

# The Body of the Postmodernist Narrator



The Body of the Postmodernist Narrator:  
Between Violence and Artistry

By

Fatima Festić

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P U B L I S H I N G

The Body of the Postmodernist Narrator: Between Violence and Artistry, by Fatima Festić

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## FOREWORD

In 1995, the last year of the military aggression on Bosnia and Herzegovina and the dreadful war there, when as a doctoral scholar I participated in Jacques Derrida's Seminar on "Witnessing and Responsibility" at the University of California at Irvine, I heard on CNN about the case of an eleven year old girl from Eastern Bosnia who, terrified by the news about Serbian soldiers advancing into her hometown, shot herself in the head by her own father's gun.

Although I passed through harassment and intimidations at my work-place at the University of Sarajevo in the pre-war and the beginning-of-the-war time and later through great strivings in my various refuge-places, having only a tiny thread of humanist thought as my support and survival-guide, and although I had all my family in the Hell of the besieged Sarajevo all through the war, the death of this unknown girl struck me as my personal defeat.

*To the memory of the girl, Anisa Babić, I devote this book.* I wished that she somehow let her own voice be heard here. I wish to believe that my own authorial voice hasn't prevailed over hers.

The book was finished in the Spring of 1998. Although it would have been much easier to write it in English (the language of most primary and secondary sources which I used, and also the language of all of my own critical and theoretical texts), I wrote this book in Bosnian-Croatian, feeling an intrinsic need to express myself in my dissertation in my native tongue, given the circumstances, and it certainly reads better as such. I myself translated it into English. There are some points in the text that clearly indicate the exact time of its writing, yet I didn't modify or update anything for the purpose of publishing it a decade after it was written, thinking of it as a small document-testimony to the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was marked by the imponderables that some of those who were more lucky, as I was, nevertheless, have kept as the core and the substance of their own lives even today.





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# INTRODUCTION

Writing about postmodernism first requires clarification of a concept that has been the focus of most academic and popular disciplines since the ninety seventies.<sup>1</sup> My intention is to consider one of the aspects of postmodernism that has largely been neglected in those discussions, an aspect that has simultaneously become a subject for critical theory as well as for psychoanalytic and feminist criticism of the literary texts from previous epochs; in a word: the body.

To show that postmodernism exists in relation to modernism, that differentiating features of a period or approach (many think that postmodernism is more about a different logic than about a different moment) means excluding or subsuming features of the preceding or following one, always implies a psycho-sexual and material context apart from the aesthetic and socio-historical ones. I will begin by talking about postmodernism in novelistic narrative literature by referring to Jürgen Habermas' claim that the end of modernism is marked by the Holocaust. This statement certainly does not limit postmodernism geographically to the "Western World", as Douwe Fokkema<sup>2</sup> states in another context – quite the opposite: it includes much wider spatial, economic-political, and cultural-ideological circles. This is suggested by a darker, and from my perspective, more determining, side of literature, namely, the side of murder and destruction, of dark forces of desire and the repercussions of their externalisation in the reality of life.

I would like to elucidate the relation between literature and murder, the relation that I first noticed empirically, and then traced in literary sources. The understanding of this relation would also determine the duty of those whose vocation is writing – to bring dignity back to literature. Literature and history, literature and madness, literature and witnessing, literature and law – these are subjects of recent theoretical studies, which, however, rarely reflect upon contemporary fiction. Yet, literature as the primary activity of the mind also poses the question: *how to think the body*. This poses the question about the body that speaks just before the very end of the second millennium (ad.), as "the bloodiest and the most torn apart by

the wars century in all human history” (UN Report, *New York Times*, 8. 13, 1997).<sup>3</sup>

The problem of violence sets the question of “the other” and “otherness” not only epistemologically (the distinction between epistemological and ontological was set out cleverly, but too simply, in Brian McHale’s *Postmodernist Fiction*). For once we get to know the other’s differentiating features, the features become the subject of our own conscious or unconscious determination towards the other: of assimilation, negation and/or reflection. Thus, the question: “how to think the body?” implies the much more intriguing question: what to do with the body? We have reached the moment when John (Langshaw) Austin’s “how to do things with words” is invested into its reversal “how to do words with things”. Verbalization of all spheres within Habermas’s *Lebenswelt* (the practice and politics of life) or in Fredric Jameson’s “linguistic self-reflexivity that constitutes the denial of historicity and is only a comodified version of *l’artpourtartism*” (1987: 208), today problematizes the continuation of literature without reductive functionalisation.

If we try to consider these two questions simultaneously: how to think the body and how to save and continue literature, we cannot but notice that the self-referentiality of writing abolishes itself, for there is, constatively, a physio-biological human element behind it. Behind the human element, there is the impossibility of ignoring the tragic theatre of human interactions as well as the possibility of much more positive concepts of freedom that include the norms to which genders, citizens, institutions, and practices respond in order to reach the plurality so much desired in our time.

I selected authors and texts to follow the direction traced by the questions indicated above, and tried to connect them in the title *The Body of the Postmodernist Narrator*. Hypertrophy of things, bodies, and objects shows itself in the separation of objects and language, in “indulging in the idiotic *jouissance* of popular culture” as Slavoj Žižek formulates it (1991: viii), the *jouissance* that then asks us to re-read Sigmund Freud or at least his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, this time as the postmodernist text *par excellence*. Christa Wolf, John Maxwell Coetzee, Salman Rushdie, Donald Michael Thomas (whose novels published in the last two decades will provide basic references in my argumentation) belong to the generation of writers who challenge the established postulates of postmodernism and to the generation of readers who have mastered the polylogue of discourses

and ambiguous determinations of cosmopolitanism self-consciously enough that they cannot be satisfied with either fortified or fluid subjects of narrative literature.

