of growing old and losing his stunning beauty, complained about when he first looked at the painting: "'It will mock me some day,' he protested, 'mock me horribly.'" Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 26.

[332] Ibid., 109.

[333] Ibid., 185.

Then, Dorian does away with Basil's murder, for he has graver concerns to deal with, and, in a way, Basil deserved it: "Nor, indeed, was it the death of Basil Hallward that weighed most upon his mind. It was the living death of his own soul that troubled him. Basil had painted the portrait that had marred his life. He could not forgive him that. It was the portrait that had done everything."[334] This is the ultimate buck passing through which Dorian intends to make his conscience clean again; "the murder had been *simply*[335] the madness of a moment."[336]

Dorian's ambiguous attitude towards the painting advances in a crescendo of disturbing obsession that culminates with him stabbing the canvas, thus causing, rather foolishly, his own death. A perfect, literary example of complete identification with the shadow. The portrait is the physical incarnation of Dorian's shadow; as he grows more and more distressed by his sinful life, rather than coming to terms with it and then proceed to integration, he resolves, quite naively, to eliminate it. Yet another excessively superficial choice. By stabbing the painting, Dorian tries to destroy his past, his guilt, his sins — all that had haunted him over the years, in a desperate attempt at cleansing his soul, cleaning the slate of his debauched life and, at last, "be at peace."[337] Perhaps his is a suicidal action, considering that he called the portrait "monstrous soul-life"[338] before, evidence of his awareness that his painted counterpart was, in fact, animated and that, as such, it did have the power to affect his life. Whatever the reason for Dorian's final act, he suffers a horrible death, thus showing the reader that one cannot simply get rid of their dark abyss.

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[334] Ibid.

[335] My italics.

[336] Ibid.

[337] Ibid., 187. An expression that unequivocally evokes death.

[338] Ibid.

2.2.2 Integration of the shadow

Pre-Romantic poet, painter and printmaker William Blake seems to have anticipated crucial parts of Jung's theory, argues American analytical psychologist June Singer, who contributed to popularise Jung's psychology in the United States.[339] Jung himself admitted: "I find Blake a tantalising study, since he has compiled a lot of half or undigested knowledge in his fantasies."[340] Symbols, myths and archetypes are at the root of Jung's analytical psychology just as much as Blake's mythology is at the centre of the poet's prophetic books and artistic production. Furthermore, in parallel with Jung's shadow theory, the acknowledgement that evil is embedded in human beings (particularly in their rational mind) plays a pivotal role in Blake's visionary writings.

In *Literature and Evil*, Bataille dedicates an entire chapter to the enigmatic, charming figure of William Blake. The French philosopher declares that:

"We must examine Blake's curious words attentively. They are heavy with historical significance. What they describe is ultimately man's compliance with his own laceration, his compliance with death and the instinct which propels him towards it. They go beyond purely poetic words. They are an exact reflection of a definitive return to the totality of human destiny."[341]

According to Bataille, in fact, "Blake managed, in phrases of a peremptory simplicity, to reduce humanity to poetry and poetry to Evil."[342] Blake's controversial personality and idiosyncratic views, surrounded by an aura of mystery, certainly add to the charm of his persona within the literary and

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[339] For more details, see: Singer, June, *The Unholy Bible: A Psychological Interpretation of William Blake*, Volume 287 of Harper colophon books (New York City: Putnam, 1970) and Singer, June, *Blake, Jung and the Collective Unconscious: The Conflict Between Reason and Imagination* (Newburyport: Nicolas-Hays, Inc., 2000).

[340] Letter to Nanavutty, 11 Nov 1948, in Jung, *C. G. Jung Letters, Volume 1.*

[341] Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, chap 5, Kindle.

[342] Ibid.

philosophical scene. The singularity of Blake's work, whose expressiveness and creativity are nevertheless unquestionable, makes his production difficult to classify. Nineteenth-century scholar William Michael Rossetti characterised Blake as a "glorious luminary,"[343] and "a man not forestalled by predecessors, nor to be classed with contemporaries, nor to be replaced by known or readily surmisable successors."[344] Significantly, defying all categorisations, thereby blurring the boundaries set up by rational compartmentalisation, perfectly mirrors the urge to break free from the shackles of rational mind ("mind-forg'd manacles")[345] underlying the most part of Blake's production. Far from depicting a benevolent, charitable God, Blake's cosmogony is built around a multitude of symbolic, archetypal deities inspired by the Bible as well as Greek and Norse mythology. Among Blake's postlapsarian body of deities the intriguing figure of an old sage-looking man stands out. It is Urizen, representative of conventional reason, law, and the abstraction of the human self.

A parallel can be drawn between Blake's divine character Urizen and Jung's alchemical concept of shadow. Urizen is usually depicted as a bearded old man, sometimes holding architect's tools[346] to create and constrain the universe, or nets with which he ensnares people in the rigid grid of law and conventional society. His name, as Bataille explains, comes from a combination of 'reason' (or: 'your reason') and 'horizon,' which limits human view. In fact, Urizen is "the circumscriber who draws horizons for man so as to bind his energies;"[347] he is

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[343] Blake, William, and William Michael Rossetti, *The Poetical Works of William Blake: Lyrical and Miscellaneous* (London: G. Bell, 1890) xi.

