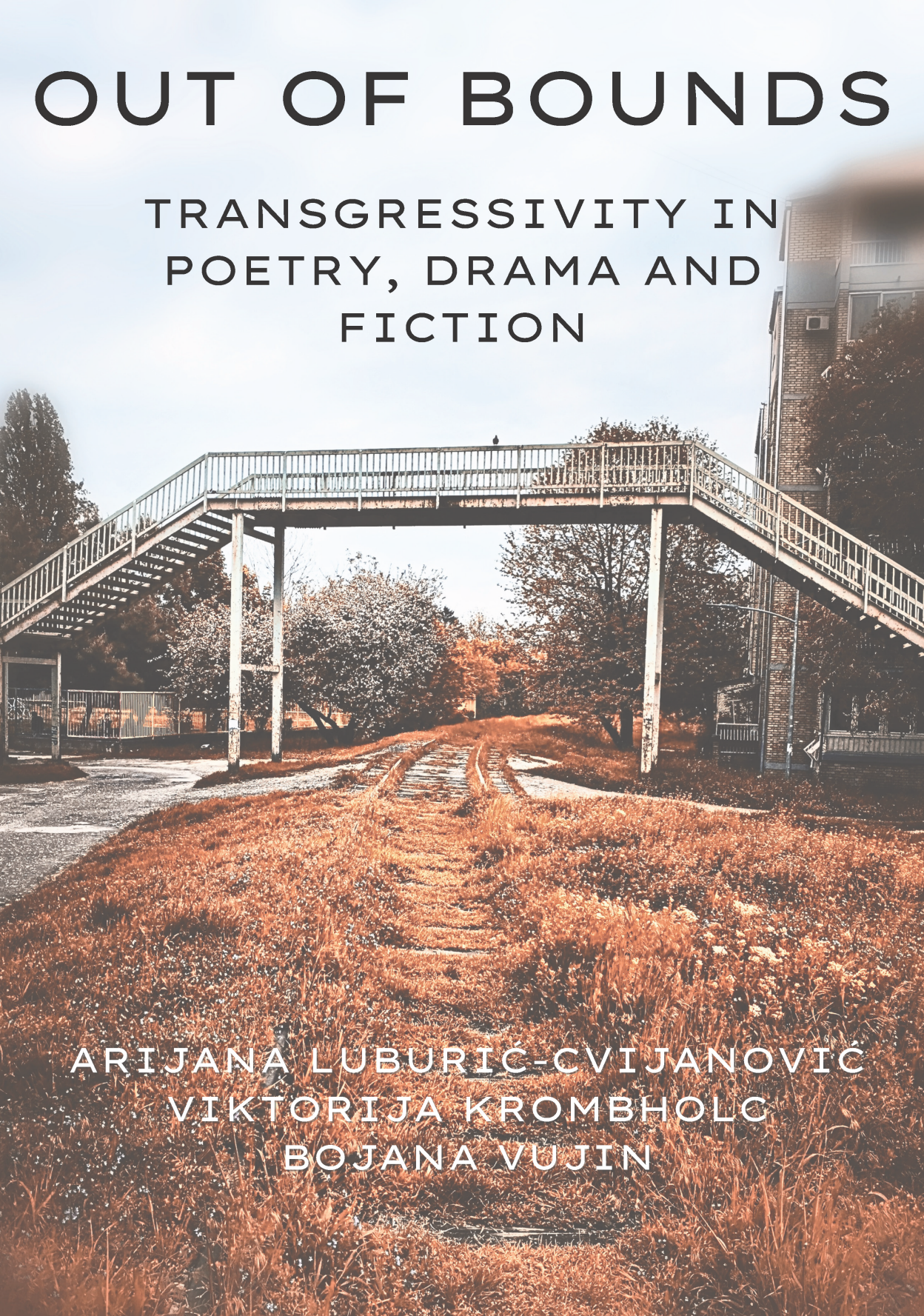
OUT OF BOUNDS

TRANSGRESSIVITY IN POETRY, DRAMA AND FICTION



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OUT OF BOUNDS: TRANSGRESSIVITY IN POETRY, DRAMA AND FICTION

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TRANSGRESSIVITY AS AN ESSENTIAL FEATURE OF LITERARINESS

It might seem odd for a study on literary transgressivity to start with a claim about tradition, but it is within tradition that acts of transgression occur. Without traditions, or boundaries, there is no transgressivity. In the Judeo-Christian, Greek and other cultural traditions across the world, "human existence as we know it began in a fundamental act of transgression" (Booker 1). What M. Keith Booker means by this is that the primal acts of transgression, such as those of Adam and Eve or Prometheus, represent rebellious defiance of authority but also the birth of imagination, creativity and critical thinking which came to define the human. It is for this reason that "the transgression of boundaries" is understood as "an essential feature of literariness" (Booker 3). Stepping across the line, challenging the norm and breaking the rule are all indispensable to literature for they bring about novelty.

Every form of transgressivity in literature – and there are indeed many – is defined by boundary crossing, but as we hope to illustrate, boundary crossing takes numerous shapes in literature, so definitions of transgressivity are bound to vary in purpose and complexity. Our intention, however, is not to outline them all, nor is it to trace transgressivity in all its literary manifestations. That endeavour would certainly be heroic but also foolish and doomed to fail. Instead, we wish to explore various meanings and functions of transgressivity as it relates to the body, mind, society, sexuality, violence, gender, literary form, experiment, performance and subversion in poetry, drama and fiction, in order to demonstrate that rule-breaking is the driving force behind transgressivity as a violation of literary conventions, moral norms, and dominant institutions and ideologies. In their indispensable book on the politics and poetics of transgression, Allon White and Peter Stallybrass point out that the "top" in culture and literature wishes to marginalise and eliminate the "bottom" only to discover that it is dependent on the "bottom" and includes it symbolically (5). In this study we look at ways in which the two are mutually conditioned and interrelated, and expose the unstable boundary between "top" as mainstream, classic, canon, high, or serious, and "bottom" as transgressive, countercultural, low, experimental, popular, or entertaining. Like White and Stallybrass, we are interested in dissonances, antagonisms, overlappings, intersections, and interstices, with the aim of revealing their creative and subversive potential.

Transgressivity as a form of creative subversion has characterised literature from its very beginnings, as the towering achievements of ancient

satirists like Petronius and Ovid demonstrate. In a study which examines transgressive fiction as a genre in the satiric tradition, Robin Mookerjee understands it both as a mode and a genre, with roots in ancient satire and the works of more recent satirists, such as Jonathan Swift. While it has always existed as a mode, as a genre it only developed in the final decades of the twentieth century, with a few notable predecessors from mid-twentieth century. The term "transgressive fiction" was coined by Michael Silverblatt in 1993 to refer to what had already become "one of the most daring and controversial genres of contemporary literature" (Luburić-Cvijanović and Krombholc 207), and now refers to a wide variety of authors and texts, from Bret Easton Ellis to Angela Carter, and from *A Clockwork Orange* (1969) to *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002). Although important differences between these writers and their works prevent us from drawing easy parallels, Mookerjee outlines some very general features of transgressive fiction that characterise most novels which represent the genre: matter-of-fact and/or graphic representation of unpleasant and taboo content, antiheroes, violence, perversion, substance abuse, sexuality, and frequent satiric undertones. We wish to set off from this genre, which Mookerjee exaggeratedly labels "the most significant literary movement of our time" (14), and venture into other literary territories where these and other kinds of transgressivity can be found.

Our approach to transgressivity is therefore closer to Booker's, White's and Stallybrass's than it is to Mookerjee's, in that it promotes a wide understanding of transgressivity which encompasses an impressive variety of literary transgressions. For this reason, we have chosen a diverse group of authors who have little in common except a shared propensity for boundary crossing which inspires them to create texts that are playful, experimental, interrogatory, provocative, and at times dangerously inappropriate or unsettling. The book begins with poetry, where it all started, and demonstrates that transgressivity is neither new nor found in prose alone. To further disrupt its association with prose, the book continues through drama, to highlight that the features of content and representation seen as typical of transgressive fiction can be found in, for instance, in-yer-face theatre. Finally, the book ends with a section on fiction outside the boundaries of the transgressive genre, and examines texts which escape definition as novels or, in some cases, prose. Calling them fictions might also be a bit of a stretch, but fictions they all are, at least to a certain degree.

In the first section, we play with the notion of poetry, starting with a respectable, canonical form of the dramatic monologue, only to then move onto

popular children's poems and finally finish our journey on stage, with rock music. We also move the timeline significantly into the past, first stepping back into the nineteenth century to show that transgressivity should not be reserved exclusively for the modern age. The chapter that opens the book, "Victorian Psycho", focuses on three famous murder poems by Robert Browning, "Porphyria's Lover", "My Last Duchess" and "The Laboratory". Here, dramatic monologues characterised by verse brilliance and yet uttered by downright devious literary personas serve to illustrate how formal and thematic transgression work in tandem in poetry. The second chapter, "Cat Carnival", takes us to the realm of children's poetry, and explores how the genre of nonsense and the carnivalesque mode work together in Dr. Seuss's picture books. Here, the emphasis is placed on linguistic transgression, and the very foundations of language and language acquisition are shown to be unstable and arbitrary. The final chapter in this section stretches the definition of poetry, and instead of traditional, written verses, focuses on rock music. Starting from the established idea that classic rock music is an expression of patriarchal hegemony, this chapter, aptly titled "Transparent Closets, Transgressive Sounds", analyses two songs by the band Queen and demonstrates how camp functions as a vehicle of queer transgression in an otherwise heteronormative genre. This performative kind of poetry also serves as a springboard for the move into our next section, drama.

In contrast with the broad temporal scope of the chapters exploring transgressivity in poetry, the section devoted to drama zooms in on the theatrical output created at the turn of the millennium. It is impossible to write about transgressivity in the sphere of theatre and drama without a discussion of British new writing of the nineties and its pervasive in-yer-face sensibility, which is why the first chapter focuses on the links and resonances between transgressive fiction and the tradition of in-yer-face theatre, exploring Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995) as its seminal text. In an effort to capture the experiential quality of in-yer-face drama, the first chapter borrows its title, "Fill Your Eyes with This Horror!", from Abel Gance's powerful anti-war cinematic manifesto, *J'accuse!* (1938). Read against Gance's film, the title also draws attention to possible points of departure between transgressive fiction and in-yer-face theatre, with respect to the ways in which they express their critique or articulate their moral standpoints. The ethical concerns relating to representations of violence provide a link with the second chapter, "Nobody Was Hurt", which discusses Tim Crouch's *The Author* (2008), a piece that shares with *Blasted* an explosive performance history. The issues of audience

engagement and mediation of violence lie at the heart of the play's ethical investigation, which is carried out in dialogue with *Blasted* and the in-yer-face tradition, but employing markedly different dramaturgical strategies. Finally, the last chapter in this section, "Postcards from Crimpland", turns to the theatre of Martin Crimp, a playwright whose work can be read within the context of the transgressive wave of the nineties, but who also stands firmly apart, creating highly individual and subversive texts. With its highly experimental, fragmented form, Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) might seem an obvious choice for inclusion here. Instead, the chapter chooses to focus on *The Country* (2000) and *The City* (2008), companion pieces which are usually considered his more conventional, sedate work, in order to unearth teeming undercurrents of transgression and subversion that belie them, and challenge the casual association between experimentation in form and subversion of other norms.

From there the book embarks on an analysis of fictional texts that depart from the genre of transgressive fiction in important ways but remain powerfully transgressive and subversive in others. Like poetry and drama, prose has known transgression from its very beginnings. As the novel "grew out of and in response to drama and the epic" (Bulson 14), it is only natural that the section on fiction follows those on poetry and drama. Even in cultures where the novel did not develop "organically" from existing literary forms but was brought by the colonisers, or in those that boast early examples of novels, like Murasaki Shikibu's eleventh-century *Genji monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*), it came to full fruition after poetry and drama. As the works discussed in the third section strictly speaking escape definition as prose, defying the genre of the novel or mixing text and image, prose and poetry, the section is titled "Fiction". It leaves aside existing readings of transgressive fiction in order to analyse wildly heterogeneous texts which resist classification, even though some of them are sold as "novels". The first chapter, "Experiment and Transgression", switches between Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), a novel, and Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein* (2019), a fiction, to take a two-hundred-year-long historical view of transgressivity as the foundation of the literary and scientific experiment, to scrutinise the complex connections between the body, society, text, and technology, and to finally reflect on the authors' posthumanist concerns. Using a phrase from Winterson as its title, "Crossing the Boundaries Messes Up the Binaries" then considers the graphic novel as a "trans" literary and artistic form, and explores boundary crossing in Stephen Appleby's *Dragman* (2020) in the context of binary-disruptive genre and gender identity.

"The Transgressive Power of Experimental Fiction" concludes our study with a discussion of experimental literature that challenges genre and questions the status of the literary text. Like the first chapter, it focuses on two texts, Mark Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* (2006) and Giannina Braschi's *United States of Banana* (2011), hoping to illuminate the transgressive power of experimental writing. There may seem to be little connection between the two authors, especially in terms of political overtones, save an interest in experimentation, but the chapter will highlight some relevant similarities between them. Finally, why two? To at least give a glimpse of the variety of experimental literature; two are far from enough, but in the small space of a book chapter, two will do.

The present selection by no means offers, nor can it offer, an exhaustive list of the kinds and aspects of the transgressive in literature, but goes through different genres, authors and works to tackle various aspects, purposes and effects of transgressivity, and emphasise its vital role in literature. All the texts we have chosen resist definition, defy categorisation and cross a number of binaries, but we are fully aware that another selection might have been just as adequate and illustrative of the fact that, in its remarkable variety of forms, transgressivity is present in all literature: poetry, drama, fiction, and anything in between.

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POETRY

Bojana Vujin

VICTORIAN PSYCHO: ROBERT BROWNING'S MURDER POEMS

Sign 'o' the Times: Transgression and the Dramatic Monologue

The notion of transgression, although not solely the province of postmodern literature (Booker 15), usually appears hand in hand with more recent fictional forays into the centre of the mind. Postmodern works are certainly more self-aware of their transgressive status than those created in earlier, less metafictional eras; however, given that the human psyche has always been wonderfully (or frighteningly, depending on one's point of view) outré, it should go without saying that art, as a reflection of human imagination, has consequently always reflected the strange, the bizarre, the transgressive and the excessive. If transgression lies at the spot which marks the discrepancy between the outer order and inner chaos, there is no better place to start than in the locus famous for its jealously guarded uptight exterior: Victorian Britain.

To be perfectly clear, that uptightness is probably two fifths truth and three fifths historical construct (we could even allow for a fifty-fifty split). The Lytton Strachey-approved, bad faith view of the Victorians as stuffy, puritanical and sexually repressed was recognized as exceedingly biased[1] as early as 1960s (Jones 301), and has by now become skewed in the opposite direction. Increasingly, through the lens of our "libidinous fantasy" (Kohlke 67), those once priggish Victorians have been deemed not only a lot more sexually liberated than they actually were, but are frequently ascribed all manner of depravity and perversion to boot, in a newly exoticising, Othering venture which Marie-Louse Kohlke calls *sexsation*, whereby we temporally project our dreams of obscenity onto the past, like we once spatially did onto the Orient. As always, the truth is regretfully somewhere in the middle: the Victorian era was decidedly not a no-holds-barred smorgasbord of debauchery, but neither was it a place where men would start loosening their cravats with shaking hands, having lost control of all higher faculties at the sight of a well-turned ankle. Or a shapely table leg.

Ironically enough, this tendency to superimpose contemporary constructs onto historical periods is something that we have in common with the Victorians. Their "appetite for exploration and appropriation of other cultures, however distant geographically or chronologically" (Pearsall 73) is

[1] For more on this, see Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*.

present in much of their art, from painting to literature, perhaps best exemplified by the (relatively) recently recovered sixteenth-century portrait of Isabella de 'Medici (cf. Cascone), found lurking underneath a Victorian beauty makeover that made the subject appealing in a generic, milquetoast way, not dissimilar to today's Instagram and TikTok filters. This painting, tentatively attributed to Allesandro Allori, can illustrate not only the Victorian (and admittedly, not just Victorian) tendency to project contemporary standards of beauty and behaviour onto historical eras, but also – inadvertently – its preoccupation with duality and fear of the unsavoury elements hiding just beneath the veneer of "normalcy". As the nineteenth century progressed and gave way to the Fin de Siècle, this worrying dichotomy, which Booker links with the "fundamental transgression between human and animal" (53), was increasingly explored in works like Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), or Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). In terms of poetry, when searching for this boundary-crossing, or boundary-erasing, Victorian duality, one need not look further than the dramatic monologue, or as Isobel Armstrong calls it, "the double poem", arguably the greatest among the myriad Victorian poetic innovations, in order to find many a depraved, insane, or simply evil character, gleefully narrating their titillating misdeeds via some of the period's most formally brilliant verses.

As a poetic form that encompasses lyric, dramatic and narrative elements, the dramatic monologue naturally lends itself to transgression, due to its liminality and generic hybridity. Although it was not a Victorian invention – some scholars trace the genre back to Ovid, and the immediate precursors can be found in Romanticism, both in the meditative conversation poems and in less overtly philosophical works like William Wordsworth's "The Thorn" (1798) – the dramatic monologue as we understand it today is the brainchild of the Victorian poets who gave it its definitive form, primarily Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning. Though Tennyson was already experimenting with dramatic-psychological poetry as a teenager in mid-1820s, he wrote what was to become the first "official" dramatic monologue, "St. Simeon Stylites", only a good while later and first read it to his friends in November 1833, a few years before Victoria's ascension to the throne and the official start of the "Victorian" era. "St. Simeon" (which wasn't published until 1842) was followed by Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" and "Johannes Agricola in Meditation", which

were probably written in April or May 1834, and published in 1836 (DeVane 125). Roughly two decades later, in 1855, when both Tennyson's *Maud* and Browning's *Men and Women* were published, the dramatic monologue finally established itself as "a proper school of psychological poetry" (Faas 16) and received its due critical attention (which, of course, soon afterwards led to the oversaturation of the literary market and the form's dissipation into sensationalism). While Tennyson is credited with creating the first dramatic monologue, the fact that "St. Simeon Stylites" and "Porphyria's Lover" were written within months of each other indicates that he and Browning were probably working concurrently and came up with the form independently of one another. Since Tennyson employed the genre much less frequently – as I already mentioned, "St. Simeon" was published only in 1842, in the same collection (*Poems*) as the more popular "Ulysses" – it was almost exclusively under the influence of Browning, who wrote and published his monologues fairly regularly, that the genre evolved (cf. Faas 49) and eventually became canonised.

While the term "dramatic monologue" was employed sporadically throughout the nineteenth century, even, at some late point, by Tennyson himself, it did not become widespread until the critics writing on Tennyson's and Browning's poetry after their deaths cemented its use (Slinn 80). Instead, poets and critics oscillated between different names, including "dramatic lyrics", "dramatic romances", "dramatis personae", "monodramas", "retrospective dramas" and "lyrical monologues", which all point to their awareness of the genre's hybridity and its strong connections with the dramatic arts. What all these poems have in common is that they are narrated by a speaker caught in a moment of crisis[2] who, in a rather theatrically performative way, bares their soul to someone, either another character in the poem's diegesis who takes on the role of a silent listener, or the wholly non-fictional reader on the receiving end of the poetic work. Worthy of notice is that the usually reticent Browning underlines the difference between the poet and the speaker in the Advertisement to *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842), explaining that the poems in the collection are "often Lyric in expression", but "always Dramatic in

[2] In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", T. S. Eliot's parody of the dramatic monologue, the speaker asks, "Should I, after tea and cakes and ices, / Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?" (Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 5-6)

principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine." (*Complete Works Vol. III* 197)

While it must be noted that transgression is neither the norm nor the requirement for dramatic monologists, it should nevertheless be pointed out that a remarkable number of speakers in these poems do tend to veer towards some manner of aberration. The reason for this might be, as I suggested at the beginning, reactionary: the more stifling societal expectations, the more transgressive artistic expression. This can also be seen in the American poetry of the 1950s, where reactions against the burdens of conformity gave rise to highly transgressive works of the Beats and the Confessionals. Seeing how the Victorian dramatic monologue greatly influenced both of these poetic movements, there might be some truth in the matter. Neither is it a coincidence that the Modernists (T. S. Eliot included, despite his protestations to the contrary), believing themselves to be a lot more liberated than they actually were, also turned to the dramatic monologue, Browning's version in particular, so as to indulge their own era's obsessive, navel-gazing preoccupation with the self, while safely hiding all those pesky emotions behind a poetic mask. Clearly, the reprobates that people the poems penned by Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barret Browning, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Christina Rossetti, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Dora Greenwell, or Augusta Webster made a lasting impression on a number of later authors. One might even suggest that the first-person narrators of postmodern transgressive novels, from early precursors like Humbert Humbert to more clear-cut examples like Patrick Bateman, owe quite a lot to the quasi-confessionals uttered by the Victorians' wife-murdering dukes, leprosy-admiring necrophiliacs, or would-be poisoners.

Ekbert Faas links the rise of the dramatic monologue in the 1830s and 1840s to the development of "mental science" in the early nineteenth century, though he acknowledges that the influence is not as one sided as it might appear at first glance. Both early mental science and "psychological poetry" were greatly indebted to introspective philosophy, while alienists, early practitioners of what is today known as psychiatry, studied poetic works, from Elizabethan drama (particularly Shakespeare's soliloquies) to Victorian

dramatic monologues, in order to gain insight into the human mind. Tennyson[3] viewed *Maud* as "a little *Hamlet*, the history of a morbid, poetic soul, under the blighting influence of a recklessly speculative age" (Tennyson, *Selected Edition* 515), and was delighted when the founder of the *Journal of Mental Science*, Sir John Charles Bucknill, whom he described as "a mad-house doctor", saw "a remarkable sketch of poetic mental pathology" in the poem (qtd. in Faas 32). Despite the unsavoury elements their creators applied to them not only liberally, but also with great relish, dramatic monologues were viewed as "objective, case-history-like studies" (Faas 14) by the surprisingly receptive Victorian readers and critics, and lauded as genuine ways of understanding abnormal psychology – provided, of course, that all parties concerned were in agreement that the poems were merely a reflection of a fascinating new science, and decidedly not any true self-revelation. The monologists' dark night of the soul, to borrow Juan de la Cruz's phrase, would keep the public spellbound as long as it was clearly understood that it was all fictional, and probably send them running for the nearest of the many newly established asylums to request the perpetrators (i.e. the poets) be institutionalised if there was any indication that some actual deviation from the rigid standards of normalcy was taking place.

Observed from this angle, it is no wonder that the notoriously private Browning insisted that his speakers were "some imaginary persons", and that Tennyson, whose family had a long history of mental instability, who himself suffered regular bouts of what would today probably be recognised as clinical depression, and who therefore had every reason to be concerned for his sanity, found a way to turn introspection into seemingly objective, dramatic poetry (Faas 53-55). On the other hand, Algernon Swinburne, whose expression in dramatic monologues was much more direct, with less critical distance, and who was in it, at least partially, for the shock value, was generally reviled as a disgusting pervert, a prime example of Robert Buchanan's "Fleshly School of Poetry" (though, to be fair to Buchanan, he does at least recognise Swinburne's "comic amazement" amid his "hysteric tone and overloaded style"). Of course, this is not to say that dramatic monologues are somehow drawn from biography: it should hopefully be obvious to anyone who has ever read any

[3] For my transgressive reading of Tennyson, see Vujin, "A Magic Web with Colours Gay: A Queer Reading of Alfred Tennyson's and Elizabeth Bishop's Shalott Poems".

poetry that the speaker of a poem and its author are not the same, even in poetic modes like Confessionalism that often draw upon personal experience and rely heavily on self-mythologisation. Nevertheless, this insistence by both Tennyson and Browning that their personae are not speaking *for them* should serve as yet another illustration of the Victorian obsession with duality: only by spelling out the distinction between the poet and the monologist do the authors of the dramatic monologues allow themselves to delve deep into transgression, exploring, with obvious gusto, their safely fictional deviants and their many equally fictional excesses. Even when both the deviants and the excesses are inspired by real-life events, they are still, as Humbert said of Lolita, "safely solipsized" (Nabokov 60), and thus exempt from public scrutiny and moral outrage. By reminding their readers that the poems were basically clinical research undertaken by the absolutely, totally, not-at-all-questionably rational authors whose only crime was giving in to their muse and indulging some unsavoury "imaginary persons", the poets could keep the transgression behind closed doors (or closed pages of the book) and thus reaffirm the ethical norm. As Faas (185) observes, "like Victorian asylums, dramatic monologues in this sense are a means of sequestration, particularly of their authors' own morbidities." Lest we start feeling a bit too smug about our own era's open-mindedness, it should be pointed out that this isn't all that different from today's woker-than-thou, pseudo-liberal, but in reality appallingly puritanical insistence that one can (maybe?) enjoy even morally dubious works of art, as long as they first acknowledge all that is, to use favourite phrases *du jour*, "problematic" or "toxic" about that work (or its author) and write a treatise on how they properly condemn those impure elements.

With that in mind, it is easy to understand why one of Tennyson's friends, upon hearing the poet read "St. Simeon Stylites", showed some concern over the new poetic form being used by other authors for something entirely "unwholesome" (cf. Pearsall 72-73). Tennyson's chosen topic in this monologue is religion turned fanaticism, and he is not the only poet to tackle that subject. Both "St. Simeon Stylites" and Browning's "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" explore religious madness, though in completely different ways. While St. Simeon perversely indulges in his suffering, oscillating between condemning himself as a sinner and glorying in his martyrdom, certain of his impending sainthood, Agricola smugly informs us that he is God's chosen child,

and as such, he is "guiltless for ever" (23)[4], and has "God's warrant" (33) to commit all sorts of "hideous sins" (34). Tennyson lets us witness St. Simeon's hallucinations, and has him reaching for an imaginary crown in an unambiguous reference to the troubled Macbeth and his blood-dripping dagger, thus pointing at the invisible line between spiritual vision and utter madness. Johannes Agricola's religious insanity is more odious, and his self-congratulatory fanaticism is a clear indication of where Browning planned to take his future monologists. Obsession and its different manifestations have pride of place in his poems, and the numerous unscrupulous characters he creates cannot help but take that obsession to the extreme. Cornelia Pearsall notes that many speakers of the dramatic monologue are involved in destruction, both of themselves and others, pointing out that destruction can still be an act of creation (78). That two-step process can perhaps best be seen in Browning's notorious murder poems, "Porphyria's Lover", "My Last Duchess" and "The Laboratory". Let us therefore take a closer look at them.

Immortality, Sexuality, Murder and Poetry: "Porphyria's Lover"

In the spring of 1834, Browning visited Russia. It was in St. Petersburg that he wrote both "Porphyria's Lover" and "Johannes Agricola". The two poems, first published anonymously in the January 1836 issue of the *Monthly Repository*, were later grouped together as *Madhouse Cells* (DeVane 125-126). This is as explicit an indication as possible that Browning was interested in patterns of madness and obsession. Both speakers take their feeling of being right too far – the nameless lover of Porphyria is absolutely certain that Porphyria is supposed to be his forever, while Johannes Agricola has no doubt that he is one of God's hand-picked few who are destined to end up in Heaven. Even though both poems are frequently anthologised, "Porphyria's Lover", unlike "Johannes Agricola", is still one of Browning's most popular and most beloved poems. If, as Pearsall (71) suggests, dramatic monologues rely on transformation – of the speakers' circumstances, of their own self, of their silent listener, or of all those things combined, then it is hardly a surprise that the transformation present in "Porphyria", the transformation of life into death, seems a lot more compelling than "Agricola's" transformation of a sinner into a saint (if only in the speaker's own mind), particularly in today's secular world. Add to that the blatantly sensationalist elements of murder and

[4] All quotations from poems are referenced by their verse numbers.

necrophilia, and no wonder that any student of literature knows and appreciates "Porphyria's Lover".

If we approach the poem's transgressive duality from a formal perspective, we can immediately notice the tightly wound (pun unintended, but happily embraced) and structurally uniform verses that are doing their best to rein in the speaker. Browning uses iambic tetrameter, a deliberately more unusual and less leisurely choice than the more common pentameter, in order to imply his speaker's aberration from the norm, while still holding onto its approximation. The rhyme is also sustained throughout the poem, and even though the monologue is set as a paragraph, it can technically be divided into pentastichs (another unusual choice) which employ the *ababb* rhyming pattern. One less beat per line, one more line per stanza: the poem is *off* enough to make the reader just slightly uncomfortable, but not enough to make them run for the hills. The Lover's speech thus sounds *almost* rational – not coldly calculated like the Duke's in "My Last Duchess", and not nearly as unhinged as the poisoner's in "The Laboratory". Nevertheless, the implication that something is *not right* is there as soon as Porphyria enters the room, since the poem's first enjambment coincides with her arrival. The Lover does not answer Porphyria's call, and when she puts his arm around her waist (16), the idea of *encircling her* begins to germinate in his mind, which is indicated by the series of anaphoras that play like a broken record in his head (each of the next four lines begins with "and"). After Porphyria spreads "her yellow hair" (20) and tells the speaker that she loves him, that idea rises to the surface in the form of "a sudden thought" (28) and the enjambments, indicating the speaker's newly aroused excitement, start dominating the poem. The moment of murder is preceded by the repetition of the word "mine" (36), and after he strangles Porphyria and kisses her cheek, the speaker can once again return to the calmer pattern of his earlier speech and apply, for the most part, clear end-stopped lines. It is also possible to interpret this verbal arrangement as a pattern mimicking sexual congress: the initial calm (which does little to mask his impatience and excitement) is followed by arousal that climbs as a crescendo, then the poem briefly loses its rhythm in the moment of climax – the murder is spread over five heavily enjambed lines that constitute a single sentence – followed by the gradual relaxation of the verses (and even a kiss and a cuddle). Browning would later masterfully subvert verse patterns in *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842) and especially *Men and Women* (1855), but even this

early work shows both his technical brilliance and his instinctive grasp of the interplay between formal order and thematic unrest.

The sexual undertones of the form thus correlate to the highly stylised theme of sexual transgression in the narrative. Porphyria arrives at the speaker's cottage at night time, having left some "gay feast" (27). She is unchaperoned, and the rendezvous we are witnessing is clearly meant to be a sexual tryst. Porphyria thus transgresses mores of sexual propriety, indicated by her "soiled gloves" (12), her bared shoulder, and especially her indecorously loose hair, to which the monologist draws our attention even before he turns it into his murder weapon. Is the method of the murder, then, meant to indicate that Porphyria was punished because of her transgression? The speaker's sexual desire is sublimated into murder, and the poem's climax coincides with the strangulation of Porphyria, but the fact that it was her own loose hair, symbolising both her femininity and sexual freedom, that was used to asphyxiate her, makes us wonder whether the speaker (at least subconsciously) disapproves of her equally loose behaviour. After all, he chooses to kill her in the moment when she is "perfectly pure and good" (37), thus forever preserving her in the moment of perfection. This mixture of sexual desire and revulsion at that desire being fulfilled plays a role in the psychology of sexually motivated murderers, and the fact that Porphyria was strangled instead of stabbed may even indicate the speaker's impotence (cf. Mariotte). It is, after all, only his *heart* that swells and grows in the poem (34), and the speaker is otherwise too weak to put his arm around Porphyria's waist himself (she is the one who does it for him), or even raise his voice to reply to her calls. If Porphyria's "one wish" (57) is to "give herself to [the speaker] for ever" (25), he may have granted it in the only way he was physically able to.

Following from this, the obvious transgressive element in the poem is the Lover's murder of Porphyria, but of equal, if not greater importance, is also the fact that he narrates it almost in real time, as it unfolds, as if he were livestreaming a gruesome Victorian snuff video. The delicately phrased "unwholesomeness" that Tennyson's friend was so worried about is put centre-stage in "Porphyria's Lover". Here, we can clearly see the "drama" in the dramatic monologue, and not just any drama, but the most outrageously transgressive genre that the Victorians knew about: Jacobean revenge tragedy. Several other researchers have alluded to the influence of Jacobean theatre of

blood on the Victorian dramatic monologue (cf. Jones; Jack), so I am clearly not boldly going where no one has gone before. Still, it bears pointing out that, contrary to canonical readings of Jacobean drama as gratuitously violent, artistically aberrant and morally repugnant, new perspectives argue that the seventeenth-century theatrical excesses were strategic experiments in stagecraft and a wholly self-aware aesthetic pose (cf. Müller Wood). The deviants populating the works of John Webster, John Fletcher, Cyril Tourneur, Thomas Middleton, or George Chapman may have been a reaction to the rising decadence of the post-Elizabethan era, but they could just as likely have been a self-referential reflection on the changing role of the theatre as an institution, in both aesthetic and political sense. Seen this way, we can forge a strong link between Jacobean drama and the Victorian dramatic monologue, as the driving force behind both is not only societal change, but also poetic experimentation and the desire to explore the possibilities offered by new forms of art. Hence, the transgressive streak which is unmistakeably present in both literary forms challenges accepted mores of "good taste" and forces us to re-examine our own artistic complacency.

The reader is thus drawn into the role of the spectator, even co-conspirator. Unlike the Duke in "My Last Duchess" or the unnamed speaker of "The Laboratory", Porphyria's lover does not relate his story to another character in the poem – the role of the silent listener (variously also called the auditor or the interlocutor) falls upon the reader. The consequence of this forced intimacy is discomfort, but also a perverted sense of privilege for having been chosen as the recipient of the bizarre narrative. Since the listener's presence in the dramatic monologue usually guides the speaker in their narration (e.g. Andrea del Sarto's dwelling on his ill-fated love for his wife is a direct result of her being in the room with him), we cannot help but wonder, in morbid fascination, how come we get to listen to a story of murder and necrophilia. This, of course, then makes us question our position as readers and unwitting accomplices to those fictional crimes. In short, "Porphyria's Lover" accomplishes exactly what any good transgressive story sets out to do.

In writing the poem, Browning was inspired by two sources. The first was a passage from "Extracts from Gosschen's Diary", a sensationalist account of a man who murdered his wife printed anonymously in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1818 (today, it is known that the author was John Wilson). There

the murderer mentions his wife's "golden hair" by which he grabs her, her "snow-white breasts" and the forty stab wounds he delivers with his dagger. The poor wife does not scream, since she dies instantly, though the murderous husband optimistically believes that she would have seen that he "did right to murder her" had she somehow survived for a while. Then he lays her down on a bank of flowers, and informs us that his joy and happiness were "perfect" (qtd. in Browning, *Selected Poems* 70). The second source was the long narrative poem *Marcian Colonna* (1820), by Browning's friend Bryan Procter, which, too, was based on Wilson's story. Procter (writing under the *nom de plume* Barry Cornwall) ups the ante by having his murderer sit with the corpse. This detail is also present in Browning, as the Lover props Porphyria's head on his shoulder and euphorically concludes, "And thus we sit together now, / And all night long we had not stirred, / And yet God has not said a word!" (58-60). The murder itself, though rather vividly described – "all her hair / In one long yellow string I wound / Three times her little throat around, / And strangled her." (38-41) – arguably makes the reader less uncomfortable than the "sitting together" that happens afterwards. As one of the most resilient taboos, necrophilia is the perfect subject for a transgressive poet. Browning's Lover, whose identity is so dependent upon Porphyria that he has no name outside of his relationship with her, decides to preserve her forever in that glorious moment of death. Unlike Swinburne's Leper from the eponymous poem (1866), the dead Porphyria is more Uncanny than Abject (even her dead eyes are "without a strain" (45), a tall order for a victim of strangulation); not decaying, but perfectly intact (though, to be frank, she has only been dead for a little while). She is therefore a superb candidate for being immortalised through poetry.

"Porphyria's Lover" was written more than a decade before Edgar Allan Poe explained how "the death of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world" ("The Philosophy of Composition" 35), and yet, the Lover from Browning's poem seems to share his opinion. Thus, he kills Porphyria not out of jealousy or rage, but because he realises that she "worships" him, saying that in "that moment she was mine, mine, fair / perfectly pure and good" (36-37). Death arrests this perfect moment, creating a fixed point in time: Porphyria is now truly, forever his. Again, comparisons with *Lolita* are inevitable – just like Humbert realises at the end of the novel that "the refuge of art" is the "only immortality" he can share with Lolita

(Nabokov 309), the Lover can only fully possess Porphyria if he turns her into a work of art. Being a deviant murderer, of course, he accomplishes this by strangling her with her hair; however, on the extra-diegetic level, this is precisely what Browning does as well. His sole purpose for lovingly creating Porphyria is to trap her in a poem in which she is forever getting murdered, all for the sake of his artistic vision. And she is not the only female character this happens to, as we will see in the next section.

A Masterclass in Moral Insanity: "My Last Duchess"

Everyone's favourite dramatic monologue, "My Last Duchess", is regularly praised in poetry primers as one of the "most perfect" poems in the English language (other prominent candidates for this lofty title are Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" and Blake's "The Tyger"). That pronouncement is not without merit, since Browning's mastery of the dramatic monologue is probably at its highest here, resulting in a truly unforgettable poem. All the elements of the genre are beautifully proportioned: there's the usual *in medias res* beginning, there's the compelling narrative, there's the acknowledged silent listener, and above all, there's the absolutely captivating speaker. Add to that the themes of jealousy, obsession and murder, stir in the sure-fire "poetical" subject of the death of a beautiful woman, sprinkle in the idea of art and poetic expression, pour everything into the old faithful mould of deftly constructed verse, and just let it bake. Soon enough, your perfect poem is ready to be served.

By the time "My Last Duchess" was published in *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842), Browning had perfected his craft, and it shows. The poem (originally titled "Italy") was initially paired with "Count Gismond" (at the time known as "France"), just like "Porphyria's Lover" was paired with "Johannes Agricola". This linking up might have had a similar thematic reasoning behind it. Both "Porphyria's Lover" and "Johannes Agricola" deal with maniacal obsession, while both "My Last Duchess" and "Count Gismond" let their skilful speakers spin gripping tales of being wronged and having to take vengeance, while leaving just enough space between the lines for the reader to question their reliability, which is, of course, the ultimate point of both poems. While neither Porphyria's Lover nor Johannes Agricola could ever be called sane, we do not, for the most part, doubt the veracity of their stories – though there are critics, like Isobel Armstrong, who offer a sound reasoning for at least "Porphyria's Lover" to be read differently: that is, merely as a sexual fantasy, a "solipsist

soliloquy" (Armstrong 137) where the Lover only imagines both Porphyria's presence in his cottage and the subsequent murder. Nevertheless, the reader does not feel like a victim of deliberate deceit when listening to the Lover rant about Porphyria's perfectly still form, her "smiling rosy little head" (52) and her unfortunate Rapunzel hair. On the other hand, both the Duke from "My Last Duchess" and the Countess from "Count Gismond" come across as extremely manipulative, carefully weaving their stories in such a way that we are left wondering what it is that they are calculatingly keeping from us, and what it is that they are (inadvertently?) admitting to by conspicuous omission.

Once again, the form of the poem is perfectly suited to the subject and serves as the reader's entryway into the speaker's mind. Browning chooses classic heroic couplets, but they are so heavily enjambed that the poem reads like blank verse instead. Thus, the extreme constructedness of the Duke's speech does not even register at first, but it is further and further revealed upon every subsequent reading. Unlike Browning's later accounts of jealousy, like "The Laboratory" (1844), "Too Late" (1864), or "A Forgiveness" (1876), "My Last Duchess" is so tightly controlled in its rhythmical and verse pattern that it becomes clear very early on that the Duke's jealousy is not the result of his passion, but of his arrogance and desire to control. Of special interest are his carefully considered, deliberate pauses: when he mentions that the Duchess "had / A heart – how shall I say? – too soon made glad, / too easily impressed" (21-23) or that "She thanked men, – good! but thanked / Somehow – I know not how – as if she ranked / My gift of a nine-hundred-year-old name / With anybody's gift." (31-34), those dashes (or ellipses, depending on the edition) and pauses are meant to be fraught with meaning. Since, as Aristotle taught us, nature abhors a vacuum, the delicately woven emptiness of those spaces invites both the reader and the silent listener to fill them with, undoubtedly, "unwholesome" content. In other words, this "calculated effacement", this conspicuous absence leads to a "symbolic reappropriation of presence" (Derrida 142, 143). The Duke is perfectly aware of how manipulative his monologue is, and his insistence that he has no "skill in speech" (34-35) reads as an egregious fakery. After all, as Humbert Humbert tells us, "[we] can always count on a murderer for a fancy [poetic] style" (Nabokov 9).

Ian Jack makes a comparison between "My Last Duchess" and "Porphyria's Lover", concluding that, while the Lover is not only unbalanced,

but "obviously (to put it mildly) over-excited" (94), the Duke is "almost frighteningly in charge of the situation", and "as sane a man as Iago" (95). This makes him a more frightening villain and a more transgressive speaker: we are perhaps morbidly curious about the Lover and his crime, but we are properly *seduced* by the Duke, and kept in his poetic thrall. From the moment he flings the curtain aside and shows us the Duchess' portrait, we are fascinated, and want to know everything about him. Browning, of course, does the same thing on the extra-diegetic level: he pulls off the cover and gives us the portrait of the Duke who then, just like his painted Duchess, stands there "as if alive" (Slinn 82). The monologist thus reaffirms the constructed nature of the world he inhabits, and, as Armstrong suggests, he obsessively reads himself, effectively supressing the fact that he is being read (138). Such destabilisation of poetic meaning and an aggressively polysemic strategy of reading works to show that transgression in poetry often occurs on the level of language, even when – perhaps precisely because – the language itself remains highly constructed.

Porphyria's murder happens, as it were, onstage. Shocking and graphic though it undoubtedly is, it is arguably less potent than it could have been because it does not leave room for conjecture. The Duchess' murder, on the other hand, is horrifying precisely because it is only implied, when the Duke explains to his guest that he had to do *something* about his wife's unacceptable behaviour: "Oh, Sir, she smiled, no doubt, / Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without / Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands / As if alive" (43-47). When asked to clarify what happened to the Duchess, Browning famously replied that he meant that the Duke had her killed, but after a moment, he added, "Or he might have had her shut up in a convent" (*Complete Works Vol. III* 372). The inspiration for the poem came, similar to many of his other works, from Browning's readings of Italian history. The Duke was based on Alfonso II, the fifth Duke of Ferrara, who lived in the sixteenth century and whose first wife, the teenage Lucrezia de 'Medici (incidentally, the younger sister of Isabella, whose heavily concealed painting I mentioned earlier), died only a few years into their marriage at the ripe old age of seventeen, which gave rise to rumours that her husband had her poisoned (cf. DeVane 107-109). Browning embraced the vagueness of the story, and created a poetic showpiece that relies mostly on our ability to actively engage with the text.

It is not difficult to see why Faas underlines the link between contemporary strategies of "mental science" and Browning's poetry. One of the types of madness outlined in J. C. Prichard's *A Treatise of Insanity* (1835) was the so-called "moral insanity", described as a "morbid perversion of the feelings, affections, habits, without any hallucination or erroneous conviction impressed upon the understanding" (qtd. in Faas 191). In other words, the morally insane were not raving lunatics, but appeared, for all intents and purposes, completely normal, while lacking both empathy and scruples, similar to later notions of psychopathy. The Duke's calculated, manipulative verbal expression, his arrogance, his self-importance and pathological need for control, as well as his apparent indulgence in murder (though, unsurprisingly, without dirtying his patrician hands), makes it irresistible to analyse him in terms of moral insanity. This is particularly interesting when combined with his artistic inclinations and collector attitude, which makes him a more rational, though no less disturbed, cousin of Porphyria's lover. He, too, turns his partner into art; however, his reasons are not ecstatic in nature, but politic. Unlike the Lover, he will not stay up all night to admire the immortal beauty of his dead beloved; he will instead cover her portrait in order to control when and for whom she smiles. Victorian Psycho is truly an apt soubriquet for this character.

If the Duke is transgressive in his moral insanity and linguistic virtuosity, what of the silent listener? Unlike Porphyria's lover, the Duke is not addressing the reader, but another character in the poem: the emissary of his next father in law, sent to negotiate the terms of marriage (for the historically minded, DeVane (107) identifies him as Nikolaus Madruz, who actually worked for Alfonso's second *brother* in law, the Count of Tyrol). Is he at all disturbed by the Duke's account, which can also be interpreted as a thinly veiled threat where his future wife's behaviour is concerned? Armstrong argues that the dramatic monologue, or "double poem" as she calls it, is a deeply sceptical, political genre, because it is "founded on debate and contest" (13). Browning deliberately leaves the emissary's reaction offstage, inviting the reader to contribute to the constitution of the poem's meaning. If transgression, as Booker explains, "can never occur simply within a text", but instead "in the interaction between a text and its social and discursive surroundings" (126), which also include the reader of the text, then "My Last Duchess" allows for a more transgressive reading than the seemingly more aberrant "Porphyria's

Lover", which, for all its gruesomeness, leaves less room for interpretation and hence less space for the reader's involvement. Instead of forcing us into the role of the monologist's confidante, like "Porphyria's Lover" does, "My Last Duchess" invites us to join its speaker and create the poem's meaning together. We can, after all, choose to safely confine the Duchess to a convent and pretend that nothing bad will happen to her there. Browning would later famously return to the topic of spousal murder in *The Ring and the Book* (1868), but "My Last Duchess", ostensibly only a practice run for the theme, proved to be an altogether more enduring, alluring, and accessible work.

The Subtle Science and Exact Art of Poison-Making: "The Laboratory"

In the previous two sections, I explored Browning's male murderers. The time has now come to turn to women. The delightfully demented speaker of "The Laboratory", whose tireless narration accompanies her supervision of a harried apothecary who is preparing a poison per her order, is different from both Porphyria's lover and the Duke, and not only in terms of gender. Browning covers all stages of death by foul play in the three poems discussed in this chapter: "My Last Duchess" tells the story of a murder that was committed some time ago, "Porphyria's Lover" lets us witness the murder as it happens, and "The Laboratory" shows us the planning stages of a future murder (Or two. Or three.). The speaker's excitement and sheer vindictiveness are palpable in every line, and we are left imagining both her gleeful execution of the plan and the elation that will surely follow it. Just like the previous two poems, "The Laboratory", which was first published in *Hood's Magazine* in June 1844, was also part of a pair upon republication. Similarly to "Porphyria's Lover" and "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" which were collectively known as *Madhouse Cells*, "The Laboratory" and its counterpart, "The Confessional", were given the joint title *France and Spain*. The similarities between the paired poems are mostly superficial, and can be tentatively stretched to include the theme of betrayal; however, the only true commonality they share appears to be the speakers' gender.

A more appropriate thematic sibling to "The Laboratory" would probably be "A Forgiveness", published in *Pacchiarotto, and How He Worked in Distemper* (1876) decades later. The monologists of both poems are motivated by sexual jealousy and fully intend to murder those who have wronged them. "A Forgiveness" is as theatrical as it is sensational, and even includes a

(somewhat hackneyed) plot twist at the end, when the priest, who has been listening to the speaker's confession, turns out to be his late wife's past lover. In his confession, the speaker informs us that a while ago he unexpectedly returned home earlier than usual and caught sight of a man leaving his garden and his wife's company. Even though his wife begged him to kill her, for the next three years he proceeded to behave as if nothing was wrong in public, while mentally torturing her in private. The marriage ended when he stabbed his wife, forced her to write a letter in her own blood, then waited for her to slowly bleed to death overnight. To no one's surprise, the priest also gets murdered by the speaker in the poem's closing lines. "The Laboratory" is, conversely, a rather more straightforward tale of revenge. The woman who has been cheated on does not play mind games with her partner for years, only to then have him happily agree to being killed. Actually, she does not seem to have any plans to get rid of him at all, and is only plotting to murder her rival instead, though she soon starts fantasising about a couple of other women dying by her hand, presumably for no other reason than her dislike of them.

Here, too, the verse pattern can help us gain better insight into the speaker's psyche. The poem consists of twelve quatrains, which is a fairly conventional stanzaic form; however, Browning's choice of metre is significantly more interesting and shows that not everything is as it seems. Instead of the more usual iambic pattern, used (with only a few shifts into trochee or spondee) in both "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess", "The Laboratory" is, for the most part, written in dactylic tetrameter, though there are quite a few noticeable deviations from the pattern (sometimes Browning uses three dactyls and one trochee per line, and sometimes, intriguingly, he inverses the stress, and we instead get one iamb followed by three anapaests). Elizabeth Barrett (not yet Barrett Browning) objected to Browning's first version of the first line, and urged him to change it to something less clunky, but even after the change, the line was still quite a mouthful, as Tennyson pointed out (cf. Browning, *Selected Poems* 210). The larger than usual number of syllables crammed into a single metric foot, however, indicates the monologist's urgency of speech, her giddiness and even euphoria. The tetrameter, meanwhile, is generally maintained throughout the poem, allowing for a semblance of control. The outer order thus hides the chaos within, perfectly encapsulating the Victorian social duality and its exploration in art. Unlike the Duke from "My Last Duchess", whose innumerable enjambments,

pauses and caesuras work very hard to disguise the tight control he exerts over the poem and the narrative contained within, the speaker from "The Laboratory" easily (though perhaps unintentionally) reveals the Ms Hyde lurking beneath the refined lady persona through her manic logorrhoea. The use of the simplest rhyme possible – almost exclusively masculine couplets (barring two instances of feminine rhyme in the first and the fifth stanza, i.e. four out of twenty-four rhymed pairs) – gives the poem a playful, sing-song quality, which alludes to the rhythm of nursery rhymes. "The Laboratory" is full of such verse discrepancies, which, together with the more obvious contrasts in the narrative, endows the poem with a darkly humorous, even grotesque tone. Ian Jack notes that the harshness of sound is "entirely justified in this poem, where it is used to emphasise both its macabre setting and the rancorous hatred of the woman who is the speaker" (103).

DeVane (170-171) notes that the poem has no obvious source, but suggests that it might have taken inspiration from the notorious poisoner Marie-Madeleine D'Aubray, Marquise de Brinvilliers, who murdered her father and two brothers by poison, allegedly planned to murder her husband, and was later also rumoured to have poisoned her maid and numerous other women. The case jump-started the scandal known as the Affair of the Poisons and was tied to the court of Louis XIV, which led DeVane to speculate that Browning's subtitle to "The Laboratory", *Ancien Régime*, indicates that the poem's monologist was indeed Madame de Brinvilliers. Whatever the inspiration behind the poem, Browning's unnamed speaker manages to convey vengefulness and malice in a chillingly playful way, mostly leaving out the sensationalism that might have found a place in the poem had the narrative taken place after the murders had already been committed. This way, "The Laboratory" builds the reader's anticipation, similar to the build-up in the first half of "Porphyria's Lover". Unlike the latter poem, however, "The Laboratory" does not deviate into the sexual, barring some suggestive word choice in the third stanza ("grind away", "moisten", "pound"), and the monologist's offer to the apothecary to kiss her "on [the] mouth" (46) after he has completed his potioneering job.

The speaker is quite curious about all that she can see in the apothecary's "devil's smithy" (3) through her safety mask. She admires the "faint smokes curling whitely" (2) and all the different phials, pastes, powders

and "gold oozings" (14), all the "treasures" (17) and "invisible pleasures" (18) that can kill. This appreciation of art, particularly in connection with deadliness – she enjoys the idea of carrying "pure death in an earring, a casket, / A signet, a fan-mount, a filigree basket!" (19-20) – connects her with both Porphyria's lover and the Duke, and shows that she, too, finds sublime beauty in death. Indeed, when presented with the finished product, she complains that "The colour is too grim! / Why not soft like the phial's, enticing and dim?" (25-26) and is excited at the idea that "yonder soft phial, the exquisite blue / sure to taste sweetly" (15-16) might also be poison. She is particularly elated at the prospect of a mere lozenge or pastille ending the life of Pauline and Elise, the two women she apparently dislikes, and she takes great pleasure in imagining them dying within thirty minutes of taking the poison. Like *Harry Potter*'s Professor Snape, she appears to understand "the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses" (Rowling 150). Her goal, however, is neither to bottle fame nor to brew glory, but instead to stopper death – she is intent upon murdering her romantic rival, in the most painful way possible ("Not that I bid you spare her the pain; / Let death be felt" (37-38)). While gender dynamics are beyond the scope of this analysis of his murder poems, it must be noted that Browning, for all his transgressiveness, firmly follows stereotypes here, and has his female murderer use a typically feminine-coded choice of weapon – poison.[5]

Another gender cliché is the speaker's motive for her planned murder – revenge for sexual infidelity. Unlike the Duke from "My Last Duchess", she has actual reason to be jealous and to feel betrayed – she saw the cheating with her own eyes (and, in a parallel to the speaker from "Mesmerism" (1855), even unsuccessfully tried to evil-eye-stare at "her" and get her to shrivel up). Interestingly enough, the speaker does not plan to murder her unfaithful lover, even though, according to her account of the events, both him and his mistress know that she is aware of the affair, and keep laughing at her, believing that she is either crying or praying in an empty church. Instead, she seems to blame the affair entirely on the woman, who seduced her lover with her voluptuous figure: "She's not little, no minion like me! / That's why she ensnared him" (29-

[5] For our exploration of Professor Snape's gender transgressiveness, see Vujin and Krombholc, "High-Voiced Dark Lords and Boggarts in Drag".

30). The revenge she intends to enact upon her lover is to make him watch his mistress painfully die in front of him, burnt and disfigured. This sadistic streak might be the reason why Elizabeth Barrett said to Browning in a letter that "the Laboratory is hideous as you meant to make it" (Browning, *Complete Works Vol. IV* 384). We are once again reminded of the Jacobean drama, and the many inventive ways in which it gleefully tortures its characters.

