The Sublime Character of Gothic Fiction (1764–1847)

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For Katie Long.

One crucial device of the Gothic novel is to put the reality status of its story-worlds into doubt while having characters tackle forms of being which lack empirical self-evidence and naturalness.[1] The characters of Gothic novels live in deeply unstable relations with the material reality of their environment. This feature is closely connected to a second constitutive effect of the genre: the often visceral feeling of dread and anxiety on the side of characters and readers which has been addressed variously through concepts such as "terror" and "horror" (Radcliffe), "the uncanny" (Freud), "the abject" (Kristeva), and "the sublime" (Burke, Kant, Hegel, and Lacan).

Building upon these observations, I argue that the Gothic novel enacts the material precariousness of its fictional worlds through the psychological disposition, equally precarious, of its characters. In Gothic fiction, the precariousness of characters manifests in psychological phenomena based on dubious information, seductive fantasies, and overpowering affects and emotions. Following a psychoanalytic theory of sublimation, I argue that these mental states indicate a physiological-material excess within the subject, and I examine how the character-subjects of Gothic fiction develop in relation to this bodily and material dimension of their being. At the same time, this approach is concerned with the measure of autonomy and self-conduct that characters of Gothic fiction are enabled to maintain in response to precisely this corpo-reality.

I will put this materialist approach to the test by examining three of the classics (my slightly a-chronological order will justify itself in due course): *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) by Horace Walpole, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and *Northanger Abbey* (1817) by Jane Austen. I hope to show that the Gothic novel forms a test case for us to rethink the ontology of literary characters in both literary and ethical terms,

1 Cp. Tzvetan Todorov who in his seminal study on the Fantastic has defined the "hesitation" of readers (and characters) concerning the reality status of the fictional world as a pivotal feature of the genre (*The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Trans. Richard Howard. Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1973).

while enabling ways of exploration that may as well apply to other, non-Gothic styles of fictional world-making.

1.

In the aftermath of Structuralism, literary characters were reduced to a set of functions for the plot,[2] or they were seen to result from the sheer fact that "identical semes traverse the same proper name several times".[3] Instead of fascinating personalities, characters were mainly studied as a "configuration of symbolic relationships".[4] More recent approaches informed by Cognitive Science do not significantly alter this situation, because, similar to the Structuralist notion of the linguistic 'signified', they conceive of character "as text-based construct or mental image in the reader's mind".[5] From all these various angles, literary characters are considered to

2 Vladimir Propp: *Morphology of the Folktale*. Trans. Lawrence Scott, 2nd edn. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1968; Lotman, Jurij: *The Structure of the Artistic Text*. Trans. Ronald Vroon. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan, 1977; Greimas, Algirdas Julien: *Sémantique structurale*. Trans. Daniele McDowell, Ronald Schleifer, and Alan Velie. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983.

3 Roland Barthes: *S/Z*. Transl. Richard Miller. Cape 1975, 67.

4 Barthes: *S/Z*, 68.

5 Uri Margolin: Character. In: David Herman (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2007, 66–79, 76. Recently, the concept of character has been reviewed with a special focus on what "forms of critical engagement readerly interest in characters might prompt" and to "recognize[…] our responses to characters not only as situated within ideological and sociohistorical contexts but also as importantly moral and affective in ways that much of the historical work in the field has left unexplored" (Anderson, Amanda/Rita Felski/Toril Moi. *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2019, 7). Elaborating on these "importantly moral and affective […] ways" of response, critics have argued that literary works can teach us subtle forms of identification and empathy with other human beings (John Frow: *Character and Person*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), that they can act as a form of moral tuition (Martha C. Nussbaum: *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992) or train the mind-reading capacities needed in our everyday social interaction (Alan Palmer: *Fictional Minds.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008; Lisa Zunshine. *Why we read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*. Ohio State University Press, 2006; Blakey Vermeule. *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010). Nevertheless, all these attempts at reforming character studies do not really account for the psychocorporeal complexity of characters, neither can they elucidate the interactions of characters with the specific material qualities of the environments inhabited by them. The reason for this is that, by and large, these critics continue to rely on the premises of traditional literary theories of reception (à la Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser): they conceive of literary entities mainly as mental or linguistic constructs – as realities, as it were, in the reader's head.

act as purely linguistic or cognitive constructs, and it is hardly feasible to conceive of them as corporeal beings situated in a material world.

At first glance, the current move of New Materialism seems to offer favourable ground for a review of characters with regards to the materiality of their being. However, what makes a New Materialist approach to the characters of literature rather difficult is the explicit critique of the 'human subject' governing this theoretical field: New Materialists see human and nonhuman entities to emerge from a heterogeneous array of multiple and ever-changing forces.[6] In this non-hierarchical, or 'flat' ontology, reality is not only viewed as strictly detachable from the human mind, but the human mind itself is also largely considered the result of a "network" of "psychogenic" forces, and it is this "apparatus" which is held responsible for the very "production of [psychic] interiorities".[7] For this reason, New Materialism does not allow us to grasp the psycho-physiological complexity of characters which, as literary history has amply proven, are so wonderfully exploitable for action-packed stories about captivating personalities.

The fascination of literary characters is based on a material excessiveness of these characters as human subjects. This excessiveness is situated not in what the New Materialists claim to be more-than-human, but in what is more-than-subject *within* the subject. This surplus quality shows in literature whenever characters are driven by desires and drives, deluded by their imaginations, and whenever they falter in their attempts to represent, mentally or linguistically, the individual misery, state of fear or joyfulness in which they find themselves – and where, in Gothic fiction, to say the least, is this exactly not the case?

Psychoanalysis, especially of the (Post-)Lacanian variety, offers a subtle take on this material dimension within the subject and thus proves particularly adequate to the complex ontology of literary characters. These theorists consider the "notion of a fully constituted material reality as the sole true reality outside our minds", such as promulgated by New Materialists and Object-Oriented Ontologists, as downright "naïve".[8] Far from subscribing to a plainly idealist agenda, however, this psychoanalytic school of thought takes the human psyche itself as its materialist starting point:

6 Levi R. Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (eds.): *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. re.press, 2011; Diana Coole/Samantha Frost. *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

7 Bruno Latour: *Reassembling the Social: an Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford UP 2005, 165–172; *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: an Anthropology of the Moderns*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2013, 186.

8 Russell Sbriglia/Slavoj Žižek (eds.): *Subject Lessons: Hegel, Lacan, and the Future of Materialism*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2020, 9.

> the subject is indeed an object, as the new materialists and realists claim, but a very particular, very peculiar kind of object, a strange object that, insofar as it is in the subject more than the subject itself, is constitutive of subjectivity as such.[9]

One domain where this material reality in the subject prominently shows is the Sublime: a concept of singular importance in connection with the present study by means of which philosophers like Immanuel Kant responded to, or, as is the case with Edmund Burke, anticipated some important aesthetic principles of Gothic fiction.

The 18th and early 19th century philosophical discourse on the Sublime has invariably highlighted specific material and physiological aspects of the human mind. Appearing seven years before Horace Walpole's foundational novel *The Castle of Otranto*, Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry* anchors the experience of the Sublime in bodily responses to experiences that trigger our survival instincts. A similar "materialism" can be discovered in Kant's 1790 *Critique of Judgment*. In the face of the Sublime, human imagination has to stay "in contact with nature", Paul De Man has pointed out about the Kantian Sublime: when responding to the Sublime, our mental activities cannot be "idealized to the point of becoming pure reason", because the imagination, triggered by the Sublime, at the same time "remains pure affect rather than cognition".[10]

At the same time, however, the same philosophers consistently confirm the superiority of the human mind, as it were, against their own essentially materialist foundation: in Burke, the bodily tension caused by sublime terror eventually culminates in a higher form of aesthetic pleasure. For Kant, on the other hand, the experience of the Sublime amounts to the subject's awareness that human reason is radically independent and thus ultimately superior to the material necessities of nature. Whereas all these approaches to the Sublime in the end successfully manage to dispose of their own materialist and physiological foundations, the psychoanalytic "theory of sublimation" follows through a coherent materialist agenda.

