Through the Siren's Looking-Glass:
Victorian Monstrosity of the Male Desiring Subject

by

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INTRODUCTION

> *The terrifying is unsettling: it places everything outside its own nature. What is it that unsettles and thus terrifies? It shows itself and hides itself in the* way *in which everything presences, namely, in the fact that despite all conquest of distance the nearness of things remains absent* [1]
>
> Martin Heidegger

We live in a world of dreams.

It sounds absurd, it is true, to introduce a discourse, especially a critical, academic one, with such a prosaic statement. Written like this, out of the blue, the statement appears thoroughly vague, we might even whisper ridiculous. One cannot live in a dream, or in a number of dreams; one can only dream a dream, at the end of which one is bound to awake. Strictly speaking, dreams are uninhabitable, they cannot be possessed by the dreamer from the outside, they emerge from within, and their uninhabitability comes as a result of the fact of awakening. For if there were no awakening to come, no sober reality to shake the dream off of the dreamer, how could we say that the dream had been dreamed at all? If there were no end to the spectral plight of dreaming, how could we even say we lived in a world of dreams? We would simply say we lived in a world: period. Dreaming, which presupposes awakening, becomes a consequence of awakening. In this sense, awakening ontologically precedes dreaming, but dreaming itself assumes the primary epistemic position. Without awakening, there could be no dreaming; without dreaming, there could be no knowing, unless knowing is knowing a dream, from within a dream.

It is my intention to write about awakening, or the lack of awakening, about a missed opportunity of awakening and the pervasiveness of a dream. The dream I would like to write about is one of a peculiar Victorian horror – of sinister places and shifting monsters. This horrific dream is precisely of the kind introduced above: persevering and deceptive, a dream that dreams its own awakening, like Jacques Derrida's 'labyrinth that includes its own exits.'[2] This dream, or a web of dreams, is a cultural one, spanning centuries and hypnotizing nations. Being so wide and profound, the statement that opened the discourse (that we live in a world

[1] Martin Heidegger, 'The Thing,' in *Poetry, Language, Thought,* trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 164.
[2] Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 104.

of dreams) holds for us the very key to questioning this dream; maybe even to the awakening itself.

As a constative, the statement informs us that there is a world made of dreams, and that we live in this world. By that we presume a possibility of such a world: the statement rests upon the idea that a world can exist as a phantom, a specter, a ghost or a dream that comes before the dreamer. For how could we 'live' in this world, if there were no 'world' to live in? And what does 'living' inside this world mean? Dreams just might be inhabitable after all. But far more important in this statement that breaks the silence of a blank, yet unfilled page, is who 'we' are, we who are permitted to live, not just anywhere, but in this world of dreams. The introductory statement, being a constative, apart from saying that we live in some spectral world, incorporates all the above-mentioned issues: how does 'one' 'live' in a 'world of dreams'? These issues could appear benign, unimportant, or even completely unnecessary, just a vain exercise of mental gymnastics. Unless, what is at stake is the very world of dreams that is invoked. We could call it a world of dreams, or, viewed from a different angle, from a different horizon, a world of fears. Between these two worlds, between the realm of dreaming and the realm of fearing, there is a small, infinitely diminishing semantic space that opens to us the culture that dreams, the culture that is both the subject of dreaming and the object of its own fearing. And inside this opened space, this space that opens to us in the act of a cultural reverie, fears are materialized, desires are provoked, subjects are summoned, monsters are born.

The monstrous dream in question, the one that is brought about by the fact of its own uninhabitability, is a dream that the European mind has been dreaming, mostly without knowing, for centuries. For this mind, which has just been uncritically generalized as European, this dream has never actually happened, it has never become an unfolding reality, a reality that was unfolding, and is unfolding as we speak/write. Since it is considered uninhabitable, it has always been just a text, just a space of cultural production devoid of actuality, a world always of the second order, always 'only' a dream. And in this 'only,' in this graphic and cognitive act of cultural naturalization, the dream reveals its powers, it spreads its stygian wings that cover the land, the sky and the sea, eclipsing all possible exits, overshadowing a possibility of awakening.

What is precisely this ominous dream that has stayed with the European mind for so long, quietly and imperceptibly lulling it back to sleep over and over again? Being so persistent and enduring, one would assume that it is a pleasant dream, a fairy tale without an end, a happily ever after for the enchanted dreamer. Maybe it is indeed a tale of fairies, maybe it is pleasant

to the dreamer, but from the outside this dream looks like a nightmare. From the second half of the eighteenth century onwards, from 1764 and *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole at least, the European mind has been hexed by the centrality of a hellish nightmare of monstrosity. Ruined and haunted castles, demonic priests, gloomy villains and monsters of the night, animated corpses and ancestral curses: horror and monstrosity settled into the very heart of European literature, leaving the margins of medieval manuscripts and Renaissance unexplored lands behind. What was named the Gothic novel, a perverse pleasure of a few, stole the heart and soul of the nineteenth-century European public.[3] Thus began a monstrous fantasy, and the European mind has been dreaming it ever since, along with dreams about an ostensible reality, about a beyond of the dream where the actuality of real life occurs. A dream that includes its own awakening, a maze that includes its own ends, a fantasy that fantasizes about its own death, a dream within a dream within a dream: monstrosity.

It is my intention to discuss this circular dreaming maze that has been haunting European imagination for centuries now. The nightmare of horrid beings, disquieting, hybrid bodies and split, psychopathic personalities has been incredibly persistent and powerful. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Western imagination is occupied with horror more than ever, and even a superficial glance at primetime TV shows, the pulse of audiences, reveals the truthfulness of this statement. With *Dexter* we root for a serial killer, who uses his murdering impulses for 'good'; with *Hannibal* we take pleasure in killing by the cookbook, every murder bearing a name of a dish; in *True Blood* vampires 'come out of the coffin,' as they try to integrate into the human world; in *Penny Dreadful* we are taken back to the good old Victorian monstrosity of vampires and Dorian Gray. *American Horror Story*, *Supernatural*, *Crime Scene Investigation*, *The Fall*, *The Twilight Saga*, *Underworld*, *Blade*, *Resident Evil*, *The Walking Dead*, *28 Days/Weeks Later* – examples of horror narratives are countless and they go on and on, as the saga of mutants, hybrid beings and bodies turned inside-out unravels. The fact is that today's global population takes extreme pleasure in types of dread, torture and esthetics of mutilation that would make the heads of Marry Shelley, and the company from Lake Geneva, spin in disbelief of their own naïve horror.

There is a feeling that Victorian times, the nineteenth century, is something far away, something finished, done, severed from the twentieth- and twenty-first-century modern life;

[3] For Gothic fiction in general, see Clive Bloom, *Gothic Horror: A Guide for Students and Readers* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), or J. E. Hogle, *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). For gothic imagination, see Richard Davenport-Hines, *Gothic: 400 Years of Excess, Horror, Evil and Ruin* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998).

there is a feeling that Victorian horror is enclosed within the appropriate confines of the term 'Gothic' and that, once imprisoned in that nominal cell, we can approach it from a safe distance of another world, another time and another reality. Although it is not my aim to discuss all these historically contingent forms of horror, this thesis still aims at a particular kind of Victorian monstrosity. The small reminder above of the present-day situation only serves to point to the fiendish dream that, in many forms and going by many names, has plagued the European imagination for too long. I say for too long, because a dream must have an awakening if it is to be a dream; without an awakening, the dream becomes reality. And the European imagination has not awoken from its hellish fantasy yet, but it has only kept dreaming about its end instead.

As Gil Anidjar truthfully observes in the preface to the Serbian edition of *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy*, there is no such thing as the 'West,' or at least that is what has been constantly repeated. There is no entity that has acted throughout history as an integral, coherent European self, but there is a specific context that such a claim comes from.[4] In the same sense, there can be no specifically European dream, nor a specifically European subject, but there is a context, at the beginning of the globalist twenty-first century for writing about it. This especially rings true for the nineteenth-century Europe, whose interconnectedness of nations was of a far lesser degree than that of our own time. We live in a globalized world, in a Global Village, where technologically mediated (and thus circularly (re)constructed) knowledge is, sometimes and for some, only a click away. But saying that, confronting the nineteenth-century flow of ideas and meanings with the (post-post)modern one, does not make the former a conglomerate of separate national knowledge, a reality devoid of cultural exchange. As Eric Hobsbawm observed, seemingly contrary to Anidjar's view, the nineteenth-century Europe *was* one juxtaposed entity, although far from global or coherent.[5] Cultural exchange between the countries of the 'Dual Revolution,' (French and Industrial) as well as between the Old and the New World was live, but knowledge met with diverse semantic demands, depending on the latitude and longitude, reappropriating meaning, reconstructing and reinventing it. We could say that what we experience today – a cultural difference in sameness, as well as a cultural sameness in difference – has its roots in the nineteenth century. Monstrosity, the main focus of this research, is no different from any other cultural palimpsest, from any dream that had

[4] Gil Anidjar, Preface to the Serbian Edition of *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy* (Beograd: Beogradski Krug & CZKD, 2006), 7.
[5] Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789-1848* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972); Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital, 1848-1875* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975).

crossed national boundaries and in that flight became reborn. For instance, though they both treat the same topic of an inanimate matter 'brought' to life, there is a difference between Mary Shelley's ostracized monster from *Frankenstein*, who has an identity and a history, and E. T. W. Hoffmann's uncanny, passive automaton Olimpia from *Der Sandmann*. Faced with this difference in sameness and sameness in difference, much as my own desire disagrees, I am compelled to narrow down the abstract European mind to one small part of itself, to only one facet of the vast universe of the nineteenth-century horror. Bound by a limited textual space, we will have to settle for a specific, *mostly* Victorian British horror, the horror that surfaces throughout the British nineteenth-century cultural production.

This being said, one may immediately assume that the subject of this book, or at least the material to be discussed, is that of undying Gothic horror; that I hint at works of Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, Elisabeth Gaskell, or any of their later successors, like Bram Stoker or Robert Louis Stevenson. No: the horror of Gothic bodies, Gothic skin, and the Victorian *femme fatale* has been written about so extensively that I hardly find it an innovative enough topic to be dealt with here.[6] Without wishing to diminish other works in the mentioned area, what I have in mind, the dream that I would like to write about, the dream within a dream that precludes awakening and induces a false sense of reality (the only one possible after the dream has begun) is slightly different. It is an agonizing dream of love and ecstasy that has largely been neglected so far; it is a dream of sirens.

The Levels of Monstrosity

At the beginning of his capital work *Orientalism*, Edward Said says:

> The idea of beginning, indeed the act of beginning, necessarily involves an act of delimitation by which something is cut out of a great mass of material, separated from the mass, and made to stand for, as well as be, a starting point, a beginning.[7]

[6] See, for example, Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism and Degeneration at the* Fin-de-Siècle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995); Jennifer Hedgecock, *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: The Danger and the Sexual Threat* (Amherst, New York: Cambria Press).
[7] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1798), 16.

At the beginning of this book, we face the same problem of delimitation. When one needs to write about a dream that dreams about itself, about a never-ending horror of textual circularity, the idea of a beginning appears to be particularly difficult. Thus, for the purposes of clarity and easier treading through the dreaming, enchanted forest of Victorian monstrosity, I will separate the issue/argument of the book into two levels of generality.

At the broadest level, the book discusses the relationship between the languages of monstrosity and commodified materiality in the nineteenth-century Britain. It presents the way the changes in the materiality of things, due to the Industrial Revolution, have influenced a new conceptualization of monstrosity. In addition to being haunted by vampires, curses and ghosts, the Victorian imagination gave birth to a particular type of fantasy that questioned the new relationship of man to things. Precisely at the historical moment when, according to Michel Foucault, a fundamental opposition between life (as organic, growing) and death (as inert, barren) emerges, animated matter in the form of golems, Frankenstein's monster, and living portraits, becomes a burning Victorian fantasy.[8] Giorgio Agamben calls this particular spin-off of Victorian fiction the 'disturbing literature,' and the dread that looms behind it 'bad conscience with respect to things.'[9] Building on Karl Marx's work on commodity and Sigmund Freud's work on fetishism, he argues that the new type of alienated capitalist production introduced a new type of alienated commodity that restructured man's relationship to things, as well as man's imagination of them. As the boundary between man and things grew blurry, animated objects began invading the Victorian imagination, while the humanity itself became commodified, objectified, and embodied in the figure of a 'dandy,' a human being bordering on a commodity. For Agamben, this process of people becoming inanimate things signaled an extreme human condition in the era of capitalist production – 'the commodification of the real.'[10] Starting from his imaginative analysis of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, I would like to argue that the change Agamben correctly observed, apart from obviously having had a strong impact on the idea of humanity, had a profound impact on the idea of monstrosity, as well. The changed ideas of materiality and monstrosity, of alienated, animated objects and monsters summoned into the very heart of the Victorian fantasy, echoed the same epistemic change at the level of the Victorian language, where the language is not to be understood as a living language, but as a structure of signs, *langage*. Inside this language, a

[8] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Tavistock/Routledge (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 251-252.
[9] Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (Minneapolis and London: Minneapolis University Press, 1993), 47.
[10] Ibid., 52.

blank, unsignifiable space opened, a dark place of sinister desire, calling the monster into the heart of the Victorian subject, calling the subject *as* a monster into existence, and opening an unknown semantic space between people and things. Thus, in the last instance, this book discusses precisely this empty space of representational interruption, a part of language that cannot be expressed, described or attained – the burning object of the Victorian subject's desire, namely, death proper.

At the other, more concrete, level of analysis, the book is narrowed down considerably. Developing the idea of a representational interruption inside the Victorian language (thus inside the Victorian subject, the Victorian subject *as* an interruption in language), the book focuses on one specific commodity and one specific monster – the mirror and the siren. Both mirrors and sirens, together as well as separately, underwent profound changes in the nineteenth century, making them a perfect case study for the discussion of a rupture inside the Victorian language and the relationship of this rupture to the Victorian desiring subject.

Firstly, during the nineteenth century, mirrors changed from hard-to-come-by things into fetishized commodities found literally on every corner. Secondly, during the same period sirens changed from vicious, pernicious seductresses into fragile virgins in pursuit of their own happily ever after. Thirdly, the relationship between mirrors and sirens changed: inseparable in their iconography at least since the medieval times, sirens and mirrors departed from each other in the Victorian times, the examples of sirens holding mirrors being almost impossible to find (thus the book, in a way, revolves around another absence, around the nonexistence of a specific material).[11] It is my intention to show that these changes (of the commodified materiality of mirrors and the monstrosity of sirens) were related, echoing deep inner displacements at the level of language and the production of knowledge. Inside both the language of materiality and monstrosity settled a dark, unsignifiable object of desire, a place that will, as the book proceeds, turn out to be death itself. This place was the nature and the birthplace not only of the Victorian monstrosity, but of the Victorian desiring subject: it was the birthplace of the *Victorian subject's monstrosity*.

The Victorian subject in the book has been defined as *male*. This has not been done accidentally: the book essentially discusses language as desire of the *male* subject. By saying

[11] In the field of material culture studies there are those who have already considered an approach to materiality through its absence. In *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past* (London: Routledge, 2001), Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas discuss the very foundation of archaeology as based on fragmentedness of the archaeological records and an inevitable speculation on what materials have not survived or have not been deposited in the records at all. In *An Archaeology of Socialism* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2000) Victor Buchli calls for a 'shifting away from our preoccupation with presence [of the material record and material culture in general] towards one of absence' (5).

this, I do not assume that the subject is fundamentally male, in the way the Biblical subject is, the female subject emerging as his reflection only. As far as mirrors are concerned, many, if not most, of the arguments in the book could be, and sometimes indeed are, easily applied to the female subject as well, but since the thesis is about Victorian mirror narratives in relation to the representation of *sirens*, I have decided to limit the study to the male desiring subject only. Sirens have always been an essentially male fantasy, and bringing the female subject into the analysis would complicate it to the point of impossibility, at least in this book. Also, less important but still pertinent to the text is the fact that the field of the Victorian nineteenth-century cultural production was largely (but certainly *not* exclusively) male, most of the material analyzed having been produced by male authors. This might seems to be a limitation and inconvenience, but it actually gives an interesting and original twist to the problem we are dealing with. I would like to show that in the representation of siren bodies, bodies primarily sexualized as *female* (with notable exceptions such as Matthew Arnold's poem 'The Forsaken Merman' (1849) and John William Waterhouse's visual treatment of the poem, *The Merman* (1892)), we can find a topology of a subject that is primarily sexualized as *male*. Contrary to, or, better, building upon, the readings of Victorian sirens (scarce as they are) as expressions of misogyny and acts of female discursive subjugation, I would like to propose that sirens in the nineteenth-century Victorian culture were not *exclusively* indicative of changing female gender roles (which they definitely were), but also (or even more so) indicative of the male subject who created them. This male subject had a very important idiosyncrasy: he essentially lived in the world of dreams we started the book with. And his Being, or a signifying illusion of it, was every bit as nightmarish and incoherent as the dream he inhabited.[12] Using Jacques Lacan's concept of the split subject, or rather appropriating it for my own ends, I would like to propose that the male Victorian subject himself was as monstrous as the siren body of his imagination. I would like to propose that the siren body was the Victorian male desiring subject's vessel.

Combining the Inappropriate

The Victorian monstrous subject that the book discuss in relation to the representation of sirens is a fundamentally split subject, and its expression by means of the language of siren monstrosity is only a symptom of a deeper epistemic turmoil of the Victorian culture. The book

[12] In order to distinguish between the metaphysical 'being' (Heideggerian 'being') and 'being' as a 'creature,' the prior will always be capitalized. 'Being' in cited paragraphs and sentences will be left in its original version.

draws primarily upon the theoretical works of two great twentieth-century French authors, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan. In spite of Foucault's early praise of psychoanalysis in *The Order of Things*, one might say that Foucault and Lacan are completely antithetical, especially having Foucault's later view on psychoanalysis in mind.[13] But, confessedly, this is exactly where I take my joy from – from combining the inappropriate. While Foucault's analysis of the changed configuration of knowledge at the end of the eighteenth century provides the starting point for the book's theoretical framework, Lacan's concepts of the split subject, mirror stage, *aphanasis*, *jouissance* and *objet a* give us tools for an analysis of a specific Victorian subjectivity. Combined together, Foucault's historical research into language and its relationship to representation, and Lacan's research (following Sigmund Freud) into the very precondition of this language – the unconscious – allow us to explore the relationship between the subject and the language of monstrosity in the representation of Victorian sirens. The idea hiding behind my research is that the emergence of a Lacanian split subject, a semantically incoherent subject – an idea that Lacan, in a way, raises to the general level of human condition within culture – is highly historically specific and particularly pertinent to the nineteenth century.[14]

According to the Lacanian psychoanalysis, a subject appears as a subject only at the moment of his invocation by/into language (I will specify the gender of the noun 'subject' in accordance with the general discussion of the male subject).[15] In this sense, Lacan's conceptualization of the subject does not differ considerably from Louis Althusser's ideologically 'interpellated subject,' or Judith Butler's subject resulting from performativity and exclusionary practices of language.[16] Derrida too denies self-presence of the subject before speech and signs, arguing that

[13] For Foucault's early praise of the boldness of psychoanalysis, see Foucault, *Order of Things*, 411-424. For a summary of his ambivalent relationship to it, see Jacques-Alain Miller, 'Michel Foucault et la psychanalyse,' in *Michel Foucault philosophe*, ed. François Ewald (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1989).

[14] For example, in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan says: 'Consciousness has to come to terms with that outside world and it has had to come to terms with it ever since men have existed and thought and tried out theories of knowledge' (Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, trans. Dennis Porter (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 56). This is one of the places where Lacan presumes universality of language. In his view, there has always been an outside to the representation and thought and thus of consciousness.

[15] See, Jacques Lacan, 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,' in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2006), 179-268.

[16] Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),' in Mapping Ideology, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London and New York, Verso), 132-136; Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 3.

> the subject becomes a speaking subject only in its commerce with the system of linguistic differences; or yet, the subject becomes a *signifying* […] subject only by inscribing itself in the system of differences. Certainly in this sense the speaking or signifying subject could not be present to itself, as speaking or signifying, without the play of linguistic or semiological *différance*.[17]

According to all of them, language, structurally formalizing culture (in the Lacanian language, the Symbolic), is the signifier that calls the subject into existence. But in Lacan, by the very act of this call that cannot be ignored, the subject himself (previously a subject-to-be) becomes an element in the chain of signification, petrified into a signifier for another signifier. At the very moment of the subject's entrance into culture, the subject becomes a sign in the chain of signification that moves on and on. Fossilized at the gates of the Symbolic (a culture), in order to became a bearer of *meaning* the subject has to die as *Being*, a process Lacan calls *aphanasis*. By this logic, although a sign himself, the subject as Being has no place in language; the subject, as Being, is literally *not*.0 What is left of the subject, though, after his initial appearance/disappearance, is language of the unconscious, the unconscious that is structured like language, through which the subject emerges. Emerging essentially from this language (of the unconscious), in which there is no place for him as Being, the subject is always *not*, always a negativity without coherence or stability. For Lacan, there is no coherent, solid core of the subject, or the subject *per se*; the centrality of the Freudian ego is only an illusion of the subject, initiated by the 'mirror stage.'[18] Since the book revolves heavily around these Lacanian concepts, it is vital that some of them be clarified from the start.

The term *aphanasis* (from the Greek ἀφανής, *aphanes*, 'invisible') was originally employed in psychoanalysis by Ernest Jones in 1927 to designate the fear of seeing desire disappear.[19] As we have seen, Lacan uses the term to refer to the fundamental disappearance of the subject as Being. He argues that the subject is called into existence by a signifier in the field of the Other (in this case the Symbolic, language, culture) – an illustration of this invocation being the 'mirror stage.'

[17] Jacques Derrida, 'Différance,' in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982), 16.
[18] Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,' in *Écrits*, trans., Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2006).
[19] Ernest Jones, 'The Early Development of Female Sexuality,' Introduction to *Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 8 (1927): 459-472.

Lacan first outlined his idea of the mirror stage at the Fourteenth International Psychoanalytical Congress at Marienbad in 1936, relying on the previous work of Henry Walton. Walton had argued that chimpanzees, as well humans, seem to recognize their mirror images as images of themselves at the age of six months. While chimpanzees soon lose interest in their reflection, humans invest a lot of time into its inspection. This investigation into the relationship between the body and the image helps toddlers to develop a sense of selfhood.[20] Lacan developed this idea further, reshaping it in the decades that followed, making it the focal point of his writing on the split subject, as evidenced in first of his *Écrits*, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function.' Somewhere between the first six and eighteen months of a toddler's life, the Other (which is usually a parent) shows the toddler (who is a subject-to-be), a reflective surface (a mirror or any other device). As part of this act, usually followed by the words 'Look, it is you!' the Other signals to the subject-to-be (the toddler) to identify with his own mirror image. The subject-to-be looks at the mirror image and, verbally invited by the Other, for the first time recognizes himself as a *whole*. This whole appears to the subject-to-be the final resolution of his inner incoherence, fragmentation, struggle and anxiety, so he identifies with the external image, appropriating it as his own coherent core, his own coherent ego. This is the initial promise of the mirror – a wholeness that, once attained, ends the restlessness of the subject's chaos of fragmentation. But, this identification of the self with an exteriorized image has a profound effect on the subject's psychic life. By identifying with his externalized corporeal existence, by appropriating it, a fundamental *méconnaissance* of the ego's coherence is initiated: the appropriation is only an illusion, as the subject is no more coherent and whole than he was before the encounter. The subject remains split between the promise of coherence and the essential illusion of that promise.

At the Congress, Lacan's idea met with a lack of interest, and universal validity of this idea still remains unproven. Raymond Tallis remarked, quite justifiably, that a literal interpretation of Lacan's mirror-stage presupposes that blind people are incapable of forming a sense of selfhood, and are denied entrance into culture.[21] Regardless of this doubt, we shall see that the scenario of the mirror stage is a powerful tool for discussing the Victorian monstrous desiring subject.

[20] Dylan Evans, 'From Lacan to Darwin,' in The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative, ed. Jonathan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 38-55.
[21] Raymond Tallis, Not Saussure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory (London: Macmillan Press, 1988), 153.

Returning to the issue of the subject's relation to language, what we can deduct from the mirror stage scenario is the subject's invocation into the circle of language, into the maze/chain of signification. Facing his mirror image, invited to identify with it, the subject-to-be enters the symbolic relations of culture, emerging as a full subject by the power of the signifier (the language), emerging as an *effect* of language. But, according to Lacan, as soon as he appears as a subject, as soon as he enters the language, he becomes a signifier himself – for another signifier and the chain of signification moves on. This way, by acquiring meaning, the subject 'loses' his Being; he identifies with his external image, with the fullness of this image, which is an illusion nested in the very core of the subject's existence. Thus, the moment the subject enters the language, he becomes a split subject, split between his fundamental incoherence and the illusion of coherence dwelling in his core, between his 'lost' Being and gained meaning, between the Real (of his Being) beyond language and the Symbolic (of his meaning) which *is* that language. Lacan calls this eclipse of the subject's Being by meaning *aphanasis*, the 'fading of the subject.' It is one of the fundamental *vels* of logic for Lacan – either/either – that exist in language, as well as in experience. '*Aphanasis* is to be situated in a more radical way,' says Lacan,

> at the level at which the subject manifests himself in this movement of disappearance that I have described as lethal. In a quite different way, I have called this movement the fading of the subject. […] There is no subject without, somewhere, *aphanasis* of the subject, and it is in this alienation, in this fundamental division, that the dialectic of the subject is established.[22]

The scenario described above will provide us with a basic model for dealing with the Victorian mirror culture and its relationship to Victorian sirens and male Victorian desiring subject. It is vital, though, to note that one cannot take the Lacanian mirror stage for granted, since it suffers from several obvious flaws. Apart from the already mentioned visual issues, Lacan's idea of the split subject, as well as that of the mirror stage, rest heavily on a relationship between the subject and language. This relationship has been argued about and criticized in the Western philosophy at least since the appearance of Ferdinand de Saussure's structural

[22] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1963-1964*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 207-208; 221.

linguistics.[23] As Foucault, among others, has shown, language, as a formalizing relationship between meaning and representation, is historically specific, while Lacan's psychoanalysis deals with language in absolute terms.[24] Also, the applicability of the mirror stage is diminished by the idea's gross generalization, and, as soon as it is presented, one may rightly wonder what happens with the subject in case a mirror is lacking? How can one use this scenario historically for a discussion of cultures with no mirrors, or clear reflecting surfaces? We could agree that there has always been a certain level of recognition of one's reflection in stagnant waters, such as ponds, lakes or polished stones, but Lacanian identification with an external *coherence* takes the clarity of the reflected image to a whole new level. Was there no subjectivity before mirrors? These are all sensible questions to ask.