[344] Ibid., xiii.

[345] Blake, William, "London," in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (London: Penguin, 2005), 86.

[346] Such as compass and other drafting symbols borrowed from Masonic symbolism of God as the "Great Architect of the Universe." Peterfreund, Stuart, *William Blake in a Newtonian World: Essays on Literature as Art and Science* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998).

[347] Bloom, Harold, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1961), 40.

the god of restraint. Urizen is also the Prince of Light, "God, the terrible destroyer and not the Saviour,"[348] and though he is the creator, the Demiurge, he also represents the fallen Satanic figure.[349] Originally conceived as one half of a two-part system, Urizen is the power of abstraction, he epitomises reason, "that understanding of God as a tyrannical, despotic taskmaster,"[350] as opposed to the second half, Los,[351] who stands for imagination.[352]

Urizen appears as a recurring character in Blake's artistic production. He is usually represented in a hunched position [**Figure 3**], seemingly unable to extend or stretch his body outward; sometimes his hands and feet are shackled, or he is trapped in a net,[353] his eyes are often closed, his face strained in a grimace of pain. His curved, downward and inward-oriented position points at a horizontal display of the body, reminiscent of his name's meaning and opposed to the vertical posture, reaching towards the sky in an attempt to connect earth

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[348] Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, chap 5, Kindle.

[349] What sets Urizen apart from the Christian god is precisely the fact that, much like man, he also falls from edenic eternity — that there exists, in other words, a postlapsarian, embodied demiurge god.

[350] Makdisi, Saree, *Reading William Blake* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 39.

[351] Blake will then rework his mythic system, describing Urizen as one of the four Zoas that result from the division of the primordial man, Albion (whose name derives from the ancient and mythological name of Britain). He continues to represent reason. The other three Zoas are: Tharmas, Luvah/Orc and Urthona/Los. Los is described as a smith, beating with his hammer on a forge, thus epitomising the beating of the human heart. His name is the anagram of *Sol*, the Latin word for 'sun.' He embodies the divine aspect of the imagination, and, consequently, art as an imaginative creation resulting from the connection between imagination and the natural cycle. Los represents the progression through life to the conscious state. Frye, Northrop, *Fearful Symmetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 254–258.

[352] As reported by Bloom, Los' duty is watch over Urizen. Urizen is seen as an eternal priest, while Los takes the position of eternal prophet. Bloom, *The Visionary Company*, 71-75.

[353] It is Los who encased Urizen within a physical form whose access to Eternity is blocked by nets and gins, in an act both punitive and protective. As mentioned in the previous note, Los watches over Urizen to prevent him from returning, through his disruptive force, to Eternity, which he has been said to have abandoned. Los therefore constrains Urizen's body, especially obstructing his organs of perception; "the limits he imposes (…) will keep Urizen from being able to perceive the state he has left, thereby assuring his separation and protecting Eternity from the infection of his rise." Goss, Erin M., "What Is Called Corporeal: William Blake and the Question of the Body," *The Eighteenth Century* 51, no. 4 (2010): 424. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41468113.

and heaven, material and spiritual, below and above, that is typical of divine, prophetic figures. In *The Book of Urizen*,[354] Urizen is presented as an eternal self-focused being who creates himself out of eternity in a parodic creation myth that taunts the Book of Genesis.[355] The parodic effect of Blake's didactic allegory comes to the fore in the description of the origin of the fallen world as "retroactive result of the 'mind-forged manacles' that have led to belief in a despotic and vindictive deity who despises his creation."[356] Urizen's despotic need for certainty cautions the reader against allowing their notion of divinity to become too enmeshed in the fetters of Enlightenment rationality.[357] Urizen seeks to impose his authority on the world

Figure 3. Blake, William, *English: Europe a Prophecy*, 1794. Copy D, plate 1, frontispiece: "The Ancient of Days." Colour relief etching and white-line etching in blue, black, red and yellow; with added hand colouring. British Museum, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1859-0625-72.

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[354] Blake, William, *The Book of Urizen. Illuminated Manuscript with the Original Illustrations of William Blake* (United States, e-artnow, 2013).

[355] A commentary on the poem as parody can be found in David Worrall's notes and introduction of Blake, William, *The Urizen Books. Blake's Illuminated Books, Volume 6* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). Many other readers have seen this poem as parody. George H. Gilpin, for instance, claims that the poem presents a parody of Genesis in order to "satirize theories of creation favored by the reason-bound and theoretical science of the Enlightenment" in "William Blake and the World's Body of Science," *Studies in Romanticism* 43, no. 1 (2004): 35. Only later, will Los become a figure for the creative and poetic imagination in Blake's work.

[356] Goss, "What Is Called Corporeal: William Blake and the Question of the Body," 417.

