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Shelley Jackson's Grotesque Corpus

Notes on my body—a Wunderkammer

For no one has thus far determined the power of the body.

Benedicto Spinoza, *Ethics*

1 Introduction: Shelley Jackson's Grotesque Corpus

The body—that place from which the concept of self emanates, the locus where the subject conflates with the socio-cultural regulations that provide its frame—is for Shelley Jackson the fundamental canvas on which to display her work. The different metaphors of the body present in her pieces share a common aspect: the author is not concerned with beautiful bodies, but rather with deformed, hybrid, tragicomic, grotesque ones. These bodies deviate from the established beauty canon in the same way that the hypertexts used to contain them overflow the limits of a conventional reading economy. The reader generates her own grotesque feeling when faced with a textual framework that devours her without rhyme or reason, without revealing its confines, its routes, and where she must advance half-blindly, groping in the dark the interior of a fragmented and intertwined textual body, at once vital and morbid. Jackson colonizes hypertext as a feminine writing space, warning beforehand of its ugliness, transforming ugliness in an aesthetic manifesto, a vindication of the grotesque at the hands of the author. Shelley Jackson makes use of the disfigured body to pose a critical stance regarding the social regulations that constrain, not only the feminine body, but also the corpus of her creations.

As we will see, *Patchwork Girl* (1995) and *my body—a Wunderkammer* (1997) are two variations on the same theme, the history of the body as a space in which the subject is progressively constructed and acquires its identity traits.¹ The mind-body relation does not emerge from an ontological integrity, but in the immanent and recursive parceling, fragmentation, and reconstruction of the whole, the subject, by a reflexive and creative self through a variety of metaphors. These metaphors allude to the mechanisms by which the notion of the subject is reconstructed: acts of fictional creation like reading and writing. In the case of *Patchwork Girl*, sewing, as an eminently feminine activity, becomes a synonym for female writing and the reading mode recommended by the hyper-

text (“I am buried here. You can resurrect me, but only piecemeal. If you want to see the whole, you will have to sew me together yourself”).



Fig. 1. First and second lexias of the “Graveyard” section of *Patchwork Girl*.

In *my body*—a *Wunderkammer*, the cabinet of wonders is the metaphor around which the textual fragments as well as the reader disposition are articulated—the body exhibits itself with the promise of surprising visitors with the revelation of some deformity, anomaly or grotesque eccentricity.

The exhibition of grotesque bodies is a recurrent theme in Jackson’s work, both digital and in print. We can read, for example, her first print collection *The Melancholy of Anatomy* (2002), where, as Lance Olsen has observed, “the engaging and the invigorating discover their source in the contaminated, the infected, the mongrel, the ill-defined, the unhygienic, the grotesque, the interstitial,” Jackson’s corpus affirms the freakish, Lance states, because for her the freaks are the real survivors in “evolutionary, gender, and narratological terms” (4). I believe we should pay closer attention to the mechanisms by which Shelley Jackson makes use of the aesthetic quality of the grotesque to construct her corpus, both fictional body and artifact; at the same time a strategy to reflect on the connection body/self and a critical stance regarding the expressive possibilities of hypertext as a medium. Or, we should rather say, the grotesque is in Shelley Jackson a mode of figuration used to explore the limits of any form of writing to apprehend the self. As we read in *Patchwork Girl*: “You could say that all bodies are written bodies, all lives pieces of writing” (“all written”).

The grotesque style shares with the monster of *Patchwork Girl* a subterranean origin. From the Italian word *grottesco* (“of a cave”), the grotesque emerged during the Renaissance as an imitation of an Ancient Roman decorative style rediscovered when Nero’s unfinished palace *Domus Aurea* was excavated. As the distorted mirror image of Neoclassical values, the grotesque was characterized by excess, extravagance, lack of symmetry and proportion, by reflections of organic excrescence growth in arabesques and contorted shapes that yielded strange, hybrid bodies. The grotesque glance implies therefore a particular deformation of reality that produces in the viewer a complex reaction of disgust and empathy, a tragicomic relief that allows society to integrate that which is unexplainable, unclassifiable, mysterious and absurd.

As Rémi Astruc (2010) contends, the grotesque—which profusely emerges in times of change and transformation—provides a form of expression to a primeval and universal experience of alterity and change, prior to any attempt at conceptualization, either in philosophical or aesthetic terms. It emerges from a sensation of curious surprise towards the world on the part of the subject (3), who tries to apprehend the unknown through the anthropological operators of the grotesque aesthetics: reduplication, hybridity and metamorphosis. And we should not lose sight, Astruc reminds us, of the first anthropological operator from which all human experience is constructed: the body.