Since there is no room for dealing with the history of subjectivity, I have decided to turn the above questions the other way round and ask: what whold be the *necessary conditions* for the mirror stage scenario to be possible? What kind of culture would allow identification with the mirror image, so intense that the mirror image becomes a reality? Firstly, the culture in question would have to be one in which mirrors are *common* and *frequent* enough. Secondly, it would have to be a culture in which mirrors are not only frequent, but *large* and *clear* enough, so that the subject could fall prey to his illusion. Thirdly, and most importantly, if the subject is fundamentally dependent on and subjectified by language, and the language is historically specific, it would have to be a culture whose language is appropriately incoherent so as to reflect, and produce, an incoherent subject. The Victorian nineteenth-century culture was precisely that kind of culture and the Victorian nineteenth-century language was precisely that kind of language.

According to Foucault, the classical episteme, spanning roughly the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, was characterized by a 'duplicated representation,'[25] an organization of meaning where 'representation in its peculiar essence [was] always perpendicular to itself,'[26] cancelling meaning as we know it. The sign in the eighteenth century, was a sign only if it expressed in itself the relationship to the thing represented. The sign had to represent, but the representation had to be represented in it. Foucault calls this relationship of the sign to the

[23] For an account on conceptualization of the relationship between the subject and language in Western philosophy, see Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Philosophy in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).
[24] The investigation of historicity of language pervades Foucault's work as a whole, but the most explicit works on the topic are *The Order of Things*, and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).
[25] Foucault, *Order of Things*, 70.
[26] Ibid., 72.

representation, and of meaning to language, the 'binary organization of the sign.'[27] He takes images rather than words to be crucial examples of this perpendicularity of representation. An image is, at the same time, a sign of what is represented and the content of the representation itself. Following this logic, according to which everything available to representation is already contained in the sign that represents, not only does the theory of signification collapse but also meaning as we know it (a differential relationship between the signifier and the signified) cannot even emerge. Foucault says that '[t]his universal extension of the sign within the field of representation,'

> precludes even the possibility of a theory of signification. For to ask ourselves questions about what signification is, presupposes that it is a determinate form in our consciousness. But if phenomena are posited only in a representation that, in itself and because of its own representability, is wholly a sign, then signification cannot constitute a problem. Moreover, it is not even visible.[28]

Foucault concludes that no meaning is exterior or anterior to the sign, because there is no intermediary element, no opacity between the sign and its content. Signs, therefore, have no other laws than those that govern their content: everything that is to be represented has already found its place within the representation, leading the representation to always fall back on itself. He goes on to exemplify the 'duplicated representation' by analyzing the fields of eighteenth-century natural history, language and the theory of value.

The nineteenth-century, i.e. modern episteme, witnessed a different relationship between meaning and language. For Foucault, this shift was 'certainly one of the most radical that ever occurred in Western culture,' when the classicistic configuration of knowledge changed into that 'from which, even now [in 1966], we have doubtless not entirely emerged.'[29] The representation stopped being perpendicular to itself, and the sign stopped encompassing everything that gives itself to representation. Within language, an irreducible element has been born: a representational blank space that could not be reduced to representation. From that moment on, 'what gives value to the objects of desire,' writes Foucault, 'is not solely the other objects that desire can represent to itself, but an element that cannot be reduced to that

[27] Ibid., 71.
[28] Ibid., 72.
[29] Ibid., 239.

representation.'[30] The fullness of the classicistic configuration of meaning has been shattered, representation and language becoming incoherent, due to this disturbing element that exists 'exterior to the actuality of the representation itself.'[31] A radical opposition emerged between the representation and what is represented, a blank space of rupture surfacing in-between and pervading the language of representation. And through this unsignifiable rift that now stands at the core of the representation, Being itself fell through. 'The very being of that which is represented,' continues Foucault, 'is now going to fall outside representation itself.'[32] Things represented now offer themselves only partially to representation, in fragments or profiles, in pieces; knowledge is created in the cracks and crevices of language. This withdrawing of knowledge and meaning beyond the reach of representation, this unrepresentability of Being, for Foucault crystallizes finally as metaphysics, as well as a transcendental subject whose metaphysical existence depends upon a space beyond language, representation and meaning; a subject whose impossibility becomes the very condition of his possibility.[33]

It becomes clear that, as incompatible as Lacan's idea of the split subject and Foucault's archaeology of knowledge may seem, they actually converge in their antihumanistic attitude towards the subject. What Foucault describes as the split language and the metaphysical subject is just another, and more historically precise, face of the Lacanian split subject. Foucaldian 'falling of being outside representation,' is structurally the same as Lacanian *aphanasis*. What is vital for my own argument is that both authors emphasize a space *beyond* language and meaning as the precondition of the subject's existence: Foucault argued that this beyond was typical of the nineteenth-century configuration of knowledge, while Lacan maintained it to be the human condition within culture *per se*. Foucault's space beyond language could quite plausibly be read as the Lacanian Real.

Summarizing the theoretical argument outlined so far (and its pertinence to the idea of this book), I have decided to take Lacan's psychoanalytic concepts and, through their placement within the structure of the Foucauldian historicity of knowledge, appropriate them as tools for a historically specific discussion of the Victorian male desiring subject. I do not claim that they would prove equally useful for analyzing other historical periods, but, through a more detailed analysis in the chapters to come, I hope to prove their usefulness in discussing nineteenth-century commodified materiality, monstrosity and subjectivity. The Victorian time was the

[30] Ibid., 257.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., 260.
[33] Ibid., 263-265.

very first moment in history when mirrors, known and limitedly used on both sides of the Atlantic, became overabundant and thus an inescapable part of the everyday life; they became a commodity. Though the production of glass mirrors capable of reflecting a full image of the subject's corporeal existence had existed since the thirteenth century, the Victorians were the first to encounter their externalized corporeality almost on every corner. In this respect, the nineteenth century introduced a phenomenon, whose extreme version is known to most people living in the (at least) Western cultural sphere today: the first thing to do when one is out of bed is to look in the mirror and reconfirm the coherence of one's image. As it will be shown in the first part of the book reserved for an in-depth discussion of this phenomenon, at the beginning of the century, the interaction of the subject with his reflected image was still sporadic and frail, but it became a normalized cultural practice by its end. The introduction of mirrors into everyday life had a series of profound effects on the subject's relationship with himself, and as a consequence, with the language of representation of the self. The subject gazed into his external coherence materialized before him in every street, on every corner, and he fell prey to the game of the appearance that the reflecting surfaces nurtured. He took this external image to be his own coherent self, entering a dream so profound and so reverberating (and so monstrous) that he would never awake again. The core of what he now perceived as his stable, coherent self, a permanent place of agency identified with the pronoun 'I,' rested on an illusion, masking the fundamental incoherence of the subject and his ego. Split between the illusion of semantic coherence that became a reality, and the reality of incoherence that was felt but not perceived, the subject became imprisoned in the realm of the in-between, reaching for a phantom fullness presented by the mirror, always falling short of it, experiencing the aggression of this fall time and again. As I discuss the material on mirrors, considered as mirror narratives in their essential relationship to the language of representation, we shall see, over and over again, that what the subject sees in the mirror is never what he wishes to see. Whenever in contact with a reflecting surface, or, rather, whenever testifying about this contact, the subject finds himself unable to express the fullness he desires, continuously falling short of words (language), with every attempt falling back into the rabbit hole of signification and expressing his ineptitude in a language of lack and excess. What, in these narratives, the subject perceives in the mirror is always more or less than the language he possesses, thus always more or less than the subject himself. Every confrontation with a mirror image invokes a haunting strangeness of reflection, a *différance* as *sameness* which is not *identical*; it summons a creature hardly recognizable as what the subject understands as the 'self' – incoherence, confusion, a nightmare, a monster. Through the looking-glass, the subject is drawn into a world of dreams,

a world made of dreams of a fullness that never comes, never achieves itself, never satisfies, but always calls, beckons, seduces and implores; a dream that dreams about awakening. Caught in this vicious circle, the subject fails to notice that what reflecting surfaces now actually mirror is a blank, unsignifiable space within him, a fissure in language that both Foucault and Lacan talk about: mirrors begin expressing the subject's desire for this ravenous place, his essential, yet historically contingent, desire for death.

The Monster of Our Own

Before we proceed to the to the close reading of the material, there are two more issues to be discussed, if we want the analysis to be clear and tangible. We are dealing with languages of monstrosity and materiality in connection with the Victorian subject. Since we have already discussed the relationship between the subject and language, we need to turn briefly to the subject's relationship to monstrosity, as well as to his relationship to materiality.

How does monstrosity relate to subjectivity? This question is, of course, historically specific and it is my intention, by reading the monstrosity of sirens, to offer a possible answer that would prove convincing for the Victorian times. In the Victorian Britain, monstrosity, placed at the heart of literary and visual production, changed its language considerably. In 1981, Loren Daston and Katharine Park, later followed by a number of authors in the field of 'monster studies,' showed that from the Middle Ages until today, the conceptualization of the monster went from that of a prodigy, to a wonder, and then finally to a naturalized object.[34] In 1998, they reconceptualized this linear evolution of the monster in their book *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, adopting a more heterogeneous approach, and historicizing the order of nature itself in its connection to the concepts of wonder and the pleasures of wondering. They showed that in the Renaissance appreciation of wonders there was a highly class-distinctive element of the European elite culture, a practice that changed in the Enlightenment. They pointed to a 'sharp

[34] Katharine Park and Lorraine J. Daston, 'Unnatural Conceptions: The Study of Monsters in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France and England,' *Past & Present* 92 (1981): 20-54. There is no an academic discipline called 'monster studies.' Under this term, I include many diverse studies on monstrosity drawing upon old works such as Ambroise Paré, *Des monstres et prodiges* (Genève: Droz, 1971) written in the 16th century. Some of them are, Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (London: Penguin Books, 1974); Jeffrey J. Cohen, ed., *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 1996); John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2000), Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Le Moyen Age: antiquités at exotismes dansdans l'art gotique* (Paris: A. Colin, 1955); Georges Canguilhem, 'Monstrosity and the Monstrous,' in *Knowledge of Life*, trans. Stefanos Geroulanos and Daniela Ginsburg (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); Martin Monestier, *Le Monstre. Histoire encyclopédique des phénomènes humains* (Paris: Le Cherche Midi, 2007); Marie Hélène-Huet, *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) and many others. French authors were definitely a vanguard in this area of studies.

rupture in [their] narrative,' the moment when wonders of nature became part of popular culture. 'When marvels themselves became vulgar,' Daston and Park conclude, 'an epoch had closed.'[35] With this rupture the epoch of their study closed, but that of this book opened. Most other studies on monstrosity throughout the twentieth century examined the monster from the perspective of natural history, but what I am interested in is the monster as a trope of imagination, as expressed in the arts. My own reading of the nineteenth-century material on monsters leads to a conclusion that the Victorian monster was essentially connected to the language of the subject's desire.

Two major ways of thinking about monstrosity dominate today's criticism. They are inseparable, being locked in the dialectics of mutual reshaping, but for the purpose of clearer argumentation, they are artificially divided here into distinctive categories: the monster as an *external* and the monster as an *internal* condition of the subject's possibility of existence.

External (from the outside toward the beyond). The perspective on the monster as a dialectical outside of the humanity and the self has been immortalized by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's influential essay, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses).'[36] Published in 1996, the essay capitalized on a long tradition of understanding the monster as a borderline entity. As the essay's title anticipates, Cohen's theory has seven theses and the fourth thesis states that the '[m]onster dwells at the gates of difference,' echoing Donna Haraway's famous quote from her 1983 essay *A Cyborg Manifesto*: '[m]onsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations.'[37] The view of the monster as foreign to sociality, as outlandish or liminal, is the most common approach in cultural criticism. In this view, the monster defines what it means to be human, and it does so from the *outside*. The monster's inappropriately articulated body is scattered all around the field of subjectivity, drawing lines and painting a negative landscape whose shifting contours articulate the equally shifting notion of humanity and the self. For Judith Butler, these 'zones of uninhabitability' are irrevocably the land of monsters, of 'those who do not enjoy the status of the subject'; they are places 'which a subject

[35] Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 19.
[36] Jeffrey J. Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven These),' in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 1996), 6.
[37] Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,' *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 180. In the same spirit, the seventh thesis of Allen S. Weiss' 'Ten Thesis on Monsters and Monstrosity' states: 'Monsters exist on margins. They are thus avatars of chance, impurity, heterodoxy; abomination, mutation, metamorphosis; prodigy, mystery, marvel. Monsters are indicators of epistemic shifts.' (Allen S. Weiss, 'Ten Thesis on Monsters and Monstrosity,' *The Drama Review* 48:1 (2004): 125). This tendency to discuss monstrosity in theses is an attempt to anti-historicize the notion of monstrosity, as well as to subjugate its semiotic impossibility to a possible categorization.

fantasizes as threatening its own integrity with the prospect of a psychotic dissolution.'[38] Where one's notion of the self feels threatened, where the coherence of one's illusion of the self falls apart, the monster is born. This monster, which faces one either from the other side of the abyss that protects one from what one is not, or which is itself precisely the abyss in question, polices the borders of imaginable possibilities. The monster thus becomes the very condition of the subject's coherence, a place of refuge *sine qua non*. The subject exists as a coherent whole in so far as the monster cannot, the dialectical relationship shaping both of them in a never-ending play of the Self and the Other. This epistemic position of the monster is a perfect illustration of the Julia Kristeva's abject, 'something rejected, from which one does not part.'[39] The abject gives the monster a chance to be not the Other, not a conditional negative of humanity, but the very border that puts the Self and the Other each in their respective places. The monster becomes the identity figure over and above all identity figures; it becomes the anti-identity whose impossibility bestows on it tremendous powers. In a way, we could say that, fleeing dialectics and becoming the dialectics itself, the monster, as a semantic trope, becomes a metaphysical entity capable of crushing any signifying order from *without*.

In the same respect, Haraway theorizes the monster as an 'inappropriate/d other'; not as that which is 'not in the relation,' 'the authentic, the untouched,' but that which is a 'critical, deconstructive relationality,' that which is 'not […] originally fixed by difference.'[40] In Haraway's appropriation of the monster as an 'inappropriate/d other,' we can trace this move from dialectics to metaphysics. Leaving the field of the Other and becoming the very relation between the Other and the Self, the monster (that Haraway names 'the cyborg subject position'[41]) is postulated as a critical modality whose purpose, and/or power, lies not in deconstructing the preexisting categories, or in a return to them; the power of the monster, as a critical modality, lies in opening a space of 'elsewhere' beyond the clashing dualities.[42] The monster gains the power of a *beyond*, an 'elsewhere' which is a gift and a promise of the monster.

Internal (from the outside inwards). The perspective on the monster as an internal quality of the subject has been developed in another highly influential essay, written in 1962 by the French theoretician Georges Canguilhem, entitled 'Monstrosity and the Monstrous.' Canguilhem starts from a general view that the monster is that which is 'other than the same, an order other than the

[38] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 3; 242 (note 3).
[39] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.
[40] Donna Haraway, 'The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others,' in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 299.
[41] Ibid., 300.
[42] Ibid.,131, 328, 330.

most probable order.'[43] But he does not stop there, nor does he move to placing the monster beyond the system of signification, as Haraway does. On the contrary, Canguilhem moves the monster to the very heart of the subject, the monster becoming an inner condition of the subject's possibility. He assumes that the idea of monstrosity essentially refers to organic beings ('[t]here are no mineral monsters'), and that the fundamental value of life is its integrity of form – 'by the regeneration of mutilated organs in some species, and by reproduction in all.'[44] For Canguilhem, the monster, as a detour of integrity from itself, points to the contingency of life and living forms. Thus, the opposite of life is not death. Death is just part of life's form, it is the condition that has already been included into life itself; death is 'a limitation from without, the negation of the living by the nonliving.'[45] Monstrosity, on the other hand, is 'the accidental and conditional threat of incompleteness or distortion in the formation of the form; it is the limitation from within, the limitation of the living by the nonviable.'[46]

As we can see, Canguilhem also opposes the Self (as the living, the same) and the Other (as the monster, the nonviable), but in doing so he moves in the direction opposite to that of the theoreticians of the outside, pulling the monster into a conditional accidentalness of life. Instead of postulating the monster as a theoretical figure capable of transcending the dualities of modern dialectics from the outside, Canguilhem's monster is the very condition of humanity from within. But in both approaches to monstrosity, in the external one that envisages the monster at the borders of the imaginable sociality ('zones of inhabitability') as well as in the internal one that takes the monster's accidental singularity as the subject's limitation from within, we perceive that, one way or the other, the monster epistemically faces the subject from *without*, no matter whether we conceptualize this *without* as an inside or an outside of the subject. The monster is that which is opposite to humanity, it is that which is the Other to the subject, be it an abyss of the abject that can never be crossed, or the transcendental Other that surmounts dialectics completely. *The monster simply cannot be a subject*.

I found it necessary to sketch this opposition between external and internal approaches to monstrosity as the subject's conditionality, artificial as their separation may be, so that their clash can make a theoretical middle ground for my own understanding of the Victorian monstrosity. I would like to argue that the Victorian monstrosity that is to be discussed throughout the book is of neither kind, but that it borrows from and builds upon both of them. I would like to propose that

[43] Canguilhem, 'Monstrosity and the Monstrous,' 134.
[44] Ibid., 135.
[45] Ibid., 135-136.
[46] Ibid., 136.

reading Victorian cultural texts about monsters ('text' taken as a formalization of the language of representation) unearths a subject whose Being is neither limited not conditioned by the language of monstrosity, but essentially *identified with it*. The Victorian subject that we find buried in the bodies of Victorian sirens is not a negative of these bodies, nor is it their product: the Victorian subject we find in the texts is himself a monstrous subject, his very Being conforming to the language of Victorian monstrosity. Neither dialectic, nor metaphysic; *the Victorian subject is a monster himself*. The monster can be a subject, after all.

The Object of Our Own

This brings us to the other issue to be discussed, namely, the relationship between materiality and subjectivity, or between man and things. It may seem that, by separating this duality from the monster/human one, I advocate its ontological or epistemic independence. On the contrary, I believe that the language of Victorian materiality conforms to the same structure to which Victorian monstrosity and subjectivity were subjected. In the last instance, I believe that the language of Victorian materiality, expressed in the commodity form, was as monstrous, as semantically incoherent, as the language of the Victorian subject.

'The definition of humanity has often become almost synonymous with the position taken on the question of materiality,'[47] says Daniel Miller, as he develops a theory of things. What Miller, along with other leaders in the anthropological field of material culture studies, rightly observes is that the question of humanity and its historically contingent definition, is often, if not always, the question of the thing's 'thingness' too, as Heidegger describes it.[48] Defining what constitutes humanity is a problem of the epistemological grounding of animate and inanimate matter itself. In this definition, whole worlds are contained, the totality of mechanisms of social realities. The recognition of a shady and shadowy differentiation between humans and things, present in the nineteenth-century, allows the *différance* to slide in, to

[47] Daniel Miller, 'Materiality: An Introduction,' in *Materiality*, ed. Daniel Miller (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 2.

[48] Material culture studies are a borderline discipline between archaeology and anthropology. The central authors in this field are Daniel Miller, Christopher Tilley, Michael Shanks and Victor Buchli (among many others). They all come from different fields of archaeology and anthropology, treating material culture as a cultural palimpsest or an ideological, racial, gender (etc) battleground. Titles such as Christopher Tilley, *Metaphor and Material Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999) or *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths and Monuments* (Oxford: Berg, 1994), Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008) or *Clothing as Material Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), and Arjun Apadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) exemplify the diversity of their interests well.

penetrate fixed appearances and summon unknown possibilities. A deconstructive journey leading to an inquiry into the issue of *Where is the human?* is always already an inquiry into the issue of *Where is the thing?* Giorgio Agamben says that things are not properly anywhere,

> they are not outside of us, in measurable external space, like neutral objects (*ob-jecta*) of use and exchange; rather they open to us the original place solely from which the experience of measurable external space becomes possible.[49]

But, '[d]o we really need anything like thing theory the way we need narrative theory […]?' rightly asks Bill Brown. 'Why not let things alone?'[50] Materiality comprises our whole known world, but the way we conceptualize it is always a fantasy, full of historical imagination and preconceptions rooted so deeply in our *doxa* that they disappear out of sight. Miller calls this disappearance 'the humility of things'[51]: things are important not because they are common and obvious or because they have an evident power of agency, but because they are *culturally imperceptible*. They determine what takes place to the extent to which we are unconscious of their capacity to do so. Objects are so thoroughly embedded into the veil of material and social reality that they are the most active participants in the creation of man. Pierre Bourdieu argued that 'a whole cosmology [can be instilled] through [...] seemingly innocuous details,'[52] and the more imperceptible material things are, the more we take their materiality for granted – it's just a book, it's just a mirror, it's just a chair.[53] The more we take the materiality of things for granted, the more we construct the abstractions from which the ultimate power of the things is derived. At the precise moment of saying 'it's just a mirror,' the mirror is given a new life, an introduction into cultural naturalization, and a new phantasmagoria of revived inanimate matter comes to life by sinking the mirror into the world of cultural preconceptions.

Judith Butler argues that materialization is not something that simply *is*, but something that *happens* – a story that unfolds like a palimpsest, a construction through performance of social

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[49] Agamben, *Stanzas*, 59.
[50] Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory,' *Critical Inquiry* 28:1 (2001): 1.
[51] Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1987), 85-108.
[52] Pierre Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1981), 69.
[53] In the 1980s, the material culture studies have been strongly influenced by the Marxist theory (of commodity and ideology). Along with Miller's 'humility of things' Shanks and Tilley have discussed this imperceptive 'only' as a tool of ideology (Marx) or hegemony (Antonio Gramsci). Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, *Social Theory and Archaeology* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987). This was also one of the points of their highly influential book *Re-constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

norms, and a mutation of those norms through the cracks in their repetition.[54] Finding its root in the one-hundred-and-fifty-year-old tradition of historical materialism, it restates the Marxist argument that humanity is a product of its capacity to transform the material world through production, as a mirror in which humanity recreates itself.

In the eighteenth century, Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* wrote of commodity as triviality, something given, a conduit of exchange, a force external to sociality – like gravity – and therefore infinitely removed from the notion of humanity.[55] The nineteenth century was the age in which changed social relations, in connection with technological progress, made an impact on the fragile understanding of the human/thing relation. Karl Marx's famous chapter on commodity fetishism from Capital, describes the 'mysterious character' of commodity as a consequence of an ideological process, in which social relations between producers have been substituted in the minds of people for natural, objective relations between commodities. As a corollary of this alienation of humans (producers), an estrangement of the things produced (commodities) appeared, imbuing their use-value with a personified afterlife of commodity fetishism. The disturbing sentiment of commodity fetishism was for Marx so strong that he compared it to the 'misty realm of religion' where creations of the human mind 'appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own.'[56]

'How does the thing presence?' asks Heidegger, and he immediately replies: 'The thing things. Thinging gathers.'[57] In the nineteenth century, the thing does not thing anymore, its Being disappears behind its existence as a representation, as a sign. This play of symbolic substitution is essential for the understanding of the human/thing differentiation in the age of accelerated technical progress. Once awakened, the change in the social relations of the industrial era put into motion an uncanny transformation of everyday things into fetishized commodities. According to Agamben, from the Industrial Revolution on, 'the owner of [the] object will never be able to enjoy it simultaneously, both as a useful object and as value.'[58] The

[54] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 9-10.
[55] Adam Smith, 'Of the Natural and Market Price of Commodities,' in *The Wealth of Nations* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 157-66.
[56] Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 165.
[57] Heidegger, 'The Thing,' 172.
[58] Definitions of the fetish are countless. For Marx, the mystery of fetishized commodities is 'all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour' (*Capital*, 169); for Freud it is a 'substitute for the penis […] but for a particular and quite special penis that had been extremely important in early childhood but had later been lost […]: the fetish is a substitute for the woman's penis (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and […] does not want to give up' (Sigmund Freud, 'Fetishism,' in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XXI* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1927), 151-152); for G. A. Cohen, to make a 'fetish of something, or fetishize it, is to invest it with powers it does not itself have' (C. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, 115). Agamben's analysis of the fetish in *Stanzas*, 37. is the only analysis that I find as imaginative and playful as Slavoj Žižek's

appropriator will be able to do anything with the object, even destroy it, 'but in this disappearance the commodity will once again reaffirm its unattainability.'[59] This unattainability is precisely the new life that the commodity gained – the life of a fetish. The commodity, which in Freud would be a fetish object, became a negative reference, a summoning of presence into existence by absence. The interplay of absence and presence in fetishized objects – not only their mutual substitution, but the very actuality of their opposition – would dominate the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Resting at the heart of the commodity, thus at the heart of consumerism, this breaking of the inanimate shell of the thing would bring a truly pervasive, uncanny feeling toward humanity's semiotic control over things and also toward humanity's self-possession.[60] As we shall see, in one of the following chapters, Victorian commodities are literally running loose, confirming the validity of Thomas Richards' comment that 'things appear as independent actors on the historical scene,'[61] and arousing Agamben's 'bad conscience with respect to things'.[62] Out of this shaken language of things, a whole new genre of uncanny interests and literature would arise, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), E. T. W. Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann* (part of *Die Nachtstücke,* 1817), Edith Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle* (1907), Lewis Carrol's *Alice* series (1865 and 1872), Lucy Clifford's *The New Mother* (1882) *Android Clarinetist*, a life-size robot created by Cornelis Jacobus van Oeckelen in 1838, a procession of Madam Tussauds' uncanny wax figures and many of Charles Dickens' novels.[63] All these works explored the topic of inanimate matter wondrously coming to life, where reawakening was understood as a real event or as a personal nightmare of the real and the unreal, of the animate and the inanimate, as in the case of Hoffmann's Olympia. *Der Sandmann* and its disturbing

analysis of commodity fetishism in the postmodern era in 'Fetishism and Its Vicissitudes' (Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso, 1997)).

[59] Agamben, *Stanzas*, 37..

[60] By referring to humanity's *self-possession*, I would like to introduce Agamben's the idea of semiotic instability—the ever harder struggle to retain control over fixed definitions of humanity. An emphasis here is on *control*, on the inability of humanity to dominate the semiotic earthquakes of the nineteenth-century materiality.

[61] Thomas Richardson, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 11.

[62] Agamben, *Stanzas*, 47.