While the unhinged and increasingly impatient speaker delightedly plans both her crimes and her upcoming evening at the King's, the apothecary works in silence. There are indications that he might regret entering into business with the speaker – at one point, she tells him to stop being "morose" (41) – but that does not prevent him from finishing the potion. Unlike the Count of Tyrol's emissary in "My Last Duchess", the apothecary is a literal accomplice to the lady's crime, and yet, he remains silent. He is given substantial monetary compensation for his troubles ("Now, take all my jewels, gorge gold to your fill" (45)), and is even offered a sexual reward ("You may kiss me, old man, on my mouth, if you will!" (46)). This forces the reader into the position of a moral judge (cf. Jones 328) who then sympathises with or condemns not only the monologist, but the silent listener too. If, as Suleiman (qtd. in Jenks 100) notes, "the characteristic feeling accompanying transgression is one of intense pleasure (at the exceeding of boundaries) and of intense anguish (at the full realization of the force of those boundaries)", then the speaker and the silent listener in this dramatic monologue jointly create those feelings. So does the reader, because, unlike "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess", "The Laboratory" is a morbidly funny, and not just a morbidly alluring poem. No wonder that Dante Gabriel Rossetti made it the subject of his first water-colour. This painting puts the glowingly white lady in the centre, while the gloomy potioneer is lurking in the shadows. The two may be in apparent cahoots with one another, but the lady is obviously the one in charge, almost pushing the potioneer into the corner of the frame. The resulting impression is both disturbing and humorous. The same happens in the poem. From the first stanza, when the speaker primly asks the apothecary, "Which is the poison to poison her, prithee?" (4), the discrepancy between the speaker's jubilance at the thought of murder and her ladylike veneer creates a grotesque duality that we cannot help but find amusing. There is no abjection in the poem, no obviously off-putting transgression of taboos. Even the subtitle, *Ancien Régime*, makes us think that, since this is all happening "once upon a time", we might as

well enjoy the ride. That alone might, paradoxically, make "The Laboratory" the most transgressive among Browning's murder poems.

When the Hurlyburly's Done: A Postscript

In this chapter, I gave an account of what precisely makes the three poems I analysed transgressive. In each case, it is a combination of factors, a mixture of content and form. The fact that they are all dramatic monologues narrated by murderers is an obvious link between the poems, but, as we found out, Browning's mastery of verse allows for impressive linguistic transgression as well. Of particular interest was the role of the silent listener in each of the monologues – their very presence (or absence, in the case of "Porphyria's Lover") directs the course of the poem and creates ambiguousness in meaning. And then there is the reader, whose interpretation of the poems is reliant upon their ability to read between the lines, thus proving the truth of Armstrong's contention that the Victorian "double poem" rests on the interplay between scepticism and affirmation. Even though Bakhtin insisted that poetry is by nature monologic, both Slinn and Armstrong argue that there is room for dialogism in the dramatic monologue. As the monologists weave their tales, the diegetic listeners and extra-diegetic readers join them in creating the meaning, always balancing between different interpretations.

Of course, in analysing "Porphyria's Lover", "My Last Duchess" and "The Laboratory", I only scratched the surface of the wretched hive of scum and villainy (™Obi-Wan Kenobi) known as Browning's murder poems. For obvious reasons of space, I did not linger over *The Ring and the Book*, and while I briefly touched upon some other dramatic monologues, not only by Browning, but also by Tennyson and Swinburne, a detailed analysis of all relevant poems is beyond what we have envisioned for this book. The three poems I chose are not only the most representative among Browning's murder poems, but also the most well-known, which, I think, makes for a more relatable analysis. Each of the poems offers a slightly different perspective on the issue of transgression, while maintaining certain commonalities, enough to draw a valid synthetic conclusion. Each, finally, has its very own Victorian Psycho, and the art of poetry is all the better for it.

CAT CARNIVAL: DR. SEUSS, NONSENSE AND THE CARNIVALESQUE

In the Beginning: Children's Literature and Transgression

In the previous chapter, I talked about the dramatic monologue, one of the many innovative poetic genres that emerged in the Victorian era. The dramatic monologue, particularly The Browning Special edition, however, was not the only Victorian poetic form that took the literary world by storm, spawned countless variations and imitations, and then proceeded to change the face of poetry forever through its influence on later generations of poets. The same could be said of nonsense literature, particularly children's nonsense poetry.[1] In this chapter, we will be dealing with the subversive nature of nonsense verse, which transgresses linguistic boundaries, dances on the edge between the pre-symbolic and the symbolic, and challenges the idea of language as a communicative, logical system. At the same time, it is strongly tied to the carnivalesque, in both linguistic and thematic terms. As Lecercle observes, nonsense features some of the most important aspects of carnival – "topsy-turviness, eccentricity, mismatching and profanation" (194) – and those elements work together with the formal components of verse to defy cultural norms, thus both breaking the rules and ensuring stability (cf. Jenks 7). Poetic transgression, as I hinted in my analysis of the "Victorian Psycho", does not exclusively rest upon the poem's thematic or narrative elements, but instead tends to at least *start* with the poem's form, and frequently plays out in the spaces between sound and meaning, in the joyful destabilisation of the linguistic construct that occurs at the intersection between the poet's creation, text's essence and reader's interpretation (and of course, we can throw in a bit of social, historical, etc. context into the mix as well). Nowhere is this more obvious than in the poetry written for young readers.

I do not have the space (nor the inclination, to be honest) to provide even a rough sketch of the history, definitions, and theories of children's literature here. Since the field's boom in the late 1990s and early 2000s, there have been numerous studies that provide a solid basis of understanding, so the interested reader is welcome to consult them[2]. For my purposes here, it is

[1] For my analysis of the influence of Victorian nonsense on popular music, especially The Beatles, see Vujin, „Nasleđe viktorijanskog nonsensa u stihovima Bitlsa".

[2] See, for example: Peter Hunt, *Understanding Children's Literature* (1998), Deborah Cogan Thacker and Jean Webb, *Introducing Children's Literature* (2002), Matthew Grenby, *Children's Literature* (2003) or Karen Coats, *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Children's and Young Adult Literature* (2018).

enough to point out that there have been as many different ideas of what children's literature is as there have been ideologies of childhood. Every era has its own notions, and the further away from a particular period we are, the easier it is to understand the ideologies at work (cf. Coats, *Bloomsbury Introduction* 7-47). Donelle Ruwe rightly notes that a lot of studies of children's literary history follow a "markedly and stubbornly teleological" path, where various "scholars insistently overlay a progression onto children's literature in which there is a decisive movement from the didactic and moralizing and toward the pleasurable, imaginative, and playful" (168). The reality is, of course, that children's literature is always both: it is written both for instruction and for fun. Our own era has moved noticeably closer to instructional ideology, with "lessons" that can be learnt from a story taking precedence over the story itself. This might explain why so many celebrities, from King Charles III to Kelly Clarkson, publish books and (especially) picture books for children: they all feel that they have some lessons to impart, though the lessons are rarely, if ever, followed by actually engaging stories. The moralising aspect of today's children's narratives may not follow a strict religious bent; nevertheless, secular ethics is still ethics, and so children's literature remains firmly didactic, even if it is no longer overtly homiletic.

What I am interested in exploring in this chapter is the *literary* aspect of children's poetry, and how particular genres – in our case, nonsense – function if observed through the lens of transgression. Far from being relegated to its usual didactic role (be it educational or moralising) then, children's literature is instead seen here as a lively, transgressive force that does not serve purely as a young child's apprenticeship to the world of letters, but proves that children should be acknowledged as "natural deconstructionist readers" (Cogan Thacker and Webb 141). It can even be argued that a large percentage of contemporary literature which claims to be experimental, priding itself on things like unfixed meanings, linguistic play, uneasy relationship with narrative authority, or creative, active role it bestows upon its reader, actually borrows almost all of these approaches from literature written for children. Viewed this way, even the benchmark subversive works of Postmodernism, like John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) cannot boast of much originality – after all, Fowles offering his reader a choice between three endings is only a high-art version of many interactive children's games and storytelling practices, from everyday (purely orally transmitted) bedtime stories to published works like pick-your-own-path picture books for

very young children, or choose-you-own-adventure narratives for slightly older readers.[3]

In her illuminating study of the connections between children's literature and radical experimentation in mainstream art, *Alice to the Lighthouse* (1987), Juliet Dusinberre posits that the writing of highly innovative Modernist figures like James Joyce and (especially) Virginia Woolf was influenced, at least in part, by the linguistically transgressive books they read as children, in particular Lewis Carroll's *Alice* stories (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 1865, and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, 1871). The obsession with language and one's mastery over it, the dreamlike visionary quality of the novels, their highly stylised structure – all of this points at a clear connection between the modernist novel and the experimental works for children written in the period known as the Golden Age of children's literature (roughly the second half of the nineteenth century). As children's fiction has far too often been seen merely as something popular, a half-nostalgic, half-embarrassing subculture best left to one's (usually idealised) past, it is no wonder that the hoity-toity critics who saw literature as "high art" tended to suggest that the worlds of children's and mainstream, adult literature should be kept separate, and consequently disregarded any influence "juvenile" works might have had on "proper" writing (i.e. works by cisgender, male, white, middle-aged, upper-to-middle-class, heterosexual authors, directed at equally cisgender, male, white, middle-aged, upper-to-middle-class, heterosexual readers). At the same time, they freely borrowed elements from children's literature without acknowledging the debt and pretended that they invented them, in a staggering example of (sub)cultural appropriation. Henry James[4], for instance, believed that the novel must get rid of its family audience to truly come of age as an art form, because he was afraid that universal literacy would surely bring about the vulgarisation of the novel by making it cater to

[3] Of course, all that both Fowles and the authors of choose-your-own-ending children's books are actually offering to their readers is merely an illusion of choice, since any choice the reader makes is limited to one of the options already pre-determined by the author. We could compare this to gift cards: the giftee can choose whatever they want, but the nature of that choice is ultimately entirely up to the gift-giver, as they are the one deciding both the origin (i.e. a particular shop that issued the gift card) and the cost (the amount of money on the gift card) of the gift. The choice is still there, but it is fundamentally limited to what the gift-giver is comfortable with.

[4] To be fair to James, even though he was cisgender, male, white, middle-aged and upper class, he was probably not heterosexual. For more, see Zwinger, "Bodies that don't Matter: The Queering of 'Henry James'".

popular taste (cf. Sarland 35-36), and yet he often used the (wholly constructed) image of the naïve child as both a symbol and a narrative ploy in order to explore the horrors of adult life in the modern age, as can be seen in both *What Maisie Knew* (1897) and *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). Anecdote has it that James was rather jealous of the literary success of his friend and neighbour, the famous children's author Frances Hodgson Burnett (whose *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1886) was so popular that it even inspired a huge fashion trend of velvet suits for boys), but that is neither here nor there and is, as such, best left to speculation.

In short, children's literature should not be viewed as somehow disconnected from mainstream creative trends, but instead as an equal participant in them, actively engaged in various artistic schools and movements. As Deborah Cogan Thacker and Jean Webb (2) note, not only do "books written for children embrace the aesthetic of any particular age", but they "often anticipate, and perhaps inspire, innovation." Therefore, just as transgression is not confined purely to Postmodern and contemporary works, so too is it not present only in literature written for adults. Children's literature in general, and children's poetry in particular (given how it frequently stretches the parameters of language), often questions boundaries, breaks or subverts rules, and exceeds limits. Since (as I have already mentioned) the role of children's literature is always dual, its ultimate goal being both education and entertainment, with different periods and different ideologies emphasising one or the other, children's literature is often also socially engaged, or at least connected with the social, thus allowing for an interrogation of societal and ethical customs, regardless of whether they ultimately end up overturned or reaffirmed. One of the best examples of this complex relationship between children's literature, social/linguistic conventions, and the child reader's natural inclination towards subversion can be found in yet another Victorian poetic genre: nonsense.

Nonsense, or how to Follow, Subvert and Reaffirm Rules

Like the dramatic monologue, nonsense is also not, strictly speaking, a Victorian invention, even though it is most often associated with two particular Victorian authors, Edward Lear and Charles Dodgson, a.k.a. Lewis Carroll, who gave it its recognisable features and form. This is nothing new – most critical works on either nonsense or children's poetry mention that the origins of nonsense are somewhat murky, but that the incarnation of the genre that is both most familiar to today's readers and most influential in terms of later

writing, can be traced back to the Victorians. Matthew Grenby, for instance, acknowledges that the genre's history "reveals another pattern of gradual evolution rather than sudden innovation by iconoclastic geniuses", stating that "Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll were undeniably brilliant, but there were many antecedents" (43). One of Grenby's antecedents to nonsense is William Roscoe's poem about insects hosting a garden party, *The Butterfly's Ball and the Grasshopper's Feast* (1802), which inspired a profusion of other, similar poems, all written in the first decade of the nineteenth century and later dubbed "papillonades" (cf. Ruwe 167). Indeed, we might easily trace Carroll's inspiration for both the hookah-smoking Caterpillar and the tea-party-throwing trio of Hatter, Hare and Dormouse to Roscoe's hugely successful entomological ditty. In *The Origins of Nonsense* (1997), Noel Malcolm goes back a lot further, firmly locating nonsense as we know it today almost two and a half centuries before the publication of Lear's *A Book of Nonsense* (1846). He states that "the literary nonsense poetry of the seventeenth century was invented by a lawyer, rhetorician, minor poet and wit, Sir John Hoskyns, in 1611", further claiming that "nonsense poetry sprang, almost fully armed, out of Hoskyns's head into the English literary world" (4-5). Hoskyns' predecessors in this regard, according to Malcolm, can be found in Renaissance and mediaeval European comic poetry, and even earlier still, in Aristophanic drama. Jean-Jacques Lecercle observes that nonsense is both a genre with no history (i.e. a Victorian creation) and a genre with overly long history (i.e. it can be traced back to pretty much any point in the literary past, including the ancient folkloric tradition of nursery rhymes), which only emphasises the discordant duality that lies at its core. Determining the genre's origin is thus no easy feat, but luckily, that is not what we are interested in here. For our purposes, we can concentrate on the Victorians, since the particular flavour of nonsense that I will be exploring in this chapter, the nonsense that features in Dr. Seuss's picture books, is greatly indebted to the works of Carroll and Lear.

Defining nonsense can be exceptionally tricky, because, as a genre, it is quite good at evading pigeonholing. If we try to identify some of its traits, we might fare better. Nonsense is a literary genre, but also a mode of writing. Just because it is called nonsense does not mean that it makes no sense. "The negative prefix", explains Lecercle, "indicates a relation of Freudian negation to the rules of sensible discourse, that which provides the bounds of linguistic sense, logic" (199). We must not confuse nonsense as a genre with nonsense as a synonym for gibberish. Rather than having no meaning, nonsense generally has too much meaning. It is so overly packed with meaning, in fact, that it

delivers a message and dissolves into nothingness at the same time. It stretches language to its maximum, and points at its arbitrary nature and inadequacy in the same breath. It is both conservative and revolutionary (Lecercle 2), because on the one hand, it insists on rigid rules of grammar, and on the other, it subverts those rules. Not only is it charmingly contradictory, but it is in fact wholly dependent on contradictions. In Lecercle's view, nonsense rests upon the dialectic of excess and lack: the excess of syntax, and the lack of semantics. Good nonsense conforms to the rules of grammar up to an interpretative point: it is phonetically, morphologically and syntactically coherent, but semantically absolutely incoherent (cf. Lecercle 21-30). It is not illogical; rather, it depends on logic being used almost too stubbornly. It adheres to strict rules of grammar, but usually separates semantic elements of language from their pragmatic context. It is a weapon best wielded by an extremely methodical (or even neuro-divergent) mind. Lewis Carroll, the most famous author of nonsense, was, in his day job, a mathematician. Let us analyse an example from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*:

> 'I beg your pardon!' said the Mouse, frowning, but very politely. 'Did you speak?'
> 'Not I!' said the Lory hastily.
> 'I thought you did,' said the Mouse.' – I proceed. "Edwin and Morcar, the Earls of Mercia and Northumbria, declared for him: and even Stigand, the patriotic Archbishop of Canterbury, found it advisable –"'
> 'Found *what*?' said the Duck.
> 'Found *it*,' the Mouse replied rather crossly: 'of course you know what "it" means.'
> 'I know what "it" means well enough, when *I* find a thing,' said the Duck: 'it's generally a frog or a worm. The question is, what did the archbishop find?' (33)

The humour (another feature of nonsense) of the above passage rests entirely on language. By following strict linguistic rules, nonsense insists on the literal, and abhors the symbolic. Metaphors are not recognised in nonsense. Language is taken at total face value; thus the Mouse's use of "it" as a purely grammatical filler word, is incomprehensible to the Duck: *it* must refer to something; it cannot be an empty signifier without the signified. This can also be seen later in the book, when Alice has gone through so many changes that she is no longer certain of her identity. She starts a conversation with the Caterpillar, who asks

her who she is. Alice replies that she is not sure, and the following exchange occurs:

> 'What do you mean by that?' said the Caterpillar sternly. 'Explain yourself!'
> 'I can't explain *myself*, I'm afraid, sir,' said Alice, 'because I'm not myself, you see.'
> 'I don't see,' said the Caterpillar. (50)

Even the simplest of metaphorical phrases, like "explaining oneself" and "to see", prove to be a challenge in Wonderland: nonsense does not allow for any symbolic meanings. Every word carries equal weight, which impedes interpretation, and at the same time, makes the reader question language itself and its ability to serve as a tool of communication. This subversive strategy is instrumental in reading nonsense. Where poetry is concerned, the rigidity of rules extends to the poetic form: it is not by chance that Lear preferred limericks, an extremely strict, yet playful genre, wholly dependent on formulaic verse patterns, or that Dr. Seuss wrote almost exclusively in anapaestic tetrameter. In nonsense, the rhythm and sound of words are frequently more important than their meaning, and strict formal patterns bring to mind incantation and ritual (cf. McGillis 166-167). These formal constraints work in tandem with semantic disorder (not chaos!), creating sophisticated, yet silly poetry. Other features of nonsense include the use of neologisms (Carroll's "Jaberwocky" and the words he uses there, like "brillig", "slithy", "vorpal", or "frabjous", are a prime example), and the abundance of puns (in *Alice in Wonderland*, the Mouse's long *tale* turns into a long *tail* that proceeds to curl and spiral down the page in a whimsical, typographical pun). As Lecercle reminds us, "the world of nonsense is itself fairly regular: as we have seen, language is not at all dissolved, but exploited" (113).

This exploitation of language is what makes nonsense enormously entertaining for child readers. In her Lacanian analysis of children's literature, *Looking Glasses and Neverlands* (2004), Karen Coats explains that "what surrealism did for art, nonsense and non-realistic fiction has done for literature" (8), i.e. they allowed the reader to assume a position of fluidity in regard to the Symbolic. Once a child can read, they move to becoming an active participant in the structure of language as a written system – they begin to

crack the code. Since the linguistic code in nonsense literature for children often presents itself, in Bakhtinian terms, not as reflection, but as refraction (cf. Lecercle 209) – a distorted, fun-house image – the child is able to both acquire and challenge the Symbolic at the same time. Nonsense, thus, teaches the rules of language by gleefully subverting them. The lack of seriousness intrinsic to the genre, mostly manifested as absurdist comedy or the carnivalesque, is just the cherry on top for an average five-year-old.

Victorian nonsense thus transgresses language and meaning. As such, its point of origin might be found in the rigid rules – both of society in general[5] and of previous children's literature. I have already mentioned that children's literature has a dual role: it is written both for instruction and enjoyment. Pre-Victorian poetry for children combined those two roles to great success, but still leaned firmly onto the tradition of eighteenth-century moral didactic poetry. This does not mean, of course, that it was not imaginative or enjoyable, as can be seen in perhaps the most famous children's poem of the Romantic era, Jane Taylor's "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" (1806), the poem which was, incidentally, parodied by Carroll in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (parody being another feature of nonsense). With the genre of nonsense, the educational role of children's poetry was transposed from behaviour onto language, which is why, as Coats suggests, nonsense for children, like the works of Dr. Seuss or television shows such as *Sesame Street* (1969–), often serve as primers for children who are learning to read. In the remainder of the chapter,

[5] As I mentioned elsewhere in this book, this would explain the emergence of so many popular and/or transgressive genres in the Victorian period. One of them, the dramatic monologue, was thoroughly explored in the previous chapter, but there are many others, and not just in mainstream literature. Nonsense is obviously another one, as is children's fantasy (which really took off only in the 1840s, despite Romantic idealisation of children as some sort of unearthly beings who reside in the domain of the imagination). Such experimentation, subversion, and/or transgression can be found in other artistic forms as well, especially visual ones (e.g. the fad of fairy art in painting, or the earliest instances of photo manipulation (so many headless figures holding their own heads!) in the art of photography). This clearly shows that the artists who rebelled against the dominant cultural mode of realism found their refuge in the realms of fantasy subculture. For my analysis of how fantasy, popular culture and children's literature work together, see Vujin, „Čarobnjaci i leptiri: engleska i srpska fantastična proza za decu".

I will be focusing on Dr. Seuss's particular brand of nonsense, especially its linguistic transgressiveness and carnivalesque subversiveness.

The Nonsense of Dr. Seuss: Language and Style

In his long and prolific career, Dr. Seuss (née Theodor Seuss Geisel) published over sixty books for children, starting with *And to Think That I Saw it on Mulberry Street* (1937), and ending with *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* (1990), with quite a few others added to the collection posthumously. The books are mostly aimed at beginner readers, and feature Seuss' original drawings, which illustrate, enhance or explain the verses. The texts, meanwhile, are usually poems written in anapaestic tetrameter – a joyful, playful, childlike rhythm that perfectly corresponds to the whimsical semantic content of the words. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Seuss came up with the rhythm while on a transatlantic boat ride: he would listen to the ship's engines and try to come up with the poetry that used the same beat as the machine (cf. Anderson 14). That might explain the ritualistic nature of Seuss's rhythm, which makes his poetry sound simultaneously mechanical and soothing; indeed, tonally, it is almost like ASMR and reading it aloud can arguably even be a useful stimming tool.

Through their unique blend of stylised, exaggerated illustrations[6] and quick-paced, rhythmic verse, Dr. Seuss's picture books serve as a perfect introduction to language, both as a means of communication and as a system of arbitrary rules that are as confusing as they are essential. The child acquiring language is intuitive, but that intuition does not mean that language acquisition does not often come hand in hand with frustration. It is not always easy to understand rules, even if we learn to adopt them. This can be seen in Seuss's 1965 book of tongue twisters, *Fox in Socks*.

At the beginning, we are introduced to the characters Fox and Knox, who have a pair of socks and a box, and who are soon joined by some Chicks with bricks and blocks and clocks. After some amazingly nonsensical combinations of all of these words (e.g. "Socks on chicks / and chicks on fox. / Fox on clocks / on bricks and blocks. / Bricks and blocks / on Knox on box."

[6] For an examination of how Seuss's illustrations may unconsciously reflect racist stereotypes, even as his books consciously advocate for equality, see Philip Nel, *Was the Cat in the Hat Black?*

(12)[7]), Fox starts asking Knox to repeat a series of increasingly more difficult tongue twisters, to Knox's apparent confusion and frustration (he keeps complaining that he cannot do it). In the end, Knox has understandably had enough, and he (somewhat less understandably, but still amusingly) pushes the Fox into a bottle. After that, he manages to let out a string of words which thoroughly conform to Lecercle's linguistic analysis of nonsense (i.e. they appear to be part of the language system according to the rules of phonetics, morphology and syntax, but make absolutely no sense when regarded semantically):

> When a fox is
> in the bottle where
> the tweetle beetles battle
> with their paddles
> in a puddle on a
> noodle-eating poodle,
> THIS is what they call...
> ... a tweetle beetle
> noodle poodle bottled
> paddled muddled duddled
> fuddled wuddled
> fox in socks, sir! (58-59)

Here, we can see all the hallmarks of nonsense: language taken literally (the Fox is *actually* bottled up now, like some sort of demented genie who does not so much grant wishes as torment the bottle-rubber), linguistic play (puns, rhymes, alliteration, assonance, the whole enthusiastic glossolalia), neologisms, semantic incongruence, the rhythmic precision which keeps the structure together. It is not always easy to see, because there are quite a few fluctuations in rhythm, but *Fox in Socks*, unusual for Seuss, uses mostly trochaic dimeter. That meter, however, makes perfect sense when we consider that the frantic pace it sets indicates urgency of speech, playfulness, and slight transgression – given that trochee is a less "natural-sounding" beat in English than the more usual iamb. Meanwhile, the poem is so oversaturated with

[7] For reasons of clarity, in this chapter, the verses from Dr. Seuss are referenced by their book page numbers, not their line numbers.

language that it loses almost all meaning, thus completely transgressing the boundaries of sense. What is more, this book, perhaps more than any other by Dr. Seuss, relies on the illustrations to do the heavy lifting in communicating meaning, because the rhymes, taken on their own, serve mainly to challenge, entertain and frustrate the child reader. Without the illustrations, even the adult reader would be hard pressed to figure out just what exactly is going on in the nearly impenetrable verses. The rhythm of the poem gives it a ritualistic quality, and read aloud (if the reading does not get botched, of course), *Fox in Socks* sounds rather like a magical chant.

At the end of the book, Knox thanks the Fox for "a lot of fun" (61) and leaves. After so much frustration, there is a sense of victory. Since the book speaks to children who are presumably still in the language acquisition age bracket, it can be extrapolated that it metaphorically explains how confusing and arbitrary language can be for a young learner. Karen Coats points out that the child who is learning to read is starting to see that "the phonotactic logic of his language . . . has been displaced into a strange symbolic logic", and that the "humour, music and anarchy of the nonsense text" allow them "to hold on to that bit of outlaw *jouissance*" (*Looking Glasses* 64). This challenging of language acquisition through humour and absurdity of nonsense, but without the frustrating tongue twisters, can also be seen in *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish* (1960), where Dr. Seuss gives us a panoramic view of many ridiculous creatures and their habits. The oft-quoted lines, "From there to here / from here to there, / funny things / are everywhere" (9) introduce the main concerns of the poem: contrasts and contrasting points of view (there/here and here/there), humour (*funny* things), vagueness of reality (funny *things*), and the wonderfully weird and whimsical nature of the entire world (everywhere).

The things, whose origin is unknown, but most probably quite distant (cf. Seuss, *One Fish* 13), go by different names, from mundane (Mike, Ned, Clark), to silly (Wump, Nook, Zans, Gox, Ying, Yink, Yop, Zed, Ish, Gak, Zeep). In the classic nonsense tradition, sounds of the words are often a lot more important than their meanings, and frequently the latter follows from the former – the things' characteristics are generally determined purely by rhyme. Thus, the funny things' names give rise to their many different purposes (Zans opens cans), habits (Yink "likes to wink and drink pink ink" (43)), and looks

(there is a Wump with only one hump, but there is also another one, with seven humps). What all of them have in common is that they are "funny" – interpreted as either humorous or bizarre (or, indeed, both at the same time). Seuss thus playfully uses nonsense to expand the rational world and transgress the boundaries of accepted reality. I will properly concentrate on the carnivalesque in the next section, but this parade of "funny things" (the illustration on page 13 of the book shows them in an endlessly spiralling procession), showing off their outrageous special skills mostly resembles an old-fashioned freak-show. The topsy-turvy world of the carnival can be seen when one nameless funny thing first stands upright, telling us, "My hat is old. / My teeth are gold. // I have a bird. / I like to hold. // My shoe is off. / My foot is cold." (28), and then, on the next page, stands upside-down, repeating the poem, with stanzas now in reverse order: "My shoe is off. / My foot is cold. // I have a bird / I like to hold. // My hat is old. / My teeth are gold." (29) *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish* is clearly indebted to Carroll's Wonderland and its captivating convention of mad eccentrics. Even the children from whose point of view the reader is presumably watching the "funny things" – we cannot be certain, but illustrations seem to indicate it – may have been inspired by Alice, in that they are meant to be "Everychildren" who question the logic of this Bizarroland they inhabit (though, unlike Alice, they just happily go with it). Funnily enough, *One Fish* does not owe much linguistically to *Alice*, even though Seuss is no stranger to using Carrollisms (e.g. in *Oh, The Places You'll Go!*, he employs words like "opener" instead of "more open", or "the winning-est winner", in a clear homage to Alice's famous "Curiouser and curiouser!"). The idea of language as an orderly, clear, meaningful system with comprehensible rules is still subverted (e.g. the reader is advised what to do "if you wish to wish a wish" (57)), but the fun is emphasised over the absurd.

One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish thus still interrogates our linguistic complacencies, with a much larger help provided by the narrative than was the case with *Fox in Socks*. There, the language itself was the star of the show, and here, the spotlight is shared between the content and the form, something that is more common for Dr. Seuss. The humour of nonsense depends largely on language, and Seuss exemplifies it time and again. In *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (1957), for instance, he often twists the words so that they can fit his rhyme (e.g. "chimney" needs to rhyme with "nimbly", and so it becomes "chimbley"), but frequently does so in a way that hints at the

arbitrariness of language rules, like when he rhymes "houses" with "mouses". Any beginner learner will have issues with "irregular" plurals, and a young child, who is still acquiring language, will generally use the rule they are familiar with (e.g. "mouses" instead of "mice"). In Lacanian terms, once they have entered the Symbolic order and accepted the side of the Law, they are expected to abide by the rules of that law. Nonsense poetry, thus, reaffirms the rules by subverting them, and uses humour to facilitate the subversion/affirmation paradox. In *Hop on Pop* (1963), subtitled *The Simplest Seuss for Youngest Use*, the poems in the book are all extremely short, simple, and easily rhymed, and the illustrations again work in tandem with them to explain the basic rules of phonics though nonsense verse. The young reader is encouraged to adopt language rules, while being shown that communicating meaning is not as simple as that. Semantically humorous examples (like "house on a mouse", or "three fish in a tree") are questioned, and long words (like "Constantinople" or "Timbuktu"), as well as series of short words spelt without spaces between them (e.g. "hethreetreebee") are there both to amuse and to intimidate. In short, this is nonsense for the very young, and it still manages to be poetically and linguistically transgressive.

As I demonstrated in this section, Dr. Seuss's poetry works in a subversive way typical of nonsense. The structure remains rigid, mostly through tightly reined in beat of his verse and the regularity of rhyme, while the content thrives on humour and paradox, woven from both the author's and the reader's linguistic prowess. In our world, cats may not wear hats (at least not without human intervention), and elephants don't usually hatch eggs, but in the world of nonsense, these things are perfectly acceptable, as long as their diegetic universe makes linguistic sense. Nonsense thrives on the bizarre, and readily embraces the fantastic. It often goes hand in hand with the eccentric and the profane, particularly in children's literature. In other words, nonsense does not transgress merely through challenging language as a coherent system, but by throwing itself headlong into the carnivalesque.

"And They'd Feast! And They'd Feast! And they'd FEAST! FEAST FEAST! FEAST!" – Dr. Seuss's Carnival of Nonsense

The above quote comes from *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* and refers to what the denizens of Whoville in the book like to do at Christmas, and what the Grinch finds intolerable. The Whos enjoy their religious festivities,

especially the banqueting, the singing, and the togetherness. The Grinch, on the other hand, cannot stand any of that, so, in order to stop the Whos, he steals all of their presents and food during the night. It doesn't work: the Whos celebrate even without the gifts, and the Grinch, his heart having now grown three sizes, takes his bulging sack of stolen goodies from the top of the mountain to the valley below, and joins the Whos in their feast, even carving the "roast beast" himself.

Here, we can find several features of the carnivalesque – the eating and drinking, the participatory ceremony, the grotesque body (the enormous heart), the stand-ins for bodily protrusions and orifices (the mountain and the abyss), and, perhaps most importantly, the "triumphal banquet" at the end, which represents "the triumph of life over death" (Bakhtin 283). This serves as a fitting conclusion to Christmas festivities, since the ritual they originate from (the death and rebirth of the year symbolised by the winter solstice) fits nicely with the regenerative nature of the carnival. The link between nonsense and the carnivalesque is inevitable, given how they both thrive on duality, inversion and laughter. Jean-Jacques Lecercle (cf. 194-195) points out that there are some elements of the carnivalesque that are nonsensical (e.g. the primacy of the comic over the serious, or the theme of madness), and some that are not (e.g. interest in political problems). Kevin Shortsleeve[8] does not fully agree, and notes that Dr. Seuss's particular combination of nonsense and the carnivalesque "bestowed political agency on that generation 'most critical of the Vietnam war'" (189). However, the carnivalesque elements of children's nonsense poetry do not need to (and usually do not) inspire actual political change: their social impact can remain firmly in the realm of linguistic and poetic transgression. Children's literature as a whole, particularly humorous works aimed at younger readers, often engages in the practices of carnival: there is an awful lot of gobbling, beating, metamorphosing, and feasting there

[8] Shortsleeve is concerned with similar topics as I am (the title of his article is "The Cat in the Hippie: Dr. Seuss, Nonsense, the Carnivalesque, and the Sixties Rebel"), but we approach the subject from different angles. While his analysis is primarily aimed at the socially transgressive potential of Seuss's books, mine deals with the elements that make it poetically transgressive. He lists several features shared by nonsense and the carnivalesque speech (cf. 191-192), including exaggeration, love of play, and neologisms, but mostly focuses on how Seuss's nonsense inspired defiance of authority in the Hippie generation. In other words, he is exploring children as "activists in training" (190), while I am exploring children as naturally subversive readers.

– any of Roald Dahl's fantasy books may serve as an example (just remember what happens to Augustus Gloop, Violet Beauregarde and Mike TeaVee in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964)). This might have something to do with the connections that children's poetry, especially nonsense, has with ancient folk culture (nursery rhymes), or it may simply be that both mediaeval peasantry and typical modern pre-schoolers find scatological humour hilarious. Whatever the reason, children's authors make liberal use of the carnivalesque, and Dr. Seuss is no exception.

I have already mentioned that the procession of "funny things" in *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish* has certain carnivalesque elements. The "things" are bodily aberrant and incongruous, like the Wump with seven humps, or the unnamed creature with eleven fingers (four on one hand, and seven on the other). Seuss is often inspired by the atmosphere of circus, like in *If I Ran the Zoo* (1950) or *If I Ran the Circus* (1956). In *If I Ran the Zoo*, young Gerald McGrew is not impressed with ordinary animals – if he ran the zoo, he would populate it with the most bizarre creatures he could find, among them, a lion with at least ten feet, an elephant-cat, some Joats (cow-goat-squirrel-dog combos), and "the Fizza-ma-Wizza-ma-Dill, / The world's biggest bird from the Island of Gwark / Who only eats pine trees and spits out the bark" (n.p.). These creatures are decidedly grotesque, and the illustrations in the book only intensify that feature. *If I Ran the Circus* has both strange animals and another staple of the mediaeval carnival: clowns. A particularly interesting creature is the Drum-Tummied-Snumm, who can drum any melody on his protruding belly, another carnivalesque trope. Speaking of melody, *If I Ran the Circus* is an interesting deviation from Seuss's customary meter: although it mostly relies on the usual anapaestic tetrameter, it also often uses amphibrach – still a playful, childlike beat, but with a markedly humorous twist.[9] A further typical carnivalesque feature present in this book is the fixation on food and elimination from the body, as can be observed from the example of "The Remarkable Foon / Who eats sizzling hot pebbles that fall off the moon! / And the reason he likes them red hot, it appears, / Is he greatly enjoy blowing smoke from his ears." (n.p.) Bakhtin reminds us that the grotesque body "can fill the entire universe" (318), and that is very close to what the being known as the

[9] This metric combination of anapaest and amphibrach also often occurs in another staple of Victorian nonsense: limerick (cf. Lear 95-156 for numerous examples).

Spotted Atrocious does: he is exceedingly large, and our attention is drawn to his gaping mouth and giant teeth, and also his diet, which consists of (among other things) carpets, sidewalks, people and trees. In *Circus*, Seuss also includes "the abuse and thrashing" which functions in a regenerative way, because it is always "followed by praise" (Bakhtin 197) – we can see this when a giant beast called the Grizzly-Ghastly gets to be slapped, slammed, and pinned by the Kid Sneelock, who is "the champ-of-all-champs" (n.p.). Meanwhile, the life-death duality, represented through victory over fear, is accomplished by the Great Daredevil Sneelock, who jumps, plunges into a four thousand, six hundred and ninety-two feet deep dive and triumphantly lands in a fishbowl.

The circus-like (or purely circus) atmosphere is these books lends them the spirit of the carnival, but Seuss does not deeply explore the upside-down nature of the world in these freak-show menageries. However, in two of his most famous works for children, *The Cat in the Hat* (1957) and *Green Eggs and Ham* (1960), the use of the carnivalesque is more sophisticated, since the books are concerned with the world turned inside out, where the typical hierarchies of everyday life are temporarily put on hold. In *Green Eggs and Ham*, the very phrasing of the title indicates the inversion: instead of the usual phrase, "ham and eggs", we get "eggs and ham", and green ones to boot (cf. Anderson 89). The child character, Sam, arrives at the scene riding a goat-like creature and carrying a sign that says "I am Sam", and then moves off-page. When he returns, he is riding a cat, and the sign now says "Sam I am": the reader realises that the book is now going to depict a very different world. In this world, the child is attempting to make the adult eat green things (cf. Shortsleeve 193-194), and the adult keeps refusing, without even trying (by the end of the book, he has finally tried them, just to get Sam to leave him alone, and surprise – decided that he likes them after all, and would indeed eat them "anywhere"). *Green Eggs and Ham*, more than any other Seuss book, has an incredibly ritualistic, chanting quality to its rhythm, and the reason is repetition. To wit, for some time, starting with *The Cat in the Hat*, Seuss's publishers challenged him to create books using limited lists of words. For *Green Eggs and Ham*, the list only had fifty words (Seuss ended up using forty-nine), which made for a very repetitive poem. Luckily, this form corresponds perfectly to the content, because the reader is as fed up as Sam's friend is with the back-and-forth about eating green eggs and ham in a house, with a mouse, in a box, with a fox, in the rain, on the train, and so on. Almost all the words are

monosyllabic, and the rhythm is simple iambic tetrameter, making this poem one of the least embellished Seuss creations. No wonder that it ended up becoming the most popular book he ever wrote. The emphasis on eating, meanwhile, is a typically carnivalesque feature, especially when the food's grotesque elements are taken into consideration. Here, the grotesque relies purely on association – usually, when food is green, it is rotten (if it's not *supposed* to be green in the first place, that is), and the reader would be repulsed by it, were it not for the illustrations and the genre of nonsense. The illustrations depict ham and green eggs as completely normal, if green, and since nonsense does not recognise metaphor, we can be fairly sure that the food is safe to eat, because it is not bad, only literally green. Thus, we are a little revolted, but mostly amused. *Green Eggs and Ham* ends up subverting our expectations: instead of being rotten, the food is simply colourful; instead of the adult friend forcing Sam to do something, it is Sam who chases the adult down with the offer of food; finally, instead of the friend standing his ground and throwing green eggs and ham into Sam's face, he ends up liking them and wanting to eat them all the time. This carnivalesque inversion results in a thoroughly entertaining reading experience for a beginner reader. Through this topsy-turvy version of the world, the child reader gets to experience a temporary reversal of roles when the barriers between classes – in our case here, adults and children – get torn down. Nonsense and the carnivalesque work together in this book, and the result is amusement and laughter.

I will end this section by focusing on what is undoubtedly the most carnivalesque work by Dr. Seuss, *The Cat in the Hat*. Here, we have numerous hallmarks of carnival: the upside-down world, the clown figure, the anarchy that is joyfully introduced into the everyday order, and the reminder that the suspension of hierarchic distinctions is only temporary, because by the end of the book, the authority of the ruling class (i.e. the mother) will have been firmly re-established. Cats often serve as harbingers of transgression in Seuss's works, as we saw in *Green Eggs and Ham*, when Sam-I-am came in riding a cat. This is not exclusive to Seuss's written art either – many of his most out-there, phantasmagoric paintings feature cats, including *Cat Carnival in West Venice*, which was the inspiration for the title of this chapter. There, another cat in a hat is dancing with a woman in a beautifully designed ball gown, and the romantic atmosphere of Venice is depicted in the fantastically colourful background details. Similar ambience can be seen in paintings such as *Green*

Cat with Lights, *Cat Detective in the Wrong Part of Town*, *Archbishop Katz*, *The Great Cat Continuum*, or *Venetian Cat Singing Oh Solo Meow*.[10] Through their careful combination of whimsical, eccentric imagery and scrupulously methodical composition, these paintings transgress "the artificial boundary between 'high' and 'low' culture" (Booker 222), and the same can be said for Seuss's nonsense poetry. *The Cat in the Hat* came into being as a result of a request that Seuss write a book that "first graders can't put down" (Anderson 81), using only a pre-approved list of 225 words, which featured no adjectives. These formal limitations allowed Seuss to concentrate on creating as much disorder and impropriety as possible within a pre-established closed, orderly system; in other words, the genre of nonsense, which depends on establishment, transgression, and re-establishment of rules, and the carnivalesque mode, which functions as "a sanctioned form of 'subversion'" (Booker 6), provide, in *The Cat in the Hat*, a perfect vehicle for an anarchic exploration of transgression in the form of children's poetry.

The premise of the book is simple: on a "cold, cold wet day" (1), two children, who have been left alone in their house, cannot do anything fun; instead, they just sit inside, not liking it "one little bit" (3). Luckily for the reader, because a story about children just sitting around would not make for a particularly fun book, The Cat in the Hat appears, tells the children that he can show them "a lot of good tricks" (8), and proceeds to wreak havoc in their home – he juggles, throws things around, upsets the pet fish, unleashes the fun-loving Thing One and Thing Two who introduce even more chaotic energy into the mix, and basically makes a mess that is "so big / And so deep and so tall" (55) that it cannot be picked up before the children's mother returns. Fortunately for them, the Cat is magical, and quickly clears everything up, so that, when the mother arrives, everything seems to be in order. While the Cat goads the children into letting him happily destroy the house, the fish keeps reinforcing the rules. As Karen Coats points out, "the Cat represents the anarchic possibilities of desire, and the fish represents the Law. Children keep distance from either extreme, and retain a position of relative autonomy" (*Looking Glasses* 69). The Cat is a clown figure, but also a parody of a trained circus animal, or a sideshow freak. He is a carnivalesque disruptive force, and

[10] These paintings can be seen in *The Secret Art of Dr. Seuss* (1995), or on *The Art of Dr. Seuss* website (link in references).

his "tricks", which turn the social order upside down (bending the rake, sinking the toy ship, throwing the fish into a pot, balancing on a ball) can be interpreted as his own, grotesque version of cleaning the house; in other words, his household antics are an inversion of the mother's presumably orderly world, a profane parody of her sacred rituals. If the mediaeval carnival got rid of the social hierarchies, if only for a while, the Cat's behaviour makes children, who are a notoriously disenfranchised class, imagine what it would be like if they were free of the Mother's authority. Interestingly enough, they do not wholeheartedly embrace this chaos: their desires are kept in check by the law. Shortsleeve (203) insightfully points out that Thing One and Thing Two, who look like a cross between the Cat and the children, function as children's alter egos who are allowed to act out their fantasies "with reckless abandon" and "without any fear of reprisal". Similarly, the entire carnivalesque ruckus serves as wish fulfilment for the child readers, who are rarely allowed such freedoms; indeed, much less so today than at the time of the book's publication, since present-day parenting insists on nearly constant adult supervision and thus leaves children with virtually no alone time and almost no liberty in their highly regulated lives. The flouting of the mother's authority is most clearly seen when Thing One and Thing Two put her new gown on the kite's string and start running around her room, bumping into her bed. The boy speaker informs us that he does *not* like "the way that they play" (45), which shows us that, while the hierarchy has been temporarily suppressed, it still exists. When the mother returns, the Cat has already departed, having cleaned up the mess, and there is no evidence of the revelry that has been going on in the adult figure's absence. The mother asks the children what they did while she was out, and they do not know what to say. The very ending of the poem, where the speaker asks the reader, "Should we tell her about it? / Now, what SHOULD we do? / Well… / what would you do / if your mother asked YOU?" (61), is deliberately ambiguous and can be interpreted as both an invitation to confess and a challenge to keep silent and subvert the social norms. As the reader is the one with the ultimate authority to decide, the book's transgressive potential can range from mild to high.

The Cat in the Hat is a trickster figure who "wields the power of nature" (Mookerjee 179) and embodies the spirit of the carnival (he is not just some random cat wearing a hat; he is *the* cat in *the* hat). His performance is "grotesque, unsettling, both blurring boundaries and affirming them", and yet,

despite his disruptive, even destructive, unruliness, he is "a merrily transgressive force who *should* be in the house" (Nel 42). His excessive misbehaviour functions as a conduit for children to vicariously experience disorder and fulfil every transgressive desire they might have, without taking responsibility for it. Fantasy here serves the role of madness in that it allows children to transgress, while also being their "mitigation for having transgressed" (Jenks 136). Nonsense is thus a perfect tool for a carnivalesque subversion of the dominant social order – the adult world can be interpreted as the official culture, while the world of the children works along the same lines as unofficial folk culture, or subculture. This mixture of high and low, official and folk, sacred and profane, is a feature of both nonsense literature, which rests upon paradoxes, and the carnivalesque, which inverts the usual circumstances of everyday life. Dr. Seuss's picture books illustrate how these concepts find their natural home in the poetry written for youngest readers, the poetry that encourages children's inherent tendency to transgress the established mores of language, order and meaning.

Oh, the Thinks You Can Think About the Transgressive Power of Nonsense

In *Horton Hatches the Egg* (1940), Mayzie the lazy bird tricks Horton the elephant into sitting on her egg, while she goes off gallivanting on sunny holidays. Horton climbs the tree, sits in the nest, and faithfully guards the egg through thick and thin (including being carted off and sold to a circus) for a whole year, because elephants are "faithful one hundred per cent". When Mayzie accidentally comes across Horton just at the moment when the egg starts hatching, she suddenly decides that she wants it back (having previously resolved to just abandon it). Horton is heartbroken, but when the egg hatches, the creature that emerges from it is half-elephant, half-bird, and chooses to go with him instead of being with Mayzie. This is a heart-warming story, equal parts ridiculous and charming. It has many features of nonsense, including the usual strict form (Seuss's customary anapaestic tetrameter), plethora of stylistic adornments (puns, repetitions, anaphoras, chiasmi…), misuse of grammatical rules for comic effect (e.g. during a storm, it poured and it "lighteninged"), and semantic incongruity. It also has many carnivalesque elements, like the inversion of social norms (Horton the elephant acts like a bird, and Mayzie the bird is a deadbeat mum), clownish revelry (scenes at the circus), or subversive bodies (Horton the male elephant is the mother of a

bizarre hybrid baby, whose appearance is equal parts grotesque, adorable and funny). It is easy to see how both of these aspects work together to create a transgressive work of art aimed at children. This is the formula by which Dr. Seuss's poetry operates: silliness and subversion act as a dynamic duo, allowing children to work their deconstructive magic on the verses, and play with the sounds and meanings.

Transgression in children's literature, especially children's poetry, and most especially, poetry aimed at very young children, obviously functions differently from the transgression in mainstream fictional worlds. Beginner readers do not usually face murderers, psychos, or creeps in their picture books, but that does not mean that those picture books cannot be transgressive. As I have extensively shown in this chapter, poetic transgression frequently takes place at the linguistic level, where the very idea of language as a meaningful system of rules gets playfully turned upside down. Nonsense allows us to remember just how ridiculous some of the traditions and decrees we usually take for granted actually are. A child reader, possibly encountering such notions for the first time, naturally acts in a subversive way, often reading against the text and taking full control of its interpretative potential. While the liveliest children's literature often has least to do with imparting lessons on the reader, I cannot help but point out that there might indeed be a moral to this story: if we approach literature as a site of linguistic pleasure, a defiantly aesthetic playground, the very act of reading might end up becoming the most transgressive force of all.

TRANSPARENT CLOSETS, TRANSGRESSIVE SOUNDS: QUEEN, CAMP AND QUEER TRANSGRESSION

Hegemonic Power and Superficial Subversion: Rock Music, Ideology and Masculinity

As we move away from clear-cut notions of transgression, so too do we gradually abandon rigid ideas of genre. Therefore, my choice of poetic material gets deliberately less "properly" poetic with each chapter. In "Victorian Psycho", I talked about a well-established, respectable poetic form written by some of the most distinguished names in the English poetic canon. Given that Queen Victoria's Poet Laureate himself laid the proverbial groundwork for it, absolutely no one in their right mind would question whether the dramatic monologue qualifies as "true poetry". In "Cat Carnival", by contrast, I spoke of nonsense, a genre which is only marginally canonical, because of its usual association with popular culture and children's literature, both of which are often excluded from considerations of mainstream cultural and literary trends. Although it may not be commonly appreciated by the fusty makers of literary canon, there is no doubt that poetry for children *is* poetry, even by the most elitist standards of high culture, unless our imagined classifier is being deliberately obtuse. In this chapter, I intend to move even further away from the poetic comfort zone, and concentrate on songs and lyrics, a form of poetry that does not always – barring certain artists like Bob Dylan who have by now become part of the establishment – get the recognition it deserves.[1]

Like I mentioned before, poetic transgression can stem from both formal and thematic features, and frequently it's the former, rather than the latter, that crosses the boundaries of accepted norms. As a hybrid form, popular songs depend, arguably, in equal measure on music and lyrics, with the lyrics behaving like traditional poetry and thus relying both on poetic structure and narrative/thematic content in establishing meaning. Music and lyrics, in turn, are then also often joined by visual elements, in the shape of music videos, album covers, or artists' performances. If lyrics are understood as a form of poetry, they should then logically be treated as such, and any interpretation of lyrics should be done with the help of the exact same critical tools used for

[1] For more on this, see my doctoral dissertation (Vujin, *Poezija britanske popularne kulture dvadesetog veka: poetika i hermeneutika*), my article on "silly love songs" (Vujin, "Besmislene ljubavne pesmice"), or my articles on the intersection between children's literature and rock poetry (Vujin, "The Road to Hell is Paved with Yellow Brick" and Vujin, "Popularno nije sinonim za loše").

discussions of traditional poetry (cf. Vujin, "Besmislene ljubavne pesmice" 67-73). However, in the spirit of completeness, literary analyses of songs would ideally also include aspects of meaning generated by the musical and visual components of the compositions in question. Rather than focusing on how songs can be accepted as a transgressive form of poetry by their very hybrid and "lowbrow" nature, I will take it for granted that they *are* poetry, and concentrate on their transgressiveness in terms of gender and sexuality with regard to established androcentrism and heteronormativity of the rock genre. To that end, I will be talking about the band Queen, and their ingenious use of camp for the purposes of gender subversion, artistic experimentation and implicit sexual transgression.

Even though there is no natural connection between music genres and gender, certain styles of music and vocal registers have historically been seen as gendered and become "codified as male or female within particular social and cultural contexts" (Cohen 231). Rock music in particular has tended to be regarded as an expression of male experience, primarily sexuality and creativity. Especially annoying are ideas concentrated on the vague notion of "authenticity", which usually means whatever those operating from the central positions of power want it to mean, and which is, as a rule, contrasted by the equally arbitrary category of "artifice". The very act of categorising is an implicit demonstration of hegemonic power (cf. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*), which is apparent in standard academic divisions of popular music into "pop" and "rock" that frequently occur along nebulous gender – and thus hierarchic – lines (cf. Keightley; Coates). Rock music is often implied to be connected to authenticity, which is in turn connected to masculinity, while pop music is seen as both artificial and feminine. This consequently leads to questionable conclusions that masculinity (constructed power fantasy though it may be) is automatically deemed "authentic", without the realization that "the metonymic equivalencies . . . between rock, masculinity and authenticity remain discursively hegemonic" (Coates 53). All this despite the fact that rock music was simply appropriated by straight white men and was, for all intents and purposes, pioneered by a queer black woman named Sister Rosetta Tharpe (cf. Wald), who has, until quite recently, been egregiously overlooked by the rock 'n' roll history, in an appalling, if entirely predictable, example of the industry's racism and sexism. As Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie wrote in their 1978 article on rock, sexuality and gender, "rock is a male form" (319) only because the industry, from producers to journalists, is male-dominated, and "the subordination of women in rock is little different from their

subordination in other occupations" (322). In other words, there is nothing inherently *male* in rock, but there is quite a bit in it that is constructed as *masculine*, with both femaleness and femininity being systematically excluded and oppressed. It is the patriarchal ideology that makes rock a male cultural activity, rather than anything inherent to the music itself, despite accepted, if flawed, arguments that the rock sound is "coded as unmistakably phallic" (Coates 50) and that "it is not only lyrics or visual imagery but the music itself that constructs gendered experiences" (Walser 113).

Rock music is not only male-centric, but ideologically heteronormative and aggressively homosocial, and not nearly as subversive as it has always liked to pretend – even less so now, when it is firmly in the category of Dad (or better yet Granddad) music. I mentioned that its progenitor (rock journalism would, tellingly, only allow the term "godmother") was a queer black woman, and yet, since the 1950s, rock and roll has taken on "the ultimately conservative ideological, gendered and racial meanings that continue to be inscribed and reiterated" (Coates 56), all the while celebrating "its mythical Otherness to mainstream culture" (Coates 60). As Keir Keightley (126-127) rightly concludes,

> [f]or all of rock's appropriation, modification, or outright theft of African-American, agrarian, or working-class musical cultures, it is not itself a form of crossover, nor a subculture incorporated by the dominant culture, nor a counterculture (the term most associated with rock politics in the 1960s). Rock may wear subcultural clothes, identify with marginalised minorities, promote countercultural political positions, and upset genteel notions of propriety, but from its inception it has been a large-scale, industrially organised, mass-mediated, mainstream phenomenon operating at the very centre of society.

Rock is thus yet another manifestation of patriarchal hegemony, which is even more glaringly obvious when we consider the particular gender construction at work in the genre. As gender is always performative, i.e. enacted repeatedly through a series of deliberate choices of conduct, from posture to clothes and behaviour (cf. Butler), rock's careful forging of masculinity allows us insight into the fragility and ultimate fictiveness of that construct. For all its explicitly sexual, phallic posturing, its misogynist lyrics and crude arrogance that Frith and McRobbie identify as the hallmarks of "cock rock", this machismo is nothing more than a male power fantasy, a self-indulgent, fanciful stance about

as real as any other gender fixity. Coates (52) suggests that rock masculinity is "one in which any trace of the 'feminine' is expunged, incorporated or appropriated", which then, paradoxically, results in a homosocial culture that is by its very nature at least implicitly homoerotic. Robert Walser's analysis of masculinity in heavy metal can also be applied to rock, and he is spot-on when he concludes that metal (at least up until the mid-1980s), functioning within the context of patriarchal culture, develops "discourses of male victimization, exscription, and androgyny" (118) to annihilate or at least minimise the female threat. Rock, like metal, enacts versions of masculinity that are inherently misogynist and yet in denial about their gender anxieties. In order to deal with those anxieties, it then articulates "fantastic worlds without women – supported by male, sometimes homoerotic, bonding" (Walser 110).