In his article “The Grotesque Body: Overflow and Signification” (2008), Barrios discusses the body as a socio-semiotic construction regulated from highly coercive control *dispositifs* and the grotesque as a subversive reaction to them. The grotesque body functions as a social destabilizer of the control apparatus. Appropriating the Cynical attitude, the grotesque also identifies the body—with its porous skin, its orifices, and the immediacy of its scatological functions—as the locus of resistance against the idealized and strategic discourses of Greek philosophy (6). In its aesthetic sense, Barrios argues: “the grotesque is fundamentally defined by the overtaking of identity, which implies an opposition in principle with the beauty canon as that which basically defines the status of the body in Western culture” (16).²

If as Astruc and Barrios argue, the grotesque responds to a universal, anthropological need, an artist might reach its potentialities without too much philosophical scaffolding. Nevertheless, I would rather think it is the liminal status of the grotesque as an aesthetic category, especially in literary theory, which makes it an appealing mode of expression for such a meta-reflexive author as Shelley Jackson. A deceptive or even anti-cognitive concept,³ it provides a space of expression where other more regimented categories, such as the absurd, the ludicrous or the macabre, might fail. Moreover, the grotesque is always playing at overflowing the limits, but as it goes, it is always referenc-

ing those boundaries it continuously trespasses, the boundaries of what is considered proper, pertinent, respectful, and decorous.

I would like to posit that analyzing Shelley Jackson's corpus under the light of the grotesque as aesthetic category provides us with yet another tool to understand her work across different media, and it is especially relevant in her approach of hypertext. Shelley Jackson writes in "Stitch Bitch" (Boundary Play Section):

But hypertext in particular is a kind of amphibious vehicle, good for negotiating unsteady ground, poised on its multiple limbs where the book clogs up and stops; it keeps in motion. Conventional texts, on the other hand are in search of a place of rest; when they have found it, they stop." Similarly, the mind, reading, wants to make sense, and once it has done so it considers its work done, so if you want to keep the mind from stopping there, you must always provide slightly more indicators than the mind can make use of. There must be an excess, a remainder. Or an undecidable oscillation between possibilities. I am interested in writing that verges on nonsense, where nonsense is not the absence of sense, but the superfluity of it.⁴

The "absence of sense" could be associated with the absurd, the excess is undoubtedly the territory of the grotesque. As the quote implies, it is both a mode of writing and a mode of reception, the excess produces indeterminacy, ambiguity and ever-receding horizons of expectations that do not allow the reader to rest and find an assimilable signified. However, as I will try to show, Shelley Jackson's hypertexts vary in their degree of experimentation with both the medium and the construction of a narrative voice or authorial identity with which the reader can establish a dialogue, and in this manner, reduce the text's otherness.

While in *my body* the author apparently reveals her most intimate secrets with resolute ease, exhibiting herself in an explicit autobiography, in her previous work the reader ends up discovering the author's self-portrait hidden behind layers and layers of a complex hypertextual framework. The reader of *Patchwork Girl* progressively draws a sketch of the authorial persona (a vigorous, androgynous, young woman), after running through the profiles of different fictional characters that will end up converging, in a time journey, in her figure: the feminine monster created by Mary Shelley herself and Frank Baum's patchwork doll are Shelley Jackson's alter egos. The first owners of the body parts that will constitute the monster also leave an imprint of their personalities and vivid memories in this pain-body, this conglomerate of stories that will form the communal female body. Each micro-story deposits tragicomic sedi-

ment in the reader, black humor becoming the subversive tool through which tragedy can be assimilated.

The Headstone that gives entrance to the Graveyard section reads thus: "Here Lies a Head/, Trunk, Arms (Right/ and Left), and Legs/ (Right and Left)/ as well as divers/ Organs appropriately/ Disposed/ May they rest in Piece." The irony of this "appropriate" epitaph cannot be missed, but neither can the connotations to violent forms of death involving amputation, dismemberment, organ dispersion. The links that lead to these body parts confirm this: the skull is shattered like an ancient vase, its remembrances ignite in the reader images of witchcraft accusations by an angry mob ("Sometimes when it's quiet I hear in my ears the roaring of a crowd"), the right hand belongs to "Dominique, ambidextrous pickpocket," who lost it to "punitive justice but later extracted a silk purse from the judge with her left," the lungs to Thomasina, who run in the high Alps with the goats until her father sold her to a passerby, who "took her to polish his silver in a wood-paneled home in the valley, where she found a certain pleasure in scaling the steep roof on dark nights until a loose shingle brought about her first fall ever, and her last," or the stomach, which belonged to "Bella, an oblate simpleton. She was never dyspeptic, though she ate everything. . . . When a ne'er-do-well by his fellow revelers at the tavern, was found crushed by an enormous weight, the townspeople tried Bella for murder. Bella, uninterested, nibbled on figs."

Like a Bosch' tableau, the collection of lexias in this section paints an irreverent mosaic of misfortune and nonchalant subversion. In his review of the work, George Landow remarked the distinctive voice with which Shelley Jackson endows each tale, "thereby creating a narrative of Bakhtinian multivocality while simultaneously presenting a composite image of women's lives at the turn of the century" (1). The grotesque is regenerated by Jackson through her carnivalesque inversion of reality and its hierarchies, producing a fantasy of interlocking body parts, recollections and emotions of a female collective that converge in the figure of the new monster, itself the fragile embodiment of contrastive elements, the horrific and the ludicrous.