Some, like Žižek, see the break between modernism and postmodernism in the status of the interpretation that, although also inherent to the object, is blocked in postmodernism.

Postmodernism consists (...) in displaying the object directly; allowing it to make visible its own indifferent and arbitrary character. The same object can function successively as a disgusting reject and as a sublime, charismatic apparition: the *difference* (emphasis mine), strictly structural, does not pertain to the effective properties of the object, but only its place in the symbolic order. (1991: 143)

The readers are those who are left to discover in it the most refined finesses of the contemporary theoretical reflection (1992: 2), writes Žižek. In his claims, we can criticize his excessive focus on popular culture, although popular culture reaches over “the more standardized” artistic forms. This is precisely one of the moments I would like to reflect upon and I would like to point out the necessity of relating interpretation to the context of the postmodernist artistic creation in spite of, or along with, Žižek’s claim that the aim of the postmodernist treatment is the alienation of its initial “closeness” (1992: 2).

The novels I will refer to, mainly *Cassandra* by Christa Wolf, *Foe* by J. M. Coetzee, *Shame* by Salman Rushdie, and *The White Hotel* by D. M. Thomas, corroborate the demand of worldliness that our contemporariness irrevocably makes on us. Yet, the interpretation of these novels cannot only involve alienation from recognizing objects, plots, structures, and their deconstructions, for such a separating of theoretical horizons from historical and fictional grounds has, if only symptomatically, to return later on into the living world from which all issue (history and fiction and theory), that means, unavoidably, return to the human body. The novels I am going to analyze come from different parts of the world, from different worldviews, cultures, and differently articulated claims. However, to all of them we can ascribe the quality of “more canonized” literary works in spite of all pervading trivialization of canons. Additionally, all these novels represent attempts to acquire knowledge; they are products of the drive to acquire knowledge, which Freud understands as the crucial relation between body and sexuality: the drive, which can never be satisfied, nor can the body-object be fully known. All these narratives have

been issued from the bodily experiences of their narrators and are related to the life experiences of the authors.

Focusing on the conditions that connect contemporary culture with its narratives and both of these with the bodies of the narrators, I will try to show the potential of the body in narrating and the ambiguity of its fictionalizing and subjectivizing aspects. I will reflect upon the body, materially and psychoanalytically, as the place of repressed knowledge, traumas, resistance and manipulation of desires. In that context I will claim that there is literature because there is an object-victim; there is theory because there is suicide. The simplification of this thesis derives from its pragmatic dimension and exemplifies its subject, the way it is written, its place, time and the conditions that have determined it. Yet, the possibility of writing literature provides the victim with the possibility to stop being the victim, the possibility of writing theory – to overcome the break from which both murder and suicide come. It is no longer possible to see either literature or theory outside the frame of everyday life, and in their most formalized moments we cannot overlook traces of the most reified reality.

Finally, perhaps we should be grateful for this. The age we call postmodern, in all of its modifications, has endured performativity as a model, which did not manage to destroy the referent. It has merely shifted the problematic from the relation between representation and reference to the split inherent in subject, agent, and author. The split here connotes the conceptual apparatus of the theorists of the postmodern: what is unthinkable<sup>4</sup>, unrepresentable<sup>5</sup>, what in language is not part of any particular language, the horrible, abject<sup>6</sup>...In Jacques Lacan's words (from *The Eleventh Seminar*),

It is not in the dialectics between the surface and that which is beyond that things are suspended (...) There is something that establishes a fracture, a bi-partition, a splitting of the being to which the being accommodates itself, even in the natural world (...) the being breaks up in an extraordinary way, between its being and its semblance, between itself and that paper tiger it shows to the other. (1998: 106-107)

The place of that partition is what interests me, the place where the unconscious appears and the subject functions in its constitutive relation to the signifier. Unlike in modern narratives, structured through opposition, with no transactions, introspectively and by Law, in postmodernism the traumatic Thing becomes the main concept.

For, without reflection on desire and the conditions of its production, we would, stuck as we are in the Empire of “Objectness”, have to call postmodern culture the culture of incest and do so neither in the classical Oedipal syntax, nor in the program of Gilles Deleuze’s and Felix Guattari’s desiring machines. By devaluation of the instance of Law, let’s still say of the Name of the Father, the rejection of the Name – that was the key for psychosis some time ago – has become the general cultural modus. If we don’t consider the body in the context of the historical, and even more so in the context of the dialectics of the historical (whether we take history as necessity, teleology, or condemnation), I would also say dialectics of the geo-graphic and then of the individual – we are running to the dead knot of endogamy that deprives literature, those who write it, and those for whom it is written, of the dimension of maturing and of (accepting) difference that today equals life itself.