This homoeroticism is often embraced as a seemingly transgressive, but in actuality ideology-confirming strategy, since it frequently revels in parodic exaggeration and thus offers merely a spectacle of queerness. In other words, it functions as the "licenced mayhem" of carnival practices (cf. Jenks 167), a "sanctioned form of 'subversion' whose very purpose is to sublimate and defuse the social tensions that might lead to genuine subversion" (Booker 6). Rock performances such as glam allow for a publically acceptable means for men to express gender ambivalence, by appropriating cultural tropes of stereotypical femininity (make-up, jewellery, sparkly tights or dresses), all the while performing hypersexualised masculinity (cf. Coates 63) and treating the feminine as abject. The appropriated symbols of femininity are exaggerated and contextualised as stage performances where they are "invested with the power and glory normally reserved to patriarchy" (Walser 131). There is a clear separation between an artist's performative and "real" self (cf. Cohen 233), and as long as all gender-bending shenanigans happen *onstage*, the status quo remains safely heteronormative. This is why "spectacular, musicalised manifestations of peculiar, strange, queer embodied obscenities like [Marilyn] Manson or [Lady] Gaga are considered especially dangerous, disturbing and subversive" (Taylor 48) – they continue to *perform* gender offstage, thus reminding us that we all do it every day and that the gendered body "has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (Butler 185).

It would, perhaps, be easiest to concentrate on aspects of glam and its appropriation of feminine-coded artefacts and behaviours in my analysis of Queen, given that they started their career as glam rockers, with all the glitter, nail varnish, and tight satin costumes it entails. Even their most famous, now

iconic image, the one featuring the four members' heads, which graces both the cover of *Queen II* (1974) and the video for "Bohemian Rhapsody" (1975), can serve as an illustration of queer subversiveness, since the photographer Mick Rock based Mercury's pose on a photo of Marlene Dietrich, a legendary gender non-conforming icon (cf. Rock 60-68). However, in this chapter, I am not interested in sanctioned, carnivalesque forms of gender transgression. In the seventies and eighties, androgynous performances were an artistic pose, a carefully crafted spectacle of masculinity, knowingly feminised for the purposes of shock and titillation (case in point, the inimitable David Bowie and his many personas, each subversive in its own, theatrical way) and thus, paradoxically, served as yet another decorative layer of fundamental maleness that was still seen as essential. If, as Norma Coates claims, the abject feminine was incorporated into the masculine performance, then it only served to emphasise the underlying fantasy that masculinity is fixed and real.

To use a Queen example, the famous video for their 1984 song "I Want to Break Free" (written by bassist John Deacon for *The Works* album) features three segments: a drag performance, a "regular" performance, and a ballet performance. The drag part, for all its seeming transgressiveness, is nothing more than a mildly humorous spoof of the long-running British soap opera *Coronation Street* (1960–), in the old tradition of cross-dressing comedy that was familiar even to Shakespeare; in other words, drag is used here because of its potential as comedic parody, rather than for its ironic ambiguity. Next, the "regular" performance (that is, the usual music video lip-synching), particularly Freddie Mercury's signature attire (tight leatherette trousers paired with hairy bare chest), is another traditional stage element, a regular hypersexual masculine rocker persona that nods at homoeroticism but never crosses the line into explicit gender-bending. It is the third performance, the ballet segment,[2] that has the most transgressive potential, as it includes an artistic form that is traditionally coded both feminine and queer[3], with

[2] Incidentally, this wasn't Mercury's first ballet performance. In 1979, he performed with The Royal Ballet, and described the experience as enjoyable, but terrifying and "exceptionally difficult". "I wasn't quite Baryshnikov," he said, "but it wasn't bad for an ageing beginner." (Brooks and Lupton 100)

[3] In his 1984 book on camp, Philip Core (25) notes that ballet's "artificiality, its physicality sanctified by artistic laurels, and the sexual ambiguities of dancers' narcissism, have all given rise to ritualisations and explosions of camp", with much of that camp being "frankly transvestite" or "openly homosexual or libertine in motive". Christopher Isherwood, a camp icon if there ever was one, states that "The Ballet is camp about love" (in Cleto 51).

intertextual borrowings from dancers Vaslav Nijinsky and Rudolf Nureyev, both queer icons in their own right (rumour has it that Mercury and Nureyev were involved at some point, but that it not relevant here). It is thus the subtext, rather than the text, that allows for queer transgression in this music video: Nijinsky's choreography for the *Ballets Russes* production of Debussy's *Afternoon of a Faun* (1912) that Mercury incorporates in the video for "I Want to Break Free" is far more transgressive than either explicitly parodic drag or Mercury's prancing performance of cock rock masculinity, precisely because ballet – queer-coded ballet in particular, such as Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* – is not usually part of rock idiom, and thus cannot be explained away by tradition, humour, or androgynous experimentation that is limited to the stage and thus sanctioned as publically allowed form of gender transgression. Paired with inconspicuous, cliché love lyrics written by Deacon, and thoroughly stereotypical synth-rock melody, the music video does the heavy lifting in queering the song. Nevertheless, the final result *is* at least somewhat transgressive, thanks to the intertextual links present only in the song's visual part. It is elements such as this that I intend to explore in this chapter: those that are not in-your-face transgressive, but still manage to provide enough subversion to make the audience question the heteronormativity of rock music.

The Lie that Tells the Truth: Camp and Parody as Instruments of Queering Rock

The idea that camp is "a lie that tells the truth" comes from Philip Core's eponymous book, which does not strive to define or academically explore camp, but instead offers a unique, subjective dictionary of concepts, people, artistic creations, or any cultural elements that might be read as campy, from Caravaggio and Salvador Dali to opera, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and even underwear. Stating that camp is "evanescent and protean" (13), Core borrows the "lie that tells the truth" phrase from Jean Cocteau, an eccentric, cult figure and a transgressive *enfant terrible* of the European avant-garde. In the spirit of Oscar Wilde's Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Core lists certain aphoristic "camp rules", like "CAMP is a disguise that fails", "CAMP is cross-dressing in a Freudian slip", or "CAMP is an ephemeral fundamental" (7). This difficulty of defining camp is also present in Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp" (1964), arguably the most famous attempt to make academic sense of this "esoteric sensibility" which revels in "the unnatural", in "artifice and exaggeration" (cf. Sontag 275). Fabio Cleto mentions that camp, variously described as sensibility, aesthetic or discourse, tends to frustrate theorists, particularly

when it comes to its links with queerness, postmodernity and subversive capability, mostly because it works "through a radical semiotic destabilisation, in which object and subject of discourse *collapse onto each other*" (4). This stance is dominant in culturally oriented studies of camp, but seen as somewhat problematic in those that focus on its queer subversive potential. Consequently, Moe Meyer's claim that "Sontag's appropriation banished the queer from the discourse, substituting instead an un-queer bourgeois subject under the banner of Pop" (8) may serve as yet another illustration of heteronormative hegemony that dismisses, erases, or incorporates the queer. On the other hand, camp can be seen as a transgressive force that at once *challenges* and *invokes* its queer aspect (Cleto 23; emphasis in original), and its heterogeneity which opposes categorisation might be identified as the place where subversion actually happens.

While more aggressive political elements of camp[4] are beyond the scope of this chapter, it should be pointed out that in Queen, the transgressive potential of camp works through its broad definition of the "strategies and tactics of queer parody", in the postmodern sense of "an intertextual manipulation of multiple conventions" that "can provide an oppositional queer critique" (Meyer 8). The features, then, that make camp a transgressive force in the music of Queen, include, but are not limited to: exaggeration, authentic artifice (paradoxical though it may seem), theatricality, eccentricity, humour, irony and self-irony, interplay between high art and mass culture (bonus points for mass cultural artefacts of the past that age has transformed into today's high art – opera being a prime example), sexual transgression and (usually) apolitical pseudo-aristocratic detachment. Although queerness, particularly male homosexuality, is one of the hallmarks of camp, it often tends to be erased, leading to camp being redefined as an artistic pose,[5] as can be demonstrated

[4] The basic premise is that camp functions as "the production of queer social visibility" (Meyer 4), which has been systematically erased from the dominant socio-cultural landscape. The constant "defanging" of camp into an aesthetic pose, form without content, or content without meaning, serves exactly this nefarious purpose. For more on this, see Meyer's *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*.

[5] Moe Meyer says that Sontag's article expunged homosexuality from camp, which might have allowed the 1960s public to accept it more easily, but it basically did camp, particularly its political, queer essence, a disservice. As he explains, "'by removing, or at least minimizing, the connotations of homosexuality, Sontag killed off the binding referent of Camp – the Homosexual – and the discourse began to unravel as Camp became confused and conflated with rhetorical and performative strategies such as irony, satire, burlesque, and travesty; and with cultural movements such as Pop." (6)

via glam rock's socially sanctioned version of gender ambiguity. This can, of course, be interpreted in a more sinister way: rock, as a vehicle of patriarchal hegemony which poses as counterculture, incorporates the subcultural practices of camp and consequently reduces both camp and queer to pure aesthetic, which is there merely for the sake of variety. We must, therefore, keep in mind that camp is not simply a parodic reinterpretation of dominant cultural ideologies divorced from any relations of power: it does not ape sacred canonical traditions simply as frivolous window-dressing, but for the explicit purpose of cultural critique. Even if its political engagement is dialled back, and camp is reinterpreted as part of the larger queer discourse that can, but doesn't have to, be a self-aware subversive force, being instead, as Cleto notes, both flamboyant and closeted, modern and metahistorical, aristocratic and democratic, etc., "framing camp as queer suggests to deconstruct, to question, puzzle and *cross* these binary oppositions" (Cleto 23). Observed this way, camp utilises strategies of postmodern parody to interrogate social, cultural, or artistic reality. The lie that tells the truth, indeed.

It is thus this particular blend of specifically queer parody and the underlying basic structure which is, for all intents and purposes, stereotypically masculine rock idiom, that makes Queen's music sexually and socially transgressive. This apparent incongruity – and the principle of incongruity is "a recurrent feature in camp phenomenology" (Cleto 22) – was recognised by Freddie Mercury, who insisted that Queen were "just an English rock and roll band" (Brooks and Lupton 57), and yet emphasised their self-ridiculing, tongue-in-cheek, showbiz element, describing himself as an "outrageous, camp, theatrical and dramatic" (36) performer who likes to "wear ridiculous shorts and ham it up with semi-Gestapo salutes" (33), and famously stated that Queen are "the Cecil B. De Mille of rock'n'roll" (28), who have "more in common with Liza Minnelli than Led Zeppelin" (40). Although it would perhaps be simplest to demonstrate this by analysing Queen's most famous composition, "Bohemian Rhapsody", I think it would be a lot more interesting to use a fresher, less recognisable track, both because there is less critical attention paid to songs which were never released as singles, and because "Bohemian Rhapsody" is so embedded in public consciousness that it might be difficult for the reader to forget prior associations and interpretations bound

Bearing this in mind, I still have to point out that, even though Sontag went out of her way to explain that camp should not be seen as solely the province of queer, she did, in fact, say that "homosexuals" had been "the vanguard" of camp, having "more or less invented" it (cf. 290-291).

to linger somewhere in the subconscious.[6] Hopefully, my choice of "The Millionaire Waltz" will be equally satisfying to the reader/listener.

Written by Freddie Mercury for Queen's fifth studio album, *A Day at the Races* (1976), "The Millionaire Waltz" is a wonderful example of Mercury's maxim that might define his particular brand of camp: "If something is worth doing, it's worth overdoing!" (Brooks and Lupton 47) Similar to "Bohemian Rhapsody", which was published a year earlier on *A Night at the Opera*, "The Millionaire Waltz" takes as its inspiration and intertextual starting point a genre of classical music not usually associated with rock and not often tackled even by the campiest of performers: a Strauss waltz. Mercury described is as "quite outlandish" (Brooks and Lupton 73), and extremely complex in terms of orchestration. Even though the triple metre (3/4) typical of waltz wasn't unheard of at the time (e.g. The Beatles employed it in "Being for the Benefit of Mr Kite", a track from *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) in which "Henry the Horse dances the waltz"), Queen based the entire song on it and used it for the express purpose of parodic, intertextual interpretation of a classical music form. Of course, it is not enough for a track to have classical influence to be regarded as camp – for instance, neither "Love of my Life" from *A Night at the Opera*, nor "Was it all Worth it" from *The Miracle* (1989) can be regarded as camp, even though the former is obviously inspired by Mozart[7], and the latter by Gershwin. Neither of these songs are ironic, tongue-in-cheek aesthetic poses meant to interrogate the classical tradition; instead, they are melodically and lyrically serious examinations of genuine feeling that are simply influenced by classical music styles. "Love of my Life" is a song famously dedicated to Mercury's former girlfriend Mary Austin, and it is an emotional goodbye both to her and to Mercury's pretence of heterosexuality; while "Was it all Worth it", written at the time when Mercury was grappling with his own mortality and impending death, is a (seemingly?) triumphant song by a man putting his affairs in order, satisfied with what he has achieved in his life. Lacking the ironic subversiveness and sheer outrageousness of either "Bohemian Rhapsody" or "The Millionaire Waltz", these two songs do not expose the fragile construct that is the dominant position of "high culture", and

[6] For those who *are* interested in my analysis of "Bohemian Rhapsody" – though not one that is focused on transgressiveness – see Vujin, „'Boemska rapsodija': autentičnost rok teksta i postmodernizam".

[7] I refer here to the studio/album version of the song and its piano/harp arrangement. The more famous, live version was reworked for acoustic guitar and became a sing-along behemoth on tours, but there is little classical influence left in it.

thus do not qualify either as campy or as transgressive. The same goes for "The Show Must Go On" from *Innuendo* (1991): for all its pomp and circumstance, its bombastic theatricality, vocal acrobatics and classical influences (most notably, Pachelbel's ubiquitous *Canon in D Major*), this track is an expression of genuine pathos, a death-defying swan song of a man who hasn't got much time left. As Susan Sontag says, in camp there is "never, never tragedy" (287) given that its "whole point" is "to dethrone the serious" (288).

All of this makes it easier to understand why "The Millionaire Waltz" is, indeed, camp. Since the song was never released as a single, it does not have a promotional video, thus, we can concentrate on its musical and lyrical content instead. Musically, as I already mentioned, "The Millionaire Waltz" is a parodically nostalgic piece: it takes a classical form which was by the 1970s associated more with pensioners' clubs and village dance halls than with high culture, and even in its early nineteenth-century heyday it was light music, written as popular dancing entertainment. By combining this decidedly light, feminine-coded style of music with masculine-coded, hard rock guitar sounds, Queen blur the genre and gender binaries, and create a queer, discursive musical piece. Both Mercury's vocal and Brian May's guitar draw on these elements, moving from gentle, soft sounds to harder, aggressive tones. The space that a typical hard rock song would dedicate to the guitar solo is here also occupied by the piano, relentlessly pounding the waltz rhythm, which gives the song a slightly surreal, ridiculous note. The song is strangely inverted: unlike typical rock, it relies mostly on piano and lead bass, with guitar and (especially) drums scaled back and featured mainly in interludes. Since hysterical homophobia and misogyny surrounding classic rock music make even instruments gender-coded (cf. Walser 130), with guitars accepted as masculine, and keyboards, especially "refined" instruments like the grand piano (unlike, say, church organs, which are mostly associated with the masculine-coded "intellectualism" of genres like progressive rock) labelled as both feminine and queer, this blatant flaunting of ballroom piano sounds in "The Millionaire Waltz" can be read as a deliberate tactic of queer transgression. The bridge is the only unequivocally "masculine" sound, with a change in tempo and the accompanying harsh vocal and guitar. This is not a rock song that borrows from waltz; it is instead a waltz melody with some rock thrown in the middle. In short, by placing non-masculine elements centre-stage and pushing conventional macho sounds to the margin, "The Millionaire Waltz" successfully subverts expectations of rock, thus transgressing the heteronormative, androcentric practices of this archetypally patriarchal genre.

Another camp element, invoked by the song's musical components, is nostalgia, but not in the typical rock and roll sense of yearning for one's own rebellious youth. Unlike the majority of rock musicians, Queen did not downplay their university education and middle-class background, which, in the class-conscious British society, not only rubbed a lot of people the wrong way, but also played a part in the band's queer image since they lacked the "implied heterosexuality of working-class culture" (Whiteley, *Sexing the Groove* xxi). Instead, they (or to be fair, mostly Mercury) assumed a pseudo-aristocratic, aesthetically detached pose, refusing to write about politics or to spread ideological messages, while still creating music for the masses. Combined with the nostalgia for the vaguely imagined clichés of the past, this resulted in numerous campy songs that both parodied and celebrated vaudeville, music hall, and theatrical showbiz. From the deliberately old-fashioned "Seaside Rendezvous" from *A Night at the Opera*, to the sweeping *We Are the Champions* from *News of the World* (1977), which Mercury referred to as "the most egotistical and arrogant song [he's] ever written", a "winner's song" with "more theatrical subtlety than an ordinary football chant" (Brooks and Lupton 75), these songs play with the conventions of the collective semi-remembered past, exposing it for the construct it is, in another example of transgressivity. The titular millionaire waltz, then, functions as a humorous, self-parodying camp reminder of the (imagined) upper-class dandyism which exposes the artificiality at its heart, not dissimilar to the aestheticism of Oscar Wilde.

When it comes to lyrics, here, too, intertextuality and nostalgia work together to create a humorous, campy poem, with just enough genuine emotion to keep the song from turning into purely ironic, artistic verse. The rhyming subtlety and poetic rhythm, with numerous repetitions, contrasts, assonances and internal rhymes also contribute to this atmosphere. The opening line, "Bring out the charge of the love brigade"[8] is a clear allusion to Tennyson's (in)famous "The Charge of the Light Brigade" (1854), which intensifies the nostalgic feeling – both the lyrics and the waltz rhythm invoke the nineteenth century, with its rise of modern British popular culture. The song tells a rather straightforward, stereotypical love story of someone who was once in love, and is now sad and alone because their lover is "so far away". The speaker begs his

[8] All quoted lyrics are taken from the official album booklets. For reasons of clarity, I will not be including the booklet page numbers with citations. The entire text of "The Millionaire Waltz" can be found on page 5 of the album booklet of the digitally remastered CD (*A Day at the Races*, Queen Productions Ltd., 1993).

love to return to him, to "make [him] feel like a millionaire". The campiness is once again punctuated by the verses sung in a deliberately exaggerated German accent ("my fine friend – take me wiz you unt love me forever"), which brings the song back into the aesthetically detached, ironic interrogation of nostalgic past and parodied present. Mercury's posh, Received Pronunciation accent makes his enunciation of verses, as always, crystal clear, and the expected virtuoso vocal performance carries the song's emotion from longing to frustration into humour with the usual, deceptive ease.

Combined together, then, the lyrical and musical elements of the song create a funny, emotional, campy, queer rock poem that transgresses the boundaries of gender, genre and sexuality. "The Millionaire Waltz" is just one of innumerable songs in the Queen catalogue that performs transgressivity in such a way. Here, we can see how camp employs a "body of performative practices and strategies . . . to enact a queer identity" (Meyer 4). Through this process of queering, while still remaining in his (transparent) closet, Mercury subverts the heteronormativity and fragile masculinity of rock music.

Performing Masculinity: Leather, Muscles and Elvis, through a Queer Lens

Musicians, particularly those who tend to reinvent their sound over and over again, frequently change their visual style as well, and Freddie Mercury was no exception. On the opposite side of the fey, made-up, glamorous persona who wore silk costumes designed by Zandra Rhodes and sipped champagne on stage, there was the leather-clad, hairy, tough-guy, self-styled "ogre" who dominated the stadium rock world and was perfectly aware that he was *performing* the role of "a big macho, sexual object" (Brooks and Lupton 35). Of course, both of these were mere masks, ways to perform gender and transgress sexual boundaries, deliberately, if (perhaps) subconsciously, designed with queering in mind. The pseudo-biker who pretended to like "Fat Bottomed Girls" (written by Brian May for the album *Jazz* (1978)) was no less camp than the effete boarding school alumnus who went there to learn how to be a "Good Old-Fashioned Lover Boy" (written by Mercury for *A Day at the Races* (1976)). The songs, too, retain their queer transgressivity, although the techniques of subversion they use differ significantly from the earlier Queen sound. The glam-era songs like "The Millionaire Waltz" revel in lavish production, create camp parodies of classical music, and often feature affected upper-class mannerisms and perceived tastes, thus queering the stereotypical (and, it must again be pointed out, equally counterfeit) heteronormative,

working-class, masculine-coded standards of rock music and rock musicians' behaviour. But the stripped down, basic-as-you-can-get-it simplicity of anthems like "We Will Rock You" (written by May for *News of the World* (1977)) or the stylised disco-funk beat of "Another One Bites the Dust" (written by Deacon for *The Game* (1980)) are just as constructed, and play with the masculine-coded rock "authenticity" in that they pretend to be unpretentious, almost "found" melodies, while still being every bit as elaborate in their performativity as "Bohemian Rhapsody". As I stated before, in its insistence upon (often literally) phallocentric performance, rock music acts as a tool of patriarchal hegemony and creates what is rightfully seen as a caricature of masculinity. Camp frequently indulges in similar behaviour, though it is self-aware and self-ironic enough to understand that the performance it offers is mostly a glitzy simulation of the "real thing" – with the caveat, of course, that the "real thing" doesn't even exist, since gender is culturally constructed (Butler) and sexuality is discursively produced with regard to social power relations (Foucault, *History of Sexuality 1*). We can see this, for example, in the openly queer idiom of the disco sensation The Village People, whose line-up consisted of fantastical, gay versions of typical American mythic masculinities, and who challenged heteronormative standards even while belting out their desire to be "a macho, macho man". Of particular interest to our discussion here is Glenn Hughes' character of "Leatherman", as this particular parody of machismo was one that was to have the greatest impact on the world of rock and metal music.

The look reliant on leather, belts, spikes and chains which is usually associated with hard rock and heavy metal entered both the metal lexicon and pop culture at large thanks to Judas Priest's Rob Halford. The iconic look was borrowed from the 1950s and 1960s underground gay scene, BDSM community and leather bars, and it is so glaringly queer that it is mind-bogglingly bewildering that Halford managed to keep the doors of his transparent closet closed for decades, until he came out as gay in the late 1990s. Today, it is impossible to miss the obvious queer undertones of such hypermasculine imagery, but denial can be a powerful thing in a deeply homophobic society, and hindsight is always 20/20. While there are some alternative historical interpretations (cf. Thompson), theorists mostly agree that the connection between leather, heavy muscles and gay men was established by the artist Touko Laaksonen, a.k.a. Tom of Finland, whose highly influential, fetishistic, homoerotic art featuring extremely muscular men in tiny leather shorts that did little to cover their impressive bulges had a huge impact

on postwar queer culture (cf. Snaith 79-83; Krauss 153). Tom of Finland arguably used cinema as inspiration: the genealogy of both leatherman aesthetic and the "gay clone" look he is credited with creating can be traced to two early films starring Marlon Brando, the actor who embodied postwar American masculinity (Krauss 125). In *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), reprising his star-making role from Broadway, Brando plays the angry, violent brute Stanley Kowalski, whose sweaty, muscular, working-class physique is scopophilically accentuated by the tight trousers and even tighter T-shirts he wears – a clearly performative, exaggerated, constructed version of masculinity if there ever was one. This became known as the "clone" look. Mercury would start emulating it by the early 1980s, when he began weightlifting and lost the twink look he was famous for before, in favour of manly moustache and muscles. The result is most easily recognisable in Queen's iconic Live Aid performance in July 1985. The leatherman aesthetic, on the other hand, was ushered in by Brando's performance in *The Wild One* (1953), where he played Johnny Strabler, leader of a motorcycle gang, famously sporting aviator sunglasses, biker jacket and a leather cap. This image was appropriated by the gay subculture very early on (Thompson mentions that the first gay leather bars opened as early as 1954). Mercury wore the look in the late seventies, most famously in the *Jazz* album era (1978) and the subsequent *Live Killers* tour (1979).

Let us now examine how this all works together in terms of poetry and transgressivity. This time, I will use "Crazy Little Thing Called Love", one of Queen's biggest hits and most famous songs. This well-known track's peculiar mixture of mock-1950s imagery, its visual tribute to Brando and the leatherman look, as well as its musical inspiration in Elvis Presley, offers an impressively camp combination of forged masculinity and queer subversion and thus provides the best example for my discussion. Famously written in the bath, and composed, unusually for Mercury, on the guitar, the song was released as a single in 1979, reaching number one spot on the Billboard chart. A year later, in 1980, it found its place on *The Game* album. Since Mercury was no guitar expert, the structure is extremely simple, and emulates the stripped down "authenticity" of typical rock music. Mercury wrote is as a tribute to Elvis Presley, which can be clearly heard in his vocal performance, particularly in live versions of the song. This is another element of queer transgressivity: Mercury performs Elvis, but it only serves to remind us that *Elvis* also performed Elvis. By the time "Crazy Little Thing" was written, Elvis was already dead, and his image had turned into a caricature of itself, a cautionary tale of a

washed-up addict, bloated with food and drugs; but early on, in the 1950s, he was the ultimate artist, the famous King of rock and roll. However, this dominant cultural image of early Elvis, the one that became an epitome of macho hegemony was, as Sue Wise reminds us, simply another construct, as "it was men who claimed Elvis as their butch god" (339), fearful of implications that the sexual image he presented on stage turned him into an object, which subverted patriarchal gender ideals. Instead of an object lusted after by both women and men, male writers turned Elvis into a subject, sexually controlling "hysterical girls" with his hypnotising hips, and erased any queer or transgressive potential that performance might have had. In other words, it was men who took "their subjective sexual fantasies and turned them into 'objective fact'" (Wise 339). This obviously wasn't entirely successful, because, as Sheila Whiteley points out, despite (or perhaps because of) its aggressive masculinity, "rock has been subject to queering from the outset" ("Popular Music and the Dynamics of Desire" 259), from Little Richard to Elvis Presley[9]. *Jailhouse Rock* in particular (both the song and the film) lends itself to queer interpretations, due to its clear (sub)textual homoeroticism.

Musically, "Crazy Little Thing Called Love" imitates the rockabilly sound of the 1950s, and even without the queer transgressivity inherent in the original (that is, Elvis's own performance of the constructed masculine self), there is something to be said for the symbolic gender-bending to be found in Queen impersonating the King. The 1950s are also present in the video for the song, and the band members are greased up and dressed in leather gear borrowed both from Brando's hypermasculine biker image and the gay subculture's leatherman aesthetic. This was already done a year earlier in the hit musical *Grease*, and Queen's version of 1950s bikers clearly has more in common with John Travolta than with Marlon Brando. As Mercury prances and dances on stage, accompanied by the backing quartet of men and women dancers, the macho persona he attempts to emulate (complete with women who grope him and tear up his shirt) is counterbalanced by the obvious joy he exudes as he straddles the ridiculously phallic motorcycle, completely ignoring the scantily dressed woman seated behind him. As Snaith notes in his analysis

[9] Queen often included a rock and roll medley in their live performances, where Elvis's *Jailhouse Rock* songs, usually "Jailhouse Rock" or "(You're so Square) Baby I Don't Care" and Little Richard's "Tutti Frutti", queer enough in their own right, were paired with showbiz tunes like "Big Spender" from the Broadway musical *Sweet Charity* (1966), frequently accompanied by Mercury's tongue-in-cheek striptease performance. See e.g. *Live at Wembley* (1986).

of leathermen's fetishisation of macho imagery, the queer men who dress as bikers are not even trying to resemble actual bikers. Instead, their look is a hybrid, "an accumulation of masculine symbols rearranged, adapted and transformed until given a new erotic and sexual meaning, that of a macho gay man" (83). The camp appropriation of stereotypically male, working-class emblems turns them into postmodern parody by exaggeration and detached insistence on superficiality and artifice. In this case, the camp treatment given to American macho myth by a British queer man exposes that myth for what it is, and questions the reality behind the dominant cultural narrative on rock itself, to boot.

Lyrically, "Crazy Little Thing Called Love" is a rather stereotypical love song, which is, again, in perfect alignment with the 1950s hits like Little Richard's "Tutti Frutti" it tries to imitate, complete with the dated slang. The love the speaker is not ready for thus "shakes all over like a jelly fish"[10], "swings" and "jives"; his "baby" gives him "hot and cold fever"; and he has to "get hip", "take a back seat, hitch-hike / And take a long ride on [his] motorbike" until he is ready for love. This isn't so much a coherent narrative as it is a bricolage made of 1950s popular clichés, and it works beautifully as the postmodern camp parody it is. Intertextually, the song also alludes to Cole Porter's famous jazz standard "What Is This Thing Called Love?" (1929), written for the revue musical *Wake Up and Dream* and popularized by Ella Fitzgerald in the 1950s. The line of queer camp thus stretches from Mercury's 1970s parody of a 1950s masculine rockabilly to a 1920s showbiz tune. Taken less parodically, the lyrics might refer to Mercury's embrace of gay sexuality and queer lifestyle: even though he is not ready for all the challenges that lie in front of him, even though he "just can't handle it", he "must get round" to "this thing, called love". Even so, the lyrics are wrapped in multiple layers of pretend heterosexuality, most glaringly, the speaker's referring to his "baby" as "she": although all the subtextual paraphernalia clearly indicate the queerness that lies in the centre of this song, Mercury's speaker remains, on surface, heterosexual. His closet may have been transparent, but it was still a closet.

Given rock's homophobic, heteronormative, heterosexist, male-centric nature, *particularly* in the 1970s and 1980s, it is perfectly understandable why both Mercury and Halford chose to remain sexually ambiguous to the public. However, as canonical culture of the closet, however oppressive it may be,

[10] The lyrics can be found on page 6 of the official album booklet of the digitally remastered CD (*The Game*, Raincloud Productions Ltd., 1994).

always comes with extraordinary potential for defiance (cf. Kosofsky Sedgwick), queer transgression through the subtextual subversion of gender and sexual mores – in this case, camp – allows for the interrogation of culturally accepted norms, and reminds us that *everything* is merely a construct. By playing with the established principles of phallocentrism and patriarchal hegemony embedded in rock music, Queen transgress such limiting ideas and prove that they truly deserve their self-appointed, tongue-in-cheek moniker of rock and roll majesties.

On with the Show: Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I went back to the very beginnings of poetry, when it was pure performance, connected to music, rhythm, and dance. Without any of the trappings of canonisation, which often propels art straight into the ivory tower, Queen's catalogue serves as a place of joy, whimsy and fun, but also as an important point in the interrogation of twentieth-century popular discourses. As my focus was on queer transgression through postmodern camp parody, I did not analyse the band's more conventional songs, nor did I delve deeper into their purely musical excellence. The reader should, however, be aware that Queen are not merely fun, over-the-top campy makers of stadium rock hits and silly classical spoofs, who nevertheless possess almost unprecedented musical talent and should therefore be counted among the greats *despite* their lack of socially engaged poetic work. Very seldom did they tackle issues of everyday political matters in their songs, which is often seen as anathema by rock critics, and consequently leads to the band's dismissal, since they were not the stereotypical "serious" rockers flipping off the establishment. However, their refusal to pretend that they led the same lives and faced the same problems as their working-class audience was, paradoxically, a lot more "authentic" than any "deep" verses by the wannabe blue-collar rockers, working-class heroes (not a dig at Lennon, by the way) who sang about not making ends meet by day and retired to their mansions by night, where they were then waited on hand and foot. This unpopular, but uncompromising stance resulted in many serious songs that do not deal with social reality, but instead focus on the truly universal human themes: love, happiness, regret, sorrow, loneliness, mortality, and (especially) death. Mercury might have embodied postmodernism when he insisted that his songs were "basically… *fodder*", "disposable pop" made "for modern consumption" (Brooks and Lupton 56), but we don't have to agree with him. Besides, he also said that interpretation is up to the listener, elaborating, "I will say no more than what any decent poet would tell you if you dared him to analyse his work. If you see

it, dears, then it's there. *You* interpret it how *you* want to" (59). I obviously chose to interpret his work in terms of its queer transgression, and whether he would agree with me or not is really beside the point.

As an expression of patriarchal hegemony, rock has struggled with its inherent homophobia and misogyny since its codification as masculine music in the 1950s. Robert Walser (135) rightly concludes that "rock can never be gender-neutral because rock music is intelligible only in its historical and discursive contexts". It can, however, subvert and transgress those limitations. In this chapter, I demonstrated how camp, often dismissed as mere pose, aesthetic affectation or pure expression of style over substance, can indeed be an effective vehicle of artistic subversion. Queen's songs utilise camp as "oppositional queer critique" (Meyer 8), to reveal the constructedness of masculinity and gender itself at the heart of rock music. By uncovering the arbitrariness of any strict categorisations, they challenge and transgress the boundaries of gender and sexuality. Like any true poetry, they make us think about the nature of reality itself.

DRAMA

Viktorija Krombholc

"FILL YOUR EYES WITH THIS HORROR!": MODES OF TRANSGRESSION IN SARAH KANE'S *BLASTED*

The nineties are a decade of transgression. In the realm of fiction, British and American alike, authors such as Chuck Palahniuk, Bret Easton Ellis and Irvine Welsh were pushing the limits of propriety, offering biting social critique and shocking their readers with explicit depictions of taboo topics such as drug abuse, crime and deviant behaviour, sexual depravity or mental illness. Warned against as a danger to the public and sometimes sold in sealed wrappers, they generated both frenzied public outcry and fanatical cult followings. At the same time, new dramatic voices such as Anthony Neilson and Philip Ridley emerged on the British stage, offering blood and nightmares in place of the state-of-the-nation political drama of the seventies and the eighties, only to explode in 1995 with Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, a pivotal point in the development of British theatre in the recent decades. In the words of Aleks Sierz, whose seminal study *In-Yer-Face Theatre* (2001) firmly established the term against the competing designations of "new brutalism", "the theatre of urban ennui" or "smack and sodomy plays", "[i]n the nineties, a host of plays by young writers used explicit and directly confrontational material to explore the way we live and feel. Never before had so many plays been so blatant, aggressive and emotionally dark" (45). However, despite clear temporal and thematic parallels that that exist between the transgressive genre and in-yer-face theatre, this link remains a critical blindspot.

Even though early examples can be found in the writing of Henry Miller, William Burroughs or Norman Mailer, Robin Mookerjee identifies the eighties and the nineties as "the high period of the contemporary transgressive novel" (170). This is a period when transgressive writers such as Ellis, Palahniuk or Welsh wrote "social novels written from an informal, irreverent, anarchic point of view" (171), approaching their disturbing subject matter "without taking any kind of moral stand" and treating "bizarre behavior as if it were absolutely normal" (2). This absence of clarity regarding the author's moral standpoint, or the intended moral response from the reader, is a crucial aspect of transgressive fiction, as it refuses to provide an identifiable moral perimeter of the narrative, inviting its readers to draw one themselves. Notably, transgressive fiction does not only explore taboo topics, but also "disturbs the form of the traditional novel, redefines generic categories, and reaches far

beyond the standards of propriety in language" (Luburić-Cvijanović and Krombholc 210). While Mookerjee focuses on tracing a satiric lineage of transgression back to the Menippean school, and reads contemporary transgressive fiction as a new satiric tradition, M. Keith Booker offers a more generalised approach to transgressivity in literature, arguing that "[t]ransgression and creativity have been inextricably linked throughout the history of Western culture" (3). Where their critical perspectives converge is in their shared emphasis on the role of transgressivity in bringing about "genuine social change" (Booker 5). Booker's approach is Bakhtinian and employs the notion of the carnival as a source of transgressive and subversive forces, a site where hierarchies, categorisations and systems collapse or no longer apply, capturing the spirit of "low" culture associated with breaking from the established norm. In particular, Booker finds an association between transgression and the carnivalesque in their shared emphasis on lower bodily strata, "things like sex and excrement and death", which reveal "the basic commonality of human experience and the fundamental factitiousness of all systems of rationalization for the exclusion or oppression of particular marginal groups" (13). In true transgressive vein, and taking note from Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, Booker adopts a flexible and elastic reading of the carnival itself, to include "a violation of the rules of hierarchies in any of a number of areas, including literary genres and conventions, psychic forms, the human body, geographical space, and social order" (13)[1]. Their broad interpretation of transgressivity is one adopted in this volume as well.

Like transgressive fiction, which flourished during the nineties, the new British drama that came to be known as in-yer-face theatre is very much a nineties phenomenon, capturing the dominant mood at this "time of fragmentation" (Mel Kenyon, qtd. in Urban 354). Neilson, the "granddaddy" of in-yer-face drama, paved the way for Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill and Jez Butterworth of mid-nineties, whose work marks the peak of in-yer-face writing. For Sierz, Kane's suicide in 1999 marks the end of the in-yer-face decade, but the impact of her short oeuvre and the transgressive legacy she

[1] Transgression of generic boundaries, the tracing of blurry lines between fact and fiction, and the spatial and corporeal configurations of transgression, within the bounds of the carnivalesque, or beyond, have all been a particularly fertile ground for critical exploration. See, for instance, Luburić-Cvijanović and Krombholc, "What appears is not what is", and Luburić-Cvijanović and Krombholc, "Atom and Dream".

leaves behind are both complex and far-reaching. Kane's presence can be felt in British dramatic output throughout the post-2000 period, in the work of playwrights such as debbie tucker green and Tim Crouch. The questions and the challenges posed by *Blasted* in 1995 remain open and continue to elicit speculation and engagement – what are the possible modes of representing violence on stage, and what are their ethical implications? What do these tell us about our relationship with violence in the world around us? This is not to say that transgression is entirely absent from the British stage of the twentieth century prior to the nineties, quite the opposite. Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain* (1980), featuring anal rape simulated on stage, Edward Bond's *Saved* (1965), in which a young gang stones a baby in a pram, and even the explosive language of John Osborne's watershed play *Look Back in Anger* (1956) all herald the wave of transgression that is to follow and reach its peak during the nineties. On the other hand, since its earliest days and throughout its history, theatre seems to have been on intimate terms with transgression; as Aleks Sierz reminds us, "[s]ex and violence are scarcely new in theatre" (*In-Yer-Face* 22). Classical Greek drama abounds with blood-curdling acts of violence and brutality, appalling obscenities and taboos, corporeal fluidity and transformation, from Sophocles and Eurypides to Seneca. In Sierz's words, "the greatest of the ancient Greek tragedies deal with extreme states of mind: brutal deaths and terrible suicides, agonizing pain and dreadful suffering, human sacrifice and cannibalism, rape and incest, mutilations and humiliations" (*In-Yer-Face* 22). Jacobean tragedy of revenge, the Parisian Grand Guignol, or even public executions often styled as theatre, with the scaffold replicating the stage, all testify to this association and lead to the twentieth-century explorations of the links between theatre and transgression, theatre and violence, theatre and nightmare. Drawing on the more recent tradition of Antonin Artaud, "[o]ne of transgressive theatre's greatest theorists" (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face* 27), and his Theatre of Cruelty, but also on the violent undercurrent found in much absurdist theatre, in-yer-face theatre simply exposes, foregrounds and makes explicit what has always been there. Several decades before *Blasted*, watching the walkouts and protestations in response to the 1957 Royal Court production of Ionesco's *The Chairs*, the Court's artistic director George Devine grinned with satisfaction: "That's what I'm here for." (qtd. in Sierz, *In-Yer-Face* 27)

Similarities between in-yer-face theatre and transgressive fiction come to light in Sierz's much quoted definition of the new drama of the nineties:

> The widest definition of in-yer-face theatre is any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message. It is a theatre of sensation: it jolts both actors and spectators out of conventional responses, touching nerves and provoking alarm. Often such drama employs shock tactics, or is shocking because it is new in tone or structure, or because it is bolder or more experimental than what audiences are used to. Questioning moral norms, it affronts the ruling ideas of what can or should be shown onstage; it also taps into more primitive feelings, smashing taboos, mentioning the forbidden, creating discomfort. Crucially, it tells us more about who we really are. Unlike the type of theatre that allows us to sit back and contemplate what we see in detachment, the best in-yer-face theatre takes us on an emotional journey, getting under our skin. In other words, it is experiential, not speculative. (16)

The juxtaposition of experiential and speculative theatre mirrors Mookerjee's assertion that transgressive fiction is "more interrogative than declarative" (174). Sierz's image of grabbing the audience and shaking it out if its complacency echoes Kathryn Hume's description of transgressive writing as "aggressive fiction", which "tramples reader sensibilities, offends and upsets willfully and deliberately" (8). However, while Hume finds this approach largely lacking, Sierz extolls it as electrifying: "[In-yer-face drama] is the kind of theatre that inspires us to use superlatives, whether in praise or condemnation" (16). Rather than dismissing such aggression as cheap shock with no purpose, Sierz argues that it is suggestive of the fact that these playwrights "have something urgent to say" (16), as they seek to "question current ideas of what is normal, what it means to be human, what is natural or what is real" (17). This reads very much like Booker's approach to transgression as a challenge to established norms of human behaviour. In other words, the associations between transgressive fiction and in-yer-face drama go beyond the obvious shared interest in depicting shocking content, as this interest stems from the common desire to "push the boundaries of what is acceptable" (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face* 17). For Sierz, the theatre of the nineties "[chips away] at the binary oppositions that structure our sense of reality" (*In-Yer-Face* 45). For Booker, transgressive literature "[chips away] at certain modes of thinking that contribute to the perpetuation of oppressive political structures" (4). In unknowingly mirroring each other's phrasing, Sierz and Booker capture

the eroding influence both traditions have on ossified structures that underlie human society.

Similar connections between transgressive fiction and transgressive theatre can be found elsewhere. In his discussion of the transgressive satiric tradition, Mookerjee quotes from Heidegger's *Being and Time*:

> Tradition . . . blocks our access to those primordial "sources" from which the categories and concepts handed down to us have been in part quite genuinely drawn. Indeed it makes us forget that they have had such an origin, and makes us suppose that the necessity of going back to these sources is something which we need not even understand. (qtd. in Mookerjee 4)

Mookerjee's quest to uncover the classical roots of contemporary literary transgressivity can thus be read as a journey to the darkest, oldest recesses of humanity. The link with the primordial and the necessity of its rediscovery echoes Artaud's conviction that true theatre should effect a "return to ancient primal Myths" (89), in order to provide "the audience with truthful distillations of dreams" gushing out with "its taste for crime, its erotic obsessions, its savageness, its fantasies, its utopian sense of life and objects, even its cannibalism" (65). Similarly, Sierz argues that

> [i]n-yer-face theatre always forces us to look at ideas and feelings we would normally avoid because they are too painful, too frightening, too unpleasant or too acute. We avoid them for good reason – what they have to tell us is bad news: they remind us of the awful things human beings are capable of, and of the limits of our self-control. They summon up ancient fears about the power of the irrational and the fragility of our sense of the world. At the same time, theatre is similar to other cultural forms in that it provides a comparatively safe place in which to explore such emotions. Experiential theatre is potent precisely when it threatens to violate that sense of safety. (18)

In *Blasted*, and in-yer-face theatre more generally, any such sense of safety is violently destroyed. The bomb blast planted in the middle of the play divides it in half, with the first part providing a mirror to everyday savagery hidden behind closed doors, through the abusive encounter between Ian, a middle-

aged journalist, and Cate, half his age and prone to fits of unconsciousness. After the blast, peacetime brutalities give way to the tide of war horrors that sweeps Ian and Cate's hotel room in the figure of the Soldier, who violently rapes Ian, sucks out his eyes and eats them, sharing harrowing tales of gruesome, unspeakable acts he has witnessed or committed, before the play culminates in horrific images of cannibalism and degradation. Importantly, Ken Urban argues that the "unifying feature" of the nineties culture is not violence as much as cruelty, "the violent awakening of consciousness to the horrors of life that had previously remained unconscious, both unseen and unspoken" (361). In *Blasted*, this awakening is particularly savage, as the audience awake to a nightmarish invasion of barbarities. No wonder, then, that *Blasted* and similar plays provoke such strong responses.

The importance of *Blasted* becomes more widely clear only in retrospect. Writing in 2002, Graham Saunders states that the "impact of late 1990's British drama on the theatrical canon may be too early to assess" (*Love Me* 8). Only a year later, he was ready to assert that "[t]he impact of the mortar bomb in *Blasted* was retrospectively more like a firework let off in a milk bottle – confined largely within the parameters of the play itself" ("Just a Word" 109). Today, almost thirty years after the premiere of *Blasted*, it is quite clear that the impact of the blast continues to reverberate through the subsequent decades. It confirms David Greig's assessment that "*Blasted* will last" (qtd. in Saunders, *Love Me* 37), and clearly shows that Kane was always more readily understood among fellow playwrights than in critical responses. Likewise, after its premiere on 12 January 1995, beyond the circle of playwrights who came to Kane's defence, which included the likes of Harold Pinter, Edward Bond and Caryl Churchill, the play was almost universally met with a chorus of outrage and disgust. As Saunders elaborates, "*Blasted* at the time of its first British production was almost universally castigated by its reviewers as 'no more than an artful chamber of horrors designed to shock and nothing more'" (*Love Me* ix), some even suggesting that "[i]t's not a theatre critic that's required here, it's a psychiatrist" (qtd. in Sierz, *In-Yer-Face* 132). With his now infamous and much quoted dismissal of the play as "this disgusting feast of filth", Jack Tinker of *The Daily Mail* earned the questionable privilege of becoming immortalised in Kane's *Cleansed* (1998) as the sadistic and authoritarian leader of a totalitarian university slash human laboratory. These "hysterical reviews", as Saunders (*Love Me* 9) calls them, which were often

rather provocative themselves, reveal that the outrage the play generated was quite performative in nature, and that the play itself, its formal choices, its politics, its moral vision, were woefully misunderstood.

Both Sierz and Saunders draw parallels between the effect of *Blasted* and that of *Look Back in Anger* in 1956, both in terms of provoking an outpouring of condemnation and disgust, and in opening the gates for bold new drama. Saunders sees a fine symbolism in the fact that the premiere of *Blasted* followed Osborne's death by less than three weeks. The state of British drama, once more, was deemed stagnant and predictable, and it is "during this atmosphere of nostalgia for another *Look Back in Anger*" (Saunders 2) that *Blasted* provided the explosive new voice that was so desperately needed. Even though Sierz acknowledges the centrality of *Blasted* for the new drama of the nineties, he draws a more general link between the theatre of the nineties and Osborne's play, noting that "[n]ew writing had rediscovered the angry, oppositional and questioning spirit of 1956, the year of the original Angry Young Men" (*In-Yer-Face* 11) and identifying the nineties as "the most exciting decade for new writing since the heady days sparked off by John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1956" (9). Tellingly, Sierz identifies the crisis of masculinity as one of the central concerns of the new writing of the nineties ("Still In-Yer-Face?" 21) – this in itself is a link with transgressive fiction of the time and the broader culture of laddism. This time, however, one of the most provocative, explosive theatrical voices was not an angry young man, but a twenty-three-year old woman.

To a degree, a female playwright herself is already a figure of transgression. As Elaine Aston aptly notes, "[i]f women playwrights were frequently represented as marginal to a revival of all things masculine in the 1990s (…), Kane, exceptionally, was presented as included in, not excluded from, the male-dominated circles of the young and the angry", "an honorary male" in their midst (79). Before Caryl Churchill made history as the first female resident playwright at the Royal Court (1974-1975), before Vicky Featherstone took over the leadership of the Royal Court in 2013, before critical acclaim was lavished on debbie tucker green, Lucy Prebble, and Lucy Kirkwood, Churchill's agent Peggy Ramsay sung praises for her work by saying that her play "could very easily have been written by a man" and regarded her as one of the "honorary men" as well (qtd. in Gobert 7). As British theatre of the

late twentieth century discovers and develops its own distinctive voice, finally free from the commercial clutches of West End productions and the censorship of Lord Chamberlain's office, a number of female playwrights, including Churchill and Sarah Daniels, turn to provocative and experimental methods to explore issues of gender roles and sexual oppression. Over the course of her highly prolific career, Churchill has been one of the most formally daring contemporary playwrights, earning the nickname "Picasso of British theatre", experimenting with chronology, cross-casting, overlapping dialogue, Brechtian musical elements, or dissolving the fabric of dramatic language in order to test the very limits of representation, all the while maintaining a fiercely outspoken political voice. As early as the fifties, as Osborne was raging about social injustice, while also championing male privilege and imperial nostalgia, one of the most formally and ideologically radical theatre companies – the Theatre Workshop, operating at the Theatre Royal Stratford East – was run by a woman, Joan Littlewood. Shelagh Delaney and Ann Jellicoe were as provocative and uncompromising as the angriest of the young men. Women, it would seem then, were right there at the forefront of British theatre of transgression in late twentieth century, paving the way for explicit expression, formal experimentation and radical social and political commentary of the nineties, even if in-yer-face theatre itself shares few obvious concerns with feminist theatre, and Kane herself did not consider herself a feminist writer.

Despite this, in *Blasted* the images violence and carnage are prominently gendered. The first half of the play is an illustration of gendered violence in various localised, domestic forms. Not only does Ian rape Cate during their meeting in the hotel room, but the play suggests that he used to molest her when she was a minor, and that her fits may have been triggered by abuse at the hands of her father. Ian's newspaper story features the murder of a young tourist – and the fact that the story is transported to a faraway location in New Zealand suggests the universality of violence, which is then underscored by the geographical confusion introduced by the eruption of war in the streets in the second half of the play. The horrific list of war atrocities narrated by the Soldier is also highly gendered in nature, and the talk of war is instigated after he asks about Cate because he can "smell sex" in the room. The link between a single peacetime rape and rape as a military strategy is thus clearly drawn. While sexual violence is not the only feature of the Soldier's narrative of war, it is the most prominent one – the first story he shares

features a gang rape of a group of women, including a twelve-year-old girl. Other forms of violence and torture are also sexualised, as he shares stories of men "hung . . . from the ceiling by their testicles" (43), shot through the mouth or through the legs. In the second half we witness Ian's anal rape by the Soldier, which is portrayed as a traumatic repetition of the rape suffered by his girlfriend Col at the hands of unidentified "bastard soldiers", but also functions as a broader reflection of the use of rape as a tactic of intimidation and emasculation. Even though Kane herself has suggested that rape campaigns are specific to the Bosnian war, her inspiration for the play (qtd. in Saunders, *Love Me* 48), wartime rape is a recognised weapon of war, as an instrument of terror and torture, but also as an instrument of genocide and ethnic cleansing (see, for instance, Card or Meger). On the other hand, the inspiration for Ian's blinding comes from an account of a football hooligan blinding a police officer by sucking his eyes out (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face* 107), where football can be seen as another kind of typically male-dominated tribalism.

Blasted can therefore be read as an iteration of Susan Sontag's observation that "[m]en make war" (6). Approaches to Kane's work from a feminist perspective remain limited, presumably due to her own disavowal of such categorisation of her writing. So do critical readings of the play's engagement with the gendered nature of war. An important exception can be found in Geraldine Harris and Elaine Aston's discussion of *Blasted*, which they connect with Nancy Chodorow's investigation of the "psychodynamics of masculine violence" (Harris and Aston 26):

> Men, after all, are directly responsible for and engage in the vast majority of both individual violence and rape as well as collective violence. Historically and cross-culturally, they make war. Men are soldiers and, as politicians and generals, those who instigate and lead the fighting. Men also engage in extreme violence: they are (mainly) the concentration camp guards, the SS, those who perpetrate genocide, mass ethnic rape, pogroms, torture, and the murder of children and old people. (qtd. in Harris and Aston 26)

This lengthy quote from Chodorow seems to reiterate Kane's argument that "[t]he logical conclusion of the attitude that produces an isolated rape in England is the rape camps in Bosnia, and the logical conclusion to the way

society expects men to behave is war" (Bayley). In this respect, the events of the first half of the play become not only an act of foreshadowing, but part of Kane's genealogy of violence – "one is the seed and the other is the tree" (Rebellato, "Brief Encounter"), transforming the alien horrors of the war into an alarmingly close possibility and an inevitable consequence of normalised everyday violence.

Through its insistence on showing the extremes of human suffering, *Blasted* can be read against Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003). Given its epic overtones, its depiction of war as an eternal state, its invitation to the audience to come close to the physical realities of military conflict, Kane's play seems to extend the same question that opens Sontag's book, which is itself a repetition of the question that prompted Virginia Woolf to write *Three Guineas* (1938): "How in your opinion are we to prevent war?" (154). Sontag's text is a contemplation on the role of the image in creating and shaping public responses to the war, and in her opening chapter she offers a discussion of efforts to use photography "as shock therapy in order to stop the war" (12). Such efforts are rooted in the belief that "if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war" (12), as the horrors in the photographs would speak for themselves: "Look, the photographs, *this* is what it's like. This is what war *does*. (…) War tears, rends. War rips open, eviscerates. War scorches. War dismembers. War *ruins*" (8). Among her examples is Ernst Friedrich's photography album titled *War Against War!* (1924), a book that "starts with pictures of toy soldiers, toy cannons, and other delights of male children everywhere, and concludes with pictures taken in military cemeteries" (Sontag 12), a juxtaposition that parallels Kane's belief that "[t]he seeds of full-scale war can always be found in peacetime civilisation" (Rebellato, "Brief Encounter"). Sontag also refers to French director Abel Gance and his anti-war film *J'accuse* (1938 [1919]), another portrayal of war that features images of a cemetery, shown to the booming voice of a veteran summoning the dead of Verdun: "Your sacrifices were in vain!" (qtd. in Sontag 14), and then an "army of shambling ghosts in rotted uniforms with mutilated faces, who rise from their graves and set out in all directions, causing mass panic among populace already mobilized for a new pan-European war", as the veteran cries 'Fill your eyes with this horror! It is the only thing that can stop you!'" (Sontag 14). Kane's intention may appear similar to the projects of Friedrich and Gance: to portray the extreme reality of

war with unflinching openness, since it is the only thing that can stop further atrocities. However, the first half of the play, steeped in domestic realism and suggestive of the prevalence of violence in peacetime, suggests a more nuanced, if rather disillusioned, outlook. Sontag ends her chapter with a piercing statement of futility: "And the following year the war came." (14) *Blasted* expresses a similar sentiment – the horrors of the second half can never cease if its seeds in time of peace continue to be sown. It is telling that the outrage provoked by Kane's play stems from the extremity of the second half, not the domestic violence of the first half, even though this part of the play is much closer to realist convention, a slice of (violent and painful) life.