It may seem quite a leap from the notion of the Sublime as discussed in the discipline of philosophical aesthetics to the psychoanalytic concept of sublimation which for Freud, in his 1905 *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, famously equals a compensation of sexual desire by means of socially sanctioned, nonsexual desires such as those provided by art, and science.[11] Less big a leap, however, it is towards Lacan's

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9 Sbriglia/Žižek: *Subject Lessons*, 11.

10 Paul De Man: Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant. *Aesthetic Ideology*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press 1996, 59–90, 86.

11 "The existence of a sexual need in man and animal is expressed in biology by the assumption of a 'sexual instinct'. We have long been accustomed to describing as 'sexual' all activities which have as their end the attainment of the instinct's aim — that is, of an excitation of the genitals. […] There is a kind of action which we call 'sexual' even though it does not serve the

notion of sublimation which, different from Freud, no longer assumes the object of desire to change from sex to, say, architecture or archaeology. He describes sublimation as the fundamental mode in which subjects relate to the object world in the first place. The result of this sublime access to the world amounts to a "fantasm" that comes with a materialist vengeance, because, for Lacan, this fantasm "overlay[s] the subject, to delude it, at the very point of *das Ding*."[12]

The category "*Ding* [Thing]" does in fact refer back to Freud, not, however, to Freud's concept of sublimation, but to his much earlier *Project for a Scientific Psychology* [*Entwurf einer Psychologie*] (1895) and to the essay "Negation" from 1925. In "Negation", Freud describes the *Ding* in relation to basic acts of judgment which allow the infant to decide whether an object possesses certain attributes ("good" or bad, "useful" or "harmful" and "whether something which is in the ego as a presentation [*Vorstellung*] can be rediscovered in perception (reality) as well".[13] The "precondition" for this kind of "reality-testing", Freud claims, "is that objects shall have been lost which once brought real satisfaction".[14] In other words, the Thing (*Ding*) that originally brought "real satisfaction" remains constitutively inaccessible for the self, or as Freud explicitly himself states in the *Entwurf*: "What we call things are residues which evade being judged [*Reste, die sich der Beurteilung entziehen*]."[15]

Building upon this groundwork, Lacan sees sublimation to constitute the primary relationship between the subject and the object world by raising the objects of its environment "to the dignity of the Thing".[16] This can be clarified as follows: the constitution of the self as subject equals the separation from an original state of enjoyment (*jouissance*) in which the self is merged with its milieu. This separation is attained by means of an "*Ur-teil*": a judgement (*Urteil*) that originally (*ursprünglich*) separates (*teilt*) the thing from its predicates, because these predicates are derived, as Freud had argued, "from representations of earlier stimuli invasions that help the

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purpose of reproduction, and which may be regarded as a kind of pursuit of a higher gratification. We call it the process of 'sublimation'" (Sigmund Freud: Three Essays. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Transl. J. Strachey, Vol VII. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 124–243, 180).

12 Jacques Lacan: *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960: the Seminar of Jacques Lacan*. London: Routledge 1992, 99.

13 Sigmund Freud: Negation. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Transl. J. Strachey, Vol XIX. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 234–239, 237.

14 Freud: *Negation*, 238.

15 Sigmund Freud: Project for a Scientific Psychology [*Entwurf einer Psychologie*] (1895). *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Transl. J. Strachey, Vol I. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 334; cp. Marc de Kesel: *Eros and Ethics: Reading Jacques Lacan's Seminar VII*. Transl. Sigi Jottkandt. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2009 (2001), 86.

16 Lacan: *Ethics*, 112.

'thinking apparatus' to identify the present stimuli" and evaluate them according to their positive or negative effects.[17] From this original splitting (*Teilung*) of self and world, which constitutes the self as subject, Lacan concludes that the subject is always already in "a thoroughly enigmatic position relative to that which lies within *das Ding*."[18] This enigmatic position is precisely located between the Object (in relation to the subject) and the Thing (in which subject and object are not yet separated). Sublimation is thus the mode in which the subject originally positions itself towards its environment. It forms a psycho-somatic dynamic that provides orientation for the subject in relation to the object world: keeping the lost 'Thing' present in the imagination, sublimation transforms objects into objects of desire. Crucially, the emergence of these objects is just as fortuitous as our desire itself is unpredictable, because objects of desire are always already aligned towards the radically enigmatic and inscrutable dimension of the Thing.

For this reason, sublime objects are at the same time constitutively lacking and essentially excessive. In the process of sublimation, ordinary objects begin to display something *more* than themselves, something that shines through them, indicating an unfathomable surplus value that precisely triggers the desire of what is experienced as being lost. To the extent that sublimation orients the subject's desire in relation to the object world, it institutes the subject as subject. At the same time, however, sublimation incorporates remnants of the *overfull* enjoyment (*jouissance*) belonging to the stage of the Thing. The Thing's material "excessiveness", its "intimate exteriority", as Zupančič and Lacan have respectively phrased, constitutes the "absolute Other" within the subject;[19] and, therefore, sublimation has also the potential to break down the demarcation line between the self and the world. In this case, the lack which forms the desire that constitutes the subject in relation to other objects is suddenly lacking itself. During this process, the Thing-quality of sublimation can become a main source of anxiety and shock.[20]

On the whole, then, the psychoanalytic concept of sublimation seems to be quite well attuned to the two generic features of Gothic fiction which I mentioned at the start of this essay: situated in a phantasmatic zone and wavering between object and Thing, the Gothic novel aligns the precarious reality status of fictional worldmaking with the birth of the subject. Furthermore, given that the material excessiveness of the Thing constitutes a main source of anxiety, Lacan's notion of sublimation also accounts for the immersive response of terror and shock which, from Radcliffe to Freud, has regularly been associated with the affective impact of the Gothic novel.

17 Kesel: *Eros*, 86

18 Lacan: *Ethics*, 95.

19 Alenka Zupančič: *What is Sex?* Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2017, 121; Lacan: *Ethics*, 139 and 52.

20 Jacques Lacan: *Anxiety. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*. Polity 2014, 42, cp. 53f., 63.

Finally, and even more important for the present article, sublimation in its relation to the Thing allows for a descriptive model of literary character based on how these fictional beings are oriented in different ways and degrees to the constitutively blind spot relative to the origin and goal of their desire.

In the following explorations, my aim is to put this theoretical potential to the test by showing how in *Otranto*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Northanger Abbey*, the desire of the protagonists forms a material contrariety, or "negativity", within their reality which at the same time constitutes these characters as subjects.[21] The inherent inconsistency of what is *more-than-subject* within the subject often dissociates Gothic characters from their position as autonomous individuals: hanging over the abyss that yawns between their desire and the Thing, they lack the principles upon which to rest the virtue of their conduct and actions.[22] Not (fully) knowing the cause, rule, and purpose of one's pleasure posits a fundamentally ethical problem: lacking access to the truth of the goodness of their being, these characters are situated within a framework of a radically self-determined ethics that operates independently of any moral or normative support. From this follows that the different degrees and qualities of 'thing-liness', or *Dinglichkeit*, of desire, to which Gothic characters are regularly exposed, also amount to as many compelling ways in which these characters are challenged to shoulder this experience as an ethical task.

Advancing this methodology, should, furthermore, work towards regaining an aesthetic dimension of literary character, the loss of which has often been bemoaned in contemporary Literary Studies.[23] Such an aesthetic dimension should provide an interpretive horizon which accounts, first, for the artistic value of characters as captivating personalities, and, second, for their ethical potential according to the creative latitude with regard to the corporeal world which they inhabit.

2.