One of the implications of Erick Havelock’s book *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflection on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (1986) could be that postmodernism is more about voice than about writing, that it is indeed the return to pre-literacy. Havelock depicts the Greek Muse, who learns how to write yet still keeps singing, as the voice of her people in the age of transition from orality to literacy, and shows how fiction stands for orality and the oral state of mind. Thus, we discover that in spite of the “*inter arma silent musae*”, which has been repeated for centuries, the muse does not want to be silent even in wars. The motive of orality certainly recalls Rousseau<sup>7</sup>, and also the waking of orality in us. We have borne witness that the premise of oral acting is the culture of listening and “the acoustic nerve”, which much more directly connects the different participants in literary communication, making “exchangeability” and incorporation possible (to the extent which any detailed treatment of reflection on the other requires). This does not involve only the incorporation of subjects, which would prove to be mere narcissistic mirroring, but also the reflexive “incorporation” of their objects. The understanding of, and the respect for the objects of others’ desires should be the first step in the dissolution of the polyphony of violence in which we are submerged as in the “quick sand” of culture. When we become aware that intelligence is insufficient to deal with some issues, we are ready to create a relation between narrator and listener by investing desires into a narrative exchange, desires that otherwise cannot be expressed, desires of which the motive, originator and object is the human body. “The analysis of discourse should be replaced by the logic of

enjoyment,” writes Slavoj Žižek, “by primary processes of displacement and condensation.” (1994: 74)

If we return now to the Thing and the place of the split in a subject, we can repeat the question that Kaja Silverman poses in her book *The Acoustic Mirror*: “Why Roland Barthes, who in 1968 proclaimed the death of the author, must in fact kill the author three times over, each time by a different murder weapon?” (1988: 188). Although her detailed analysis of the act leads to the conclusion that the author survives “as the possibility of a resistant and oppositional agency at times in a less masculine guise” (1988: 188), what interests me is *why* Barthes initially felt the need to kill the author and why the question itself is so important. To understand the postmodern moment in history we must reject any unchallenged statement. We must ask a universal “Why?” The condition for asking “why?” is the possibility of mapping our own space of signification. Within that space, the real, physical body must exist, and behind its corporeality biographical and institutional support must exist, to enable us to ask the question, to challenge received statements. The postmodern turn comes only then.

With the question “what does it mean to kill the author?” we mark the regression of that act in relation to the enterprise of the empiricism we inhabit today, where all writing is articulated, I repeat, not by the instance of Law or legitimacy, but, to paraphrase Jameson, from “the mess in which we live today, from the obsession by the traumatic Thing that reduces every narrative grid to a particular attempt to gentrify the Thing” (1992: 2). Barthes’s defence usually consists of his own statement that “the death of the author is the price for the birth of the reader” (Barthes, 1982: 148). Gayatri Spivak tries to deconstruct that closed circle, reading Barthes’ author (according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*) as an “authority who is in possession of moral and legal supremacy and who, when authorizing, is giving a legal power”. Thus, the “reader becomes someone who collects all the traces that constitute written text”, “the writer is a reader at the performance of text, without history, biography, psychology”, and “the writing is only creating what is called performative in which enunciation has no other content than the act by which is pronounced” (Spivak, 1993: 218).

Yet we ask: whose exclusion makes possible the supremacy of the enunciative act? That exclusion leads to total annihilation of the other, for it presupposes only the subjects to whom the position of enunciation is available. If we agree with Barthes that “the death of the author is the price



to be paid for the birth of the reader”, then the iterability of writing will never end, nor will the transfer of inner recessions, nor the reader be authorized to “collect all traces of the written text”, and by authorization, through repetition, will give “legal power” to what caused the economy of elimination that is a symptom of our age.

*The culture of the postmodern is primarily the analysis of the symptom, the act of locating the silence in the subject.* It tries to speak the unspeakable, and does so through the body or by actualising the body, the traumatic Thing, the object-cause of desire, which is always already lost, the real. That is what postmodernism seeks beyond the alleged lack of referent, while distancing itself from post-structuralism and posing the questions: what are the consequences of the poststructuralist revaluation of writing at the cost of voice? Is the terror of the graphemes to be read in the graphemes of terror and who is the authority that legitimizes reading as “collecting the traces which constitute the written text?” What comes out of a reading that does not recognize any writing but the performative one? What are the implications of abolishing the empirical ground of criticism in the world at the time of some of the darkest moments in human history? If, in the words of Susan Rubin Suleiman, postmodernism is “the epoch of the extreme, tragic, playful self-consciousness, when our present reflects on its relation to the past and future” (1990: XV), how can a future that will recognize and incorporate the past with understanding be, at the same time, critically made?

I will look for the answers to these questions in the narrative production of the authors that I listed, mentioning some narrative examples from novels written by Angela Carter, Marguerite Duras, Slavenka Drakulić, G. García Márquez, John Fowles, John Le Carré, as more or less successful attempts at articulation of the terrifying encounter with the Thing narratively.