[357] Ibid.

around him,[358] and to affirm the baleful logic of command and dictatorship that characterises his essence. His dream is to "organise life, to bring all life under control of 'One command, one joy, one desire, / One curse, one weight, one measure, / One King, one God, one Law'"[359] in a static balance that comes as a result of "the stunting of our formerly infinite capacities; or in other words our transformation into individual bodies and selves through the narrowing of our ability to perceive."[360]

This brings us to an opposition that stands at the core of Blake's ideology: the distinction between seeing with the eye (sense perception) and seeing through the eye (imaginative perception),[361] between reason and imagination. The relationship between these two faculties of perception constitutes the heart of Blake's theory of vision. One of Blake's most famous quotes perfectly encapsulates this dual conception [**Figure 4**]: "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern."[362] Makdisi comments that these words express

> "the idea that our quasi-voluntary restriction into individual selfhoods granting us access to the outside world only through the grid or the filter of the five senses — the doors of perception — cuts us off from the infinite. Second is the idea that joy, including sensual joy, involves breaking the limits of the five senses and escaping the confines of our "caverned" existence, in effect using the senses in order to overcome them.[363]

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[358] Makdisi, *Reading William Blake*, 39.

[359] *The Book of Urizen*, plate 4 (Erdman, 72) quoted by Makdisi, *Reading William Blake*, 39.

[360] Ibid.

[361] Gleckner, Robert F., "Blake and the Senses," *Studies in Romanticism* 5, no. 1 (1965): 1. https://doi.org/10.2307/25599650.

[362] Blake, William, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Boston: John W. Luce and Company, 1906), 26.

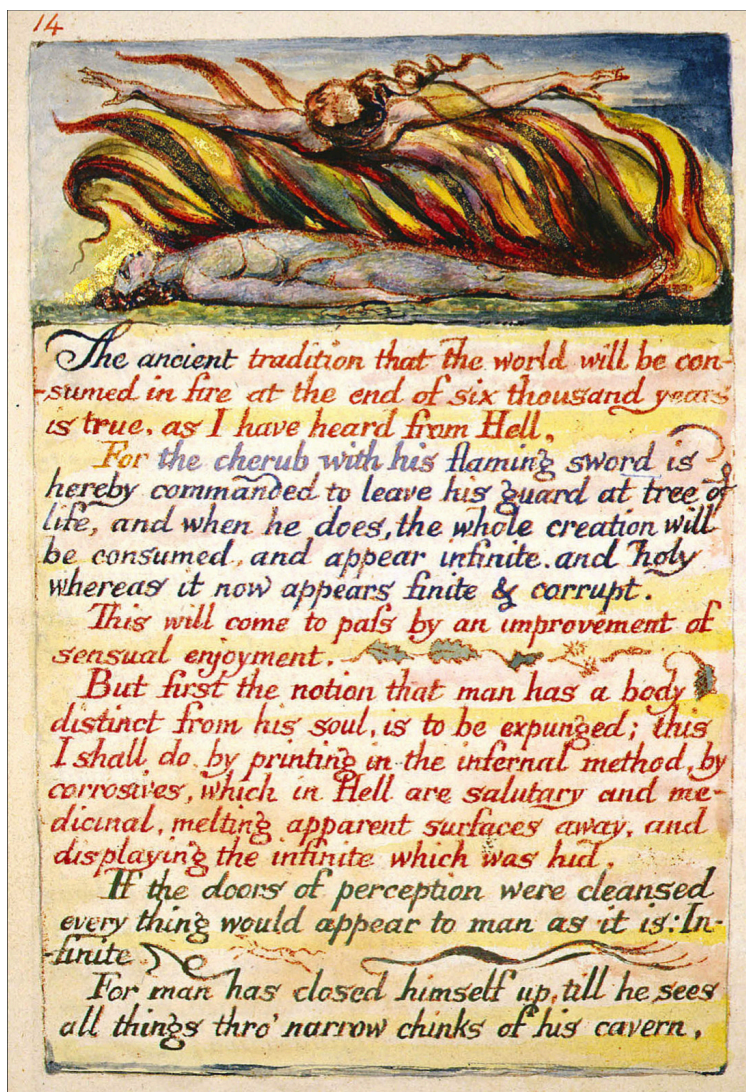[363] Makdisi, *Reading William Blake*, 76.

Figure 4. Blake, William, *There is No Natural Religion*, plate b3 according to Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick and Joseph Viscomi classification, 1788.

Witcutt,[364] in this context, quotes Blake's statement that 'Man's perceptions are not bounded by organs of perception; he perceives more than sense (tho' ever so acute) can discover.'[365] Blake proclaimed the supremacy of imagination over the rationalism and materialism of the 18th century, and, as Damrosch reports, believed that "if we could open our consciousness to the fullness of being, it would be like experiencing a sunrise that never ends."[366] Poetry plays a key role in this process of overcoming the constraining bounds of reason and the senses; Bataille affirms that "poetry appears contrary to reason," for "the true poet is like a child in the world," and that throughout Blake's life, "the visions of his poetic genius had precedence

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[364] Witcutt, William Purcell, *Blake, A psychological study* (London, Hollis & Carter, 1946), Kindle.