Following the notion of the *Unheimliche* [the uncanny], which Freud developed in direct proximity with the German *Schauerromantik*, and with E.T.A. Hoffmann's "Der Sandmann" in particular, Gothic fiction has often been described as bringing forth "a

21 For the terms "contradiction" and "negativity" in this theoretical context, cp. Zupančič: *What is*, 121.

22 Cp. Gary Farnell's observation that the "world of Gothic is one of pulsating *jouissance* – an alternating rhythm of sublimation and abjection – arising from narrative or dramatic encounters with signs of the 'beyond' or the 'outside' of signified meaning" (The Gothic and the Thing. *Gothic Studies* 11.1 (2009), 113–123, 116).

23 Cp. John Frow: *Character*; Anderson et al.: *Character.*

subject of the unconscious".[24] Jerrold E. Hogle, in his "Introduction" to *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* writes:

> the longevity and power of Gothic fiction unquestionably stem from the way it helps us address and disguise some of the most important desires, quandaries, and sources of anxiety, from the most internal and mental to the widely social and cultural, throughout the history of western culture since the eighteenth century.[25]

However, a closer look at the genre's foundational novel shows that the protagonist could not be further away from psychology in this modern sense of the term. Manfred, the villain of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, lacks a crucial premise of psychology: the assumption that "at the level of lived experience there is a deeper meaning that guides that experience, and one can have access to it".[26] In Manfred's case, there is precisely no such deeper meaning, there is no reason for being suspicious about hidden motives or unconscious patterns which would account for his actions, feelings, and attitude. Instead, Manfred's affective economy reads like a book wide open. Subsequent to his son's death, he addresses Conrad's former fiancée Isabella:

> – … since I cannot give you my son, I offer you myself. – Heavens! cried Isabella, waking from her delusion, what do I hear! You, my lord! You! My father in law! the father of Conrad! the husband of the virtuous and tender Hippolita! – I tell you, said Manfred imperiously, Hippolita is no longer my wife; I divorce her from this hour. Too long has she cursed me by her unfruitfulness: my fate depends on having sons, – and this night I trust will give a new date to my hopes. At those words he seized the cold hand of Isabella, who was half-dead with fright and horror. She shrieked, and started from him.[27]

Manfred's relationship with his surroundings is driven by instinctive necessity and by what is vital for the biological survival of his family line. With a Foucauldian view on the genealogy of modern sexuality, Dale Townshend is therefore right to argue

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24 David Sigler: Review of Dale Townshend, *The Orders of Gothic: Foucault, Lacan, and the Subject of Gothic Writing 1764–1820*. New York: AMS Press, 2007. *Romantic Circles* (https://romantic-circles.org/reviews-blog/dale-townshend-orders-gothic-foucault-lacan-and-subject-gothic-writing-1764-1820; 18.05.2023).

25 Jerrold E. Hogle: The Gothic in Western Culture. In: Jerrold E. Hogle (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 1–20, 4. Cp. James Watt: Gothic. In: Hogle (ed.): *Cambridge Companion*, 119–135, 127f.

26 Lacan: *Ethics*, 312.

27 Horace Walpole: *The Castle of Otranto*. Penguin 2001, 25. Subsequent citations are noted parenthetically within the text.

that *Otranto* is driven by incest as "the *extimate* phantasmatic Thing that haunts the installation of modern sexuality".[28] Not only does this Thing subvert the symbolic distinction between father, daughter, and wife, it also foregoes (*verwirft*) the symbolic structure of "demand".[29] What Manfred asks to be granted comes, in an utterly horrifying way, 'for free'. It does not require of the supplier anything else than the fulfillment of *just* this need:

> [Manfred] pushed [his wife Hippolta] rudely off, and said, Where is Isabella? Isabella! my lord! said the astonished Hippolita. Yes, Isabella; cried Manfred imperiously; I want Isabella. (36)

The transformation of this need "into a proof of [Isabella's or Hippolita's] love" or any other valuation of the demanding subject *as* a subject is, in Manfred's case, strictly insignificant.[30] Following Lacan's notorious formula that 'desire is demand minus need', then, we can conclude that this founder figure of the Gothic novel is not a subject of desire, because there is no demand.[31] Manfred's "I want" contains nothing that would surpass the sheer biological need of procreation for the retention of dominance.[32]

In narratological terms, too, Manfred proves a rather odd case. He conspicuously escapes traditional typologies of character such as E. M. Forster's well-known distinction between "round characters" and "flat characters" included in his 1927 *Aspects of the Novel*.[33] Manfred, to be certain, is not a "round" character, because he has no psychological depth, and he does not develop. At the same time, however, he does

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28 Dale Townshend: *The Orders of Gothic: Foucault, Lacan, and the Subject of Gothic Writing 1764–1820*. New York: AMS Press, 2007, 189.

29 For Lacan's interpretation of Freud's *Verwerfung* as "a symbolic abolition", cp. Jacques Lacan: Response to Jean Hyppolite's Commentary on Freud's 'Verneinung'. *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Transl. Bruce Fink. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006, 318–333, 322.

30 Jacques Lacan: The Signification of the Phallus. *Écrits*, The First Complete Edition in English. Trans. Bruce Fink. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006, 575–584, 580. Matt Foley has also described Manfred's tyranny in these terms: as a confusion of his demand with his need (Tyranny as Demand: Lacan Reading the Dreams of Gothic Romance. In: Daniela Garofalo/David Sigler (eds.): *Lacan and Romanticism*. State University of New York Press, 2019, 152). Cp. Sue Chaplin: Spectres of law in *The Castle of Otranto*. *The Gothic and the Rule of Law, 1764–1820*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 177–188.

31 "[D]esire is neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the very phenomenon of their splitting (*Spaltung*)" (Lacan: Phallus, 580).

32 Cp. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's view of the Gothic Novel as fundamentally "resistant to any psychological reading" as long as psychology presupposes "primacy of depth and content", which the Gothic novel is invariably lacking (*Coherence of Gothic Conventions*. Methuen 1986, 154).

33 E. M. Forster: *Aspects of the Novel*. Rosetta Books 2002, 67.

not fit into the flat category either. Flat characters, writes Forster, "remain in [the reader's] mind as unalterable for the reason that they were not changed by circumstances".[34] However, Walpole's tyrant-villain constantly changes, although in totally unexpected ways that do not amount to a coherent development, let alone 'growth', of character. These abrupt changes regularly occur in immediate response to circumstantial alterations in his material environment:

> But what a sight for a father's eyes! – He beheld his child dashed to pieces, and almost buried under an enormous helmet, an hundred times more large than any casque ever made for human being, and shaded with a proportionable quantity of black feathers. The horror of the spectacle, the ignorance of all around how this misfortune had happened, and above all, the tremendous phœnomenon [sic] before him, took away the prince's speech. Yet his silence lasted longer than even grief could occasion. He fixed his eyes on what he wished in vain to believe a vision; and seemed less attentive to his loss, than buried in meditation on the stupendous object that had occasioned it. He touched, he examined the fatal casque; nor could even the bleeding mangled remains of the young prince divert the eyes of Manfred from the portent before him. (19)

Neither round nor flat, the very rudimentary subject Manfred is shown in "very particular" and "very peculiar" relations with his material surroundings, to quote Sbriglia and Žižek's felicitous phrase once more.[35] These relations defy easy categorization. In its overwhelming materiality, the infamous helmet, for instance, does not allow for an Imaginary register, to use the first leg of Lacan's Imaginary-Symbolic-Real tripod: relating to it in terms of "a vision" proves to be utterly "in vain". Likewise, "the stupendous object" undermines the Symbolic realm: it "[takes] away the prince's speech", and even "silence" loses its status as a signifier for Manfred's state of mind, because it "lasted longer than even grief could occasion", thus forfeiting its socially sanctioned signified.

At the same time, "the tremendous phœnomenon [sic]" of the helmet forms part of a *rebus* that gradually spells out the defeat of Manfred's realm. Fulfilling the ominous prophecy "that the castle and lordship of Otranto should pass from the present family: whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it" (110), individual parts of the castle's legitimate owner, Alfonso, begin to appear: first the helmet, then a giant leg in armour (35), a sword that suits the casque (62f.), and eventually, also in armour, a hand (104). Nevertheless, Manfred effectively ignores the message of this supernatural communication, the objects of this *rebus* do not extend into the Symbolic register of his character. They are reduced to mere stumbling blocks on

34 Forster: *Aspects*, 68.

35 See footnote 8.

a purely material level of the Real, and they stand in the way of Manfred's one and only goal: the continuance of his family line through procreation with Isabella.