[63] Many critics have commented on this aspect of Charles Dickens' writing, where objects emerge as subjects while humans (protagonists) emerge as objects. See Richards, *Commodity Culture*, 2; Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 140-141; Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Fiction* (New York: Rinehart, 1953), 129; Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), 189. Also, see Asa Briggs, *Victorian Things* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing, 2003), where he regards Dickens as a 'necessary reading for the historian of things,' (7) and quotes Dickens himself: 'The mightier inventions of the age are not to our thinking, all material, but have a kind of soul in their stupendous bodies.' There is a story of a talking hat-stand titled 'My Mahogany Friend' by Dickens in Bradbury Evans, *Household Words; A Weekly Journal, 1851: Conducted By Charles Dickens. Vol. 2. 1851 Reprint* (London: Forgotten Books, 2013), 558-559.

subtext actually helped Freud in 1919 to develop his famous concept of the 'uncanny' – something repressed that comes back to haunt the subject, a peculiar feeling of strangeness aroused by an encounter with something vaguely recognized.[64] The thing ceased to be an innocent object, its spectral existence coming back to haunt the Victorian subject in his desire. As a commodity, the thing became an abject entity, its abjection being, in Michael Taussing's words, 'the preeminent state of living death where subject and object stage their epistemic panic.'[65] In Marx's world, from the moment it appears as a commodity, a table

> not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.[66]

Commodity fetishism opens a vortex leading to a new area of the thing's Being, 'the mystery that has now become familiar to anyone who has entered a supermarket or been exposed to the manipulation of the advertisement: the epiphany of the unattainable,' as Agamben concludes.[67]

This book focuses precisely on this unattainable aspect of the commodity in the form of mirrors. As we have already seen in Foucault's work on the modern episteme, language, as a formalizing aspect of a new configuration of meaning, opened the same unattainable space, an element of language impossible to reduce to representation, impossible to represent. I would like to read this representational void, this interruption, as the key element of the language of the commodity. As Richards observed in his extraordinary analysis of the Victorian commodity culture, while writing about the fetishized commodity Marx himself had to change metaphors over and over again, incapable of dealing with the commodity's fleeting language.[68] The very nature of commodity is that it cannot be described, it cannot be attained and it cannot be possessed, if only for one reason: the commodity is the ravenous heart of capitalist desire. 'The real consumer,' Guy Debord points out, 'becomes a consumer of illusions. The commodity is this factually real illusion […].'[69] As a true Lacanian *objet a*, a desiring object which is lacking and which 'is not nothing but literally is

[64] Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny,' in *The Standard Edition of Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XVII. (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1919), 217-256.
[65] Michael Taussing, 'Dying Is an Art, like Everything Else,' *Critical Inquiry* 28:1 (2001): 315.
[66] Marx, *Capital*, 163-164.
[67] Agamben, *Stanzas*, 37-38.
[68] See, for example, Stephen Prickett, *Victorian Fantasy* (Hassocks, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1979).
[69] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983), thesis 47.

not,' the commodity, in its nineteenth-century fetishistic form, constantly offers itself to the consumer, recreating itself in the consumer's falling short of attaining it.[70] As testified by the Victorian imagination gone haywire, the commodity in the nineteenth-century language has a life of its own, resting fundamentally upon this break in language that induces a *différance*, a spatio-temporal dissimilarity of meaning '[that] derives from no category of Being, whether present or absent.'[71]

Understood in this sense, as an object of desire, as 'beyond-of-the-signified,'[72] a specter of a lost object that can never be found since it is always already found in its absence, the commodity is literary *not*, establishing a metonymic relationship with the subject who desires it. By reading various Victorian monstrous narratives (siren, as well as mirror narratives), I would like to show that what burns inside the commodity, inside every desired object in the Victorian culture, is that small unsignifiable place in language that epitomizes death (a Beingless signifier) itself. 'Why is death the harbinger and index of the thing-world,' capitalizes Taussig on the strangeness of death in things, 'and how can it be, then, that death awakens life in things?'[73] He might have described the very nature of Victorian, and post-Victorian, commodified materiality.

The argument for the relationship between Victorian humanity and materiality thus goes in circles. The Victorian male desiring subject is called into existence by the omnipresent mirror. The mirror, on the other hand, is the Victorian fetishized commodity *par exellence*, essentially embodying the rupture, death, the monstrosity of the Victorian language. Thus, the subject appears as split and as monstrous as the commodity he faces, as incoherent as the language he came from, reproducing the commodity and the split in language within himself, and reproducing it in many monstrous, disturbing forms, scattered across the Victorian mindscape – including the form of the siren. He reaches for the wholeness promised by the mirror, promised by the commodity, promised by the *objet a*; he reaches for a semantic fullness promised by the mirror *as* a commodity, *as objet a*. He reaches and falls short of this fullness over and over again, only to reach for it again. He dreams a dream of coherence, beyond broken language and meaning, a persistent and profound dream; he dreams about a beyond of the Real, he dreams about it as an awakening from his dream; he wanders through the maze of language, but the maze includes its own exists, so he strays; he fantasizes about death; he revels in his own monstrosity.

[70] Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 77.
[71] Derrida, 'Différance,' 6.
[72] Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 65.
[73] Taussing, 'Dying Is an Art,' 305.

Seen from this point, from the perspective of the world of dreams the subject lives in, from the angle of his desire for death and his devotion to the 'shrine of Nothing,'[74] the book, beyond all the narrative layers of sirens and mirrors, is about that dream of fullness beyond language; it is about nothingness, which is the other face of the fullness that the subject is longing for; it is about a promised awakening, which is a symbolic death within the Victorian language itself. Without it, without this Real of death that keeps calling the subject from the beyond, the Victorian language would not be possible at all. Just like in Lacanian *aphanasis*, the death of the subject, invoked by a mortal language, becomes the condition of his very possibility.

On Things to Come

The corpus of this study is very vast and very diverse. In order to connect the dots between monstrosity, materiality and subjectivity, I was compelled to discuss the sources that could not be enclosed within the rigid confines of a single medium. Consequently, I considered all the analyzed material in view of its connection to the Victorian language, or rather as constituent parts of the Victorian language as such. The language (of monstrosity, of materiality, of the subject, of the monstrosity of the subject and of the monstrosity of materiality), is not to be understood in its literal sense of a living, specific language spoken or written; it is to be understood in its sense of *langage*, an ordering of signs, as language in its essential relation to representation, as the language *of* representation. Thus, the Victorian language that I will discuss in relation to the subject, assumes all the forms of structuration of signs, spoken, as well as written, visual, as well as material. It is my intention to show that the monstrosity of the Victorian subject originates from *within* the language taken as described, and also that it emerges from the material analyzed (the cultural production of the subject). In the same spirit of a constant return to the beginning of the text, to the 'world of dreams' that has been the world of the subject since the nineteenth century, the language of the book constantly returns to the monstrosity of the Victorian male desiring subject, and in describing and creating, creating by describing that monstrosity, the language collapses right next to itself never achieving a semantic fullness. This inevitable spiraling of the argument, where the subject is called into existence by language, only to recreate the language in the same act, brings forth a

[74] 'Death is the shrine of Nothing,' says Heidegger, 'that is, of that which in every respect is never something that merely exists, but which nevertheless presences, even as the mystery of Being itself. As the shrine of Nothing, death harbors within itself the presencing of Being. As the shrine of nothing, death is the shelter of Being.' (Heidegger, 'The Thing,' 176).

set of issues concerning the relationship of the text at hand (the book) and the text(s) analyzed; between the author of the text at hand (the author of the book) and the author(s) of the text(s) analyzed.

The text of the book, apart from the introduction, the prolegomenon and the conclusion, is divided into three chapters, each dealing with the subject's 'world of dreams' from a different perspective and further developing the argument of the book. Each chapter is divided into three or four parts: the first one is introductory to the chapter, while the following two (or three) are close readings deepening the argument of the introductory part.

Chapter One deals with the Victorian glass/mirror culture and with the language of the mirror image in its relationship to the *mostly* male desiring subject. If mirrors are concerned independently from siren narratives, the argument could be freely applied to the female desiring subject as well. After a brief historical overview of the mirror culture in general, the chapter looks into a new status of the mirror in the Victorian imagination. In the nineteenth century, the mirror stopped being a vehicle of religious moralization, or of didactics of proper conduct, and became an expression of the subject's desire. The image perceived in the mirror is never what one wishes to see, it is always more or less than that; the mirror image is a stranger looking back at the subject, promising fullness and delivering the aggression of the subject's fall. The chapter discusses the language of mirrors in connection with the language of commodity, therefore structurally revolving around the epicenter of the Victorian consumerist life and the epicenter of the commodity culture – the 1851 Great Exhibition. Analyzing the mirror narratives surrounding the Great Exhibition, which was held inside an enormous structure made of glass (the Crystal Palace), it becomes clear that most of the narratives struggle to verbally express the encounter with reflecting surfaces, but are unable to do so. The language of this encounter is always a language of lack and excess, the encounter being always either insufficient or excessive for the subject to express it. The subject constantly reaches for a place beyond language, but in his ineptitude to attain it, he experiences *jouissance* of the fall.

Chapter Two is dedicated to my monster of choice, a monster chosen as the cornerstone of the topology of the male desiring subject – the siren. Siren narratives undergo a dramatic change in the nineteenth century, when previously vicious murderesses with no respect for human life, turn into fragile maidens with sorrows of their own. The chapter traces this change in what I call the 'siren literature,' focusing my attention primarily on written, authorial

production of their monstrosity and the textual pleasures the Victorian sirens embody.[75] I have identified a list of traits of these new modern sirens, but there are three of them that strike me as the most important. Firstly, in many of the narratives sirens become the *protagonists*. This movement toward the center of the Victorian narrativity is the first trait of their new-born subjectivity. Secondly, they tend to be depicted as *innocent* and *pure*, not responsible for the deaths of their victims (if any), or not in control of their murderous impulses. This shift usually turns them into victims in the stories, making it hard for readers to distinguish the prey from the hunter. This leads us to the last trait: the sirens and their victims tend to *switch* places so often and so profoundly that their monstrosity becomes absolutely inseparable from the humanity of their victims. In the Victorian narratives, the 'Ulysses and the Sirens' *topos* becomes an indispensable tool for analyzing the Victorian male desiring subject. As the protagonists (sirens and Ulysses in his many guises) change places back and forth, the male subject emerges *both* from the language of Ulysses as from that of the sirens. Building upon the analysis in *Chapter One* and the analysis of the language of the mirror-seduced subject, *Chapter Two* develops the argument that siren bodies (with the indispensable 'Ulysses' element in them), provide us with a topology of precisely this kind of a subject, the one caught inside the illusion of his own mirror image.

Chapter Three discusses siren narratives and their relationship to the mirror-seduced male subject from another perspective. One of the traits of Victorian sirens recognized in *Chapter Two* is their new, strongly visual nature. Nineteenth-century Sirens actually stopped singing, and the power of their monstrosity got transferred from their voices into their bodies. *Chapter Three* takes this notion further, as we discover Victorian scopic regimes of voyeurism in the visual nature of Victorian siren bodies. Not coincidentally, sirens and mermaids were an obsession of those who epitomized these scopic regimes in paining – the Pre-Raphaelites. By analyzing works of John William Waterhouse and Edward Burne-Jones in the wider context of the Pre-Raphaelite painting and philosophy, I demonstrate that behind the luscious mermaid and siren bodies they so eagerly painted, lurks not (only) a *femme fatale*, not (only) misogyny, but the male Victorian desiring subject in all his monstrous glory.

[75] For oral narratives, legends and myths coming mostly from Ireland and Wells see, Miceal Ross, 'Anchors in a Three-Decker World,' *Folklore* 109 (1998): 63-75; Juliette Wood, 'The Fairy Bride Legend in Wales,' *Folklore* 103:1 (1992): 56-72; T. J. Westropp, 'A Study of Folklore on the Coasts of Connacht, Ireland (Continued),' *Folklore* 32:2 (1921): 101-123. Mermaid legends and myths have quite different narratives and structure from authorial narratives that I call 'siren literature,' and thus are excluded from the analysis.

The approach of the book would be accused by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick of 'paranoid reading,' paranoid as in having 'faith in exposure.'[76] Sedgwick claims that since Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, critical theory has been irrevocably paranoid, unearthing truth from the material analyzed and turning paranoid pleasure *into* truth. Paranoia, as a critical approach, presupposes the existence of hidden knowledge in the text analyzed, a thief veiled in darkness, so the paranoid reading initiates a game of cloak and dagger in which one sets 'a thief (and, if necessary, becomes one) to catch a thief; […] "it takes one to know one."'[77] Her problem with this kind of reading is that it presents itself as the only cognitive/affective theoretical practice; it appears to be the one and only plausible approach to reading and knowledge that excludes all other readings. Though I agree that critical theory has been profoundly paranoid, and that my own approach is as paranoid as the rest of its history, at this point I depart from Sedgwick. I do not claim my reading to be 'true', and I confess enjoying *playing with texts* in Derridian sense; I enjoy keeping the conversation going.[78] It is true that I take the greatest pleasure in uncovering the monstrous subject in the material that does not talk about him; in reading between lines; in searching through the areas of silence and cracks in language; in what has not been said and what has not been represented. But some of the material is very explicit about the issues we are dealing with, allowing me to proceed with a straightforward reading. My approach thus distinguishes between Lacan's 'subject of statement' and 'subject of enunciation.' Resting upon his idea of the split subject and the fundamental *méconnaissance* of the self's coherence, the subject of statement is the author of the material analyzed; the one who refers to himself as 'I,' as having an 'I' as the core of his writing/painting/sculpting. But this subject is always lying by telling the truth, since what he says comes from a fundamental illusion at the core of his conscious speech/act, what he presents as the obvious truth (the work of art/literature he produces) inescapably lies. On the other hand, the 'subject of enunciation' always tells the truth by lying, because unlike conscious speech his words does not come from the miscomprehended core of the self, but emerges from *within* this speech, from what is not said, from between the words, slips of the tongue, *parapraxis*.[79] This subject is, thus, always lying, but by doing so he is always, actually, telling the truth. The material analyzed will often

[76] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading: or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You,' in *Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2003), 139.
[77] Ibid., 127.
[78] Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,' in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978), 278-293.
[79] 'At the level of the unconscious,' Lacan observes, 'the subject lies. And this lying is his way of telling the truth of the matter.' (*Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 90).

be regarded as the subject's language of the unconscious. The inconvenient and troubling part of this speech is that it fundamentally rests upon the reader, upon the one who interprets the speech in question.

I am fully aware of this consequence of my approach, but I also believe that it is an inescapable part of hermeneutics. That does not mean that 'everything goes.' It means that 'everything goes' within the internal coherence of a specific 'reading,' within the coherence of the argument presented. The very nature of this introduction, and its opening statement ('we live in a world of dreams'), points to the irreducibility of the analysis to the material analyzed. I have discussed this statement as a constative, analyzing what is impressed upon us as the truth of the statement, as the statement of truth, and we have seen that beneath the hard crust of its superficiality there are questions waiting to be asked: about the 'world of dreams,' about 'living' in it, and, most importantly, about the pronoun that starts the chain, the 'we' that was allowed to emerge as the subject of the statement. Now, it may seem that the statement is a pure constative, that it only informs, says, delivers an inner truth, that it simply *states*, but that is only one of its faces, as far as the world of dreams we are discussing is concerned. As a perfomative, the statement not only *informs* about its content, about the fact that we live in a world of dreams, but it performs its content in so far as the Victorian language of monstrosity that I write about in the book continually recreates itself through what it says. The text of this book participates in the creation of the world of dreams as much as it discusses that world; the text performs the drowsiness of the subject by recreating the subject from the language analyzed.

I find it hard to imagine an approach to text that does not include the researcher becoming enmeshed in the subject of his research, the process Bourdieu describes as 'symbolic violence' or the 'transfer into the Other.'[80] In dealing with desire of the Victorian subject, the writer of these lines, along with their reader is inevitably drawn into the interpretative spiral by his own passion, by his own desire, by his own *objet a*. If he is to talk about the Victorian 'world of dreams,' the reader/writer is bound to invade this world as well. There is no such thing as writing/reading from the outside.

[80] Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*, trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (New York: The New Press, 1998), 17; Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. R. N. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 80, 82.

PROLOGUE

NEVER-ENDING HORROR OF ULYSSES' ABJECT FACES

She is a darker Venus, fed with burnt-offering and blood-sacrifice; the veiled image of that pleasure which men impelled by satiety and perverted by power have sought through way as strange as Nero's.[81]

Algernon Swinburne

The story of Ulysses and the Sirens is very old, one might say ancient; the story is as old as the European literature itself.[82] It starts with the words of a blind man, a bard whose actual existence has never been proven. Victorians adored this bard, his every word being as sweet as honey, and as moral as their belief in him.[83] From Homeric epics, or more precisely from Book XII of the *Odyssey* onwards, the sirens have been aural seductresses, always on the lookout for another body or another soul. Their nature has been carnivorous, and their appetite insatiable. Depending on the period we peruse, we find them as envoys of the apocalypse, symbols of earthly sins, and facets of lies and deceit, as they hunt men down with their enthralling voices, destroy their dreams and lead their minds into the never-ending darkness of the sea.[84] The sirens are all about love and death, about lure, ecstasy, and destruction. Their monstrous bodies invite men to drown themselves in them, to forget who they were, are, and could be, and to experience the violence of love and the ecstasy of death. Their voices, bodies, and faces – an impossible mixture of different species – cry out a wish for disappearance, promising omniscience, but delivering oblivion instead.

[81] Algernon Swinburne, *Notes on Poems and Reviews* (London: J. C. Hoten, 1866), 12.
[82] 'Ulysses' is the Latin version of Odysseus' name. I have decided to use it to avoid confusion and because many nineteenth-century sources I discuss, like John William Waterhouse's painting in this prologue, use it. The noun 'siren(s)' will be capitalized, when it refers to classical sirens (explained further in Part Two). When refers to sirens in general, or sirens from any other era, the noun will not be capitalized.
[83] See, for example, Richard Jenkyns, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980).
[84] For sirens as envoys of the apocalypse, see, for example, William J. Travis, 'Of Sirens and Onocentaurs: A Romanesque Apocalypse at Montceaux-Létoile,' *Artibus et Historie* 23:45 (2002): 29-62. For the general manner of their representation in the Middle Ages, especially as symbols of deceit and lies, see Leofranc Holford-Strevens, 'Sirens in Antiquity and the Middle Ages,' in *Music of the Sirens*, ed. Linda Phyllis Austern and Inna Naroditskaya (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 16-51.

It seems strange that, after millennia of siren lust and cruelty, Victorians invented a type of sirens opposite to all the evil that their age-old sisters represented. Hans Christian Andersen took care of that, his tale *The Little Mermaid* becoming a prototype of the Victorian 'siren literature.' Ostensibly in accordance with the prevailing discourse of Victorian femininity, this type offered a seductive vision of mute virgin girls in search of their own happily ever after, of an 'angel in the house,'[85] or poor creatures desperately in love with their (former) prey. The situation is not so black-and-white, though. As Nina Auerbach remarks,

> [w]hile right-thinking Victorians were elevating woman into an angel, their art slithered with images of a mermaid. Angels were thought to be meekly self-sacrificial by nature: in this cautiously diluted form, they were pious emblems of a good woman's submergence in her family. Mermaids, on the other hand, submerge themselves not to negate their power, but to conceal it.[86]

One feels compelled to wonder if the mute sirens were indeed disempowered by this silencing representational act. We have been given an opportunity to question the reality of their vocal deaths, and reveal sirens as essentially *visual monstrous subjects*. In order to do that, it is vital to understand that the language of sirens has never been theirs alone: it has always depended upon the language of their victims, whose faces bore the sign of Ulysses. For the language of Victorian sirens, the oscillation between these two figures, between the huntress and the prey, is essential, and it is the purpose of this prologue to introduce it. Its other purpose is to raise questions related to Ulysses' desire and show that in the background of all his attempts not to succumb to the siren song, Ulysses craved one thing above all others – death. The core of the language of Ulysses and the Sirens, the object of desire inside the Victorian language as a whole was semantic oblivion of death itself.

Analyzing the nineteenth-century visual masterpiece titled *Ulysses and the Sirens* and the twenty centuries older literary one, we observe deadly sirens as they rise from the abyss between words and images, from the blank spaces within representation, mapping the male Victorian subject for us. Taking the path of abjection, I would like to expose the constant game of absence and presence in the economy of representation of sirens, a game of interruption, which is the source of monstrosity of sirens and of the subject in the Victorian age. In their

[85] Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (London and Cambridge: Macmillan, 1866).
[86] Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1982), 7.

atrocious faces that besiege the subject's desire, we see the abject topology of the Victorian subject – split, horrified and deceived by his own mirror-image.

Ulysses' Abject Self

Figure 1 John William Waterhouse, *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1891)

In 1891 John William Waterhouse, one of the most famous late Victorian painters, eternally enraptured by the inner, implicit female power of transformation, presented the painting *Ulysses and the Sirens* (fig. 1) to the public. Modeled on the Greek red-figure Stamnos vase from the fifth century BC (fig. 2), the painting represents Ulysses in his ordeal of surviving the Siren song.[87]

At first glance, it appears that the painting follows the well-known story in order to communicate the dread of the Sirens' bodies and voices to the public. Christopher Wood, who wrote extensively on Victorian painting, with particular emphasis on the Pre-Raphaelite obsession with female devouring seductiveness, explains the subject of *Ulysses and the Sirens* as follows:

> It depicts the moment when Ulysses and his companions are threatened on their voyage home by the sirens, female monsters who lure men to destruction by their song. To counter them, Ulysses stopped up the ears of his men with wax, and had himself tied to the mast. All around flap the sirens, huge birds with the

[87] *The Siren Vase* is currently in possession of the British Museum, registration number 1843, 1103.31.

faces of beautiful women. […] The boat, the frightened figures of the sailors, and the bleakly rocky setting are all painted with strong realism, and the intrusion of the sirens gives the picture a sinister and terrifying effect.[88]

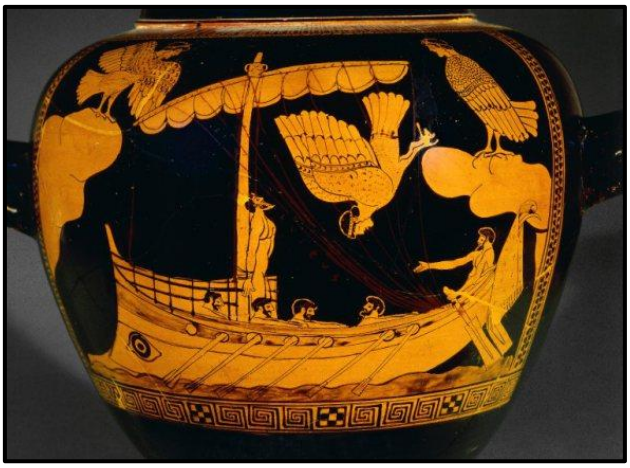

Figure 2 *Ulysses and the Sirens*, Stamnos (ca. 500 BC)

In his straightforward description of the subject at hand – the well-known story of Ulysses – Wood's explanation seems reasonable enough. But an eye in pursuit of what is *not* represented reveals certain discrepancies between the canvas and its final model, Book XII of the *Odyssey*. These discrepancies may seem unimportant and small, but they are indicative of the historical and cultural moment of the painting's appearance. The choices Waterhouse made in his work are the ones made by an artist working within the late Victorian discourse of femininity, building upon the prevailing male fantasies of womanhood and constructing his perspective on the allure, danger and cultural fear of woman's unleashed sexuality. As we shall see, although the model and the artist are separated by two millennia, Waterhouse can himself be seen as not so different from Ulysses, and yet quite different from him. Between the artist and the hero, there is a *sameness* which is not *identical*, a semantic postponement within the representational language of Ulysses that epitomizes the Victorian age. An abject desire resides in Waterhouse and Ulysses alike, a place of dark passion arising from fear and dissolution of the self. The difference is that, for the Victorian Ulysses, this place of tenebrous passion becomes the foundation of his subjectivity. This blank space in representation gave birth to the monstrosity of sirens and to the Victorian male desiring subject as well.

But before we set our sails for Victorian Britain, let us first turn to the Sirens themselves and the first mortal ever to resist their enrapturing song.

[88] Christopher Wood, *Olympian Dreamers: Victorian Classical Painters* (London: Constable, 1983), 230.

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Ulysses has been warned. He knows that the endeavor can cost him his life. But still, the unimaginable delight, and the danger that comes with it, keeps him from stopping up his ears. He has to hear them, he has to know. He is willing to encounter death with his eyes wide open and ears liberated from ignorance. He approaches them thinking that what he wants – what he needs – is the charm of their voices and the knowledge these voices offer. It is high noon, the dog hour, and the demon of the hour is ready; it is the time of the Sirens, the moment when everything melts away like the wax in Ulysses' hands.[89] The temptation, though, starts well before the voices, long before the Sirens: it consumes Ulysses from the moment he was warned, his desire, introduced by Circe's words, called upon by language, invited by her words acting as the signifier. There is a place inside Ulysses that craves and cries for what in his mind appears to be beauty, knowledge, and immortality. He is convinced, by the apparent and the obvious, that what drives him towards this distant shore and makes him face the danger so boldly, is a spark of heroism and curiosity mixed together in the image of ecstasy Circe presented to him:

> 'First shalt thou reach the Sirens who, once heard,
> Charm with their strains the souls of all mankind.
> If unawares come floating on the wind
> That clear sweet music which the Sirens pour,
> He who hath quaffed it with his ears shall find
> No voice, no welcome, on his native shore,
> Shall on his dear wife gaze and lisping babes no more.'[90]

What are these creatures that possess such power? What is the nature of their voices if they are capable of translating destruction into joy?

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[89] In Ancient Greece the planet Sirius was called the 'Dog Star' and it symbolized the hottest days of summer. The dire influence of the 'Dog Star' was said to cause fever in men – and madness in dogs. During the Middle Ages, it came to represent the hottest hour of the day – noon – the time of dizziness, sloth and temptation, the moment when medieval monks were tempted away from their discipline and faith. Sirens, being symbols of flesh, deceit and earthly sin, epitomized this hour in the medieval mythography, but as we can see in the *Odyssey*, the connection between the two is far older.

[90] *The Odyssey of Homer, Vol. 1, books I – XII*, trans. Philip Stanhope Worsley (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1861), XII, verse 6, 289.

So it began – the tradition of sirens' alluring faces. Although it would last for centuries, it begins and ends with the first one who dared open himself up to them, because from that moment on, every man will always be Ulysses, as far as sirens are concerned. For what he craves is neither simply the Sirens' love, nor the fulfillment of his desires, nor is it a simple yearning for the mythical female body or voice. No human love can ever compete with that of the Sirens, since no human love can dissolve the essence of selfhood so profoundly, forcing the subject to drown in his own ecstasy. Thus what Ulysses truly yearns for, although he does not recognize it, is death and decay itself.

By deciding not to stop up his ears, to encounter the Sirens, and to literally expose himself to them, Ulysses embodies a desire that comes not from celestial place of beauty, love and everything divine, but from hell-like depths of the netherworld, from the lair of death, destruction, and fear. Ulysses' desire is, to appropriate the view of George Bataille, an ecstatic experience of looking not towards the light from above, but towards the things from below (*choses d'en bas*); it is a diversion of the gaze that leads to the underground (*souterrain*) of lucid consciousness, a hidden, essential dimension of human existence, where Eros and Thanatos meet.[91] This desire, already visible in the ancient Ulysses, will be the *essence* of the Victorian one. He is both afraid of and aroused by dread. Horror is what keeps him going, but also what makes him order his shipmates to tie him even more tightly:

> "First of the Sirens, couched among the flowers,
> She warns us fly from the delusive song.
> I only, as we pass the fatal bowers,
> Have leave to listen; yet with many a thong
> Need is ye bind me, and with cordage strong,
> Against the socket of the mast upright,
> Lest I should move; and though I urge you long
> To loose me, and implore with all my might,
> Still bind me with more cords and strain them yet more tight."[92]

[91] For Bataille's conceptualization of desire from below and the relationship between desire and death, see George Bataille, *Histoire de l'oeil* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), *L'Expérience intérieure* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), as well as *L'Érotisme* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2011).
[92] *Odyssey*, XII, verse 23, 294.