[365] Blake, William, *There is No Natural Religion*, plate b3 according to Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick and Joseph Viscomi classification, 1788.

[366] Blake quoted in Damrosch, Leo, *Eternity's Sunrise: The Imaginative World of William Blake* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), Kindle.

over the prosaic reality of the outer world."[367] Even more so, Bataille identifies some kind of overlapping between poetry and religion, as "religion is nothing but the effect of poetic genius. There is nothing in religion which cannot be found in poetry, (…) because all that is sacred is poetic and all that is poetic is sacred."[368] Blake's achievement, Bataille concludes, "was to strip the individual figure of both poetry and religion and to return to them that clarity in which religion has the liberty of poetry and poetry the sovereign power of religion."[369]

Because it nurtures creativity, which, in turn, allows the individual to reach a sublime poetic/religious/mystical experience, imagination serves as a means to access one's unconscious — which is, by definition, otherwise inaccessible through reason. Witcutt states that "many others have descended into the unconscious as far as Blake, but they have not returned. The asylums are full of them; for the modern definition of a madman is one who has been overwhelmed by the symbols of the unconscious. Blake is the only one who has ventured as far as they and yet remained sane."[370] This claim is arguable and the English poet's mental health remains a dubious issue to this day. What is sure, though, is that Blake and Jung shared a common fascination for symbols. What Blake calls 'imaginative perception,' Jung names 'intuition' and both concepts are inextricably tied to symbols and archetypes. Because archetypes are empty forms, only the *ex nihilo* aspect of intuition reaches the archetype.[371] Intuition, in fact, allows archetypes, which are universal, to make sense for the individual.

In *Psychological Types*, Jung describes four functions: sensation, feeling, thinking, and intuition. "The essential function of sensation is to establish that

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367 Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, chap 5, Kindle.

368 Ibid.

369 Ibid.

370 Witcutt, *Blake, A psychological study*.

371 Pilard, Nathalie, "C. G. Jung and intuition: from the mindscape of the paranormal to the heart of psychology," *The Journal of analytical psychology* 63, no. 1 (2018): 77. doi:10.1111/1468-5922.12380.

something exists, thinking tells us what it means, feeling what its value is, and intuition surmises whence it comes and whither it goes."[372] Considering, yet again, that individuation is a lifetime psychological process aimed at uniting one's consciousness with the unconscious, thus coming to terms with unconscious complexes, only intuition can lead the individual to the source of their complex. In other words, only intuition is in contact with the archetype.[373] Intuition at once creates the symbols of the archetype (a function of *poiesis* in common with Blake's perceptive imagination), and reads the myth to which the archetype belongs.[374] Pilard writes that "Intuition transposes the unreachable archetype into a form available to the senses: a sound, an image, a recurring movement, a smell or even a taste. From this, we understand how active imagination through dance, painting, etc. recreates the inner complex into external forms."[375] Intuition belongs to the creative function of the unconscious.

"The Human Abstract," a poem from the Experience section of Blake's collection *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, outstandingly encapsulates the epiphany, achieved through intuition, in which the shadow becomes conscious — the moment of recognition, that is, when the evil of the world appears with startling intensity, and the lyrical subject becomes aware that it is all traceable to mankind.

> Pity would be no more,
> If we did not make somebody Poor:
> And Mercy no more could be,
> If all were as happy as we;

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[372] Jung, *Collected Works of C.G. Jung: Psychological Types (Volume 6)*, para. 899.

[373] Pilard, "C. G. Jung and intuition: from the mindscape of the paranormal to the heart of psychology," 77.

[374] Ibid.

[375] Ibid., 78.

And mutual fear brings peace;

Till the selfish loves increase.

Then Cruelty knits a snare,

And spreads his baits with care.

He sits down with holy fears,

And waters the ground with tears:

Then Humility takes its root

Underneath his foot.

Soon spreads the dismal shade

Of Mystery over his head;

And the Catterpiller and Fly,

Feed on the Mystery.

And it bears the fruit of Deceit,

Ruddy and sweet to eat;

And the Raven his nest has made

In its thickest shade.

The Gods of the earth and sea

Sought thro' Nature to find this Tree

But their search was all in vain:

There grows one in the Human Brain.[376]

Because Blake's poetic and artistic productions are conjoined, the illustration [**Figure 5**] surrounding the poem should be observed carefully. On the right side, the trunk and a few branches of the tree described in the fifth and last quatrains are recognisable, whilst at the bottom, the figure of an old, bearded man — in all likelihood Urizen — is on his knees, his hands trying to loosen the ropes that

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[376] Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience,* 88-89.

restrain him. Metaphorically, Urizen appears to be struggling with his own nets of religion, under the Tree of Mystery.