The casual sexism of Ian's journalism likewise suggests the presence of violence as a normalised, everyday phenomenon, but also points to the broader issues of representation and mediation of violence in the media, as well as the various attendant strategies of distortion and distancing. Kane reveals that, with minor revisions, Ian's news story comes directly from *The Sun* (qtd. in Saunders, *Love Me* 52). As Saunders observes, Ian's dictation of the news article is a late addition to the text of the play, included to juxtapose Ian's careless attitude to the story of murder and rape of a young woman and his own subsequent exposure to similar violence, as his "technical instructions for punctuation produce a distancing effect to any real sense of shock or revulsion to the event" (52). After the sudden blast in the middle of the play, Cate remarks: "Looks like there's a war *on*" (*Blasted* 33, emphasis added), and the words convey both shock and a sense of detachment and the unreal; they could be referring to a TV show. On the other hand, it is worth noting that it is precisely the powerful impact of media images that pushed Kane to shift her attention from a personal story to a wider political narrative. The treatment of media in *Blasted* is therefore deeply ambivalent; Ian is a hack writing exploitative tabloid pieces feeding off human suffering, and yet is implored by the Soldier to share his experiences: "that's your job. . . . Proving it happened. . . . You should be telling people." (47). Ian responds with "No one's interested" and "This isn't a story anyone wants to hear" (48), and early reactions to *Blasted* seem to prove his point. However, these lines also express a broader awareness of the obstacles to representing the extremities of violence and suffering on a mass scale. Kane has observed that her play is "only a shadowy representation of a reality that's far harder to stomach" (qtd. in Sierz, *In-Yer-Face* 107) and expressed incredulity at the fact that the play was deemed more

controversial and shocking that actual current news events. Using the medium of theatre and its physical immediacy, Kane dismantles the distancing media effects that create the impression that war and violence are far-off phenomena; "[t]hrough the physical presence of the bodies on stage the acts of violence one has been aware of in an abstract way, in the form of statistics and reports, become again connected to actual bodies" (Boll 38), as the audience is made to partake of the horror.

The initial dismissal of Kane's work as a cheap shock fest has since been tempered and revised, and given way to a reading of Kane as one of the most important playwrights of the decade, whose theatrical vision was both boldly experimental and morally fierce. Dan Rebellato quotes David Greig's assertion that Kane "was not some petulant *enfant terrible* who simply gloried in shocking audiences", but rather a "committed, sophisticated, challenging playwright who had a fine sense of the traditions she came from" (qtd. in Rebellato, "An Appreciation" 281). Kane's sophistication and nuance can be gleaned in her commentary on the 1996 Hamburg production of *Blasted*:

> In the Hamburg production, where Cate's been raped during the night, the lights came up and she's lying there on the bed, completely naked, legs apart, covered in blood and mouthing off at Ian; and I just wanted to die. I said to the director, 'you know she's been raped in the night, do you think it's either believable, interesting, feasible or theatrically valid that she's lying there completely naked in front of the man who's raped her? Do you not think she might cover herself up for example? ' And that's not to do with my feelings about nudity on stage. I've been naked myself on stage and I have no problem with it. It's simply about what is the truth at any given moment." (qtd. in Saunders, *Love Me* 26)

Kim Solga offers an insightful and sensitive discussion of the strategic choices in dramatising Cate's rape as an off-stage event. For a play that hardly shies away from showing unimaginable atrocities with utmost immediacy, the approach to presenting Cate's rape is uncharacteristically reticent. It happens not only off stage, but between the scenes, and is revealed indirectly, through hints and allusions, rather than straightforward representation, as a "spectacular non-event" (Solga 348). Kane's reaction to the Hamburg production is a clear indication that this is a deliberate choice. Solga delineates

the interpretive approaches to Cate's rape as essentially relational – it is read against the atrocities of the second half of the play, as a "premonition of the violence that will later overwhelm the stage", an "early signifier" of the fragile boundary between peace and catastrophe (348). While the parallels between domestic violence of the first half and the mass violence of the second are illuminated by Kane herself, Solga warns against the dangers of Cate's experience being understood purely metaphorically, as "an easy cipher for the politically coded violence that appears so spectacularly before our eyes in the latter half of the play: violence between men, the violence of war, the violence the Soldier commits on Ian's body, violence we all can see" (348). While Solga focuses on the way the representation of Cate's rape in Kane's play dramatises "rape's history of cultural disavowal, its ambiguous performance history, as well as the vexed history of the female body in realist representation" – the history which comes to a very naked fore in the Hamburg production – the invisibility of Cate's rape and its status as a stand-in for the interactions between men that play out in the second half also call to mind Gayle Rubin's argument concerning the social status of women as a currency for exchanges between men (1975). Rubin's argument primarily deals with peacetime exchanges and marriage, but it can be used as a framework for the discussion of wartime rape, not only as a strategy of intimidation, but also a method of emasculation and a signal of subjugation, either as *stealing* the other "tribe"'s women, or in terms of men's feminisation through male rape. Both of these are evident in *Blasted*: Ian is raped by the Soldier, his feminisation clearly signalled through his association with Col, and the Soldier shares a detail of a young girl he raped "hand up inside her trying to claw [his] liquid out" (*Blasted* 50). The image points to the danger of pregnancy unique to women in such circumstances, but also suggests the use of rape as a method of genocide, what Claudia Card refers to as "genetic imperialism" (6). Kane has suggested that, after the blast, the play "collapses into one of Cate's fits" (Stephenson and Langridge 130); it is worth noting that the fits cease in the second half of the play, which may further support Kane's assertion. Read from this perspective, the second half of the play also provides glimpse of a horrific post-traumatic psychic landscape filled with unimaginable violence, as Solga reads the fits as an expression of Cate's trauma (360). In this reading, Ian's rape at the hands of the Soldier becomes a fantasy of revenge, a more elaborate version of the act of biting his penis that we witness in the first half, but also a fantasy of escape, where the escape stands in for the fits itself.

Kane's exploration of rape and trauma signals another link with the transgressive genre in fiction, which can be found in the dramatisation and exploration of abjection. As Sarah Ablett observes, the opening line of *Blasted*, with its reference to defecation, signals the presence and preoccupation with the abject, and "sets up the abject agenda of *Blasted* right from the beginning" (63). The ways *Blasted* engages with abjection become evident as it foregrounds both the unadorned corporeality of the body and its vulnerability. Bodies in *Blasted* cry, bleed and defecate, oozing their secretions out into the world of the stage and before the audience's eyes, secretions that blend and mix until there flows nothing but blood. We see Ian crying "*huge bloody tears*" (*Blasted* 60) after his blinding by the Soldier; likewise, after Ian rapes her, Cate "can't piss" because it's "just blood" (*Blasted* 34), an image which will reappear in the closing scene, when she returns with some food, with "*blood seeping from between her legs*" (*Blasted* 60). Bodies in *Blasted* are staged as violable, penetrable, mutilated and dismembered, subjected to rape and injury, which appear infectious, unpreventable and indiscriminate; not only does Cate's rape between scenes in itself repeats the violation she suffers before the play begins, it also sets off a chain of abuse which leaves no character untouched and suggests that this is only way bodies interact or indeed exist in *Blasted*. Ian rapes Cate and gets raped himself by the Soldier, and in raping Ian the Soldier repeats the rape and murder of his girlfriend Col. This unstoppable cycle of repetition suggests that the violation of the body is inevitable and unavoidable, and that it forms an integral part of the staged reality of the play. The rapes suggest the breakdown of bodily autonomy and corporeal boundaries, as the violence of the play literally invades and enters the body interior. This collapse of bodily integrity is underscored by the motif of cannibalism, as the body is seen ingested and consumed, signalling a further breakdown of civilised order. Cannibalism is first hinted at during the scene in which Cate fellates Ian, where we see her retching in disgust after coughing up Ian's pubic hair – the same reaction as the one she would have if she were to eat meat ("I'd puke all over the place", *Blasted* 7). This initial act of forcible consumption of the human body not only suggests her sexual violation, but also foreshadows the Soldier's description of the "starving man eating his dead wife's leg" (*Blasted* 50), as well as the scene in which he sucks out Ian's eyes and eats them, and then avalanches into the notorious scene towards the end of the play in which Ian digs up a dead baby and proceeds to eat it, "thus destroy[ing] even the symbolic remains of future life" (Howe Kritzer 32). We also learn that, in eating Ian's

eyes, the Soldier repeats the torture visited on Col. The play itself ends with images of eating, as Cate and Ian share a sausage meal, and she no longer retches at the smell, as she did in Scene Two. The act of eating the dead baby is constructed as one in a series of vignettes in which we see Ian engaging in a range of basic bodily functions – eating, defecating, crying, laughing, and dying. This is abject human existence, stripped of any markers of civilised order, an image of Giorgio Agamben's bare life. Ablett argues that this sequence can be read as "a complete regression into the semiotic" (69) and into the realm of abjection. Notably, Ian and the baby share the same grave, almost interchangeable as Ian shrinks back to a state of pure being, fed by Cate and cramped in a grotesque reversal of a womb.

The abject infects the language of the play as well. This can be observed in the shift from the visual to the narrative in the descriptions of the Soldier's war experiences, as language is made to bear the brunt of representation. Without being shown any visual content, the audience are forced to confront a litany of horrors which, in many ways, surpass the violence shown on stage. The defilement of language is also observable in the way it is suffused with violence and cruelty. Ian's lines are filled with invectives and read as a catalogue of racist, sexist and ableist slurs, which are disturbingly punctured with proclamations of love. The dialogue is also characteristically short and sparse, monosyllabic, as language itself regresses to the boundary with the pre-verbal, a breakdown which is literalised by Cate's stuttering. For Ablett, the regressive move is logical from the perspective of abjection, as the "apparent collapse of meaning can be explained by a movement from a privileging of the symbolic aspect of language to that of the semiotic. Because the semiotic is pre-verbal it cannot be grasped logically and cannot be adequately described in words" (67). There is one notable exception, however, and it can be found in the elaborately descriptive and vivid passages where the Soldier recounts the horrific experiences from the war. These are juxtaposed with punctures and blind spots in the dialogue where language shuts down, seen, for instance, in the Soldier's attempt to describe Col ("She's – " *Blasted* 42). This is a sentence he is unable to finish seven times, and the verbal void functions as a linguistic corollary of her physical absence and death. More importantly, it suggests the breakdown of language when faced with the unrepresentability of abjection. This is perhaps one of the most disturbing features of the play, since we witness both this threatened collapse of the verbal and its terrible reinvigoration by

violence, before it culminates in near-apocalyptical undertones, with the Soldier proclaiming that "[g]un was born here and won't die" (*Blasted* 47), and then again sizzles out towards the end of the play, as the dialogue becomes spent and practically non-existent. The proclamation echoes another transgressive masterpiece, Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, whose Judge Holden proclaims that "war is the truest form of divination", "a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god" (263). *Blasted* similarly presents a continuity of war, both spatial and temporal, a violent constant that simply erupts into the fabric of the play, rather than an event with clear causation.

Booker places a particular emphasis on unpicking "the dialogue between abjection and the carnivalesque" (18), since

> abjection and the carnivalesque represent two different (potentially transgressive) reminders of the aspects of life that dominant culture systematically seeks to repress. Abjection and the carnivalesque are two sides of the same coin, two different expressions of the animal and mortal side of humanity: in the first case, we are reminded that we are animals and therefore must die; in the second, we are reminded that we are animals and therefore might as well live while we can. (14)

In Kane' *Blasted*, we get a carnival of blood, the carnival gone rogue. The blast in the middle of the play announces a suspension of a recognisable system of rules, and upends the existing hierarchies and categories, as the perpetrator and victim become impossible to tell apart. The carnivalesque is mediated through the temporal structure of the latter part of the play, which suggests a juncture and a disjointment, through it cyclical rotation of the seasons, its spatial and temporal ambiguity. If the carnival is licensed transgression that is delimited in duration, the cyclical structure and the instability of time and place in *Blasted* suggest a deferral or impossibility of the return to the established order. Instead, the end of the play suggests an eternity of suffering, an endless carnival of war. As Aston observes, "[t]he shifts between light and darkness that Kane uses in the end sequence, should, according to convention, indicate the passing of time. Theatrically, however, the experience of this is not one of time passing, but of being stuck in time" (86). We see Cate and Ian existing in a temporal and spatial vacuum, Ian suspended in a liminal space, dead but still trapped in the hellscape of the play, and Cate transformed almost beyond

recognition in a Blakean move from innocence to experience. The sound of rain that accompanies these seasonal transitions can be read as a nod to *The Waste Land*, and the fragile note of hope on which the play ends, as Ian expresses his gratitude as Cate feeds him, echoes the ambivalent mood from the finale of Eliot's poem. The instability of space is suggested at the very beginning in the opening stage instructions, describing the hotel room as "*the kind that is so expensive it could be anywhere in the world*" (3) and explodes with the merging of Leeds and any other global war-torn city after the central blast. By the end of the play, unstable geographies give way to a more metaphysical deconstruction of space, so that "the hotel bedroom becomes a graveyard" (Aston 87), as both Ian and the baby are buried in it, and the spaces for the living and the dead coalesce. For Sean Carney, the closing image of Ian is "simultaneously an image of both heaven and hell" (293), as he is "cleansed" and "redeemed", but also "absolutely damned" (292). The extremity of experience in the second half of the play thus effects a breakdown of boundaries and binaries, between victim and villain, war and peace, local and global, life and death, love and death, birth and death.

Ablett also identifies resonances of abjection in the "carefully crafted" move from the deceptive domestic realism of the first half to the nightmarish surrealism of the second, which, she argues, "constitutes a regression from a symbolic to a semiotic order", as "[r]ealism gives way to dream logic" (63) and the world of the play faces a crisis of meaning. The second part of the play constitutes not so much a collapse of the rational order as its substitution with a new, terrible one. Catherine Rees has argued that Kane

> rejects the simplistic associations between cause and effect in representational violent action – it is frequently shocking, inexplicable and sudden, much like violence outside of the theatre. By refusing to provide audiences with easy answers and contexts, she encouraged them to reflect more on the nature of violence itself, and also to ask questions about violence in their own lives and social environment. (114)

After the Soldier's appearance, Ian appears disoriented and wonders if he "might be drunk", but the Soldier assures him that "[i]t's real" (*Blasted* 40). This echoes Kane's comments that "[i]n a production that works well, . . . the first

half should seem incredibly real and the second half even more real. Probably, by the end, we should be wondering if the first half was a dream" (qtd. in Saunders, "Just a Word" 103). This reversal highlights the erasure of the boundary between dream and reality, reality and nightmare, but also acts as a reminder of the reality of suffering in the second part, since the war atrocities which are featured are rooted in real-life referents. This war-torn, blasted inferno, Kane reminds us, is someone's lived reality.

Kane's engagement with the realist tradition has been widely recognised as a function of her discussion on violence. Saunders argues that

> this rejection, or at least manipulation, of the conventions of realism . . . is perhaps the key distinguishing feature of the dramatic strategy employed in Sarah Kane's work. . . . her characters constantly elude psychological verisimilitude and *do not allow us with any certainty to pin down their moral standpoint*." (*Love Me* 9, emphasis added)

The refusal to provide a clear moral position is an approach shared with the authors of transgressive fiction, who also leave the content for the reader to grapple with, along with an invitation to construct their own moral standpoint with regard to what is narrated. David Greig has suggested that *Blasted* blurs the boundaries between victim, perpetrator and bystander (xvii), as its deplorable abusers and killers are shown to be victims themselves. On the other hand, *Blasted* does seem to contain a very clearly articulated moral indictment of the violence human beings inflict on one another, and can be read as a powerful anti-war play. The hardened Ian "*looks sick*" (*Blasted* 46), implores the Soldier to stop and then turns silent when faced with the horrors he narrates; the Soldier, in turn, "*cries his heart out*" (*Blasted* 49) as he rapes Ian and remembers his girlfriend. This hardly reads as an ambivalent or uncertain moral position.

In addition to this, Caryl Churchill has also noted how the play is "able to move between into the surreal to show connections between local, domestic violence and the atrocities of war" (qtd. in Saunders, *Love Me* 25). Kane herself attests to this in her discussion on the play's form:

> The form and content attempt to be one – the form is the meaning. The tension of the first half of the play, this appalling, social, psychological

> and sexual tension, is almost a premonition of the disaster to come. And when it does come, the structure fractures to allow it entry… The form is a direct parallel to the truth of the war it portrays – a traditional form is suddenly and violently disrupted by the entrance of an unexpected element that drags the characters and the play into a chaotic pit without logical explanation… The unity of place suggests a paper-thin wall between the safety and civilization of peacetime Britain and the chaotic violence of civil war. A wall that can be torn down at any time, without warning." (Stephenson and Langridge 130)

The formal experiment in *Blasted* proved almost as shocking and infuriating as its catalogue of horrors; as Solga observes, "*Blasted* is not so much horribly violent as it is violently unpredictable" (352). The blast in the middle of the play is a literalised metaphor, as the "paper-thin" veneer of realism is torn apart and the horror of war destroys the very fabric of drama, disrupting temporal and possibly spatial unity. This formal collapse is a reflection of the play's subject-matter, and its unexpected, incomprehensible and bewildering disintegration can be viewed as another strategy of conveying a specific experience to the audience. As Kane further explains, "[w]ar is confused and illogical, so it is wrong to use a form that is predictable. Act of violence simply happen in life, they don't have a dramatic build-up, and they are horrible" (Bayley). In this sense, the form of *Blasted* is organic, a function of the text's experiential nature.

Blasted in this respect counters the view of David Edgar, who views the new dramatists of the nineties as formal conservatives (Saunders, *Love Me* 7). In terms of form, *Blasted* clearly departs from the state-of-the-nation plays developed in the seventies and exemplified by Edgar's writing. However, Duška Radosavljević argues that *Blasted* approaches state-of-the-nation territory, "though not of a kind that would initially meet with critical approval" (*Theatre-Making* 89), using a new formal approach to provide a new version of political theatre, "dramatizing the political as lived experience" (Armstrong 17). The emphasis on British nationalism, evident both in Ian's wide-ranging verbal xenophobia and his ambiguous position as an Englishman, due to his Welsh background, are particularly illuminating when read against the cultural narrative of Cool Britannia in the nineties, which foregrounded British identity both as a source of pride and an important cultural currency, turning it into "Britain's favoured fetish" (Urban 355). In *Blasted*, however, Britishness and its

affiliation with the civilised world are made to face the reality and the *proximity* of brutal conflict, as well as Britain's blood-soaked colonial history, as the Soldier's remark that he has "[n]ever met an Englishman with a gun before, most of them don't know what a gun is" (40) instantly summons up images of British imperial violence. The categories and hierarchies of Englishness are further deconstructed as Ian holds on to his Welsh identity (he is Welsh, not English, he just "live[s] there", 41), but also insists that "English and Welsh is the same. British" (41), unlike the "imports" he detests and offends throughout the play. Before the arrival of the Soldier, he professes that he kills because he "love[s] this country" (32), but as his identity turns more slippery, the exact reference of "this country" becomes less clear; when the Soldier invites him to imagine committing war atrocities himself, he frames it as something to perform "[i]n the line of duty. For your country. *Wales*" (45, emphasis added). When asked which side he is on, "if [he] can remember" (40), he responds that he "[doesn't] know what the sides are *here*" (40, emphasis added). In this way, Kane provides a glimpse into a possible British civil war, in the context of identities in conflict and warring factions subsumed under the supranational umbrella of Britain, not unlike that of Yugoslavia. Finally, Ian's remark that "[p]lanting bombs and killing little kiddies, that's wrong. That's what *they* do" (32, emphasis added) also taps into the history of existing conflict in the UK through its seeming reference to the IRA, further complicating such identity categorisations and divisions of *us* vs *them*.

Another issue worth considering is the presence of the Balkan wars in *Blasted*. As Kane explains, she set out to write a play about a volatile and violent relationship between a man and a woman, but quickly saw the links with the reports on the Bosnian war in the media. The text ends up fusing the private and the political, so that "the end of Ian and Cate's torrid affair [can be read as] representative of the acrimonious end of Yugoslavia" (Radosavljević, "Illyria" 505) and the hotel room, the private space for a private affair, becomes redefined as the "conceptual framework for understanding territorial power" (Howe Kritzer 32). As Sara Grochala aptly observes, the play juxtaposes "two seemingly irreconcilable spaces: a British space of privilege and a space of brutality modelled on the 1990s Balkan conflict", concluding that "[i]n a globalized world, spaces of privilege and brutality are experienced simultaneously" (135). As mentioned earlier, Kane herself has argued that the play retains the unity of place, implying a link between peacetime Britain and

war-torn ex-Yugoslavia (Stephenson and Langridge 131). In this sense, *Blasted* can be read in terms of its critical engagement with the tradition of exporting theatrical explorations of human suffering and depravity, or provocative issues more broadly, into foreign lands, a practice that can be traced back to Shakespeare. An earlier draft of the play contains direct references to the warring sides in the Balkan conflict (Saunders, *Love Me* 52-53), but Kane decides against this in the final version of the text. The Soldier, however, remains marked as foreign and an intruder – he invites Ian to "[c]ome fight for us?" (*Blasted* 40) and then proclaims "What's fucking Welsh, never heard of it" (41) – but also appears uncomfortably *familiar*, using British slang and evoking a sense of identification in Ian as he fishes for the last drops of gin. In this way, Kane exposes not just the meaninglessness of such national affiliations, but also their parochial, localised significance. On the other hand, Kane's conflation of Bosnia at war with peacetime Britain contains a universal warning against the dangers of nationalism, British nationalism included (see also Radosavljević, *Theatre-Making* 89).

Against all odds, Kane has described *Blasted* as a "hopeful play" (qtd. in Sierz, "Remembering"), while Bond insists on its moving humanity ("A Blast"). It is thus tempting to read the ending of the play, along with Kane's and Bond's assertion of hope and humanity, in the context of Vasily Grossman's notion of "senseless kindness" and redemptive care as a possible source of resistance in extreme conditions of war. Cate's (albeit brief) nurturing of the baby she is handed, the burial and the service she holds for it "[j]ust in case" (58), and her final act of kindness as she feeds her abuser, can be seen as a powerful counterpoint to the epic carnage and destruction of war narrated by the Soldier and visited on Ian (and on Cate as well). If war has replaced God and filled his place with a gaping void, prompting Ian to declare: "No God. No Father Christmas. No fairies. No Narnia. No fucking nothing" (*Blasted* 55), this sense of nihilism is then tempered by Cate's prayer for the dead baby and her powerful acts of senseless kindness. Grossman's paradigmatic image of senseless kindness is the figure of Virgin Mary caring for baby Jesus; tellingly, Radosavljević reads the image of Cate returning with the baby as Madonna-like ("Illyria" 506), and Kane herself has commented on the "Christ-like" figure of Ian in the closing sequence (qtd. in Saunders, *Love Me* 17). Clearly, this reading is not unproblematic, since it reiterates the idea of care as an essentially feminine practice (see Christiaens 2022) stemming from female sacrifice, and

reinforces the trope of (female) suffering as a transformative path to growth. Nevertheless, it creates the possibility of identifying a surprisingly clear and articulate moral position in Kane's play, one that seems in line both with her own commentary and with her subsequent dramatic output.

In 2003, Sierz proclaimed that in-yer-face theatre "saved British theatre" ("Still In-Yer-Face?" 20). While this may be an overstatement, in-yer-face theatre, and *Blasted* as one of its most prominent examples, can certainly be seen as an expression of theatre's vitality and unbridled force. As with Osborne, there is a danger of mythologising a single play, single playwright or single sensibility as the saving grace of a dying form. Saunders is more temperate in his assertion that "[u]ltimately, it is perhaps Kane's willingness to experiment and subvert dramatic form that is her most impressive legacy" ("Just a Word" 106). From this perspective, Kane can be seen as a harbinger of the postdramatic turn in theatre, a tendency to deconstruct Aristotelian unities, or to do away with the basic dramatic elements such as plot, character, or setting, which characterises a lot of post-2000 theatre. This tendency, however, can be gleaned before the post-2000 period already, most notably in Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) and its ungraspable central character, or in the surrealist landscapes and verbal slippages of Caryl Churchill's *Blue Heart* (1997). Kane's later work and its increasingly fragmented form can also be seen as part of this trend. Such appreciation of Kane also takes a broad view of transgression, as more than mere shock tactics. Instead, her work suggests a search for new forms of expression and new modes of dramatising personal and collective issues that plague our times. In the words of Jolene Armstrong, Kane's plays display "the desire to transgress traditional social norms", and her "enactment of transgression in its various forms creates decentred subjects, loosened from the security of ethics, interiority, and subjectivity" (18). As such, they offer a cogent view of human subject at the turn of the millennium. For Urban, this absence or moral or ideological certainty roots in-yer-face drama in the tradition of nihilism and negates its transgressive potential (363). However, his stance in itself is indicative of the need for the safety of clear systems or solutions, which transgressive literature seeks to challenge and subvert. On the other hand, as we acknowledge Kane's formal legacy of transgression, one should not lose sight of her fierce commitment to showing the impact of society and its ills on the individual, which beyond doubt suggests a highly charged political outlook.

In an interview, Kane stated that "[i]t is important to commit to memory events which have never happened – so that they never happen. I'd rather risk overdose in the theatre than in life" (Stephenson and Langridge 133). In the light of these words, her theatre reads both as a warning and as a portent.

"NOBODY WAS HURT": TRANSGRESSION AND ITS LIMITS IN THE THEATRE OF TIM CROUCH

In many ways, the explosion of outrage provoked by Tim Crouch's *The Author* (2009) echoes the reactions to Sarah Kane's *Blasted*. This time round, critical reception has been mostly to praise Crouch's piece as a complex contemplation on the ethical issues involved in an act of spectatorship, while the wellspring of rage has been among the very people involved in this act, the audience. That said, the links with *Blasted* go beyond mere controversy. Kane's play is directly referenced in Crouch's piece and forms part of the dialogue on "the mediation of violence" (Crouch, "Response" 416) that he is trying to instigate, as both plays can be seen as contemplations on the representation of violence and the ethical implications involved. The mechanisms and tools which the two plays rely on to raise and explore these concerns are, however, markedly different. *Blasted* resorts to profoundly visceral, experiential dramatic strategies, seeking to shake the audience out of its complacency through the sheer extremity of its imagery and its staggering onslaught of cruelties. In Kane's play, all interactions are determined by violence, and the very world that she depicts is thoroughly drenched in it. *The Author*, on the other hand, goes to great pains to construct an atmosphere of lightness and camaraderie, and refrains from showing any violence, or any action for that matter, on stage, replacing them with narration and "arguably both the barest and most evocative medium in theatrical performance: voice" (Angelaki, "Whose Voice?"). In doing so, the play integrates the spectators "into the process of narrative construction" (Bottoms, "Authorising" 67), seeking to build rapport from the outset, creating a deceptive sense of safety and connection, only to employ those in order to challenge the audience and confront them with their own culpability as consumers of violent content. This move, the transposition of authorship onto the largely unsuspecting audience and the subsequent implication that they should bear a degree of responsibility for the abomination that is authored, is precisely what has been at the core of the controversy surrounding Crouch's play.

The play features a cast of four, seated among the audience, discussing the production of a fictional violent play authored by a character called Tim Crouch, played by Crouch himself. Along with Crouch, the rest of the cast includes two actors from the play, Vic and Esther, and a member of the

audience who has seen it, Adrian, replaced by Chris in later productions. As with the character of Tim Crouch, the script indicates that the names of the other characters should always be the names of the actors who play them. The exact content of the play they discuss is not made entirely clear, but it features a story of incestuous abuse of a young woman called Eshna at the hands of her father Pavol. As part of their rehearsals, the cast visit a women's shelter and talk to an incest survivor, travel to an unspecified Eastern European war-ridden country, and watch videos of beheadings, all to their great emotional detriment. What provokes the storm of audience outrage, however, is not the detailed account of a beheading, but rather Tim's final speech in which he reveals that after a dinner party with the actors, he watched videos of infant sexual abuse, masturbated to them, and possibly abused the actress's baby son who was in the room with him, sleeping. The explosive content is offset by the striking formal minimalism of *The Author*, as the performance dispenses with the stage altogether, places its performers among the audience and replaces showing with telling. For Stephen Bottoms, these staging choices are a reflection of Crouch's "concern to individualise spectatorial response – to authorise his audience" ("Materialising, 448), as the audience members are left to fill in the empty spaces, both imaginatively and interpretively. The formal minimalism of the piece is accompanied by an emotionally subdued and occasionally incongruently cheerful style of delivery that recalls Mookerjee's definition of the transgressive style as clinical, flat and blank. This "deliberate reticence" (Freshwater, "Children" 172), "lightness" (Crouch, "Response" 421) and speech "without coloration" (Sierz, "Navigating" 74) are at odds with the horrific content of the play, creating an emotionally dissonant and highly disturbing audience experience.

Testing the limits of theatrical form and exploring the issues of audience engagement and response lie at the heart of Crouch's theatrical practice more broadly. Having worked as an actor, Crouch started to write for the theatre in response to his frustration with conventional theatre-making. His first piece, *My Arm* (2003), is provocative both in terms of content and form, as it narrates the story of a boy who at the age of ten, "for want of anything more meaningful to do" ("About *My Arm*"), decides to raise his arm above his shoulder and never put it down again. The experimental performance features a set of random objects provided by the audience, which are used instead of actors to represent the various characters from the story, promoting the

audience's imaginative investment in the narrative. *An Oak Tree* (2005) relies on similar "non-representational minimalism" (Freshwater, "Children" 172) in order to explore the themes of grief and loss of a child through the responses of the Father, who claims to have transformed his deceased daughter into an oak tree. The Father is played by a new actor or actress each time, who are unaware of the content of the play, or indeed the script, and are fed their lines by Crouch on stage, where their bewilderment and disorientation at these arrangements dramatise the unfamiliar landscape of grief the Father is attempting to navigate. *ENGLAND* (2007) is set in gallery space and asks the audience to consider the value of art and human life in the context of geopolitical inequalities and hierarchies. However, none of these earlier performances have provoked responses that come anywhere near the vitriol directed at *The Author*, summarised in the words of Dan Rebellato: "During the run of the play in September-October 2009, several members of the audience walked out. Others heckled. On tour a member of the audience fainted. In the frenzied atmosphere of the Edinburgh Festival in 2010, the anger was even more vocal" ("The Author" 136). Crouch reveals that he was physically threatened during the run of the show (Sierz, "Navigating" 73). A slate of angry letters from the audience prompted Crouch to respond in a text for the special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* dedicated to the play. Clearly, when it comes to *The Author* passions have been running high.

Despite its largely positive critical reception, the play proves difficult for critics as well. Helen Freshwater writes of her "anxieties about *The Author*" ("You Say Something" 444), stemming from the possible proximity of its content to personal experience of the audience. Rebellato reveals that he was "never wholly clear" about the nature of the expected responses to the performance ("The Author" 139). In her review, Charlotte Higgins of *The Guardian* admits she is "still not entirely sure what [she thinks] about *The Author*", despite waiting "nearly a week to let things settle" before writing the text ("The Author"). Duška Radosavljević has suggested that "*The Author* cannot provide anything other than an intellectual form of closure" and sees this as a possible explanation as to "why the critics (and academics, such as Bottoms), being accustomed to engaging in a process of interpretation, were able to enjoy or appreciate *The Author* more readily than the less habitually reflective theatre-goers" (*Theatre-Making* 154). But plays are not performed for critics alone, they emerge in a relationship with an audience that includes

people of various sensibilities and inclinations. After all, "engaging in a process of interpretation" did not prevent at least some critics from voicing a degree of unease with the play. Even though the critics' misgivings are more cautious than the "near-riotous" audience outrage (Higgins), they do indicate a fault line in the play, one which is not simply the result of its difficult and complex subject matter. Similarly, Freshwater has argued that the strong reactions produced by the play are "not simply a product of its reference to child abuse" ("Children" 181), although she does approach the objections to it in light of the widespread "child-panic" prevalent in contemporary engagement with children and childhood. That said, it is perhaps more precise to say that, instead of actually offering a "discussion of child abuse" ("Children" 182), the play treats the topic as a device to provoke the audience into speculation about the ethics of looking, without any deeper engagement with the issue of abuse in itself. In fact, it may be speculated that this particular mode of violence is selected by Crouch precisely because it remains socially inexcusable and bound to be detested, unlike other forms of violence which may leave room for victim blaming and the dilution of responsibility of the perpetrator. The link drawn between the consumption of extreme theatre and child pornography may also strike one as rather facile. Crouch's character in *The Author* deliberately seeks out paedophilic images for his gratification, afterwards falls asleep contentedly (like a baby?), and the play constructs his suicide at the end of the play as a response to being exposed, rather than an act stemming from any sense of guilt. The fact that there is a sleeping baby next to him as he consumes these images is not only disturbing because of the potentiality of abuse it implies, but also because it creates ambiguity as to whether the molestation he is describing is what he sees online or an act he himself is committing on Esther's son. This effect is fortified by ambiguity of reference when the script refers to "this baby", since it is at times not immediately clear which baby is referred to. Crouch himself acknowledges this, when he states that there is "a blur in it because in the same room there is a baby asleep in a cot" (Sierz, "Navigating" 72). It also seems clear that the enraged responses are primarily to the final scene of child molestation, rather than the earlier descriptions of the cast's rehearsals and their research process. Crouch has observed that these do not seem to provoke nearly as much outrage: "The actress describes in detail being made to watch a beheading. More detail is given to this description of the death of a man than to the act involving a baby – but there have been no angry letters about that" ("Response" 417). However, to ascribe the difference in the responses to

content alone disregards the difference in the way the content is revealed and the extent to which it is unexpected, leaving the audience ambushed and violated.

Crouch has suggested that his work on the play "started with an idea of a culpable act of seeing" (qtd. in Freshwater, "Children" 176), and the play has been routinely read within the framework of the ethics of seeing and looking[1]. In a reply to one of the angry letters he received after the show run, he states that he believes "that we must be responsible for what we choose to look at" ("Response" 417), and the summary of the play on Crouch's website seems to reinforce this idea in highlighting the following lines from the play: "I have the choice to continue. I have the choice to stop" (*The Author* 90; "Look Out"). And yet, there is very little to see in the play, as the entire performance is translocated into the audience's imagination. The seating arrangements, with two banks of seats facing each other, transform the rest of the audience along with their responses into the central visual component of the play, but also indicate that the performance directs the audience's gaze "back on themselves" (Little 58). Bottoms reads *The Author* as a piece that "satirises the graphically theatrical sex and violence [such as those present in Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill], but also removes almost all potential for stage spectacle of its own by removing the stage itself" ("Materialising" 447). Instead, in *The Author* the visual image is replaced by its verbal equivalent, and in place of visual spectacle, the play creates harrowing mental imagery. For Crouch, "[t]he word is the ultimate conceptual art form, inasmuch as the word is the symbol for an idea or thing, rather than the thing itself. When a word is used, we need to be aware of what it is unlocking in an audience's imagination'" (qtd. in Bottoms, "Authorising" 67). He adds: "I minimalize what's happening on stage so I can maximize what's happening in the audience" (69); nowhere is this intention as evident as in *The Author*. However, while the explosive reactions to the play testify to the success of this approach in provoking heightened affective responses, its attitude to audience engagement is highly contentious.

The absence of visual spectacle brings together and highlights two concerns central to *The Author*. On the one hand, it seeks to contemplate the ethics of looking and seeing, to re-evaluate our engagement with images of

[1] The dynamics of looking and seeing, and their implicit power relations, have a rich theoretical and critical history. For more, see Krombholc, "With Shining Eyes".

violence and suffering, and to locate the responsibility for their persistence in public space. By removing the images themselves and transposing them to the realm of the non-visual, the piece purports to interrupt their public circulation, as it invites speculation on their production and consumption. On the other hand, the final speech inevitably plants the horrific image of infant molestation into the audience's minds, "co-opting" the audience's imagination (Bottoms, "Materialising" 459) and testifying to the suggestive power of the verbal. This move has the double effect of making "the violence and abuse all the more 'real'" (459) and creating "an uncomfortable sense that we are all being implicated here, merely by listening" (462). Radosavljević makes a similar point when she notes that, "[b]y supplanting mimetic with diegetic content, *The Author* implicitly shows that violence – as previously seen on the Royal Court stage, for example – does not have to be In-Yer-Face (Sierz 2000), and if it is in one's imagination, it can be even more disturbing" (*Theatre-Making* 153). As he leaves, Tim's final line is "The writing is leaving the writer" (90). The line may appear paradoxical – is it not the other way around? – yet the utterance clearly corresponds to Crouch's transferral of authorial ownership to the audience. This transferral, however, is fraught with difficulty, since the audience is for the most part an unwilling recipient of this terrible gift, with no true choice in receiving it, no freedom to reject it. Bottoms also focuses his attention on this line, suggesting that "the writing must indeed leave the writer, and be allowed to sit quietly with the spectator" ("Materialising" 462). However, the play's staging history suggests that the writing never "sits quietly" with its audience – instead, it sits rather loudly, hollers and kicks about.

The issue of audience response is thus central to *The Author*. The audience, notes Vicky Angelaki, is "the crucial participant in this production" ("Whose Voice?"), while Radosavljević concludes that "the audience reaction is integral to the dramaturgy of the piece, be it a walkout, an affective response or quiet contemplation" (*Theatre-Making* 153). The transposition of authorship onto the audience and their implication in producing the play's content is further indicated by the Barthesian stage instruction in the text itself, with Tim's suicide announced as the "*death of the author*" (*The Author* 90). Because of its engagement with the issue of audience authority and responsibility, *The Author* has commonly been read against Jacques Rancière's essay "The Emancipated Spectator", published in a collection under the same

title (2009[2008]). In the essay, Rancière questions the assumption that the position of the audience is passive and in need of instruction, an assumption that rests on the idea of opposition "between viewing and acting" (13). For Rancière, the distinction between viewing and acting is false, since the spectator "observes, selects, compares, interprets" (13). Rooted in the myth of spectator passivity, attempts to create theatre which will activate the audience and mobilize their "power to act" (5), by promoting spectator participation or creating expectations of a certain response, simply prescribe a "correct" way of engagement with the performance and retain authority over it firmly on the side of the author. Although Bottoms reads *The Author* in opposition to the reforming tendencies criticised by Rancière, arguing that Crouch is "concerned with maximising the possibility of personal responses to – rather than herd-like acceptance of – the enacted events" ("Materialising" 454), the presupposition that the audience must confront their own culpability reflects a view of their position as that of passive acceptance or ignorant unawareness. In the play, the character of Vic states that "[s]omething has to be at stake for the audience. They have to maybe need convincing of something, or persuading of something or rousing or enlisting. *Imagine them as a child or – or a confessor*." (81). This conflicting duality remains unresolved, as the audience are both castigated as naughty children who should know better, and accused of false prudishness and hypocrisy when faced with human depravity ("You will not forgive me", 90).

The Author relies on audience participation from its outset. Clare Wallace argues that it "discreetly opens spaces for audience response even before they may believe the play to have begun and continues to do so throughout the narrative performance" (128-129), as Adrian addresses various audience members, engaging them in small talk in an effort to create an air of intimacy and shared experience. However, while Wallace views these opening interactions as examples of "the performers' disarming sensitivity to spectators" (129), one may also be tempted to read them as deceptive and manipulative. The elicited audience responses may be authentic and open, but they are dramaturgically constructed as polite exchanges with a complete stranger, a situation in which they are still likely to be filtered, censored or delimited by a sense of propriety and rules of social interaction. On the other hand, the realisation that one has been duped into producing a response that otherwise may not have been freely given if the true identity of the interlocutor

had been known from the start may create unease and hinder meaningful speculation on the issues Crouch is seeking to dramatise. Like Wallace, Helen Iball points to the "[r]eassuring smiles and slightly prolonging eye contact" used by the cast (441), conceived as strategies and tools meant to put the audience at ease – but it is entirely possible to imagine members of the audience being made quite uncomfortable by these very devices. Admittedly, Iball does acknowledge that "this smiles-and-eye-contact method of reassurance (…) becomes unsettling and challenging when coupled with provocative content that foregrounds archetypal modes of exploitation" (442), and describes seeing a performance where Crouch addressed three young women in the audience, smiling and asking if he can continue, after a sequence in which he describes the flotation tank hostess at the facility where he commits suicide in sexually explicit and objectifying terms. According to Iball, the women smiled back and nodded, acquiescing (442), and one is instantly reminded of another archetypal situation – that of a woman trying to deflect and diffuse unsolicited male attention by appeasing and playing along. It is of course impossible to know whether this was the case in this particular situation, but it does highlight the skewed power dynamics of the play that Crouch seems oblivious to, and the purported effort to make the audience feel cared for thus feels both performative and ultimately deeply disturbing. Bottoms also notes that the question "Is this okay?" which follows Tim's sexualised description of the hostess "has prompted reassuring nods of assent in every performance [he has] witnessed; yet there are bound to be many – *perhaps the nodders included* – who do not really want this fantasised sex act to continue" ("Materialising" 453, emphasis added). As Freshwater has convincingly argued, *The Author* "plays with and confounds our desire to 'play along'" ("You Say Something" 408), mobilising the audience's awareness and participation in the complex set of rules of social interaction. However, these interactions are belied by a network of complex and shifting power relations and negotiations, which is powerfully illustrated in Iball's example.

Rebellato reads the questions directed at the audience as part of the charge levelled against them by the performance. By asking "Is it okay if I carry on? Do you want me to stop?" (*The Author* 81), Crouch "directly implicate[s] us in what follows" (140) – but if we do not know precisely what follows, to what extent can we be held complicit or responsible? Rebellato draws attention to the multi-layered metatheatrical moment in the play when an interview with

Karen, an abuse victim at the women's shelter, is recreated for the audience, who are invited to ask Karen questions, concluding that the scene "lays bare the occasionally exploitative power dynamics of the rehearsal room, yet even so, in some performances, members of the audience did take up the offer to ask 'Karen' questions" ("The Author" 140). He does not reveal what questions these were, but the suggestion seems to be that this is proof of the audience's willingness to engage in exploitative participation. Describing the same scene, Bottoms notes that "[e]ven for those of us who remain silent through this sequence, there is palpable sense that we are in some way responsible for its taking place: it has been researched and rehearsed for our benefit" ("Materialising" 456). However, these readings seem to disregard the exploitative dynamics which is also at play between the performance and its audience, with the script goading the audience into certain responses, which they may provide in spite of themselves, out of a desire to play along, then shaming them for producing them. If anything, the audience seems to occupy the position of 'Karen' in this particular scene, pressured and coerced to engage with the theatrical situation beyond what they might find comfortable or acceptable, where the exact nature of their participation may even remain unclear to them in the heat of the emotionally deeply charged moment of watching the scene itself. This is not to exculpate the audience or to negate the possibility of a degree voyeuristic thrill the scene may produce in some of them, but rather to state that the heightened constructedness of the created situation, its theatricality, or what Rebellato calls "the force of theatrical convention" ("The Author" 140), cannot be overlooked as a factor that would determine the extent of someone's engagement.

Iball cites Helena Grehan's argument concerning the audience's awareness of the "obligation to respond" (442), but in order to be recognised as valid, or to be "authorised", to borrow Bottom's term, these responses are expected to take a predetermined, and very limited, shape. Crouch's response to the letters he has received illustrates this quite clearly. A different, less cooperative answer to the questions from the cast likewise reveals a particularly "crushing" (Read, qtd. in Sierz, "Navigating" 74) aspect of the play, the fact that any expression of dissent will in fact be ignored by the performers and prove ineffective in changing the course of the performance. The extent to which this is revealed will vary depending on the performance and the responses provided by the audience in that particular instance, but once it

becomes clear, the invitation to participate and the charge of complicity are bound to be read in a different light. In the scene described above, Esther asks Tim to stop the improvisation, and he ignores her appeal – is this power dynamic not replicated in ignoring the audience's requests to stop? In this way, the play creates the illusion of providing space for audience involvement, extending an invitation to speak and a challenge to stop the performance, and then disregarding such responses, as the play moves inexorably towards its horrific finale. The extent to which this will be evident will depend on the individual performance one attends – in performances where the audience are less oppositional, the effect may not be as obvious. Crouch admits that his intention never was to authorise these interpellations, but to "let that voice be in the play, to fold that in, to incorporate it" (Sierz, "Navigating" 74). Bottoms identifies this as "one of the most controversial elements of *The Author*", prompting "hostility, even anger, from those who feel that audience participation has been solicited and then frozen out" ("Materialising" 455). On occasion, people have succeeded in stopping the play, which Crouch describes as a "cop out" (74). The play thus not only suggests the possibility of active spectatorial engagement, but also creates expectations of it through its ethical arguments, only to betray them and strip the audience of their agency once they take up the offer, leading Angelaki to rightly ask "whose voice ultimately matters?" ("Whose Voice?"). For Angelaki, this move pits spectatorial agency against authorial intention, ultimately reinstating "the author" as the superior authority, and this reading seems supported by the textually-based defence for ignoring pleas to stop the performance proposed by Andy Smith, one of the directors of the play and Crouch's long-term collaborator: "There is a story to tell, with a beginning and a middle and an end, and if that is disrupted too much – or if that is invited to be disrupted too much – well, that's not really what we're interested in" (qtd. in Bottoms, "A Conversation" 425). This may be the reason why *The Author*'s success in soliciting the audiences to review their own spectatorial ethics has been essentially limited: it clings on to authorial control while disowning responsibility for its creation. Tim's character states that "[y]ou write and write and discover and discover. And then you let go. You hand over. You leave it to the actors. (…) You leave it to your audience" (86), and these words are echoed in Crouch's own discussion of his role and his intentions concerning the play (see Sierz, "Navigating" 72-75, or Bottoms, "A Conversation"), but once the audience takes him up on the offer and responds authentically, authorial control is re-imposed, citing the "integrity of the text"

(qtd. in Bottoms "A Conversation 425) and its "inability to bend to the liveliness of theatre" (Chris Goode qtd. in Bottoms "A Conversation" 428). Likewise, through its dramaturgical choices, the play strips away the illusion of theatrical artifice, as Crouch performs under his own name, includes personal details from his life, and removes props, or indeed proper acting, from his performance; all that remains is the spoken word, while at the same time, in the manner of René Magritte's painting *The Treachery of Images* (1929), Crouch insists *ce n'est pas Tim Crouch*, highlighting the distinction between theatrical representation and its real-life referent. The metatheatrical device of play-within-the-play simultaneously plays into the illusion of authenticity – after all, it claims to be inspired by real-life events – and acts as a reminder of the piece's theatricality. And while Crouch insists on his own willingness to take responsibility for the play's content and its ethical challenge – by casting himself, by using his own name, by including autobiographical details such as his wife's name, and by erasing practically all illusion of theatricality – insisting that this is "just theatre" seems to dilute any effort in that direction.

Even within such limited degrees of agency, audience reactions have at times been both creative and highly performative. Higgins, for instance, reports how one audience member indicated their protest by humming loudly and reading a book very conspicuously, before walking out ("The Author"). Crouch insists that his intention is to shake the audience out of their complicity, including a scripted walk-out as a "model of an action" (qtd. in Rebellato, "The Author" 140); however, all authentic responses of outrage on the part of the audience, including the angry letters from the audience, have been dismissed as somehow missing the point, a "fucking nightmare" (qtd. in Rebellato, "The Author" 136). Crouch has argued that the staged walk-out is offered as a model of one possible response to the performance, but it is not contextualised as a response to disturbing content and is likely to be interpreted in a completely different light – it comes early on in the play, at the end of Adrian's opening attempts to engage the audience, but before anyone else has spoken and any of the provocative content has been revealed. In fact, it is an immediate response to these lines: "Look at our lonely, hopeful hearts!! Sitting here. Starting out! Hoping for something to happen. Waiting for someone to talk to us. Really talk." (79). The only clue of what is to follow is the detail in Adrian's musings on actors who "smash their brains out" because that's "what we expect of them" – "It's what we love, isn't it. We wouldn't be here. No one ever asks them to stop,

do they?" (79). It is therefore questionable whether it would be understood as a refusal to participate in an ethically problematic production – how can it be a protest against overstepping ethical boundaries if (at least some members of) the audience believe that the play has not even started yet? Bottoms views the staged walk-out as a means to "facilitate the conditions by which a spectator can indeed author her or his own experience of and response to [the play]" ("Materialising" 455). In Crouch's own discussion of the device, the walk-out is recast as a kind of ethical test for the audience – not following suit translates into "a decision to be there . . . Everyone has had every opportunity to go and they are still there" (Sierz, "Navigating" 76). But the underlying distribution of power and authority is inevitably weighted towards Crouch – he is the one who knows what follows, the audience do not.

The uncertainty that surrounds the staged walk-out and its significance ties back in with Freshwater's (2011) observations about the lack of clarity with regard to the social script the audience are invited to follow, while Angelaki has noted that "[w]e are dealing with a group of audience members acting as audience members – spectators standing in the place of themselves" ("Whose Voice?"). Their cooing responses when Esther produces a photograph of the baby serves as one illustration of this, since the 'ahs' the photograph elicits may be genuine, but they are also socially expected and scripted. Crouch observes that the photograph may "come back to them at the end" (Freshwater, "Children" 178), making the final speech all the more unbearable. While the intention may be to lead the audience to reassess their own consumption of images and the possible implications of these "acts of seeing", the link feels contrived and the possibility of intellectual engagement diminished by the sheer affective weight of the final revelation, which the audience are exposed to, rather than knowingly choose, since there is no way of anticipating the content of the final speech until it has been delivered. This stands in sharp contrast with Crouch's character, who actively seeks the images out on his "meanderings". There is even an added layer of provocation, as he openly invites the audience to identify with him as he consumes "[i]mages of flesh": "I'm not proud, but we've all done it, haven't we?" (89), a statement seemingly inviting identification, but bound to shatter any sense of lightness created earlier.

The Emancipated Spectator includes an essay on "intolerable images" and the way they are disseminated, which proves equally useful for the understanding of Crouch's piece. "If horror is banalized," argues Rancière, "it is not because we see too many images of it. We do not see too many suffering bodies on the screen. But we do see too many nameless bodies, too many bodies incapable of returning the gaze that we direct at them, too many bodies that are an object of speech without themselves having a chance to speak" (96). Perhaps this is the reason why Crouch's piece provokes such strong affective responses. In choosing a baby, subjecting it to the gaze of the audience and then to the gaze of a predator, and making it an object of speech while its voice is doubly absent, since it is both sleeping and nonverbal, Crouch offers us the ultimate intolerable image. The script highlights both the absence of the baby's awareness of what it is being subjected to (the one in the video and the one in the room with Tim alike), and the provocative co-optation of the experience by the perpetrator, as Tim insists the abuse is committed "quite lovingly" (90). This may be lesson behind *The Author*: an invitation to challenge not the images themselves, but how we are told to read them. To further complicate things, the script seems to allude to Rancière, in referring to "[t]he unbearable image" (83). Given the fact that the collection of his plays is headed by an epigraph from *The Emancipated Spectator*, this seems highly likely. As a result, the entire discussion feels particularly tongue-in-cheek; Crouch the character takes is upon himself to "explore how these pictures fashion our relation to one another" (83), and yet this is dismissed by Crouch the playwright, as his character is exposed as a despicable consumer of these very images. On the other hand, in highlighting the audience's role and their investment in the play (and even outside of it), *The Author* seems to lay bare precisely how "these pictures fashion our relation to one another".

Suzanne Little reads *The Author* against the theoretical framework of the "witness turn" in theatre studies, citing Crouch's text an example of "the desire to charge spectators as complicit creators in the production of violent and depraved theatre" (43), echoing Sierz's assertion that "[w]hen taboos are broken in public, the spectators often become complicit witnesses" (*In-Yer-Face* 19). In *The Author*, the emphasis is on the audience's complicity; rather than witness and affirm the suffering of the traumatised other, the audience are invited to "bear witness to themselves in the act of consumption, and to accept responsibility for their choices" (Little 44), their gaze "turned on itself

in an act of unwanted and confronting self-witnessing" (45), and their attendance of the play proof of their unethical spectatorship. Herein lies the central problem of *The Author* – the audience is accused of unethical behaviour in choosing to attend the play, but are ambushed into hearing largely unexpected disturbing content. Effectively, the play feels akin to sending unsolicited nudes and then calling the audience a slut for opening them unaware of their nature. A walk-out can only come *after* this content is made known, once the horrific images already "forcibly materialise in the minds of audience members" (Little 55). This recalls the experience of one audience member: "*having drawn your audience in, and having demonstrated the negative impact that violent images have on our fictitious characters, you impose an equally disturbing image onto your unsuspecting audience, a type of abuse in its own right*" (Crouch, "Response" 418). Despite these charges, Crouch insists that "if anything, *The Author* is a rallying cry to stop the thoughtless representation of abuse" ("Response" 418). Following the play's logic, the only ethical decision would be choosing not to attend at all, but unless the audience are aware of the exact nature of the play, how are they to make this decision in advance? Eschewing all potentially disturbing content is surely not the answer, since it shuts down spaces of representation for traumatic experiences and stands in direct contradiction to calls to witness-bearing. The role of the spectator is shaped in response to the approach to disturbing subject matter the author and the text choose to take, but this cannot be known before the experience of spectatorship takes place. Perhaps it is the very presupposition that the audience might take pleasure in viewing an act of depravity that generates such level of outrage. While this possibility cannot be entirely excluded, a traumatic response is much more likely. The play thus risks traumatising a large chunk of its audience in order to chastise those who may respond with voyeuristic pleasure or mindless endorsement. As Little acknowledges, "[t]he strategy is undoubtedly unsettling and also potentially traumatising and unethical" (57); or, as Aragay aptly notes, "where does participation end and coercion and manipulation begin?" (7).