Lacking any Imaginary and Symbolic dimension, the gigantic objects in *Otranto* are therefore precisely not *sublime* objects. For, both in the philosophical and in the psychoanalytic sense, the concept is tantamount to processes of negotiation, mediating between horror and pleasure, between the insufficiency of our senses and the supremacy of our reason, between reality as object and reality as Thing. By contrast, the various objects of terror in *Otranto* effectively delineate a zone that is radically disconnected from the human sphere. The breakthrough into the lofty sphere of reason (*Vernunft*), which according to Kant affirms human self-determination beyond the physical laws and material necessities of nature, completely fails to come to pass. What the objects, spelling out the castle's legitimate owner, effectively display is the empirical limits of Symbolic representation. They strike the protagonist in *Otranto* on the immediately corpo-real level of the Thing: as entirely insignificant, incomprehensible, opaque, yet deeply disconcerting entities.

In spite of the protagonist's close proximity to the Real dimension of the Thing, Walpole's novel effectively dodges the actual ethical challenge to engage his character with the blindness of desire and the fact that he does not really know what he wants and why. The only basis left for such an ethical stance is derived from a purely artificial alliance with the Catholic belief system:

> The moment Theodore appeared, the walls of the castle behind Manfred were thrown down with a mighty force, and the form of Alfonso, dilated to an immense magnitude, appeared in the centre of the ruins. Behold in Theodore, the true heir of Alfonso! said the vision: and having pronounced those words, accompanied by a clap of thunder, it ascended solemnly towards heaven, where the clouds parting asunder, the form of saint Nicholas was seen; and receiving Alfonso's shade, they were soon wrapt from mortal eyes in a blaze of glory. The beholders fell prostrate on their faces, acknowledging the divine will. (112f.)

Walpole's novel ends on a truly strange performance. It re-enacts the biblical account of the Transfiguration of Christ (Mt 17:1–9, Mk 9:2–9, Lk 9:28–36) with Hippolita, Isabella, and Manfred performing the roles of the apostles St Peter, St James, and St John, and with God-Gift 'Theo-dore' playing the part of the Saviour, while Alfonso and St. Nicholas share between them the role of no lesser a character than God:

> a bright cloud overshadowed them. And lo, a voice out of the cloud, saying: This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased: hear ye him. And the disciples hearing, fell upon their face, and were very much afraid. (Mt 17: 5–6)

The artificiality of this moral closure is hard to miss. It rests upon as exotic a foundation as the "ancient errors and superstitions" of Catholic spirituality that Walpole, in the first Preface to his novel, connects with the utmost "north of England" where the "work was found in the library of an ancient catholic family" and the utmost South of Italy, Naples, where the text of *Otranto* "was printed […] in the black letter, in the year 1529" (92). Twenty years after this fictional date, in 1549, the Feast of Transfiguration was to be effectively removed from the English liturgical calendar due to the adoption of the Book of Common Prayer. In 1662, it was established as a minor feast with no readings allowed or collect appointed.[36] In Walpole's own times, elements of the Catholic liturgy had thus become available for show booth effects of sensationalist fiction: as impressive as ethically unrewarding.[37]

3.

In his 1957 *Literature and Evil*, Georges Bataille writes:

> The basis of sexual effusion is the negation of the isolation of the ego which only experiences ecstasy by exceeding itself, by surpassing itself in the embrace in which the being loses its solitude. […] To no mortal love does this apply as much as to the union between the heroes of Wuthering Heights, Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff. Nobody revealed this truth more forcefully than Emily Brontë.[38]

The ethical rigour that Bataille assigns to Emily Brontë's only novel is based on a logic of sovereign expenditure: it disconnects sexual desire from the principles of use and gain ('marriage', 'children', 'increase of wealth and property'), pleasure and pain (for 'pain can be pleasure', and 'pleasure can be pain') and opens itself up to a "state of ecstasy" similar to "Death alone".[39] Luca Bosetti has pointed out the similarity of

36 Benjamin Thomas: *An Anglican Hermeneutic of the Transfiguration* (*Studies in Episcopal and Anglican Theology*. General Editor: C. K. Robertson. Vol. 1). New York et al.: Lang 2013, 158. As Thomas further points out, "This very minimal observance of Transfiguration in Anglican liturgical practice largely prevailed until the reinstatement of the feast day in the 1892 Book of Common Prayer" (159).

37 See Diane Long Hoeveler who has argued that this anti-Catholic variety of the Gothic novel, "in its bid to establish a (false) pedigree for itself, […] is also nostalgic, reactionary, and in thrall to the lure of an earlier feudal, aristocratic, and Catholic past" (*Gothic Riffs: Secularizing the Uncanny in the European Imaginary*, 1780–1820. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2010, xviii).

38 Georges Bataille: *Literature and Evil*. Translated by Alastair Hamilton. Penguin Books, 2012, 16.

39 Bataille: *Literature*, 26

Bataille's logic of expenditure (*dépense*) to Lacan's ethos of sublimation.[40] Both confront the subject with a transgressive enjoyment (*jouissance*) which is situated on the level of the Thing: beyond the Symbolic order of moral duties and profitable pleasures ('tit for tat'; *do ut des*), and beyond any Imaginary delusions about what could possibly represent the ideal of a superior common good.[41]

At first sight, this does not actually distinguish *Wuthering Heights* from the first novel into which we have looked: similar to the stupendous objects in *Otranto*, there is an essential connection of Brontë's characters with reality on the level of the *Ding*, beyond Symbolic mediation or Imaginary compensation. Nevertheless, the crucial difference lies in the strictness with which the two main characters of *Wuthering Heights* occupy the sublime chasm between the object of their desire and the sheer materiality of the Thing. From this vantage point, Brontë sets about to probe the ethos of her two lovers as radically self-determined subjects without recourse to any established moral or religious standard.

In order to defend his actual wife Isabella, the second-level first person narrator, Nelly Dean, challenges Heathcliff, the infamous hero, in these words:

> '… you cannot doubt that [Isabella] has a capacity for strong attachments, or she wouldn't have abandoned the elegancies, and comforts, and friends of her former home, to fix contentedly, in such a wilderness as this, with you.' […]
> 'She abandoned them under a delusion,' he answered, 'picturing in me a hero of romance, and expecting unlimited indulgences from my chivalrous devotion. I can hardly regard her in the light of a rational creature, so obstinately has she persisted in forming a fabulous notion of my character, and acting on the false impressions she cherished.'[42]

Catherine's own passion for Heathcliff operates on terms crucially different to Isabella's. The otherness of her love does not only show before the slightly hackneyed romantic backdrop of her sister-in-law, but also when compared with other female characters from the stockpile of Gothic fiction: it is as if Isabella from *Otranto* fell madly in love with her tormentor Manfred, or as if Emily from Ann Radcliffe's *The*

40 Luca Bosetti: *From the Criminal to the Sinthome: Lacan's Ethics of Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Life*. Diss. University of Nottingham, 2010, 119f.

41 Psychoanalysis has provided a common ground for criticism on Emily Brontë's novel: Heathcliff, who ends up as the eventual head of the involuted Earnshaw family, has for example, been categorized alongside Freud's mythical concept of the primal father (*Urhordenvater*; James H. Kavanagh: *Emily Brontë*. B. Blackwell, 1985, 27), Philip Wion has described Catherine Earnshaw's passion for him as a "displaced version of the symbiotic relationship between mother and child" (Philip. K. Wion: The Absent Mother in Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights. In: Linda H. Peterson (ed.): *Emily Brontë*. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003, 364–378, 366).