Before analysing the poem, which D. G. Rossetti defined as one of "very perfect and noble examples of Blake's metaphysical poetry,"[377] there is another point worth taking into account, which adds to the context and meaning of the composition. The collection *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* presents a double, mirror-like structure: most poems are paired, presenting the same subject under the complementary lenses of innocence and experience. The nature of such opposition is emphasised in the subtitle of the work: "Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul." This dualism is interpreted by Frye as the fracture that separates the "unfallen world" (innocence) from the "fallen world" (experience), in a Miltonian dialectic.[378] The previous, draft title of "The Human Abstract" was "The Human

Figure 5. Blake, William, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (London: Penguin, 2005), 89.

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377 Gilchrist, Alexander, *Life of William Blake: With Selections from His Poems and Other Writings, Volume 1* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1880), 27.

378 Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 42.

Image," which clearly stands out as counterpart poem of "The Divine Image" of the Songs of Innocence. In "The Human Abstract," Blake stages the four divine virtues at the centre of "The Divine Image" — mercy, pity, peace and love — and associates them with the human scourges from which their very existence derives. Poverty generates pity; misery begets mercy; mutual fear is the condition for peace; and cruelty exists as direct consequence of a twisted version of love — self love. However, as opposed to the last two lines of "The Divine Image," where the attributes of mercy, love and pity reside with God ("Where Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell / There God is dwelling too"),[379] the ending of "The Human Abstract" lets the reader know that they are products of the human brain. As Gleckner suggests, in fact, in the world of experience the human-divine imaginative unity of "The Divine Image" is shattered,

> for the Blakean fall, as is well known, is a fall into division, fragmentation, each fragment assuming for itself the importance (and hence the benefits) of the whole. Experience, then, is fundamentally hypocritical and acquisitive, rational and non-imaginative. In such a world virtue cannot exist except as a rationally conceived opposite to vice. There are no longer single entities participating harmoniously in one divine unity; there are only, in effect, pairs, opposites, contraries, and they are at war.[380]

The poem has six four-lined stanzas and follows an AABB rhyme pattern. In line with the other poems in the collection, the rhyme scheme (mostly AABB or ABAB) recreates ballad and nursery rhyme-like sonorities which give the poems a lively, light-hearted tone that clashes with the didactic, serious content of the pieces. The virtues are capitalised, as if they were personified, so much that Cruelty "knits a snare," "spreads his baits with care," "sits down with holy fears,"

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[379] Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience,* 32-33.

[380] Gleckner, Robert F., "William Blake and the Human Abstract," *PMLA* 76, no. 4 (1961): 374. https://doi.org/10.2307/460620.

and "waters the ground with tears" in the second and third stanzas. In particular, the hunting imagery the lyrical voice employs to portray cruelty ("knits a snare" and "spread his baits") is emblematic and recalls the most disturbing stanza of "The Tyger," another poem of the Songs of Experience, where, after a wonderstruck illustration of the symmetrical beauty and gruesome fierceness of the tiger,[381] the lyrical subject wonders whether the god who created such a stunning, yet deadly animal was satisfied with the result, and whether that god is the same who made the innocent, pure lamb: "When the stars threw down their spears / And watered heaven with their tears: / Did he smile his work to see? / Did he who made the Lamb make thee?"[382] As Frye points out with great clarity, "Blake imitates Milton in beginning with the fall of the Satanic principle, and the Bible in introducing us first into a world of chaos. But the two essential principles of his thought, that the Creation was a fall and that it was the fall of a God as well as a man, are clearly there."[383] This would also explain the presence of evil in God's creation — why the "immortal hand"[384] created the fearful symmetry of a tiger.

The fourth stanza, then, breaks the rhyme pattern to draw attention to "Mystery," which "bears the fruit of Deceit" and comes to represent the ultimate by-product of the tree that has emerged from all the previous virtues. The final stanza encapsulates the essence of the poem, leading the reader to a painful realisation: the evil of the world is a creation of the human brain and religion itself is a human construct. The title, in fact, refers to the abstract god which mankind has created. Gleckner comments that "The poem's discursiveness, its rather mechanical, almost mathematical simplicity make it unlike other songs of experience; the obviousness of the contrast suggests a hasty, impulsive

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[381] The lyrical voice in this poem directly addresses the tiger.

[382] Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience,* 78-79.

[383] Frye, *Fearful Symmetry,* 256-257.

[384] Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience,* 78-79.

composition."[385] Blake's attack on human reason has always to do with its tendency towards abstraction and the consequent mistake of regarding God as distinct from humans.

The first stanzas of the poem eloquently convey the idea that, if humans were not evil, the fundamental virtues upon which religion is built would not exist. Furthermore, Mercy and Pity appear as hypocritical, spurious virtues, since if we really felt pity and mercy for the wretched, we would try our best to uplift them. Then, there would be no more need for pity and mercy and they would fade away. In other words, if there really were a benevolent God, the world would be happy and filled with genuine love; the false virtues advocated by Christianity would not be necessary. Likewise, peace is only a state of truce due to fear of one's foe. Gleckner holds that, "abstracted from the corpus of the divine, the 'virtues' not only become selfish but also hypocritically disguise their true natures — cruelty, jealousy, terror, and secrecy — under the old names (mercy, pity, peace and love). (…) Blake's intention in 'The Human Abstract' then was to analyse the perversion"[386] of such deceitful 'virtues.'