Little argues that Crouch constructs *The Author* as "a form of aversion therapy: the audience members willingly attend a play famous for its violent and depraved content (the stimulus) and then are subjected to a form of discomfort (here, negative self-witnessing through reflecting accusation and torment) in order to condition them against wanting to see other depictions of

violence" (57). This is perhaps the crucial misconception on Crouch's part – that audiences *want* to see depictions of violence, that their visit to the theatre is motivated by no more than bloodthirst and that this is something he is called on to exorcise. But many spectators will decide to attend and *endure* a violent or upsetting performance *despite*, not *because of* its disturbing content. Crouch's play thus bands together the urge to bear witness to suffering or engage with difficult subject matter with cheap titillation and voyeurism, while "unowning" authorial responsibility for the existence of unbearable images and shifting it to the domain of the audience instead. In fact, in defending the choice to brutalise his audience with violent imagery, Crouch's character ironically reiterates the discourse of witness bearing: "How can we not? . . . If we do not represent them then we are in danger of denying their existence" (83). While the act of bearing witness itself may be an ethically fraught affair, as it creates an illusion of common experience where none exists, seeks to represent what may be beyond representation and potentially appropriates, distorts or silences the voice of the survivors (Little 48), these are not at all the concerns addressed by Crouch's piece, as the child abuse is only a device used to dramatise other issues Crouch seeks to engage with – a practice whose own ethical implications may be rightly questioned. Furthermore, as Wallace observers, the remark also "has very strong echoes of Kane's famous defence of her work" (136):

> When I read *Saved*, I was shocked by the baby being stoned. But then I thought, there isn't anything you can't represent on stage. If you are saying you can't represent something, you are saying you can't talk about it, you are denying its existence, and that's an extraordinarily ignorant thing to do. (Bayley)

Other details point to Crouch's engagement with Kane and the in-yer-face tradition – the insistence that the setting of the piece is the Royal Court, the list of atrocities Adrian has seen and enjoyed on stage, the use of the baby as the ultimate source of provocation. As Crouch himself has said, he has "great difficulties with violent plays" ("Response" 416), asserting that a heartfelt premise of *The Author* is that "a representation of violence is, on some level, still an act of violence", issuing a warning against using violence "unthinkingly on stage" (416). Kane and Bond seem to be used to illustrate this tendency. Given these assertions, the presence of violence in *The Author* becomes even

more difficult to position, as Crouch's comment seems to extend to visual or naturalistic representations of violence alone. Arguably, by replacing visual imagery with aural and imaginative content, Crouch attempts to go around this difficulty, and show the impact of violent images without actually *showing* it, using "no real action – only words" (416). The great revelation of *The Author*, is "the power of those words" (416), as the highly explosive audience reactions clearly confirm. But surely, this revelation is no great revelation at all.

Finally, the play's insistence on audience culpability seems particularly troubling when implicating potential victims of abuse in the audience, since victims of trauma frequently experience guilt and self-blame. In this case, the play's speculation about abstract collective responsibility may be painfully, and potentially harmfully misdirected, and the desired insights firmly inaccessible. In fact, the range of audience reactions and inactions can be viewed within the framework of trauma responses – fight, when they protest or abuse the cast, flight, when they walk out and remove themselves from the situation, freeze, when the social script of "going to the theatre" prevents them from leaving, and fawn, when they respond affirmatively or encouragingly to Crouch's bids for reassurance. The play thus seems to create the very situation it purports to criticise, using scenes of abuse as props and devices without deeper engagement and running the risk of (re)traumatising the audience. In this respect, Crouch's piece recalls another highly controversial piece, *Audience* (2011) by the Belgian theatre collective Ontroerend Goed. The group are no strangers to controversy, or to edgy performance pieces, as they routinely push the margins of performance and audience engagement alike. *Audience* is of particular interest to the discussion of *The Author*, not only because of the neat complementarity of the titles, but due to a shared interest in audience behaviour within the highly public context of theatre-going. One scene in particular has provoked heated responses, in which one of the performers singles out a usually young female member of the audience with a camera, starts verbally abusing her and telling her to spread her legs, mounting a challenge to the rest of the audience to intervene, forcing them to "make a choice: even if they make a decision to intervene, it's a decision" (Costa). While one might argue that the piece raises important issues concerning accountability and inaction in public space, this is achieved by erasing the boundary between a performance of abuse and actual abuse; to rephrase Aragay's question, where does performance end, and abuse begin? The fact

that the chosen abuse is visited on a young woman and takes the form of sexual harassment speaks chillingly clearly of the fact that this remains the most socially acceptable and publicly tolerable version of abuse. If we were to substitute gender-based abuse with, for instance, verbal violence directed at a racial minority or a person with a disability, it becomes more difficult to imagine that such a show would be staged.

The work of Ontroerend Goed plays with the existence of an unspoken "performance contract" (see Radosavljević, *Theatre-Making* 162) between performers and the audience, defining what can or cannot be expected during a performance. This issue is explored in Crouch's discussions of *The Author* and in Freshwater's reading of the piece as well, but these focus mostly on the expectations regarding audience behaviour. Ontroerend Goed take a different approach and transgress audience expectations regarding the treatment they can expect in the context of performance as a cultural event. While audience participation is no longer new or unexpected, and being put in the spotlight may clearly be uncomfortable for a significant portion of the audience, the unspoken contract is that the audience will not be openly harassed, as in *Audience*, or made to divulge private information about themselves only to have it repeated publicly later on in the show, as in *Internal* (2007). In this sense, these shows do not simply test the boundaries of audience behaviour, but the ways we engage with others in public space more broadly. On the other hand, in subjecting a woman in the audience to sexual harassment in order to prove this point, *Audience* encounters a similar impasse as *The Author*, since it resorts to violence in order to make a statement about it.

Unlike most other critics, who either praise Crouch's methods or express unease or ambivalence, Little is more explicitly critical of them, seeing them as an example of "condescending or totalising encounters between practitioners and the audience" (58). Her final word on *The Author* is rather scorching:

> While ethical spectatorship is desirable, placing the ethical responsibility for the reception and/or content of a production on the audience is a precarious and dubious practice. The strategy of attempting to reconfigure audiences as witnesses, as well as that of forcing audiences to witness their own unethical spectatorship, places the practitioner above audiences as an ethical authority and it

> disrespects spectators and their capacities: it assumes that audiences are homogenous groups who need to be directed toward ethical behaviour by theatre practitioners. (58)

It is hard not to agree with Little here. On the other hand, willingly or not, *The Author* manages to produce a rich chorus of audience responses, and it is perhaps where its true contribution lies. Rancière argues that "[t]he collective power shared by spectators" lies precisely in the synergy of their individual responses, in "the power each of them has to translate what she perceives in her own way" (16-17), or, in Aragay's words, "there are as many ways of being active as there are spectators" (8). Given Crouch's at times contradictory comments on what he considers to be a valid or ethical response to seeing his play (is there really one?), one might even be tempted to conclude that this has been precisely his intention – to encourage his audience to act on their individual "translations" of his play, to stand up to him, to "not forgive him". If this is the case, this is clearly something he cannot reveal. In offering himself to the public to be reviled as an author figure that at least some will find despicable, he does manage to fuel speculation about the ethics of seeing and representation of violence in the theatrical context. One can only hope this is the explanation, but this strategy nevertheless runs the risk of audience traumatisation, which is both ethically questionable and largely self-defeating.

POSTCARDS FROM CRIMPLAND: LOCATING TRANSGRESSION IN *THE COUNTRY* AND *THE CITY*

Martin Crimp has been widely recognised as one of the most distinctive and innovative dramatic voices in British theatre at the turn of the millennium. He came to international renown in the nineties with his groundbreaking piece *Attempts on Her Life* (1997), composed as a series of seventeen "scenarios", "attempts" on the life of the central character of Anne, and "widely regarded as the most original innovation in playwriting since the work of Samuel Beckett" (Sierz, "Martin Crimp" 363). *Attempts on Her Life* is created as an "open text", which means that Crimp provides the dialogue for the performance, but does not specify the speakers, their number or the setting, leaving those decisions and choices to the director and the actors. *Attempts on Her Life* has also been read in the context of postdramatic theatre, since "of the expected formula of drama, what remain are only the vestiges of language and of character" (Angel-Perez, "Nomadic Voices" 355). The play is reflective of Crimp's broader commitment to formal experimentation, exploration and critique of late capitalist society, of his willingness to bring theatrical form to breaking point and beyond, and to deconstruct the usual theatrical categories, and of the broader emphasis on theatrical language as the central vehicle for communicating dramatic meaning in the recent decades.

Aleks Sierz describes Crimp as a playwright who

> takes the best of the British modernist tradition – Beckett's linguistic precision, Pinter's verbal menace, and Caryl Churchill's daring use of form – and confronts it with the European traditions of surrealism, absurdism, and post-structuralism. The result is Crimpland, a place where the common preoccupations of ordinary English middle-class folk, from selling their houses to moving to the country, barely conceal a world of dark fears, vicious emotions, and wild desires. Human longings smoulder just below the surface of everyday life, undermining the best-laid plans and turning security into panic. (Sierz, "Martin Crimp" 371)

Crimpland, the unique "theatrical territory" Crimp creates in his plays, is a universe strikingly different from "the more familiar scenery of British drama",

displaying a degree of theatricality at odds with the "literal-minded realism that is British theatre's standard mode" (Sierz *Theatre of Martin Crimp* 110) – although we must not forget that this anti-naturalist territory was already bravely ventured into by female playwrights such as Caryl Churhcill well before the eighties, when Crimp makes his debut. As the quote from Sierz indicates, Crimp's transgression of theatrical form is coupled with a deeply disturbing vision of contemporary life: his plays are "experimental in form and unsettling in content" (*Theatre of Martin Crimp* 1), "characterised by a vision of society as a place of social decline, moral bad faith and imminent violence", leaving the audiences with a sense of "moral ambiguity and riddles about motivation" (1), an approach that bears clear associations with transgressive literature's ambivalence towards straightforward moral standpoints. In their refusal to provide clear answers with regard to the characters' background and motivation, his plays recall Harold Pinter in creating an unsettling atmosphere of menace which is fused with a darkly playful divorce from the logical and the rational, offering "inconclusive stories" (Angelaki, *Power Plays* 10) that resist interpretation and closure. Unlike Pinter, however, where the source of menace is an unspecified external threat, in Crimp the danger and the collapse come from within.

Crimp's writing is as elusive and cryptic as the playwright himself. It defies easy categorisation or classification, transgressing not only the bounds of theatrical form, but the boundaries of British theatre as a whole, both through its association with European theatre, and through the importance of translation to his work, as a practice as well as a thematic concern and a formal device. Although he is lauded as a key figure in contemporary British theatre, boldly experimental and daringly original, his output both substantial and versatile, his name is strangely absent from the Methuen surveys of the decades of British writing or other such reference books. As Sierz notes, "[t]he more you search, the more the mystery deepens" (*Theatre or Martin Crimp* 6). Vicky Angelaki notes this curious absence as well, attributing it to the fact that "Crimp's writing does not fall neatly in a singular period of contemporary theatre"; instead, his work is "refreshingly unpredictable and reliably non-mainstream" ("Dealing with Martin Crimp" 309). Similarly, commenting on the curious fact that Crimp's recognition in Britain lagged behind his international acclaim, Sierz suggests that the key to this discrepancy lies in the fact that "Crimp's work is difficult. . . . His plays are hard work" (*Theatre of Martin Crimp*

1). Crimp, he concludes, is "an acquired taste" ("Martin Crimp" 363). In an effort to reinscribe him into the context of recent British theatre, Sierz identifies Crimp as a "central figure on the new-writing scene, an important influence on young playwrights such as Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill" (4). Indeed, Crimp's plays are routinely violent and disturbing – *Getting Attention* (1991) is an early play that portrays the abuse of a child, whereas in *The Treatment* (1993) he offers a disturbing satire on the ways in which the central female character is transformed into a sexual commodity. This leads Sierz to describe Crimp as a playwright "attuned to the new 1990s in-yer-face sensibility" ("The Treatment"). However, even though his plays consistently dramatise cruelty and violence, Crimp also seems to stand apart from the highly experiential world of in-yer-face drama, never quite reaching the heights of visceral brutality of *Blasted*. Instead, Crimp's plays are above all deeply unnerving, creating a sense of disorientation and bewilderment, and offering visions of a collapsing world.

In this respect, both thematically and formally, Crimp's theatre reflects broader trends in British drama in the recent years. After the decade of in-yer-face theatre in the nineties and its emphasis on the visual and the visceral, in the post-2000 period there can be observed a shift towards the textual and the verbal, an emphasis on aural forms of theatre, which has often been termed "in-yer-ear" in juxtaposition with the highly visual theatre of the previous decade. On a parallel note, Angelaki describes a shift in Crimp's work occurring after 2000, when, "after his early occupation with larger casts and wide-ranging plots", he "delved into minimalist and introspective representation", coupled with "burgeoning neo-absurdism" (Angelaki, "*Alles Weiteres*" 315), although he was to return to more maximalist productions and collaborations in the recent years. The non-realist drive and the emphasis on the aural are therefore features shared by Crimp's work as well. His plays consistently offer biting critique of contemporary society, and its capitalist underpinnings in particular, but the degradation and collapse primarily come from within, from the nucleus – from familial and marital relationships, which, instead of offering stability, connection and intimacy, read as apocalyptic emotional wastelands. Crimp's work can also be read in the wider context of the attitudes to stage representations of violence in postmillennial theatre, which follow an interesting trajectory. With the dissipation of in-yer-face drama after the nineties, there is a distinct aversion to explicit visual representations of

violence in post-2000 theatre, but this shift is accompanied by what Dan Rebellato describes as a "hypertrophic escalation in the scale of violence represented, to the point one could reasonably call apocalyptic", a "response to the redundancy of realism under neoliberal capitalism" ("Apocalyptic Tone"). This apocalyptic escalation is particularly evident in the work of Caryl Churchill, whose plays *Far Away* (2000) and *Escaped Alone* (2016) turn to this zone of destruction as their central dramatic concern, although Rebellato astutely notes that *Blasted* already "reveals or produces a devastated world" ("Apocalyptic Tone"). Unlike *Blasted*, however, Churchill's plays offer fragmented dreamlike glimpses of a world in ruins. By way of explanation, Rebellato suggests that "one can perhaps see the refusal of graphic representation as a response to the phenomenon that so much violence in this century has taken place on the level of images" ("Apocalyptic Tone"), an issue which is also highlighted and engaged with in Crouch's *The Author*, discussed in the previous chapter. On the other hand, Rebellato sees the annihilated theatrical landscapes as a direct response to the deeply entrenched nature of capitalism as the basis of contemporary economic and social reality, and to the "unthinkability" of a world without it, creating a vision of the apocalypse not just at the level of plot and imagery, but also of speech and form. Crimp's theatre fits well within this trend, with its prominent critical drive, its dystopian view of contemporary life and its preference for theatrical form that is fractured or pared down. However, as noted earlier, his work also resists such neat categorisations. *The Country* (2000) and *The City* (2008), which can be read as companion pieces, offer an illuminating example in this respect.

In her discussion of the immediate critical reception of *Attempts on Her Life*, Mary Luckhurst notes that many critical readings have been unable to "locate political meanings" in Crimp's piece, instead tending to foreground "that well-known postmodern trope that privileges lack of meanings as 'the real meaning'" (49). This points to problematic assumptions concerning the relationship between formal transgressivity and social critique. Although *The Country* and *The City* are far less opaque and fragmented than *Attempts on Her Life*, their constructed nature, their apparent lack of depth, particularly prominent in the latter play, and their slippery meanings make them another easy target for similar misinterpretations. In *The City*, the absence of meaningful plot and the flat, unnatural dialogue are revealed to be reflections of their own artificiality, in a metatheatrical twist at the end of the play which

recasts them as the invention of the central character of Clair, her failed attempts at writing. As a result, it is easy to conclude that the interpretive locus of *The City* is Clair's imaginative crisis, which translates into the failure to progress beyond a couple of bars of the musical piece in the closing image of the play. Even when this is understood as a broader reflection of the state of contemporary culture, this critical approach needs to take account of the elements of critique present even in Clair's faltering and flawed narrative: the commentary on global military engagement, expressed in the references to a "secret war" waged by the neighbour's husband and the accompanying images of faraway cities attacked and destroyed, the human cost of late capitalism and its dehumanising effects, explored through the character of Chris, who loses his corporate job and takes up a job as a butcher's assistant, and the overall deconstruction of the family and human relationships against the backdrop of urban decay and alienation. *The City* therefore shows not only that a highly experimental, formally transgressive form is not a prerequisite for critique, but also that texts which engage in metatheatrical deconstruction and deferral of meaning can amount to more than self-reflexive navel-gazing, and serve as vehicles for expressing powerful political statements.

The Country seems even more conventional, as it does contain an outline of recognisable, and very stereotypical, physical reality – a married couple, a house in the suburbs, a rich doctor who has an affair with a young blonde. However, reality in both *The Country* and *The City* proves unstable and vaporous, and the precise nature of what is happening between the characters remains beyond grasp, as the clues and information we are given lead nowhere – for instance, in the opening scene of *The Country* we learn that the wife, Corinne, is cutting up some pictures to hang around a cot, but no further references to any baby are made, simply the generic phrase "the children". The play is not a straightforward parody or satire of suburban life, but an uncanny version of suburbia from the twilight zone, where the rules of logic, plausibility or natural communication simply do not apply. What *can* be ascertained is the pervasive sense of collapse and destruction, and its rootedness in the social structures the couples are placed within. In this respect, rather than transgressing boundaries centrifugally, creating a dispersed and fragmented (blasted?) theatrical form that would represent its object of criticism in a heap of deconstructed scenarios, or imagining radically unconventional and transgressive alternative worlds, these plays conceptualise transgression as a

centripetal force, directed within, retaining the outer perimeter of a recognisable social universe while dissolving the fabric of reality within it. Rather than going from the centre to the periphery and beyond, these plays reverse the course of their transgressive impulse and direct it at the centre itself, leaving it to dissolve and liquefy, or rather *pulverising* it, to use one of Crimps' favourite words. In that respect, Crimp's transgressivity here is essentially *nuclear*. This reversal is revealed in Crimp's own comment that "*Attempts* was a play that pulled plays apart, so [*The Country*] is a play where I attempt to put a play back together again" (in interview with John Whitley, qtd. in Sierz, *Theatre of Martin Crimp* 56). To do so, Crimp directs his gaze back to the centre of theatrical, cultural and social meaning-making, playing with the structures he finds there – not snugly fitting puzzle pieces, but prickly shards – amplifying them and revealing their arbitrariness, their superficiality, and their ultimate meaninglessness. This is further evidenced in Sara Grochala's assertion that *The City* contains "recognizable plot elements", but its "dramaturgical structures make it impossible for the spectator to organize all of these elements into a coherent story", whereby the play's "plot structures disrupt the story-making process to the point where there appears to be no access to the story at all" (176). While Grochala's concern is primarily with the structural aspects of the play, her comments can be read as a reflection of the ways both plays approach and understand transgression, as a force that is not directed outwards, seeking out and crossing boundaries of representation and ideas, but inwards, foregrounding, amplifying and sharpening highly stereotypical elements coming directly from the centre, until they pierce each other, deflate and collapse.

For this reason, this chapter seeks to highlight and engage with this particular undercurrent of transgression and non-realism present in *The Country* and *The City*, plays which are both couched in a seemingly realist veneer. It is easy to see how *Attempts on Her Life* or the later *Fewer Emergencies* (2005) are transgressive; on the other hand, Martin Middeke feels that *The Country* represents a return to the "calmer" and "more shallow waters of mainstream theatre" (111). This is indicative of the ease with which transgressivity is equated with experimentation, which fails to acknowledge those plays whose transgressive potential is not expressed primarily through form, and, more worryingly, suggests that formal experiment necessarily translates into a subversive outlook. It is true that *The Country* and *The City* are

not fragmented narratives, and yet, they too refuse to yield a straightforward or coherent expression of meaning. Instead, they take the reader or spectator on a chase to decipher what lies beneath the odd non-referential dialogue, the disconcerting relationships, the incoherent plot elements and the slippery reality of their dramatic universe; Sierz calls *The Country* a play "full of evasions", where "questions are constantly being answered with other questions" (Sierz, *Theatre of Martin Crimp* 105). In that respect, the plays which are formally more conventional, such as *The Country* and *The City*, are at least as charged with transgressive potential as works that are openly experimental, as they retain the semblance of conventional form, and implode it from within; as it were, transgressing transgression itself. As we have seen, the social critique of capitalism and the exploration of gender relationships in contemporary society, which are expressed through fragmented scenarios in *Attempts on Her Life*, also underlie *The Country* and *The City* – but then, these are Crimp's usual targets. While the far more experimental formal strategies of *Attempts on Her Life* collapse the boundaries of form, their radical inventiveness is potentially in danger of overshadowing or sidelining their underlying thematic concerns. In more formally conventional pieces, the boundaries can be made more clearly visible, creating a rupture between the expectations created by the presence of conventional form and the elusive and slippery meanings suggested by the content. This rupture is a productive source of transgressive meanings, as it leads us to re-examine and question the very basis of naturalism. It is another way of showing that "binaries do not apply to Crimp's work as it purposefully eludes them, constructing a space where assumed contradictions meld into a state of co-existence to produce powerfully defamiliarising and affective performance" (Angelaki, "*Alles Weiteres*" 317-318). This approach is also reminiscent of Sierz's distinction between hot and cool versions of in-yer-face theatre, where the hot version "uses the aesthetics of extremism", as in *Blasted*, whereas the cooler versions "mediate the disturbing power of extreme emotions by using a number of distancing devices: larger auditoriums, a more naturalistic style or a more traditional structure" (*In-Yer-Face* 18). Although he does not connect this description with Crimp's theatre specifically, Sierz shows that naturalism and traditional form are not necessarily at odds with transgression, an important reminder in the postmillennial period that seems to favour experimental, postdramatic pieces and approaches – which then run the risk of becoming too

familiar, losing their transgressive edge, and transforming into the very norm they seek to subvert.

Using a blend of satire, bleak humour, disturbing menace and overall strangeness, Crimp has positioned himself as a fierce observer of bourgeois life, dissecting it with surgical precision. His plays often focus on domestic situations to reveal an undercurrent of violence, vitriol and viciousness. Crimp's texts dramatise "oppressive relationships, evidencing the fact that in Crimp's theatre domestic spaces are never safe" (Angelaki, *Plays of Martin Crimp* 87). The domestic sphere in Crimp, however, acts as shorthand for wider social ills. The scope of his plays is usually narrow, focusing on a small number of characters or a closed family circle, but the implications always extend beyond the immediate context. This is evident throughout his work: in *Dealing with Clair* (1988), an upwardly mobile couple is there to reflect the materialistic-driven attitudes of their time, rooted in the Thatcherite "deification of property ownership and individual progress" (Angelaki, *Power Plays* 6); in *Attempts on Her Life*, the character of Anne serves as a projection screen for the cultural narratives of patriarchy and late capitalism. Images of contemporary life in Crimp are typically refracted through what Vicky Angelaki describes as "Crimp's unhospitable domestic warzones", characterised by "devotion, desire, strife, and violence" (*Power Plays* 2). His theatre consistently dramatises the relationship between physical, emotional and mental spaces, all of which are portrayed as desolate and corrupted, places of death and decay, inherently dangerous and threatening. As Angelaki notes,

> [t]he habitat of a relationship, that space that develops between any two people intimately connected to each other, is never safe. That ecology is always perturbed from inside and within. It is a streak of conflict and turmoil that is electrified not only by external conditions and their essential and undeniable impact on the private, but also from the characters' own desire for undoing. (*Power Plays* 2)

Relationships in Crimp's theatre are thus always deeply ambivalent, both as sources of abuse and betrayal, and as states of paralysis that the characters are either unable to transcend or keep returning to, creating distinctive "relationscapes", to borrow Angelaki's term, which reveal "the artificiality of the domestic as construct and social convention" (*Power Plays* 14). The

characters' desire for their own undoing noted by Angelaki reads very much like Mookerjee's discussion of transgressive anti-heroes who seek closeness with death[1], and it is evident in the plays both literally, in images of self-harm, such as the motif of drug addiction and overdose in *The Country*, and metaphorically, through relationships that are, on the one hand, deeply unsatisfactory, alienated and constantly on the verge of violence and abuse, and, on the other hand, impossible to leave, as in *The Treatment*. Similarly, *The Country* and *The City* both focus on a closed circle of characters – a married couple, their children, and one or two outsiders – in order to offer theatrical speculations on the nature of human relationships in late capitalist society. As Maria Elena Capitani notes, "Crimp eliminates any possible form of complete innocence: no one is exempt from cruelty and even children are ambivalent figures, robbed of their moral purity" (67). In this respect, the children in *The City* are no exception, and recall Flora and Miles from *The Turn of the Screw*. The idea that the children might somehow be corrupt or not to be trusted is first expressed in the fact that they seem to have locked themselves in their playroom. We do not get to see the boy, Charles, but hear that he has been bad and should be punished. The Girl herself, unnamed, is a figure that is less than innocent, as she recites a dirty poem, does not seem particularly upset or perturbed when Chris swears at her, and ends up wearing high heels in the closing scene. Chris does not call her by her name, using "sweetheart" instead, where a term of endearment and intimacy is used to reveal distance and coldness.

Crimp's work is frequently read in a satirical vein, and he himself has described it in those terms (qtd. in Sierz, "Form Follows Function" 390). While this is justified by the fact that his targets are aspects of contemporary society, and his early plays are more traditionally satirical, the directions in which Crimp's satirical method develops in his later plays is rather unorthodox, as can be observed in both *The Country* and *The City*. These plays are driven by a satiric impulse to offer critique, but lack the humour or the hyperbole of classical satire, or indeed of Crimp's earlier work in *Dealing with Clair* or *The Treatment*. *The City* can be read as a critique of capitalism, corporate forces and their dehumanising effects, but this is not achieved through satire. Rather than

[1] For a discussion of the transgressive anti-hero, see Krombholc, "Dobri, loši, zli", and Krombholc and Luburić-Cvijanović, "Sleek Monsters".

mock, the goal is to denaturalise these structures, but also to expose their deeply entrenched nature, to suggest that they have replaced the individual itself. This is why the play recasts them as a crisis of creativity, where Clair's failure to imagine characters to populate her city with translates into the characters' failure to imagine themselves as complex individuals in late capitalist society. Angel-Perez describes Crimp as a neo-satirist, who takes "traditional metaphor-based wit to its end by extending it, beyond black farce, all the way to such categories as the ludicrous, the incongruous, the madcap, the surreal, the zany or the over the top, the preposterous, or the absurd" ("Horrendhilarious"). However, the pervading tone of *The Country* and *The City* is not one of black farcical humour, as is the case with, for instance, Edward Bond's *Early Morning* (1968), which features visions of Queen Victoria in a cannibalist heaven, or Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* (1979), with its gender-bending caricature[2], but of disorienting blandness coupled with sinister incongruity. There are flashes of humour in *The City*, as when Chris asks Jenny, the neighbour, "How is the war?", and she replies with "Oh, the war's fine, thank you." (117), but these are juxtaposed with an overall mood which is more sober and markedly non-humorous, a point underscored by explicit references to jokes and laughter, which are drained of any humorous content. Crimp's characters continuously "chuckle" when there is nothing funny, and smiling is taken as a sign of fear. Laughter is thus embedded in the dialogue and disturbingly clashes with what is being said, as laughter out of place laced with nervous horror, or unnerving smiles at odds with the interaction. As a result, it might again seem that Crimp evokes Pinter's comedy of menace, and the comparison with Pinter has been made more than once, but the similarity only goes so far. With Pinter, you may famously wonder whether these characters "are all supposed to be normal" (Esslin 37), but you do not question whether they are actual people. With Crimp, in the chosen plays at least, the dialogue and the characters seem to exist outside these categories altogether, only eerily reminiscent of humans.

Crimp's distinctive style is a vivid expression of the nuclear tension between convention and transgression that belies his work. Language and

[2] A further discussion of transgressive humour can be found in Krombholc and Vujin, "Speak of the Devil". For a discussion focusing specifically on *Cloud Nine*, see Krombholc "You Have to Look at it".

dialogue are key to creating the atmosphere of the strange and the unnerving in Crimp's plays. Angelaki describes Crimp's style as

> quietly surrealist: there is a considerable degree of plausibility in the exchange between the characters, yet, we know that on the basis of what we hold to be real, or mundane, the conversation cannot be taking place on any plane of experience that we broadly associate with the everyday – and so it is dreamlike, haunting, suspended. (*Power Plays* 10-11)

Sierz describes Crimp's tone as one "characterized by an icy irony", ("Martin Crimp" 363), as it "constantly moves between self-conscious irony and overt satire, *between being meaningful on more than one level, and resisting any meaning at all*, is the essence of Crimp's vision" (367, emphasis added). He also notes the "characteristic stop-start iterations" of his dialogue ("Stories" 44), which translate into a stilted, punctured quality of the exchanges. In *The City*, this quality of the dialogue is eventually framed as a reflection of artificiality, a consequence of Clair's failure at authenticity. But the dialogue goes beyond being merely *unnatural* – it is frequently mechanically repetitive, illogical, and at times outright bizarre. On the other hand, when Chris reads from Clair's diary, the narrative does not suffer from the same kind of issues. It may be unimaginative or bland, but it is not logically fractured like the rest of the play, indicating a discontinuity that cannot be accounted for by the play's metadramatic closure. Notably, as he reads Clair's diary, Chris stutters and hesitates, peering at the words he cannot read and following them with his finger, losing his place in the text. The stage instructions state that he is "*not a 'good' reader. He seems generally oblivious to the sense of what he's reading*" (119), which can be read as a comment on the experience of reading the play itself. In this way, the play seems to dramatise its own difficulty and opaqueness, but then, the part of the text Chris struggles with is both the most coherent passage in the play, and the most creative. Perhaps what the play is indicating is not the difficulty of reading fictionalised worlds, but the ultimate inaccessibility of the narratives that underlie everyday reality.

Given their spatially oriented titles, in *The Country* and *The City* one might expect plays that are spatially more sprawled or detailed, offering a range of rural and urban images, but this is not the case. In *The Country*, the

setting is both foregrounded as an escapist pastoral idyll, through the characters' move from the city, and notably absent, narrated rather than shown, and this too in very limited terms. The "country" for the most part is just a road, until the very end of the play where it transforms into a space of wilderness where signs of human civilisation are lost along the way, and its presence remains indirect and mediated through Corinne's story, recast as the setting of her narrative rather than the play itself. In *The City*, the setting is even more delimited, claustrophobic, reduced to the couple's room, which is left deliberately vague. In the stage instructions, both time and space remain unspecified, and throughout the text, the setting is notably sparse, with few props (a computer, a piano) which are used to signal the interiority of the stage space, while its outlines can mostly be gleaned from the dialogue. Even though we are told that Clair travels as an internationally acclaimed translator, the characters are static and we see them exclusively within the bounds of their home. On the other hand, the play includes references to other urban spaces – Lisbon, where Clair travels for a conference, and an unspecified foreign city where Jenny's husband is stationed as a military doctor. However, these are present as essentially non-urban spaces, as Clair's visit to Lisbon contains no references to the city itself, and what happens there is confined to the interior non-places of the hotel room and hotel cafeteria. Likewise, the description of the foreign city under attack, "pulverised" in the secret war, is both highly generic ("the squares, the shops, the parks, the leisure centres and the schools", *The City* 95-96), so that it could be anywhere in the world (including Britain), and brief, since it quickly shifts to an alternative space down the drain and below the city streets, a parallel urban underworld.

These indirect references create a vision of the city as a space of uncertainty, accompanied by an atmosphere of dread. The urban space is constructed and coded through absence rather than presence, as a spatial, social and metaphysical void, with no people or other signs of life:

> **Jenny** You say your children are out on their bikes – but I can't hear them – I didn't see one single child when I walked here from my flat – nobody was out – it was so quiet – it was unnatural.
> **Clair** Christmas is always like that: everyone's indoors with their families.

> **Jenny** It didn't feel right. There were no smells in the air. People had wreaths on their front doors, but I couldn't see anybody through the windows, even though they had lights flashing round the window frames. (*The City* 116)

The wreaths are there because it is, inexplicably, Christmas, but they also suggest a funeral, recasting the urban space as a city of the dead, the image recalling the earlier description of the pulverised city retreating below ground. Once it is revealed that the city and the characters are in fact Clair's invention, the space of the city is reframed as a fictional one, its emptiness a reflection of Clair's creative block, but also commentary on the alienation of urban life. Clair's inner city is "a huge and varied city full of green squares, shops and churches, secret streets, and hidden doors leading to staircases that climbed to rooms full of light where there would be drops of rain on the windows, and where in each small drop the whole city would be seen, upside down." (*The City* 119). The description begins as "the barest sketch of buildings, functions, places" (Clements 18) and is intertextually played against similar urban descriptions in other Crimp's plays, but after the bland and generic opening images, Clair's description turns more lyrical, describing a secret view within this imaginary place, a whole city contained in a raindrop, a *mise en abyme* creating recurring infinitesimal copies of itself and endlessly deferring any stable meaning, a compression that is ultimately no different from pulverisation – which becomes evident when Clair finally reaches it, finding that "there were no inhabitants, just dust" (*The City* 120). In terms of its ultimate fate, Clair's city is therefore "rather like the city of Jenny's secret war" (Clements 18) – destroyed and annihilated. The spatial imagery thus plays on the fragile boundary between creation and destruction, tying in with Crimp's observation of a "connection between attempting to write and attempting to destroy oneself or others" (Sierz, *Theatre of Martin Crimp* 90). Rachel Clements also picks up on this triangulation in her discussion of domestic space in the play, which turns increasingly threatening, until "[t]he world that is demolished is simultaneously the city and the home and the psyche and, indeed, the play itself" (19):

> … the house seems to have turned on its inhabitants; as soon as the possibility of the children being locked, or locking themselves, into the playroom has been voiced, it becomes reality – the key, once imagined,

> turns in the lock. The city is turned to dust, the house becomes dangerous from the inside out and, in the play's final moments, as Chris reads out Clair's diary, the characters and world of the play fracture, fall apart, and – like 'the people who are left' – cling on. (18)

Clements also highlights the intertextual link between *The City* and the earlier *Cruel and Tender* (2004), a play that dramatises the resonances between Sophocles' *Trachiniae* and the War on Terror. The link between the plays is signalled through the repetition of the highly peculiar lexical choice from *The City*: "We wanted that city *pulverised* – and I mean literally pulverised – the shops, the schools, the hospitals, the libraries, the bakeries, networks of fountains, avenues of trees, museums – we wanted that so-called city turned – as indeed it now has been – irreversibly to dust" (20-21, emphasis added). At the end of *Cruel and Tender*, a character named Laela (a name that reappears in *The City*) reads a quote from Hesiod: "Men will turn the cities of other men to dust without reason" (52), and its prophetic tone resonates not only through the text of *The City*, but through the present at large, as the "images of pulverizing and of dust connect the ancient world and the modern" (Clements 16), casting human history as a continuum of death and destruction.

Finally, Clements shows how the references to cities in *Attempts on Her Life* – Florence, Paris, London, Berlin – "morph into 'the' city of the scenario; their differences effaced or masked by the monuments that – in this moment, at least – tie the ideas of these places together. The speakers create a city that contains all of these monuments; the synecdoche performs a takeover" (15). Similarly, in *The Country* the ancient monument is present as an idea of a monument rather than a specific object – Richard and Corinne discuss visiting "the Wall" and "the Fell", and it is mostly referred to simply as "the stone", in a curious erasure of its man-made status. If in *Attempts on Her Life* the Duomo of Florence and Nelson's Column stand for the idea of the city, in *The Country* the unspecified monument is an empty vessel readily imbued with meanings and significations. In the play, we witness two such acts of meaning-making – Rebecca and Corinne, mistress and wife, both sit on the stone throne and the act seems transformational. Rebecca becomes one with the stone, in a kind of communion, experiencing a "congruence . . . between the arms: the arms of the stone, and the arms of… [f]lesh" (*The Country* 27). Ultimately, however, the meaning of the stone and its relevance remain unstable and beyond reach.

Rebecca's experience may be a drug-induced vision, a self-important affectation of a historian in training, or a cathartic cleansing in the wilderness, since her body is associated with the urban – when the affair with Richard started, her "body… became the city" (*The Country* 54). On the other hand, Corinne's experience is portrayed as a moment of insight that pierces through the carefully constructed pretence of her marital life, but this is both short-lived and difficult to read against the other meanings produced by the image of the stone throne in the context of the play. In the closing scene, it is revealed that she has visited the ancient stone as well: to get there, she has to leave her car behind and walk along a track that turns increasingly wild. Once she reaches the stone, its starts to "devour [her] heart" (80). For a moment, this seems to lead to a violent revelation: "When I get up from this stone, what I my heart has gone? What if I have to spend the rest of my life simulating love?" (*The Country* 81). Crimp's imagery here feels both strikingly bizarre and deeply elemental. Corinne goes out into nature, leaving behind signs of human civilisation – that these signs are featured as litter is a telling detail – and approaches the ancient monument, a stone styled like an old throne, a portal to a different human world. This contact has a profoundly transformational effect; she feels devoured, evoking images of ritual sacrifices and cannibalism alike. The scene reads like a liminal experience, a rite of passage for Corinne, as she has a deeply unsettling vision of the true nature of her marriage as a simulation. However, the effect of the vision is undercut by the fact that it is retold after the fact, when it is clear that the games of evasion will continue, and the final image of Richard and Corinne suggests both a deadlock of wills and a broader sense of stasis, reinforced by recurrent images and motifs – the exchange about the taste of water, the use of the word "solicitous". There is a hint of metatheatricality here, as one of the neighbours, Morris, is called "a character", and Richard is "very definitely a character – but a very different character" (81), anticipating the metatheatrical denouement of *The City*, but how this ties in with the other dramatic strands is less obvious. Ultimately then, the closing image serves to highlight the essential elusiveness of meaning in the play, which is anything but firm and solid, and pushes against the more stable interpretive framework implied by the conventional form of the play.

Like *The City*, *The Country* is essentially devoid of people, showing the central couple almost in a social vacuum. The children exist, but are never seen, Sophie, the poor neighbour who looks after them, is there on the other side of

the telephone line, but is never actually heard, and neither is Morris, another neighbour and Richard's fellow doctor. The only other character who makes an appearance is Rebecca, and she provides a Pinteresque intrusion on the seemingly safe space of the couple's home – only in Crimp, the domestic space was never safe to begin with. The last scene takes place two months after Rebecca's visit, and at first, it seems that the couple have reconciled and moved on – it is Corinne's birthday, the house is "*transformed by daylight*" (59), Richard has promised to keep clean, Rebecca is not mentioned at all. But the atmosphere quickly turns sinister again, as the dialogue becomes increasingly incoherent and cannot agree on basic facts – was Richard asleep or awake during the night, or maybe he was "just pretending to be awake" (61)? *The Country* can be read as a dramatisation of marital power games, and Middeke takes that perspective as well, as the scenes untangle a web of deceit and evasion which involves all three characters who appear on stage. In the course of the play, we discover not only Rebecca's true identity as Richard's lover, but also the true reason behind the couple's move to the country, which is not meant to facilitate Richard's abstinence, but to further enable his affair with Rebecca, who moves to the area to research its history. For Middeke, the references to the game of rock-paper-scissors read as "an acid comment the power games taking place in Richard and Corinne's dying marriage, which seems utterly corroded by suspicion and betrayal" (112), but this reading does not account for the pervading air of unreality and the bizarre. Rock and scissors both appear as props in the world of the play, as both Corinne and Rebecca are seen cutting with scissors (and hurting themselves or someone else), and the rock becomes the ancient stone throne they visit. Is paper History then, since this is the last word of Scene III, which ends with a reference to paper? Or does it stand for texts in general – including the play itself? What is the significance of this, particularly in relation to Richard and Corinne's marriage? These questions remain unanswered in this reading, since it approaches the play as if it were an essentially realist text, where the images are used symbolically, but still refer back to a realist storyworld. Clearly, this is not the case. This is not to say that *The Country* does not seek to portray marital failure, but the oddity of the relationship between Richard and Corinne cannot be reduced to simple psychological manipulation or mind games. A similar ruse can be found in the fact that Rebecca is styled as a historian. This appears significant at first, but is arguably just one in a series of smokescreens raised by the text. In the context of Corinne and Richard's marriage, she is the disruptive external element who

reveals uncomfortable truths for both of them, a voice demanding to speak and to be heard – but what she is saying is less clear. She makes a lofty pronouncement that "the opposite of History is surely – forgive me – ignorance" (*The Country* 34). However, History with a capital H is bound to be read ironically, as a grand narrative exposed as empty and deceitful. History in the play is associated with the Virgilian ideal, leading Michael Billington to read *The Country* as an "assault on the pastoral myth" (qtd. in Middeke 112), and Middeke concurs, but, as before, this interpretation appears structurally unsound. If Rebecca is the exponent of the pastoral myth which is assaulted and deconstructed, how are we to read the ending of the play? We do not learn what has happened to Rebecca, but she remains there as a ghostly presence in Scene V, as Morris finds her gold watch, a prominently consumerist image she has been associated with from the start. Has the myth itself been corrupted and persists only as an American blonde who shoots up and reads Latin? Has it been dismantled before the onslaught of death-driven millennial urbanisation embodied in Richard? None of these readings really hold up against the fractured, incoherent logic of the play. Crimp has described his ideological position as "universally critical" (interview with Sierz, qtd. in "Form Follows Function", 390), and from that perspective, yes, the pastoral myth can be seen as one of his targets. But so can everything else. The play offers clues pointing to other possible interpretative lanes – for instance, Richard neglects his duty as a physician and lets a patient die, but this particular element of plot fizzles out in a particularly anticlimactic resolution, as Morris covers up for him. This suggests that this particular plotline is not meant to be explored in depth, but is included as another red herring regarding the true meaning of the play. It adds to the overall impression of disintegration and adds commentary on the social universe represented in the play, but it is not what the play is *about*.

In this respect, Crimp both reflects other transgressive approaches and departs from them. The elusive nature of meaning and interpretation do not translate into ethical relativism or moral ambivalence; if anything, they serve to underscore Crimp's critique of contemporary life. Likewise, they do not indicate a crisis of representation or communication, but a sharper, more uncomfortable and less cooperative vehicle of expression. Crimp has commented on this tendency in an interview with Aleks Sierz:

> I get irritated when people, probably influenced by European philosophy, talk about language being a barrier to communication. And they ask me whether my plays are about a failure to communicate. And I always say, 'No, I don't think so.' They are all about communicating. Obviously, some of my characters would prefer, at certain moments, not to communicate, but that doesn't mean they can't. (Sierz, *Theatre of Martin Crimp* 105)

The same could be said of Crimp's plays – they are all about communicating, but would prefer, at certain moments, not to, at least not in ways we expect them to. This in itself raises questions the nature of transgressive theatrical or literary idiom at large, especially regarding the associations between formal experimentation, linguistic transgression and cultural subversion. Crimp's plays effect all three, but at the same time, they consistently defy expectations concerning what a transgressive piece should be like. In *Attempts on Her Life*, Crimp goes to the limits of current theatrical practice and beyond in order to look back on the cultural and social practices he finds fault with, but that much is clear, and this intention is made evident by the highly innovative form he devises. Despite all of this, critics have found the play limited in terms of content (Luckhurst 59). In *The Country* and *The City*, on the other hand, he takes a journey to the centre of the normosphere, formally and thematically, and tears it apart, co-opting and transforming highly stereotypical social and cultural landscapes into deeply unsettling, unwieldy and inscrutable narratives that communicate in fractured discourse, not because they are unable to, but because this is part of the message they are seeking to communicate. They work by peeling through layers of convention until their fictional dramatic world is stripped bare and the impression is one of looking at an animated skull. For this reason, these plays do not engage with transgression by dealing in the carnivalesque; instead, they offer a disturbing, deeply transgressive vision of the realm beyond the carnival, where the binaries and hierarchies are still upheld, but snap and crumble under their own weight, until they are perceived as profoundly unnatural. The fact that *The Country* and *The City* have been mostly received as Crimp's more conventional, calmer, and ultimately less exciting works, speaks more about our notions of transgressivity than the plays themselves.

FICTION

Arijana Luburić-Cvijanović

EXPERIMENT AND TRANSGRESSION FROM MARY SHELLEY'S *FRANKENSTEIN* (1818) TO JEANETTE WINTERSON'S *FRANKISSSTEIN* (2019): TOWARDS POSTHUMAN HORIZONS

experiment *n*.
A test under controlled conditions that is made to demonstrate a known truth, examine the validity of a hypothesis, or determine the efficacy of something previously untried.

The process of conducting such a test; experimentation.

An innovative act or procedure.

The result of experimentation.

transgression *n*.
A violation of a law, principle, or duty.
The exceeding of due bounds or limits.

The Free Dictionary

Test and testing; act, procedure, process, and result; something previously untried and innovative. In all these senses, experiment is an example of transgression. In crossing boundaries, pushing limits, and journeying into uncharted territory, experiment inspires a sense of adventure and danger. Like the creation of William Blake's tiger, which is itself an experiment in divine-biological-artistic creation and literary form, it requires ability, skill, inspiration, imagination, ambition, talent, determination, and, above all, courage. An experimenter is a revolutionary figure who defies conventions, breaks rules, flouts taboos, takes risks, and embraces perils. A violator of established laws, principles and duties, disrespectful of due bounds and limits. In short, a Prometheus, a Lucifer, a Faustus, a Frankenstein.

In different cultures and traditions – Judaeo-Christian, Hebraic, Hellenic – transgression and rebellion signal "the birth of the imagination" (Booker 3), and the birth of the imagination is also the birth of art and literature. Transgression and experiment are then crucial to artistic and literary creation, and "the transgression of boundaries" can be understood as

"an essential feature of literariness" (Booker 3). By no means does this imply that a work of art or a literary piece needs to be transgressive, experimental and subversive to merit the name. Numerous artistic and literary creations remain safely within the boundaries of convention, but it is those that do not which propel art and literature in new directions. What deviates from the norm gives birth to novelty, and novelty is at the heart of the word "novel".

> ORIGIN mid 16th cent.: from Italian *novella* (*storia*) "new (story)", feminine of *novello* "new", from Latin *novellus*, from *novus* "new". The word is also found from late Middle English until the 18th cent. in the sense "a novelty, a piece of news", from Old French *novella*. (NOED 1268)

Precisely how the novel was new is a matter for discussion in a large number of existing studies on the early development of the genre. Of importance here is that, among the many novelties which it brought into existence, the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century novel in English was characterised by experimentation and transgression from the outset. Ranging from less experimental texts, like Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740), to those which are considered the forebears of postmodernism, like Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759), early novels experimented with genre, form, language, and content.

In little more than a century after the appearance of the first novels, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) took experimentation and transgression to the next level. Written in an era of major scientific advancements, the Industrial Revolution and political upheavals, and inspired by all of them, *Frankenstein* was one of the first daringly transgressive fictions in the history of the novel, which marked an important shift away from "the fear of corrupted aristocracy or clergy . . . to the fear embodied by monstrous bodies" (Halberstam 16). This profoundly influential narrative was conceived of by an eighteen-year-old woman whose mind was equally honed by the scientific, economic and political turmoil of her time, and by the radical ideas that she was exposed to while growing up in the household of the late feminist and human rights advocate Mary Wollstonecraft and political anarchist William Godwin. At that time, women did not receive formal education, for what good was an education if they were thought to have smaller

brains. "The assumption was that women didn't have the brains for serious study – and when they did have the brains, too much concentration made them crazy, ill, or lesbian." (Winterson, *12 Bytes* 12) Luckily, Mary Shelley's father thought otherwise. Born of "a hyena in petticoats" (read: free-thinking woman with brains) in a time when women writers published secretly, anonymously or under pseudonyms, Mary Shelley was a revolution in the making and her novel, from today's point of view, "a message in a bottle" (Winterson, *12 Bytes* 9).

Frankenstein has often been eulogised as an originator of two hugely popular literary genres of the modern age: the Gothic and science fiction. Synthesising them when the former was experiencing an upsurge in response to the Enlightenment's obsession with the rational and the latter was only beginning to emerge under the influence of modern science and technology, and at the same time using different forms and points of view, *Frankenstein* was certainly innovational. Its greatest value, however, far transcends matters of genre, form, point of view, or literature generally, lying instead in the prophetic nature of its groundbreaking ideas. To start with, *Frankenstein* was inspired by lectures and discussions on the origins of life, the early development of machine technology, the ideas of liberty and equality, and the latest scientific research, especially the experiments of Luigi Galvani and his nephew, Giovanni Aldini, who galvanised a human corpse. Mary Shelley combined all of this to offer a twist on the Judeo-Christian premise that "human existence as we know it began in a fundamental act of transgression" (Booker 1). In the novel, this fundamental act of transgression is made possible by science and it resonates with politics: life is created by the mad scientist who is also the archetypal figure of the age, the Promethean revolutionary. His project, however, is stripped of nobility as it is in line with that of bourgeois capitalism and colonial imperialism, both of which exploit nature and treat the body as a tool (Mellor 112-13). The revolutionary proponent of modern science in Mary Shelley's novel is also a fanatical usurper who devotes his life to the kind of scientific research that "attempts to *control* or *change* the universe through human intervention" (Mellor 90). His creation, then, is manipulated nature, but also the exploited worker and the disposable slave. Yet the novel's critique offers more than a comment on the economic and political realities of the Romantic era. Discussing Nick Dear's and Danny Boyle's 2011 theatrical production *Frankenstein*, Anne Mellor reminds us that both the

play and the novel go beyond any single context in showing "how a monster is created by society, by social rejection rather than by a single scientist" (*Frankenstein* Then and Now 17:55-17:58). Around that premise, Mary Shelley built her story of the uses and abuses of science, responsibility and social demonisation, whose political, social and bioethical concerns reach through centuries to our own time.

Like her contemporary, Ada Lovelace, mathematical genius and the world's first computer programmer, Mary Shelley "recognised a decisive shift in the fundamental framing of what it means to be human" (Winterson, *12 Bytes* 10). On one hand, Shelley's thorough personal understanding of what it means to be the Other as a woman in a patriarchal culture empowered her to expose the "dialectics of otherness" that pathologises all modes of embodiment except the Humanist Man, and relegates them to the domain of monstrosity: "non-white, non-masculine, non-normal, non-young, non-healthy, disabled, malformed or enhanced" (Braidotti 68). On the other, she foresaw the numerous changes, enabled by science and technology, in the conceptualisation of the human and of embodiment. These intersecting alleys of thought render *Frankenstein* more relevant than it has ever been. In view of persistent racism, xenophobia, sexism, and, more recently, transphobia and technophobia, Shelley's considerations of social ostracism, of life made rather than born, of responsibility, ethics and scientific possibilities, all anticipate the many questions raised by contemporary social sciences, humanities, artificial intelligence, brain science, genetic engineering, and biotechnology. For that reason, Jeanette Winterson, whose fiction *Frankissstein* (2019) takes its cue from Shelley, sees *Frankenstein* as much more than an early example of science fiction, Gothic fiction, or a novel by a woman about what would become "the world's most famous monster" (*12 Bytes* 9). In a century that witnessed scientific research by Georges Cuvier, Friedrich Wilhelm Herschel, William Smith, Christian Konrad Sprengel, and others revaluating "the orthodox Linnaean concept of an immutable physical universe" (Mellor 96), Mary Shelley recognised the potential of science and technology to radically alter human perception of and relationship with the universe, as well as the very concept of the human. To unlock that potential, science and technology put their faith in experimentation.

If early scientific experimentation was associated with the supernatural, with alchemy and blasphemy, it also gave rise to modern science that has likewise, to a degree, been characterised by secrecy and fascination with the forbidden despite scientific claims to transparency and objectivity, which cause continued concern, as Sandra Harding reminds us (*Objectivity and Diversity* ix). Contemporary examples of illegal experiments, such as those in gene editing performed by Dr He Jiankui, and research that stretches ethical horizons, like Renewal Bio's work on creating "embryo-stage versions of people in order to harvest tissues for use in transplant treatments" (Regalado), verify that twenty-first-century experimentation is still a site of transgression. The scientific experiment remains an act of testing limits, venturing into the unknown and defying what those who share Victor Frankenstein's inclinations see as the tyranny of the permitted. As if to confirm that, the modern scientist in both Shelley's and Winterson's fictions is at the same time Prometheus, "the creator and/or saviour of man and the long-suffering rebel against tyranny", and Faustus, an "embodiment of hubris" (Mellor 71, 94). Two centuries apart, these texts show Frankenstein simultaneously pushing the boundaries of knowledge and breaking rules, so that his science mounts a challenge to the human, the natural and the ethical, proving Donna Haraway's point that "natural science . . . provides the instruments of domination of the body and the community" (43). In different contexts, repercussions for the body and community are explored by Shelley and intimated by Winterson through focus on experimentation that raises serious ethical concerns. Referencing "recent advances in the sciences of evolution, chemistry, and electricity, as well as cutting-edge medical practices such as dissection, transplantation, anatomical preservation, galvanism, and blood transfusion" (Hunt Botting 10), Shelley examines the consequences of Frankenstein's taboo experiment. Similarly, drawing on breakthroughs in cryopreservation, computing and robotics, Winterson outlines areas of concern while highlighting the positive aspects of transhumanist applications of science and technology, which do not yet demonstrate that "[t]he merger of the human with the technological results in a new transversal compound, a new kind of eco-sophical unity" (Braidotti 92) but suggest that this may be possible in the future.

Although Shelley did not describe her vision as transhumanist or posthumanist, she most certainly recognised the necessity for that kind of unity. Imagining the conduction and aftermath of a highly controversial

experiment, her novel exposes the dangers of human exceptionalism and the consequences of treating Other bodies as expendable. At the same time, it probes into the moral and ethical implications of Frankenstein's obsessive wish to bring dead matter back to life. While he appropriates the attributes of God and mother, Frankenstein perverts religious creation theories and scientific evolution theories at a single stroke. Using dead bodies to create life, Shelley's mock God plays with taboo, simultaneously usurping her own position of a motherless child and questioning childbearing as a woman's prerogative. As he seeks "to penetrate nature and show how her hidden womb works" as well as "to steal or appropriate that womb" (Mellor 112), Frankenstein echoes capitalist exploitation of nature and applies science to *produce* life. His product/creation is entirely independent of female participation and literally man-made, but its monstrosity is evidence of the scientist's failure of imagination:

> How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips. (Shelley 50)

Contrary to Frankenstein's painfully unrealistic expectations, the Creature's appearance contradicts the Enlightenment's ideals of beauty found in proportion and symmetry, evidencing that "[t]he monster always represents the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries" (Halberstam 27). Instead, the Creature appears grotesque and uncanny in being familiar yet strange, human yet non-human, assembled from decomposing body parts yet alive. Frankenstein's disappointment at the outcome directly responds to Erasmus Darwin's revised scientific observation that it is the male rather than the female imagination which determines the outstanding traits of the child, including therefore those perceived as monstrous (Mellor 98-99). The Creature's monstrosity inspires "breathless horror and disgust" (Shelley 50) in Frankenstein, leading him to abandon his product/creation/child: "rather than

clasping his newborn child to his breast in a nurturing maternal gesture, he rushes out of the room" (Mellor 41), leaving both the Creature and the society into which the Creature is released to fend for themselves. Frankenstein's denial of parental responsibility can also be read in the larger context of a "failure of empathy" (Mellor 42) for his creation and the world, which translates into his carelessness as a scientist. His experiment shows no respect for nature, life, death, the body, or society, so its monstrous result comes as no surprise. That the entire society, rather than any single human, is responsible for this lack of empathy, is confirmed by the Creature's subsequent rejection by all except, crucially, a blind man. Like Todd Phillips's film *Joker* (2019), released in the same year when Winterson published *Frankissstein*, *Frankenstein* reveals that monstrosity and pathology are not only accidents of birth or results of a single man's mistakes. They are systematically produced by social factors and a collective lack of empathy that can and should be counteracted.