Paradoxically, as Katherine Hayles has noted in her famous study of *Patchwork Girl*, "the text not only normalizes the subject-as-assemblage but also presents the subject-as-unity as a grotesque impossibility" (29). She alludes as an example to the passage when the narrator satirizes the unified subject and the medieval theologians' dilemma regarding the resurrection of amputees who have had their limbs eaten by other creatures. The bizarre scenario depicted in this section (body of text/resurrection/remade), with diverse limbs being regurgitated from the animals' flesh, in fact serves to destabilize the notion of the Cartesian subject by showing the shortcomings of our use of logic in domains that elude our understanding. By exposing the grotesque product of lo-

gic in philosophical constructs of the past, Jackson invites us to reflect upon contemporary notions of the self which are equally preposterous.

To contribute to this erosion of the Cartesian subject, Jackson offers in *Patchwork Girl* a collage of discourses in which the literary history of the texts of the body comes together with her personal story, fictionalizing in a grotesque manner the way in which the collective memory is incarnated in an individual female subject. The opposite movement is patent in the case of *my body*, in which the body, whose diagram is the center of the hypertext structure, is a universe where the microhistory (the author autobiography) becomes macrohistory. This movement is based on the mimetic nature of the reading experience, as the author writes her inventory of body memories, she is urging us to participate in a meticulous exploration of our own bodies, using her model to find coincidences and points of suture.

As readers, we undertake the exploration of a literary anatomy in which each section of the body is the entry point to an associative chain of memories linked to that zone. These memories reverberate in our mind as we proceed with the reading, producing friction with other zones and other bodies. The body is lived as a primeval and universal experience, connecting us more than our anatomic differences separate us. As we can gather from their reading, both works reflect upon the relation between body and identity, upon the mystery entailed in the unfolding of our being inside a space we cannot thoroughly apprehend, whose in-depth knowledge is elusive. The body is, simultaneously, the Other, the undiscovered territory, which provokes curiosity, and the territory of being, of our very identity. To tackle this paradox, Jackson resorts to analogies with thinking modes of the past, with obsolete technologies, and subverts them to transform them in literary exercises that can reveal to us new ways of looking at our relationship with the body. For instance, *Patchwork Girl's* section entitled "Broken Accents" (fig. 2) is inspired by phrenology to offer a graphic medium in which to interweave fragments, quotes, scattered thoughts; Jacques Derrida's texts get interlaced with those by Donna Haraway, Hélène Cixous, Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard or Lucrece.

This is the most metareferential section of all, since in it the author describes her understanding of hypertextual writing and reflects upon the relation among the mechanisms and resources of memory, the eternal present of the thinker, the text fragmentation and the whole. Hypertext is presented by Jackson as a framework that allows her to reconstruct in a more reliable manner than paper her own mental rhizomes, at the same time that it becomes an overwhelming and unmanageable monster even for its author, who gropes her way through her writing.

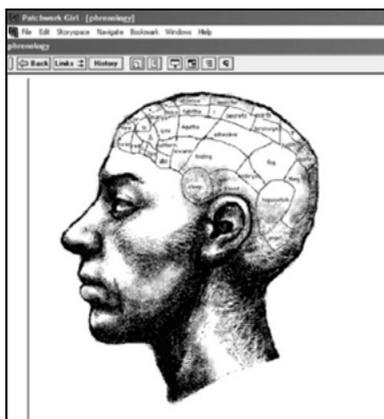


Fig. 2. Entry frame for the “Broken Accents” section of *Patchwork Girl*.

If the monstrous body of the patchwork girl is formed by a conglomerate of limbs and organs of diverse origins, the text in which it lives as a fictional entity is also a composite work made of multifarious elements, both originally created and appropriated, fiction and metafiction, remediated print assembled as a hypertext and newborn digital lexias that read linearly (Journal). As the narrator notes, *membrum* or “limb” also signified “clause” (body of text/typographical), which propitiated the analogy used by ancient Rhetoricians regarding a well-written text, which should not look like a disproportioned, grotesque body.

Throughout the work, this grotesque characteristic is often associated with the deviant feminine writing the hypertext represents. However, despite the defense of the author in “Stitch Bitch” of hypertext’s superior flexibility to capture our train of thought, “a mesh of relationships,” without clogging, and to take the reader beyond the comforts of certainty, *Patchwork Girl* does not actually support a binary opposition between print and hypertext, as Paul Hackman has observed (96). It is still a work heavily indebted to print modes of reading. In his article, “I Am a Double Agent: Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* and the Persistence of Print in the Age of Hypertext” (2011), Hackman’s insightful reading exposes the interaction between print and hypertext, rather than the celebration of one at the expense of the other, as one the most important contributions of the work. As the narrator expresses in Hackman’s selected lexia: “I have a letch for sequence, don’t doubt it. I am not the agent of absolute multiplicity any more than I am some redoubtable whole. I am a double agent, messing up both territories” (“double agent”/ Body of text). It is my contention that this “productive multiplicity” at the borders is exactly what the grotesque celebrates, not only the monstrous deformity of hypertext associated by Jackson to the feminine and its deviance from canonic notions of beauty,

but the unsettling of both categories, print and hypertext, through their intermingling. As Hackman concludes: “*Patchwork Girl* therefore references both print and hypertext in order to question how our world and sense of self are structured by both the illusion of wholeness and the impossibility of complete fragmentation” (105) or, as the narrator herself remarks: “What holds me together is what marks my dispersal. I am most myself in the gaps between my parts” (body of text/dispersed). This statement would also fit like a glove in Jackson’s hypertext for the web, *my body—a Wunderkammer*. In this case, we confront an apparently simpler work, less indebted to print, which makes it, paradoxically, a more conventional hypertext. However, its labyrinthine structure and complex lexia connections bring forth with brilliant execution the enigma of human identity and its relation with corporeality.