As soon as the notion of 'selfish love' is introduced, in fact, the poem takes a turn to explore the dire consequences of the touchstone virtues praised in "The Human Image," which ultimately become the breeding ground for a new system of values based on cruelty, fear, and deceit. Far from the now faint dream of innocence, this new system starts to grow in the shape of a tree. The reference to the Tree of Knowledge (or of Life) from the prelapsarian, Edenic idyll is clear. Humility is demeaned to the roots of the tree, trampled by Cruelty. The branches and foliage spread a 'dismal shade' of mystery, which, symbolically, shuts out the light of innocence and true vision. Finally, the fruit the tree bears are associated with Deceit and a raven, the symbol of death, is harboured its darkest branches. The divinely human level of "The Divine Image" has thus been

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[385] Ibid., 379.

[386] Gleckner, "William Blake and the Human Abstract," 376.

gradually lowered to the natural, Gleckner observes, adding that the poem is "noteworthy mainly for its consistent, effective use of natural imagery, from the fertilisation of the ground to the bearing of fruit. Ironically this natural cultivation leads to the intricacy of the human brain."[387]

By the end of the poem, the reader realises that the description of the tree was a glimpse into the human mind, and the evil hitherto outlined belongs in the rational mind of mankind. The poem slowly but relentlessly builds up a creeping tension whose calm, slithering pace reminds of the biblical serpent that guards the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Then, in the last stanza, the creeping pace gives way to the abrupt acknowledgement that cruelty, epitome of the evil of the world, has nothing to do with nature — it stems from the abstract human mind. Confused by both the unsettling mismatch between form and content of the poem and this final recognition, the reader is left baffled.

The god praised in "The Divine Image" is therefore revealed to be created, for selfish purposes (out of the "selfish loves" of the second stanza), by the human intellect. He is, in truth, a cruel and self-centred god who, in Blake's perception, overlaps with the god of traditional religion: Urizen[388] (ergo the illustration). "Mystery," in this context, stands for 'unnatural.' In fact, "the Gods of the earth and the sea" look for the tree of Cruelty in nature, but to no avail ("their search was all in vain"). Such selfish, man-made religion is hollow and shaky, since it is the result of human artificial perceptions.[389]

The motif of deceitful fruit and of the parodic tree is reiterated in "A Poisonous Tree."[390] A sort of continuation of the tenets laid in "The Human Abstract," "A Poisonous Tree" displays an exacerbation of the cruelty the human

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[387] Ibid., 379.

[388] In fact, Urizen detaches from eternity out of a self-diversifying urge. He then turns against the other Eternals and believes himself holy.

[389] As opposed to imaginative perceptions, which, on the contrary, give access to infinity.

[390] Always in the Songs of Experience. Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, 92-93.

brain can lure man into. In keeping with the natural tree growth metaphor, the poem warns the reader against the danger of repressing negative feelings: "I was angry with my friend: / I told my wrath, my wrath did end. / I was angry with my foe: / I told it not, my wrath did grow."[391] Here too, the newborn poisonous tree is fed with fear and deceit: "And I watered it in fears, / Night & morning with my tears: / And I sunned it with smiles,[392] / And with soft deceitful wiles."[393] Yet, here Blake brings the didactical allegory even further. Anger grows into vengeance and the deceitful fruit bred by the toxic tree (tellingly, an apple) becomes deadly, ultimately affirming its harmful agency in the last two quatrains: "And it grew both day and night, / Till it bore an apple bright, / And my foe beheld it shine, / And he knew that it was mine, / And into my garden stole, / When the night had veild the pole: / In the morning glad I see / My foe outstretched beneath the tree."[394] The biblical Tree of Life is definitively supplanted by an earthly tree of death.

In his powerful poems, Blake recreates the myth of the Tree of Knowledge or of Life through a distorted, bleak reflection — one that, although shadowy and inhabited by ominous ravens, is indeed fruitful, but for vicious ends. This tree, which is crafted by human reason rather than divine will, gives falsehood instead of truth, and death instead of life. We could, then, regard the human abstract's tree as an epitome of the Jungian shadow present in every individual. Acknowledging its being intrinsic in human nature and responsible for the net each person who does not confront it is forced into, constitutes the first step towards integration and, subsequently, individuation. It is only when the subject overcomes their shadow, that they can break free from the restraints imposed by

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[391] Ibid.

[392] The image of grin as a sign of malice keeps returning. The narrating I smiles at his enemy when all the while he is inwardly and secretly plotting his revenge.

[393] Ibid.

[394] Ibid.

their own basest self and become whole — or, in Blakean terms, release themselves from their mind-forged manacles to see everything as it truly is: infinite.