'The phobic has no other object than the abject,'[93] Kristeva says, and in the moment of Ulysses' peril, the Sirens appear as what he desires and fears the most – they appear as his abject self. Their song of knowledge and bliss has its dark and sinister side, the one that leads to disintegration of selfhood, transformation of the Self into the Other and back again, tapping the 'deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate: the abject.'[94] Like a subject and his abject, Ulysses and the Sirens are interlocked in one and the same image, inseparable in their mutual haunting, as the abject becomes a subject and the subject repels the abject. As it will be shown in the chapters to come, Ulysses and the Sirens are both irreducible words in the sentence of the Victorian male subject's monstrosity.

Ulysses is an archetype of the Victorian male abject fascination. Kristeva explains that the abject is

> a treat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside [of being], ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects.[95]

Following Kristeva's thoughts, we are able to approach that dreadful place inside Ulysses, this death in language that has become the heart of the subject in the nineteenth-century. It became the dream that has not receded since, still manifesting itself in our obsession with, and pleasure in horror at the beginning of the twenty-first century. From the nineteenth century on, deep down inside the subject, inside us, dread-consumers and terror-seekers, close to the imaginary wellspring of our Being, dwells a fiercely burning horror-driven desire. Its flame is black and cold and if we approach it too openly, we risk losing that which we name *ourselves*. This desire entices us, seduces us to come closer and look directly into its heart. But the desire's very voice hurts us, penetrates our skin from the inside, repelling us. We cannot but want this horror of torment, we yearn to be scared. From our own psyche rises the all-pervading horror that haunts our minds, our lives, and our self-knowledge. We are afraid of the monster under the bed or inside the closet, but what we fear most is that once the monster announces itself letting out an anguished roar, we will hear its horror, comprehend its voice, and connect to its

[93] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 6.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid., 1.

words.[96] It is then that we realize that the monstrosity we dread – the true abject – is the one within. If we read the episode of Ulysses and the Sirens bearing this key in mind, we will see that the Sirens are Ulysses' own dreaded monstrosity, as well as his subjectivity, the rejected and desired part of his ego that can never be overcome and will always hover over the construction of his identity.

> "For the shrill Sirens, couched among the flowers,
> Sing melodies that lure from the great deep
> The heedless mariners to their fatal bowers […]
> Thou through the waves thy course onward keep,
> And stop with wax your comrades' ears, that they
> Hear not the sweet death-songs which through the wide air stray.
> But if thyself art fain to hear their song,
> Let thy companions tie thee, hands and feet,
> Upright against the mast with cordage strong.
> So mayst thou hearken to the voices sweet
> Of the twin Sirens, as thy white sails fleet
> Along the perilous coast; yet though thou yearn
> To linger, and with tears thy friends entreat,
> Let them remain hard-hearted, doubly stern,
> Yea, with more chains enwind thee, and thy anguish spurn."[97]

Circe's wise counsel, which Ulysses scrupulously follows, enables him to continue his voyage unscathed. What matters here, though, is not the storyline, which is all too well known, but Ulysses' desire to encounter death, his unfathomable will to expose himself, his senses and his mind, against all odds, to a landscape that is truly transgressional, truly abject, and truly

[96] Joseph Conrad addresses this fear explicitly in his 1899 novel *Heart of Darkness*, at the moment when Charles Marlow encounters the natives. I have italicized some parts of the cited paragraph to emphasize his desire for fear: 'The Earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there – there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly and the men were – No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; *but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity* – like ours – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just *the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dumb suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you – you so remote from the night of first ages – could comprehend*' (Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: Dover Publications, 1990), 68).

[97] *Odyssey*, XII, verse 7-8, 289.

monstrous. It is very important to note a sharp contrast between the Sirens' voices and everything that surrounds them. Their enthralling song comes from a pile of rotting corpses, human skins are stretched on the rocks, and horror is looming in the air. Still, Ulysses is seduced; the words of Circe have imprisoned him.

As he approaches the Sirens, Ulysses is taken by the landscape as a *whole*. To borrow the expression from Inna Naroditskaya and Linda Phyllis Austern, he is captured by 'the nameless and deadly sirens in their bone-strewn seaside meadow,'[98] which makes Ulysses want to jump from the ship, free himself from the ropes of reason and unite with the dread and the love, in one last act of all-consuming joy. Analyzing the painting by Waterhouse, Patrick Hunt expresses a general view on the episode as a whole, where Ulysses is drawn to the voices of the Sirens:

> There is an urgency throughout the painting as his men pull hard on their oars, a tautness in this dramatically imagined scene […] only because its intention seems to be showing Odysseus in a moment of madness he will survive, straining in ecstasy at which any other human, less heroic, could only wonder. This is the moment […] Waterhouse chose, a tantalizing image of musical madness that ravished the soul until the body gave in and men threw themselves overboard, often to drown in churning seas. Odysseus is rapt, internally safe from their "honeyed voices" [translation of the *Odyssey* by Robert Fagles] only as long as the external ropes hold him tight.[99]

Ulysses' ecstasy has always been explained as an aural experience, a vocal drug causing him to go crazy and jump overboard, but this emphasis on the aural aspect of the Ulysses and the Sirens *topos* renders the landscape of the encounter almost completely *imperceptible* and Ulysses almost completely *blind*. In this tradition, Lawrence Kramer argues that '[f]or Homer's Odysseus, the siren's song is a lure to simple dissolution; for his modern descendants, the dissolution is the sirens' song itself, the pleasure of which is its own fatality.'[100] But, in the

[98] Inna Naroditskaya and Lynda Phyllis Austern, 'Introduction: Singing Each to Each,' in *Music of the Sirens*, ed. Linda Phyllis Austern and Inna Naroditskaya (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 5.
[99] Patrick Hunt, 'Homer's Odyssey in Art: Sirens from Greek Vases to Waterhouse,' last modified 4 October 2009, Viewed 13 April 2013, http://traumwerk.stanford.edu/philolog/2009/10/homers_odyssey_in_art_sirens_f.html.
[100] Lawrence Kramer, '"Longindyingcall:" Of Music, Modernity, and the Sirens,' in *Music of the Sirens*, ed. Linda Phyllis Austern and Inna Naroditskaya (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 199.

image of the Sirens' accursed isle, we are presented with so much more than vocal enticement, much more than a simple dissolution:

> Where around about them, piled in many a heap,
> Lie the bleached bones of moldering men that sleep
> For ever, and the dead skins waste away.[101]

From the stack of human bones, where death lurks, abject is calling.

'These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death,' says Kristeva. 'Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadere*, cadaver.'[102] The sweet alluring Sirens' voices and the rotting, decomposing landscape are a single abject image, virtually inseparable from each other. The abjection of the corpses encroaches upon Ulysses and limits between life and death are fading away – *fainting away*, as Kristeva says.[103] The border between life and death has become an object itself. It has become the object of Ulysses' desire. The Sirens, with their invisible bodies (since physically *not* described at all in the poem) sing and lure from a place where death reins, and Ulysses will die for it. Not for the Sirens – he will die for death itself. The Sirens' song is a call to death, but it is also a call to otherness – Ulysses is in the process of becoming the Other at the expense of his own life. 'If dung signifies the other side of the border,' continues Kristeva, 'the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything.'[104] This blurring, fading away of the boundary between life and death, is a rhapsody of decay, of bodies dismembered and turned inside out. It is an ecstasy of devoured flesh; it is the expulsion of the ego.

As remarked before, there are some notable discrepancies between the Homeric description of the Ulysses and the Sirens episode and the canvas by Waterhouse. One of the most obvious is that the despicable shore of rotting human flesh on which the Sirens dwell has changed into a rocky, narrow passage, with only one way out. The semiotic disturbance in Homer, caused by the violent relationship between the sweetness of the Sirens' voices and the landscape that surrounds them, moved into the half-female sexualized bodies of the Victorian Sirens

[101] *Odyssey*, XII, verse 7, 289.
[102] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.
[103] Ibid. In the English translation we have been using, Kristeva's *s'évanouir* has been translated as 'fall in a faint.' We have translated *s'évanouir* as 'fainting away,' in accordance with our sentence.
[104] Ibid.

themselves. This shift from the horrendous landscape to the menacing Sirens' bodies is exactly where the late nineteenth century portrayed itself most clearly. Describing the Victorian cultural imagination, Auerbach rightly observes that the nineteenth century was above all a mythical era – one in which female sexuality, and its connections to the unbridled nature and power of transformation, found expression in the most subtle and innocent looking female representations.[105] By the end of the Victorian era, feminist thought and gender changes have become powerful and demanding, giving birth to the cultural paranoia of the 'New Woman' and drilling their way into works of art that at first sight had nothing to do with them.[106] The changes at a deeper cultural level were in motion, molding cultural imagination in previously unimaginable ways, the misogyny of the period creating the devouring *femme fatale* of the *fin-de-siècle* and her serpentine hair, enchanting hands, and shifting body.[107] This is the climate behind Waterhouse's visual choices, shaping his mindscape, and leading his hand between the sharp rocks of Ulysses' ordeal – a visual, representational and cultural one-way passage.

In the *Odyssey* the Sirens were only two. And most importantly: *they were not physically described at all*. We, western readers, writers and dreamers picture them with feathered arms or fish-like lower parts, but the *Odyssey* does not give us that information. From their first appearance in the Western literature, the Sirens appear as a visual void, an interruption in visual semiotics. 'Everything starts with an interruption,'[108] says Paul Valéry, and by embracing this view, I am making the Ulysses episode a strong issue of spatiality of language, as well as of the *visuality* of the episode itself. The real space, the repulsive landscape of the *Odyssey* moved into the loathsome bodyscape of the Sirens in Waterhouse's painting, following the myth of female transformational power, increasing their number to no less than seven, while they haunt Ulysses not from afar, like in the *Odyssey*, but this time from up close. Derrida once said that

[105] Auerbach, *Woman and the Deamon*, 1. The most notable examples definitely come from the Pre-Raphaelitism (like works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John William Waterhouse or Edward Burne-Jones), but, according to Auerbach, the characters of Trilby O'Ferrall from *Trilby* by George du Maurier, Lucy Westenra from Stoker's *Dracula* and 'Frau Emmy' from Freud's *Studies on Hysteria*, fall into that category too. Poems such as 'The Origin of the Harp' by Thomas Moore, and 'The Mermaid' by William Butler Yates, can be said to belong to the type.

[106] See Duncan Crow, *The Victorian Woman* (London: George Allen & Uwin Ltd, 1971). For the Victorian woman, see also the book by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Mad Woman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

[107] In the now unavoidable guide for any student of Victorianism, Walter E. Houghton describes the many faces of the fundamental Victorian anxiety. See Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1957). For the Victorian fascination with women's hair, see Meghan Edwards, 'The Devouring Woman and Her Serpentine Hair in Late Pre-Raphaelitism,' last modified 26 December 2004, Viewed 14 December 2012, http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/prb/edwards12.html, but also the seminal paper by Elisabeth G. Gitter, 'The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination,' *PMLA* 99: 5 (1984): 936-954.

[108] Paul Valéry, *Mauvaises pensées et autres* (Gallimard: Paris, 1943); our translation.

a woman seduces from a distance and that it is necessary to keep the distance in order to succumb to that distance.[109] This is particularly true of the Victorian culture and its representational spiral. Waterhouse's Ulysses wants to surrender to the fascination, but the Victorian Sirens are too close. He cannot succumb to them, nor can he embrace them, because they are both parts of the same mortal Victorian language. They are all around him, populating the representational space of the painting that Wood describes as 'weird, menacing, and nightmarish.'[110] They are invading his boat as a floating piece of land, his own little heterotopy, in a reverse semiotics of the social order where monstrosity now embodies social norms and Ulysses, in turn, embodies a detached piece of stray territory floating in abject waters. There is a semiotic confusion in this representation, an implosion of meanings.

Reading the Sirens of the *Odyssey* with their bodies visually left blank echoes gazing at them in midair on the canvas by Waterhouse. These remarkable beings, capable of knowing everything, promising everything and destroying everyone, are neither properly here nor there – there is a rupture in their representation. Kristeva says that '[abject] is what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.'[111] And exactly there, in that in-between, in the rift of representation and the temporary blank space of collapsed meaning, is the birthplace of the Sirens' abject monstrosity and of the Victorian male desiring subject alike. The Sirens and Ulysses are one and the same image, two parts of the topology of the Victorian male subject.

Blank space is what Ulysses often encounters on his journey. He expects the sweetness of the Sirens' voices, but if we go back to their dreadful isle once again we shall see that, being a heterotopy in itself, a place where all norms and values are perverted and turned upside-down (or inside-out like putrefying bodies), their home presents itself first as an abrupt nothingness, as another interruption in language:

> Anon the wind slept, and for many a mile
> Some god in silence hushed the marble mere.
> Forthwith, our men the canvass furl, and pile

[109] 'A woman seduces from a distance. In fact, distance is the very element of her power. Yet one must beware to keep one's own distance from her beguiling song of enchantment. A distance from distance must be maintained. Not only for protection (the most obvious advantage) against the spell of her fascination, but also as a way of succumbing to it, that distance (which is lacking) is necessary. Il faut la distance (qui faut),' in Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 48.
[110] Wood, *Olympian Dreamers*, 230.
[111] Kristeva, *Power of Horror*, 4.

> Safe in the hollow ship their naval gear,
> Lean to their oars, and whiten the blue waters clear.[112]

As if at the gates of Hades itself, the home of the Sirens, a presumed residence of joy and bliss, is actually this still, smooth, aquatic grave, covered in human gore. But Ulysses nevertheless is seduced by the ghoulishness of the place, by the threshold of the beyond. No other place can offer him the thrill of enjoyment like the residence of fear itself. This non-existent place to which Ulysses and his companions arrived is '[t]he Nether Nightmare of misogynist fantasy, home of the subject as devoured and drowned'[113] as Kramer puts it, but it is also Kristeva's place of *fear* – the word which hollows out representation and fills it with a 'hallucinatory, ghostly glimmer.'[114] This calm place of nothingness is exactly what the nineteenth century bestowed on the monstrosity of sirens and on the male desiring subject.

As stated above, while introducing Ulysses into his transgressive search of ecstasy from below, from fear, destruction, and death, what we fear the most is the monster that dwells *inside* us. Monstrosity is a text-book example of Kristeva's realm of the abject,

> something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.[115]

Victorian monstrosity is not an object, it cannot be fixed and properly introduced into a semiotic system; it rests on its cultural impossibility that haunts identity, leading to that dark flame inside of us. Victorian monstrosity is an abject, but an abject taken as the very essence of subjectivity. However paradoxical it may sound, I would like to argue that the male Victorian subject *is* that abject, he *is* that monster, and has been ever since. We cannot deal with the dread of our own skin, so we compel ourselves to express it, to render it intelligible. We write the monstrosity, paint it and sculpt it, rarely recognizing in it the exhausting and painful path of self-knowledge.

Thus the Sirens, coming from the netherspace of the monstrous subject, are not opposed to Ulysses, and he cannot reject them by himself. He has to be tied to the mast of the ship, that

[112] *Odyssey*, XII, verse 24, 295.
[113] Kramer, '"Longindyingcall,"' 198.
[114] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 6.
[115] Ibid., 4.

symbol of defense against the piercing, deadly voices of the Sirens. But they are not the same with him either, so he craves them. Ulysses and the Sirens, in their representational language, are the '*sameness* which is not *identical*,' they are words of the Victorian language, a language in whose heart resides a *différance*. Filled with desire and at the same time afraid, robbed of his reason somewhere half-way there, Ulysses is trapped facing the Sirens, trapped by the fact of their inseparability. He is neither the subject nor object, but the abject – that Other which is always already in the core of the ego, because the Other comes before the ego, before representation, before meaning.[116] The abject screams from the undivided space of *always already before*, a space beyond language and meaning the male Victorian subject had been dreaming of since he appropriated his mirror image. The Sirens are Ulysses' abject mirror image, calling, imploring, promising fullness, promising happiness and stability, just like it was in the beginning, like it was in front of the mirror. They promise the whole that will never be. Because it is false, because it is not who we are (if we are at all), it is always the Other we seek, and the Other we need. In the age of mirrors, Sirens are monstrous faces of the male Victorian subject. Risen from this eternal abyss of self-recognition and self-identification, the abject roams the semiotic space and reaches out, while Ulysses the Victorian and his sinister abject siren faces, steering his dream-bound vessel, approach.

[116] Ibid.,10.

PART ONE

MIRROR: THE NIGHTMARE I INHABIT

In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror.[117]

Michel Foucault

Reflection: This morning I caught myself staring at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. It was not just a passing glance, like any other morning, nor was it a vain gaze that appreciated or rejected what it saw. It was more a look of wonder, one that interrogated the image perceived. And it was not alone, that look that penetrated the clear, alluring, imperceptibly silvered surface of the looking-glass; it was followed by a sentiment, haunted by puzzlement, overburdened by doubt. It was a stare that asked – what? – something ungraspable to my half-benumbed mind.

It lasted a moment, an effervescent heartbeat maybe, but it felt like ages to me. And I wondered – not what one would expect from a dialogue with a mirror, namely, who was that person looking at me from behind the glass, peering into my eyes with feverish intent; what I wondered was who was 'I' who stared at the mirror and was I, as I know myself as 'I', there at all. As I continued staring, a half-forgotten verse came to my mind: 'Take off your faces from your masks.' How could I have been sure that there was anything even remotely extant as a perceiving 'I,' a point in the experiential life of an individual, a convergent spot of thoughts, emotions and sensations capable of a true act of seeing? Was this person an individual at all, or was it a void of chaos that stared at this smooth, rounded phantasmal being whose left eye was my right and whose right eye was my left? There was a sort of bewilderment in the encounter that morning, as I could not shake off the feeling of emptiness, and a certain scent of death that filled the space between me – whoever 'I' was, and whatever 'I' signified – and the mirror. Something was not there, where I had assumed it would be; something was lost to me, something that might not had been there at all. But I could tell with certainty that I *lacked* it, that I felt its *absence* – and I could feel it was absent since the beginning, any beginning. How come that, from that moment on, my reflection carried an imprint of death? How come

[117] Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces,' *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité* 5 (1984): 4.

that this emptiness would not go away, disappear, wither away? How come that what I saw was somehow not what I wished to see, but both more and less than my wishful image? And how come that at the thought of it, at the most distant inclination of that void that stared at its own fully rounded reflection, I felt an urge to stretch out my hand and reach for it? How come I felt excited?

* * * * *

Gazing at oneself in order to see the Other, and imagining the Other in order to embrace oneself – these are only two of the limitless possibilities of a mirror. It is said that a mirror could tell us who we are, if we just looked at it from the right angle. In truth, it could show us what we wish to see, but it could also terrify us with fears and desires that are hard to fathom. As an instrument of self-knowledge, the mirror allows endless possibilities for the self and the Other, reaching toward the inside, while exteriorizing an abject self like a fleeing ghost of a man eternally chained to its tomb. There is a monster behind the mirror, because even in a full-length reflection all we can see are fragments of possibilities, never knowing if the next time the mirror image will be a nightmarish one. Sabine Melchior-Bonnet observes: 'monstrosity – the part representing the whole.'[118] The eternal dread of facing fragments of the self, while imagination and culture do the rest, leads a fixed gaze right into the center of the silvered phantasm, only to expose a monster that lurks on the other side – the unfathomable self.

The task undertaken in this chapter is to show the way mirrors, as Victorian commodities, embodied the semiotic interruption of the Victorian language discussed in the introduction. Scattered across the Victorian mind- and cityscapes, mirrors became vehicles of a new monstrous/fragmented subject, the one who dreamed about his semiotic wholeness; he inhabited a queer dream of his own perverted mirror image. It will be shown that mirrors embodied the semiotic incoherence of commodities and expressed the monstrosity of the subject through the language of material culture – a new, shifting, troubling space that, within the culture, opened up between men and things. This space was a small one, as small as a slip of the tongue, as minute as the blank space between words in a sentence. And it was essentially empty, meaning that it acted as a symbolic, nameless residue that attracted desire. This impossible, monstrous space arrived on the wings of three new moments in the history of

[118] Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror: A History*, trans. Katharine H. Jewett (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 226.

mirrors that separated the Victorian culture from its previous history: 1) As commodities, mirrors became omnipresent in the second half of the nineteenth century, they grew in size and advanced in clarity, enabling a perceiving subject to grasp himself as a visual, almost clear, corporeal unity for the first time; 2) The spectacularity of mirrors in the nineteenth century accounts wore off as the century wore on, making them naturalized, culturally inperceptible; 3) In most of the accounts, mirrors came not to reflect the world *without* but the world *within* the subject – his desires, fears and fantasies. These factors, taken together, changed something at the level of desire. Among countless Victorian *objet a* commodities, one of them transformed the male desiring subject into a stranger to himself, into a monstrous, haunting subject. If the Victorian subject was monstrous because he was split between his existential chaos and a miscomprehended illusion of coherence, Victorian mirrors, as semantically shifting commodities, were fragments of the grotesque and monstrous Victorian modernity's endless dream.

The Spectacular Modernity of the Mirror Image

What happens when the gaze penetrates its own reflection so deeply that the spot from which it reaches the upside-down world disappears? This absolute loss of representational parameters is the story of our own times. The first half of the nineteenth century was in this respect still young, although not innocent. The representational labyrinth that started eating away at Being from within the language was new to the century that had just become overloaded with mirrors. In the first half of the century, mirrors, abundant as they were, still inspired awe; they were still culturally perceptible, freshly taken into the world of devious commodities. They were still spectacular, their conspicuousness resonating with wider scopic, voyeuristic tendencies of a culture that began manifesting itself as a theatre.

Nothing exemplifies this convergence of spectacle and mirror image better than the 'mirrored curtain' of the Royal Coburg Theater. On the south bank of the river Themes, at the New Cut that connected Blackfriars and Westminster road was the Coburg, one of the smaller theaters of London.[119] In its day it was famous for its name 'Blood Tub,' a name earned by frequently staging violent melodramas.[120] The Coburg's patrons were Their Royal Highnesses, Princes Charlotte and Prince Leopold, and it struggled to survive, competing with major

[119] Thomas Kenrick, *British Stage, and Literary Cabinet* 2 (June 1818): 136.
[120] Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 34.

London theaters right into the twenty-first century. Today it is still there and bears the name of Old Vic.

The interior of the Coburg was extravagant itself. In 1822, Augustus Frederick Glossop Harris, the first manager of the theatre, commissioned a marine salon that featured panoramic views by the prominent English marine painter Clarkson Frederick Stanfield, representing the recent triumph of the British navy in the bombardment of Algiers in 1816, huge mirrors, as well as portraits of the theatre's patrons.[121] Two large galleries encircled the building, providing the majority of seats. But more than anything else, the Coburg stayed remembered for the visual spectacle of the 'mirrored curtain' novelty (fig. 3).

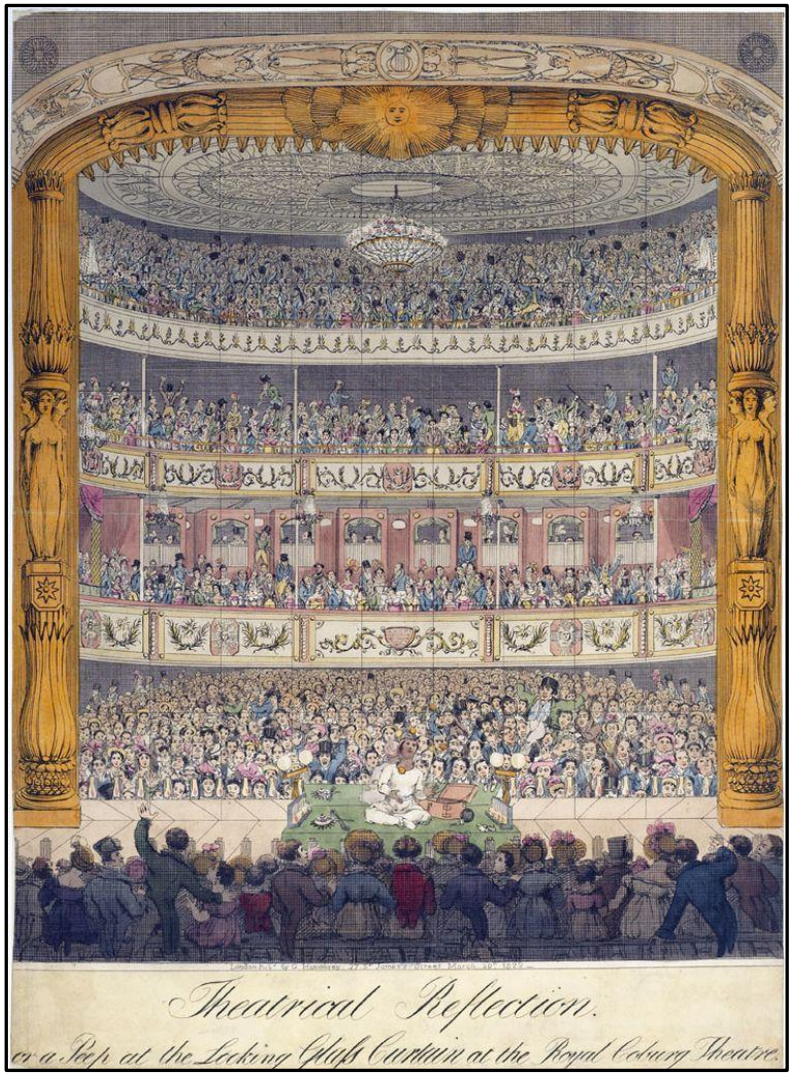

Figure 3 The Mirrored Curtain, The Royal Coburg Theatre (1821)

[121] Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre*, 151-152; see bill for 21 November 1822; Edward Wedlake Brayley, *Historical and Descriptive Accounts of the Theatres of London* (London: Architectural Library, 1826), 92.

In December 1821, the managers of the Coburg installed in the proscenium of the stage an enormous plate-glass mirror, later to be called the 'mirrored curtain.' Since it had still been impossible to produce a one-piece mirror of that size, it was comprised of sixty-three mirrored panels carefully put together and enclosed in an extravagant gilded frame featuring a radiant sun and groups of nude female bodies resembling Caryatides of the Athenian Erechtheion. On the evening of December 26, 1821 the mirror was lowered between the stage and the audience, inspiring awe, provoking the feeling of strangeness and causing commotion. It was so big that it reflected the majority of the perceiving subjects who waved at themselves and at each other. Thirty years before Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace, everyone in the audience became everyone else's reflection, surveying one another, the mirror homogenizing the crowd and killing the distance between the subject and the reflection. In a single, discontinuous stroke of the sixty-three panels of a fragmented monstrous mirror, the audiences could see themselves as participants in their own spectacle. Entering the world of commodities – abstracted in awe, spectacularized in a Victorian voyeuristic fantasy and alienated in the same extravaganza – this mirror embodied the scopic pleasures of the Victorian culture, reflecting, as Edward Fitzball said in 1859, 'every Form and Face in the gorgeous house, from the topmost seat in the galleries, to the lowest bench in the pit.'[122] Richardson believes that the society of spectacle consolidated itself around The Great Exhibition of 1851, but we can see that some traits of this scopic cultural phenomenon had already emerged in small, dim 'places of noise, dirt […] and unbridled sexual commerce,' as Jane Moody describes Georgian theaters.[123] The very act that allowed the boundary between the perceiver and the perceived to be obliterated in the Coburg mirror, allowed audiences to enter a representational loop of appearance, introducing a distance from Being in the visual spectacle. Later we shall see that the Victorian age was an age of the world picture where Being came into being only by being represented, but we have already discussed *aphanasis* as the subject's dying as Being and emerging as meaning. Nothing exemplifies better this distancing death of Being at the conjunction of spectacle and commodity than this mirror that reflected 'every Form and Face,' accentuating the illusion and eclipsing the reality of the stage.