If phrenology tried to establish the foundation for a relation between brain and mind by parceling out brain areas and associating them to an emotion or type of thought, the cabinet of wonders becomes at the hands of Shelley Jackson a metaphor through which to explore the relationship between the set of body parts and the sense of wholeness associated with one’s identity. The body as microcosms is a vision that finds its way back to the Renaissance, a moment in which the body is perceived as a miniature world that reflects God’s creation in every detail. The analogy with the cabinet of wonders carries us back to a phenomenon prior to the Enlightenment, to a way of exploring the world free from the cataloguing craze of the 19th century. As the author herself states in this work: “But you don’t approach a cabinet of wonders with an inventory in hand. You open drawers at random.” Thus, this analogy is applied not only to the introspective work carried out by the author, but it also turns out to be a guideline for the reader-visitor, who must adopt a certain attitude in order to explore the work.



Fig. 3. The frontispiece of the book *Musei Wormiani Historia*, catalogue of the cabinet of curiosities of the Danish physician and collector Olw Worm, 1588–1655.

Geographical and spatial metaphors have been used recursively in the history of art to allude to and describe the body. However, I am interested here in exploring the effects that the use of these analogies produces in these particular works. With phrenology, Jackson had recurred to an obsolete science, a mode of cataloguing the spaces of the mind characteristic of the 19th century to illustrate the prejudices that each period projects upon its way of ordering the world, the bodies and the minds. With the cabinet of wonders, the approximation towards the body promises to unveil something shocking, exotic, out of the ordinary, belonging to the world of the unwonted, even the mythical. The work alludes, in a premeditated manner or not, to one of the predominant phenomena of cyberspace: the exhibition of intimacy as a narcissistic pose around which cybernauts articulate their social roles between voyeurs and exhibitionists. The reader is supposedly endowed with a curious zeal and made nearly a voyeur in this exploration of the exposed body's intimacies, which is performed without leaving a trail, in search of a rarity, an astonishing surprise that would bring forth exclamation.

Nevertheless, Jackson goes on to subvert the reception pattern expected of wonder cabinets, provoking in the reader contradictory sensations of a sort, the minor affects (using Sianne Ngai's terminology) one so often encounters in relation to the cultural products of our contemporary societies. Unlike Romanticism's sublime ideal, or the shock of the grotesque, these are low-intensity sensations; they produce tenderness, laughter sometimes, uneasiness at the lack of decorum, a certain interest, and empathy. As Ngai explores in her work *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012), these apparently trivial aesthetic categories have become central in our culture. These sensations produce in the spectator ambivalent, nearly contradictory, feelings of low intensity, so diffuse as to avoid a cathartic reaction. The cute versus the beautiful, irritation versus downright rejection, the interesting versus that which is transformative. Ngai places Jackson's work in the category of the comedian in the *commedia dell'arte*, a category that has to do with performativity, with action, with doing too many things at the same time and experiencing information overload (7–8). These characteristics, which inscribe Jackson's corpus in the aesthetics of its time, can also offer us, as we will see next, a particular vision regarding the renewal of the grotesque in the digital creations of the 21st century.

2 My Body—a Wunderkammer

Jackson's piece is a hypertext with the body as the narrative's map, a historical map of sedimented memories (scars, tattoos, life fragments associated and evoked by the curious and thorough observation of body parts, fragmented in

different territories). This canvas-body, map-body, is a bidimensional diagram which has, nevertheless, many layers: it becomes an index of the various lexias or textual fragments, the origin and destination to which the reader always returns—it is thus the entry to the body's interior, which in its turn, is formed by the intertwined nodes, some textual intestines that curl and heap up in an aleatory fashion. The body image is that which is external, the surface; and the text and its meanders offer us a journey through an interior space in intimate symbiosis with the surface, but with multiple levels and internal pathways.

If we inspect the HTML code of the body diagram page, we can read the list of tagged lexias, but we do not gain access to the third underlying layer, which would show all the hidden lexias, as in the complete graphical representation of the work offered by the different maps of *Patchwork Girl* in Storyspace. We can observe here that the hypertext is formed by the lexias linked to the body part labels and some others, which are distributed inside other lexias and which compose alternative reading routes (for instance, the lexias “theories,” “migraines,” “cabinet,” or “other bodies”).

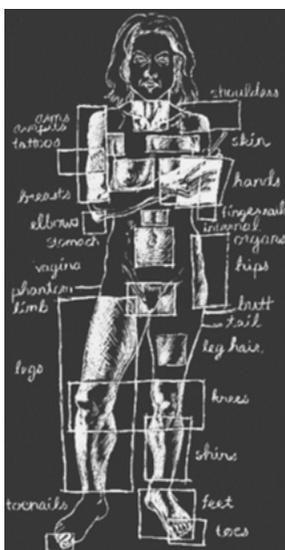


Fig. 4. Main page of *my body—a Wunderkammer* (1997).