I will use theories of feminism, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva and Shoshana Felman, and the frames of post-colonialism and the Holocaust will also fit in the (mostly psychoanalytic) analysis of which I will pose the concepts of *working through* (*durcharbeiten*) and *transference* as the narrative *universals* that dissolve themselves at the end of narrating. As Shoshana Felman notes in her text “To Open the Question”, a preface to the collection *Literature and Psychoanalysis. The Question of Reading: Otherwise* (Felman, ed. 1977), in the relation between literature and psychoanalysis, for a literary critic, literature is a subject, not an object – it is important to initiate a real exchange, to engage

in a real dialogue between literature (with its constitutive irony) and psychoanalysis as between “two different bodies of language and two different modes of knowledge”. We have to deconstruct the structure of opposition between interpretation and its object. For the text is precisely the site where meaning and the knowledge of meaning are located, so the critic is in the position both of the psychoanalyst (in relation to the interpretation) and the analysand (in relation to transference). Felman claims the following:

Psychoanalysis tells us that fantasy is a fiction, and that consciousness is itself, in a sense, a fantasy-effect. In the same way literature tells us that authority is a *language-effect*, the product or the creation of its own *rhetorical* power: that authority is the *power of fiction*; that authority, therefore, is likewise a fiction (...) There are no *natural* boundaries between literature and psychoanalysis, which clearly define and distinguish them; the border between them is undecidable since they are really *traversed* by each other. (1977: 8-9)

\*\*

This book consists of three theoretical parts and of analyses of narratives in the novels mentioned above. The first part focuses on visuality and its role in the formation of consciousness and narration. Considering who the other is in the postmodernist culture and over whose body it is constituted, I will talk about the mechanisms of identification and narcissism which are both fundamental to it. In the second part I will talk about the symbolic and about representation, and try to show that in the body, only what escapes the representation of the body retains the initial experience of the split, making the new narration possible. In the third part I will talk about the referent and reference, the real and the return of the repressed, about “the fragment of the real which is missing.” That “which is missing” is indeed in the heart of postmodernist narrative, as being displaced onto all types of difference and otherness – on woman, on the eccentric, on the one who is decentred, colonized, etc. The violence of metonymy has been distributing, already in advance, the knots of narrative negativity. So, in light of this understanding, it becomes clear why Barthes wanted to kill the author – he would not dare to be the reader of her/his text.

## I VISUALITY

### 1. THE EMPIRE OF "OBJECTNESS"

#### 1.1 Doctor Freud, Whom Do They Kill First?

As the Thing becomes the basic concept at all levels of discourse, we anxiously discover that the discourse of the subtlest poetry is not far from the unwritten experiences of the concentration camps that are inventions of the 20th century. There is *No Way Around*, as Scandinavian writer Trygve Gulbranssen writes in the title of his fictional lyric trilogy in the early forties. The writer and the reader live simultaneously, inhabiting the same discursive space and E.A. Poe's *The Purloined Letter*, passing through the (faked) infantilism of Jacques Derrida's games, finishes in the hands of Barbara Johnson who well knows why she claims that Lacan's statement: "the letter always comes to its rightful destination" means that "the receiver is whoever receives the letter (...) the letter's destination is thus wherever it is read" (1977: 502) – *its destination is wherever it arrives*. The answer to the stories of our times cannot be found either in dissemination or in silence, perhaps primarily because we can approach the resistance of the gaps in those stories only with our knowledge, the knowledge as much about specific conditions of generating a narrative as about the conditions that determine ourselves. Today we read postmodern narratives as parables of our (as well as Lyotard's) postmodern condition, not because the fiction has not always been the parable of its "condition" in time but because we are now, being divided by the (auto-) dictate of the omnipresent gaze, capable of seeing – in fiction – ourselves as such. "The postmodern sentence," Ihab Hassan would say, "sees itself." (1986: 132)

#### The One Whom They See...

Our ubiquitous openness, "the gaze at the side of the Thing" in Lacan's formulation, Jameson's "signatures of the visible" that also stand for signatures of Michael Foucault's panopticon, show that the increasing self-consciousness of the contemporary culture is only the other side of its fundamental materiality.

Perhaps it is useful here to quote Jameson's words from his text "Reading without Interpretation: postmodernism and video-text", where he says that

the thematic moments are just moments of interruption, of a kind of blockage in this process: at such points, a provisional “narrativisation” – the provisional dominance of one sign or logo over another, which it interprets and re-writes according to its own narrative logic – quickly spreads out over the sequence like a burn spot on the film, at that point “held” long enough to generate and emit a thematic message quite inconsistent with the textual logic of the Thing itself. Such moments include an unusual form of reification, which we can equally call thematization – the moment in which an element, a component of a text is promoted to the status of an official theme, and becomes a candidate for even higher honour – the meaning of the text. (1987: 218)

This understanding of the video text as the privileged example of any postmodernist text (that also means the narrative text) overlooks, however, that the place of any visual game is the human body, furthermore, the sexed body, no matter how much one would like to liberate it from the compulsion of “the genital organization”<sup>1</sup>. The automatism of our response to the traumatic Thing (*the intervention of the machine is precisely what revitalizes the realm of the body*), the automatism of our own apparatus of registration and reception, suggests that the issue of the relation between Self and the Other has never been set more explicitly from the place of their inseparability. Therefore, if the postmodern visibility dissolves all borders, and challenges all identities, it is primarily exemplified in the receptivity and conductibility of woman’s body. The abuse of the figuration of woman’s biological condition has reached its peak in postmodernism. “It occurs to me that the women knew precisely what they were up to”, writes Rushdie in a meta-fictional passage of his novel *Shame*,

that their stories explain, and even subsume, the men’s. Repression is a seamless garment; a society, which is authoritarian in its social and sexual codes, which crushes its women beneath the intolerable burdens of honour and propriety, breeds repressions of other kinds as well (...) *If you hold down one thing you hold down the adjoining.*  
In the end, though, it all blows up in your face. (1983: 173)

Yet the reception of literature will be too simple if we limit it to a thesis on mere transparency of a literary work for social reality. Rushdie is not so simple a writer, first because he himself chooses woman as the primary metonymy of his own (writing-)exit from the society he criticizes. In her text “Reading the *The Satanic Verses*” Gayatri Spivak notices “Rushdie’s anxiety to write woman into the narrative of History”, and also that “in *Shame* the women seem powerful only as monsters, of one sort or another”

“sentimentalizing of terrorism” in his struggle against “grands récits” as Hassan formulates it (1987: 134). Faced with the inevitability of our prismatic reality, we still, fortunately, ask: what is behind/beyond it?