[AU] – Conclusion

"You poisoned me with a book once. I should not forgive that. Harry, promise me that you will never lend that book to any one. It does harm."[395] Dorian — conveniently — believes he has been poisoned by the yellow book; that literature can indeed affect people's real life. Lord Henry mocks Dorian for the ingenuity and moralising tone of this allegation, claiming that there is no such thing as being poisoned by a book: "Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile. The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame. That is all."[396] Yet, showing the world its own shame is a powerful enough role art should possess, Bataille maintains. It is "complicity in the knowledge of Evil," that which constitutes the "basis of intense communication."[397] To build such knowledge, experience of evil is key. The aesthetic domain, with this regard, provides an important terrain in which one is free to extend their experience and knowledge of evil through vicarious participation.

To assume that the yellow book did 'poison' Dorian — that it is, in other words, the primal cause of his self-destruction — would be overindulgent. Yet, it is after reading the book, that Dorian truly starts to develop his own individuality, ceasing to swallow and endorse whatever flamboyant aphorism Lord Henry comes up with. Although the yellow book can hardly be held accountable for Dorian's descent into the abyss of corruption, its contribution to the young man's individuation process is undeniable. Even for Pater, a major advocate of the Aesthetic movement's *art for art's sake* motto against Victorian moralism, art is endowed with a certain agency: that of compelling us to live a richer, more passionate life.

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[395] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 183.

[396] Ibid.

[397] Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, preface, Kindle.

The question of art's agency upon its viewers has been and still is much debated. The rise of the novel caused a surge of moral concerns regarding the threat fiction was thought to pose in the 18th century. Lingering too much in the adventures of the literary world was deemed dangerous, as it might have led to a perilous detachment from reality and, consequently, folly. Everyday life tendencies that continue to exist to this day have been identified through and called after popular fictional characters or situations. Quixotism, Wertherism, sadism, Bovarysme, kafkaesque are just a few examples of neologisms coined from narrative phenomena that forever altered the European literary imagery since the 17th century.

The power literature exerts on the human mind extends within and beyond aesthetic boundaries. Would Waverly have embarked in his reckless military feats in the Scottish Highlands, had he not spent his youth engrossed in dreamy romantic literature? Would Emma Bovary have settled for a lukewarm faithful marriage, had her yearning for romance and luxury not been stirred by popular novels? Or again, more importantly, would all those romantic youths have committed suicide, had it not been for the so-called Werther-mania? The power of literature and art in general has hardly ever left the world indifferent. If one of the most controversial and sickening[398] works ever written like *The 120 Days of Sodom* has managed to spark, almost two centuries later, an irrepressible feminist wave,[399] could it not be that our innermost repressed drives may find discharge and solace through aesthetic catharsis?

Starting from the debate on empathy and its hypothetical social consequences, through the distinction between mainstream art and art that 'stays with evil,' this dissertation has provided a definition of negative empathy

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[398] In *Literature and Evil*, Bataille acknowledges the crucial importance of *Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome* claiming that its power lies in its language, "that of a universe which degrades gradually and systematically, which tortures and destroys the totality of the beings which it presents. (…) Nobody, unless [they are] totally deaf to it, can finish *Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome* without feeling sick." Bataille, "Sade," in *Literature and Evil*, Kindle.

[399] First under the leadership of Simone De Beauvoir and, then, Angela Carter.

that is comprehensive of its origin (affect), its particular activation device (identification), and its engaging element (catharsis), which establishes a particular bond between subject and object. Whether such bond is stronger and more encompassing than the one fostered by regular empathy, is left for the reader to say. We have analysed why and how negative empathy works, and through which means it can be induced. Finally, a reflection over its cathartic power and the far-reaching implications it can entail as far as human consciousness is concerned has been developed.

Humans are aesthetic animals, that spend vast amounts of time and resources on seemingly useless aesthetic activities, psychologist Henrik Høgh-Olesen argues in *The Aesthetic Animal*. The ultimate questions of why we exhibit such behaviour and what functions the aesthetic impulse might serve, Høgh-Olesen explains, "have largely been left to psychoanalysts like Freud and Jung and their successors and thus to theoretical and speculative rather than practical, empirical, and experimental approaches."[400] On the one hand, Freud perceives art as disguised and dissatisfactory instinctual urges of the sexual kind, which society and the conscious mind refuse to acknowledge. They therefore cannot be fulfilled openly and directly; they must find an outlet through more indirect and symbolic means (such as dreams, fairy tales, neurotic symptoms). "Put briefly, we make art" — and make use of art — "because we cannot satisfy our primary sexual and aggressive urges directly, within the given conditions of society. Art replaces the urge, and in this way becomes displaced or sublimated satisfaction."[401] Such view frames art as a kind of cultural pressure relief valve. For Jung, on the other hand, art cannot be reduced to a kind of "displaced surrogate satisfaction or a symptom of the artist's underlying

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[400] Høgh-Olesen, Henrik, *The Aesthetic Animal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 6.