As it becomes apparent, the “Wunderkammer” hides surprises, not everything is labelled out, and there is space for the discovery of something unexpected. There is, for example, even a phantom limb, which is indicated in the diagram but its tag leads nowhere. We will actually find the “phantom limb” lexia in the tagged lexia “arms,” if we click in the area “I roller skate.” The phantom limb is an imaginative device conceived by the child to explain her clumsiness. And

there are moments when the highlighted word again leads you nowhere, as in one of the few instances in which the narrator addresses the reader directly in the lexia “tie in products”: “This is a work in progress. If you would like to sponsor further study of your favorite body part or you are a collector, please email me care of Alt-X,” and the word “collector” does not activate any window. As in these cases, Jackson’s rhetoric of links is rich and playful with the reader’s expectations: sometimes the relation between lexias has overt narrative coherence, at other times it seems purely coincidental, since the same word appears in each lexia. There are frequent loops, for instance, the lexia “skin” is connected to the uncharted lexia “theories,” which in turn has “skin” as a hot word that leads you back to the “skin” lexia.

These multiple levels and internal pathways are created by the intertwining of highlighted words that provide internal routes from one lexia to another, introducing different themes and trails of association that function independently of the route provided by the body diagram. Important themes are often hidden in deeper layers. For example, “other bodies” (connected to the lexia “skin” by the highlighted phrase “I swam in the neighborhood swim team”) is one of the few links in which the narrator directs her attention to other bodies, which she finds despicable, pretentious and unhealthy, and expresses the frictions implicit in exchanging gazes: “It was difficult to negotiate the field of crossed gazes between my towel and the pool.”

There is only one body area which is free of its corresponding tags in the diagram, the head, although it also contains hyperlinks to the elements that compose it (brain, eyebrows, eyes, nose, lips, ears). In this case, the territorialization of the body seems to imply a deterritorialization of the face, following Deleuze and Guattari’s metaphor in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1972), a sort of invitation to exchange roles. The author’s image looks straight ahead, pen and paper in her hands, ready to draw whatever she sees, also transforming the reader/viewer in object of scrutiny, returning our gaze. The possibility of this change of perspective, which is made patent in the lexia “other bodies,” reminds the reader that the body we scrutinize as tourists has eyes through which to judge us in return.

This monochromatic diagram over slate is remediated in pixels that shine on the screen. In it, the game proposed to the reader is not based exclusively on the exhibitionist revelation of intimate memories, but rather in a mirror game that invites us to establish similarities with our own recollections of the body. Soon, however, we will discover that the apparent autobiographical tone of many paragraphs should not deceive us: the authorial persona recreated in *my body* shares with the patchwork monster some freakish characteristics, the narration often jumps to magic realism, grotesque irreverence, turns a defamil-

iarizing glance at the body as a veritable cabinet of wonders that verges on the fantastic.

The textual monstrosity, however, is not as apparent as in *Patchwork Girl*, which was a far more complex work to execute. Nevertheless, the exploration of *my body* is neither easy nor straightforward. As we have seen, it has hidden passages and chambers, the narrative coherence between the parts is not made explicit and you have to traverse it as a labyrinth, undoing your steps, going in circles, groping your way blindly through this textual body's interior. As in her previous work, the connection between body and text, self and writing, is also established. In the lexia "vagina," through sensual and indecorous provocation, literature is incarnated in the most literal sense,⁵ as Susana Pajares Tosca has also noted:

It wasn't a big leap from eating books to sticking them up me, a page at a time. Fine literature in my vagina, pulp fiction up my ass, that was my instinctive decision, that is at first, before I began to question whether the distinction was really so clear. I sat through English class with Chaucer and Boccaccio here, S. E. Hinton there. One day, when I fished out the slippery wad, laid it on my desk and teased its folds open with a pen, I noticed that some of the words seemed changed. I took the stinking page to the library and confirmed my discovery in the echoing stacks. My vagina had rewritten Joyce. It was then I knew I was going to be a writer. I also found, and would like to share with other women, that a dictionary in a pocket edition, if well worn, can be rolled up and used as a tampon in case of need. ("vagina")

As we can see, it is a matter of giving voice, of exhibiting that which is socially inexpressible in the screen space—a place which is a cabinet of wonders of its own right, at once public and private. The back and forth movements promoted by the hypertextual reading draws in the mind of the reader a map of the territory, and an arboreal and rhizomatic image that progressively grows and interlaces with one self's childhood and adolescence memories.

my body is the representation of the interior of an imagined, mythical, surrealist body, and the hypertextual writing is the method to approach its knowledge. The drawing of the body is the replica, a scale model over which one can project the spaces of remembrance and imagination, a spatial metaphor that allows the author to classify the snippets of memory, imagined as texts with diverse origin and materiality (pages from journals and notebooks, school reports with pictures and diagrams, drawings, labelled biological specimens or broken vials) which comprise a single corpus. Overriding the knowledge of an interior filled with entrails appears the empty space of the imagined body ("While I know that the inside of my body is a dense press of lubricated

meats/ I can't help seeing it as hollow space, like the inside⁶ of a trunk") inside which lexias are organized, not as an exercise of textualizing the body, but rather as a form of handing a corporeal nature to the text. The shapeless mass of the hypertext transmutes into the ideal canvas in which to sieve the memories and overflow the forms of this grotesque body/corpus. The medium is the meat, and reading becomes peristalsis, in Terry Harpold's words: "The docuverse could be shaped like your own intestines, and reading an act of dissection turned inside out, the text traversed convulsively by the contractions and dilations of the boundaries of what you used to think of as a book" (1).