Shelley's considerations, however, are not entirely pessimistic. In spite of a prevailing sense of misery and tragedy, the novel hints at the future possibilities of science and technology, which provides the strongest link with today's world and Winterson's fiction. In Winterson's own words, Shelley envisions a decidedly modern "transhuman creature, swifter and stronger than biological humans, a being able to withstand cold and hunger", whose "capacity to learn would now be understood as cognitive enhancement" (*12 Bytes* 126). The birth of modern technology and the scientific revolution of Shelley's time were the first steps towards "the point where human beings are able to manipulate life-forms in ways previously reserved only to nature and chance" (Mellor 114), so Frankenstein attempts to overcome the limitations of embodiment and, to that end, searches for a way to reconfigure the human body. Inspired by a wish that is not altogether dissimilar from Frankenstein's, throughout her oeuvre, Winterson looks into the mutability of the body and identity, focusing more and more commonly on "[c]ommunications technologies and biotechnologies" as "the crucial tools recrafting our bodies" (Haraway 164). After a thorough exploration of gender play, fluidity and transformation, online identity fabrication, and cosmopolitan belongings,[1]

[1] For more on that, see Luburić-Cvijanović and Krombholc, "What appears is not what is"; Luburić-Cvijanović, "The Internet as a Space of Fantastic Reinvention"; and Luburić-Cvijanović and Krombholc, "Atom and Dream".

Winterson's latest fiction, *Frankissstein*, substitutes cryopreservation, robotics and surgery for Frankenstein's reliance on chemistry and electricity. Her careful scrutiny of the advantages and pitfalls of contemporary science and technology manifests a concern with what Shelley all but prophesied two centuries earlier: the "bio-genetic structure of contemporary capitalism" that "both invests and profits from the scientific and economic control and the commodification of all that lives" (Braidotti 59). Hence Winterson's interest in bio-technological interventions, whole body and neuro cryopreservation (currently offered by the life extension foundation Alcor), the now still theoretical concept of mind uploading, the widely available sex bots, and gender confirmation surgery. All of these presuppose, and depend on, advanced capitalism's commodification and control of human *material*.

Control over life, death and the body provides the starting point for Frankenstein's experiment and for Shelley's consideration of "natural as opposed to unnatural modes of production and reproduction" (Mellor 40). *Frankisssstein* takes this consideration further to debate the distinction between the natural and unnatural, the natural and artificial in a time when life is so thoroughly modified and dictated by technology. A strand of Romanticism which developed in Germany in Shelley's time claimed that the artificial *was* the natural for the modern man. What then are the natural and the artificial for the twenty-first-century human, and "[w]hat is real life these days" (Winterson, *Frankisssstein* 51)? If "[l]ate twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed" (Haraway 152), twenty-first-century science and technology have considerably strengthened the connection between machine and organism. While fully aware of the possible and real dangers of technology and connectivity – "Broadband internet was city-wide across the world by 2000. That felt like a true new beginning for a true new century. And look what happened next." (*12 Bytes* 63) – Winterson takes a brighter view of our technologically mediated reality to explore its promising possibilities and potentials. "Modern Western sciences and their technologies have always been regarded with both enthusiasm and dread" (Harding, *Whose Science* 2), so responding to dystopic, post-apocalyptic and technophobic ideas of a world without humans or one ruled by technology, Winterson's positive, though not naïve, futuristic perspective imagines "the *world-as-it-could-be*" (Hunt Botting 15), enhanced and less divided.

The idea of enhancement emerges in the opening pages of *Frankissstein*, which imagine Mary Shelley on Lake Geneva in 1816, when the story of Victor Frankenstein and his Creature first started to form in her mind. Among the many seemingly unrelated reflections of Winterson's fictional Mary is that human skin is "inadequate" in "pitiless" nature and that, except for the ability to think, she as a human is "a poor specimen of a creature" (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 3), one in need of improvement. Winterson takes this as the thought that eventually inspired Shelley to write a creature fit to survive in the harshness of nature but sadly ill-equipped to deal with human cruelty. Winterson revives the turbulent context that engendered Shelley's creature – the shackles of patriarchal culture that "limit the active principle of a female" (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 318), allowing Shelley's identification with her ostracised Creature; the fascination with the supernatural, which contradicted the era's obsession with order, logic and reason; and the political, scientific and technological revolutions that opened up new vistas for humans – only to repeatedly remind us that scientific and technological advancement does not presuppose moral or spiritual progress. With that in mind, Winterson transports Shelley's enhanced Creature, "the first non-human intelligence" (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 27), to the scientifically and technologically advanced twenty-first century, which is still haunted by social pathologies that produce inequality and discrimination. Winterson juxtaposes different historical points characterised by experimentation and persecution: Frankenstein's fictional eighteenth-century experiments, the historical reality of nineteenth-century Bedlam, the Second World War experiences of geniuses Irving John Good and Alan Turing (the former marked as a Polish Jew and the latter as a homosexual), and today's developments in science and technology against the backdrop of gender and other forms of discrimination. This also allows her to revisit Shelley's idea that "[d]etached from a respect for nature and from a strong sense of moral responsibility for the products of one's research, purely objective thought and scientific experimentation can and do produce monsters" (Mellor 94), Frankensteins and their creations. So, Shelley's concern with the spirit, "conscience" and "scruples" against an "interest in the future" that follows the maxim "[t]he light of science burns brightest in a blood-soaked wick" (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 20) should be read in view of its social implications. Switching between contexts, Winterson demonstrates that the entire history of scientific experimentation should be read in that manner as it

proves a worrying truth: "science is not immunised against nationalist, racist and hegemonic discourses and practices" (Braidotti 32).

Shelley's Frankenstein belongs to a long line of fictional and historical scientists, regarded first as natural philosophers and then as scientists since the mid-nineteenth century, as Harding reveals (*Objectivity and Diversity* x), who disregard their moral and social responsibilities, while also epitomising science as a white bourgeois male privilege. That privileged white males have continued to dominate science and technology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is illustrated by examples in both Harding and Winterson which are too numerous to list here. Yet Frankenstein is a product of his time and possesses redeemable qualities that contradict Mellor's assessment of him as "a calculated inversion of the eighteenth-century 'man of feeling'" (108) because, despite his moral failings, Shelley's novel presents him as a man whose ability to feel is extraordinary. In Robert Walton's opinion, Frankenstein is "so noble a creature destroyed by misery" and Walton's discussion of his own projects is "led by the sympathy which [Frankenstein] evinced", the same sympathy that produces a strong emotional reaction when Frankenstein realises that they are like-minded:

> As I spoke, a dark gloom spread over my listener's countenance. At first I perceived that he tried to suppress his emotion; he placed his hands before his eyes, and my voice quivered and failed me as I beheld tears trickle fast from between his fingers; a groan burst from his heaving breast. (Shelley 19)

In truth, Walton is yet another privileged white male invested in Western bourgeois male projects, which undoubtedly conditions his perception of Frankenstein. Nevertheless, Shelley clearly emphasises Frankenstein's extraordinary sensibility for he is a visionary, and Winterson revives that sensibility by narrating Professor Victor Stein's relationship with Ry, in what she suggestively subtitles a love story, and emphasising an artistic streak in the otherwise rational and pragmatic character. The ever-tighter union which the renowned AI specialist and transhumanist embodies – that between science and technology on one hand, and art on the other – is already implied in the Greek word *tekhnē* 'art': "From Prometheus to Plato, techne applied as much to the writing of poetry as to the implements of scientific discovery or

engineering." (Hunt Botting 10) Both Shelley's Frankenstein and Winterson's Stein are scientific/technological visionaries *and* artists, who believe "that *Homo sapiens* was always *Homo faber*, man as maker, the user of tools, of which the body was the first" (Nayar 34), and therefore always associated with technology. The visionaries' imaginations bring them dangerously close to madness, and their interests are bound together through *tekhnē* with Winterson's love of technology and experiment, scientific and literary.

While it thematically focuses on the present and future possibilities of AI and cryopreservation, *Frankissstein* also serves as an example of literary experimentation and transgression as the themes' formal expression. With its dispersed structure, plot and spatiotemporality, lack of character development or a sense of closure, the text defies classification as a novel and confirms Winterson's belief that her narratives should be called fictions rather than novels. In that sense, experiment and transgression characterise quite literally Winterson's entire oeuvre, from its generic and formal aspects through its subversion of norms and expectations concerning gender, sexuality, and family to its examination of boundaries (among others, male/female, history/fiction, physical place/virtual space, human/non-human). The triangle art, literature and/or science and technology, thoroughly explored in works such as *Art & Lies* (1994) and *The PowerBook* (2000), firmly roots *Frankissstein* in Shelley's idea that both literature and science "are grounded on the use of metaphor and image" (Mellor 89), which particularly affected the bodies of gendered, racialised and naturalised Others. Thematically and formally, both Shelley's and Winterson's literary experiments indicate that the body is a site of scientific, technological and social experimentation.

In *Frankenstein* and *Frankissstein*, literary, scientific and technological experiment are inextricably related to embodiment and bodily transgression. Like the bodies of the two texts, assembled from diverse elements (various points of view, forms, settings, characters, stories, narrative modes), the bodies of characters in these fictions are scientifically, technologically or medically fashioned from disparate parts (several decomposing bodies,[2] male-female

[2] The connection between the text of *Frankenstein* and the Creature's body has already been noted by Chris Baldick in the study *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing* (1987), and by Judith Halberstam in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (1995).

and human-machine). All of this suggests the body's *construction*: with the help of different instruments, the Creature is made in Frankenstein's lab, transgender Ry is transformed in an operating theatre,[3] and sex bots are produced in a factory. Winterson reminds us that production initially alienated humans when the Industrial Age turned woman, man and child into hands, and enabled the machine to dominate human life. Her fictional Mary understands a fundamental similarity thus established between "the wretched [human] *creature*" and machine:

> I visited a manufactory in Manchester with my father. I saw that the wretched creatures enslaved to the machines were as repetitive in their movements as the machines. They were distinguished only by their unhappiness. The great wealth of the manufactories is not for the workers but for the owners. Humans must live in misery to be the mind of the machines. (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 59)

Criticising exploitation in nineteenth-century factories, Mary demonstrates the increasingly "leaky distinction . . . between animal-human (organism) and machine" (Haraway 152). Within the context of economic exploitation, trade wars and control over the means of production, production is discussed in Winterson's narrative in relationship to commodification, and is most persuasively illustrated by the interconnections among the body, sexuality, robotics, and mass production in the lucrative sex bot business, which caters to human fascination with automata and sex. All three bodies in these texts, the Creature's, Ry's and sex bot's are enabled by technology, exemplifying some among many possible encounters between the body and machine. The texts also indicate that "how we perceive the body is a function of our level of technology" (Synnott 30), and we increasingly see the body in terms of replaceable parts, so like the Creature, the sex bot comes in parts and needs to be assembled, while Ry is reassembled or rearranged.[4] The resulting

[3] Emphasis on the constructedness of Ry's body does not treat the trans body purely as "a constructed effect–whether figuring her or him as the pawn, victim, or dupe of medical technology" (Prosser 9). Saying that the body's rearrangement is *made possible* by medical technology does not dismiss transsexual agency.

[4] By aligning Ry with the Creature and the sex bot, and examining the body's constructedness, neither Winterson's considerations nor the present discussion wish to dehumanise the trans body. Trans bodies are not depicted as "the Frankensteins of modern technology's experiments with sexual difference" (Prosser 9), for to compare

estrangement – estrangement from what is experienced as living, human, whole, or male/female – looks back to the pervasive sense of alienation in nineteenth-century factories and forward to the perceived incongruence of the body subjected to ever more radical alterations ensured by technology.

The Creature defies the Enlightenment ideals of beauty and proportion, and embodies the abject as a living corpse. He is and is not a living organism whose grotesque appearance that represents "the monstrosity of surfaces" (Halberstam 1) encroaches upon the most fearsome taboo, that of death, reminding us of the fragility of the human body while foreshadowing the enticing yet intimidating potential to transcend its limitations via technology. If we agree with Judith Halberstam that Gothic fiction "produces the deviant subjectivities opposite which the normal, the healthy, and the pure can be known" (2), the Creature is precisely one such subjectivity, which serves as a repository of what is undesirable, unacceptable, repressed, and forbidden. As such, the Creature inspires fear, disgust and hostility. Similarly, Ry's body is a threat to order, it bears testimony to the technological power to overcome the limitations of human embodiment and constitutes a subjectivity outside the norm since it resists binary gender definition. Ry's gender ambiguity is signalled by their name – Ry is short for Mary rather than Ryan – and their trans body possesses male and female attributes. Both the name and the body cause reactions. Upon learning that Ry is short for Mary, Ron, the sex bot king, "falls silent while he processes this fact" (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 83) and insists on placing Ry within the only gender coordinates that he understands, the male and the female. On another occasion, Ry's hybridity receives superficial support from a journalist, who believes that "[i]t's a good look" because "[t]rans is hot right now" (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 96-97). For Victor, who keeps looking at and touching Ry "[a]s though he was scanning me" (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 119), Ry's appearance is a source of fascination and attraction, and an object of inspection. In those who feel deeply uncomfortable around Ry, whose body they perceive as a threatening monstrosity, it arouses hostility which rapidly escalates from verbal abuse to beating and rape. Like Ry, the sex bot provokes interest that is both sexual in nature and more general,

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them is not to equate them. The intention in both Winterson's fiction and this chapter is to look into what it means to be human and, more specifically, what it means to be gendered today, as well as to postulate that all bodies are to varying degrees socially constructed, while some are also technologically constructed.

as it closely resembles humans, exemplifying what is known as uncanny valley. The sex bot disrupts the clear boundary between human and machine, and mounts a challenge to family life: "The doll will shape the sexual and emotional landscape of everyone who lives around her perfectly groomed, just-there-to-please presence." (Winterson, *12 Bytes* 150) As such, the sex bot is an alternative "to sex workers . . . to a relationship with a woman . . . to women" (Winterson, *12 Bytes* 145), for the robotic doll is invariably compliant and shows no signs of bothersome intelligence. In that, Winterson takes us back to the expectations of Mary Shelley's time, which shaped the socially acceptable woman as inferior in intelligence, submissive and obedient. If nineteenth-century women were starved of options in

> being refused an education, being legally the property of a male relative . . . having no rights to vote, and no money of her own once married, and being barred from every profession except governess or nurse, and refused every employment except mother, wife or skivvy (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 318),

sex bots are even more so. They are disassemblable and disposable objects for male entertainment and satisfaction that pose a sexist threat to gender appreciation and equality.

Frankissstein's scrutiny of gender transgressivity expands on Winterson's usual concern with gender boundaries. From cross-dressing, gender ambiguity and play with gender expectations in *The Passion* (1987), *Written on the Body* (1992) and *Art & Lies* respectively, through gender transformation in *The PowerBook*, to transgender that provokes confusion, curiosity and hostility in *Frankissstein*, gender is a site of transgressive experimentation in Winterson's writing. Within the biology/culture framework, gender "was developed as a category to explore what counts as a 'woman'" (Haraway 147), so Ry questions what demarcates a woman or man, pointing to significant contemporary redefinitions of female and male embodiment. While highlighting the increasing complexity of gender, and precluding easy navigation through firmly established and seemingly clear givens, Ry's identity also contributes to Winterson's discussion of body and identity transformation and enhancement. Haraway argues for the concept's intricacy in her 1991 claim that

> the political and explanatory power of the "social" category of gender depends upon historicizing the categories of sex, flesh, body, biology, race, and nature in such a way that the binary, universalizing opposition that spawned the concept of the sex/gender system at a particular time and place in feminist theory implodes into articulated, differentiated, accountable, located, and consequential theories of embodiment, where nature is no longer imagined and enacted as resource to culture or sex to gender. (148)

However, in spite of the relevance of nuanced gender to the debate on experimentation and transgression in these fictions, to read Shelley's and Winterson's characters solely in terms of gender would result in oversimplification. Their multilayered identities escape definition as no single interpretation can exhaust them: Shelley's Creature has the propensity "to deconstruct at any time, to always be in the process of decomposition" (Halberstam 37) (literal or figurative), Ry escapes categorisation as male or female, and the sex bot questions the distinctions between the natural and the artificial, the human and the robotic. In that, all three pose the following question: How is the human (continually) reconceived within the framework of technology?

It might be worthwhile to repeat at this point that identity is shaped and reshaped by multiple forces within society and culture, and that it inevitably partly depends on the body for its definition. Why is this relevant here? Because state-of-the-art technology and medicine enable bodily transformations (and therefore identity readjustments) which were inconceivable for many centuries even though body modification (tattooing, scarification or piercing, for instance) is not a product of modern technology. As technoscience studies point out, technologically introduced or enhanced modifications are "prefigured in myth and legend, folk tales and animal fables in which the human/non-human boundaries are blurred" (Nayar 36). Admittedly, such modifications are more common in Western cultures and, in case they require significant resources, still mostly available to the privileged few. Nevertheless, they are also at times freed from particular cultural locations, so traditional body modifications transcend culture in a time of extensive cross-cultural pollination, and technological advances allow medicine worldwide to treat the body "as a site of perpetual intervention"

(Winterson, *12 Bytes* 93). The ever-widening palette of available services, which relies on "the humanist argument of self-actualization" (Nayar 33), includes interventions on bodies that feel inadequate or wrong (gender confirmation surgery, height enhancement surgery), bodies that require improvement on aesthetic grounds (cosmetic surgery), or those that do not function according to the norm (prostheses, IVF). Winterson ponders over how else the human might be reconceived when she discusses brain uploading: "Once you are pure data you can download yourself in a variety of forms" (*Frankissstein* 266), and that literally means any form, each and every one of which is customisable and fixable. Winterson's considerations also take into account the most painful limitation of embodiment: the body is time-bound. "As biological beings, humans are subject to time, most importantly our allotted span: we die" (Winterson, *12 Bytes* 3). However, endlessly improving technology is not, so we reach out to it in our attempt to overcome our dependence on the allotted span. For that reason, *Frankissstein* imagines a future beyond human embodiment, one in which it is at the same time possible to preserve the body (cryopreservation), transcend it and choose its form (brain uploading), and entirely free intelligence from the human body (AI). For now, AI helps or serves the human (body), cryopreservation of embryos, stem cells and organs depends on the body's materiality and proves that bodies are at times reduced to "their informational substrate in terms of materiality and vital capacity" as "carriers of vital information, which get invested with financial value and capitalized" (Braidotti 97, 117), and gendered embodiment (like racialised and naturalised embodiment) confirms the continued relevance of the body you are born in within the social, economic and political arenas.

Winterson thus expands Mary Shelley's examination of the body that is made/produced, as well as the social implications of non-normative embodiment. Both Shelley and Winterson reflect on creations that depend on electricity, but Shelley's Creature is body-bound, whereas Winterson discusses both embodied identities and non-embodied digital creations. This is undeniably a consequence of their different historical contexts, and the technological horizons that characterise them, so in view of contemporary technology, it is possible for Winterson to consider bio-enhanced embodiment and recast the age-old concept of a "disembodied state of consciousness" (Winterson, *12 Bytes* 97) as disembodied AI and, perhaps in a not so distant

future, disembodied, or reembodied, human intelligence that would pronounce the biological body obsolete. If this seems like a transhumanist fantasy, research and experiments are conducted in this direction and may someday enable what technorealists now see as far-fetched. In their different ways and historical moments, Shelley and Winterson show that the body is transformable and that "[w]e have perversely worshipped science" that enables bodily transformations; among other things, "by agreeing that 'nature' is our enemy and that we must control our 'natural' bodies" (Haraway 9). In both Shelley and Winterson, the need to control is balanced with a wish to improve, so Frankenstein takes extreme measures to solve the problem of death, Stein envisions a future in which technology augments or supersedes nature and dismisses binaries, while Ry is "part of a small group of transgender medical professionals", some of whom "are transhuman enthusiasts too" (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 104) because they understand the predicament of feeling/being in the wrong body. Even though it shows acute awareness of possible pitfalls, *Frankissstein* expresses clear transhumanist sentiments as it largely celebrates technological augmentation of the body and life. As it wonders about the nature of the human in the context of contemporary science and technology, while also speculating on the future features of the human, Winterson's fiction aligns itself with fiction that asks "what forms of the human are now extant and existent?" and "[w]hat comes after (post-) the human?" (Nayar 12). To address these questions in a world heavily dependent on microelectronics – "Microelectronics mediates the translations of labour into robotics and word processing, sex into genetic engineering and reproductive technologies, and mind into artificial intelligence and decision procedures." (Haraway 165) – Winterson chooses to focus on what can be gained from the vertiginous advances in technology. In truth, Stein is at times overly optimistic because his gaze is fixed solely on the future, so he pronounces that "binaries belong to our carbon-based past" (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 72) in spite of the persistent social rejection, in our still very much carbon-based present, of what is seen as non-normative and therefore often treated as expendable. Trapped in his own time, Stein is impatient for a change that will dilute the significance of race, gender, sexuality, religion, and the body, but this is a world that is yet to be created, not only because non-normativity is subject to discrimination, but also because, on the other hand, it is frequently worn with pride. The world that will hopefully be created, surely with the aid of technology, but even more so with the help of understanding, empathy and tolerance, is one in which

ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, and all other potential signs of otherness can become peacefully coexisting sources of strength. In intimating that world, *Frankissstein* is also more generally posthumanist.

Science and technology have fundamentally redefined the nature-culture continuum that Rosi Braidotti[5] uses as her starting point for outlining the posthuman predicament. Under the influence of technology, and because the categories of the subhuman produced by the Enlightenment, colonialism and capitalism still dictate the lives of millions, it is increasingly difficult to define the human. In all its complexity and evasiveness, "the concept of the human has exploded under the double pressure of contemporary scientific advances and global economic concerns" (Braidotti 1). At the same time, discourses and representations of "the non-human, the inhuman, the antihuman, the inhumane and the posthuman proliferate and overlap in our globalised, technologically mediated societies" (Braidotti 2), making it nearly impossible to clearly demarcate the human. This may be a cause of concern to some, but in the eyes of others it might be a potential gateway to a more inclusive posthuman reality. Created through conscious effort and in the spirit of "[*z*]*oe*-centred egalitarianism" (Braidotti 60), such a reality is a way to displace the human, end human exceptionalism, and proceed from the Anthropocene to an epoch that would be appreciative of all life forms. Instead of merely overcoming human embodiment,

> [c]ritical posthumanism sees embodiment as essential to the construction of the environment (the world is what we perceive it through our senses) in which any organic system (the human body is such a system) exists. But this embodiment is *embedded* embodiment, in which the human body is located in an environment that consists of plants, animals and machines. (Nayar 20)

In decentring the human and going beyond human labels and binaries, Winterson reaches for such posthuman horizons, and suggests that AI can but does not necessarily help create such a world. Namely, Ron, the creator of sex bots in *Frankissstein*, does not imagine the human-cum-bot universe as one that embraces its human and non-human heterogeneity. Thinking that it would

[5] Her work is indispensable for understanding posthumanism, both as an ontological condition and as a conceptualisation of the human (Nayar 13).

solve racism and Brexit, he proposes a rather insular "model for a new world" in which worker/helper bots would "all be Welsh"; an idea, in Stein's opinion, that Ron could sell well "to Hungary and Brazil. Or Trump. No Mexican bots" (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 276). To make the posthuman world a reality, its antagonistic forces need to be balanced and kept in check. To think that they could be entirely eradicated is illusory, so the posthuman future is not without flaws. Elsewhere in the fiction Winterson also points out that brain emulation, as well as augmented/super/uploaded humans do not benefit the human race, or the planet, if humans remain morally and spiritually unimproved: "with all the shit that comes with us . . . we are barely crawling out of the sea onto dry land. We are not ready for the future you want" (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 280). Hence the need for conscious effort in creating an appreciative posthuman future in which transhuman enhancement would aim for a "morally advanced human with greater abilities of empathy, selflessness and ethical responsibility" (Nayar 17), whose importance Shelley communicates in *Frankenstein*.

Mary Shelley highlights the necessity for both spiritual advancement and species egalitarianism when she all but foreshadows the posthumanist turn and contemporary transhumanist concerns with moral and ethical improvement. Shelley may appear contradictory in simultaneously expressing transhumanist and posthumanist views, for transhumanism relies on the concept of the human and human distinctiveness, whereas critical posthumanism aims to displace traditional conceptions of the human and human supremacy.[6] Yet her novel manages to strike a fine balance between a

[6] To understand the distinction between a moral transhumanist stand and a critical posthumanist one, it is worth quoting Pramod K. Nayar in full. "Critical posthumanism shifts away from the moral transhumanist position in one very significant way. Moral transhumanism believes we can accentuate and enhance specific human qualities (such as compassion) for the greater good of life on earth – but with this it retains a *very clear idea of the desirable qualities of the human*. The human is still the centre of all things desirable, necessary and aspirational. In the case of critical posthumanism, it treats the 'essential' attributes of the human as always already imbricated with other life forms, where the supposedly 'core' human features, whether physiology, anatomy or consciousness, have co-evolved with other life forms. Where moral transhumanism seeks enhancement of supposedly innate human features and qualities, critical posthumanism rejects the very idea of anything innate to the human, arguing instead for a messy congeries of qualities developed over centuries through the human's

celebration of bodily enhancement that clearly indicates the need for accompanying moral and ethical improvement, and a contestation of "the arrogance of anthropocentrism and the 'exceptionalism' of the Human as a transcendental category" (Braidotti 66), which create a world lacking in mutual tolerance and true equality. Aligning herself with what would become critical posthumanism and attempting to explain how science enforces anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism, Shelley models Frankenstein as a product of the seventeenth-century scientific revolution and then makes him the object of scrutiny. Frankenstein is "taught to see nature 'objectively' . . . as passive and even dead matter . . . that can and should be penetrated, analyzed, and controlled", and to accord nature "no living soul or 'personhood' requiring recognition or respect" (Mellor 110). His lack of appreciation and respect for nature feeds a convincing argument in favour of *zoe*-centred egalitarianism, which "strikes . . . an alliance with the productive and immanent force of *zoe*, or life in its non-human aspects" (Braidotti 66), and gains in significance in the context of ever-more pressing debates on climate crisis, ecological disaster and economic sustainability. Our collective lack of appreciation and respect for nature has resulted in a shared (human and non-human) vulnerability to threats, which has become a dominant negative determining factor in recognising the need for cooperation. Winterson reminds us that common threats presuppose any number of pessimistic scenarios: "It could be climate breakdown. It could be nuclear. It could be Trump or Bolsonaro. It could be *The Handmaid's Tale*."; or "[p]overty, disease, global warming, terrorism, despotism, nuclear weapons, gross inequality, misogyny, hatred of the stranger" (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 98, 204). As a first step towards a solution, in her study of the posthuman Braidotti expresses a belief in "new generations of 'knowing subjects' who affirm a constructive type of pan-humanity by working hard to free us from the provincialism of the mind, the sectarianism of ideologies, the dishonesty of grandiose posturing and the grip of fear" (11). As such generations are yet to rise, Shelley's and Winterson's texts can only intimate their arrival and emphasise the potential of positive relationships between non-humans and redefined humans.

interactions with the environment (which includes non-organic tools and organic life)." (22)

The human has always been "a normative convention" and, as such, "highly regulatory and hence instrumental to practices of exclusion and discrimination" (Braidotti 26). Different forms of antihumanism, such as feminist or postcolonial antihumanism, have sought to question humanist prioritisation of the human and restructure traditional concepts of the human to render the category more heterogeneous and nuanced. Despite clear antihumanist allegiances, Braidotti does not claim that humanism is all bad, while antihumanism and posthumanism are all good. Instead, her critical posthumanism "marks an end to the humanism/anti-humanism stalemate" (Zaag), and adopts decidedly positive posthumanist standpoints. Similarly, Shelley and Winterson move beyond strictly oppositional agendas in their examinations of what constitutes the human and what may come after the human. Whereas Shelley's bleak world only implies the possibility of positive alternatives, Winterson openly calls for a more inclusive category of the human in an era that sees the human scientifically, medically and technologically transformed, and for more balanced human-non-human relationships. At the same time, she exposes the deficiencies of the present moment – ecological disaster, political oppression, economic disparity, gender and racial discrimination, and violence – which could be overcome, at least to a degree, if the repeatedly emphasised human capacity for regeneration and adaptation were used to shape posthuman subjectivity. If we understand posthumanism as "the historical moment that marks the end of the opposition between Humanism and anti-humanism and traces a different discursive framework, looking more affirmatively towards new alternatives" (Braidotti 37), the search has to involve the question of (post)human subjectivity. This would enable us to identify alternative forms of human-non-human relationality and tackle the problems of shared vulnerability in "a period that appears to pervade all forms of planetary life with an unprecedented degree of indeterminacy" (Susen). It would also allow us to mobilise affirmative aspects of relationality found in a strong sense of collectivity, a sense built on an as yet unaccomplished concept of collectivity characterised by inclusivity, tolerance, respect, and solidarity as the basis for a posthuman community.

Simon Susen fails to understand Braidotti's return to the question of subjectivity[7] even though critical posthumanism focuses on the *posthuman* subject rather than the abandoned sovereign human subject, redefining human subjectivity as "an assemblage, co-evolving with machines and animals" (Nayar 19). On the other hand, Annette-Carina van der Zaag holds the view that the return to the subject compensates for what she sees as a lack of engagement with subjectivity in discussions of science, technology and advanced capitalism within science and technology studies. Braidotti defines the posthuman subject in the following way:

> I define the critical posthuman subject within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity, that is to say a subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated, but still grounded and accountable. Posthuman subjectivity expresses an embodied and embedded and hence partial form of accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality and hence community building. (49)

Significantly, the posthuman subject exists and should be perceived across different axes. Susen believes that the proliferation of words prefixed with "trans-" and "multi-" (transgender, trans-species, multi-species, trans-corporeality) exhibits the tendency to understand the posthuman subject transversally. Such an approach to subjectivity is certainly "worthy of the complexities of our age" (Braidotti 102) and is possibly the only one that aptly reflects these complexities, as Winterson's fiction illustrates. However, Braidotti's concept of subjectivity is undoubtedly unwieldy as the critical posthuman subject is defined in terms which are all-embracing (can any definition of the posthuman subject effectively include *all* humans, let alone *all life*?) and it is decidedly *human*.[8] An all-inclusive definition of the posthuman

[7] Likewise, he fails to clarify his stand: "it is far from clear why she wishes to hold on to the concept of 'the subject'" versus "owing to the Foucauldian presuppositions underpinning her approach, it makes sense for her to advocate a posthumanist and post-anthropocentric conception of 'subjectivity'" (Susen).

[8] This problem is well pointed out by Susen when he claims that "the notion of 'we' that lies at its core is both vague and presumptuous: it is vague because it is not clear whether it comprises *all* or only *some* living beings; at the same time, it is presumptuous because the contention that we are *all* in the process of becoming posthumanist and post-anthropocentric is far-fetched".

subject (involving human and non-human life forms) would fail to do justice to life forms' distinctiveness, peculiarities and heterogeneity, and it would potentially obscure persistently enforced inequalities among them. This is why the claim that we are all becoming posthumanist/post-anthropocentric is presumptuous. Like the idea that we are living in a post-racial world, it is also untrue. On the other hand, it is vital to strive for a posthumanist future and see the human from the critical posthumanist perspective in the larger context of other, equally valuable life forms, as "an instantiation of a network of connections, exchanges, linkages and crossings with all forms of life" (Nayar 14). This is the first step towards the posthuman as a lived reality.

The role and significance of technology in constructing and interpreting the posthuman is repeatedly stressed by critical posthumanism and intimated by both Shelley and Winterson. Owing to "the convergence of four key branches of techno-scientific expansion: (1) nanotechnology, (2) biotechnology, (3) information technology, and (4) cognitive science", traditional boundaries have blurred "between human and non-human aspects of life on Earth" (Susen). Technology itself, however, cannot ensure the creation of a posthuman world; a co-evolution of human and technology, which confirms and improves the human-inhuman/non-human bond, making room for moral and ethical as well as physical evolution, can. Two centuries after Shelley beckoned in that direction, we are only a little closer to a post-racial, postgender and posthuman society. As *Frankissstein* points out, that society is yet to be created because nationalism, racism and patriarchy have lately been on the rise. This is further evidenced by tendencies and events that have continued after the fiction's publication: the spreading and strengthening of right-wing politics, a continual rise in the killing of black people by the police in the United States, the 2022 abuse and murder of women and protesters by the Iranian morality police, and by the recent anti-abortion laws in Europe and the United States. Institutionalised racial and gender discrimination, homophobia, transphobia, and cancel culture[9] all instance what Winterson calls a "throwback" and a "refusal of the future" (*Frankissstein* 110).

If technology can help create a world beyond and outside binaries, for now it still sometimes reinforces them: software engineers like James Damore

[9] Cancel culture is listed here as a contemporary form of witch hunt and an example of intellectual dogmatism and policing that stifles freedom of thought and expression.

and Patrick Shyu publicly belittle women in technology, while artificial intelligence is taught on biased data sets. Amazon recruitment algorithm was discarded in 2018 because it was trained on the CVs of white men with background in science, but those same men were predominantly hired for four more years, and Joy Buolamwini, a computer scientist who founded the Algorithmic Justice League, exposed the racism behind facial recognition software that had not been trained to recognise darker skin (Winterson, *12 Bytes* 183-84). Even if technology challenges some Western dualisms – "It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine. It is not clear what is mind and what body in machines that resolve into coding practices." (Haraway 177) – gender inequality in technology and science remains unresolved. "Mary Shelley had many insights into the future in her 1818 novel *Frankenstein* . . . When it comes to AI and AGI, just like Victor Frankenstein, men are the creators." (Winterson, *12 Bytes* 223) Although Haraway's claim that "scientific networks crucially determined who did science and what science was considered good" (15) uses a past tense, Winterson's numerous examples from "hard" sciences and artificial intelligence statistically illustrate that things have not changed much since Mary Shelley's and Ada Lovelace's time.

To beckon towards a posthuman future, Shelley's novel transgresses in that it decentres man by breaking deep-seated taboos and illustrating the social mechanisms which create monsters. "Monsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations" (Haraway 180) as repositories of undesirable traits which are defined by the community. Such traits are historically determined, culture-specific and subject to change – "The body that scares and appals changes over time . . ." (Halberstam 8) – but monsters continue to be shaped by society and placed on the margins of community. Shelley's examination of this process employs the Gothic, which can itself be read as a narrative technology for the production of monsters whose bodies, as receptacles of negative identities, then produce infinitely interpretable meanings (Halberstam 21-22). Crucially, however, monsters are also created outside the Gothic, as Achille Mbembe's penetrating analysis in *Necropolitcs* (2019) reminds us when it elaborates a theory of the construction of the enemy. The constructed and persecuted enemy/monster can be virtually anyone – a witch, a Jew, a communist, a Muslim, a trans person – so to answer precisely who the enemy/monster is depends entirely on the context. Inspired

by the scientific, medical and technological advances of Shelley's time, *Frankenstein* envisions a creature/monster/enemy that "has crossed the barrier that separates the human from the bestial, the domesticated from the wild" (Mellor 46), that is *made* from parts of humans who were once *born*, and is therefore both human and non-human, natural and unnatural, or "un/natural" (Hunt Botting 20). Her liminal creature, whose "difference is his downfall", who "is not human, yet the sum of all he has learned is from humankind" (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 128), is substituted in Winterson's narrative by the technologically created sex bot and the transformed trans body, both of which challenge conservative perceptions of the human and, more specifically, those of the gendered human. In Halberstam's opinion, Shelley's novel stabilises the white bourgeois male (Frankenstein and Walton) as the human – "the only category that remains unmarked in the novel, the only category that seems 'natural'" (40) – but, like Winterson's *Frankissstein*, the fiction also decentres the traditionally conceived human by blurring boundaries and pointing to the need for a "connection of human and other living creatures" (Haraway 152), for a connection within the human community and between the human community and other life forms.

The post-anthropocentric, posthuman future may be all about connectivity, "the buzzword of our era", but connectivity that goes beyond "what the computing revolution has offered us" (Winterson, *12 Bytes* 112, 5), beyond the World Wide Web, the Internet of Things, ambient computing, or data and experience sharing. As much as she was of her time, Mary Shelley was also ahead of her time precisely because she placed her bioethical concerns within a sketchy vision of an egalitarian future based not on brotherhood – *liberté*, *égalité*, *fraternité* – but on a posthuman community that should include women and men, as well as other forms of life. With an intent that we can now label post-anthropocentric, Shelley's vision "displaces the notion of species hierarchy and of a single, common standard for 'Man' as the measure of all things" (Braidotti 67). Additionally, she predicts that strictly "Western, bourgeois, and masculine projects" (Harding, *Whose Science* vii) in science can only produce what is perceived as monstrosity. *Frankissstein* continues Shelley's subversion of such projects and speculates that "[w]e will learn to share the planet with non-biological life forms created by us" once we accept what contemporary scientific research has already confirmed: "[s]cience is no longer convinced that Homo sapiens is a special case" (Winterson,

Frankissstein 73, 79). Homo sapiens is still a long way from accepting that, so Eileen Hunt Botting's confessedly timely call for the protection of rights of all forms of life and intelligence also seems rather naïve.[10] Hunt Botting's "environmental premise" presupposes that "all creatures are artificial, since they are made by their surrounding social and cultural circumstances" (28), risking overgeneralisation and homogenisation of all creatures under *human* terms. Even if "society" and "culture" can be applied to non-human creatures, all creatures, including humans, are shaped by a variety of circumstances, many of which are natural and environmental. For this reason, the present discussion reserves "artificial" for those forms of existence which are shaped purely by *human* social, cultural and, especially, technological forces. To go back to Hunt Botting's defence of the fundamental rights of all creatures, in a time that does not yet fully recognise the basic rights of black people, women, people with disabilities, queer people, and of numerous other marginalised groups of humans, let alone the rights of other living forms of the planet, artificial creatures have yet to wait in a line that is depressingly long. Humans still largely place themselves at the centre of things, and for all its posthumanist sentiment, even *Frankissstein* partly re-centres the human through the idea of space colonisation. The perpetrators of the imagined space colonisation are humans who have shed the human form: "Once out of these bodies, we can handle any atmosphere, any temperature, lack of food and water, distances of any kind, providing we have an energy source." (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 282) They may well have shed the human form, but they are human nevertheless, shaped by Western ideas, and still convinced of human supremacy and the rightness of colonising projects.

Another problematic point about *Frankissstein* is its insistence on the role of technology in enhancing humans and building posthuman communities.

[10] "Because my *Vindication* provocatively defends fundamental rights to love, care, identity, and nondiscrimination for all artificial creatures, it also justifies duties to provide them, while outlining how, when, and by whom it would be appropriate to do so. This universal 'hospital tent' of rights and duties immediately covers and serves any and all forms of life and intelligence that show sensitivity to the circumstances that made them. If erected in national and international cultures and laws, it might prevent the destructive treatment of an array of creatures whose capabilities and experiences do or could overlap in surprisingly creative ways with our humanity." (Hunt Botting 29)

Many parts of the world have no easy access to technology, so this strand of thinking aligns itself with "[p]opular posthumanism" or transhumanism that

> also sees a telos for humanity's future that is achieved almost exclusively through technology. This view of the future of mankind in transhumanism draws, not unjustifiably, the criticism that it is another "white mythology" because it retrieves the myth of the white man's technological superiority and progress. (Nayar 18)

Is not the West recentred by such considerations if "the degree to which actors have (or have not) become posthuman(ist) and/or post-anthropocentric depends on the *social* positions they occupy and the *social* dispositions they acquire within the *social* universe" (Susen)? This question is further complicated by the fact that access to technology, and therefore to the posthumanist and/or post-anthropocentric status, also depends on the social positions *within* societies, including Western societies. Additionally, is not human supremacism thus reinforced? Even Braidotti's idea of *zoe*-centred ethics, which clearly involves the non-human, is framed in human terms since ethics is a human concept. "By focusing less on ability and agency and emphasizing shared vulnerability, posthumanism calls for a radical rethink of species uniqueness and boundedness of the human" (Nayar 13), but with such problems as are posed by prioritising technology and ethics as defined and developed by humans, it is difficult to see how or when that rethink is supposed to happen.

Mary Shelley's key thematic triad, "[m]orality, ethics, responsibility in the modern era", emerges from the view of "the autonomous, self-conscious, coherent and self-determining human" (Nayar 16). In other words, Shelley's reflections on morality, ethics and responsibility were encouraged by a cultural climate that had not yet overthrown the humanist man. To be fair, *Frankenstein* does suggest that it is necessary to decentre the human and inspire "greater moral–ethical response, and responsibility, to non-human life forms" (Nayar 19). *Frankissstein* suggests the same, but both confirm Harding's view that "[w]e cannot 'strip nature bare' to 'reveal her secrets,' as conventional views have held, for no matter how long the striptease continues or how rigorous its choreography, we will always find under each 'veil' only nature-as-conceptualized-within-cultural projects" (*Whose Science* 12). Put differently,

all our searches, sciences, concepts, and attempts at radical rethinks are confined within human terms. So, *can* we step outside the human, and if so, *how* do we do it? Shelley's and Winterson's narratives rely on technology for that leap of the imagination, acknowledging at the same time that it will take more than technology to make that process a reality. Improving the human by using technology to transcend bodily limitations will not be enough. It will take moral and ethical restructuring for respect, responsibility and solidarity to work within and across human communities, as well as across species. Even more importantly, the human first needs to be redefined and understood as an assemblage in a network of interconnections with other life forms.

For us to be able to perceive and accept different life forms as interconnected and equally valuable, an end needs to be put to the separation between the human and the non-human. Shelley's and Winterson's fictions illustrate that strict boundaries between these categories have already blurred, if they were ever clear to begin with. The human/non-human separation may be peculiarly European in its association of humanity with the West, and characteristic of European thought since the Enlightenment, as Braidotti and Susen claim. Yet the distinction, which has certainly become a sort of obsession propelled by the Enlightenment's focus on reason, rationality, the autonomy and power of the human mind, has in fact always existed. Demons, devils, spirits, and monsters as antipodes of the human and representations of the non-human have been an essential part of the European and world imaginary since the beginning of civilisation. The standard human, however, is not only defined as the opposite of the non-human. Shelley's and Winterson's fictions demonstrate that "the construction of the 'normal' human with specific biological features and abilities, sex, form and functions" depends on a "particular physiology, anatomy, intellectual ability and consciousness . . . as the marker of normalcy" (Nayar 11). But what are these particular parameters today when the very idea of normalcy is dismissed in so many aspects of human experience, ranging from language to the body? As we see in fashion and beauty product advertisements, for instance, standards persist, but they are instantaneously disputed by other advertisements which propose that all bodies are beautiful. While the tendency to eliminate the "normal" or "standard" human can only be beneficial and stop discrimination, total rejection of the human subject has side effects. If we eradicate the human subject, how do we account for the many marginalised groups, such as women,

people of colour, queer people, or people with disabilities, who have been fighting for visibility and recognition as subjects that are fully and equally human? Instead of rejecting the human, it is far more useful to redefine the category, as Shelley and Winterson do, "as an assemblage, co-evolving with other forms of life, enmeshed with the environment and technology" (Nayar 13), as well as to accept the pointlessness of insisting on the boundary between the human and the non-human today.

In Shelley's and Winterson's fictions, science and technology cross that boundary. As Harding reminds us, science has always been driven by interests – as has technology, we might add – and is therefore itself a kind of politics (*Whose Science* 10), so Shelley's and Winterson's concerns with the horizons and limits, uses and abuses of science and technology, as with matters of responsibility, accountability, rights, and consequences, inevitably acquire political dimensions. As a result, apart from setting the foundations of science fiction as

> a genre that (1) is grounded on valid scientific research; (2) gives a persuasive prediction of what science might be able to accomplish in the foreseeable future; and (3) offers a humanistic critique of either specific technological inventions or the very nature of scientific thinking (Mellor 107),

Shelley originated "*modern political science fiction*" or "*poliscifi*" as "a principal modern strain of SF" (Hunt Botting 1, 2, 7). While reflecting on what it means to be human, and what it means to be human in relation to others/non-humans, both Shelley and Winterson deliver multilayered critique. Of course, Winterson's text cannot be classified as science fiction, but the point in common here is politics rather than genre. If critique of institutions and ideologies is necessary for a work to properly fulfil its transgressive and subversive potential (Booker 3), *Frankenstein* and *Frankissstein* certainly achieve that goal. Their critique of science tackles one of the most important questions concerning objectivity and decision making:

> [A]t issue in the objectivity debates is more than who actively participates in making scientific decisions. At issue is also the question of whose agendas science does and should pursue. Whose hypotheses, concepts, preferred research designs, and preferred understandings of

> nature, social relations, and inquiry should be supported . . . ? (Harding *Objectivity and Diversity* xi)

Shelley's critique of science is at the same time "a call for better science" (Harding, *Whose Science* 1), more responsible, ethical and equal science, but what Harding understands to be the desired scientific diversity, one which respects the values and interests of *all* citizens (*Objectivity and Diversity* xi; my emphasis), is achievable only in theory, for in practice nothing can ever respect the values and interests of all. Winterson illustrates this using an example from another context, that of the starving nineteenth-century workforce and their terrible working conditions. Her discussion mentions the Corn Laws that forbade the import of cheaper foreign grain "for the benefit of fat gentleman farmers, at patriotic liberty to charge what they like for their corn" (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 250). Jump a few centuries – and this is one among many examples – the robot substitutes for the loom, so robotics furthers the replacement of the human by machine, also for the benefit of the privileged. In Shelley's time, privilege or a lack of it directly translated into political representation: "the wealth of England is shifting from the land to the towns, and yet these swelling numbers in the manufactories have no voice of their own, and none to speak on their behalf" (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 251), but if we think that twenty-first century is much improved in this respect, we only need to remember the unabating political struggles of the world's numerous marginalised groups.

Shelley's and Winterson's searching critical insights also "philosophically engage the ethics and politics of making artificial life and life artificial" (Hunt Botting 4) beyond economic matters. The questions that Frankenstein's experiment raises as to who should or should not be brought back to life, when, how, and with what consequences, are echoed by Winterson's examination of responsibility in cryopreservation. "[W]here do you draw the line? Murdering bastards, child molesters, thugs, nutters, that bloke in Brazil – Bolsonaro. What if you had Hitler's head in a bag there? Would you defrost it? And then there's really boring people . . ." (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 227). Of course, for now, cryopreservation also depends on economic privilege. While embryo freezing is available to all only in countries whose demographic policies include financial stimuli to increase the birth rate, whole body cryonic preservation and neuro preservation are only for the

affluent. However, a far more controversial issue, which both *Frankenstein* and *Frankissstein* address, is what happens once the preserved body or brain are resurrected? Can we at all foresee how resurrection would affect the resurrected, other humans, and life on the planet as a whole? Does *Frankenstein* offer a persuasive scenario, or are *Frankissstein*'s more positive transhumanist speculations concerning the uploaded mind's downloadability into a form of one's choice more likely to come true?

If these questions are somewhat far-fetched at this moment in history, Shelley and Winterson also voice concerns that are closer to it. Some such concerns are expressed in their critique of the conventional notions of human, gender, family, and community. In their different ways, the Creature, Ry and the sex bot embody threats to any narrow definition of the human, and to a clear demarcation line between the human and the non-human. At the same time, their presence questions gender stereotyping and binarism, and subjects to scrutiny a continued tendency to see what lies outside the binaries as an anomaly (Creature, Ry, sex bot), a look or a fashion choice (Ry), or a threat (Creature, Ry, sex bot). The threat is to unambiguous gender identity: we cannot claim with any certainty that Shelley's Creature is a male, as the category is traditionally understood; Ry's trans body creates confusion: "You're a woman then? says Ron. / No, Ron. I am a hybrid. My name is Ry. / You're a bloke then? says Ron. / I'm trans. / Like, transhuman? / Transgender." (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 83); and, finally, the sex bot uncannily resembles the human female but is robotic. Perhaps even more frighteningly, the threat is to the apparent safety of the domestic sphere in its traditional, and especially organic, variant since the Creature, Ry and sex bot "alter forever the comfort of domestic privacy" (Halberstam 15). The Creature is denied a family of its/his/their own and literally destroys Frankenstein's existing and future family; Ry does not have a family and, if they decided to have one, their chosen gender identity would inevitably remodel any conventional model of family; unlike Siri, Alexa or any other digital assistant or robotic device, the sex bot is bound to change the emotional climate in a family or displace the family altogether if single men experience it as an alternative for women. Finally, these ambiguous presences pose a threat to traditionally imagined communities, as well, with one notable difference that is aptly summarised in Haraway's comparison between Shelley's Creature and the cyborg:

> Unlike the hopes of Frankenstein's monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate, through its completion in a finished whole, a city and cosmos. The cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family. (151)

For the human in the twenty-first century, community based on the model of the organic family is one option, but there are others.

Like Hunt Botting, who believes that *Frankenstein* "resonate[s] with debates in contemporary political science about the ethical, legal, and policy implications of the creation, transformation, or modification of forms of life and intelligence through science and technology" (22), Jeanette Winterson recognised the novel's contemporary relevance and broadened its discussion. If the traditional novel is a reflection of the Enlightenment's conception of the human (rational, able-bodied and heterosexual white bourgeois male), Shelley's and Winterson's experimental texts envision a different human, one who is characterised by "radical indeterminacy" that "escapes the stifling logic of the scientific obsession with 'patterns' based on regularity, causality, and functionality"[11] (Susen). So redefined, the posthuman human is conceptualised as a result of radical changes in "the nature, role, and . . . the dominance of Homo sapiens" (Winterson, *12 Bytes* 9) in a world based on "an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or 'earth' others, by removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism" (Braidotti 49-50). This obstacle is a common denominator of political, economic and gender oppression, scientific bias, capitalist exploitation, destruction of the environment, and climate change. Given a growing sense of impending doom as a combined effect of the Covid-19 pandemic, the near-inevitable ecological disaster and wars, the concerns expressed in *Frankenstein* and *Frankissstein* are more significant than ever. Writing in 1991, Harding said it was "a moment of rising skepticism about the benefits that the sciences and their technologies can bring to society" when, at the same time, "intellectuals in the fields of science and technology are gaining more and more power in higher education and in government" (*Whose Science* 1). Skepticism has continued to rise with

[11] Susen's words refer to dynamic nomad sciences, which are rooted in material reality or people's worlds and experiences, but are strangely adequate in the context of my claim.

the outbreak of Covid-19, especially about the benefits of medical interventions to the human body. Similarly, vigorous debates attempt to establish whether medical and technological interventions on and in the human body make us less human, and whether they serve to treat malfunctioning bodies or simply enhance them. In such a climate, both transhumanism and posthumanism need to be wary of pitfalls. As millions of techno-enthusiasts are at this very moment enjoying their conversations with OpenAI's ChatGPT, their faith in technology should be balanced with an awareness of its abuses. From the perspective of critical posthumanism, the posthuman human is "co-evolving, sharing ecosystems, life processes, genetic material, with animals and other life forms", and technology is not "a mere prosthesis to human identity but . . . integral to it" (Nayar 19). As wonderful as this sounds – here is a note of scepticism which I believe is necessary – posthumanism needs to steer clear of relativism and naïve optimism because it gets dangerously close to them when it envisions a world populated by mindful humans who embrace technology and share the planet with all other life forms in a spirit of true solidarity, fairness, respect, and appreciation of all life forms as equally valuable. The future of the planet may indeed depend on cooperation that includes and values all human and non-human life forms, but instead of claiming that we (as a vague category that comprises all or some living beings) are all in the process of becoming posthuman and post-anthropocentric, we (as redefined humans) need to take measure of our distance from that horizon. Winterson places her faith in the human capacity to evolve – "The success story of Homo sapiens has been one of infinite adaptability" (Winterson, *12 Bytes* 81) – but if we do not reach the posthuman horizon, what good is all the scientific, medical, technological, and artistic advancement?

"CROSSING THE BOUNDARIES MESSES UP THE BINARIES": STEVEN APPLEBY'S *DRAGMAN* (2020)

Crossing the boundaries messes up the binaries. . . . Where shape-shifting has been part of the mythology of a people, it may be easier to understand the self as dimensional.

Not one thing. Not one gender.