[401] Ibid.

frustration."[402] The artistic impulse is, rather, "an innate (archetypal) inner urge and a means to self-expression, self-realisation and self-knowledge."[403]

Using the protected aesthetic dimension as a relief valve or a means of self-knowledge comes with a number of benefits. As we have seen with Miall's affective model of response to stories and Menninghaus' Distancing-Embracing model of the enjoyment of negative emotions, the subject's involvement in art reception can be significantly amplified by negative empathy. Whether because it promotes the reader's interpretative activity and, therefore, active participation in the aesthetic experience, or because it converts the power of negative emotions into aesthetic pleasure, negative empathy might represent a critical asset in making art more compelling, engaging and attractive in an era dominated by the acceleration of technological development. As anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen reports in his book *Overheating* — a ground-breaking exploration of the too full, too fast, uneven and unequal age of the Anthropocene — the surplus of information brought about by the massive intensification of the internet "makes it difficult to weave a coherent narrative about life, the universe and everything."[404] We no longer live in the age of long novels. The direct consequence of information overload is its fragmentation into ever smaller packets. Reading long stretches of prose continuously is becoming harder and harder, Nicholas Carr affirms in a 2008 article titled "Is Google making us stupid?"[405] His experience, shared by many, tells us that the average attention span has shrunk and that the ability to absorb and digest information, turning

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[402] Ibid.

[403] Ibid.

[404] Eriksen, Thomas Hylland, *Overheating* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 120.

[405] Carr, Nicholas, "Is Google Making Us Stupid? What the Internet is doing to our brains," *The Atlantic*, July/August, 2008, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/.

it into knowledge, is now limited to fragments, abstracts, headlines and short texts.[406]

In 1997, Ursula Heise published *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative, and Postmodernism* — a study on the way in which developments in transportation, communication and information technologies have determined the emergence of a new culture of time in Western societies. The book explains how conventional notions of time and space, considered by Heise as complementary parameters of experience, are in crisis due to widespread acceleration and globalisation, respectively. According to Heise, if cultural and technological transformations profoundly affect art, the reverse is also true. In the so-called age of nanosecond culture and posthistory, cultural artefacts, "to the extent that they depend upon or address temporal and spatial experiences, participate in their reconceptualisation."[407] Acknowledging the enmeshment of art, literature and other forms of aesthetic expression in the shaping of values and outlooks of cultural and social improvement, suggests that the imaginative power of the aesthetic realm could come to play a key role in upending long-held beliefs, opening up new ways of thinking and fostering fruitful, forward-looking, comprehensive approaches. This leads us back to the topical issue of the Anthropocene. If such a radical change in our understanding and experience of time was axiomatic to Heise in 1997, Carr in 2008 and Eriksen in 2016, now it is more urgent than ever. We need new ways to bridge the gap between artworks of the past, whose consumption and enjoyment requires a larger amount of time, attention and energy, and today's craving for immediate content. The demand for ready-to-access artistic products threatens works of art to become rapidly disposable whenever the hectic yearning of an ever easily

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[406] Eriksen, *Overheating*, 121.

[407] Heise, Ursula, *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative, and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 2.

distracted audience fails to meet substantial engagement. In the light of the fact that, in Western societies, interest seems to be increasingly driven by narcissistic, self-referential strivings, negative empathy could contribute to retrieving and reaffirming the historical and cultural importance of a canon that appears at times outdated and unrelatable. Furthermore, by normalising what is 'other,' dark, ugly or scary, it could play a part in ushering the present awareness of climate crisis into the urgency to adopt a comprehensive, anti-anthropocentric posthuman approach.

The history of the arts is rich in uncanny prospects of present and future, as fictions of alternative forms of humanity and, especially, corporeality have long been fascinating the human mind. Negative empathy aroused by unnerving dystopian scenarios and disturbing representations of human cyborg bodies offer fertile soil to unprecedented matter, space and time combinations.[408] The endeavour to propel a reevaluation of the notions of good and evil through images that produce shock and disgust, opens the way to the posthuman sought-after rearrangement of human–other-than-human relationships, and its mission of rendering technoscientific reconfigurations of the human digestible, familiar and — possibly — desirable.

Lastly, the subjective, moral freedom enabled by negative empathy within the aesthetic dimension could act as proxy for a beneficial cathartic experience that transcends fictional barriers, encroaching on actual recognition of the repressed and relieving discharge of latent tension. If so, the underlying potential of negative empathy might prove dramatic beyond the scope of critical theory, translating into momentous ramifications in the most diverse territories: from psychology to philosophy, through neuroscience and environmental awareness. For these reasons, further interdisciplinary research on negative empathy is required to open up new

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[408] According to Haraway, Donna J., *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

horizons which could herald practical applications beyond the theoretical scope of aesthetics. Much could be achieved starting from the acknowledgement that, to quote Edward Bulwer-Lytton, "We love the beautiful and serene, but we have a feeling as deep as love for the terrible and dark."[409]

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[409] Bulwer-Lytton, Edward, *Zanoni* (Project Gutenberg EBook, 2006), chapter 3.IV.

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