The hypertextual reading can be seen as an act of digestion of a text that advances in peristaltic and involuntary throbs, jumping from frame to frame, reluctantly facing a structure that challenges the reader's orientation skills. It is not in vain that the reading mode prescribed by the author is that of touching, groping one's way towards the inside. In the lexia that carries the piece's title, "cabinet of wonders," the author gives us the key to access her work, which also serves as guideline to make the most of this internal journey travelled by all:

As a matter of fact, I am making a replica of this text: a huge wooden chest in the shape of my body, with innumerable drawers in which I will store my findings. Some of the drawers will be large and capacious, some smaller than matchboxes. Some will be *disguised*, some will be booby-trapped. I will hide secret buttons, levers and locks in my carved folds and crevices. You will have to feel your way in. ("Cabinet of Wonders")

As she did in *Patchwork Girl*, warning the reader that she would have to sew the pieces herself, in *my body*, the reader must dig through her senses and feelings in this other body that it is not her own, but with which she cannot help but to feel at least a connection. The most apparently trivial details are told in a string of thoughts evoked by the meticulous exploration of the map of the body. One of the points of suture with the reader's own memories is the banality of some memories interlaced with moments of tenderness, rebelliousness or alienation that we have all associated with those recollected fragments (an apparent incongruity of memory, a system breakdown: Why do we remember this and not that? What is hidden behind that sketch?).

The workings of memory, fastened to body reactions, both physical (such as pain or cold) and psychological (such as feelings of inadequacy or embarrassment) direct us to the body as the anthropological operator, primeval and universal, from which all sense of identity is built. In *my body*, the memories associated with the body are focused on childhood and adolescence, a stage where one is not totally aware of the social restrictions regarding the body and

where its limits are explored. The body is a cabinet of wonders for the subject herself, who must rummage through it until she finds her talent, that which makes her unique.

From the reading emerges the presence of the little author in the making, an image of infancy that deviates, however, from the category of “cute” associated with childhood; Shelley Jackson’s remembrances are not tailored to transform powerlessness in aesthetic experience, neither do they provoke a sentimental attitude towards that which is diminutive or weak. The intimate self-portrait offered by the narrative voice is that of a person that stands out from the crowd, an androgynous girl, vital, strong, and carefree. But she is someone who, at the same time, searches for her space among the other bodies. In the link “other bodies,” the narrator shows her concern with beauty, with leaving a mark in others: “My own body was, I felt, invisible. . . . It didn’t register, I was like a stick figure, of which you don’t ask, is it well-drawn, is it beautiful? My body was the engine that propelled a pair of eyes through the world.” If the author has ever felt invisible, subject rather than object of the gaze, a voyeur rather than an exhibitionist, the work *my body* inverts the terms, transforming herself into an object of scrutiny. Exhibiting her rarity, the author places herself as the central piece of a cabinet of wonders, a piece that provokes attraction and repulsion in equal measure, since she feels half-boy, half-girl, a kind of monster, a hermaphrodite, a candidate to represent the third sex. Nevertheless, as the patchwork girl of her previous work also claimed, that which is monstrous can also be beautiful, since it is unique.

Drawing as a way to explore the human anatomy is one of the recurrent themes in this piece. As we can see in her silhouette (fig. 4), her body is both object of analysis as well as subject who draws and analyses what she sees. One of the *leitmotifs* that provide a sense of coherence to the textual fragments is the progressive learning of drawing techniques that will allow her to capture with pen and paper the contours and shapes of different parts of the body. The little Shelley Jackson, this artist girl, tries to approach her object as it really is, escaping artistic or cultural stereotypes. The art of sketching is presented as an antidote against prejudices, criticisms, against hegemonic doctrines of beauty. On the one hand, the body’s observation, the intense gaze over the object and its transposition to the canvas, becomes a nearly erotic relation: “At one time or another, learning to draw, I have been obsessed with every part of the human body. . . . Could I mistake this dotting attention for disinterested curiosity? Drawing is almost sex.”⁷⁷ In this line, the tattoos are treated as relevant authorial elements, traces left on purpose over the canvas of the body, which are not born of accident nor trauma, but of the subject’s decision, and which allow other bodies to read and approach her person. The action of tattooing oneself promotes a new instance of re(signification), of reterritorialization, of those

body parts or aspects that are affected by the social construction of the body. In the same way, the piercings, another type of voluntary transformation of the body, manifest the wish to exert a transgression of the beauty canon in defense of an exercise of singularity that does not flinch at embracing the “grotesque” character of the said transgressions. The body of Jackson, with its multifarious tattoos and perforations, metamorphoses itself, as modelling clay at the hands of its owner, in the grotesque corpus of the hypertext. In fact, the interconnection between body and text manifests itself again in the commitment to writing and the discipline it entails as a relation of voluntary servitude: the ring that decorates her navel is used to chain the writer to her desk, so that she does not get up every five minutes to clip her “toenails or refill the ice trays.” And she adds: “The weight of the links—it is not a heavy chain—is enough to make me aware of my bondage, and strangely, this is a relief; it stops me from wondering where else I might want to be” (“Stomach”).