[122] Edward Fitzball, *Thirty Five Years of a Dramatic Author's Life*, 2 vol. (London: T. C. Newby, 1859), vol. 1, v.

[123] Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre*, 3; Thomas Richardson, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (London and New York: Verso, 1991). The main argument of his book is that consumerist culture preceded consumerist economy and not the other way round, and that this culture, as a culture of spectacle, consolidated only during and after the Great Exhibition of 1851.

The responses of the spectators to the curtain were diverse. Horace Foote was carried away by the enchantment of the commodity, where 'crowded audiences testified their delight at seeing themselves in this immense mirror, and for the first time "on the stage".'[124] So, as early as 1821, mirrors came to embody the awe of the Victorian voyeuristic stare, returning the gaze of the subject to him and catching him behind the peephole of the world. Everyone could see everyone else – not like in Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon where vision was dominated from an invisible blind spot of the architectural state power, but in a democratized illusion of scopic equality. The viewers became protagonists of their own melodrama allowing the mirror – the *looking-glass* – to *look back* from the 'flesh of the world' that would otherwise have stayed concealed. Imagining the novelty of the mirrored curtain, Foucault's words ring true: 'The mirror […] enables me to see myself there were I am absent,' in the blind spot of the existence.[125] The bill from the evening of the premiere summarized the new phenomenon of the mirror-commodity concisely: 'the most NOVAL, SPLENDID & INTERESTING OBJECT ever displayed in a British Theatre' – the very definition of the commodity.

Matthew Kaiser commented that the Coburg mirror 'implicates its audience, resituates them onstage, and reduces the whole world to a melodramatic spectacle.'[126] But there is more to this mirror than an inversion of the perceiver-perceived relationship. This grand mirror introduces a semiotic interruption in the visible public space, not only by *inverting* the roles in the scopic spectacle, but by *perverting* them, leading them astray (as in Latin *pervertere*: 'to overthrow,' 'to turn away'). This distortion of meaning is the blueprint of the Victorian spectacle. In this spectacle the epistemic lines between people and mirror-commodities were not *erased* or *inverted* but *convoluted*, leaving the perceiving subject in a nameless spectral space that drives the desire to always crave for more – never becoming satiated and always creating a stronger distance from Being. In the Coburg mirror we can see the same implosion of meaning that we will observe latter in the monstrosity of the mirrorless sirens of the Pre-Raphaelite painting: the spiral labyrinth of signification, which includes its own exits, and in which Being dies at the expense of meaning, while the desire of the perceiving subject roams in never-ending torment of dissatisfaction, searching for a satisfaction. Another contemporary account, a bit less flattering, by James Robinson Planché, clearly expresses this monstrous labyrinth of the visual drive:

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[124] Horace Foote, *A Companion to the Theatres and Manual of the British Drama* (London: William Marsh & Alfred Miller, 1824), 74.
[125] Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces,' 4.
[126] Matthew Kaiser, *The World in Play: Portraits of a Victorian Concept* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 53.

> […] it was a large mass of plate-glass, and in those days must have cost a great deal of money. There was a considerable applause at its appearance. The moment it ceased, someone in the gallery, possessing a stentorian voice called out, "That's all werry well! Now show us summat else!" What more cutting commentary could the keenest wit have made upon this costly folly?[127]

In the world of commodities, desire always craves for *more*. In the field of desire, *objet a* is never reached, never attained, the thirst for more of 'it' is unquenchable. The mirror invoked a vortex of a broken signifying chain, broken somewhere half-way between the audience and the mirror image. In this chain, the representation did not fall back upon itself like in the 'duplicated representation' of Foucault's eighteenth century, cancelling the meaning as we know it.[128] In the Coburg mirror, as in the Victorian language as a whole, the signifier falls not upon itself but always upon something else, introducing the *différance* into signification. This epistemic premise of the nineteenth century – the death of Being and the birth of the monstrous/fragmented subject from the body of a differential sign – assumes that what is revealed by the mirror (however nonsensical and disturbing it may be) is the 'truth' of the subject. In 1821, George McFarren sharply summarized this in a satirical verse on the Coburg mirror submitted to the periodical *Drama*:

> The giant houses, t'other side the water
> Who give to our humility no quarter,
> Say, nought but nonsense live within our portals,
> And call our heroes monsters, and not mortals;
> And henceforth to astound these native elves,
> *Our portals must be true for you'll behold yourself*.[129]

In this verse, we see that as long as the subject beheld himself what came as an image presented itself as the truth. As the subject was entering the labyrinth of signification and

[127] James Robinson Planché, *Recollections and Reflections: A Professional Autobiography*, 2 vols. (London: Sampson Low, 1872), vol. 1, 127.
[128] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Tavistock/Routledge (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 70.
[129] *Drama* 2 (December 1821): 393; my emphasis.

revealing himself as rambling, hence monstrous, the words of Matthew Kaiser resonated true: one should know how to 'survive the looking-glass.'[130]

Horrid as this semiotic implosion, and thus desire, might have been, the perceiving subject was still both frightened and astonished by the revelation of the mirror, its spectacularity not allowing the mirror to sink completely into the third world of commodities, to gain the introductory element: 'just (a mirror).' In 1821, mirrors had still not been naturalized; the image in them still not appropriated fully, hence the fear and astonishment. On the surface of the Coburg mirror, one could see the imprints of the workers, greasy smudges that still alluded to the world without, outside the reflection in the mirror and outside the semiotic implosion of *différance*. 'The glass was all over fingers or other marks,' said the unimpressed Planché.[131] The monstrous subject still wrestled his image and his monstrosity, the imprints hinting at the Real outside the representation. As Kasier wittily observes, big as the Coburg mirror was, it 'was not large enough to swallow the world. […] [It] *might* have swallowed [it]; the signifier *might* have devoured the referent, existence *might* be irrevocably in play.'[132] But it had not, yet. The relationship between the subject and his mirror image was not inverted, but perverted. Mirrors had not acquired their humility yet, and the troubling effect they had on the subject was the striking feature of that time. Once mirrors had become fully integrated into the fabric of the society – naturalized, imperceptible, and taken for granted – the mirror image either disappeared or was broken, as in so many twentieth-century narratives. This scenario slowly began unfolding in the second half of the nineteenth-century. The early nineteenth century subject summoned his will to penetrate his own reflection, and the image he perceived *did* come to life. There was still a spectacular reflection to be grasped, one that would, by the second half of the century, turn into a nightmare.

The Cornucopia of Selfhood

By the end of the nineteenth century, mirror, as an artifact, had come a long way from being a rare object, used only by the nobility, highly expensive and hard both to make and acquire.[133]

[130] Kaiser, *World in Play*, 54.
[131] Planché, *Recollections and Reflections*, 127.
[132] Kaiser, *World in Play* 52, 55; my emphasis.
[133] Geneviève Sennequier, *Miroirs: Jeux et reflets depuis l'antiquité* (Paris : Somogy éd. d`art, 2000), 57.

The history of mirrors is very long and complex.[134] Most of their story is not directly pertinent to our argument, but a short survey could illuminate the argument's background.

When Venetian glassworkers were moved to the famous Murano islands in 1291, mirrors, although extant in various forms for centuries before, were miracles of technology.[135] For centuries, Venice had the monopoly over the production of mirrors, so pure and so clean that they were called *crystalline*, and for a long time these mirrors were perversely expensive.[136] In the second half of the seventeenth century, by a series of events worthy of the best espionage–counterespionage novels on The Cold War, France broke the Venetian monopoly and founded the Royal Company of Glass and Mirrors. The Sun King was crazy about mirrors, and for another century, mirrors basically remained limited to those connected to the court.

The mirror was never larger than what could be cut from a glass ball, and the curvature gave it a bulging shape that could be found in Flemish paintings and German engravings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[137] This is the mirror on the table in Quentin Metsys' *Moneychanger and His Wife*, and on the bedroom wall in Van Eyck' *Arnolfini Portrait*; no larger than a tea saucer and reflecting a distorted image. The game of looking into oneself had different rules, because what one could see was only a distorted image of reality, literally darkened and twisted. In the late Middle Ages and throughout the Renaissance, mirrors were associated with good as well as evil.[138] They had strong religious significance, and Heinrich Schwarz shows that

[134] The history of mirrors and the history of glass are inextricably linked. Some authors, such as E. Barrington Haynes, place the origins of glass in Egypt, *Glass* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1948), 16-20. For variously detailed histories of glass and mirror production, see Gerry Martin and Alan MacFarlane, *The Glass Bathyscapes: How Glass Changed the World* (London: Profile Books, 2002); Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Hugh Tait, ed., *Five Thousand Years of Glass* (London: British Museum Press, 1991); Hisham Elkadi, *Cultures of Glass Architecture* (Aldershot and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2006), 1-15; Harold Newman, ed., *An Illustrated Dictionary of Glass* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1977). For a more history-of-science oriented brief survey, see Seth C. Rasmussen, *How Glass Changed the World: The History and Chemistry of Glass from Antiquity to the 13th Century* (Berlin and Heidelberg: Springer, 2012). There are authors who argue for the Mesopotamian origins of glass, see A. von Saldern, et al., *Glass and Glassmaking in Ancient Mesopotamia* (New York and Cranbury: Corning Museum of Glass Press and Associated University Presses, 1970). For more mirror-oriented surveys, see Mark Pendergast, *Mirror Mirror: A History of the Human Love Affair with Reflection* (New York: Basic Books, 2003); Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror*. For the history of mirrors in art, see Jonathan Miller, *On Reflection* (London: National Gallery Publications, 1998) and Heinrich Schwarz, 'The Mirror in Art,' *The Art Quarterly* XV (1952): 97-118. Margaret J. M. Ezell analyzed seventeenth-century mirrors, predominantly in literature, in 'Looking-Glass Histories,' *Journal of British Studies* 43 (January 2004): 317-338. There is also an interesting, comprehensive survey of mirrors as metaphors and ways of seeing by Richard Gregory, *Mirrors in Mind* (London: Penguin Books, 1998).
[135] Melchior-Bonnet, *Mirror*, 99.
[136] Mark Pendergrast, *Mirror, Mirror*, 146.
[137] Melchior-Bonnet, *Mirror*, 14.
[138] Heinrich Schwarz, 'Mirror in Art,' 97-118.

> the mirror – that is to say, the unblemished mirror, *speculum sine macula* – was the symbol of the Virgin's purity, one of the many symbols referring to St. Mary's Perfection and the miracle of Christ's incarnation.[139]

The mirror also became the symbol of Truth or *Veritas*, as well as of the Deadly Sins: *Superbia* or Pride and *Luxuria* or Lust were frequently represented with a mirror in medieval miniature paintings, as well as in sculptures (Bordeau, Moissac and Arles) and stained glass windows (Notre-Dame, Auxerre and Lyons) of the great French cathedrals.[140] In the Italian Renaissance the classical heritage connected Vanity and mirrors, transforming them into the 'tools of Venus' – emblems of seduction and prostitution.[141] Thus, although the mirror had always been an ambiguous and contradictory symbol, its most persistent attributes were those of lies and deceit — one could not trust its reflection, nor could one identify with it. Mirrors were regarded as miraculous or demonic, capable of predicting the future.

As long as the mirror remained rare and luxurious – existing, but somewhere else – one's disappearing inside one's own image, objectifying oneself, was not possible. Clear reflection and a persistent gaze were still quite far away.

But things changed. With the French aristocracy, crystal mirrors gradually replaced metal ones, which almost completely disappeared from estate inventories in the last third of the seventeenth century.[142] When the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, a joint project of architects Charles Le Brun and Jules Hardouin-Mansart, was presented to the public in 1682, it was met with resounding admiration. As the production of mirrors became cheaper, mirrors slowly started populating everyday space of illustrious salons in the eighteenth century, giving rise to the *cabinet de toilette*. 'Mirrors thus invaded household decor,' explains Melchior-Bonnet, 'and transformed furniture throughout the eighteenth century.'[143] A certain amount of time was needed to get accustomed to mirrors, however, for their visual effects 'turned the relationship between empty and full surfaces on its head and defied equilibrium. But soon people could not do without the light brought by looking-glasses.'[144]

Then, a very curios mirror-piece appeared, one that can be quite interesting for a discussion of mirror-commodities and their impact on loosening the border between people and things.

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[139] Ibid.,98.
[140] Ibid.,105-106.
[141] Cathy Santore, 'The Tools of Venus,' *Renaissance Studies* 11:3 (September 1997): 179-207.
[142] Melchior-Bonnet, *Mirror*, 25.
[143] Ibid,, 81.
[144] Ibid.

The mirrored armoire, a mirror embedded in furniture, emerged in the nineteenth century capturing one of the paradoxes of commodity.[145] Once a mirror of God or Satan, held by Vanity or Pride, this amazing invention that merged luxury and everyday life, now held piles of sheets, household linens and utensils. In our own time, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is hard for us to appreciate the grandeur of this invention. Today, every apartment, house or a household possesses a piece. We wake up in the morning, we open our closet or approach a sideboard, and as we fold our sheets or arrange our china, we see our faces reflected *within* these commodities. In our time, we do not even acknowledge it – a human face within a commodity has become our everyday reality. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the mirror was still young in pulling the subject into this space of blurred semiotic boundaries, but the more common mirrors became, the more enchanting they were. As we have seen in the introduction, this is what Daniel Miller calls the 'humility of things': once a thing becomes common, we tend to take it for granted. Our vigilance, then, becomes low and we start referring to the thing as 'just (a mirror).' But the less vigilant we are the greater the impact of the thing on our lives, the stronger its influence on the construction of meaning becomes. The thing then sinks into the third world of objects – an imperceptible, marginalized reality that strongly influences us nevertheless.

The amazing discovery of the mirrored armoire allowed the monstrous subject to appear to us once again – in order to see himself, the subject gazed into the furniture. His image was now part of the thing, not framed in gold, ivory or wood, but covered in shelves, blankets and china. The commodity, an alienated human child, an offspring of changed relations of production, expressed the anxieties of the Victorian language, taken as the Lacanian Symbolic, and created a background from which the agonized, disjointed subject both appeared and announced himself, spirally enraptured by his own reflection. In the nineteenth century, the future of the post-modern self was born: to see one's own face was to see a commodity. To gaze into oneself was to gaze back into one's own commodified nature.

The Victorian culture was undoubtedly a culture of glass and mirrors. Due to the intense innovation in the technology and production of cheap glass, London – as one of the capitals of the nineteenth century – was, by the middle of the century, completely covered in it.[146]

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[145] Pendergrast, *Mirror, Mirror*, 200; Serge Roche, *Mirrors*, trans. Colin Duckworth (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1957), 302.

[146] Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 133. Glass became cheap in the second half of the nineteenth century. For its circulation, see John Cassell, 'A Visit to Apsley Pellatt's Flint Glass Works,' in *The Illustrated Exhibitor and Magazine of Art: Collected from the Various Departments of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, History, Biography, Art-industry, manufactures, Inventions and Discoveries, Local and Domestic Scenes, Ornamental Works, Etc., Etc., Volumes I and II* (London: John Cassell, La Belle Sauvage Yard, 1852), 54-59, 70-74. See also

Everything could be made of this old but new material. 'Ink stands, paper weights, knives, pen trays,' lists the *Illustrated Exhibitor and Magazine of Arts* in 1852, 'lamp pedestals, candelabra, candlesticks, salt cellars, knife-rests, mustard pots, sugar basins, butter coolers, smelling-bottles, flower-vases, door-knobs, moldings, panels, chandeliers, surgeons' speculae, railway and other reflectors.'[147] Every building in the center of London had ground floor covered in glass shop windows (fig. 4). Interiors of cafés, shopping malls and restaurants reflected consumers as they browsed the goods.

Figure 4 Shaftesbury House, Aldersgate street, Thomas Hosmer Shepherd (26th July 1830)

In his essay *The World as Exhibition*, Timothy Mitchell recounts a story describing the experience of two Egyptians who traveled to France and England in the company of an English orientalist. The 1882 story *Alam al-din* by Ali Mubarak was one the first fictionalized accounts of Europe to be published in Arabic. On their first day in Paris, the visitors walked into a

Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor: Cyclopedia of Conditions and Earnings* (London: Griffin, Bohn and Company, 1861). For the glassing of London shops and public spaces see, George Dodd, 'London Shops and Bazaars,' in *London*, 6 vol., ed., Charles Knight (London: Charles Knight & Co., 1851), vol. 5, 385-400; Charles Manby Smith, *The Little World of London: or, Pictures in Little of London Life* (London: Arthur Hall, Virtue, and Co., 1857), 319-400. Henry-Russell Hitchock's *Early Victorian Architecture in Britain*, 2 vols. (London: Architectural Press; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954) illustrates nearly a dozen large-windowed shop complexes dating from the 1840s in London and elsewhere, see figures 5-7, 13, 15, 22-27, 29, chapter 12. See Mark Wiggington, *Glass in Architecture* (London: Phaidon, 1996), for the use of plate glass in architecture. See also, N. Whittock, *On the Construction and Decoration of the Shopfronts of London* (London: Sherwood, Gilbert & Piper, 1840); Raymond McGrath, *Glass in Architecture and Decoration* (London: Architectural Press, 1937); Kathryn A. Morrison, *English Shops and Shopping: An Architectural History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003).

[147] *Illustrated Exhibitor and Magazine of Arts* 1 (1852): 70-71.

wholesale shop and lost themselves in the endless corridors and crowds of people infinitely multiplied by omnipresent mirrors. As they wandered in horror through the endless maze of reflections, passers-by did not even acknowledge their desperation. 'They stared at the two in silence as they passed,' concludes Mitchell, 'standing quite still, not leaving their places or interrupting their work.'[148] This and similar stories show how the glass culture appeared to the subject from *outside* the Western representational labyrinth, and how exuberant mirrors actually were. Today, mirrors are so completely naturalized in our culture that it is really hard to appreciate the astonishment of the Middle-Eastern visitors, and a sense of novelty the Western subject experienced. In the city's shop windows, public mirrors, barber mirrors and café mirrors, one never saw one's own image from the same angle, there was always a different subject reflected back to the perceiver. The copiousness and size of public reflective surfaces literally revolutionized the way a subject interacted with his own corporeal and psychic coherence.

There is 'an inordinate love of plate glass,' complained Charles Dickens in *Gin Shops*, '[…] door knocked into windows, a dozen squares of glass into one [in shops and gin palaces].'[149] Transparency and reflection became prime architectural, artistic and social elements. Isobel Armstrong shrewdly observes that Victorian 'glassworld' – the fantasy of the 'dreaming community,' to borrow Walter Benjamin's phrase – embodied the cultural dream, or better the illusion, of a transparent, democratic society.[150]

By the middle of the nineteenth century the fetishization of the mirror and its turning into a commodity became evident at the Great Exhibition, which Benjamin immortalized as 'pilgrimage-sites of the commodity-fetish.'[151] Tracing the steps of Marx, Agamben concluded that Marx's visit to London in 1851 when the first Great Exhibition took place in Hyde Park led his thinking to the analysis of commodity fetishism. 'The "phantasmagoria" of which he speaks in relation to the commodity,' argues Agamben, 'can be discovered in the intentions of the organizers, who chose, from among the various possibilities presented, Paxton's project for

[148] Timothy Mitchell, 'The World as Exhibition,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31:2 (1989): 225-226. Another story he recounts is of the same nature, taken from the story by Rifa'a al Tahtawi, *al-A'mal al-Kamila*. It also tells about an Egyptian writer and his experience of mirrors on his first day in a European city: 'There were a lot of people in there, and whenever a group of them came into view, their images appeared in the glass mirrors, which were on every side. Anyone who walked in, sat down, or stood up seemed to be multiplied. Thus the café looked like an open street. I realized it was enclosed only when I saw several images of myself in mirrors, and understood that it was all due to the peculiar effect of the glass' (226).

[149] Charles Dickens, 'Gin Shops' in *Sketches by Boz, Illustrative of Every-Day Life and Every-Day People*, ed. Charles Dickens (Philadelphia: Getz, Buck & CO., 1852), 101.

[150] Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*. This is one of the main arguments in the book.

[151] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Harvard University Press: Cambridge (Mass.), 2002), 50.

the enormous palace constructed entirely out of glass.'[152] This exhibition used glass and reflection game to capture,

> the transfiguration of commodity into an enchanted object [...] In the galleries and pavilions of its mystical Crystal Palace, […] the commodity is displayed to be enjoyed only through the glance at the *enchanted* scene.[153]

Reflecting surfaces proved themselves *as* commodities, objects miraculously came to life by acquiring the *bluish halo* of the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park. Wherever they turned, people were haunted by their own reflections. In the streets, during meals, in city shops, transparent and reflecting surfaces surrounded the subject every step of the way. For the first time in the history of the West, the subject was not only able to encounter himself on every corner, but also to experience fully the externalization of his body. The full-length image of one's body was a new experience. In 1889 *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James, the governess experiences her full-length mirror image for the first time.[154] In the course of the century, the Western world became a mirror; the subject was being mediated by reflective surfaces everywhere.

The sentiment that the world of the nineteenth century (the age of the world picture, the world as a stage, or a peepshow) itself became a mirror grew strong. In the 1930s, Benjamin was able to note in one of his convolutes from *The Arcades Project*:

> Paris is a city of mirrors. The asphalt of its roadways smooth as glass, and at the entrance to all bistros glass partitions. A profusion of window panes and mirrors in cafés, so as to make the inside brighter and to give all the nooks and crannies, into which Parisian taverns separate, a pleasing amplitude. Women here look at themselves more than elsewhere and from this comes the distinctive beauty of the *Parisienne*. Before any man catches sight of her, she already sees herself ten times reflected. But, the man, too, sees his own physiognomy flash by. He gains his image more quickly here than elsewhere and also sees himself more quickly merged with this, his image. Even the eyes of passersby are veiled mirrors, and

[152] Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (Minneapolis and London: Minneapolis University Press, 1993), 38.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* (New York: Courier Dover Publications, 1981), 7.

> over that wide bed of the Seine, over Paris, the sky is spread out like the crystal mirror hanging over the drab beds in brothels.[155]

There are a myriad of things to read in this convolute by Benjamin. In his account, in his male fantasy, women see themselves multiplied, the same as male subjects, but always in anticipation of the male gaze. Their reflection cannot step out of Benjamin's fundamentally male, objectifying gaze. Also, man *merges* with his image. He appropriates it quickly, embodying the exteriorized image of the self. The hyper-abundance of and obsession with reflection is clear in Benjamin, even exaggerated. Every little thing – passersby, their eyes, even the sky above the river – sends the subject's image back to him, pointing to the same circle of desire that troubled Freud in his excerpt from the 'Uncanny.'

> As I was walking, one hot summer afternoon, through the deserted streets of a provincial town in Italy which was unknown to me, I found myself in a quarter of whose character I could not long remain in doubt. Nothing but painted women were to be seen at the windows of the small houses, and I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning. But after having wandered about for a time without enquiring my way, I suddenly found myself back in the same street, where my presence was now beginning to excite attention. I hurried away once more, only to arrive by another *detour* at the same place yet a third time. Now, however, a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny, and I was glad enough to find myself back at the piazza I had left a short while before, without any further voyages of discovery.[156]

As Freud always comes back to the same red-light street, performing the repetition of a repressed sign, so does Benjamin's gaze always come back to him no matter where he looks, staging the trauma of the lost self-coherence (the one that is experienced as a lack, as an absence of something that has never been there in the first place), a dissatisfaction of desire, a misstep – like grabbing water in a hollow cup. As Hanna Arendt observes, Benjamin's imagination was essentially superannuated, essentially Victorian, 'as though he [Benjamin] had drifted out of

[155] Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 537-538.
[156] Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny,' in *The Standard Edition of Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XVII. (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1919), 236.

the nineteenth century,' and his writing reflects the Victorian age haunted by its own mirror image – precisely because this image was false.[157] Beyond this reflection, where the 'true' coherence of the self dwells, waits the Real that always comes back to itself. It inhabits the space beyond the representational labyrinth that the subject will never reach. Is not this convolute by Benjamin perturbing; is it not something uncanny that comes back from beyond, or below, like from Bataille's 'underground'? Does it not make us apprehensive, this reflection that comes at the same time from everywhere and nowhere? Is it so unimaginable that in an age obsessed and haunted by its reflection something changed at the level of desire?

Another convolute by Benjamin citing S. F. Lahrs shows that the reality of 1837 was quite similar to his own experience of a reflective Paris.

> Egoistic – "that is what one becomes in Paris, where you can hardly take a step without catching sight of your dearly beloved self. Mirror after mirror! In cafés and restaurants, in shops and stores, in haircutting salons and literary salons, in baths and everywhere, 'every inch a mirror'!"[158]

In the above quotation, we see the subject enraged by the encounter with himself every step of the way, his external existence loathed and despised; he is almost tired of this skirmish with mirror images. As Armstrong suggests, these abundant public reflective 'surfaces, recording the random, dispersed, and evanescent images of the body in the world, gave a new publicity to the subject, who could exist outside of itself in these traces.'[159] This external existence, and its re-appropriation, is the new Being of the Victorian male desiring subject.

In an environment in which, for the first time, the subject was able to live his own reflection, to visually experience an *almost* clear (a mirror is never completely clear, especially in the nineteenth century) and coherent image of the self, what happened with the perceiving subject? What did this change mean to him? As we shall see shortly, the narrative of the mirror, the fantasy it conveyed, inevitably had to change. The spatial democratization of reflective surfaces, the mediation of the self by mirrors and windows, by the glass of the nineteenth century, led the subject into the same representational loop of the Victorian language that we have already diagnosed for the materiality of the commodity in general – because reflective

[157] Hanna Arendth, Introduction to *Illuminations*, by Walter Benjamin (London: Pimlico, 1999), 25.
[158] S.F. Lahrs, *Briefe aus Paris*, in *Europa: Chronik der gebildeten Welt*, ed. August Lewald (Leipzig and Stuttgart, 1837), vol. 2, 206. (Cf. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 539).
[159] Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 95.

surfaces *were* commodities. Through the looking-glass, the Victorian world of *appearances* opened, it started descending into the nothingness of its own reflection. 'It blinks,' this mirror world, says Benjamin. '[I]t is always this one – and never nothing – out of which another immediately arises.'[160] The mirror world, the Victorian 'glassworld,' slowly established a world of simulacra at the expense of the unattainable Being. 'The space that transforms itself does so in the bosom of nothingness,' continues Benjamin anticipating Gilles Deleuze's claim that the 'modern world is one of simulacra.'[161] Contrary to the absolute transparency of the twentieth-century glass culture, Armstrong argues, the subject of the Victorian transparency is a 'subject in difficulties,' signified by scratches and fingertips on the glass that created internal contradictions.[162] In a counter-movement to the externalization of his image, the subject appropriated the image perceived taking it as his own coherent self. And out of this misrecognition the split was born, a dark and horrid place impossible to signify, which kept summoning the subject in, the subject in search of congruity and escape out of the representational horror. Towards the Real, towards the lack, towards the *object a* that has never been there – towards a coherence of the self. From this anxiety of an attainable desire, the one reaching towards commodities as false objects of satisfaction, a dream arrived, fundamental to the Victorian modernity – a dream of wholeness, a dream dreaming its own awakening. This dream expressed its spiral horror in a new mirror narrative, one that kept haunting the subject and the culture for more than a century – the narrative of similarity that is not identical, of anxiety and strangeness. Once more the subject expressed himself in a disquieting, agitating language of the unconscious – in a haunting mirror image – as yet another face of the haunting commodities, the inanimate things miraculously came to life. And the subject kept dreaming his fantasy. But the dream that came to him, the one he was born from, turned out to be a nightmare.