Freud wrote the first draft of this essay from March to May 1919, simultaneously finishing his text “The Uncanny”, where he also mentioned “the compulsion to repeat” as a phenomenon observed in children’s and patients’ behaviour in therapy, the compulsion that comes from the deepest nature of instincts and goes “beyond” the pleasure principle. Yet, in these texts he did not mention “death instincts”. He returned to the essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* at the beginning of 1920, after the death of his daughter, Sophie (observations of whose child and his games became the focus and the argument of his theory on the compulsion to repeat) and finished the essay between May and July of the same year. In his letters to Oskar Pfister and Sandor Ferenczi in February 1920 (Sophie suddenly died from pneumonia on February 25), Freud mentions, “regaining his balance through writing”, the balance that is itself called into question by the topic of the death drive. He admits that the death of his daughter inflicted on him “a serious narcissistic injury” (S. Freud, 1960: 328) and that he tries to overcome the painful experience through the continuity of his work: “I work as much as I can, and I am thankful for the diversing (...) what is known as mourning will probably follow only later.” (quoted to Ernest L. Freud, 1960: 328).

I will present a short survey of Freud’s insights that preceded this subject, insights which state that the course taken by mental events is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle. Those events are set out by an unpleasurable tension and they themselves tend to lower it and to produce pleasure; everything that can increase the quantity of excitation is not pleasurable. The tendency towards the pleasure principle is in conflict with some other forces or circumstances that inhibit it; influenced by the ego’s self-preservation instincts, the pleasure principle is replaced by the reality principle. In this way satisfaction is postponed, unpleasure is tolerated, and some other possibilities are excluded. Yet the pleasure principle remains the operating method of sexual instincts and “often succeeds in overcoming the reality principle, to the detriment of the organism as a whole.” (1989: 7) The other source of unpleasure is to be found in the conflicts that take place in the mental apparatus that arise while the ego is developing into “more highly composite organizations”. Almost all the energy that fills the apparatus comes from its innate instinctive impulses. Individual instincts become incompatible in their aims with the remaining

(1993: 223), so the issue turns out to be, who indeed authorizes the interconnecting of repressions on the postmodernist scene. The answer becomes clearer when it is exemplified in the narratives of the possible bearers of change, whose texts are repressed or lost.

A British author, Angela Carter calls her beautifully written yet horrible story *Love*, of 1969 (“the time of *Nescafé*, and the welfare state, of days of social mobility and sexual freedom” – the new version of Benjamin Constant's early 19th c. novel of sensibility, *Adolph*) in a revised edition of 1987,

a sinister product of male impersonation, the icy treatment of a mad girl and its penetrating aroma of unhappiness (...) I can not resurrect Annabel, of course; even the women's movement would have been no help to her and alternative psychiatry would have only made things worse. The novel ends so emphatically, on such an irrefutable statement, that there is something a little tasteless about taking her husband and brother-in-law and the lovers and the doctors out of the text that is Annabel's coffin and resurrect them (...) I've changed a lot since 1969, and so has the world; I am more benign, the world is far bleaker. (1987: 113-4)

Ironically, the world got rid of Angela Carter by a malign tumour in less than five years' time (1992), and set up Salman Rushdie (who was calmed down a bit and changed quite a lot after the death threat of the Name-of-the-Father of Ayatollah Khomeini) as a supporting friend to Carter to her very end (which he describes in the introduction of the posthumous edition of the collection of her stories *Burning Your Boats*, 1997: 5) and as the reciter of Andrew Marvell's meditative verses about immortality of soul at Carter's funeral.

I will analyze Freud's essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), the reading of which illustrates the process of objectification through words, as well as the possibilities of engendering a new narrative. Since Freud's question – “What is beyond the pleasure principle?” – is also the basic question that I ask in my approach to the postmodernist narrative (the question that corresponds to the general theme of repetition in contemporary theories), it seems necessary to consider some of Freud's insights. To ambitious claims like the one made by French structuralist Pierre Macherey – that criticism starts where the clinic stops – we can answer that we bear witness to no possible ground for the critic who is not touched by the symbolic machine (if there is such a ground, that is the place of the clinic). Yet, the same can be said about Lyotard's

ones, which are able to combine into the inclusive unity of the ego; the former split off from this unity by the process of repression and fall in the lower levels of psychical development, losing the possibility of satisfaction. Even if satisfaction comes (which can happen with repressed sexual instincts), the ego will experience it as unpleasure. As a consequence of the old conflict that was repressed, the possibility of pleasure becomes the source of unpleasure (all neurotic unpleasure is such). The larger part of unpleasure that we experience is perceptual unpleasure, the perception of the inner pressure (unsatisfied instincts) or of that which is external (the beyond pleasure principle tends to be lowered both from outside and inside). Freud states that

the facts which have caused us to believe in the dominance of the pleasure principle in mental life also find expression in the hypothesis that the mental apparatus endeavours to keep the quantity of excitation present in it as low as possible or at least to keep it constant. This later hypothesis is only another way of stating the pleasure principle. (1989: 5)