42 Emily Brontë/Richard J. Dunn: *Wuthering Heights*. Norton 2003 (fourth edition), 117f. Subsequent citations from this edition are noted parenthetically within the text.

Mysteries of Udolpho became deeply infatuated with her abductor, the Italian brigand, Signor Montoni. For, this is exactly what happens in Brontë's novel: Catherine loves Heathcliff *in spite of* and precisely *because of* the violence of his being – the Symbolic distinction between *in spite* or *because of* becomes constitutively insignificant in her case.[43] The precariousness of Catherine as a subject of desire shows in the degree to which she clings to the excessive corpo-reality of her lover: she loves Heathcliff *as* a "cannibal" (137), *as* "a […] fiend, a monster, and not a human being" (119), "a ghoul" and "a vampire" (252). In this way, Heathcliff functions as Catherine's "intimate exteriority": he is the absolute Other of herself, her very own inconsistency, that becomes an organic part of her very "own being" (64).

Catherine's love of Heathcliff is, in the Lacanian sense, sublime, because it exceeds the moral principle of the common good and aims for an ethical relation of a superior kind. Catherine's love incorporates "the unique value" of the other's "being beyond all content, beyond all that [they] may have done of good or evil, beyond anything that may be inflicted on [them]."[44] When Isabella begins to fall for Heathcliff, Catherine tries to warn her by pointing out "what Heathcliff is":

> '… an arid wilderness of furze and whinstone. […] He's not a rough diamond—a pearl — containing oyster of a rustic; he's a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man. […] [A]nd he'd crush you, like a sparrow's egg, Isabella, if he found you a troublesome charge. […] There's my picture; and I'm his friend—so much so, that had he thought seriously to catch you, I should, perhaps, have held my tongue, and let you fall into his trap.' (81)

In this way, Catherine's love of Heathcliff incorporates the intrinsic contradiction and the absolute negativity of her reality. It is this contrariety in all its overpowering corpo-reality that forms the material character of Catherine as a subject.

Notwithstanding all this, there are clear limits to this reading of Catherine's passion as a sublime form of love, because, quite simply, the love of Brontë's heroine does not subsist unconditionally. This ethical wager is forfeited at quite an early stage of the novel and substituted by an exchange logic that pays its due to the monetary fact that: "Heathcliff [is] so low […] [i]t would degrade me to marry Heathcliff

43 Arguing that Catherine "in fact express[es] the desire for an impossible symbiosis, for a state of non-differentiation between the self and the other which Lacan contends belongs to the realm of the psychological 'Imaginary'", Marielle Seichepine has wonderfully misunderstood Lacan's triad and what is ethically at stake in Catherine's *amour fou*. (Childhood and Innocence in Wuthering Heights. *Brontë Studies* 29.3 (2004), 209–216, 211).

44 Lacan: *Ethics*, 324f.

now" (63). In this way, Brontë has her female protagonist forgo the chance to turn the necessity of her love into an act of freedom.[45]

Yet again, in Brontë's novel, the same as in *Otranto*, once the excessive corporeality of the Thing called love proves too much of an ethical challenge for the narrative to process, the spiritual catch-phrases of a post-religious age are ready to step in: the force of Catherine's quandary is subdued by unspecific invocations of a transcendental "existence of yours beyond you" and underpinned with an equally vague as portentous hope for what "resembles the eternal rocks beneath …" (64). Finally, Brontë has Catherine assign to Heathcliff similar saviour qualities as the ones that Walpole, in his little biblio-drama of the Transfiguration, assigns to his 'God's gift' Theo-dore, he only difference being that Brontë follows a slightly less melodramatic slant: "If all else perished, and he remained", Catherine asserts, "I should still continue to be; and, if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the Universe would turn to a mighty stranger." (64)

The limits of this post-religious consecration show once we ask ourselves what would happen if Catherine's love were actually articulated in a genuinely Christian framework. Following Slavoj Žižek's *On Belief* , the ethos of Christianity proves surprisingly able to maintain a radically materialist stance, because it unconditionally abides by the Thing called love. For Brontë's heroine this would mean that instead of sacrificing her desire for reasons of utmost profanity ("if Heathcliff and I married, we should be beggars" 64), she would have to prorogue the operative and ruling "logic of 'this is not that'" (Heathcliff *is not* rich) and FULLY ACCEPT that 'this IS that' – that the [man] with all [his] weaknesses and common features IS the Thing I unconditionally love.[46]

In total, then, the similarities between *Wuthering Heights* and *Otranto* outweigh their differences. But what about Heathcliff himself? Part of the fascination of Brontë's novel is how Heathcliff defends his place in an utterly hostile environment. He does so by means of a strategy of sublimation that consistently suspends the rules of moral laws and their discriminating logic of the "good". Instead, he follows a practice of enjoyment (*jouissance*) that locates him as a subject of desire in the thoroughly enigmatic position relative to the Thing. Yet again, the question remains whether this material excess within the subject has actually the strength to form an ethical foundation of conduct and action in Brontë's novel?

After his first encounter with the Lintons and those distinguished by their "yellow hair, and the whiteness of [their] skin" (77), Heathcliff is obliged to review the worth of his own life at Wuthering Heights. He faces up to the task pursuing the logic of this excessive calculus:

45 I am borrowing this phrase from Friederike Danebrock's *On Making Fiction*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2023, 271.

46 Slavoj Žižek: *On Belief* . London: Routledge, 2001, 90, emphasis in the original.

> 'I'd not exchange, for a thousand lives, my condition here for Edgar Linton's at Thrushcross Grange not if I might have the privilege of flinging Joseph [the servant at Wuthering Heights] off the highest gable, and painting the house-front with [his stepbrother] Hindley's blood!' (38)

Heathcliff's ethos invariably expresses an absolute will, not only to power, but to physical violence and destruction against the other and against himself. As to Catherine's decision to marry Linton, for example, he fully confirms the unconditional freedom of his beloved, and not less emphatically does he assert his own resolute will to self-denial: "I never would have banished him from her society, as long as she desired his". However, in the sentence, immediately following this selfless gesture, he makes clear:

> 'The moment her regard ceased, I would have torn his heart out, and drank his blood! But, till then—if you don't believe me, you don't know me—till then, I would have died by inches before I touched a single hair of his head!' (116)

The excessive foundation of Heathcliff's love is best described with Freud's idea of a death drive: an essentially regressive tendency in the subject of desire that gravitates back to the sheer corpo-reality of the inorganic state:

> 'I'll tell you what I did yesterday! I got the sexton, who was digging Linton's grave, to remove the earth off her coffin lid, and I opened it. I thought, once, I would have stayed there, when I saw her face again—it is hers yet—he had hard work to stir me; but he said it would change, if the air blew on it, and so I struck one side of the coffin loose, and covered it up—not Linton's side, damn him! I wish he'd been soldered in lead—and I bribed the sexton to pull it away, when I'm laid there, and slide mine out too. I'll have it made so, and then, by the time Linton gets to us, he'll not know which is which!' (220)

Again, we feel obliged to ask, has Heathcliff's material drift towards this "side of the coffin" really the potential to lay an ethical foundation of conduct and action? Following Lacan, one would answer in the affirmative, because Brontë's hero incorporates the sheer impossibility of desire: the sheer inconsistency that we can fulfil our desire only by sacrificing the illusion of ourselves as autonomous subjects. From this angle, the ethos of Heathcliff lies in the lesson that enjoyment comes at the price of our annihilation as subjects. It is this material wisdom that Brontë's hero invariably enacts through a conduct of radical expenditure and self-sacrifice.

Nevertheless, does Heathcliff's aggression not also prove the extent to which his whole being is trapped in a parasitic relationship of envy, and resentment towards the law-giving and allegedly enjoyment-prohibiting institution of the Big Other? Is the contingent morality of the yellow-haired and white-skinned community, in

other words, not effectively confirmed in its rules and claims: not so much *in spite of* but precisely *because of* Heathcliff's ongoing acts of transgression? The material texture of Brontë's narration offers a trace that can point us the direction towards a tentative answer to these questions.