The Haunting Strangeness

In 1891, through the pen of Oscar Wilde, Lord Henry said to Dorian Gray: 'It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances.'[163] Fleeting as it might be, this remark bears in itself a culture, a history, and a language. As any cultural creation, it reaches deep down into the pool

[160] Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 542.
[161] Ibid.; Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), ix.
[162] Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 14
[163] Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 30.

of socially possible and impossible imageries, bringing back to the surface the inner structure of the society itself. If something as an appearance, which has been for centuries conceived of as a synonym for the superficial – even diabolic – could have emerged as its own opposite, then this substitution tells us about the specific cultural moment of *fin-de-siècle*, as much as it speaks of the inner demons that haunted Dorian Gray. At the core of this remark, we find an inversion of form and content, absence and presence, humanity and commodity – an inversion that established itself as a prerogative of the society of spectacle. Putting it into the wider context of the novel from which it appeared, what Dorian Gray allowed himself was to abstract his existence and transcend his humanity. By doing that, he entered a game of categories that were not erased but *blurred*, raising with this act the mentioned fears of an uncanny transgression of commodity. He became an object, materiality deprived of growing old, his self eternally stored in a picture frame which would be his reward and punishment. Oscar Wilde, the dandy of the era, captured the spirit of the age in a single evanescent remark.

As the commodity became the 'centerpiece of everyday life,' the 'focal point of representation,' and the 'dead center of the modern life,' as Richards stresses, the mirror joined the vast and diverse family of commodities and assumed a primary position in Victorian culture.[164] By its newly acquired commodified and fetishized nature, this curios object developed a new narrative, showed its new face – one that proved essential to the new male desiring subject. It showed, or was beginning to show, the essential dependence of the subject on the material language of commodity. Contrary to its medieval, Renaissance and Enlightenment history that considered the mirror as an instrument of God, as well as an instrument of Satan, a tool of moral purity or fall – but rare and small all the same – the moment the mirror became omnipresent as a cheap, widespread commodity, its representation in art and literature stopped reflecting God, sins and virtues – it stopped moralizing and educating on proper values of life as it did in the ages past. Now a new role of the mirror consisted not in reflecting what was *without* and *external* to the subject who gazed into it, but precisely what was *within* and *internal* to him – his dreams, his fears, his fantasies. The mirror and its fantastic story became a playground for the subject of the unconscious, causing the subject to reveal himself from *inside* the language. In a nutshell, mirror, in its guise as a commodity – an object raised to the status of a Thing, desired, yearned for, ostensibly acquired, but always leaving a craving for more – became, almost literally speaking, a *creature of desire*.

[164] Richards, *Commodity Culture*, 1.

In the poem *The Lament of the Looking-Glass* by Thomas Hardy we can see this twisted nature of the mirror's materiality that gets morphed into the selfhood of an object. In it, the looking-glass laments its forsaken existence, revealing the subject that once stood before it, confusing the categories of the perceiver and the perceived. The mirror discloses the ghosts of the perceiving subject's desire: 'I flash back phantoms of the night / That sometimes flit by me […],' says the mirror.[165] The limits of representation of materiality collapse in the mirror-commodity, leaving man immobile and inanimate, and turning a thing – the mirror – into a talking subject. The looking-glass literally *looks*. It is alive. It discloses for us the language of monstrosity, and in its disturbing undead materiality, it reveals the monstrosity of the Victorian subject who dreams of it. This subject has a nightmare without realizing it, expressing his tormented non-Being in a displaced representation of the animate object. Time and again in Victorian poetry we encounter the same theme of strangeness and appropriation of the reflection in the mirror.

We are principally discussing the male subject, as expressed in his creations (poetry, painting, sculpture, etc). But, as it has been said in the introduction, many of the issues discussed could be seen as relating to the female subject too. We will analyze a couple of examples together with the examples of the male subject.

In *A Royal Princess* (1866) by Christina Rossetti, mirrors obsessively reveal to the princess, dissatisfied with her golden cage, her ubiquitous, multiplied and fragmented self:

> All my walls are lost in mirrors, whereupon I trace
> Self to right hand, self to left hand, self in every place,
> Self-same solitary figure, self-same seeking face.'[166]

She cannot escape her mirror image, reflected in her every move, on every wall. The face in the mirror image, the same as her own, keeps searching, isolating her in a solitary figure. As she sits on the dais, her mirror image keeps haunting her, showing both her fear and her desire, as she comes to despise her comely face: 'A mirror showed me I look old and haggard in the face.'

[165] Thomas Hardy, 'The Lament of the Looking Glass,' in *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. James Gibson (London: Macmillan, 1976), 675.
[166] Christina Rossetti, 'A Royal Princes,' in *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, ed. R. W. Crump (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 149-150.

In George Meredith's *Modern Love* (1862), a husband observes his wife's struggle to confess:

> She has desires of touch, as if to feel
> That all the household things are things she knew.
> She stops before the glass. What does she view?
> A face that seems the latest to reveal![167]

We can almost feel the desire for the comfort of things, the subject's reaching for subjectified commodities, 'things she knew,' as the wife turns towards the mirror to view the reflection in which her face comes to be reflected last. The subjectivity of the wife (in the eyes of her husband) is first expressed in the form of familiar commodities, leaving a chasm of unsignifiable space gaping from the mirror, between the revelation of things and the revelation of the human face.

In *By the Looking-Glass* (1866) by Augusta Webster, a girl sitting in front of a mirror, displeased by the superficiality of the society says:

> A girl, and so plain a face!
> Once more, as I learn by heart every line
> In the pitiless mirror, night by night,
> Let me try to think it is my own.
> Come, stranger with features something like mine,
> Let me place close by you the tell-tale light.[168]

The girl pretends that the face she sees in the mirror is hers, precisely because it is *not*, because the mirror reflects not what it is, but what the perceiver desires. The image is here literally a stranger, with features that resemble the girl's, but they are not hers nevertheless. The mirror again opens a nameless part of the language, it opens up a *différance*, in which what one sees is always both more and less than what one wishes to see. Desire pulls the subject in,

[167] George Meredith, 'Modern Love,' in *Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside with Poems and Ballads*, ed. Rebecca N. Mitchell and Criscillia Benford (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 44.
[168] Augusta Webster, 'By the Looking-Glass,' in *Augusta Webster: Portraits and Other Poems*, ed. Christine Sutphin (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2000), 117.

towards the appropriation of this nameless, horrid, and troubling stranger. 'There,' the girl says, 'looking back from the glass, is my fate.'

Finally, *The Other Side of a Mirror* (1882) by Mary Coleridge, capitalizes on all the fragments of the strangeness of the mirror image we have discussed. Almost every line of the poem is dripping with the queerness of one's reflection, hinting at the void in representation, introduced and epitomized by the mirror's commodified nature. 'I sat before my glass one day, / And conjured up a vision bare […] / The vision of a woman, wild / With more than womanly despair.'[169] This image is not only wild and overly desperate, emotionally too much and too little, but it is *conjured*, summoned like an otherworldly minion in a hellish fantasy. This specter invoked through the commodified nature of the mirror comes to our summoness as an essentially *silent* image – mute and commodified.

> Her lips were open – not a sound
> Came through the parted lines of red.
> Whate'er it was, the hideous wound
> In silence and in secret bled.
> No sigh relieved her speechless woe,
> She had no voice to speak her dread.[170]

This silence of the subject is a *dreadful* silence. It is the silence of desire's dreadful spiraling around the semiotic implosion of the Victorian language. This desire grows mad, enraged, furious, berserk, its dissatisfaction never-ending, jealous, vengeful and unceasing.

> And in her lurid eyes there shone
> The dying flame of life's desire,
> Made mad because its hope was gone,
> And kindled at the leaping fire
> Of jealousy, and fierce revenge,
> And strength that could not change nor tire.[171]

[169] Mary Coleridge, 'The Other Side of a Mirror,' in *The Collected Poems of Mary Coleridge*, ed. Theresa Whistler (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), 88.
[170] Ibid.
[171] Ibid., 89.

And then it collapses in the *jouissance* of appropriation, in the experience of the fall of the subject:

> Shade of a shadow in the glass,
> O set the crystal surface free!
> Pass – as the fairer visions pass –
> Nor ever more return, to be
> The ghost of a distracted hour,
> That heard me whisper, "I am she!"[172]

The poem perfectly embodies the themes of strangeness of the mirror; a mirror reflection that presents itself as haunting, mad, insatiable, ghostly, silent; a reflection that reveals the within of the perceiving subject; and finally the appropriation of the hallucinated image as one's own in the final 'I am she.' The poem epitomizes the Victorian world as a mirror, a maddening desire of the subject in search of coherence, dreaming about wholeness, but misrecognizing the external mirror fantasy as her own self, and, by doing that, expressing herself as fundamentally incoherent and monstrous.

* * * * *

There are authors who have already acknowledged this shifting narrative of the mirror in various spheres of the Victorian culture. Isobel Armstrong takes up this new notion of the reflection in the mirror. Discussing Victorian 'glassworlds' – the metaphors and socially constructed meanings of the Victorian glass culture – the chapter on the Victorian mirror-poetry includes themes such as 'ghosts,' 'fragments,' 'surfaces and depths,' and 'a stranger's look' as common tropes in the nineteenth-century poetry.[173]

Analyzing the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century romantic poetry and criticism, M. H. Abrams identifies two great metaphors of artistic creation, and the role of poets and artists in it: the mirror and the lamp. He explains them as two 'common and antithetic metaphors of the mind, one comparing the mind to a reflector of external objects [the mirror] the other to a

[172] Ibid.
[173] Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 111-113.

radiant projector which makes a contribution to the objects it perceives [the lamp].'[174] The mirror had been a basic metaphor for critical thinking since Plato, until the end of the eighteenth century, while the lamp exemplified the romantic tradition. Abrams sets an artificial dividing line between these two attitudes around the year 1800, taking Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* as a convenient document to 'signalize the displacement of the mimetic […] by the expressive view of art in English criticism.'[175] Although he identifies that the mirror metaphor disappears precisely in the period of our analysis, this disappearance *speaks*. As the mirror slowly entered the world of commodities, disappearing into naturalization towards its cultural imperceptibility of 'just (a mirror),' (that would not happen suddenly, but slowly in the course of the century), the mirror disappeared from the language of art criticism too, giving way to the metaphor of the lamp, to 'the internal made external.'[176] Thus the mirror and the lamp embody a change, not only on the surface of words, preferring one to the other, but they express the cultural imagery of art which, from the nineteenth century onwards, describes the Victorian subject as 'the internal made external,' (the radiating lamp), just as the haunting strangeness of the mirror presented the internal as external. In the same fashion, Oscar Wilde exclaimed in the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: 'It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.'[177]

The above poetic material shows that the Victorian subject appears as a fundamentally tortured and shattered one. The abyss in the representation of the commodified materiality pushes the mirror to the fore in form of an object that miraculously comes to life, expressing the anxiety of a disjointed subjectivity. This rift in the representation of mirrors as tools of a monstrous, split, desiring self, reveals itself to us in a number of Victorian narratives. We have already found it in the mirror poetry – various nineteenth-century poems that use the 'mirror reflection' trope, expressing this new, disturbing, unknown place within the subject, which presented itself as ghostly, strange and nameless. We will find, shortly, the same rift in *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll, the undying Victorian classic that deals explicitly with this disturbing figure of language wrapped in the images of mirrors. We find it in the unavoidable image of the Crystal Palace of the World Exhibition of 1851 by Paxton, which materializes Victorian social, political and class fantasies, as Armstrong shrewdly observes. In the next chapter, it will be shown how the Palace embodies the desiring fantasy of the male

[174] M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), vi.
[175] Ibid., 22.
[176] Ibid., 48.
[177] Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray*, 6.

subject – a place where the subject falls, exhausted and overwhelmed by his own reflection, dissolved in the *joissance* of materiality. Finally, we find this new mirror figure in a number of monstrous narratives that span the century: from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, as well as in a number of siren stories that are the subject of Part II of the book. In all of these cultural pieces – material, visual, and written – the mirror expresses a new relationship of the perceiving subject with the thing reflected and perceived, or better, revealed. In all of them, something disturbing lurks behind the reflected image, a dark fantasy that haunts the subject and his relationship with his image. For this reason, Lacan's analysis of the mirror stage proves convenient for thinking about the dream behind this change in representation. For Lacan, the 'mirror stage is always a drama,' a place where everything begins and ends in a swirl of misrecognition of the image perceived.[178] Nothing can be truer of the Victorian mirrors. The subject who looks in the mirror rarely sees what he expects to see; he rarely sees what he *wishes* to see. He always sees more or less. As we dive into the Victorian mirror reflection through the two segments to follow this introductory chapter, time and again we find an exhausted, puzzled subject, one afraid of what might appear next in the mirror. In this context, the Lacanian mirror stage is completely Victorian. Arriving from the intellectual milieu of the mid-twentieth century (precisely at the moment when everything Victorian gains its strength again), the imaginary of the Lacanian mirror stage seems as nineteenth-century in its nature, as any heir of Freudian psychoanalytic vocabulary. As Auerbach convincingly showed, analyzing Freud's narrative of hysterical Dora, Freud's theory was brutally subjected to the Victorian male fantasy about female sexuality, an unknown field Freud himself confessed he had never understood.[179] Building on Freud's theory, Lacan argued for the split subject that mistook the coherence of his mirror image for his own self. In this image, he exposed the fanciful reality of the Victorian desiring subject.

Though, on the surface, many things Victorian met their respective deaths at the hand of the twentieth century, the desiring subject of the twentieth stayed profoundly Victorian in his nature. The split that opened in representation and inhabited language from within – the chasm that, circularly, both gave birth to the monstrous subject and emerged as a result of his split self – stayed there in the centuries to come, becoming wider and more bloodthirsty as it grew. What was a dilemma in nineteenth-century narratives, what presented itself as exhaustion of the

[178] Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,' in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2006), 78.
[179] Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1982), 26-34.

subject and the impossibility of coherence that troubled the mind of the Victorian desiring subject, became the nature of reality itself for his twentieth-century descendants.

One thing remains certain: the encounter with a reflecting surface must have profound effects on the perceiving subject, regardless of the age when it takes place. Whether we agree that the trans-historicity of Lacanian analysis is questionable, or that his mirror scenario can help us deal better with the representation of the self in the nineteenth century and the centuries to come, the moment a subject first sees himself as whole, comes as an important moment in the construction of selfhood. This is the point in time when the subject realizes that he is not the Other that cares for him (a parent) and that he has a corporeal existence of his own. In this light, the historical moment that introduces the mirror as an everyday, omnipresent artifact, revealing reflective surfaces at almost every step, must be considered as an important moment in the history of selfhood, as well as in the history of language. The nineteenth century *was* that moment, the first moment when the looking subject could gaze at his own reflection everywhere, all the time. It was a time of commodities and a time of mirrors – it was a time of mirrors *as* commodities. In this chapter we saw how this particular conjunction of the historicity of mirrors and that of commodities resonated together through the Victorian semiosphere, transforming mirrors from elite, luxurious, hard-to-get object into everyday commodities, at the same time when an afterlife of these commodities, in the form of desire, expressed the split of the subject. The transformation of mirrors and the afterlife of commodities were two sides of the same nineteenth-century modernist dream – a sustaining dream of a whole, coherent, untroubled selfhood in the age of a split, fragmented self – monstrous precisely due to his unending, semiotically troubling nightmare that weaved itself into the very fabric of the society.

FALL 1: EXHAUSTED AT THE LAKE'S SHORE

> *[A]ll of the things that are used to signify derive, from the very fact of their pointing to something else, a power which makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things, which raises them into a higher plane, and which can, indeed, sanctify them. Considered in allegorical terms, then the profane world is both elevated and revalued.*[180]
>
> Walter Benjamin

In the previous chapter we saw how, at the historical moment of the mirror's overabundance, its commodification transformed the perception of the self. The mirror introduced a split in the language of representation through which the perceiving subject fell. The anxiety of this fall we read in the language of the mirror's materiality and of the mirror's reflection. In the nineteenth-century mirror narratives, the image coming to the perceiver back from the mirror was still extant; the mirror was not broken, nor did it reflect an absence. Instead, it reflected a stranger who was often more or less than what the perceiving subject expected. The Victorian imagination brought the mirror to life, the mirror assuming a speaking subjectivity and looking back from within its silvered, smooth surface. Even more often, the reflection in the mirror appeared as a menacing selfhood, haunting the perceiver in a troubling, nightmarish dream. In this respect, the mirror and its image embodied in their spectral existence the very nature of commodity fetishism discussed in the introduction – the phantasmal desired object in the commodities, death itself.

This fantasy of convoluted and perverted epistemic lines between people and commodities was one of the expressions of the split subject – the subject seduced by the congruity of his own mirror image, by the omnipresent reflection of his corporeal existence. In this respect, the materiality of Victorian mirrors presents itself to us as a borderline between the perceiving subject and the object of his gaze, as a battle for the humanity of people as distinct from the materiality of things. In this *Fall*, as well as in the following one, it will be shown that the mirror in the Victorian imagination became a dividing line, beyond which inanimate things came to life and animate humans turned into objects. We are talking about the workings of the Victorian imagination that allowed the subject to overcome the rigid boundaries of the animate and the inanimate and reach towards a place that does not exist, or better, that exists only in its

[180] Walter Benjamin, *On the Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), 175.

own absence – the *objet a* – the coherence of the Self, the awakening from the dream of language. This coherence that lured the desire, as a fundamental illusion of the Victorian (and post-Victorian) culture, has been rediscover through the mirror narratives, but only to be sought again, since it was rediscovered only in its absence, *as* an absence that was there in the first place. In this illusion the subject keeps reaching out through the mirror for this empty space that promises wholeness, continuously enacting his own fall, and experiencing *jouissance* as a result. This *jouissance* of an unattainable object – an experience that leaves only the absence of the *objet a* behind – is the topic of this chapter. By analyzing the narrative of 'The Grand Boudoir Glass' through the prism of a larger architectural structure also made of reflective surfaces – the Crystal Palace – we shall see how the subject experiences *jouissance* of the fall in face of the unattainability of commodified materiality that mirrors came to embody and signify.

Jouissance *as the 'Pleasure-in-Pain'*

Lacan developed his concept of *jouissance* on the wings of Freud's late introduction of the 'death drive' to his theory. Being only ostensibly a sort of pleasure, the title of the work in which the 'death drive' appears clearly states that it is *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.[181] The difference between the 'pleasure principle' and the 'death drive' *beyond* it is at the level of excitation a person experiences in relation to the object of his/her desire. While the pleasure principle functions as an 'economic speculator,'[182] as Adrian Johnston calls it, calculating the probable and possible level of satisfaction – maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain/displeasure – the 'death drive' goes beyond this moderated/mitigated level, bringing *extreme* pleasure to the subject. Freud developed this concept by identifying a strong tendency among war veterans and neurotic patients to keep reliving their painful experiences over and over again, their psyche constantly repeating the pain in spite of its obvious displeasure.[183] Lacan identifies his idea of *jouissance* at this register. *Jouissance* as an extreme psychic experience of transgression always involves a limit to be transgressed. There has to be a line to be crossed, a Law to be broken, after which *jouissance* is promised to the subject. In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan argues for this concept by criticizing Kant's example from the

[181] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Seattle: Pacific Publishing Studios, 2010).
[182] Adrian Johnston, *Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 234.
[183] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 11-35 (Section II and III).

Critique of Practical Reason. Simplified for the purposes of this chapter, Kant says that a man faced with a choice between sexual satisfaction that results in death or non-satisfaction, by default chooses the latter. As an example he takes a man who is offered a choice to sleep with the woman of his dreams but be hanged afterwards, or not to sleep with her at all. Contrary to Kant, Lacan says that the psychoanalytic experience shows that there are many cases where individuals actually choose the former; it even shows frequent examples when they choose satisfaction *precisely because* it involved the possibility of death.[184] We have seen an example of this scenario in the prologue, with Ulysses desiring death itself. Seen in this way it seems that *jouissance* involves a final satisfaction, a pure pleasure by transgressing against the Law and finally attaining the Thing (*das Ding*) – the phantasmal, always already absent *objet a* of desire. But, of course, this is not the case. In the *Encore*, Lacan distinguishes between two types of *jouissance* – *jouissance* expected and *jouissance* obtained.[185] The subject expects the *jouissance* promised by the very existence of the Law (that prescribes the limit of socially acceptable satisfaction) to be transgressed in the attaining of the Thing, but in the process of reaching for it he always falls short – the Thing always stays out of reach by its very absence, which orients the desire towards it. In this fall the subject experiences *jouissance* obtained, a sort of extreme pleasure that, nevertheless, falls short of the idealized standard. Thus, this *jouissance* of 'falling short,' of not reaching the goal, in most cases manifests itself as 'pleasure-in-pain.' This *jouissance*, through the fall and exhaustion of the subject, always says: 'This is not it!' *Jouissance* expected is a mythical experience orchestrated in the libidinal economy by and around the missing object; *jouissance* obtained, the only existing type, is an 'enjoyment that is enjoyable only insofar as it doesn't get what it's allegedly after.'[186] Extreme pleasure does not have to be pleasant.

The Context of the Mirror

The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations was the epicenter of Victorian commodities, and thus we will be returning to it again and again. Signifying the temporal center

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[184] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, trans. Dennis Porter (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 134.

[185] '"That's not it' is the very cry by which the *jouissance* obtained is distinguished from the *jouissance* expected. Structure, which connects up here, demonstrates nothing if not that it is of the same text as *jouissance*, insofar as, in marking by what distance *jouissance* misses – the *jouissance* that would be in question if 'that were it'– structure does not presuppose merely the *jouissance* that would be it, it also props up another.' Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore, 1972- 1973,* trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), 111-112.

[186] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 164.

of the nineteenth century (1851) as well as the center of the world – politically, socially, culturally, evolutionary – it was hosted at the Crystal Palace (fig. 5), an enormous glass structure designed by Joseph Paxton.[187] As it shall be seen in a drawing by George Cruickshank from Henry Mayhew's *1851: or, The Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Sandboys*, the Crystal palace literally embodied the center of the world by pulling the works of industry and all the nations towards its reflective/transparent structure. The Palace was made out of 300,000 plates of glass covering a 92,000 m^2 area, its size and its glitter causing amazement, the effect of what Agamben calls a 'bluish halo.'[188]

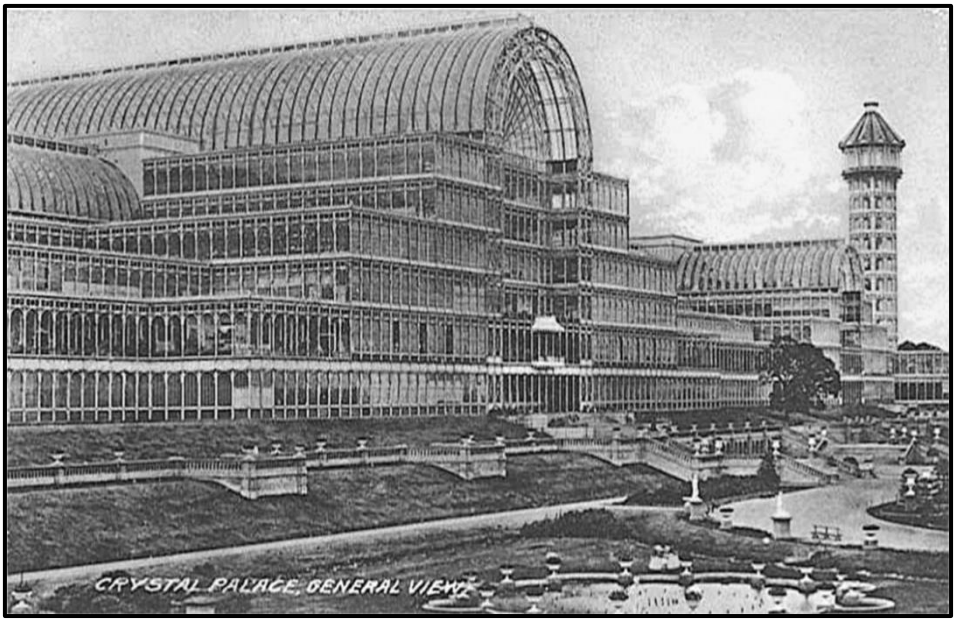


Figure 5 The Crystal Palace designed by Joseph Paxton, Sydenham (1854)

Being such a huge and enchanting structure, it hardly suffices to say that it received a reaction of equal magnitude. It came to represent the very tissue of the Victorian culture and the role of Britain as the leader of economic and evolutionary progress. The Exhibition, said *Eliza Cook's Journal*, was

[187] After the Exhibition the Palace was moved to Sydenham. The social, cultural and colonial implications of the Great Exhibition were extensively covered in Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1988), as well as in his famous essay 'The World as Exhibition,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31:2 (1989): 225-226. Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995) is a postcolonial study worth mentioning, as well as a more class-oriented essay by Lara Kriegel, "'The Pudding and the Palace": Labor Print Culture, and Imperial Britain in 1851,' in *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and Through the Nation*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Duke: Duke University Press, 2003), 230-246.

[188] Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (Minneapolis and London: Minneapolis University Press, 1993), 38.

> to industry what galleries of painting and sculpture are to art – what a library is to literature – what a museum is to science – what a zoological and botanical garden is to natural history – a chart of the progress of mankind.[189]

The number of written reports from the years of and after the Exhibition, was superseded only by the number of academic works about the Exhibition that runs through the second half of the twentieth century. *The Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of Works of Industry of All Nations* (maybe the only creation more monstrous, larger and more incomprehensible than the Exhibition itself) was published in six volumes by the Royal Commission, its size and unintelligibility giving birth to a number of explanatory works, such as *The Crystal Palace Exhibition Illustrated Catalogue* or *The Crystal Palace and its Contents*, as well as a vast number of unofficial reports and accounts. When, from the 1950s onwards, academics became interested again in everything Victorian, the Crystal Palace and the Great Exhibition became unavoidable parts of every analysis of the Victorian culture.[190]

There, inside that gargantuan structure, we encounter 'Section 22 (General Hardware),' where the object of our interest is stored. 'The Grand Boudoir Glass' (fig. 6), as it was called by the *Official Catalogue*, was made for the Duchess of Sutherland by the flamboyant

[189] Jericho, 'Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations,' *Eliza Cook's Journal* 2:40 (2 February 1850): 217.