Jeanette Winterson, *12 Bytes*

In an interview for a special issue of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* dedicated to the graphic novel, the Australian artist, writer and film-maker Shaun Tan noted that "[t]he crossing of boundaries is . . . fundamental to storytelling" (Earle 385). Motifs of the journey, transition, transgression, and boundary crossing have always defined human narratives, as they have characterised perpetually changing human identities. As a defining feature of the narrative species called human, the persistent presence of storytelling has highlighted both the significance and the omnipresence of stories: stories are fundamental to our identities and they are to be found in every area of life, from literature, art and film to biology, astronomy and bioengineering. Most importantly, and especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, storytelling has taught us that some stories "we must learn to tell differently" (Winterson, *12 Bytes* 193). One story that we must learn to tell differently is the increasingly complex story of gender. In its discussion of Jeanette Winterson's treatment of gender, the previous chapter has already suggested possible ways in which to tell this story differently. Instead of the usual male/female coordinates, Winterson's fiction explores the instability and inadequacy of gender binaries, alongside sexuality outside the bounds of heteronormativity, by telling stories of transgender identity (*Frankissstein*); gender ambiguity and fluidity (*The PowerBook*), inspired by what is widely accepted as the first transgender novel in English, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928); androgynous appearance and male-to-female cross-dressing (*Art & Lies*); as well as female-to-male cross-dressing (*The Passion*). Like Winterson, Steven Appleby, a British-Canadian artist, cartoonist and illustrator, proposes a way to tell the story of gender differently. The established comic artist's first graphic novel, *Dragman* (2020), offers an exciting and heartwarming account

of the adventures of a transgender superhero[1] partly modelled on Appleby, who first identified as a cross-dresser and then came out as a transgender person[2]. The story is one of boundary crossing between text and image, different genres and various gender identities. It establishes transgender as "the trope of crossing" (Prosser 21), at the same time exposing the male/female binary as insufficient, untrue to reality and inadequate to describe the lived experiences of numerous people who remain outside the traditional categories of man and woman. Together with genderqueer, non-binary, non-conforming, queer, and an increasing number of other categories, transgender demonstrates that twenty-first-century cultures, Western cultures in particular, have been redefining the concept of gender, which was once introduced, as the chapter on Winterson reveals, to examine what counts as a woman. The ever more nuanced and inclusive categorisation suggests that we have come a long way from the concept's beginning. This is not without pitfalls, however, as is proven by ongoing debates in mainstream gay, lesbian and trans communities in the United States about whose experience is more transgressive or whose position more aggrieved (Halberstam 20). Appleby's playfully disruptive novel demonstrates that being trans means being transgressive and aggrieved to begin with. To tell this story of transgressivity and aggrievance, Appleby employs the age-old motif of cross-dressing.

Cross-dressing and gender transformation have featured as important motifs since the earliest human tales, and have served different purposes. Cross-dressing or gender change may offer the much-needed disguise, as in the story of Zeus's rape of Callisto, whom he approaches in the form of Artemis, or in *Little Red Riding Hood* (1697), whose embodiment of male threat, the wolf, appears dressed as the girl's grandmother. The same motifs may, on the other hand, indicate gender fluidity or ambiguity, as the androgynous Ardhanarishvara, a combination of Shiva and Parvati, demonstrates. Cross-dressing and gender ambiguity have been thoroughly studied in different

[1] For the sake of text clarity, and in accordance with the available literature on *Dragman*, "he/his" will be used throughout the text to refer to the main protagonist. This also gives the superhero narrative an interesting twist, which undermines it from within, because the "he" in the story is at the same time a seemingly ordinary man and a trans-woman.

[2] For this reason, the present discussion will alternate between cross-dressing and transgender.

cultures and authors as diverse as William Shakespeare and Jeanette Winterson. Shakespeare's plays employ cross-dressing as protective disguise for his heroines (Viola) or as authority-lending robes (Portia). As this famously leads to the construction of mistaken identities, it creates much confusion to comical results: the characters involved cannot tell with any certainty who is who or who has fallen in love with whom. The audiences in Shakespeare's time were additionally thrown into comical confusion by the fact that female roles in Elizabethan theatre were played by boys, so boys cross-dressed as women would then "cross-dress" as men. In Winterson's fictions, gender play is used to other ends: to subvert gender binaries, reveal the potential ambiguity of all gender categories, and present the self as multiple. Of course, cross-dressing is not only a literary motif but an important and widespread historical phenomenon, as Peter Ackroyd's *Dressing Up: Transvestism and Drag: The History of an Obsession* (1979) explains, one whose precise meaning and value vary from culture to culture. For this reason, book-length studies would be required to properly explain the implications of cross-dressing on stage, in opera and drama, for instance, to thoroughly analyse the roles of medieval transvestite saints, or to examine the cultural implications of third gender hijras in India, two-spirit people in North America, virginas in some areas of the Balkans, as well as other culturally specific categories across the world.

Despite the phenomenon's conspicuous historical and cultural presence, and the many context-dependent links between cross-dressing and gender, only a handful of books theorise cross-dressing, which sharply contrasts with an abundance of studies on transgender as a broader category that includes various gender identities and expressions that differ from the sex assigned at birth, and of those researching the more specific and potentially contentious transsexual identities[3]. One notable study of cross-dressing and its relationship with culture is Marjorie Garber's *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (1992). In it, Garber helps the reader understand why cross-dressing has acquired the status of "a sign of the constructedness of

[3] Like transgender, transsexual implies a difference between one's gender identity or expression and the sex they were assigned at birth. More narrowly, in its more common connotation, the term was coined by Harry Benjamin in 1966 to denote sex-changers, and applies to people who have undergone medical treatments. The term may be experienced as problematic because of its historical association with mental illness and/or sexual perversion.

gender categories" (Garber 9) in criticism. To illustrate it, she provides examples from a recent history of changes in Western societies which indicate that gender identification via colour-coding and the skirt/pants binary, for instance, is not only constructed but at times also purely arbitrary. Before the Second World War, boys wore pink and girls wore blue, colours signalling that someone is a homosexual alternated between red, green and pink, and it was only in the twentieth century that the custom of dressing all infants in frocks disappeared (Garber 1-3). My intention, however, is not to continue Garber's detailed analysis of cross-dressing, or to outline its history in either literature or theory, but to show how this long-standing motif has come to occupy the attention of the graphic novel as "a 'trans' form of literature" (Knowles et al. 380) that is ideally suited for representations of both transitional and deeply personal or sensitive experiences. In this way, I also wish to partly compensate for a relative lack of literature on cross-dressing in graphic novels.

Because Appleby's novel tackles the issue of cross-dressing in relation to transgender, it is worth mentioning that transgender has also featured as an important literary motif, especially in contemporary literature. Since *Orlando*, the first novel in English which proposes transgender as its theme, gender outside traditional binaries has been thematised by a number of writers, such as Patrick Califia, Akwaeke Emezi or Amy Ellis Nutt, whose works range from life writing to fiction, and are sometimes written from alternative gender positions. Foregrounding non-traditional gender identities like transgender, genderqueer, non-binary, or non-conforming questions conventional perceptions and representations of gender. This is also one of the main aims of transgender studies, where border crossing is a longstanding motif (Caroll 25), a field that emerged coterminously with queer theory to contest the pathologisation and objectification of non-traditional gender, and examine the variety of gender identity and expression. As transgender is increasingly common in fiction, non-fiction and theory, it is also to be found in graphic novels. These include Chii's *The Bride Was a Boy* (2018), Keito Gaku's *Boys Run the Riot* (2020), Molly Ostertag's *The Witch Boy* (2017), and Jen Wang's *The Prince and the Dressmaker* (2018), to name a few recent titles. To enable proper understanding of the graphic novel's suitability for the representation of private, sensitive and/or transitional experiences, I need to briefly outline the graphic novel genre and its relation to autobiography.

Originating from Palaeolithic art and, more recently, from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century newspaper cartoons across the world, the graphic novel has come to academic and critical attention in the 1970s, when comics studies started to develop. Precisely how we can distinguish between the terms "graphic narrative", "graphic novel" and "comic", with all their idiosyncrasies and overlapping, is the subject of vigorous critical debates and lies outside the scope of this discussion. To briefly illustrate the lack of consensus on the topic, I will only outline a few problematic issues. Contrary to the predominant view that graphic narratives are an umbrella term, Jean-Marie Viljoen defines graphic narratives as a subdivision of graphic novels, while she understands comics as an umbrella term for graphic novels, graphic narratives and comics (43). She distinguishes between graphic narratives and graphic novels based on their degree of fictionality: graphic narratives are non-fictional, while graphic novels are fictional (44). For this reason, Viljoen reads Joe Sacco's works as factual, non-fictional graphic narratives, while Sam Knowles considers them graphic novels. Another problem is that the term "graphic novel" may be understood as "a viable package" or "the critical byword of the new comics" (Hatfield 23, 20), one which lends comics an aura of high art. Even though the demarcation line between comics and graphic novels is far from clear, for graphic novels use the book-length comic format and are sometimes serialised before being published in book form, the graphic novel's definite departure from comics is that the term defines it as a type of novel. The graphic novel now generally denotes a transmedial form of storytelling or a literary genre that covers a range of themes, styles and formats, usually combines word and image, and often possesses artistic qualities (Luburić-Cvijanović 225-226), which are admittedly difficult to assess.[4] When understood as a novel in comic-book format, the graphic novel retains its connection with comics, a connection which has always been there, according to Charles Hatfield, who reminds us that both comics and graphic novels are frequently published in serialised format and then in book form, to varying degrees of success (154). Appleby's debut graphic novel *Dragman* itself originated from comic strips published in *The Guardian* and functions as a novel that is not ashamed of its kinship with comics. One final contentious issue that I will mention here is the possibility of

[4] For a more detailed overview of terms, definitions, features, and history, see Stein and Thon, *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels*; and Luburić-Cvijanović, "Cosmopolitan Encounters in Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*".

a textual bias in reading and interpreting comics and graphic novels. Leigh Ann Howard and Susanna Hoeness-Krupsaw claim with some certainty that "[c]omics, like performance events, is subject to a textual bias, one that denies the dynamic interaction a comic has with its readers" (6). If we expand this assertion to include graphic novels, this chapter intends to show that reading the graphic novel as a *transmedial* text preserves a dynamic interaction with the visual-textual narrative, especially one which contains elements of autobiography.

The 1960s and 1970s demonstrated a considerable interest in the autobiographical graphic novel, also known as "autobiographix, graphic memoir, and autography" (Chaney 5). The genre has particularly proliferated since the publication of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980), accompanied by increased academic and critical appreciation since *Maus* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1992. Hatfield suggests that Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor* (1976-2008) should be credited with enabling autobiography to emerge "as the nonfiction comic's most familiar and accessible guise" (111), but Pekar's *American Splendor* is far from representative of all autobiographical graphic novels. Pekar successfully thematised the everyday lives of ordinary people in a specific social milieu, but many autobiographical graphic novels deal with other issues. While those like Marjan Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000) and GB Tran's *Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey* (2010) narrate traumatic collective and personal histories, worlds in crises, war, or immigration, others, like Craig Thomson's *Blankets* (2003), Adrian Tomine's semi-autobiographical *Shortcomings* (2007) and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006), tend to focus on the more personal issues of dysfunctional families, identities and sexualities. Whatever their specific focus might be, all of them rely on the immediacy of visual expression for their representation of sensitive issues like trauma, memory, family, identity, and sexuality. At the same time, they redefine realist(ic) representation as a distinctive feature of autobiography. As Michael Chaney reveals, "[w]hen the 'I' of autobiography is explicitly stylized as a kind of cartoon, the result is a brazen departure from the 'seemingly substantial' effects of realism that traditional autobiographies presume" (7), which frees the narrative, and the reader, from the expectation of pure factuality or veracity. Appleby's narrative plays with the boundary between fictionality and factuality not only by having August Crimp's struggles mirror the author's own, but also in the novel's self-reflexive presentation of

superhero comics as stories of real adventures and superheroes. In that sense, *Dragman* honours "the promise implied in all autobiographies that the life stories authors tell about are, if not verifiably true, at least emotionally truthful to the way they perceive, remember, and make sense out of their lives" (Chaney 3). In view of that promise, Appleby's *Dragman* is fictional, as its Afterword makes clear, but it contains crucial autobiographical details concerning the author's body, gender identity and family relations, so the narrative attempts to make sense of a life-changing transformation in Appleby's life, detailing some of its social and emotional implications. In Hatfield's opinion, autobiographical graphic narratives overturned "the corporate comics hero in favor of the particularized and unglamorous common man or woman" (111). While this is certainly true of Pekar's protagonists, Appleby brings the two seemingly opposed genres in the graphic novel together, so *Dragman* is a blend of superhero narratives and autobiography, fantasy and realism, fiction and non-fiction.

Since its emergence, the autobiographical graphic novel has been thoroughly examined within the now prolific fields of study like graphic narrative theory and comics narratology, which were born when comics studies merged with other fields and theories (Luburić-Cvijanović 227-228), so a subfield has emerged that deals specifically with autobiographical graphic narratives. Special attention is paid to "how graphic narratives deploy word-image combinations to tell the story of a self's becoming, thereby inviting readers to engage in particular methods of worldmaking" (Herman 231), and, in narratives like *Dragman*, how they deploy these combinations to fictionalise the story of a self's becoming. Scholarly interest in autobiographical graphic narratives constitutes an alternative to theory on life writing, which makes a clear distinction between non-fictional and fictional autobiographies, although even non-fictional autobiographies inevitably rely on selection and erasure, and therefore tamper with the representation of a person's life and character. As such theory tends to focus on more traditional autobiographies, by examining the graphic novel Chaney's edited volume represents an attempt to compensate for criticism's failure to address other forms of autobiography. None of the essays in his volume, however, deal with the issue of transgender or cross-dressing, although queer identities form a focal point in an analysis of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. This may be due to an adopted binary thinking mode. Namely, when discussing the autobiographical persona as theorised by

Charles Hatfield, Joseph Witek and Ray Zone, Chaney himself imagines it in binary terms as "an explicitly foregrounded autobiographical persona in dialectical relation to the background object of *his or her* cultural environment" (6; my emphasis). To counterbalance this, I wish to draw attention to the significance of Appleby's semi-autobiographical narrative representation of cross-dressing and transgender experience.

Biographical and autobiographical representations of cross-dressing, transsexuality, transgender, and queerness are fairly common outside the graphic novel. Transgender and transsexual autobiographies became popular in the twentieth century alongside biographies of trans people. Unlike biographies, which at times impose "normative assumptions about sex and gender . . . overwriting the reality of lived experience", autobiography is "a form of self-expression through which such misrepresentations might be redressed" (Caroll 4). Sometimes the intention is to show that being transgender or transsexual means being like everybody else. Appleby's August Crimp/Dragman, as we shall see, is definitely not like everybody else, so *Dragman* departs from autobiographies that wish to assimilate their central figures. Other autobiographies may wish to avoid the possibility of "forcible, and often posthumous, exposure" as "a recurring trope in historical biographies of transgender subjects" that "extends across a range of cultural narratives" (Caroll 5). By publishing the partly autobiographical graphic novel, Appleby announced to the wider public what he had previously revealed only to his friends and family, so in the lives of both the author and his character exposure happens in their lifetime. In different situations they do or do not come out gradually, which would involve control over the process and strategy, to allow everyone involved to feel more comfortable (Schrock and Boyd 56). August comes out gradually in his younger days but is later accidentally exposed by his wife when she finds his outfits, and Appleby is honest with his future wife from the beginning and tells his sons before they start school. *Dragman* tackles the potentially devastating consequences of exposure, but, for the most part, these remain in the realm of possibility as the main character lives a more satisfying, if also a somewhat more complicated life afterwards. A decidedly positive consequence of Appleby's own exposure is that the publication of *Dragman* prompted the author to start living full-time as a woman: "Although Appleby had been out for several years to his close friends and family, he realises now that the new character embodied an urge to go

further." (Armitstead) As a partly autobiographical graphic novel, *Dragman* shares some of the most intimate detail of the author's life, seeking to "portray experience in a manner that is emotionally and psychologically true to the unique, often idiosyncratic perspective of the author-artist" (Chaney 4), at the same time recasting the superhero graphic novel as a semi-autobiographical thriller.

The graphic novel was for long "primarily seen as a vehicle for superheroes, science fiction and fantasy: SF narratives. These were predominantly produced in the US, and primarily – though not exclusively – aimed at young boys" (Knowles 86). Even today, decades after its proliferation as a "safe" genre during censorship in the United States, the superhero remains firmly ingrained in the popular imagination as *the* genre of comics and graphic novels. Yet in the larger context of the graphic novel's transformation with the arrival of alternative or underground comics, the superhero genre has itself undergone transformation:

> [I]n the graphic novel of the end of the 1980s and the 1990s there seems to be no place left for the Manichean superhero and his conservative agenda. The traditional figure of the reactionary superhero is revisited and questioned in works like Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (1986–87). The new "ethical" superhero becomes a twisted, suffering individual, whose moral values and role in society are questioned by the common citizen. (Romero-Jódar 18)

Dragman continues the genre's transformation as a generic hybrid that features a transgender superhero. As a semi-autobiography, Appleby's novel differs from *Maus* and *Persepolis*, which place more emphasis on the historical and/or political context, but is similar to *Fun Home* in its focus on intimate worlds and cultural perceptions of gender and sexuality. It is also akin to confessional comics like Pekar's *American Splendor*, which "have in fact reinvented the comic book hero" (Hatfield 111) as an ordinary man. To Hatfield's understanding, autobiographical comics, and alternative comics in general, oppose adventurous, fantastic superhero narratives: "To a field fed on the adventures of glamorous *übermenschen*, autobiography provides a salutary alternative with its schlemiels and sufferers, hangdogs and gadflies." (112)

While Hatfield's assumption may well point to a general rule applicable to Pekar's work or Chester Brown's *Paying for It* (2011), Appleby seamlessly integrates the superhero genre and autobiography, and demonstrates that there are also noteworthy exceptions. In the endless interplay between touching frankness and straightforward fictionalisation, in which "truth" is shaped by subjective vision and artifice, Dragman is at the same time a superhero and an average person, and the superhero narrative prevents his story from ever being reduced to the banality of some autobiographical writing in comic-book form.

Appleby further transforms the superhero genre by questioning the common perception of superhero comics and graphic novels as "juvenile fictions" (Chaney 6), which clearly prevails in academic circles as well. Namely, academic literature that approaches comics and graphic novels as relevant areas of study, and reads them through various lenses from narratology to film and performance studies, at times shows bias by favouring graphic novels whose content is autobiographical, historical and/or political, or by openly stating, as Howard and Hoeness-Krupsaw do, that it caters to readers who "want to expand their knowledge of graphic narratives beyond superhero stories" (3). As if to mock the efforts to delineate the graphic novel as serious literature and art from comics as low art and juvenile entertainment, *Dragman* brings them together. Despite an "upsurge of serious, and especially politically charged, graphic novels" since the 1980s and 1990s, "the highly sophisticated twentieth and twenty-first century graphic narratives are not entirely free from association with low art" (Luburić-Cvijanović 226-227). Nor should they be, *Dragman* seems to suggest. Like so much contemporary fiction, Appleby's novel combines the high and the low, the serious and the entertaining, and dismisses the distinction between the graphic novel and comics, embodying Hillary Chute's early definition of graphic novels as book-length narratives in the comic format. Appleby recasts the conventions of the seemingly trivial superhero genre to narrate profoundly intimate experiences and, like so many "juvenile" superhero narratives, deal with issues such as marginalisation, discrimination and a sense of isolation. To additionally dissolve the line between the high and the low, Appleby relies on the conventions of another genre that is frequently dismissed as popular entertainment, the thriller. Dragman and his friend Dog Girl, an androgynous human-to-animal shape-shifter, are on a mission to save people while an epidemic of soul selling,

prompted by another scientific experiment gone wrong,[5] is raging and a killer of trans women is on the loose. This "graphic thriller", as the back cover blurb calls it, narrates the secret life of August Crimp, alternating between panels that portray his present and past life and brief prose passages that recount the story of the murderer and Crimp's dreams, to discuss the very serious and very real threats which transgender people are exposed to, ranging from verbal, psychological and emotional abuse to physical violence, against the background of the contemporary capitalist society's increasing vapidity. The necessary degree of realism which this lends to the narrative aligns *Dragman* to a slight degree with underground comics that "admitted a new psychological realism and, concomitantly, a potential for radical cultural intervention" (Hatfield 111). Despite Appleby's focus on a superhero, and his lack of interest in the commonly spotlighted working-class life, the novel's psychological and social realism, finely balanced with the fantastic, as well as the relevance of its subject matter bring it close to alternative comics.

To confirm Andrés Romero-Jódar's observation that in recent graphic narratives "the superheroes themselves question the values they are supposed to embody" (18), August Crimp/Dragman represents a transgression both as a superhero and as an ordinary human, so his neighbour's appreciative assertion "You'll never be normal. Embrace it, Mr Crimp." (Appleby 59) is pregnant with meaning: he redefines the normal because he cross-dresses and has superpowers, but also because he resists superhero conventions. As a superhero, he undermines the genre's predominantly binary-coded gender system, he infringes the superhero code in the novel, and even takes his infant son on one of his missions – after all, he is a family man and has no one to babysit at that moment – while as an average man, he subverts societal expectations about gender identities and gender roles. Unsurprisingly, Appleby's superhero has a special outfit, but it is not a mere costume nor does it conform to superhero standards: tight suits, with the occasional cap and/or mask for superheroes. With the exception of the odd sexist image of Superwoman and Wonder Woman in a mini-skirt, even superheroines are

[5] A Nobel prize-winning scientist discovers the soul and then finds a way to enable transmigration. Eventually, it all turns into a business of selling souls or buying more desirable ones. The scientist's desire to explain "the poetry of the world" (Appleby 211) is thus reduced to a capitalist venture. I will leave the details of how it is abused by the murderer in the novel for the reader to discover.

expected to wear spandex or else fight half-naked. Members of the superhero club in Appleby's novel worry that Dragman's outfit will bring them into disrepute, so they insist on an "appropriate" costume for a male superhero: "I mean, you're a man underneath. What's wrong with doing super-deeds wearing a brightly coloured men's armour-plated superhero tights, like the rest of us?" (Appleby 191). Dragman's outfit, an elegant dress that responds to the many hypersexualised images of superheroines, is in fact the right choice for this unusual superhero, whose superpowers – levitation and flight – are mobilised only when he puts on women's clothes. This too is a problem, so Dragman is first denied membership in the club on the grounds of "[r]ule 987-B-17" which "clearly states that a superpower must NEVER be clothing based" (Appleby 194). Dragman's unique superhero outfit is subversive in yet another aspect: it radicalises the "arch-genre of comic books, the superhero, in which power must be closeted or checked for the sake of preserving the status quo" (Hatfield 111) when Dragman's power ventures forth to change the status quo. Because Appleby endows Dragman with superpowers when the character is in women's clothes, the novel also subverts the centuries-old trope of male quest and adventure. Quoting from a number of mostly Western philosophical, theological, anthropological, sociological, biological, psychological, and medical sources from the early Judeo-Christian and Greek cultures to contemporary ones, Anthony Synnott's 1993 overview of gender dualism reminds us that, prior to the twentieth century, man was almost invariably associated with trial, peril, strength, action, and adventure. As if to prove Hatfield's assertion that "heroism in comic books", or graphic novels, we might add, "has never been simple" (111), Appleby's novel rewrites that association: the hero of this adventure, who shows strength and action and goes through trial and peril, is trans.

By transforming a cross-dressing transgender character into a superhero, Appleby redefines the historically medicalised and pathologised phenomenon of transgender. Richard Ekins's 1997 study surveys the available theoretical literature of the time, concluding that "[m]ale cross-dressing and sex-changing . . . when not ignored as is usually the case in the serious literature, remains largely either medicalised or ghettoised" (26). Appleby dismantles the medical and psychiatric definition of transgender as a condition, disorder or illness, and turns it into a superpower. In other words, gender in *Dragman* is not something to be treated nor is it, on the other hand,

"a struggle for power" (Synnott 71); it *is* power. Ekins reminds us that "in the period immediately prior to the rise of sexology in the late nineteenth century, cross-dressing was commonly understood as a harmless eccentricity, or as a source of innocent pleasure" (40). Reclaiming cross-dressing from the grip of sexology and rescuing it from the stigma of sexual perversion, Appleby has Crimp enjoy stepping across the line – "It felt transgressive. Exciting." (Appleby 54) – and establishes links between eccentricity, pleasure and power. However, the power does not reside in the choice of outfit, but rather in the lived reality of being trans. It is not the clothes or trans identity as a "role" that help Dragman develop his power, but his acknowledgment and acceptance of his ambiguity. Dragman's superhero nickname may be erroneously interpreted as signalling that his gender identity is performance – "I dress as a woman, but I'm not doing drag. If anything, I'm TRANS… I think" (Appleby 96) – but "drag" should not be equated with gender performativity for three reasons: it cannot explain the complexity of gender performativity and, as Rachel Caroll notes, not all drag performers are transgender people, nor is transgender identity a drag performance (19). Playing with the trope of the superhero's duality (Clark Kent/Superman, Peter Parker/Spiderman, Bruce Wayne/Batman), Appleby uses Dragman's superhero outfit as an expression of gender. Dragman's hidden self is also his true self – in fact, all of his/her selves form a composite and ambiguous true self – so in tune with Judith Butler's idea of citationality, his gender comes into effect through its repeated citations in the novel. In his critique of Butler, Jay Prosser exposes a common understanding of queer transgender as binary straight gender's "subversive foil": "whereas the constructedness of straight gender is obscured by the veil of naturalization, queer transgender reveals, indeed, explicitly performs, its own constructedness" (31). Appleby's graphic novel allows for such an understanding of its main protagonist, but it also opens up a space for a different kind of understanding, one in which Dragman's transgender is understood as being equally referential and literal.

While being his true self, Dragman also acts out the "fantasy of the shape-shifting and identity-morphing body" (Halberstam 76), which Judith Halberstam contemplates in the context of visual culture and, specifically, transgender cinema. The fantasy is, of course, age-old and is a long-standing motif in mythology, folk literature, fairy tales, epics, romances, the Gothic, science fiction, and a number of other old and contemporary genres, all of them

populated by colourful tricksters, antiheroes and shape-shifters (Krombholc and Luburić-Cvijanović 301-302). At the present moment, when medicine and technology enable forms of shape-shifting that were previously only imagined, as the chapter on Winterson reveals, tampering with the human body to allow it to change shape and appearance makes that ancient fantasy a reality, but it nevertheless remains a source of confusion and anxiety resulting from the disruption of stable binaries: "God makes us as we are and we should not tamper with it. / I said, if God hadn't wanted us to tamper with things, She wouldn't have given us brains." (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 240) This brief exchange between Winterson's characters illustrates the controversy that still surrounds the view of the self as multiple and shifting, and the comic-book format may just be the right medium to represent this:

> The syntax of comics—specifically, its reliance on visual substitution to suggest continuity—puts the lie to the notion of an unchanging, undivided self, for in the breakdowns of comics we see the self (in action over a span of time) represented by multiple selves. (Hatfield 126)

Appleby's novel calls attention to the self as multiple and dimensional through both the syntax of the format and the motif of cross-dressing. In Dragman's story, "the ambiguous, ambivalent, multi-contextual, multi-dimensional, emergent nature of much cross-dressing" (Ekins 2) makes it clear that the fantasy of shape-shifting is a defining feature of the character's identity rather than an incentive to role-playing, in which many gender femalers engage according to Ekins's extensive study (57-58). Throughout the narrative Dragman continues to live a double existence, so ambiguity and shape-shifting as dominant features of gender identity are fortified through Dragman's continued presence as August Crimp/man/husband/father and Dragman/transvestite superhero. Instead of adopting a femme name, except when the unwritten rules of a trans club demand it and he dons Dolly Marie that both hints at Dragman and keeps the identity secret, Crimp follows in the footsteps of superheroes like Batman, Spiderman and Superman when the media nickname him Dragman. The nickname evokes both the essence of his superpowers and the character's gender ambiguity. Appleby's drawing style itself leaves room for ambiguity, for the tall, lean figures of both Crimp and Dragman possess an androgynous grace: "You're half beautiful and half handsome." (Appleby 150) Graphic self-representation thus "literalizes a

process already implicit in prose autobiography", which enables us to "*see* how the cartoonist envisions him or herself" and "projects and objectifies his or her inward sense of self, achieving at once a sense of intimacy and a critical distance" (Hatfield 114-115), while the text verbally articulates the author's/character's transgressive inward sense of self.

If we consider the fact that "in contemporary Western societies cross-dressing and sex-changing are commonly viewed as deviant" (Ekins 49), the body that crosses boundaries between male and female questions the binaries normal/deviant and healthy/pathological, as well as the entire system that relies on clear demarcation lines between them. "For both [Susie] Orbach and [Kim] Chernin women's bodies are fundamentally different from men's. These natural differences provide the basis for the evolution of patriarchal systems" (Vannini and Waskul 187), which are predicated on the existence of two sexes and their corresponding genders (male/female, man/woman). Dragman's body does not conform to such systems and throws into confusion all theories which disregard intersex and gender non-conformity, for example, as well as the many differences within the categories of woman and man. Insisting on a fundamental difference between women and men may also attempt to bypass the difficulty of precisely defining what constitutes the categories of "natural" woman and man, which are both "historically relative" and "culturally relative" (Synnott 71). To show that whether woman or man is viewed as "natural" or "constructed" may be a matter of perspective, a series of panels depict young Crimp in women's clothes on the rooftop of his mother's house imagining a space invasion by aliens who would see him only as "an example of a human being" because "[t]hey wouldn't know any different" (Appleby 131). That the categories of man and woman are also biologically relative is demonstrated by the fact that, for instance, a woman may be born without a uterus (Mayer-Rokitansky-Küster-Hauser syndrome). Does that make her less of a "natural" woman? Vannini and Waskul see Orbach's and Chernin's premises as indicative of a wider tendency in psychology and sociology, since "across psychology and sociology the concept of body-image suffers from a variety of dualisms that do little justice to the body's polysemy and creative force" (188). Dragman's trans body signals the body's polysemy and creative force in that it redefines what constitutes a woman or man by uniting what society sees as opposites. Synnott reminds us that

> [w]e define men and women not simply as biologically different, but as "opposite" sexes; we even refer on occasion to "the battle of the sexes".

> Men and women are polarized in our culture, as opposite, unequal, and at war. (38)

The battle is centuries long: gender dualism and inequality were established by creation myths in several different cultures, as Synnott explicates, consolidating the image of woman as man's bittersweet ruin and providing a basis for patriarchal oppression. Synnott's analysis, however, remains safely within gender binaries, and other binaries (mind/body, virgin/whore), so the more complicated issues of transgender are left out of his discussion. The dual and ambiguous nature of Crimp's/Dragman's gender would historically be described as the "third sex" or "third term", which were used to denote those who felt they were neither truly male nor female, but neither "sex" nor "term" fully explains the character's in-betweenness. Instead, Crimp's/Dragman's gender can be seen as "a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility" (Garber 11), which accounts for a deliberate and creative lack of finish in the development of Crimp's/Dragman's gender identity. Even though cross-dressing does not make for easy blending – it initially causes discomfort, anxiety and fear – it invokes the Platonic idea of sexes as complementary and eventually achieves a comfortable coexistence of elements traditionally understood as separate. Instead of embodying opposition and conflict, Dragman's trans body thus becomes a site of reconciliation. Synnott reproduces the Pythagorean table of opposites from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (4th century B.C.), where male is associated with limit, odd, one, right, resting, straight, light, good, and square, while female is associated with unlimited, even, plurality, left, moving, curved, darkness, bad, and oblong. Dragman's intention is not to subvert these traditional binaries, so cross-dressing in the novel demonstrates that "not every gender-crossing is queerly subversive" (Prosser 32). Instead, Appleby's protagonist uses the enormous creative potential of female features and combines them with male features to signal the plurality and fluidity of gender identity.

Despite the rising popularity of androgynous fashion that favours unisex and genderless clothing as a result of the growing trends towards diversity, inclusivity and gender neutrality, Dragman's transvestism may be experienced as "the disruptive element" (Garber 17) because of the persistent tendencies in the opposite direction, towards an aggressive reinforcement of traditional concepts of the normal in relation to the body: healthy, fit, able-bodied and unambiguously male or female. Speaking of transsexuals, Dennis Schrock and Emily M. Boyd conclude that transsexuals' body projects, which

involve reflexivity (the body is viewed and treated as an object that requires modification), are deemed deviant, so transsexuals are compelled to account for their bodies and projects, and to control their presentation of themselves to others (51-52). Even though Schrock's and Boyd's conclusions are painfully limited as they are based on "the experiences of nine white, middle class male-to-female transsexuals" (Schrock and Boyd 52), their idea is applicable to other forms of transembodiment and helps explain why Dragman is repeatedly invited to account for his cross-dressing habit. If "the notions of the normal" are upheld by "a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality" (Halberstam 4), Dragman's lifestyle also redefines the normal in terms of social expectations about male/female bodies since Appleby's novel shows how one can be "queer", to use Halberstam's term, or "transgender" *and* have a family. Appleby's superhero narrative indicates that Crimp's/Dragman's privileged white middle-class lifestyle and nuclear family are far from conventional even if some aspects of his life story adhere to what Halberstam calls heteronormative time/space constructs, such as reproductive time and family time (10). He shuns his superhero identity in his early days of marriage to Mary, in an attempt to live a "normal" life, but the narrative soon changes into one about his openly double life as man, husband and father, and trans-woman, superhero. How much this disrupts heteronormative definitions of family, manhood and men's roles is best seen in panels showing Crimp enjoying family time as Dragman. After a successfully completed task, Dragman comes home for supper and a regular family conversation ensues while he is still wearing women's clothes and a wig: "Gully! Dada! And how are you my darling tiny man? Dada fly! Fly! Fly! No flying, August. He'll be too excited to sleep. Of course. Hi, Mary. Down you go, sweetie… Whee… How's Cherry? Doing fine." (Appleby 316) Dragman figures as a disruptive, transgressive element even in the context of transembodiment because his cross-dressing involves no imitation, practice or retraining of the body "to produce feminine verbal and nonverbal gestures" and feel "more authentically female", nor does he indulge in a "continual editing of how their [body] may be signifying gender" (Schrock and Boyd 55, 57). In other words, the act of cross-dressing does not affect Dragman's bodily and verbal expression, but changes only others' perceptions of him. If the need to blend in and be perceived as female produces anxiety about "residual signs of manhood" (Schrock and Boyd 55) in some transgender people, Dragman seems unperturbed in this respect and eventually appears rather comfortable as a man dressed in women's clothes.

As virtually anything can be up for sale in late capitalism – Appleby's novel satirises this by turning the old motif of selling your soul to the devil into a literal monetary transaction – bodily flexibility is commodified and has become a highly lucrative business. The fashion industry now capitalises on the growing gender diversity and neutrality while admittedly enabling more varied gender expression, and medically enabled gender transitioning has become even more profitable. Based on the experiences of over two hundred informants and several thousand other cross-dressers and sex-changers, Ekins concludes that many cross-dressers seek para-medical and cosmetic interventions like electrolysis, speech therapy, wig fittings, and the like (42). Dragman, however, needs no expensive treatments or interventions because he has no intention of transitioning. His trans body thus resists commodification, and is defined by a desire to express his gender ambiguity by keeping his male body and wearing female clothes. Dragman's cross-dressing is what Ekins calls "gender femaling" (2), a phenomenon that differs from but is variously connected to "body femaling", which entails changes to the body, and "erotic femaling", which involves sexual arousal and gratification.[6] Even though these distinctions are useful in clarifying that cross-dressing is not inevitably associated with sexual gratification, nor does it invariably entail cosmetic interventions, Garber reminds us that the divisive nature of such categorisation, especially when done for clinical, medical purposes, may be unhelpful in the eyes of the transvestite-transsexual community, whose members tend to prefer the word "cross-dresser" to "transvestite" as the former denotes a choice of lifestyle rather than a medical condition (4). For Dragman, male femaling, a social process that involves "genetic males who 'female' in various ways, variously adopting what they take to be the thoughts, feelings, attitudes, behaviours, accoutrements and attributes of genetic females" (Ekins 48), is indeed a chosen lifestyle, and forms a unique feature of his superhero identity, an identity whose meaning is variously dependent on private and public spaces.

In his short story "Hotel des Boobs" (1985) David Lodge indulges in a humorous quasi-philosophical rumination on ways in which nakedness is related to space in order to understand how female breasts gain and loose erotic value in relation to arbitrary territorial zones. Similarly, Appleby carefully considers the meaning and significance of Dragman's transvestim in

[6] This last is also known as transvestophilia and does not necessarily require the transvestophile to cross-dress as it may refer to sexual fantasies about cross-dressing or erotic interest in cross-dressers.

relation to different spaces, outlining and literalising the process of coming out. Before becoming Dragman, the protagonist engages in "purely private male femaling within a privately co-opted and enacted male femaling world" (Ekins 35), alone and safe in the privacy of home. When he starts going out dressed as a woman, Crimp wishes to avoid detection: "If the Mingles saw me here dressed as a woman… God! I dread to think! They'd laugh. Be disgusted. And everyone would hear about it." (Appleby 36-37) Coming out literally and figuratively is associated with anxiety and fear, which are clearly outlined in the panels showing his face while thinking these thoughts. Crimp's exposure happens both in a public space, when a girl whose life he saves dressed as a woman recognises him as her male neighbour, as does Dog Girl with her "super smelling ability" (Appleby 73), and at home, when a box breaks open and Mary sees his outfits. The two-page panel with Mary holding her husband's halter corset features a television "expert" in the background opening his advertisement for soul selling with the following words: "You know how we all sometimes get the feeling that the world is an illusion and nothing is real?" (Appleby 48-49) Even if it shatters the illusion that Crimp can be defined as a man, neither instance of exposure results in a public blowing off or family break-up as Dragman's secret is safe with the little girl, Dog Girl immediately befriends him, and his wife is only troubled by the fact that he lied to her. Once Crimp/Dragman moves from private to public spaces in the process of coming out literally and metaphorically, both private and public, open and closed spaces become sites of his transformations from Crimp to Dragman and back. His identity is nevertheless conditioned by territorial zones, so at home he mainly remains August/man/husband/father and in public spaces he appears as Crimp, Dragman and Dolly Marie.

Speaking of public spaces (male, female, or male/female) which trans people use, Ekins uses words such as "co-opting" and "colonisation" to describe "group colonising of private, semi-private and public spaces and worlds" that "will be variously exclusive, variously boundaried, variously extensive in space and place, and will be for varying periods at a time" (33-35). Appleby illustrates this by having his superhero characters gather in a superhero club-cum-agency. As a superhero, Dragman is eligible for permit that would grant him access, but as a transgender superhero, he is first asked to account for his cross-dressing habit and change it before he is finally, though not unanimously, accepted. The club is for superheroes rather than trans people, so within the supposedly safe space of the club Dragman encounters both hospitality and abuse: Hindsight knows him for a trans and greets him cordially with the words

"Enchanté, madame", but the aptly nicknamed Fist expresses open hostility by calling Dragman "a SICK FUCK", claiming that "there's NO WAY I'm letting a SICK WEIRDO like you join this club" (Appleby 81, 95, 119), and pursuing him throughout the novel. Since his instinctive kindness, an act of saving a young girl who has not paid superhero insurance to get saved – yes, even saving lives costs money – and the chosen outfit and lifestyle have marked him as a pariah among superheroes, Dragman has "to overcome the enmity of a superhero community that is not only transphobic but has banned any rescue that is not strictly covered by insurance" (Armitstead). From rejection, which causes Crimp to try living an ordinary life, the narrative proceeds towards recognition, confirmation and acceptance. Halfway through the story, however, the reader realises that this is not the only club in which Dragman finds a sense of community. If his identity as a trans-woman occupies the space between man and woman, joining them together, his identity as a trans superhero grants him entrance to both the superhero club and another exclusive club in the novel, a club for trans people.

As each club is variously exclusive, variously boundaried and governed by various rules, Dragman can belong and feel at home in them on one condition: "You must NEVER reveal your secret identity. That's rule number one." (Appleby 98) In the context of the superhero club, the secret identity is his identity as August Crimp, occupation: ordinary man, and in the trans club the secret identity is that of Dragman. If the space of the superhero club offers relative safety to Dragman, it also sharply contrasts the vulnerability of trans-women in the trans club, whose "crimson, dimly lit bedrooms" offer the promise of pleasurable encounters with girls who are men "beneath the wigs, false eyelashes, powder and paint" (Appleby 127-128). While the club gives the girls a chance to "bask in the lust of the men", act out the fantasy that they are "beautiful and desirable mythological creatures" (Appleby 128), and be themselves, it also exposes them to danger.

> "Dirty bitches", the man says to himself, smiling. "Pretty like a girl, dirty like a boy…" . . . Tonight the man hopes to find a girl who'll suggest things he hasn't tried yet. Things he hasn't even imagined. And when he finds her he'll enjoy her and kill her and take her soul. (Appleby 127-128)

For Dragman, even this club, a space of diversity and inclusivity, socialisation and sexual encounters, which welcomes "[g]irls, boys and

everyone somewhere in between" (Appleby 155), imposes restrictions. As I have already mentioned, the rule that he must never reveal his secret identity applies there, as well. If "[b]ecoming involved in the transgender subculture . . . can change how transsexuals define and feel about themselves" (Schrock and Boyd 52), Dragman's narrative confirms that the claim applies to cross-dressers, as well, for they find a sense of community in the club where they can be who they feel they are although some aspects of their identities remain outside. The threat that trans-women face in the space which they recognise as a safe zone for being themselves and having fun represents the ultimate form of "enforcement of normativity" (Halberstam 87), and possibly a reminder of the murder of Venus Extravaganza, who was most likely a victim of transphobia.

Although the murders in *Dragman* are committed in London, which plays into the hands of the tropes of urban wilderness and urban danger, in reality, transgender people, especially those who are underprivileged in terms of class and race, are at risk everywhere. That all the spaces with which Crimp's/Dragman's complex identity interacts are in the city repeats "the essential characterizations of queer life as urban" (Halberstam 15) and suggests a link with Appleby's experience of being a city trans, to the exclusion of trans experiences outside of urban spaces. This brings us to the question of the (in)visibility of trans experiences, which is spatial (trans people's relative visibility in the urban spaces of the more liberal societies sharply contrasts their near-total invisibility in rural areas and more conservative societies), but is also, and more importantly, political, social and cultural. Transgender theorists like Sandy Stone have already pointed out that cross-dressers and transsexuals often, though not inevitably, wish to pass as women or men and appear "normal", which decreases their visibility as trans.[7] "To identify as transgender", like Winterson's Ry, Appleby's Dragman or Appleby himself, "is to refuse the invisibility – whether social, political or cultural – which Stone describes" (Caroll 3), but also to expose oneself to the possibility of harassment. If transsexual was once seen only as transitional (from male

[7] Transsexuals, as well as those who identify as transvestites or trans, "who are 'read' as men in women's clothing", but also those, like Brandon Teena, who are seen as women in men's clothing, "commonly face public harassment and sometimes violence" (Schrock and Boyd 53), and the threat of harassment and violence is thematised in *Dragman* in thriller-like fashion. Because of a predominantly negative attitude to trans people, Dragman is not immune to anxiety or fear, and to avoid ridicule and harassment, his initial idea is to stay undetected or pass as a woman: "I didn't want to be noticed. I didn't want to stand out." (Appleby 40)

through transsexual to female or from female through transsexual to male), it is now an identity category in itself, as is transgender. Dragman's transgender is not transitional, nor is it an act or a performance. The same applies to Appleby, who dresses as "a trans-woman . . . comfortable looking feminine but continuing to be called Steven" (Appleby 330), and embraces transgender as a category for those who find "man" and "woman" insufficient, limiting or simply wrong.

In theoretical approaches to transgender identity, invisibility has been perpetuated by the conflation of transgender with queer, which Jay Prosser is particularly concerned with as he believes that not all transgender people are queer either in its original sense (homosexual) or in its more recent and more figurative sense (denoting gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people) (31). The visibility of transgender is also negatively affected by the "habitual interpretative reduction of transgender identities and bodies to exemplary ciphers for queer theoretical paradigms" (Caroll 17), which theorists like Prosser and Susan Stryker warn against. Yet matters of visibility and category overlapping are fairly complicated in the area of cross-dressing, where "to ignore the role played by homosexuality would be to risk a radical misunderstanding of the social and cultural implications of cross-dressing" (Garber 4-5) as transvestism can be historically related to gay culture. On the other hand, to say that all cross-dressing is associated with homosexuality is to risk obscuring female-to-male cross-dressing and reaching an erroneous conclusion that all cross-dressers are gay. Appleby points to this problem in a brief introductory exchange between Hindsight and Dragman. Hindsight mentions that he is available but then quickly corrects himself, visibly perspiring, by saying "Not that I'm… I mean… I didn't mean… Er… I'm not gay!", to which Dragman replies with a smile "Neither am I!" (Appleby 82)

As regards visibility, in the twenty-first century the situation may seem brighter in view of institutional support and positive media publicity

> ranging from the formal inclusion of transgender people in the equality and diversity policies and strategies of public and private bodies (including charities, NGOs and health care providers), to the prominence of some transgender people in popular culture and social media, especially in relation to celebrity, film and television drama, and fashion. (Caroll 20)

Yet this may sound more optimistic than it actually is, as both Winterson and Appleby highlight in their different examinations of continued discrimination against and threats to transgender people. Despite the cultural and media prominence that Caroll mentions, transgender people also receive negative attention in the media and social networks, and are officially dismissed by public policies and laws across the world. For instance, in 2022, Florida Senate passed a bill which bans discussion of gender identity and sexual orientation in primary schools (Popat and Honderich), and in December of the same year, the Russian Parliament passed a new anti-LGBT law that discriminates against what is defined as "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations" (Vernon), with the ban also affecting non-traditional gender identities. This illustrates the common conflation of non-normative gender identity with non-normative sexual orientation, and the persistent marginalisation of both. For the same reason, the LGBT umbrella term is a target of criticism as "the specific needs and interests of transgender people are confused, obscured and displaced through the apparent conflation of gender identity (transgender) with sexual identity (lesbian, gay and bisexual)" (Caroll 21). The term's latest extension, LGBTIQA+, confirms the legitimacy of such concerns since the A in the acronym stands for asexual, agender and/or aromantic. If and when resistance and struggles for visibility rely on an "insistence on integration" (Caroll 23), assimilation consolidates the status quo and further decreases visibility. In reality, both visibility and opportunity are affected by class, ability, race, and other factors which determine, among other things, access to medical care. Since integration and assimilation solidify existing privileges, obscure vastly different experiences, and neglect matters such as class, race and ability, homonormative strategies are subject to continuous critique in the context of neoliberal policies (Caroll 20-26).

Like Appleby, Dragman is integrated into mainstream society to a certain degree, but his integration as husband and father happens before his coming out as a cross-dresser and then transgender. Indeed, and again like the author, Dragman is a privileged white trans whose support of the institutions of marriage and reproductive family may be absorbing him into the status quo, but his trans identity radically changes the status quo by recasting said institutions and broadening the definition of who counts as eligible for marriage and parenthood. In Halberstam's view, "[q]ueer uses of time and space" – and Halberstam's understanding of "queer" includes non-normative forms of embodiment – "develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of marriage, family, and reproduction" since alternative queer

temporality is in some degree associated with "the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing" (1). Appleby's and Dragman's experiences demonstrate that they do not need to develop in opposition. Halberstam acknowledges that not all people who identify as non-normative in terms of gender and/or sexuality radically differ in their ways of life from heterosexuals (1) or, we might add, cisgender people, but Appleby's and Dragman's identities and daily routines make for alternative lifestyles and alternative definitions of conventional institutions. Halberstam repeatedly insists that queer time exists outside bourgeois family and reproduction, but instead of merely assimilating into conventional society and solidifying its institutions, Appleby and Dragman can be understood as moving beyond discourses of oppositionality towards new alliances, demonstrating that it is possible to have a family *and* exist in queer time.

If the institutions of conventional society are reshaped by trans and queer people, bodies and life stories of trans people are equally made and shaped by historical and social forces, as transgender artist Cassils reminds us. Their performance *Becoming and Image* (2012-) exposes "what is neither seen nor recorded: it is a testament to the struggle to make an impression in the field of representation, to gain visibility in conditions of unseeing and to find a foothold in the institutions of cultural memory" (Caroll 1). In a way, this is precisely what all literary and artistic works on transgender attempt to achieve, those that wish to understand how transgender is shaped by various forces as a historical phenomenon and those that examine its contemporary manifestations and meanings. Insisting that we must refrain from projecting today's concepts of transgender identity into the past to understand and/or define gender non-conformity throughout history, Caroll reminds us that we can approach historical transgender existence as "'unresolved tales' (Halberstam), historical 'glimpses' (Rawson), and 'possibilities and actualities' (Getsy)" (9). Knowledge about historical transgender existence in a time when transgender people enjoy more visibility than ever could lead to a more thorough understanding of the "motifs of inauthenticity, deception and imposture" that continue to be used "not only to question the legitimacy of transgender lives but also to rationalise prejudice, discrimination and violence against transgender people" (Caroll 18). Trans bodies and lives are also shaped and subjected to violence by academic discourses, where transgender issues still struggle for visibility as a legitimate area of study. The threat of perceiving and treating trans lives and bodies as *objects* of study, for instance, is well illustrated by Schrock and Boyd's use of technical vocabulary throughout their

chapter. Words and expressions such as "retrain", "redesign", "body project", "strategies of implementation", or "transformative bodywork" aim at reflecting a scientific approach, scientific register and scientific objectivity, but their word choice inevitably resonates with the emotional and social distancing, alienation, ostracism, and objectification that trans people experience. Appleby's semi-autobiographical graphic thriller responds to such a treatment of transgender through self-definition and self-representation in a fragmented form which evokes the sense of dislocation or discontinuity that characterises the experience of being trans, and perfectly accommodates a story of transforming identities due to its own transitional nature (text/image, superhero/autobiography, migration from panel to panel or page to page).

The form's flexibility provides a suitable medium to explore "gender flexibility" that was "a site of both fascination and promise in the late twentieth century" (Halberstam 18), and remains so in the twenty-first, but not without pitfalls. As we have seen, gender flexibility is also a site of hostility and abuse. At the very beginning of Appleby's novel, Dragman and Dog Girl are out patrolling when they are verbally abused by three sexist thugs: "Hey, girls! / Out for some fun? / Sexy mask." (16) Once they hear Dragman's voice, their aggression turns away from women to trans people: "Hey! That voice… The tall one's a man! / Dressed as a girl! / Fucking pervert. Ugh." (Appleby 17) As with anything that occupies the uncomfortable space between categories, cross-dressing and gender ambiguity are often approached with a "mix of fascination and repulsion" (Ekins 13). That and the continued use of labels, by queers and non-queers, cisgender and transgender, binary and non-binary people alike, suggests that we have not entirely eradicated binaries nor have we reached a post-gender society. In a 2005 study, Halberstam refers to gays and lesbians who, thinking of themselves as living in a post-gender world, discard labelling as a sign of oppression (19), but today personal profiles on websites and social media, such as poet profiles on the website of the Academy of American Poets, often proudly assert non-normative labels. A related problem is the potential reinforcement of stereotypical femininity and "gender role stereotypes" (Ekins 40) by trans people themselves if and when they associate girls with dolls, a gentler manner, compulsory make-up and "feminine" clothes, or when they present women as endlessly obsessing about the "right" clothes, colours and hairstyles, or as constantly and acutely aware of their gestures, manners, behaviour, and appearance. Yet another difficulty is caused by an insistence on trans people's construction of femininity or masculinity, either through drag or through medical intervention. Speaking of transsexuals, Prosser claims that

insisting on the transsexual body's construction treats it as a product and effect of medical technology, thus precluding transsexual agency, in a larger context of construction as inevitably negative and instrumental in discrimination against what is seen as unnatural (7-8). However, the male femaler's construction of femaleness and femininity can be viewed as positive and no more literal than any other construction of femaleness and femininity.

Dragman successfully defies labels, stereotyping and construction by emphasising the main character's in-betweenness as his true self. To get to that true self, Crimp/Dragman embarks on a labyrinthine journey of self-discovery that is characterised by a prevailing sense of confusion. The journey's level of difficulty is suggested by the drawing on the inside cover of the novel: a confusing and funny image of a children's maze whose entangled lines Crimp is supposed to master to find his way to his true self. Luckily, his adventurous and dangerous quest results in success. Speaking of one mode of representing transgenderism on film, Halberstam notes that "the transgender character is presented at first as 'properly' gendered, as passing in other words, and as properly located within a linear narrative; her exposure as transgender constitutes the . . . narrative climax, and spells out . . . her own decline" (78). As if to respond to such a treatment of transgenderism, and such a narrative trajectory, *Dragman* follows a different plot line. In response to any narrative that deliberately or inadvertently advertises heteronormative standards and conventions, instead of the transgender character's downfall or demise, we witness Dragman's triumph. In the final confrontation, Dragman's enemies take away his clothes/power. Dog Girl retrieves them, but he decides to fight with no clothes, male or female: "I was… never very good at being a man. And I don't think I'll ever feel truly right as a woman. I'm something else, Fist. I'm ME! I'm DRAGMAN!" (Appleby 193) And on that note, the superhero starts flying in the nude because he has embraced his true superpower, his being between binaries.

By all standards, Appleby's first graphic novel is an unconventional narrative. *Dragman* upsets a number of binaries, those between the superhero genre and autobiography, fantasy and realism, truth and fiction, text and image, the graphic novel and comic book, as well as male and female. In the comic book and graphic novel industry, *Dragman* bridges the gap between "a dominant fannish emphasis on superpowered heroes, and . . . an alternative, post-underground outlook, from which larger-than-life heroism has been evacuated in favor of heady satire or in-your-face realism" (Hatfield 111). Appleby's novel offers both, for the story of Dragman's extraordinary yet profoundly human

heroism draws inspiration from the two opposed subgenres of the graphic novel, redefining them along the way by offering an unconventional superhero plot and protagonist, and being alternative in its focus on a marginalised identity, one that is largely absent from underground and post-underground graphic narratives. At the same time, *Dragman* unites trans autobiography and the autobiographical graphic novel in a narrative where "the pictorial presence of the autobiographical subject . . . both fortifies and unravels autobiography's founding generic claims" (Chaney 7). Appleby blurs the distinction between the narrating subject and the narrated object in "drawn self-portraits, in which emotional interpretation often exceeds and even sabotages literal description" (Hatfield 116) to reflect our changing realities. In spite of a rising trend in Western societies to bring up children as gender neutral, we undoubtedly live in a world that is still predominantly gendered and binary: "In dress and colour, make-up and hair-styles, the hands and the feet, cosmetic surgery and body-builds, we symbolize our opposite sexes. The rituals of the body are also gender-specific" (Synnott 65), and gender conditioning starts from the earliest age. But *Dragman* demonstrates what lived reality and the media daily reflect: a gendered landscape that is becoming more and more nuanced, and will not be ignored for much longer.