In Freud, our acceptance of this fact is one of the strongest reasons to believe in the death instinct which manifests itself in the compulsion to repeat. He describes the compulsion to repeat as the operation of tendencies beyond the pleasure principle, tendencies that are more primitive, more elementary and more instinctive, and are independent of that principle. The question he asked, observing his eighteen-month-old grandson who was constantly repeating the game he himself invented (throwing away all small objects he could get hold of – which stands for rejection of his mother as the primary source of desire), was how does the repetition of a disturbing experience as a game fit in with the pleasure principle? Two possible answers – that the child overcomes his passive situation and that he revenges himself on the mother for her “departures” – set the new question – does the impulse to consciously work through a painful experience and thus overcome it, find expression in a primary event that is independent of the pleasure principle?

### **...The Lady Vanishes...**

Freud was not recording his thoughts simultaneously while observing the child but wrote and finished the essay only after three or four years. In that text, as was noticed in a number of its interpretations, he does not talk about the loss of his daughter, and even when in a footnote he mentions Sophie's death, he relates it only to the death of the child's mother, the child in whom “the second child born in the interval had roused violent

jealousy” (1989: 16). He writes about his loss in his letters, but not about Sophie’s (Freud-Halberstadt) loss of her life. As one of the recent interpreters, Elisabeth Bronfen, states in her text: “The Lady Vanishes”, Freud refused to acknowledge an interdependence between the theoretical formulation of a death drive and the experience of his daughter’s death, probably thinking that “an acceptance of the intersection between a real event of death and a theoretical speculation would counteract the reassurance this piece of writing was to afford.” (1992: 18) Personal names are not mentioned in the text at all, only the name of Sigmund Freud, the author, is there. From today’s perspective, however, that intersection, in Derrida’s words “the self-representation of representation” has great importance, independent of (un)acknowledging the death drive. Bronfen focuses on the displacement from the daughter’s significant part to that of a grandson, as the blind spot into which she wants to insert her discussion – on the absent mother. According to Bronfen’s text, Freud’s articulation of the death of “the mother” returns to support the narcissistic cathexis of Freud’s ego, because it comes with Freud’s awareness of his own mortality – Freud used his work to deny the deep gap in his narcissistically formed “Self”, the gap he had to acknowledge to himself. Reflection on the concept of the death drive was supposed to restore balance to the system of thoughts that was threatened to be trapped in the concept of narcissism – writing was meant to heal his wounded narcissism and also to develop the theoretical concept of narcissism on which Freud was working at the time.

Although writing about death seems to constitute a gaining of control after the tormenting experience of death, the maintaining of continuity when he is faced with discontinuity and the overcoming of the loss of his daughter (whom Freud does not mention even as a sign of respect to the deceased), the resulting text articulates precisely this ambivalent interplay between the break and the control, the loss and the regained assurance in the substituting presence and re-presentation, between the fear of death and the narcissistic libidinal cathexis. Bronfen writes,

The rhetorical strategy of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is such that it self-reflexively repeats its thematic concerns. Repetition is doubly inscribed, for one by the death drive; directed toward reduction of tensions; toward an original of complete identity; toward an animate state anterior and posterior to which both precede and follow the life, and then it is inscribed by the pleasure principle which is directed toward production of tensions through division of unity; separation leading through the detour of substitution to the production of new unities. In this interstice, repetition



serves to acknowledge the death drive beyond the pleasure principle in the sense that the mother/infant dyad must be renounced and translated into supplementation because the division death threatens is always inherent in this pleasurable unity. (1992: 30)

If we assume that the concept of the death drive came out of Freud's most intimate emotions, hints and resentment at the power of death – which he tried to deny, let us recall his own sentences from the same text – that in a person “only ego is resistant”, but not the unconscious, whose only endeavour is “to break through the pressure weighing down on it and force its way either to consciousness or to a discharge through some real action” (1989: 20). Therefore, the compulsion to repeat has to come from the repressed unconscious, and Freud's persistent efforts to separate the impartiality and authority of his theoretical insight from the reference to his own trauma confirm that the traumatic Thing in Freud, the narrator, influenced the course of narrating. For, his (suppressed) recognition of the fact would open his narcissistic wound again, this time without the possibility of overcoming it through the authority of the narrating subject. Freud's sudden “fright”, emotional and physical, caused by the closeness of the deadly *das Ding*, is the postmodern reaction into which he was drawn by his narcissistic predisposition, which, decades later, will become the characteristic of the end of the millennium we inhabit today, still asking ourselves (if we ask anything at all): *what is beyond the pleasure principle?*

Is everything in contemporary culture (later we will say cultures) reduced to the economic instance that is fully governed by the pleasure principle? Is there something more original, dare we say “a myth of nature”, that from time to time warns us about cultural deviations, “a manifestation of the power of the repressed”, which according to Freud, in its instinctive character and opposition to the pleasure principle, often appears as a “demonic force”? The “demonic force” that appears in psychoanalysis as the compulsion to repeat, makes the “patient reacts like a child”, showing that traces of memory in her/him are not bounded, so they have the capacity to form (with the past day's remains) a fantasy that fulfils wishes in dreams. I will show later in the examples in the text how this model is analogous to the model of generating the postmodern narrative. What I would like to point out now, in my reading of this text of Freud, and specifically of its second chapter, is the perspective of the Thing, the capacity of the Thing to disappear, to be rejected or thrown away – whether we inscribe in its disappearance ourselves or the other, according to our own libidinal disposition. I am interested in the function of

“seeing”, which the Thing takes over from us, returning to us, through its terrifying gaze the blow that, thanks to feminist theories, we can no longer ascribe to Medusa.<sup>2</sup>

We can grasp something which, already in nature appropriates the gaze to the function to which it may be put in the symbolic relation in man (...) the gaze is outside and I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture. This is the function that is found in the heart of the institution of the subject in the visible, (1998: 105)

writes Lacan. Thus the subject, that matters always and in everything, would stand only for the empty place from which the Thing perceives itself as alienated.