[190] The literature on this topic is so vast that it would be impossible to cover it completely. Some of the more important and comprehensive studies, besides the already mentioned Mitchell and McClintock are: Christopher Hobhouse, *1851 and the Crystal Palace* (London: John Murray, 1950); Yvonne Ffrench, *The Great Exhibition of 1851* (London: Harvill Press, 1950); Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibition and World's Fairs, 1851-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); Louise Purbrick, ed., *The Great Exhibition of 1851. New Interdisciplinary Essays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001); Patrick Beaver, *The Crystal Palace 1851-1936: A Portrait of Victorian Enterprise* (London: Hugh Evelyn, 1970); John R. Davis, *The Great Exhibition* (Sutton: Stroud, 1999); Jeffrey Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition and Historical Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); C. R. Fay, *Palace of Industry, 1851: A Study of the Great Exhibition and its Fruits* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951); George W. Stocking Jr. addresses the Exhibition in the context of the idea of civilization before and after 1851 in *Victorian Anthropology* (London and New York: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1987); Paul Young, *Globalization and the Great Exhibition: The Victorian New World Order* (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); many authors use the Exhibition to discuss the commodity culture in the nineteenth-century novel, such as Andrew H. Miller, *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006). James Buzzard, Joseph W. Childers and Eileen Gillooly, ed., *Victorian Prism: Refractions of the Crystal Palace* (Charlottesville and London, University of Virginia Press, 2007) is an excellent, relatively recent, compendium of important issues on the Crystal Palace, including an analysis of 'The Grand Boudoir Glass' by Isobel Armstrong; Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (London and New York: Verso, 1990) is an extraordinary, in-depth analysis of the Exhibition as a consolidating point of the Victorian society of spectacle; I favor the view of Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination, 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), where the Exhibition and the Crystal Palace are approached as part of the wider context of the Victorian glass and mirror culture. This list is far from exhausted. From the 1950s, the Victorian culture has become an object of various types of academic interest, with the Palace in its epicenter in every sense.

manufacturer of ornamental products, William Potts from Birmingham, and embodied the paradoxicality of glass under glass.

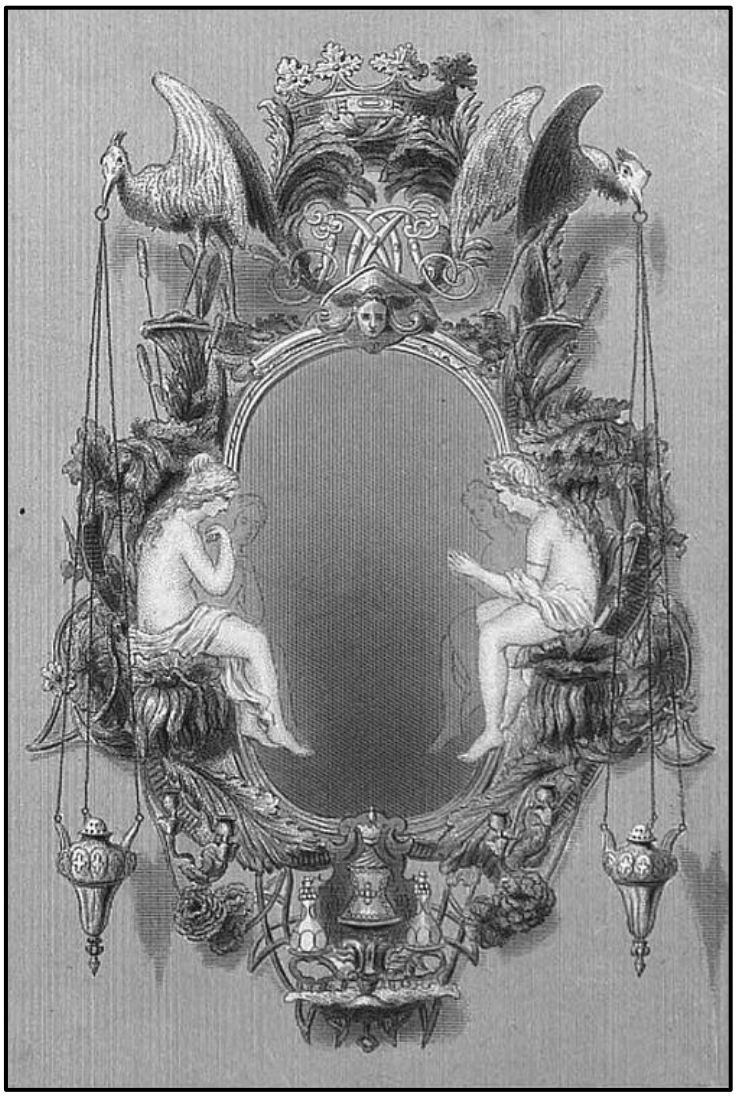
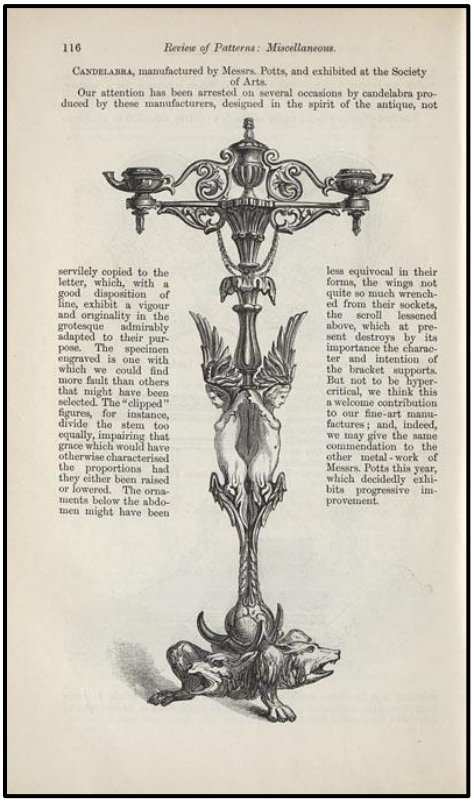


Figure 6 'The Grand Boudoir Glass' by William Potts (1851)

The Crystal Palace and its Contents – one of the guides to the *Official Guide* of the Exhibition – stated that this 'toilet-glass' was one of the 'largest mirrors cast in bronze manufactured in England and that its design and workmanship reflect[ed] the highest credit on its spirited manufacturer.'[191] Henry Cole, a hard and rigid Victorian authority on design, occasionally commented on the work of William Potts as expressing 'exuberant fancies,' as well as having 'much fertility of imagination, much cleaver modeling, much originality and

[191] *The Crystal Palace and its Contents: An Illustrated Cyclopedia of the Great Exhibition of 1851* (Warwick Lane: W. M. Clark, 1852), 407; the image of 'The Grand Boudoir Glass' is on the page 408.

dash.'[192] A year later, he commented on a fascinating candelabra made by Potts and exhibited at the Society of Arts (fig. 7) as embodying 'vigor and originality in the grotesque.'[193] In the light of his other works, William Potts was exhibiting 'progressive improvement' with his grotesque creations that crashed human forms onto animal ones.



116 *Review of Patterns: Miscellaneous.*

CANDELABRA, manufactured by Messrs. Potts, and exhibited at the Society of Arts.

Our attention has been arrested on several occasions by candelabra produced by these manufacturers, designed in the spirit of the antique, not servilely copied to the letter, which, with a good disposition of line, exhibit a vigour and originality in the grotesque admirably adapted to their purpose. The specimen engraved is one with which we could find more fault than others that might have been selected. The "clipped" figures, for instance, divide the stem too equally, impairing that grace which would have otherwise characterised the proportions had they either been raised or lowered. The ornaments below the abdomen might have been less equivocal in their forms, the wings not quite so much wrenched from their sockets, the scroll lessened above, which at present destroys by its importance the character and intention of the bracket supports. But not to be hypercritical, we think this a welcome contribution to our fine-art manufactures; and, indeed, we may give the same commendation to the other metal-work of Messrs. Potts this year, which decidedly exhibits progressive improvement.

Figure 7 Candelabra by William Potts (1850)

In this chapter we will see how the perceiving subject experiences *jouissance* in the encounter with this looking-glass and how he expresses a 'pleasure-in-pain' in a language of excess and wonder. We will show how the same exuberant experience resonates with the accounts of the Crystal Palace and its content, as well as through the accounts of other encounters with reflective surfaces in the nineteenth century. The Palace, as a large mirror, and the Exhibition as its diagnosis, are in the accounts always too much, beyond words, unrepresentable, they are surfaces that transform things into a spectacle of commodities, bestowing upon them an imaginary afterlife. In the encounters, the subject marvels at the Palace's excess and reaches for the *jouissance* expected beyond the Palace's symbolic limit. This limit, that presents itself as the possibility of this *jouissance,* is the limit of materiality and

[192] Henry Cole, 'Exhibition of Arts and Manufacturers, Birmingham' *The Journal of Design and Manufacturers* 2 (1849): 66.
[193] Henry Cole, 'Miscellaneous,' *The Journal of Design and Manufacturers* 3 (1850): 116.

it is embodied in the mirror-commodity. Even the very name 'Crystal Palace,' given by the editors of *Punch*, illustrates this language of excess and exorbitance, since, in reality, the Palace was just a large greenhouse made of glass. As Richards observed, this enormous reflective/transparent structure 'built to house one hundred thousand commodities had been designed to make ordinary glass look like crystal and the shape of a greenhouse look like the outline of a palace.'[194] Victorian commodities in their semiotic incoherence were *objet a* of the Victorian capitalist culture, the mirror being a special case among them. In our mirror made by William Potts, we will find encapsulated this wider context of the unattainability of commodities, the dream of representational stability and wholeness, a Real that always keeps receding in loops, a labyrinth of language that includes its own exits. The *jouissance* that the subject experiences in the process, in the accounts on the Exhibition comes to us in two different versions: as *exhaustion by ornamentation* and *exhaustion by wonder*. Both of them express a similar overload of visual experience that the subject cannot bear, the exhaustion finally leading to the fall.

Elephantiasis of Ornamentation as the 'Horror of Sight'

Armstrong has noted that Potts's mirror perfectly embodies the Victorian grotesque – representation of different species forced into one another, producing disturbing effects of a grotesque material amalgam.[195] The mirror's grotesqueness notwithstanding, we will move the emphasis to a different aspect of its materiality. On the surface of the mirror, two nymphs are gently and idly seated on both sides, as they gaze into the silvered surface of the glass. Their soft, pale porcelain bodies make a strong contrast to the rest of the mirror's physicality. All around them, dark bronze twists and twirls in the shapes of an aquatic fantasy, water lilies underneath the nymphs' soft bodies mimicking a lush shore of a fairytale lake. At the top of the frame a pair of herons holds two candle-burners whose long, straight chains visually cut the spirals of the mirror's plant life and the voluptuousness of the nymphs' bodies. Both nymphs are almost naked, only their thighs are covered with silky drapery exposing their bodies to a voyeuristic gaze of the spectator. Leaves of reed spring from the wild floral undergrowth, and hard straight lines of cast bronze frame the mirror at its bottom. At the top of the reflecting

[194] Richards, *Commodity Culture*, 6.
[195] Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 234-239.

surface, flanked by the herons, there is a sign that reads: *frangas non flectes*.[196] The words *frangas* and *flectes* flank a small cast, hardly perceptible, face.

As the spectator gazes at the mirror, the mirror tells a story. In fact, it tells a number of stories, when put in the wider context of the language of commodified materiality, which expressed the anxieties of the age. The first and the most obvious story is the designer's intent to convey the calmness of an enchanted lake. There is almost a successful totality in the execution of this idea. All the elements are present: the stillness of the lake's surface represented by the reflective surface itself; the abundance of plant and animal life at its shore; and, of course, the figures of delicate and apathetic nymphs, whose presence introduces an enchanting, fairytale element into the mirror's narrative. The first extraordinary thing is that in a relatively small space (small comparing to the abundance of details) we encounter a plethora of species – plants, animals, fairies – the fairies, by their humanoid nature, also bringing a human element into the picture. They are all forced into the frame of the mirror, simulating the calmness of the shore, but actually pushing one another around the silvered surface whose conspicuous emptiness seems to be the center of the representation. The only element that was actually not crafted, but introduced ready-made (the mirror itself), in the light of the *fabula* that unfolds around it, becomes the center of the image. The stillness of its surface highlights the saturation of the frame, the frame's species being in a clash for the representational space. On this calm shore the ornaments are running loose, enveloping the bodies of the nymphs, pushing them towards the mirror's surface. Seen from this perspective, it seems only natural that the nymphs are facing the surface, since they are being claustrophobically forced into the only open space left. And there, in the salvation of the mirror's depths they see their own reflected faces.

Commenting on the commodities of the Exhibition, Agamben says that there is an aura 'that bathes the commodity-fetish, so the elephantiasis of ornament betrays the new character of the commodified object.'[197] He might as well have commented on Potts' mirror itself. The ornaments of this mirror frame are so abundant and so densely packed that the eye that gazes at the mirror becomes invaded by the grotesque cornucopia of overstressed details, the perceiving subject becoming suffocated by the busyness of the frame. As the eye stares in the

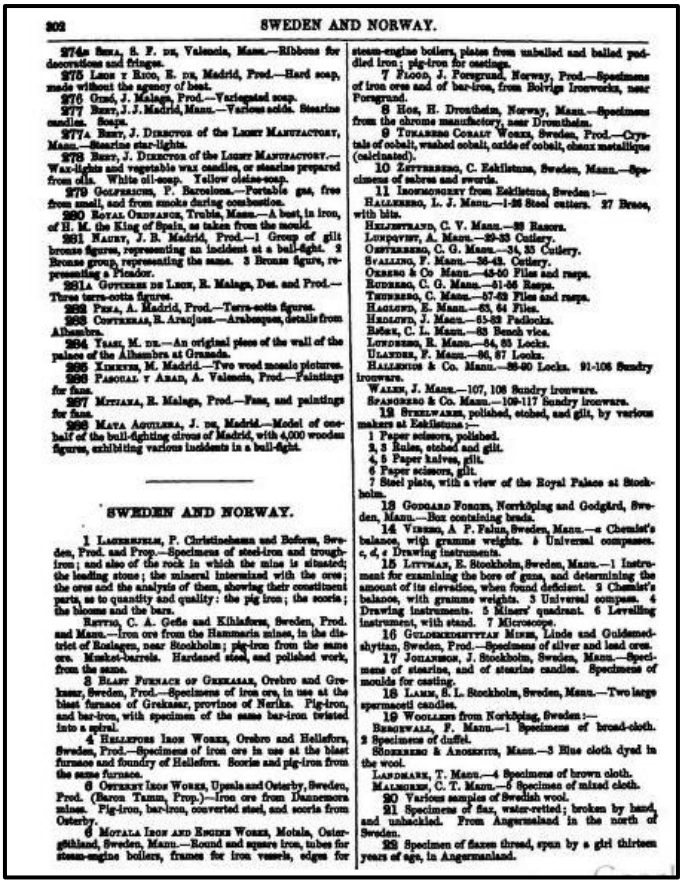
[196] In the only two drawings of the mirror, from *Tallis's History* and from the *Illustrated Cyclopedia*, we find two different versions of this motto: the first reads FRAGAS NON FLETES, the other FRANGAS NON FLECTES. Armstrong thinks that the version from the *Illustrated Cyclopedia* is the correct one, the other one's Latin being too eccentric and corrupted. She translates it as 'You may break me but you will not bend me,' arguing that depending on who reads it – the owner, the designer or the commentator – the motto, just as the mirror itself, reads different social and class relations (Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 237).
[197] Agamben, *Stanzas*, 39.

mirror, reaching towards the reflection, one experiences exhaustion by ornamentation, the reflected image literally being drowned at the bottom of the lake the mirror is intended to represent.

This exhaustion by the ornamental elephantiasis of commodities was not limited to Potts' mirror and its alluring narrative of the ostensive calmness of a secluded aquatic wonderland. If we broaden the scope of our interest, we see that the same exhaustion appears over and over again in the accounts dating from the year of, and years after, the Exhibition. It is the same exhaustion that we will find latter, in the panoptic 'naturalism' of the Pre-Raphaelite painting, best exemplified by Holman Hunt's *The Awaking Consciousness*. What can be seen in Potts' mirror frame is not only the Victorian exhibitionism, voyeurism and scopophilia (to be discussed later in greater depth), but a type of *jouissance*, an aggressive experience that follows encounters with reflective surfaces at the 1851 Exhibition, as well as with its content. This *jouissance* arises as a result of the subject's investment in his own image through the troubled materiality of mirrors – artifacts that bring the blurred boundaries of the humanity/commodity relationship into play. As the subject gazes into his own reflection, entering the loop of a disrupted signifying chain, reaching for a phantasmal wholeness, the only thing he gets, the only thing he *can* get (since wholeness is always found only as absence) is *jouissance*, as a substitution for the fundamental dissatisfaction of desire. This is the place where the subject falls: what he craves he cannot get, experiencing *jouissance* in the fall.

For the visitors at the Great Exhibition, where our mirror was exhibited, the Crystal Palace was a magical place. 14,000 exhibitors showcased 100,000 items. As Benjamin pointed out, Victorians of the mid-nineteenth century experienced, for the first time, 'the intoxication of the commodity around which surges the stream of customers.'[198] For 1851 this number was beyond imaginable, and it was represented as such. A quick glance at the *Official Catalogue* shows pages and pages of numbers and names and lists attacking the eye of the reader in an incomprehensible jumble that was supposed to help the readers digest the Exhibition, but all it did was make them tired (fig. 8).

[198] Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 55.



202 SWEDEN AND NORWAY.

274a Sena, S. F. de, Valencia, Manu.—Ribbons for decorations and fringes.
275 Leon y Roco, R. de, Madrid, Prod.—Hard soap, made without the agency of heat.
276 Grad, J. Malaga, Prod.—Variegated soap.
277 Bert, J. J. Madrid, Manu.—Various acids. Stearine candles. Soaps.
277a Bert, J. Director of the Light Manufactory, Madrid.—Stearine star-lights.
278 Bert, J. Director of the Light Manufactory.—Wax-lights and vegetable wax candles, or stearine prepared from oils. White oil-soap. Yellow olein-soap.
279 Golfrichs, P. Barcelona.—Portable gas, free from smell, and from smoke during combustion.
280 Royal Ordnance, Trubia, Manu.—A bust, in iron, of H. M. the King of Spain, as taken from the mould.
281 Nadal, J. B. Madrid, Prod.—1 Group of gilt bronze figures, representing an incident at a bull-fight. 2 Bronze group, representing the same. 3 Bronze figure, representing a Picador.
281a Gutierrez de Leon, R. Malaga, Des. and Prod.—Three terra-cotta figures.
282 Pena, A. Madrid, Prod.—Terra-cotta figures.
283 Contreras, R. Aranjuez.—Arabesques, details from Alhambra.
284 Yanez, M. de.—An original piece of the wall of the palace of the Alhambra at Granada.
285 Ximenez, M. Madrid.—Two wood mosaic pictures.
286 Pascual y Arad, A. Valencia, Prod.—Paintings for fans.
287 Mitjana, R. Malaga, Prod.—Fans, and paintings for fans.
288 Mata Aguilera, J. de, Madrid.—Model of one-half of the bull-fighting circus of Madrid, with 4,000 wooden figures, exhibiting various incidents in a bull-fight.

SWEDEN AND NORWAY.

1 Lagerhjelm, F. Christinehamn and Bofors, Sweden, Prod. and Prop.—Specimens of steel-iron and wrought-iron; and also of the rock in which the mine is situated; the leading stone; the mineral intermixed with the ores; the ores and the analysis of them, showing their constituent parts, as to quantity and quality: the pig iron; the scoria; the blooms and the bars.
Reuter, C. A. Gefle and Kilafors, Sweden, Prod. and Manu.—Iron ore from the Hammaria mines, in the district of Roslagen, near Stockholm; pig-iron from the same ore. Musket-barrels. Hardened steel, and polished work, from the same.
3 Blast Furnace of Grekaasar, Orebro and Grekaasar, Sweden, Prod.—Specimens of iron ore, in use at the blast furnace of Grekaasar, province of Nerike. Pig-iron, and bar-iron, with specimen of the same bar-iron twisted into a spiral.
4 Hellefors Iron Works, Orebro and Hellefors, Sweden, Prod.—Specimens of iron ore in use at the blast furnace and foundry of Hellefors. Scoria and pig-iron from the same furnace.
5 Osterby Iron Works, Upsala and Osterby, Sweden, Prod. (Baron Tamm, Prop.)—Iron ore from Dannemora mines. Pig-iron, bar-iron, converted steel, and scoria from Osterby.
6 Motala Iron and Engine Works, Motala, Ostergothland, Sweden, Manu.—Round and square iron, tubes for steam-engine boilers, frames for iron vessels, edges for steam-engine boilers, plates from unballed and balled puddled iron; pig-iron for castings.
7 Flood, J. Foregrund, Norway, Prod.—Specimens of iron ores and of bar-iron, from Bolvigs Ironworks, near Foregrund.
8 Hoe, H. Dronthein, Norway, Manu.—Specimens from the chrome manufactory, near Dronthein.
9 Tunaberg Cobalt Works, Sweden, Prod.—Crystals of cobalt, washed cobalt, oxide of cobalt, oboux metallique (calcinated).
10 Zetterberg, C. Eskilstuna, Sweden, Manu.—Specimens of sabres and swords.
11 Ingmongery from Eskilstuna, Sweden:—
Hallenberg, L. J. Manu.—1-26 Steel cutters. 27 Brace, with bits.
Helmstrand, C. V. Manu.—28 Razors.
Lundqvist, A. Manu.—29-33 Cutlery.
Osterberg, C. G. Manu.—34, 35 Cutlery.
Svalling, F. Manu.—36-43. Cutlery.
Oxberg & Co Manu.—43-56 Files and rasps.
Rudberg, C. G. Manu.—51-56 Rasps.
Thunberg, C. Manu.—57-62 Files and rasps.
Haglund, E. Manu.—63, 64 Files.
Hedlund, J. Manu.—65-82 Padlocks.
Boek, C. L. Manu.—83 Bench vice.
Lundberg, R. Manu.—84, 85 Locks.
Ulander, F. Manu.—86, 87 Locks.
Hallenius & Co. Manu.—88-90 Locks. 91-105 Sundry ironware.
Wallin, J. Manu.—107, 108 Sundry ironware.
Spangberg & Co. Manu.—109-117 Sundry ironware.
12 Swedenware, polished, etched, and gilt, by various makers at Eskilstuna:—
1 Paper scissors, polished.
2, 3 Rules, etched and gilt.
4, 5 Paper knives, gilt.
6 Paper scissors, gilt.
7 Steel plate, with a view of the Royal Palace at Stockholm.
13 Godgard Forsen, Norrköping and Godgård, Sweden, Manu.—Box containing beads.
14 Vising, A. P. Falun, Sweden, Manu.—a Chemist's balance, with gramme weights. b Universal compasses. c, d, e Drawing instruments.
15 Littman, E. Stockholm, Sweden, Manu.—1 Instrument for examining the bore of guns, and determining the amount of its elevation, when found deficient. 2 Chemist's balance, with gramme weights. 3 Universal compass. 4 Drawing instruments. 5 Miners' quadrant. 6 Levelling instrument, with stand. 7 Microscope.
16 Guldsmedsnyttan Mjuk, Linde and Guldsmedshyttan, Sweden, Prod.—Specimens of silver and lead ores.
17 Johansson, J. Stockholm, Sweden, Manu.—Specimens of stearine, and of stearine candles. Specimens of moulds for casting.
18 Lamm, S. L. Stockholm, Sweden, Manu.—Two large spermaceti candles.
19 Woollens from Norrköping, Sweden:—
Bergwall, F. Manu.—1 Specimens of broad-cloth. 2 Specimens of duffel.
Sundberg & Andersson, Manu.—3 Blue cloth dyed in the wool.
Lagnemark, T. Manu.—4 Specimens of brown cloth.
Malmgren, C. T. Manu.—5 Specimen of mixed cloth.
20 Various samples of Swedish wool.
21 Specimens of flax, water-retted; broken by hand, and unhackled. From Angermanland in the north of Sweden.
22 Specimen of flaxen thread, spun by a girl thirteen years of age, in Angermanland.

Figure 8 A page from the *Official Catalogue* (1851)

As a response, a number of 'official' guides to the official guide emerged, systematizing the plethora of commodities. Until 1851, there had never been an occasion that induced such a proliferation of discourse, all in an attempt to survive the semiotic anxiety of the overabundance of commodities. A cunning story in *Punch* by Henry Morley – intended to be sarcastic and funny – captured this discursive maze by conjuring the image of a talking catalogue giving an account of itself. 'I am the Catalogue of the Great Exhibition,' begins the catalogue:

> […] I, as a celebrated Catalogue had much to go through with ere I lernt that which I reach now in the illustrated edition, the official edition, the French edition, the German edition, and the twopenny edition.[199]

Through the insurmountable chaos of the visual and semantic overload of the Exhibition, the language that was supposed to describe the commodities got transformed into a commodity itself, taking on a new life of selfhood – literally becoming *alive*. This language turns upon

[199] Henry Morley, 'The Catalogue's Account of Itself,' *Household Words* 3 (23 August 1851): 519-23.

itself (or upon him/herself), creating a paradoxical spin of signification in loops worthy of M. C. Escher's mid-twentieth century op-art.

The same overload can be found in George Cruikshank's two drawings from Henry Mayhew's *1851: or, The Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Sandboys*. Both drawings wonderfully express this 'horror of sight' induced by a 'sensory overload,' as Armstrong calls it.[200] The first drawing was named 'All the World Going to See the Great Exhibition' (fig. 9) and it has already mentioned it as an example of the Exhibition as the center of the world. But this time the emphasis will be, temporarily, shifted from the Crystal Palace to the rest of the drawing, so as to appreciate the overload of the visual field.