The frame-narrator Mr Lockwood ends up in a symbolic position which Brontë materially marks, in chiastic permutation, as the exact linguistic equivalent to the place assigned to Heathcliff: whereas Heathcliff is forced to act as the excluded third party with regard to Catherine *Earnshaw's* and Edgar *Linton's* matrimony, Lockwood has to take the place of the excluded third party in Catherine *Linton's* and Hareton *Earnshaw's* romantic attachment. Fulfilling this *chiasmus*, *Wuthering Heights* ends with Lockwood overwhelmed by the "smiting beauty" (235) of the younger Catherine. Feeling "irresistibly impelled to escape them" (258), he steals away, and this is how the novel ends.

This material fabric of Brontë's writing makes of the first-level narrator Lockwood an utterly profane *doppelgänger* of the infamous hero: in the end, Lockwood just proves the sad fact that often enough material resistance in matters of love can be of quite a plain kind: sometimes one's desire simply impacts the barrier that the beloved has just chosen the other guy … With the two young lovers, Catherine and Hareton, firmly in place, the convoluted family history of the Earnshaws has come full circle: with "the date '1500,' and the name 'Hareton Earnshaw'" above "the principal door" (4) of Wuthering Heights, there is hope for a new start and a better course. Even before his actual death, Heathcliff's rule is replaced by the new couple who soon begin to refuse to "obey" (244). As Lockwood observes: Catherine and Hareton "are afraid of nothing […]. Together they would brave Satan and all his legions." (258)

Crucially, moreover, Heathcliff's reign is not violently overturned, it is simply shown to exhaust itself. If Heathcliff's ethos of relentless enjoyment, or *jouissance*, is based on a criminal will to negate the good at the price of self-annihilation, then, the primacy of his death drive in the end simply withers away. Rather than terminating with a spectacular bang, the corpo-real excess of Heathcliff's desire merely exhausts itself. The ethical drift towards the Thing is thus curtailed in an utterly unassuming and literal way. "[N]ow would be the precise time to revenge myself", he tells Nelly towards the end of his life:

> 'I could do it; and none could hinder me. But where is the use? I don't care for striking, I can't take the trouble to raise my hand! That sounds as if I had been labouring the whole time, only to exhibit a fine trait of magnanimity. It is far from being the case—I have lost the faculty of enjoying their destruction… .' (247)

4.

The excessive materiality of Gothic fiction, I have argued in this article, tallies with the specific conditions of literary characters as subjects: it produces confrontations with the *Ding* that embody subjectivity in relation to its intimate exteriority. At the same time, the chasm between the object of desire and the fantasmatic opacity of the Thing marks a blind spot within the desiring subject and equals the impossibility to ascertain the good of one's being. From this I have inferred that the exposure of characters to their own 'thing-liness' equals an ethical task. The two novels that I have so far analyzed clearly dodge this duty: the objects of terror in *Otranto* hit the protagonist directly and exclusively on the level of the Real, leaving no space for negotiation between the character's need and his demand, between the 'thingly' and the objective qualities of his being. In Brontë's novel, Heathcliff and Catherine mutually confront each other with a corpo-reality that embodies the absolute negativity of their being. Catherine eventually eludes this Real dimension of her being by means of an economic grid of values that excludes her lover in the end for the simple reason of his poverty. Heathcliff by contrast tackles the absolute Other of his being 'head on', but this determination comes at the price of violence against others and against himself and thus lacks a justifiable ethical perspective. Furthermore, as we have seen both novels seek moral back support by drawing on post-religious forms of spiritual reassurance such as Wapole's little biblio-drama of the Transfiguration or Brontë's pseudo-consecration of her protagonists' *folie à deux*. Compared to *Otranto* and *Wuthering Heights*, the exceptional status of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* becomes readily apparent.

But is *Northanger Abbey* in truth a Gothic novel? To begin with, it certainly fulfils the two main components of the genre with which I have started this essay. For one thing, there is a high degree of ontological uncertainty in terms of how the protagonist Catherine Morland perceives other characters, objects, and circumstances. For another, this confusion about reality goes along with sudden moments of shock and terror that prove profoundly disquieting for Austen's protagonist. As I will show, the world that *Northanger Abbey* establishes for her heroine is in its material existence as inconsistent as the world of *Otranto* and its fragmented objects of helmet, leg, hand, and sword. Equally, the fictional world of *Northanger Abbey* proves not less tormented than Brontë's, with dead Catherine haunting Heathcliff who after his own death, as "the country folks, if you asked them, would swear on their Bible", also "walks" (257). *Northanger Abbey*, however, remains a unique parody of the Gothic novel, and Austen's superior quality shows in the fact that she fully realizes and even outperforms its material principles of sublimation, while also striving to reveal and overcome the genre's foundation in patriarchal violence.

Austen's novel shows a heroine devouring Gothic fiction, Radcliffe's *Udolpho* in particular, and nearly two thirds of the book are over before she reaches the epony-

mous abbey. There, she thinks herself in a world identical with the one of Emily St Aubert, including mysterious chests (168) and cabinets (172) – and a ruthless villain.[47] It is the father of her beloved Henry, General Tilney, whom Catherine suspects to have either made away with his wife or to be keeping her a prisoner. What in *Udolpho* forms a genuine threat – Count Montoni is an actual danger to the health and life of Madame Cheron, his wife – becomes in Austen's novel the mere misunderstanding of a young girl. Notwithstanding that the General is objectively displayed as a rather heartless husband who "loved [his wife] […] as well as it was possible for him" (202) and whose "temper injured her" "while she lived" (203), he is clearly not a murderous *bandito* like Montoni. Catherine, it seems, has simply been taken in by her own overwrought phantasy.

In this way, Austen's transformation of Radcliffe's novel thoroughly corresponds to the classic definition of parody in Scaliger's *Poetics* according to which in "parody […] serious verse is so changed as to become ridiculous".[48] Similar to, for instance, Charlotte Lennox's *Female Quijote* Arabella, the novel-induced hallucinations of Catherine finally amount to a series of comic failures that make the adventures reported in actual Gothic novels look rather laughable: "how frightful!—This is just like a book!" (162). As long as Catherine proves self-aware of her projections as being born from letters printed on a page, the effect remains as playful and enjoyable as in Scaliger's classic definition of parody. Eventually, however, Austen's protagonist loses herself in them to such a degree that she requires mental guidance; and loyal son Henry is only too ready to liberate Catherine from her macabre confusion about his father, General Tilney: serving up the entire gamut of corrective institutes from Fatherland to Faith, from Learning to Legality, Henry's chauvinistic lesson indeed proves successful in the end.

> 'Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you—Does our education prepare us

47 Jane Austen: *Northanger Abbey*. *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge UP 2006. Subsequent citations are noted parenthetically within the text.

48 Frederick Morgan Padelford (ed.): *Select Translations from Scaliger's Poetics*. New York: Henry Holt and Company 1905, 67. Cp. Gérard Genette. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997, 10–30. On *Northanger Abbey* as a parody, cp. Harry Levin: *The Gates of Horn: a Study of Five French Realists*. No. 157. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1966. George Levine: Translating the Monstrous: *Northanger Abbey*. *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 30.3 (1975): 335–350.

> for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? […] Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?' (203)

After this, "[t]he visions of romance were over. Catherine was completely awakened" (204). — It is further evidence of Austen's superior parodistic skills that Catherine effectively experiences two awakenings in the course of the novel. As seen in the previous quote, the first awakening involves, in Lacan's terminology, a shift from the Imaginary world of Gothic mysteries and marvels to the Symbolic register, that is, the well-ordered, highly ritualized, and rather boring world of the landed gentry. Catherine's second awakening, on the other hand, is realized in the register of the Real, and this awakening naturally is of a much rougher kind. It occurs once the General thinks he has discovered that the potential future wife of his son effectively lacks any 'fortune' and 'consequence', that is, has no funds and no social influence worth mentioning.[49] After being told to leave the abbey and to go back to her parents on the following day, Catherine falls into a state of anxiety, and, mockingly, Austen insists that this anxiety "torments" Catherine in a categorically different way than the "agitated spirits and unquiet slumbers" which affected the heroine during her previous Gothic enactments: for, this time, Catherine's "anxiety had foundation in fact" (234).