If we carefully analyze this narrative of Freud, that is, the second part in the standard edition, printed on six pages, we will see that it starts (and continues in the first third of the text) with a definition of “traumatic neuroses” – caused by heavy mechanical concussions, accidents or life-threatening experiences. As World War I had just finished, Freud concludes that in the case of war neuroses, symptoms are not necessarily caused by mechanical force, that they are, in everyday traumatic neuroses, caused by the sudden fright (*Schreck*) – in which an important role is played by un-preparedness for certain events and by the element of surprise (traumatic neuroses represent “general enfeeblement and disturbance of the mental capacities”, due to un-preparedness in danger) (1989: 10). Dreams from traumatic neuroses comes repeatedly in the course of therapy; the function of dream is disturbed in the condition of neurosis and declines from its purpose or (Freud writes later, in 1921) “we can be led to think about mysterious masochistic trends of the ego” (1989: 12). Freud leaves, at this point, as he says, “the dark and dismal subject of traumatic neuroses” and passes to “examining the method of working employed by the mental apparatus in one of its earliest *normal* activities – in children’s play” (1989: 12).

First he talks about the importance of the economic motive in play – the pleasure gained in play – then describes his weeks’ long observations and interpretations of the child’s acts – the child was throwing all small objects away from himself and uttering the vowel “o-o-o-o”. When he did that with the wooden reel with a piece of string tied round it, throwing it “very skillfully” (1989: 15) over the edge of his curtained cot, he pulled it back uttering joyfully – “da” (there). The translation of child’s “o-da” into “*fort-da*”, meaning “gone-back”, as the arbitrary semantic coding of sounds that

are determined by the observer-grandfather and the mother of the child, stands for the game of disappearance and return.

According to Freud, it is the child's mother that disappears, for Lacan, it is the subject who disappears in the process of signification, but actually the disappearance – *aphanasis* – of the subject only replaces the mother's disappearance, so, feminists would say, the mother is again the one who is (symbolically) killed. For Lacan the reel does not represent the mother as reduced to an object, but a small part of the subject that the child separates from himself, at the same time still keeping it (for if it is true that the signifier is the first hint of the subject, then the subject has to be determined in the object – reel; the object-reel is the *objet petit a*). D.W. Winnicott sees in the game the child's "inside mother" of whose *non-vanishing* through her reification into small items the child assures himself: the loss of the real mother is a test of the child's relation to his inside mother, so the child's mastery of its internal relation also means the mastery of the disappearance of the external mother. For Derrida, the central concern of the text is the intersection between the autobiographical and rhetorical strategy of self-reflexivity, the "self-representation of representation" – the necessary return of and to the self. The father, Freud, uses repetition through his triple role of observer-narrator-grandfather through his identification with his grandchild's jealousy, to "repossess" his lost daughter. Disappearance is experienced as a narcissistic wound (the one primary, the other paternal) and engenders a game of signification: in the child – a reel and the chain of signifiers (*fort-da*) as a cultural achievement (of language acquisition), in the father a narrative and its footnotes, the games that both negate and return the absent "mother". The thesis of overcoming the passivity through the active use of the Thing also focuses on the object-Thing that begins to materialize what was projected in it, and becomes, with the power of the projection, the master of both the initial intent and its executor.

Certain materialistic reading of this narrative of Freud seems to correspond with tasks and the intention of my study. It is important to analyze the very beginning of the text, the historical conditions, and Freud's position in everyday life, as one who belonged to the side that lost World War I – and the Austro-Hungarian Empire that vanished at that point, the war from whose traumas, during analytic sessions and his speculative research he tried to derive the concept of the "compulsion to repeat", to which he added the concept of the death drive only after his experience of personal loss in his family. Freud's Jewish background was pointed out in a number

of interpretations and is certainly relevant to the narrative, but the accent might be shifted from the content of Jewish tradition to the moment of difference in a general sense of disturbance and turning-point. We will discern this on the fictional level of the novel *The White Hotel*. Whether or not his discovery of the death drive was mere coincidence with Sophie's death (as Freud persistently claimed), it is our interpretation that counts here. Interpretation, the work of criticism, as Kristeva would say, always goes one step further than its subject and "brings to the light of a broader rationality these concealed depths first explored by literature." (1993: 166). Furthermore, postmodernism sets the new criterion of aesthetic value – a text is everything that interpretation proves it to be – and only self-representation of representation, along with knowing the context of generating the text, can make the meaning of empty or unclear parts in the text accessible to us.