Appleby's narrative departs from matters of biology and psychology, where transgender is routinely medicalised and pathologised, defined as a condition caused by gender discomfort, gender dissatisfaction or gender dysphoria, and stigmatised. Once Crimp's/Dragman's trans identity is disassociated from shame, anxiety and fear, it becomes a source of joy, pride, self-confidence, and power. Appleby's brave exploration opens up new possibilities for the graphic novel as a genre and form that now enjoys international attention among publishers, readers, booksellers, academics, and critics, which endows it with considerable impact and potential to produce change. In this respect, *Dragman* is particularly relevant in a time when the ever-widening palette of gender identities "puts in question identities previously conceived as stable, unchangeable, grounded, and 'known'" (Garber 13). Three full decades after the publication of Garber's *Vested Interests* we are nowhere near to alleviating the cultural anxiety created by the crossing of gender binaries. This chronic anxiety is well summed up by a brief discussion in Winterson's *Frankissstein*: "No one in the Bible is trans. / The Bible was a long time ago, Claire, I said. No one in the Bible flies in a plane, drinks bourbon or eats grilled cheese." (241) As gender is becoming increasingly complex, the anxiety may in fact be aggravating: as educational institutions in Germany and

Australia, for instance, introduce gender-neutral and/or gender-inclusive language, the rise in right-wing politics across the world is accompanied by a desperate call for traditional gender identities and relationships. For this reason, as a medium that inevitably presupposes reader engagement, *Dragman* is precious reading material for those who see in graphic narratives "potential for social and political change" (Howard and Hoeness-Krupsaw 1). Its trans form, provocative content, redefinition of genres, and trans character as a triumphant protagonist with a(n) (un)conventional family create a symbiosis of text and image that is moving, chilling and funny, and points to the growing need to think and act outside the binaries.

THE TRANSGRESSIVE POWER OF EXPERIMENTAL FICTION: MARK DANIELEWSKI'S *ONLY REVOLUTIONS* (2006) AND GIANNINA BRASCHI'S *UNITED STATES OF BANANA* (2011)

[T]he truly important transgressive energies of literature . . . are directed not at other literature but at dominant institutions and ideologies in the real world of politics and history.

M. Keith Booker, *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection, and the Carnivalesque*

If the previous chapters in this section make transgressivity in fiction seem relatively easy to identify and define, the present chapter will hopefully dispel any illusions about easy demarcations in the area of literary transgressivity. It is for this reason that I choose to focus on experimental literature, where definition, categorisation, classification, and terminology often fail to capture its proverbially intractable nature. In its long history, experimental literature has been associated with transgression, subversion, play, reconceptualisation, and alternative. In the eyes of a general readership, as well as in scholarly literature, experimentation is usually associated with twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature. *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (2012), for instance, starts from modernist experimentalism even though experimental writing has existed much longer. Pattern poetry in ancient literature (between 7th century BC and 11th century AD) and in the sixteenth century, the Three Perfections in Chinese art (a combination of painting, poetry and calligraphy), Edmund Spenser, William Blake, and Laurence Sterne are some among numerous examples of premodern experimental literature. Much further back in the past, arguably the first novel ever written, *The Ethiopian Romance* (3rd century AD) by Heliodorus of Emesa, "employs innovative formal aesthetic strategies – such as the interlacing of multiple narratives and voices and a structure of stories within stories – in order to represent the geographic and epistemic limits of human experience and what is knowable" (Keith 281). Admittedly, such experimentation became much more common in modernism and in the following, increasingly turbulent decades of the twentieth century both the novel and the author were

pronounced dead, and literature was declared exhausted and used up.[1] It followed the erratic courses of history, politics, economy, and culture, so in an age of unstable, changing political, social and historical realities, the novel took on a destabilised form, examining genre, text, plot, traditional character representations, the idea of a stable personal identity, familiar linear spatiotemporality, and the sense of closure. Throughout the twentieth century, the novel ventured ever further away from its traditional nineteenth-century manifestation, and in so many different directions that, in the twenty-first century, the term "novel" may cover anything from the more conventional plot and character driven narratives, organised in neat chapters with clearly outlined spatial and temporal settings, to texts which combine word and image, rely on dispersed or non-existent plots, use no characterisation, show preference for fragmented structures and spatial and temporal criss-crossing, mix prose and poetry, and blur fact and fiction. It is a funhouse for sure, one in which we are bound to be lost.

The kinds of experimentation that this chapter examines build upon the proliferation of experimental writing since the mid-twentieth century, ranging from the French anti-novel to the postcolonial merging of native and Western narrative techniques, genres, forms, styles, cultures, and languages, and inspired by anything from substance abuse (William Burroughs's 1959 *Naked Lunch*) to technology (twitterature, code poetry). While some contemporary experimental literature relies on rules (lipogram or n+7),[2] and Mark Z. Danielewski follows in this direction, other experimental works seem to thrive on purposeful randomness and capriciousness of design, as my discussion of Giannina Braschi hopes to demonstrate. You may experiment with every aspect of a fictional work: plot, character, language, style, form, structure, genre, reader engagement and/or expectations, media, and format. The motivations behind experiments may vary, so some works seek to extend the possibilities of language or form (Georges Perec's 1969 *La Disparition*),

[1] These ominous declarations referred to Western writing and inspired much experimentation in form, structure, genre, language, and style. In the second half of the twentieth century, an increasing number of Other voices, such as postcolonial or women's, reinvigorated Western writing with new authors, themes, traditions, cultures, genres, and styles.

[2] Here I employ an understanding of "contemporary" that is a bit broader than elsewhere in the section, to refer to literature from mid-twentieth century to the present moment.

others wish to explore the influence of technology on our perception of reality or the literary text (Rob Wittig's 2001/2002 *Blue Company*), and others still intend to subvert dominant institutions and ideologies (Angela Carter's 1984 *Nights at the Circus*). To give a glimpse of the wide variety of contemporary experimental writing, I will mention only a few relatively recent phenomena: post-postmodernist literature, Altermodernist fiction, avant-pop, hoax poetry, concrete poetry and prose, uncreative writing, unnatural narrative, digital fiction, and multimodal literature. The list goes on and is very long indeed, so entire volumes would be necessary to properly understand the contexts, types, varieties, forms, and purposes of experimental fiction. The aim of this chapter is therefore fairly modest: to briefly examine two experimental novels, Mark Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* (2006) and Giannina Braschi's *United States of Banana* (2011), in order to outline the transgressive potential of experimental fiction in the twenty-first century.

In a section on her old website that is currently unavailable,[3] Jeanette Winterson discusses *The PowerBook* (2000) in the context of twenty-first-century literature, which can serve to contextualise my discussion of Danielewski's and Braschi's fictions.

> Why do you call it twenty first century fiction?
> There's been a lot of talk about the death of the book, but there is no death of the book, only a transformation of the book, both as artefact and as idea. In a new century we need new ways of looking at familiar things – that's the only way we make them ours, otherwise they're just borrowed and soon become clichés. I've used all kinds of devices to keep asking the big questions and to defamiliarise what's important but in danger of becoming stale. The shape of the book, its structure, its language, is a different way of working.
> Are you sure it's not all a gimmick?
> What a bloody waste of time that would be! Who am I kidding? I'm in this because I'm passionate about language, in love with books, and because I want to move on the discussion. We can't go on writing traditional nineteenth century fiction, we have to recognise that

[3] Parts of the quote can now be retrieved from a few resources that are available online. By a lucky chance, I managed to copy the entire section just before they redesigned the website.

> Modernism and Post Modernism have changed the map, and any writer worth their weight in floppy discs will want to go on changing that map. I don't want to be a curator in the Museum of Literature, I want to be part of what happens next. (Winterson)

Only Revolutions and *United States of Banana* are two among many examples of what happens next, and what happens next blurs the line between mainstream and experimental writing. Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale claim that mainstream literature (bestsellers and classics) is dedicated to repressing the fundamental questions of experimental writing, which asks what literature is and what it can be (1). Indeed, experimental literature was for long understood as being outside the mainstream, subversive, transgressive and deviant, so authors like Blake and Sterne were seen as anomalies in their own time and only gained in popularity in centuries to follow. At the same time, such authors contributed to a major overhaul in our perception of both the mainstream and bestseller, and proved that mainstream literature bears the seeds of its own subversion. If modernist experimentation was initially revolutionary and outside the mainstream, the great modernists eventually became canonical. In the decades to come, infinitely diverse Other voices – postcolonial, queer or women's, to name a few – utterly transformed mainstream writing, making it more inclusive and diverse.[4] Prestigious literary prizes like the Booker and the Pulitzer fuelled this widening of scope and radicalised the concept of the bestseller when they were awarded to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980) respectively.

Mark Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* (2006), a work so experimental as to be at times almost unreadable *and* a New York Times bestseller *and* a National Book Award Finalist, further questions mainstream and experimental fiction as distinct categories. *Only Revolutions* has been described by Philip Leonard as "[p]art narrative poem, part free verse, part road novel, part historical collage" that "not only ranges transgenerically across different literary modes but also often resembles haptic poetry" (145), if only because it needs to be physically manipulated by the reader. Yet this arresting and daunting text is prosaically subtitled a novel, challenging expectations and

[4] For more on this, see Luburić-Cvijanović, "Ruždi i preokret u britanskom romanu".

reading practices. To try to confine it within a specific genre would be impossible since the text is at the same time a version of a road novel, a romance and, most of all, a failed epic whose epic journey, sense of adventure and grandiose scope seem to confirm the following claim: "Novels are not encyclopedias containing all the world's knowledge, but that doesn't keep them from trying to pack everything in." (Bulson 7) Even if it tries to pack in quite a lot, the text's epic reach is contradicted by the facts that it is "filled with nobodies, who are barely getting by" and involves a plot "where nothing 'epic' happens" (Bulson 8). To say that there is no plot or story in it would be misleading, but to say that there is one would be just as wrong. Attempts have been made to summarise *Only Revolutions* as an experimental and historically framed road novel immersed in American mythos, which follows two star-crossed lovers across centuries and the changing American landscape. As is the case with James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) or David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), all attempts at providing plot summaries are bound to do injustice to the complexity of these texts. Like *Ulysses* and *Infinite Jest*, *Only Revolutions* operates around a number of rules so numerous and complex that readers are offered guides on different websites.[5]

You may choose to read *Only Revolutions* using different strategies, so "the experience of reading [it] invites parallels with some approaches to digital texts, in particular the emphasis on their variability, and their ability to generate infinite versions from a finite source" (Bray 183). Yet the book cover flap suggests that you should turn the book upside down and swing it around every eight pages to alternate between Sam's and Hailey's narratives, in a movement that Hanjo Berressem likens to turning vinyl on a record player and to the record's revolution (217). Namely, the book begins from both ends, so one side of the book (recto or verso, as you wish) develops Sam's narrative, which occupies the top half of the page (while Hailey's is upside down in the bottom half). Conversely, the other side of the book develops Hailey's narrative in the top half (while Sam's is in the bottom half): "Hailey arriving when I'm leaving. / Hailey leaving when I'm arriving." (Danielewski 169S)[6]; "Sam leaving

[5] See, for instance, *Only Revolutions* Reader's Guide on www.penguinrandomhouse.com or *Only Revolutions* Reading Group Guide by David Glines on www.forums.markzdanielewski.com.

[6] Page numbers in quotes from Sam's narrative will be marked S, and those in quotes from Hailey's narrative will be marked H.

when I arrive. / Sam arriving when I leave." (Danielewski 169H) This allows the two narratives to spin together towards the middle and towards each other in a vortex that has the reader spinning the book. The fiction's predominant "sense of circularity" (Leonard 146) is further accentuated by the motif of the road journey, so the narratives, or "whirls of ours" (Danielewski 179S), keep spinning like the wheels of the cars the characters are driving and the bikes they are riding: "Aboutandout. Cycling crunchy around" (Danielewski 174S). As the narratives approach the centre where they meet and part, the spinning gets faster, and the word "spinning" frequently appears in the 360 pages of the book, with each spread containing 360 words. The narrative comes full circle but does not stop there; instead, it repeatedly emphasises perpetuity of motion, promised by the title. The first O in "revolutions" is a pause button and the two narrative threads begin/end with a pause button. As there is no one to press it, the two characters and their narratives arrive at no destination: "Hailey allways the ongoing fun."; "We are without edge, continually unwinding, uniting."; "Away we go...We sure whirr."; "no one can challenge our run enough to stop me" (Danielewski 221-22S, 217H, 241H). As the narratives respond to and rewrite each other in different ways, the reader may often feel disoriented or lost, just like in a vortex. Exactly how the spiralling text and imagery makes for vertiginous reading is well illustrated by any number of quotes, such as the following example.

> Until I'm surrounded, / a warning labor, bzzzzzzzzzing / **Alfaalfa Corollas**. / Wax and venom sacs / dutifully waiting on the hazards of / a spin. Air thick with disaster. / the me I terribly feer. / My own stinging vulnerability. / Even if by some momentum / and glee, I can't deny now / this twirling / speed. / Sam though shoots by, / scurrying and hurrying, / somehow scotching away barbs, / which, eschewing **Honeysuckle**, / **Heathers**, **Fennel** and **Thyme**, / rise for a dance with the wind. / And over again, despite sharp / rafts of worry, Sam, yippling with / laughs, keeps clearing my path / happily."[7] (Danielewski 40H)

Danielewski reimagines logically ordered, rule-bound writing as more creative and seemingly free-flowing writing that is nevertheless rule-bound and follows its own logic. He thus combines the two strains of writing which

[7] All peculiarities of spelling are in the original.

were associated, as Pramod K. Nayar reminds us, with the rational and the phallic (the former), and with women's writing (the latter) (32). Such a text challenges the integrity of the written page and demands a more active process of reading. So active, in fact, as to put a serious strain on the reader and prove Booker's claim that the transgressive potential of a literary piece has to be unlocked by the reader. Put differently, the transgressive potential of the reader is vital for a work to successfully exercise its subversive power. If experiment is "literature's way of reinventing itself" (Bray et al. 1), *Only Revolutions* is an endless process of reinvention through experimentation. Does that place it among works which are "so difficult and complex that only professional scholars seem to be able to recognize their radical potential" (Booker 3)? Frankly, the puzzling complexity of Danielewski's text makes sure that no amount of expertise can save professional scholars from getting lost in it. As they should in a narrative structured as a vortex.

The text's vertiginous spatiotemporality mirrors "the technological manipulation of time, space and distance, and . . . a specifically twenty-first-century speed" (Boxall 3), combining the time of Sam's and Hailey's stories with a historical framework on page margins, whose dates span centuries, while the past, present and future are kaleidoscopically changing. Sam and Hailey are timeless – they are always 16 – but the time of the world keeps spinning and speeding up. The years and dates occasionally get mixed up or changed, like the dates of Victor Basch's death and of the Treaty of Valparaiso, so the reader and the characters are "here to get circled"[8] (Danielewski 256S). The story is therefore temporally elusive, its "temporal coding . . . is *both* inexact *and* multiple" and "the space of each page enables the simultaneous co-existence of multiple time zones" (Gibbons, "You Were There" 169). The same impression is created by Danielewski's treatment of geography, since different places (cities, countries, continents) co-exist on each page, just like they do in the world outside the book. Toponyms, dates and historical references seem to locate the narrative in space and time, but contextualisation is endlessly deferred as the story spins around while the main protagonists are in perpetual motion. While the American geographic and cultural landscape, with which the characters merge physically and linguistically ("us" is spelled as "US"), seems to root the text in reality, the historical framework throws in places, events and

[8] Sam means "married", but the word is beyond doubt ambiguous.

people from around the world and across time. American states, towns, diners, bars, gas stations, living forms, people of different ethnicities, and car brands are all juxtaposed with natural, political, social, economic, and sports events from other countries, continents and moments in history. Such a treatment of space and time saturates the text "by a sense of place and displacement" (Leonard 156), and is therefore at the same time American and transnational, or even planetary. Different locations and points in time are interwoven, reflecting increased experimentation with spatial and temporal representation in fiction that is transnational, cosmopolitan and planetary.

While Sam and Hailey's journey, which spatially and temporally unfolds only in the act of reading (Gibbons, "You Were There" 169), "takes place within a territorial space that the text firmly situates as the space of the nation", the margins' "chronomosaics . . . reinforce . . . a sense of the transnational and the global" (Leonard 157). History in *Only Revolutions* is both national and transnational, personal and collective, unofficial and official, factual and fictional, miscellaneous, fragmentary and rewritten. Events are piled up in such a manner that they seem absolutely meaningless, but each one bears significance in human history and in the lives of individuals and communities. To illustrate this, any chronomosaic will do.

> Aug 3 1977
> FALN's Manhattan blasts, / 1 goes. / Cambodian troops & / Ta Phraya, 29 go. / Salisbury explosion, / 11 go. / – Well, you've got me. / Mojave & Enterprise. / Herbert Kappler. / Elvis goes. / Amnesty & / FRETELIN guerrillas. / Arktika's North Pole. / Marble Cone's 175,000 acres. / Mozambique massacre, / 16 go. Bill 101 & / 4,000 Eskimos. / Tong-sun Park. / Stockholm US Embassy, / Leopold Aragón goes. / Benigno Acquino goes. / Panama Canal & / Omar Torrijos Herrera. / – counter any threat. / Stephen Biko goes. / Courageous cups Australia. / Onassis & $20 million. / Peking, Hua Kuo-feng & / Pol Pot. (Danielewski 137H)

Bray takes pains to elucidate how the apparently coincidental arrangement of information in the chronomosaics actually invites the reader to search for the many complex parallels in them. In a detailed discussion of one such parallel, found in the chronomosaics of pages 277 in Sam's and Hailey's narratives, he points to the link between two very different events

described as "Robert Steven goes", a reference to anthrax attacks in the United States in 2001, and "Brooklyn's Rudolf Ivanovich Abel", a reminder of the 1953 Hollow Nickel Case; both events led to FBI investigations (Bray 193-195). Even after multiple re-readings, how likely is the reader to discern such connections, even if they make Danielewski's text more meaningful? As adventurous and fascinating as this act of decoding might sound, and we all immerse ourselves in it to different degrees because the urge is irresistible, there are dozens of possible clues on each page, so from the reader's point of view, it might be far more engaging to understand the big picture that these chronomosaics create.

When you scan any entry, the words which stand out are those that tell of violence, struggle, power relations, disaster, and death. For instance, on page 313 of Sam's story the chronomosaic mentions "Atomic blasts", "Hurricane", "goes", "UN plane", "are forced upon", "Military Revolt", "domination", "fight and fight and fight again", and "border". Personal and historical narratives connect through violence, so when Sam's narrative uses words and phrases such as "whipped", "corpses of ruin", "smolders with feer", "annihilation", "carnage", "gore" (Danielewski 30S), the margins speak of cyclones and blizzards, serfdom and electrocution, Jack the Ripper and measles, rebellions and floods, the abolition of the slave trade and fire. It is a history of violence – of people (war, massacres, colonisation, riots, lynching, rape, beating) and of nature (floods, hurricanes, viruses) – but also a history of achievement (vaccines, inventions, treaties, the suffrage movement). Although *Only Revolutions* is not by any definition historical fiction, the narrative's historical consciousness demonstrates "a keen awareness of history as event" rather than process, "history as a material force which is not simply produced by narrative, but also shapes and determines it" (Boxall 41). The narrative's kaleidoscopic nature is thus both framed and shaped by the chaotically arranged historical events, but it is equally determined by the fact that there is no historical framework from January 18 2006 on page 285 of Hailey's story. Danielewski projects no history after the year of his book's publication, so the rest is silence that history itself has to interrupt. Danielewski's historical vision is one of kaleidoscopic shifts and randomness, convergences and divergences. The text itself is therefore characterised by incessant change: the world, the landscape and the narrative keep changing but are held together by the story's focus on the two lovers. Their narratives meet, part, respond to and mirror each other as they encounter, confront or pass by dozens of other "characters"

while hundreds of thousands of anonymous and famous people pepper the margins.

The idea of history and society as a kaleidoscope is formally conveyed through Danielewski's merging of prose and poetry that worships sound. Danielewski's experiment with language and style plays with sound, spelling, rhythm, and words, and shows musical influence:[9]

> About me, around me,
> spinning me, galling me,
> doublenelsoning me until
> before it's begun and after it's done
> I'm overwhelmed by Them.
> Raped. Defied. Tried.
> Lunched. Staked. Despised.
> everybody gets a turn.
> – *You*, Them bash.
> – *Me*, Them smash. Earned
> without yearning, and for such
> Woe & Shame, flinging their
> frustratings upon me. Freeforall.
> From balls to bones,
> by sticks & stones,
> jabs, swings and brawling slugs.
> I don't move.
> Them don't stop.
> All of them. One by one. Allatonce.
> Until abruptly Them's gone.
> Leaving me menacing
> and, well, okay, slightly startled.
> (Danielewski 29S)

If the reader also feels slightly startled, the impression becomes even stronger when such verbal revelry is accompanied with literary allusions ("If

[9] As much as it is possible, the quote is arranged as it appears in the original because the text's layout is essential for illustrating my claim.

somewayssomewhere on batten / winds, a sadder neigh." (Danielewski 27S) echoes Italo Calvino's 1979 title *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*), jumbled phrases ("Don't iron while the strike is hot." (Danielewski 72H)) and the employment of reflections. For instance, the two narratives mirror each other on page 83 in Hailey's section/278 in Sam's, where Hailey describes being threatened and attacked by THE CREEP, a character who haunts both her and Danielewski's text, while Sam describes how they finally defeat THE CREEP, responding to Hailey's description with the same imagery of violence and repetition of words that she uses. There are also instances of diagonal matching (Hailey's text ends with "never" and Sam's begins with it on page 279H/83S), colour-coding through letters and words in different colours, as well as changes of font type and size. The author thus plays with the materiality of the book and the space of the page, developing "a spatial poetics" and heralding "a new orientation of the page as a surface of writing" (Berressem 201, 210). Even if some of it seems to indicate that Danielewski is committed to "experimentalism that is narrowly preoccupied with stylistic or linguistic innovation", this is not entirely true, for "he finds in the printed book a technology for exploring and enhancing the devices and techniques that are today more commonly associated with new media technology" (Leonard 148). At the same time, his innovative fiction is reminiscent of the earlier experiments of Italian Futurists – their "words-in-freedom", or play with grammar, punctuation and typographical symbols inspired by modern life and technology – as well as Russian Cubo-Futurists' fragmentation of form and deconstruction of language.

Only Revolutions is one of those "texts which transgress logical laws and therefore challenge the imagination" (Bray et al. 15) on a number of levels. Admittedly, against M. Keith Booker's claim that "literary transgression has genuine political force only when it is carried out against a highly specific target" (12), *Only Revolutions* appears lacking in political agenda: even though Sam and Hailey can be read as embodiments of "the central American image of heroism", which is "one of the rebellious individual" (Booker 9), what exactly do they rebel against? If they are rebels against conformity, they are also *conforming* to this myth, while the history they are framed by appears scattered and nonsensical. From this viewpoint, the "revolutions" promised by the title, while perfectly capturing the text's circularity, fall short of any revolutionary political stance. This, however, makes the fiction no less

transgressive, even within the heavily politicised arena of contemporary literature, for Booker's own advice is to focus on ways in which a work *is* transgressive and subversive rather than berate it for ways in which it is not.

Danielewski's "novel", a text characterised by variability, reflection and repetition, is an example of "[p]rocess-oriented writing" that "invites us into the workshop to witness the experiment as it unfolds" (Bray et al. 13) but never ends. Towards the end of each narrative thread both death and end are deferred, so the text "invites only continual, illimitable rereadings" (Bray 189). Sam is poisoned but recovers only to find Hailey seemingly dead, and Hailey falls off a slippery ledge and survives only to find Sam seemingly dead. "My end denied by her end", "My demise denied by Sam's demise", "without her I am only revolutions of ruin", "without him I am only revolutions of ruin" (Danielewski 335S, 335H, 347S, 347H). As time speeds up, they become epitomes of timeless rage, chaos and God's wrath: "I'm no future. I'm no past. Only ever contemporary of this path." (Danielewski 358S). Hailey's last empty entry is dated Jan 19 2063, one hundred years after Sam's Nov 22 1963, which again confirms the cyclical nature of history and Danielewski's text. Contrary to Leonard's belief that "*Only Revolutions* provokes an ongoing act of narrative production that prevents the formation of a final textual artefact" (149) – after all, *Only Revolutions* is a commodified object, sold in printed book form – the narrative does not defy the formation of a final artefact, a book, but narrative completion. The story does not end on the last page of either narrative, and its circularity and openness allow for its multiple re-readings.

Even if re-readings discover that *Only Revolutions* is imbalanced in favour of formal experimentation, the text has a certain political dimension that may be read as representative of contemporary cosmopolitan literature of globalisation. Cosmopolitanism as a politically and ethically engaged "attitude and disposition", "a strategy of resistance" (Schoene 2, 5) and "a new conceptual framework to understand the interconnectivity of the world and go beyond national frames of reference" (Delanty 3) feeds into the new cosmopolitan novel, which Danielewski's text resembles in several important ways. It is fragmentary yet connected, it entwines the local and the global, takes the world as its mise-en-scène, and projects "a composite picture of the world" (Schoene 27). However, although it closely reflects "the contingency of contemporary global and transnational flows", *Only Revolutions* also crucially

differs from the new cosmopolitan novel, which is "less homebound and territorialist" and intent on "imagining the world instead of the nation" (Schoene 27, 12). Namely, Danielewski's text is homebound *and* transterritorial in imagining both the nation and the world, so instead of the expected freedom from location, the text balances between a celebration of nomadism and territorial attachment (Leonard 158). This allows it to expose the underlying violence in both world history and in the stories of individualism, the self-made man, and the cultural and racial melting-pot, which make up American mythos. Yet Sam and Hailey's endless love and love-making may be revealing the potential for more positive relations in such a world, while the dynamic merging of their narratives, framed by history in the same way in which our lives are daily framed by it, suggests the possibility of a "[p]eaceful coexistence" (Danielewski 31H) as a horizon to be reached in society (cosmopolitan aim) and on the planet (posthuman aim).

In its comprehensive approach that wavers between connection and disconnection, and relies on a number of juxtapositions – Sam/Hailey, local/global, US/world, flora/fauna, poetry/prose, personal/collective, historical/fictional – *Only Revolutions* contributes to the experimental literature of globalisation as literary texts that "combine the idea of concatenation with concentration" and "juxtapose or interleave a range of separate narratives, often focalised through separate characters, which are then gradually drawn together into a single narrative time and space" (Connell 225). Like the new cosmopolitan novel, as interpreted by Berthold Schoene, Liam Connell's definition aptly describes a certain degree of randomness which characterises Danielewski's fiction and the lived realities of the twenty-first century. Randomness is finely balanced by Danielewski with a sense of connectedness, through repetition of motifs, words, phrases, and characters, among the text's many disparate elements that resist standardisation. This brings the "novel" close to twenty-first-century Altermodernist fiction, which is "defined by an implicitly politicized aesthetic resistance to globalization, refusing standardization, stability, or stasis." (Gibbons, "Altermodernist Fiction" 239) In terms of form, time and identity, which Alison Gibbons sees as the defining features of Altermodernist fiction, *Only Revolutions* ticks all the boxes: it is formally experimental and combines disparate elements to recast reality, it represents history as "a series of pluralized accounts" in dialogue, and it explores time "as a spatialized landscape whereby past, present, and future

can be woven together into a complex network", while presenting identity as nomadic through focus on the journey and the traveller ("Altermodernist Fiction" 240). Cosmopolitan or Altermodernist, *Only Revolutions* is experimental, daring, subversive, and transgressive. If "[t]o be truly effective in a political sense, transgression must have a strong communal element." (Booker 93-94), that might just be what is missing in *Only Revolutions*. Community is there, national, transnational and transhistorical, but too dispersed and chaotic to be connected in a spirit of solidarity or empathy because Danielewski refrains from "speculative proclamations on the emergence of postnational community" (Leonard 161). Instead, the community is just there, "disturbing the easy link between connectivity and proximity" and leaving "connectivity as a kind of active problem for the text" (Connell 225, 236), in the manner of the more experimental literature of globalisation.

A strong communal element is, however, present in Giannina Braschi's experimental fiction *United States of Banana*. Like *Only Revolutions*, *United States of Banana* is advertised and sold as a novel, although it defamiliarises the novel: both dispense with a unified plot, characterisation and familiar narrative organisations of space and time, and neither offers a story in any traditional sense. The prevailing fragmentation of Braschi's narrative is foreshadowed at the very outset by the image of a dismembered man falling from the Twin Towers, who at the same time represents the crumbling power of the US empire, as Aleksandra Perisic suggests (159), and the crumbling state of Braschi's text. Held together as if by a miracle, the text is "disorienting as it traverses different literary genres, including poetry, prose, and theater, and contains an intimidating amount of literary and cultural references from Shakespeare and Calderón de la Barca, to Artaud and Joyce" (Perisic 156). As a mixture of prose, poetry, drama, and social and philosophical treatise, *United States of Banana* illustrates the novel's "remarkable capacity to absorb whatever else [is] out there":

> By mixing so many different genres together, in fact, making prose fictions sound like histories or romances or epics with bits of verse thrown in, the novel always had the potential to reinvent itself as something else. (Bulson 9)

Unlike Danielewski's *Only Revolutions*, Braschi's absorbent and strongly political mish-mash seems reliant on improvisation rather than a set of rules, creating an impression that the narrative's composition is erratic, impulsive and unpredictable. As such, *United States of Banana* brilliantly captures the predominant sense of dislocation associated with the lives and identities of individuals and communities in the text: decontextualised literary characters (Segismundo, Basilio, Hamlet and Gertrude)[10], Zarathustra, Braschi herself and, most importantly, underprivileged immigrants and terrorists as prisoners of war. These are not "peoples for whom displacement is a primary ontological condition", as Peter Boxall would have it, but individuals for whom displacement is chiefly "a result of specific political histories" (173), and it is among these individuals that Braschi's radically political vision considers the political, social and economic inequalities of the globalised world, as well as the possibility of resistance.

In that sense, Braschi's fiction can be read as representative of "[t]he literature of globalization", which shares important features with the new cosmopolitan fiction in exploring connectivity:

> the numerous and sometimes intertwined modes of social interaction available today, and the ways in which these interactions produce a perceived sense of "proximity." In exploring these themes, such literary experiments also trouble them, highlighting "the interplay between local and global as mutually interpenetrating forms." In doing so, time and space become intertwined. (Bray et al. 6)

Braschi's dispersed exploration of connectivity is first and foremost political, it was inspired, among other things, by "the traumatic sense of global terror" (Leonard 11), and focuses on two related movements: invasion and immigration (as a reaction to invasion and as unforeseen counter-invasion). These movements create the new man, twenty-first-century man, a messenger of a mixed racial and cultural background, who has blue or hazelnut Chinese eyes, freckles and an afro, and speaks Spanglish with a Russian accent. It is

[10] All four find themselves outside their literary contexts and relocated to Braschi's text. Perisic has already noted their decontextualisation in the works where they originally appear. Segismundo and Basilio are Polish royalty in a Spanish drama, while Gertrude and Hamlet are Danish royalty in an English drama.

important to note that Braschi's new man is not a product of naïve internationalist perspectives or of mobility as a privilege. On the contrary, he is brought about by the unequal global circulations of people, capital and culture, and embodies the more realistic post-9/11 internationalism and cosmopolitanism. *United States of Banana* describes "subject positions which reflect the mobility of people and cultures under contemporary global conditions" (Boxall 168), refraining from speculations about postnational identities. Namely, the text makes glaringly apparent several important issues concerning the transnational or cosmopolitan status of twenty-first-century identity: mobility may be a privilege of the lucky few, but it is a nightmare for millions of migrants across the world (refugees, illegals, victims of trafficking), and genuinely postnational identities are a distant dream for the underprivileged, whose many undesirable nationalities represent obstacles to geographic, economic and social mobility. This allows *United States of Banana* to examine the link between "connectivity and subalternity" (Schoene 127), an interest the text shares with the postcolonial cosmopolitan novel. That this link has the potential to transform the world is suggested by Braschi's new man and the community that is built by minorities which she reveals are in fact majorities (Braschi 154-55), and is formally supported by the text's endless generic shifts and kaleidoscopic restructuring.

Braschi's politically transgressive literary experiment challenges Berthold Schoene's opinion that the new literary cosmopolitanism is a peculiarly British phenomenon, and fashions a new form to embody "new ways of thinking about sovereign power, about countercultural resistance; new ways of conceiving the possibilities of democratic community in the new century" (Boxall 83) from the perspective of those who are below. While using the new form of "cross-genre works that are structural hybrids of poetry, fiction, essay, theater, manifesto, and political philosophy", as her website states, to explore new possibilities of community in the twenty-first century, Braschi exposes the forces of marginalisation, discrimination and exclusion, which are nevertheless present in contemporary democratic societies. To do this, the author spotlights people who "have inalienable qualities, not rights", for "[r]ights are full of privileges – and permissions – and escape doors that don't allow everybody the same access", people who come to the US looking for freedom only to be imprisoned by the Statue of Liberty, a revolutionary symbol of struggle against oppression turned "a symbol of the establishment" (Braschi

57, 85). Although Braschi is certain that inequality and imbalance are obvious – "who needs a formula to prove the unevenness of life" (58) – her literary experiment is characterised by unevenness and is itself a formula that proves the unevenness of life. Her characters, if characters they can be called, find themselves in New York, "a place where the very concept of nation is a splintered internationalism, where the national language is a babel" (Boxall 136), and the polyphonic narrative's splintered form reflects this, as does its foreign-speaking English, seasoned with the odd Spanish word. Foreign-speaking English, as untamable as Braschi's fiction, refers to "creative destruction of English from inside" (Perisic 169) but also, I might add, its creative reconstruction. The language's purpose is "to function as a terrorist threat to the language of Empire" (Perisic 170) and convey the heterogeneous and splintered nature of the masses in the dungeons of Lady Liberty. This language barbarises, and "to barbarize means to brutalize as well as to use barbarisms, which are forms or constructions that do not correspond to standard language use" (Perisic 170). How this works is best illustrated by another experimental work written by an immigrant, John Agard's poem "Listen Mr Oxford Don" (1967).

> Me not no Oxford don
> me a simple immigrant
> from Clapham Common
> I didn't graduate
> I immigrate
>
> But listen Mr Oxford don
> I'm a man on de run
> and a man on de run
> is a dangerous one
>
> I ent have no gun
> I ent have no knife
> but mugging de Queen's English
> is the story of my life
>
> I don't need to axe
> to split/ up yu syntax

I don't need no hammer
to mash/ up yu grammar

I warning you Mr Oxford don
I'm a wanted man
and a wanted man
is a dangerous one

Dem accuse me of assault
on de Oxford dictionary/
imagine a concise peaceful man like me/
dem want me serve time
for inciting rhyme to riot
but I tekking it quiet
down here in Clapham Common

I'm not a violent man Mr Oxford don
I only armed wit mih human breath
but human breath
is a dangerous weapon

So mek dem send one big word after me
I ent serving no jail sentence
I slashing suffix in self-defence
I bashing future wit present tense
and if necessary

I making de Queen's English accessory/to my offence

Admittedly, Braschi's foreign-speaking English is far less "foreign" and experimental, but the underlying idea is the same, that of an attack on the language and the culture, which also mirrors the prevailing perception of immigration as a demographic, economic and cultural threat. The violence that Agard's poem humorously employs is found in Braschi's bluntness of expression when, for instance, her Statue of Liberty matter-of-factly declares: "When immigrants come looking for freedom, I suck their juice." (82). She may well suck their juice, but she does not rid them of their voices.

The text's polyphony of voices, some historical and others fictional, illustrates how "contemporary fiction shapes a polyphonic ethical and political language for our dawning time" (Boxall 83), which witnesses an endless struggle between opposing forces: those of nationalism, racism and xenophobia on the one hand, and those of cosmopolitan openness and conviviality on the other. It is no wonder then that the overdrawn philosophical debate in which these voices engage throughout the book is itself conflicted: it meanders, changes direction and rambles, resisting, in Perisic's opinion, the capitalist logic of usefulness and efficiency (171), as well as that of productivity. The unwieldy nature of Braschi's text and language also points to the difficulty in finding a common language of action. Difficulty, not impossibility, and its seed, the fiction proposes, lies in vernacular cosmopolitanism of the underprivileged that arises from the margins, borders and in-between spaces. Thus, under the skirt of Lady Liberty, where imprisoned immigrants and terrorists can feel the smells of her vagina and eat leftovers like dogs under a table – a literalised representation of the globalised world's "countless sub-worlds of powerless, disenfranchised daily living" (Schoene 14) – a sense of camaraderie and solidarity is forming. These prisoners of war from around the world represent a think tank for brewing new ideas born of their heterogeneity (Braschi 116-118), and their narrative offers a twist on "narratives of a connected humanity" (Leonard 4), which project the myths of a borderless world and porous national borders: the world is neither borderless nor porous for all people. It is for this reason that Segismundo, the chief prisoner and Braschi's allegorical representation of Puerto Rico's slavish position, dreams of a world of Missizona, Nuyoricans, Chiletinos, and Canazuelans, a world without mental blocks (Braschi 134-135), and of a community that "thrives on recurrent reassemblage" (Schoene 21), whose inevitable disorderliness is literalised as Braschi's unruly text.

Only Revolutions presents the reader with recurrently reassembling and disorderly "*un*knowable communities" that are associated with "vaster geographic frames of understanding: the transnational, the postnational, the cosmopolitan, the global, the worldly, or . . . the planetary", where "the planetary" represents "an effort to think the world beyond, or 'otherwise,' or in resistance to the historical processes and discourses of globalization" (Keith 268, 270). *United States of Banana*, on the other hand, a narrative intent on a brutal dissection of the political, social and economic realities of the globalised

world, and too enmeshed in economic and geopolitical concerns to think beyond globalisation, establishes a particular, knowable community of immigrants in the United States and the much vaster world community of the less privileged. In a chapter that asks too many, confessedly vital, questions but gives too few answers, Joseph Keith outlines in some detail the implications of a planetary approach to the novel, inspired by "a growing awareness and concern with ecological crises – most notably rapid climate change" – global warming *is* acknowledged in *United States of Banana* – "and the Anthropocene – which are planetary in their scale and threat" (278). Yet the planetary threat that calls for a sense of universal solidarity, which sharply contrasts unequal responsibility in causing ecological crises and climate change, flushes out the inequalities of the globalised world depicted in *United States of Banana*. Planetary problems cannot be tackled in isolation, but have to be considered, and solved, alongside economic and geopolitical ones. If there is any solid proof of complex, and complicated, planetary connectivity, this is it.

In terms of both form and content, *United States of Banana* concerns itself with the economic and geopolitical aspects of connectivity as they affect the lives of minorities that are majorities. Their "shared experience of political precarity" (Perisic 152-153) is aptly mirrored by the fiction's structural precarity, so the lack of balance between or within the chapters of Braschi's whimsical composition at the same time reflects and spotlights the economic and political power imbalance between the United States and Puerto Rico, North America and Latin America, and, more generally, the Global North and the Global South. Her revolutionary text invites its characters and readers to resist neoimperialism, capitalism and neoliberalism, but its overall structural and narrative instability points to "the impossibility of identifying a clear and stable counterposition" in the face of shifting political realities and power balances, and to the necessity of "[n]ew modes of resistance" (Perisic 157), which Braschi does not clearly identify. If *what* these new modes of resistance might be remains unclear, *who* should conceive of and exercise them is beyond doubt. It is the masses, the multitudes, the people, or the extraordinarily resistant cockroaches, as they are variously called in the fiction. Braschi identifies with them when she forcefully delivers a short speech on their power to resist, overthrow and subvert: "my voice became the voice of the people–and it started singing ferociously–fearlessly–and it started out as a shy contralto–and it became a fearless soprano–singing–fearlessly. Nobody,

ecoutez moi – nobody is going to silence my voice" (265). Hence the efforts to liberate Segismundo from the dungeons of liberty, a nonentity who serves as "the model for illegal extraterrestrial aliens who arrive without a passport or a green card" (Braschi 164). His captivity in the dungeons of Lady Liberty is the captivity of the masses – an image of Gulliver chained to the ground comes to mind – but also suggests the captivity of Puerto Rico, which is trapped between "washy" (statehood), "wishy" (independence) and "wishy-washy" (colony, associated free state) (Braschi 152). Like mashed, fried and baked potatoes, they all taste the same (Braschi 264).

So, what solutions does Braschi's experiment propose in a world where some are still born on the top and others on the bottom, in the dungeons, a world in which the former exploit the latter while "sovereignty, equality, and the right to self-determination" (Braschi 166) remain a matter of privilege? She imagines the end of capitalism (death of the businessman that opens the novel), cockroaches uniting and "singing happily from every corner of the four poles: north, east, west, south" (Braschi 255), and the union of the Global North and Global South (marriage of Gertrude and Basilio, who stand for English and Spanish, north and south), which will, among other things, ensure entry to the United States of Banana for all Latin Americans. Namely, Basilio and Gertrude are full of ideas and promises, as politicians are, so they promise US passports to "all Latin Americans–to cross the borders and make a living in dream, dream, dream–the land of the Statue of Liberty" (Braschi 182). It is all playfully and bitingly ironic, of course, but it also points to the decidedly real possibility of "[r]enovation, restoration, change" (Braschi 199). When the people decide to become free, with "senses open to transformations" (Braschi 232-233), it is possible to envision violent insurrection bringing an end to the exploitation of large populations of the world and an end to foreign control of their resources. It is possible to imagine a different world, in which roads shake hands instead of crossing each other and tiny islands kick big states in the ass (Braschi 253, 240). In order to imagine all of this, Braschi needs to go overboard, so she needs "writing that goes overboard and over borders–and that is on the edge of breaking–and finds a light–and beams" (Braschi 236). Precisely the kind of writing that *United States of Banana* is. Irreverent, crossover, coming apart at the seams, new, and "open to transformations". At one point during the endless discussion which changes pace and protagonist, Giannina says: "We have to include–not exclude." (286) So her experiment sets an example and includes

several genres and languages, characters from different literary texts and cultures, fictionalised real people, reptiles and cockroaches. The experiment defamiliarises and reimagines the novel, deconstructs and reconstructs language, displaces and replaces immigrants, decontextualises and recontextualises literary figures. In all of this, it beckons towards "a new way of thinking about global relations, a new and ethically challenging way of mapping the tensions between political radicalism, violent insurrection, literary innovation, and the power and force of the global market place" (Boxall 123). This new way of thinking suggests that we need to reorganise, or better yet, destroy the system before we can devise a new one in which everyone is "invited (on equal terms) as a citizen of the world" (Braschi 279).

United States of Banana also endorses cosmopolitan sentiments when it proclaims that culture is becoming more relevant than politics and that nations are dead (Braschi 229). In 2011, the end of nations was perhaps more conceivable than it is now, after the 2015 migrant crisis and the 2020 outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic, among other events, reinstated the importance of national borders. Nations, cities, continents, cultures, they all gain and lose relevance while we continue to be connected in both (unequal) opportunity (for cultural exchange and cross-pollination, business, education, travel) and (relatively equal) vulnerability (to wars, viruses, natural disasters, global warming, the looming planetary ecological catastrophe). Braschi's narrative displays "an increasing recognition of our global interconnections in political, economic, technological, and ecological life" (Keith 269) that chooses to focus on the first two.

If "the nation is no longer an adequate container for the understanding of the novel" (Keith 268), which is contradicted by narratives like Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These* (2020), rooted in particular national geographies and cultures, *United States of Banana* is certainly not a novel in any conventional sense, and instead of expressing "a longing for revolutionary, countercultural expression" that Boxall erroneously thinks "seems beyond the power of the contemporary novel to articulate" (144), it embodies revolutionary and countercultural expression. Surprisingly, *United States of Banana* was published two years before Boxall's sceptical claim and *Only Revolutions* was published seven years before it, demonstrating that forms of experimentation were not beginning to enter a new phase, as Boxall believed

(144), but were already there, setting examples for this new, and clearly more experimental phase.

Only Revolutions and *United States of Banana* are both contextualised in the United States, fictionalised to varying degrees, but present this context from very different angles. While the former is rooted in American mythos, the other undermines one of the fundamental myths of America, that of a welcoming land of liberty. As cosmopolitan fictions of globalisation, both also attempt to represent the world in its fragmented totality, and the strategy of depicting the world through fragmentation mirrors, in Perisic's opinion, "the neoliberal logic of fragmentation and totalization" (158) that in Braschi's text meets resistance. Both present history and society as recurrently restructuring, but they demonstrate that the political engagement of experimental literature varies in degree and purpose, and may be overshadowed by aesthetic or formal aims. Even aesthetic and formal aims can sometimes have a political dimension and examine, for instance, ideological bias in language (L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E) or patriarchal violence through subversive form and syntax (Kathy Acker). Put differently, the texts that this chapter explores confirm the existence of a clear tendency towards politics in some, not all experimental literature. *Only Revolutions* is less overtly political, though no less transgressive, than *United States of Banana*, where transgressivity is equally aesthetic, formal and political. Braschi's brave and humorous scrutiny of American and world politics suggests not that "the novel is trying to wake from its ethical and political slumber, from its narcoticised postmodern daze" (Boxall 125), but that it is already wide awake and screaming for our attention. In their different ways, and despite the different degrees to which they engage with politics, both these fictions radically redefine what constitutes the novel, a genre "to which we still turn for its entertainment value" (Bulson 2). Entertaining they certainly are, if at times also a little tiring, and they redefine the novel for the new age because their experimentation responds

> to a new kind of being in the world in the third millennium, one that emerges in the wake of the decline of national sovereignty, and with the development of a new set of cultural and technological protocols for the organisation of space and time. (Boxall 8)

Only Revolutions and *United States of Banana* exemplify the one constant in perpetually morphing experimental literature. From Blake's and Sterne's combinations of text and image through the French nouveau roman to postcolonial play with language and sound, from modernist redefinitions of plot and character through Oulipo to Altermodernism, from the symbiosis of painting and poetry in early Chinese art through the graphic novel to digital literature, experimental writing has been "irreducibly diverse" (Bray et al. 1) and powerfully transgressive. All experimental literature examines what constitutes a literary text, subverting stale, passive reading practices and endlessly pushing the limits of possibility and expectation. It remains to be seen how experimental writing will continue to be shaped by further changes in global politics, economy and culture, as well as advances in science, technology and art. The latest craze for ChatGPT has rekindled Ada Lovelace's idea that someday machines might be able to produce music, art and literature. But if the curious case of Araki Yasusada, a fictitious Japanese poet, or Flarf poetry, a kind of "uncreative writing" that offers a twist to the era's recycling trends and uses ready-made materials from the internet, probed into the question of authenticity, how will ChatGPT and other artificial intelligence reflect on "original" or "genuine" literature? Will they sound the death knell for literature or will they be able to push literature in new directions? The novel's demise has been spelt out many times in the last few decades, but "'the novel' prides itself on being new, ever in motion, not fixed in one place or even defined by one size" (Bulson 3). It is my firm belief that fictions like those by Mary Shelley, Jeanette Winterson, Steven Appleby, Mark Danielewski, and Giannina Braschi serve as testimony to the novel's infinite capacities for reinvention and regeneration that make it difficult to define but easy to enjoy.

AFTERWORD

To try to capture the polymorphic and feral nature of transgressivity in literature is an impossible task. To capture it was therefore not our aim. By exploring some of the many manifestations of transgressivity in poetry, drama and fiction, this book looked into and celebrated its diversity, expressing a relish for literature outside norms, conventions, standards, and traditions. Such literature pushes the limits of possibility and expectation, invites more engagement and stimulates the reader to think and feel in new directions. In an interview, the Australian artist Shaun Tan said that the two most important questions pertaining to art and literature are how does it make me feel and what does it make me think about? In each and every one of its forms, transgressive literature asks these vital questions.

What conclusions have we reached? The chapters in "Poetry" remind us that poetry itself is not to be seen as a rigid, artsy form that resides mainly in its ivory tower, incomprehensible to anyone who has not devoted countless hours to the study of literature. Instead, the poetic works analysed in this book demonstrate the quintessentially playful, musical nature of poetry, which often serves as the starting point for both our enjoyment of poetry and our understanding of its transgressive potential. The three chapters on poetry placed emphasis on the auditory elements of the poems, showing how slight deviations from the expected norms, such as Browning's use of iambic tetrameter instead of pentameter, Dr. Seuss's application of poetic nonsense, or Queen's employment of classical waltz in place of percussive rock, can jumpstart transgressivity and subvert genre expectations, thus leading the poetic idiom out of bounds. As poetry is by nature, barring typical epic genres, less narrative than either fiction of drama, poetic transgression is most easily recognised in such formal subversive practices. That, however, does not mean that poems cannot be transgressive in the most basic of senses, which was clearly shown in the analysis of Browning's murderous dramatic monologists. The chapters on poetry rather obviously abandoned the idea of established literary canon, and deliberately included discussions on poetry for very young readers and, even more unusually, popular music. The analysis of Dr. Seuss's picture books allowed us to play with the notion of the carnivalesque and its application to children's world. Seuss's use of linguistic nonsense and the interplay between his poems and the illustrations that accompany them prove

that children can, and should be, seen as naturally subversive readers for whom transgression is part of the everyday experience. Leaping furthest away from traditional poetry, Queen's songs serve as doubly-filtered transgressive force: not only are they rock music, and thus outside of the sphere of usual poetry analyses, but they are also seen as transgressive of rock music itself. By analysing the ways in which Queen's music provides a campily queer subversion of heteronormative practices of classic rock music, we showed that transgression works in many different, exciting ways. The chapters in "Poetry", in short, nudge us to think of poetic works as multifaceted, experimental, and, above all, fun.

By narrowing its analytical lens, the section devoted to drama sought to pick apart the nuances in exploring, staging or figuring transgression and subversion in theatre, but also literature at large. Closest in style and choice of subject-matter to transgressive fiction as a genre, and the likes of Ellis or Welsh, the British in-yer-face tradition is an inevitable point of departure for such a critical enterprise. To say that in-yer-face plays are provocative is an understatement; in seeking to recreate in the audience the visceral experience of the horrors it stages and taking them on a journey to the edge of what is bearable, in-yer-face theatre mirrors transgressive fiction in its relentless attack on the audience's senses and sensibilities. The discussion of *The Author* in the second chapter illustrated other modes of conducting this attack, without recourse to the experiential and the visual, as the play transposes this affective battlefield into the audience's own imagination, implicating them in the process. Turning away from explicit visual representation and employing narrative strategies instead, the play nevertheless proves deeply unsettling, and the chapter examined the reasons behind this, as well as the limited success of this approach in expressing its ethical concerns. Audience reception is therefore a prominent issue in the chapters dealing with *Blasted* and *The Author*, pitting extreme imagery and its powerful effects on the audience against the intention of delivering critique. Read against Sarah Kane's own commentary, *Blasted* illustrates that the morally reticent standpoint which is a common feature of transgressive fiction is not universal to all transgressive writing, while *The Author* extends an open invitation to consider the ethical implications of creating and consuming cultural narratives with violent or disturbing content. Building on this, the discussion of Martin Crimp's theatre in chapter three explored the relationship between formal experimentation

and political subversion, in an effort to challenge the easy association between the two. By focusing on plays which are typically read as more conventional and less politically driven, the analysis sought to demonstrate that their transgressive potential is derived precisely from a fusion of more traditional forms with non-realist plot and characterisation, which uproots both the centre and the periphery in the process, transgressing both convention and transgression alike.

In an attempt to move away from the fairly narrow definition of transgressive fiction as a genre, the three chapters in "Fiction" examined some aspects of transgressivity in fiction that remain outside this definition. The chapters discovered powerfully transgressive energies in boundary crossing in science, medicine and technology, gender transformation, the graphic novel as a trans literary form, and experimental cross-genre fiction that is, in some cases, strongly political. In their explorations of transgressive science, medicine and technology, Mary Shelley and Jeanette Winterson intertwine the literary and the scientific experiment to consider their enormous creative potentials, weighing them against questions of responsibility and ethics. Embracing science and technology without abusing them, the texts imply, would help the human evolve to a posthuman condition that simultaneously improves the human and appreciates all life. In a warm semi-autobiographical superhero graphic thriller, Steven Appleby discusses the perks and dangers of being trans in a world which has used the discovery of the soul for a lucrative business venture. Like the experiments in Shelley's and Winterson's fictions, Appleby's superhero thriller tests what it means to be human in a world that still insists on clear gender coordinates. Its playful examination of "man", "woman" and "trans" suggests that boundary crossing constantly challenges us to think beyond strict categories so that we can enjoy a more diverse, inclusive and tolerant society. Finally, in their different ways, Mark Z. Danielewski and Giannina Braschi employ transgressivity in genre, form, structure, language and the very materiality of the page and the book, redefining the novel for a new age. More than any other text in this section, these "novels" demonstrate that a work's transgressive potential depends on the readers' capacity for recognising and unlocking it. As they cross boundaries of genre, play with language, plot and characters, and merge fact and fiction, these wildly transgressive texts narrate America, the one immersed in its mythos and the other undermining it, and the world in its splintered yet connected totality. In

all the fictions considered in this section, transgressivity is both a function of form and an important thematic focus, which allows the chapters to clearly indicate that transgressivity in fiction is too complex and heterogeneous to be confined to a single genre. The very essence of transgressivity advises against it.

In the end, we need to ask one final question. M. Keith Booker points out that achieving authentic transgression is becoming increasingly difficult because transgressive energies have been appropriated by dominant, mainstream discourses. As a result, transgression and subversion have become official and expected in both literature and the academia. Of course, appropriation of transgressivity is not new – think only of the approved transgression of the carnival or of the canonisation of modernists – but the dominant bourgeois culture has brought appropriation to a new level in the contemporary era. In a time when everything needs to bow down before the capitalist logic of mass production, usefulness and profitability, art and literature decorates T-shirts, bags, fridge magnets and mugs. If even souls are for sale – a very transgressive idea indeed – which directions will transgressivity take?

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Naučna zrelost, širok opseg znanja autorki, njihova kreativnost i lucidnost u tumačenjima, kao i izvrsnost jezičkog izraza engleskog jezika na kom je napisana, čine to da *Out of Bounds* možemo svrstati među veoma važne studije u širim okvirima anglofone nauke o književnosti.

Ivana Đurić Paunović

Ova knjiga predstavlja sveobuhvatno samo autoricama svojstveno djelo, koje na jedan kreativan način vodi čitaoca kroz zamršeni svijet književnosti koja pomiče granice očekivanog i mogućeg, te izlazi izvan konvencija, normi i tradicije.

Selma Veseljević Jerković

The chosen notion of transgression is shown to be part of the very essence of creation, and this not only for so-called experimental works, as questioning norms lies at the roots of any art that is not simply an efficient imitation or previous art or a skillful application of already validated rules or principles.

Anne-Laure Tissut