The corpo-reality of anxiety thus exclusively claimed for Catherine's second awakening gives evidence of Austen's superior craft as a story-teller, and it is a prime example of the refined irony already in this early novel. For, during the phase when Catherine was still acting under the assumption of the General as a murderer or abductor of his wife, her moments of shock were of course not less a matter of "fact" than when her "mind [is] occupied in the contemplation of actual and natural evil" (234). This ironic gesture effectively marks the fact that Catherine's second awakening drastically changes the material reality, the fictional ontology, of Austen's entire novel.[50]

Up until that point, *Northanger Abbey* succeeds in satirizing the imaginary constructs of Gothic fiction from a perspective grounded in a relatively stable frame of reality and seasoned with a good pinch of common sense. Subsequent to Catherine's second awakening, however, the novel sets out to fulfil all these fantasies on the level of the Real. As of then, normal patriarchal violence, which Austen minutely spells out according to the savagely materialistic logic of the British marriage market at the time, becomes suddenly indistinguishable from the truly exceptional vi-

49 On the motif of "awakening" in *Northanger Abbey*, cp. C. S. Lewis: A Note on Jane Austen. In: Ian Watt (ed.): *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays.* Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1963.

50 On metafictional devices in *Northanger Abbey*, cp. Jodi L. Wyett: Northanger Abbey and the Functions of Metafiction. In: Cheryl A. Wilson/Maria H. Frawley: *The Routledge Companion to Jane Austen*. London: Routledge, 2021, 11–22.

olence of a Gothic villain like Manfred from *Otranto* or Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights*. In retrospect, "suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, [Catherine] had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty" (256). Similarly, when the General's daughter, Eleanor, conveys to a yet unsuspecting Catherine the notice of her immediate removal from the Tilney property, the scene hammers away at the entire repertoire of Gothic fiction. Crucially, this time, however, the frisson of traditional Gothic terror is accomplished in the register of corpo-real atrocity:

> the noise of something moving close to her door made her start; it seemed as if some one was touching the very doorway—and in another moment a slight motion of the lock proved that some hand must be on it. She trembled a little at the idea of any one's approaching so cautiously; […] she stepped quietly forward, and opened the door. Eleanor, and only Eleanor, stood there. […] Eleanor's cheeks were pale, and her manner greatly agitated. […] Catherine […] could only express her concern by silent attention; obliged her to be seated, rubbed her temples with lavender-water, and hung over her with affectionate solicitude. 'My dear Catherine, you must not—you must not indeed—' were Eleanor's first connected words. 'I am quite well. This kindness distracts me—I cannot bear it—I come to you on such an errand!' 'Errand!—to me!' 'How shall I tell you!—Oh! how shall I tell you!' (230)

As a result of her second awakening, the heroine of *Northanger Abbey* faces the position of male desire in its enigmatic relation to an excessive Other. Not unlike *Otranto*, the new reality to which Catherine has been awakened includes a material precariousness which shows in the psychological disposition, equally precarious, of a violent tyrant-patriarch. The General's obsession with wealth, and with the increase of his estate does not only situate the desire of this Commander in close proximity to the materiality of the Thing, it also effectively perverts the symbolic institution of the law-giving and enjoyment-depriving Father: like Walpole's Manfred, General Tilney incorporates a *père-version* in the "act of excessive, obscene enjoyment", a super-daddy, in Žižek's felicitous phrase "caught 'with his pants down'"[51] – or, to draw on Austen's own, much more sophisticated style: "The General […] did look upon a tolerably large eating-room as one of the necessaries of life" (170).

Austen's artistic investigation into the Gothic novel demonstrates a pervasive link between the genre's general drive economy on the one hand and, on the other, a male subject position that is essentially constituted by a desire bent on violence and destruction. General Tilney's excessive form of relentless enjoyment clearly places him in the Gothic tradition of male perversion and parallels him with characters

51 Slavoj Žižek (ed): *Cogito and the Unconscious. Sic 2*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998, 98.

like Manfred and Heathcliff from *Otranto* and *Wuthering Heights*, or Montoni from *Udolpho* and Schedoni, for example, from Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*.

In this constellation, Lacan's own notion of sublimation becomes suddenly not less dubious: does the idea that sublime objects incorporate the subject's desire in fundamental alignment with the excessiveness of the Thing not exhibit a discernibly male imprint, too? One that links desire to an impossibility, a material negativity located within the subject, and which conceives the fulfilment of desire as something that is ultimately paid for with death and the annihiliation of self and others. The male-centric nature of this way of thinking sublimation is not least evidenced by the philosophical precursor theory of the Sublime, which has equally been seen to exhibit a clear gender bias: Burke's *Enquiry*, for example, assigns the Sublime to "the passions which belong to self-preservation", that is, situations in which the subject is forced to endure the anticipation of his self-annihilation, whereas the "beautiful" counterpoint is reserved to "the society of sex" with "women" as "its object", and procreation as the ultimate purpose.[52]

In the remainder of this article, I intend to show how Austen succeeds in creating a sublime character that is in the strict sense of the word: a heroine, without succumbing to this patriarchal foundation of desire.

5.

Austen refers to Catherine as a "heroine" right from the start of her novel: "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine" (5). In contrast to this light-hearted beginning, the final state that Catherine has reached as a result of her second awakening lacks all such playfulness: "I bring back my heroine to her home in solitude and disgrace; and no sweet elation of spirits can lead me into minuteness" (240).

At first sight, it is tempting to associate Catherine's eventual degradation as a heroine with "a punitive/pedagogical" type of "reading" that according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reiterates "the spectacle of the girl being taught a lesson".[53] Against this, Ashly Bennett has argued that in

52 Edmund Burke: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Oxford World's Classics, 1998, 47. Cp. Barbara Claire Freeman's groundbreaking 1995 *The Feminine Sublime. Gender and excess in women's fiction*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1995; and Kristina Fjelkestam's more recent: En-Gendering the Sublime: Aesthetics and Politics in the Eighteenth Century. *NORA-Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 22.1 (2014): 20–32.

53 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl. *Tendencies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993, 125.

> the recurring humiliations of Catherine Morland, which culminate in her 'awaken[ing]' through 'humbl[ing],' we can see how shame offers Austen a way to stage an eroticized revision – rather than mere repression – of past errors and indulgences within her heroine's interiority as she undergoes an emotional education. And this internal drama of shame is also self-consciously staged as a way for novel writers and readers to reanimate their literary investments without requiring a complete affective break from the feminized literary tradition of the novel, steeped in seemingly overwhelming sensibility and intractable shame.[54]

Bennett here refers to what I have called Catherine's 'first awakening'. However, Catherine's second, much more violent awakening in the register of the Real, offers yet another and a quite different base for Austen to revise her heroine's status and stand. For, in this second case, Catherine's state of shame does not so much amount to an exercise in what Sedgwick calls a 'lesson learned', and what Bennett describes as an "emotional education", but it amounts to Austen having Catherine redefine herself as a heroine in the face of her 'betrayal with impunity'.

This notable phrase is borrowed from the seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* in which Lacan defines the genuine hero as a character who "may be betrayed with impunity".[55] For Lacan, unpunished betrayal constitutes a 'hero', because it allows this character to endure the radical impossibility of their desire which lies, yet again, in a quality of the object desired, that is, death, which materially exceeds the integrity of the subject so strongly desiring it.[56] For Lacan, a character suffering be-

54 Ashly Bennett: Shame and Sensibility: Jane Austen's humiliated heroines. *Studies in Romanticism* 54.3 (2015): 377–400, 383.