"Traumatic neurosis" was the diagnosis that Freud related to hysteria (1989: 10) in "many similar motor symptoms", yet also separated from it because of its more expressive subjective characteristics and the total disturbance of all mental capacities. At that time he still did not realize that hysteria also does not necessarily have to be provoked by mechanical cause (in most cases it is not). Distinguishing carefully the concepts of fear (*Furcht*), anxiety (*Angst*) and fright (*Schreck* – the state a person gets into when s/he has run into danger without being prepared for it), he was led to conclude that only the factor of surprise causes traumatic neurosis as the result of either war or everyday life. Since the dreams from traumatic neuroses repetitively return a patient to the moment of the accident from which he wakes up in another fright, Freud talks about the alteration that the dream suffers in traumatic neurosis (for the nature of the dream would be to calm a patient with images from his healthy past or with the hope of a cure).

These lines precede Freud's narrative about his grandson's game, which serves him as the referent for his theory of the death drive (a few years after his observations). Thus, from his speculations on the horror of the war, Freud in a sentence passes to the warmth and comfort of the family narrative (which also, by the way, talks about a loss of life, this time the loss he suffered himself, the loss that could be the most threatening to him, reminding him of his own mortality) and transfers to his grandson, as to the metonymical object, the burden of his own sudden fright, caused by his daughter's death (and thus the possibility of his own traumatic neuroses). Grandfather-father/daughter-mother/son-grandson makes the chain of

functions that can be directly related to consideration and confirmation of the factor of heredity in repetition, about which Freud wrote in the same text. The compulsion to repeat is seen as the universal attribute of instincts and perhaps all organic life – as the impulse for restoring the earlier state of things that was abandoned under the pressure of previous disturbing forces.

In this “masculine” and “senior” game of repetitions in which Freud “restores” his ego transferring in his narrative the fright produced by Sophie’s disappearance to his grandson, *the lady really vanishes*, repetitively, first due to the laws of the historical and gender inscriptions in which “the good wife and caring mother” fulfilled her sacrificial duty, then due to the laws of biology that seal the end of life to the body yielding to the condition of disease. Sophie’s husband, the absent Name-of-the-Father or Law, is sent to the “*fwont*” in just a sentence, so as to protect the economy of the narrator’s authority, repeating the authority of the child who, rejecting his father, remains the sole possessor of his mother. (Yet – and this shows the postmodern ambiguity of Freud’s text – we can read this also as Freud’s return to a paternal scheme, in the very same sentence, after experiencing the disturbing power of the dyad mother/child in which no law, even the Oedipal one, is necessary for the child to cross the threshold of cultural development.)

Psychoanalytic and feminist thought often disagree on the Thing understood as the maternal body, as *soma* that needs to be rejected if symbolicity and language are to be reached. The traumatic Thing – as “Mother”, the primary object that simultaneously possesses the phallus and is the one who is castrated, disturbing through her gaze the child who then furiously throws her away but masterfully pulls her back when the item thrown away is the cotton reel, which can be pulled back – the materiality of the outside world that the child experiences, according to some feminists through the “constructed trope” of the “maternal” (although the mother is really the one who satisfies the needs of the child at the earliest age and thus the closest to the figure of mother) should not have meant the same for Freud-analyst-observer-grandfather as for Sophie’s one and half year old child – I would rather put the critical accent there. Freud’s claim, that the final goal of the organic strife is to achieve the former (inanimate) state – which is through his definition of the death drive the direction in which he develops his theory on the compulsion to repeat (in other theorists simply repetition) – should be considered also in the historical-social-psychological context. It is important to ask the

question: *what is the difference between each of the repetitions*, and why does Freud, who certainly has other possibilities for controlling his loss, react finally like the one and half year old child when he, not mentioning his daughter's death, sacrifices for the sake of the grapheme of his text, the dead Sophie for the second time in his text? At each of the repetitions, which make up not only the material and biological but also our social and emotional cosmos, the difference is precisely in "biography, psychology, history", which Barthes so persistently wanted to discard.

It seems to me that the relation between the material and the sexual exists only through the separation of these two fields. The discrepancy which Freud anticipated and formulated in "the death drive beyond the pleasure principle", the formulation accessible to him on the basis of existing scientific knowledge and in the patriarchal environment of (decadent) Vienna in the 1920s, is clearly manifested in our reading of his essay "against the grain". That is the same discrepancy as the one between textual and beyond textual, referential and self-referential, reflection and self-reflection, representation and self-representation. If, according to most of the contemporary theories, there was nothing behind/beyond text, still the question would remain, who posits whom beyond the text, and in what way, over whose body is the text constituted, and what turns the body, repetitively, into inanimate organic substance that returns to the cycle of the materiality of nature.

### **...Also the Jews...**

I already mentioned the circumstances in which Freud was writing this essay – the end of the war and the fall of the Monarchy whose cataclysmic sub-social courses might have easily turned, as had happened earlier in history, against a different minority, in that case the Jewish population, on its own ground. Those circumstances could not remain ignored by Freud's unconscious (if not conscious) particularly in relation to the factor of heredity. I will mention here Freud's reaction to his father's death (10. 23.1896) as being quite different from that to Sophie's death (a letter to Wilhelm Fliess, 10. 26.1896):

...I find writing so difficult just now that I have taken far too long to thank you for the moving words in your letter (...) By one of the obscure paths behind official consciousness, the death of the old man has affected me profoundly (...) I now feel quite uprooted...(2.11.) My reaction to my father's death, the most important, the heaviest loss in one's life... (*Interpretation of Dreams*, 1908, II Edition).