The central diagram foregrounds the isolation of the author's body, privileging the moment of writing, of creation, as an intimate and solitary action; the textual nodes, on the contrary, demonstrate her interconnection with other bodies, other eyes. In words of the Spanish writer Rosa Montero, “writing sews you up, unites you to the world.”²⁸ The same can be said of reading as an action that connects you to the vital fluid and sews you up inside. In particular, hypertext is a dialogical genre in which each link interpellates us and compels us to establish a point of suture that would maintain the structure on its feet; the scaffolding that works as point of reference is found as much in the authorial personality that provides coherence to the disperse fragments as in the identity structure of the reader himself. In each act of meaning negotiation, the narcissism of the reader is united with the narcissism of the author.

The proposal of Shelley Jackson invites the reader to accompany her in her chaotic reordering of the body's reminiscences, a decontextualization (inside the hypertext) of its original context. But, what is the effect produced by this successive disordering and reordering of memories associated to different body parts? The territories of memory and body are drawn and blurred, they overlap and overflow, they merge in new associations, exerting through the hypertext's grotesque corpus a destabilizing and liberating function. Above all, it implies a negotiation between the macrocosms (the society, the world) and a microcosms (the body, the cabinet of curiosities); a negotiation between the linearity of discourse and its dispersion and fragmentation in the hypertext, which makes explicit the coercive pressures that regulate the social construction of the body.

In its aesthetic sense, the grotesque is fundamentally defined by the surpassing of identity, which implies a clash in principle with the beauty canon, as the body statute in Western culture is mainly defined by it (Barrios 16). In this

sense, the form and content of *my body* make a well-oiled gear. Both the hypertext and the image of the grotesque body have blurred boundaries, diluted semiotic frontiers, each hypertext lexia is the fragment of a conversation whose meaning is marked, accidentally, by the order it occupies in our own reading, by its contingency relations with other fragments; despite the finite number of links that the piece contains, this becomes endless by virtue of the quantity of possible combinations. We could say that the hypertext, as the grotesque body alluded to in Cristóbal Pera's essay, "is a body never finished, never completed, always under construction" (37)⁹, a feature that the narrative voice also attributes to *my body* in the lexia "tie in products." This incessant action is what, according to Sianne Ngai, characterizes the aesthetic category of "zany," the sign of our times, in which the frontiers between play and work are dissolved, and the gender roles come together with those of social class to draw a stressed and surpassed feminine role. However, in this piece, the feminine subject does not drown in a sea of demands, as it is evident in other digital literature works created by women as is the case of *Pieces of Herself* (2003–2005) by Juliet Davis, or *Fitting the Pattern* (2008) by Christine Wilks. On the contrary, the dialogism of the hypertext is used to show, in a subversive manner and in connivance with the reader, the matrix of social conflict that underlies every aesthetic judgement, in relation to the body and to the text itself. The author's personality, which the reader progressively constructs out of the textual tangle of *my body*, possesses a contagious rebelliousness and force.

As in a curiosity cabinet, where knowledge emerges not from the objects themselves but from the relations that they keep among them, in the hypertext the recognition of an authorial voice emerges from the personality that is gathered from all the fragments that form the work, and from their relation with adjacent works by the same author. After reading the contents of the different drawers of memory, an image is formed that gives coherence to all of them, a new layer in which the reader reconstructs the type of personality that complements and confirms the authorial persona of *Patchwork Girl*, a subjectivity preoccupied with similar concerns regarding the power of the body to contain a fragmented yet enduring self, and the power of writing to express the experience of living in/through its contingent nature.

Acting as one of the central nodes of the work we find one of the longer lexias, it is entitled "Theories" and one can arrive to it from different paths. In it, an apparently trivial anecdote is again remembered: the narrator relates the recollection of a sudden reality jolt, the split of a branch while she was climbing up a tree as a child and which could have ended in a fatal accident. This seemingly trivial occurrence hides one of the work's epiphanies: the awakening of maturity, the acknowledgement of being limited, alike others, and not a magical child chosen by the forces of nature to be something more than hu-

man. Life—the narrative voice concludes—is still wonderful, but now one has to be careful since one will not be granted special rights, her fantasy of belonging and mystic union with the physical world has vanished.

Shelley Jackson's piece brings us back to that childhood moment in which the world, and the body in particular, is a box full of surprises, where everything is possible, and therefore, we must try hard to find the possibilities, the talents we have in store without knowing. At some point, this full confidence in our own potential, and thus in the capacity of our own body, breaks and in its place appear the vulnerability, the complex, the inadequacy feeling, which the main character of *my body* manages to eschew.