55 Lacan: *Ethics*, 321. Lacan's exemplary case is Philoctetes who in Sophocles' eponymous play is meant to participate in the Trojan war. However, on his way to Troy a wound on his foot begins to suppurate and create a stench unbearable for his fellow travellers who then simply abandon their comrade on an island. In this way, Philoctetes is betrayed of his ardent desire to fight in Troy. Ten years later, still vegetating on the island of Lemnos, Philoctetes is betrayed a second time: after being marooned, he had solemnly declared to never fight for the Greeks again. Yet, for the sake of his bow and poisoned arrows originally conferred to him by no less a character than Heracles, Achilles and Neoptolemos pay him a visit in order to abduct him from the island so that he can eventually fight against the Trojans and secure the Greeks' victory. The betrayal of Philoctetes remains unpunished – Sophocles's play ends with Hercules as *deus as machina* who supports the Greek mission and forces the castaway to fulfil his Trojan task.

56 When, in the *kommos*, or song of lamentation, the Chorus tries to persuade Philoctetes to "Come then … with us embark" to Troy, Philoctetes clings to his desire to stay on the island, intentionally letting go of the chance to restore his honour, fame and health: "Never, no never, though the King of Heaven / Should threat to blast me with his fiery leven. / No, perish rather Ilium, perish all/The Achaean host that batter at its wall; / Hard hearts who cast me forth as halt and maim." (Sophocles: Philoctetes. *Sophocles: In Two Volumes*. Transl. Francis Storr.

trayal with impunity equals the power to endure a material inconsistency within himself, and it is the power to endure this negativity which makes of a character a hero. Lacan's concept of heroism is obviously identical with his understanding of sublimation, which also marks a fundamental inconsistency in the desiring subject's relation to the object world: the "very excessiveness", and "intimate exteriority" of the "Thing". The genuine 'hero' can therefore without much ado be considered and named a 'sublime character'.

Sent back to her parents' house in Fullerton by the General, Catherine is betrayed in her desire for Henry and his for her. The interest served by this betrayal is 'money matters', and it remains unpunished, Catherine is betrayed "with impunity". What elevates her to a sublime character and makes her a true heroine is the fact that, from this particular vantage point, Austen ventures to disconnect Catherine's desire entirely from the deceptive notion of Imaginary or Symbolic goods, be they economic or moral, be they her future in-laws, the Tilneys', or her own. In this way, Catherine has to face the inherent impossibility of desire. Notwithstanding these similarities, there is one crucial difference between Catherine Morland and Lacan's version of the hero: the sublimation of Austen's heroine is not purchased through self-destruction. Instead, the heroism of her sublime character aims at a shared life based on norm-less creativity; it delineates, in other words, the possibility of transforming desire into love.[57]

Two days after returning to her parent's home, Henry Tilney arrives and asks for Catherine Morland's hand in marriage:

> They began their walk […] . Some explanation on his father's account he had to give; but his first purpose was to explain himself, and before they reached Mr. Allen's grounds he had done it so well, that Catherine did not think it could ever be repeated too often. She was assured of his affection; and that heart

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Heinemann, 1913, ll 1196–1203.) For Lacan, it is this obstinacy, the fact that Philoctetes "remains fiercely committed to his hate right to the end", "what makes Philoctetes a hero" (Lacan: *Ethics*, 320). Philoctetes does not let go of his desire, that is, his desire to fight, and, then, his desire not to fight, for the Greeks, even at the price of total self-destruction: "one parting boon" he asks from the Chorus in his final lamentation which proves him to play in the same league as the Gothic desperados just mentioned: Ph. An axe, a spear, a brand, / No matter what – the weapon first to hand. // Ch. Wherefore! What deed of violence wouldst thou do? // Ph. Hack, mangle, limb by limb my body hew; / My thoughts are bloody. // Ch. Wherefore?// Ph. I would go / To seek my father. // Ch. In what land? // Ph. Below; / For I shall find him nowhere on this earth. (Sophocles: *Philoctetes*, ll. 1204–1211).

57 For the concept of a norm-less creativity in response to the Thing, cp. Bosetti, *From the Criminal*, 374, and Jacques-Alain Miller: Milanese Intuitions 1. *Mental* 11 (2002): 9–16. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d52d51fc078720001362276/t/5e286d343aa56f615cb39b4c/1579707700527/20020512+%26+22+Miller_Milanese-Intuitions-1-2.pdf, 10 September 2008, 15.

> in return was solicited, which, perhaps, they pretty equally knew was already entirely his own; for, though Henry was now sincerely attached to her, though he felt and delighted in all the excellencies of her character and truly loved her society, I must confess that his affection originated in nothing better than gratitude, or, in other words, that a persuasion of her partiality for him had been the only cause of giving her a serious thought. It is a new circumstance in romance, I acknowledge, and dreadfully derogatory of an heroine's dignity; but if it be as new in common life, the credit of a wild imagination will at least be all my own. (252f.)

In her "dreadfully derogatory" state, Catherine, the character who has been betrayed with impunity, is elevated above Henry's pitiable need of "her partiality for him". Her sublimation is based on the next to impossible faith in that Henry's "gratitude" for her own love is sincere, that it is a truthful gift that comes without an interest rate. Inversely, Austen foregoes the narrative temptation to have her heroine bemoan the moral and economic profit of which she has been unjustly deprived by the General's patriarchal intervention. Austen raises Catherine's desire to the dignity of the Thing, without ceding to her heroine any degree of hatred, as righteous as it would without doubt be. At the same time, there is, in this crucial final passage, a sublime sense that one's real object of desire remains always replaceable with the other's anticipation of oneself, and with one's own anticipation of the other, as just the next best option.[58] Nevertheless, against this potential Ver-*Ding*-lichung – *Re*-ification, that is, or Thing-ification – of love there is also the possibility of Catherine's belief in the sincerity of the gratitude of her lover: her trust in a shared world based on the confidence that her heart, "in return […] solicited", is, as "they pretty equally knew […] already entirely his own" (252). This could be too easily understood as an act of mutual misrecognition, or *méconnaissance* on behalf of the two lovers (which in spite of its imaginary quality may even prove fully successful and profitable in terms of the marriage-to-be). Nevertheless, it can also be viewed as two lovers' trustful acknowledgement of "reciprocal vulnerability and affectation" under the banner of their desire's alignment with the Thing.[59]

At the end of the passage just quoted, the narrator's title to the "credit of a wild imagination […] all my own" conspicuously contrasts with the heroine's attitude of absolute credibility, generosity, and self-denial. The narrator's selfish claim forms a special case of irony, *parabasis*: "the disruption of narrative illusion, the *aparte*, the

58 For the notion of 'the next best thing' in this context, cp. Danebrock: *On Making*, 269.

59 For the line of argument in this paragraph and this quote, cp. Danebrock: *On Making*, 270. For the notion of *méconnaissance* as an Imaginary constituent of the self, cp. Lacan: The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I. *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Transl. Bruce Fink. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006, 75–81.

aside to the audience, by means of which the illusion of the fiction is broken".[60] What is truly "wild" about Austen's narrative imagination is the inconsistency to which it exposes the material reality of her own fiction: on the one hand, it requires, from the reader, a leap of faith in Henry's capability to overcome the petty calculus that made him beforehand bank on the "persuasion of [Catherine's] partiality for him". On the other hand, the novelty of this "romance" – which Austen insists is "a new circumstance in romance" and "as new in common life" – is marked as something that readers should not be over-confident to ever materialize in "common life". Acting as the ironic doubter of her own piece of fiction, Austen thus performs a double gesture: one that marks calm despair at how things, and especially the Thing called love, 'can just go' in life, and one that unconditionally commits to the potential freedom and creativity of her heroine's sublime character beyond the patriarchal norm.[61]

60 Paul De Man: The Concept of Irony. *Aesthetic Ideology*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 163–184, 178.

61 Here, I obviously differ from De Man's interpretation of *parabasis* as an author's "radical distance […] in relation to [their] own work" (ibid. 177).