Jackson's work transpires defiance and assertiveness. Just one melancholic moment can be singled out when the narrator asserts that, as time passes, our body acquires the characteristics of inanimate objects, until it becomes one. As in a cabinet of wonders, in *my body* the objects of nature (the body), intermingle with the human-made artifacts (the texts) and the myths (the imaginary connection that binds them together). However, in this chaotic skein of memories, each lexia does not produce the same sense of wonder and surprise than a true collection object; the curiosity it provokes is ambiguous, at once narcissistic and generous. It becomes interesting by the pure fact of being a lexia in the hypertext, by being singled out by the author as a photographer capable of isolating and making meaningful any instance that is framed by her camera.

We can assert, nevertheless, that the objectification, the parceling out of the feminine body at the hands of the female writer acquires a tone of vindication. A *wunderkammer*, the cabinet of wonders, exhibited, open to scientific exploration and curious tourism, shows us the body of woman as an undiscovered territory, yet to be known, both in the physiological plane and in the psychological. The body revealed by Shelley Jackson is certainly a curiosity because of its androgyny, but its reading sparks the recognition that such sexual ambiguity is part of all of us in some way. The myth that the author toils to deconstruct is that of a sexual polarity totally univocal and defined. The deconstruction carried out by Jackson of each memory associated with the body in fragments of text, territorializing and deterritorializing the global image of the body, and the recollection of the stark contrast between lived experience of the body and the social restrictions imposed on each little parcel of it, produces a defamiliarization effect that brings to the surface the subtle confinement to which the feminine body is subjected from infancy.

Finally, the most attractive feature of the authorial personality constructed by Shelley Jackson is that she manages to write about her insecurities in care-free, vital, and beautiful language, transmitting the pride inherent in being oneself. She is weak and strong, vulnerable and resilient, sensitive and unbreakable. We could say that she revisits the grotesque as yet another non-cathartic,

minor affect, as she does not really fit into any of the aesthetic categories to which Sianne Ngai refers. She is not “cute,” maybe a little “zany” and definitively interesting, but not in the sense of “merely interesting,” since she manages to involve us in an intimate way in her own memories. She exhibits herself without shame and demonstrates that the authorial character can become even more elusive and mysterious the more we learn about it: behind the grotesque exhibition of her most private memories lies another layer, that of the real person, which continues to be unfathomable.

Our platonic heritage has excised us, our consciences, from our own bodies in the same way that classical normativity and aesthetics have alienated our experience of reality, which often shows its ugly teeth, from an idealized representation of the world. Yet, Shelley Jackson invites us to reduce the distance between bodies and expand our knowledge towards this primeval mystery that separates self from other, consciousness and materiality, text and body, through the grotesque mode, which becomes, in her hands, a way to approach the incongruous elements that compose our identity and its relation with the body in a continuous play with the reader's expectations. The grotesque emerges then, not as a shocking spectacle, but at the interstices between Jackson's memories of the discovery of her body's potentialities and shortcomings and our own. By mixing triviality with transcendence, irreverence with devotion, by resorting to a humorous, surreal distance to assimilate our ambivalent emotions towards our own body and that of others, Jackson leads us through her particular cabinet of wonders, at once peculiar and strangely familiar, suggesting that only a grotesque text can hold the disproportioned, the unclassifiable, the non-canonical and even the tragic in its bosom without losing its integrity.

Through these notes I have tried to tentatively play with Scott Rettberg's suggestion that hypertexts can be seen as simultaneously belonging to many sets, and that “theory, like literature, does not ultimately operate a world in which each passing phase obviates the other” (1). In this case, I believe that Shelley Jackson's corpus should definitely be counted inside the renewal of the Grotesque at the turn of the 21st century, adding to this ancient style the bizarre, hybrid bodies of our technological age.

Notes

- 1 Parts of this text were published in the journal *Tropelias: Revista de Teoría de la Literatura y Literatura Comparada*. The text, written in Spanish, can be found at <<https://papiro.unizar.es/ojs/index.php/tropelias/article/view/1156/1019>>.

- 2 All translations were done by the author. Original text: “En su sentido estético, lo grotesco se define fundamentalmente por el sobrepasamiento de la identidad, lo que supone una contraposición de principio con el canon de lo bello como aquello que define fundamentalmente el estatuto del cuerpo en la cultura occidental” (Barrios 16).
- 3 Astruc contends that the danger of the established orders perceived in the grotesque had to do with the surprising anti-cognitive properties that are still today attributed to it: “because it resists interpretation, the grotesque always appears as a domain where it is expressed a certain type of irrationality, or at least, of the unintelligible” (Astruc 3).
- 4 Cf. <<http://web.mit.edu/m-i-t/articles/jackson.html>>.
- 5 Cf. <<http://pendientedemigracion.ucm.es/info/especulo/hipertul/wunderkammer.html>>.
- 6 Cf. <http://www.altx.com/thebody/organs__internal.html>.
- 7 Cf. <<http://www.altx.com/thebody/butt.html>>.
- 8 Original text: “Escribir te cose, te une al mundo” (Montero).
- 9 In the original: “es un cuerpo nunca acabado, nunca completado, siempre en proceso de construcción” (37).

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