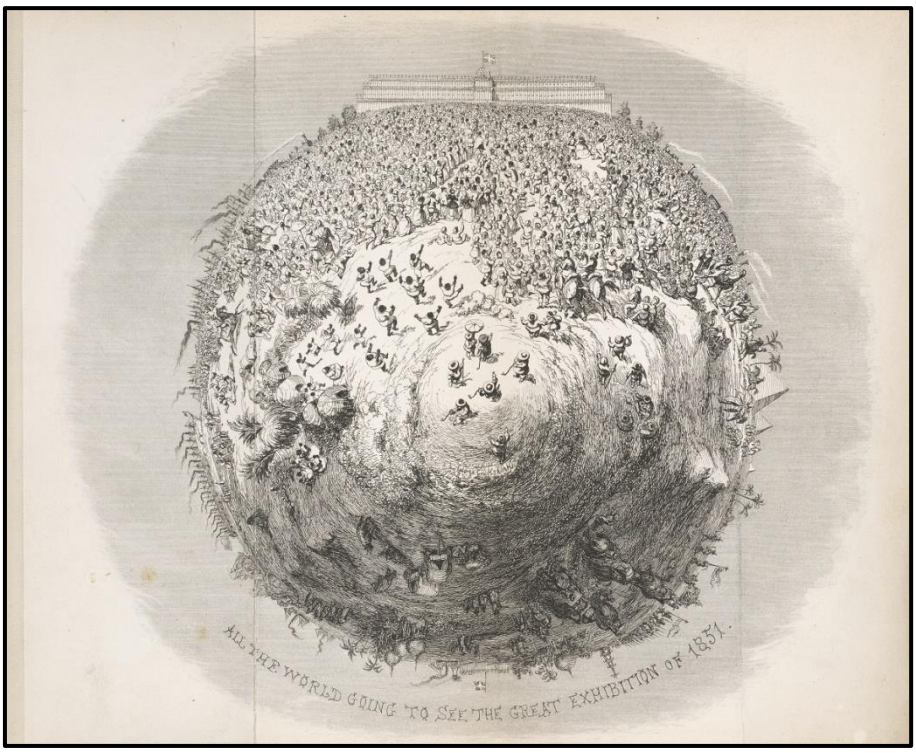


Figure 9 'All the World going to See the Great Exhibition,' by George Cruikshank (1851)

A monstrous crowd, of all shapes and colors, populates the world taken, literally, as a picture. Cruikshank's work is a prime cross-sectional example of the exhibitionistic nature of the Victorian culture and the incomprehensible visual maze that surrounds the Exhibition as the center of commodity culture. The crowd inhabits the representational space that keeps getting denser the closer people get to the Palace; the closer they are to the Palace the more indistinguishable they get too. The eye finds it hard to follow the invasion of details in the

[200] Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 250; Henry Mayhew, *1851: or, The Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Sandboys and Family who came up to LONDON to enjoy themselves and to see the GREAT EXHIBITION* (London: George Newbold, 1851).

image, but the tension develops in the opposite direction in the other Cruikshank's image called 'The Dispersion of the Works of All Nations from the Great Exhibition of 1851' (fig. 10).

Figure 10 'The Dispersion of the Works of All Nations from the Great Exhibition of 1851,' by George Cruikshank (1851)

Here the 'horror of sight' moves in the opposite direction: the things are *fleeing* the Crystal Palace with an invasive aggressiveness that threatens to shatter the drawing's frame. These things are alive, they are *running loose* – in the most sincere sense of the word. There is a pair of boots that flee without an owner in the lower left-hand corner; stuffed animals are holding hands in exile; there is even a pot running away in the lower right-hand corner. There is too much of them, they overlap in the madness of their flight. And at the center of their exodus is the Crystal Palace – the immense reflective structure that fills spectators with wonder and horror. Considered together, these two drawings tell a two-way story: people are entering the palace of glass and reflection, but anthropomorphized commodities are coming out instead. A machinery of human/commodity transformation, these two images embody the fantasy of the

limits of materiality that follow the reflective surface of the Victorian culture of glass, with the subject going through an excessive experience in the invasive 'sensory overload' of commodities.

The visual madness and overload of the Exhibition was so strong that hardly anyone was capable of experiencing its totality in one visit. People kept coming back over and over again, magically drawn to the abundance and aura of commodities. A *Punch* reporter, Mrs. Fitzpuss, confessed:

> Ever since the 1st of May, I've driven directly after early breakfast to the Palace of that Great Jin, Paxton, in Hyde Park, where for hours I've done nothing but think myself a great Princess of the Arabian Nights, with the Koh-i-noor my own property, whenever I liked to wear it.'[201]

All people could do was look at the commodities, since the policy of the Exhibition was that there were no price tags and the exhibits were not for sale. This must have heightened the scopic pleasure of the visitors, whose experience was limited to 'just looking.'[202] Deprived of other forms of consumption, the visitors must have been extremely susceptible to the impact of the visual overload in question. Many of the objects at the Exhibition expressed the 'elephantiasis of ornaments,' particularly visible in the design of furniture and gadgets. A funny example of sheer invasiveness of details would be the now famous 'Eighty-blade Sportsman's Knife,' by Joseph Rodgers & Sons, with gold inlaying and etching of Windsor Castle (fig. 11). Literally unusable, the knife hosted blades that struggled within the physical space of the exhibit, making it plainly monstrous.

[201] Mrs. Fitzpuss, 'How We Hunted the Prince: Mrs. Fitzpuss, *of Baker Street*, to Mrs. Macthistle, *of Klinkumpans*, N. B.' *Punch* 20 (1851): 222.
[202] For the introduction of 'just looking' into the nineteenth-century consumerism, see Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (New York: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1985).

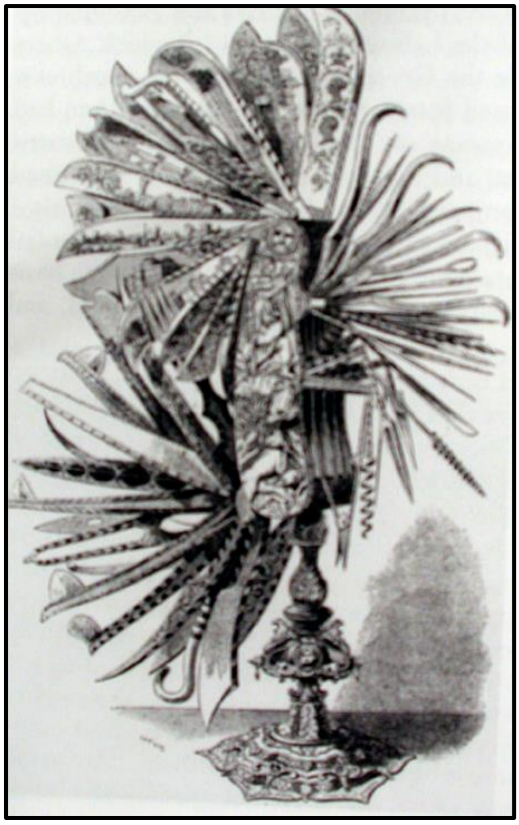


Figure 11 Eighty-blade Sportsman's Knife, by Joseph Rodgers & Sons (1851)

The 'sensory overload' or the 'horror of sight' that leads to the language of excess in the experience of *jouissance* is nowhere better expressed than in *Tallis's* account of the Exhibition:

> Fountains were sparkling and flashing in the subdued sunlight: in living sculpture were suddenly seen the grand, the grotesque, the terrible, the beautiful; objects of every form and colour imaginable, far as the eye could reach, were dazzlingly intermingled; and there were present sixty thousand sons and daughters of Adam, passing and re-passing, ceaselessly; bewildered charmingly; gliding amidst bannered nations – through country after country renowned in ancient name, and great in modern: civilized and savage. […] The soul was approached through its highest senses, flooded with excitement; all its faculties were appealed to at once, and it sank for a while, exhausted, overwhelmed.[203]

[203] *Tallis's History and Description of the Crystal Palace and the Exhibition of the World's Industry in 1851*, 3 vol. (London and New York: The London Printing and Publishing Company, 1852), vol. 3, 1.

In this passage we find all the elements of the excessive experience, as well as a reaction of the subject to it: the objects are seen as both 'grand' *and* 'grotesque' *and* 'beautiful,' in 'all forms and colors imaginable.' In the visual experiences of the perceiver, they are all 'intermingled' together in the grotesqueness of their overwhelming juxtaposition, just like the overlapping madness of Cruikshank's fleeing commodities. There are too many things, too many colors, too many people; the subject experiences an overload he cannot bear. His eye is excessively invaded and he is 'flooded with excitement.' He experiences the 'sparkling and flashing' of fountains. The chosen language is brisk and strong, intended to strike and move. He is promised an experience of transgression against the symbolic law, brought about by the intermingled objects, transcending crude materiality where objects morph one into another. In the *jouissance* promised, everything appears as elevated and enchanted, like Henry Mayhew's description of the crystal fountain at the entrance to the Palace:

> [S]hining, as the sun's rays came slanting down through the crystal roofs, *as if* it had been carved out of icicles, or *as if* water streaming from the fountain had been *made solid*, and *transfixed into beautiful forms*.[204]

The materiality changes in the *jouissance* promised, the potentiality of 'as if' heavily populating the sentence. Water becomes solid and is aggressively elevated into the realm of beauty. But the promised pure experience is an illusion – like the illusion of the fountain – and the subject falls in *jouissance* 'exhausted' and 'overwhelmed,' as it was melancholically concluded in the *Tallis's* account.

Experience of Wonderland as the 'Horror of Sight'

Now we should go back to the mirror we started from, 'The Grand Boudoir Mirror' by William Potts. There is another story of excessive experience in the narrative of the mirror's design, and it is centered on the nymphs' bodies and faces. Their enticing figures are given the task of introducing a *fairytale* into the representation. The seductiveness of their bodies' exposure is obvious and this is probably as close as we shall get to a Victorian representation of sirens/mermaid mirror reflections. Of course, they are neither sirens nor mermaids, not having feathers or tails. The context of the lake also precludes such a conclusion, sirens and

[204] Mayhew, *1851*, 134; my emphasis.

mermaids being mostly creatures of the open sea. Adding to the lure of their bodies, what strikes a spectator is the game of gazes that the seductresses play with the surface and with the spectator himself. Though tridimensional, the mirror is designed for the spectator to see the nymphs' faces only as reflections. In the only drawing of the mirror where we can actually see the reflection of their faces, from the *Official Catalogue*, we encounter not two nymphs, but four – two made of porcelain and two made of reflection, occupying the male desiring subject's dreams. The pair of nymphs on the left seem consumed by each other, the spectral nymph gazing at the porcelain one, the porcelain one into the spectral. On the other hand, the pair on the right almost seem as if looking at the left pair, making it the visual center of the image. But no one is looking at the spectator, cutting him loose from the voyeuristic pleasure of this secluded scene. Unlike a painting or an image, analyzing a tridimensional object in this respect is questionable, since the spectator may have more than one point of view. But the gazes of nymphs do show a certain asymmetry that slightly confuses the viewer regarding the possible visual center of the mirror. For Victorian male spectators, though, it seems that the allure of their naked flesh was enough to summon the *famme fatale* experience into the picture and transport the spectator into a fairyland. A reporter from *Reynolds's Weekly Newspapers* framed his experience of the mirror as following:

> *Suppose* the frame of *a* mirror modeled after aquatic objects, such as the lotus, with fowl congenial to the watery element, and so arranged that they convey to the mind an outline of the performance in question; again, *suppose* two Naiads, sculptured in porcelain, seated on aquatic foliage on each side of the mirror, whose beautiful forms are reflected in its surface, *while in the act of trimming their locks after bath*. [205]

This excerpt is of great value to us because, if we look at the language of the description, we can see that the reporter has already been transported to the *beyond* of materiality of the mirror-commodity, to a place where inanimate things come to life. In accordance with the Victorian male obsession with women's hair, these Naiads are in 'the act of trimming their locks after bath' (an act that is usually reserved for mermaids), while, in fact, there is nothing in the physicality of the design that points to that conclusion. Neither are the nymphs holding combs, nor do they appear like they just had a bath. In his account, we can sense movement in

[205] *Reynolds's Weekly Newspaper* (4 May 1851): 5; my emphasis.

the otherwise still physicality of the mirror: the figures *move* to plunge into the surface of the mirror/lake, they *move* to comb their hair. By the sheer presence of nymphs, the spectator revels in an exhibitionistic male fantasy that has taken him over the threshold of crude materiality. In the fantasy of the *Reynolds's* reporter, the mirror becomes alive. The language expresses not a rigid materiality of 'here,' but a fluid potentiality of 'elsewhere.' Even as we are presented with the hard matter of the mirror, we are invited to 'suppose *a* mirror' (some indefinite, fantastic one), as in 'assume,' 'imagine,' the same as in the already mentioned Mayhew's description of the fountain. The male subject loses himself in the experience of a wonderland beyond materiality; he reaches out to something 'out there' in his dream, but he falls short of it in his encounter with it. The Victorian reflective surfaces had a substantial role in this fantastic fall. We can trace this exhaustion by wonder and awe in other encounters with reflective surfaces and commodities at the Exhibition.

In 'Languages of Glass,' Armstrong marvels at 'how often representations in the Exhibition portray states either steeped in sleep or reverie or else galvanized into startled and violent life.'[206] This strikes true, especially in the representation of mirrors and of the Crystal Palace itself. These states of 'sleep/reverie' and of 'violent life' apply particularly well to the fantasy of reflective surfaces, where the experience of reflection is more or less than the subject expected, like depression and rage we saw in 'The Other Side of a Mirror' by Mary Coleridge. The language of excess is clearly evident in the accounts such as the one from *Sharpe's London Magazine*: the Crystal Palace felt like 'stolen from the golden country of the "Thousand-and-one-Night",'[207] or in a description from the *Times*:

> The vast fabric […] *an Arabian Nights structure*, full of light, and with a certain airy *unsubstantial character* about it which belongs more to *enchanted land* than to this gross material world of ours. The eye, accustomed to the solid heavy details of stone and lime or brick and mortar architecture, wanders along these *extensive and transparent* aisles with their terraced outlines, almost *distrusting its own conclusions on the reality of what it sees*, for the whole looks like a *splendid phantasm*, which *the heat of the noon-day sun would dissolve*, or *gust of wind scatter into fragments*, or London for *utterly extinguish* […] The vast

[206] Isobel Armstrong, 'Languages of Glass,' in *Victorian Prism: Refractions of the Crystal Palace*, ed. James Buzard, Joseph W. Childers and Eileen Gillooly (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 71. Her analysis of 'The Grand Boudoir Glass' by William Potts was republished in 2008 in her book *Victorian Glassworlds* in a slightly modified form, without any noteworthy changes.
[207] *Sharpe's London Magazine* 14 (1851): 250.

> extent of area covered, the transparent and brilliant character of the structure, the regular and terraced elevations, the light airy abutments, the huge transept, with its arched and glittering roof shining above the vitreous expanse around it, and reminding one of *nothing that he has ever heard of before*.[208]

This extensive exposé on the marvel of glass architecture, as well as the short one from *Sharpe's Magazine*, convey the omnipresent language of experiential and emotional excess in the encounter with the reflectivity of the Crystal Palace. Over and over again, the Palace becomes a wonderland of pleasure, an 'enchanted land' of promised ecstasy. Through its reflective surfaces, all that is solid melts into the air, hard materiality dissolves through a fantasy of the mirror-narrative. In the *Times* account, materiality is 'dissolved,' 'scattered,' 'extinguished.' The Palace is a 'splendid phantasm' that invites the subject into a fairytale of *jouissance* that cannot be reached, leaving him exhausted instead. 'Nothing can strike us as more preposterous than an attempt to convey by language any adequate description of the Crystal Palace,' says *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal*. 'Everyone who has seen it will have felt the impossibility of giving the account of either the fabric or its content […].'[209] The Crystal Palace is literally beyond words, but the subject tries to express it nevertheless. He tries to reach for the fullness of the experience, but realizes that what he gets can never be up to the mark with that which he has been promised in his desire. The Crystal Palace, as well as other glass surfaces around London, always reflects a world beyond materiality in the Victorian language, presenting an epistemic limit, and within that limit a possibility of transgression and excessive experience – of pure, unattainable, mythical pleasure of the void, the pleasure of semantic death.

Richard Sennett wrote that plate glass is a 'material which lets [one] see everything inaccessible to desire.'[210] This is more than true for the Crystal Palace and 'The Grand Boudoir Glass,' where the semiotic coherence of materiality is what is desired. What the Victorian male subject sees while looking at reflective surfaces is what he cannot get, but he desires it all the same, he wants the amazement of the *jouissance* expected. We can see that, for example, in *Jude the Obscure*, the last novel by Thomas Hardy, where Jude experiences an emotional

[208] *Times* (January 15 1851); my emphasis.
[209] William and Robert Chambers, 'A Glance at the Exhibition,' *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal* (31 May 1851): 337.
[210] Richard Sennett, 'Plate Glass,' *Raritan* 6:4 (1987): 1.

excess, because of the impossibility to approach the barmaid's face directly, but only as a reflection:

> At the back of the barmaids rose bevel-edged mirrors, with glass shelves running along their front, on which stood precious liquids that Jude did not know the name of. The barmaid […] was *invisible to Jude's direct glance, though a reflection of their back in the glass* behind her was occasionally caught by his eyes […] when she turned her face for a moment to the glass […] he was *amazed*.[211]

Commenting on glass shop windows, Charles Eastlake said that iron columns 'are furtively introduced, and as carefully concealed […] by craftily contrived mirrors, so that when all is finished the upper portion of the building seems absolutely suspended in the air.'[212] Mirrors summoned a new vision of materiality that inversed the architectural principles of solidity and void. This fantasy is always accompanied by the language of wonder and awe, by an ineptitude of expressivity. 'Silvered mirrors of polished plate glass, in gilded frames cannot be too profusely employed in a drawing room,' advises John Claudius Loudon, '[…] and when the cut-glass chandeliers are lighted at night […] the scene becomes *fairy-like* and *brilliant beyond description*.'[213] In the *jouissance* promised by mirrors, everything 'sparkles,' 'flashes,' is 'brilliant,' 'magnificent,' 'fairy-like', 'beyond imagination,' 'beyond words,' 'beyond description.' Like in 'The Grand Boudoir Mirror,' in all the accounts of the marvelousness of the mirror experience, the readers are invited to 'suppose' the *completeness* of that experience, to 'imagine' or 'assume' it, because to the writers this totality of the textual pleasure was continuously being denied. Lacan would probably say that they kept missing the appointment with the Real. In the Real, there is no *beyond*, the Real does not fall *somewhere else*; it is what always comes back to the same place.

At the end of the century, though mirrors started sinking into a cultural *status quo*, the awe of reflecting surfaces was still occasionally encountered. In *The Arcades Project* we find Benjamin citing Julius Lessing and his memory of the Exhibition's marvels:

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[211] Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978), 236; my emphasis.
[212] Charles Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery and Other Details* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1869), 23.
[213] John Claudius Loudon, *The Suburban Gardener and Villa Companion* (London: privately printed, 1838), 102.

> […] At the center stood an imposing crystal fountain. To the right and to the left ran galleries in which visitors passed from one national exhibit to the other. Overall, it seemed a *wonderland, appealing more to the imagination* than to the intellect. 'It is with sober economy of phrase that I term the prospect incomparably *fairy-like*. This space is a *summer night's dream* in the midnight sun' (Lothar Bucher). Such sentiments were registered through the world. I myself recall, from my childhood, how the news of the Crystal Palace reached us in Germany and how pictures of it were hung in the middle-class parlors of distant provincial towns. It seemed than that the *world we knew from old fairy-tales – of the princess in the glass coffin, of queens and elves dwelling in crystal houses – had come to life*…, and these impressions have persisted through the decades.[214]

The dream and ecstasy of the Crystal Palace were almost indestructible, thanks to the reflective fantasy of transgressed materiality. The glass transformed everything behind it and anyone in front of it, offering the experience of an extreme pleasure. As Anthony Trollope said, '[t]o that which is ordinary, [the glass] lends grace; and to that which is graceful it gives a double luster.'[215]

'The Grand Boudoir Mirror,' in its design and in its narrative, functions along the same lines as the Crystal Palace and the rest of reflective surfaces around London. For us, it serves as a suitable example of the wider context of the mirror fantasy of fetishized commodities, where materiality changes through the looking-glass, allowing things to become alive, while the perceiving subject experienced the *jouissance* of the fall. This wider context of the language of excess, of exhaustion by ornamentation and by wonder, materializes in William Potts's creation, placing the mirror firmly into the semiotic coherence of the fantasy of materiality. The optical shock and the exhaustion of the subject are the effects that keep pulling the subject into the world of appearances, where he hopes to reach the Real that always comes back to itself, evading the subject. And the subject keeps dreaming the world of the beyond, a wonderland, though he cannot express it, making this impossible fantasy a driving force behind his endless search. As a mesmerized, enchanted commentator in *Tallis's History* exclaimed

[214] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Harvard University Press: Cambridge (Mass.), 2002), 184; my emphasis.
[215] Anthony Trollope, *The Struggles of Brown, Jones and Robinson* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1870), 37.

about the Crystal Palace: ‘It was like – like nothing but itself, unsurpassable, indescribable, unique, amazing, *real*!’[216]

[216] *Tallis’s History and Description of the Crystal Palace and the Exhibition of the World’s Industry in 1851*, 3 vol. (London and New York: The London Printing and Publishing Company, 1852), vol. 1, 100; my emphasis.

FALL 2: ALICE IN MIRRORLAND

To the Looking-Glass world it was Alice that said,
"I've a scepter in hand, I've a crown on my head;
Let the Looking-Glass creatures, whatever they be,
Come and dine with the Red Queen, the White Queen, and me!"[217]
Lewis Carroll

Picking up the threads of the argument so far, we have seen that the Victorian culture was a culture of mirrors, as well as a culture of commodities – of mirrors *as* commodities. Furthermore, we have seen that the fascination with reflecting surfaces lead the subject towards the fall, an unfulfilled promise of pure enjoyment. The Victorian male subject, expressing himself in various forms, dreamed about the Real beyond the representational labyrinth that opened inside the Victorian language as a result of the appropriation of his mirror image. This appropriation, which sparked an illusion, was expressed by the subject in many semiotically incoherent, monstrous forms – commodified mirrors being one of them.

The incoherence of commodities has already been discussed in the introduction, but it is important to remember that this incoherence took many forms, many of which resonated with the theme of inanimate things coming to life. The mirror fantasy quite frequently played out this theme – the mirror becoming alive or acting as a transgressive surface, beyond which the materiality changes, categories implode and forms collapse into one another. In the fantasy of a mirror-reflection, the difference between subject and object collapses, while the subject is trapped at the border itself, reaching for the other side that always remains an illusion. In a way, the subject is trapped in a permanent state of the abject, where the boundary between life (animate) and death (inanimate) encroaches upon everything, as Kristeva says.[218] There is no beyond to be grasped, the Real keeps backing away, but the subject keeps dreaming about it all the same. We have seen this scenario in many mirror examples, as well as in the language of excess that frequently followed the accounts of the largest reflecting surface of the nineteenth century, the Crystal Palace.

[217] Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 157.
[218] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

But what happens with the subject at the border? What happens when the subject touches the surface of the mirror and gets caught in the process, disappointed by the insatiability of desire?

Materially, as well as historically, this moment was caught in the semiotic incoherence of the Victorian material culture of mirrors. This incoherence that plagued the Victorian subject found its expression in a materiality that destroyed the fragile limits of the animate and the inanimate; a materiality that crashed humans and objects into one another, instilling fear, apprehension and horror in spectators. From this perspective – of a materiality that does not conform to the strict rules of the Linnaean species or to the accepted rules of the animate and the inanimate – we shall approach the immortal novel by Lewis Carroll *Through the Looking Glass*. We are not interested in the fantasy of a dreaming child, the nonsense of logic or Carroll's so-called 'infatuation' with children (or girls more specifically).[219] By reading the novel through the language of the material grotesque and the mirror fantasy, we approach the transformation of materiality in the encounter with the mirror. The grotesque materiality in the novel, though quite innocent-looking, drew a fragile line between species, embodying the nature of the capitalistic fetishized commodity in its fullest. The peculiar relationship between people and things captured in it *is* the core of the mirror fantasy – it is the core of the fantasy of commodified mirrors. *Through the Looking Glass* plays out this fantasy fully, it dreams the dream to the end of its loop.

Stuck at the Border of the Beyond

In Guildford, Surry on September 18, 1990, two days after the centenary of the death of Lewis Carroll, a sculpture was unveiled to the public. Slightly over a meter high, the bronze, made by the local artist Jeanne Argent, depicts the famous Alice at the moment she steps

[219] Scholarship on Lewis Carroll in general and on Alice books in particular is probably among the most extensive ones. Martin Gardner's *The Annotated Alice* (New York and Scarborough, Ontario: A Meridian Book, 1960) gives a decent bibliographical overview, until the 1960s, of the most extensively researched subjects, such as the life and work of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson and John Tenniel (the illustrator), nonsense, logic and mathematics, as well as an overview of the most important psychoanalytic works. Other, more recent, comprehensive works include Edward Guiliano, ed., *Lewis Carroll: A Celebration. Essays on the Occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the Birth of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1982); Donald J. Gray, ed., *Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland: Authoritative Texts of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Through the Looking Glass, The Hunting of the Snark, Backgrounds, Essays in Criticism. A Norton Critical Edition* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971); Harold Bloom, ed., *Lewis Carroll's Alice Adventures in Wonderland: Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2006); Jo Elwyn Jones and J. Francis Gladstone, *The Alice Companion: A Guide to Lewis Carroll's Alice Books* (New York: NYU Press, 1998). These books are a good starting point for a deeper research, since the books on Carroll's 'child issue,' photography and imagination, his personal letters and diaries included, are beyond count.

through the looking-glass (fig. 12). For Lewis Carroll, Guildford had for decades been a family retreat and a place of inspiration. He visited it for the first time in August 1868, two months after his father died, looking for a house that would be suitable for his six unmarried sisters. The same year in November, the family moved into the house, which has remained famous to this day by its name 'The Chestnuts.' It was here that, in 1971, he would write the novel that interests us, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*.

The bronze sculpture – cast in plaster of Paris with a metal armature – stands in the part of the Guildford Gardens that the Guildford Borough Council acquired in Castle Street in 1988. Designed by Argent, the final work was cast in bronze by the Morris Singer foundry and it incorporated a sheet of bullet-proof glass.

Figure 12 Jeanne Argent, 'Alice' (1990)

This sculpture perfectly combines all the important points of mirror narratives. In one single piece of plaster, we see a human figure merged with a mirror, two forms (or two species – animate and inanimate) crashed into one another, collapsing the limits of human subjectivity, but also of the thing's objectivity. With her right hand stretched, Alice is reaching for the world

beyond the mirror, while rest of her body stays eternally imprisoned on the other side. An attempt to cross the fragile border of the beyond and to merge with what dwells 'out there' is an attempt at the final appropriation of one's mirror reflection – the Victorian mirror fantasy pushed to its extreme. If taken together with the novel from which it draws inspiration, the Guildford sculpture proves incredibly useful in understanding this fantasy, following the encounter with mirrors in the Victorian culture. Argent's work is recent, for sure; it does not belong to the era of the Victorian material and mirror culture, but if we keep this historical and temporal distance in mind and approach it only as a vivid illustration of the issue in question, we will see that the nature of the Guildford Alice is far more Victorian than it seems.

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In the material Alice, from the end of the twentieth century, a crucial moment in the subject's fantasy is frozen, but what happens to the textual Alice? How does her adventure embody this fantasy of shifting notions of materiality? It seems that what we are left with are only words, but Alice, published in 1872, was intended to be much more than a linear textual story from the start. John Tenniel, a famous Victorian cartoonist, worked quite closely (and sometimes in strong disagreement) with Lewis Carroll on the illustrations for the book, and it so happens that sometimes Tenniel's brilliant drawings push the structure of the story even further than Carroll intended.[220] The illustrations and the text complement each other, the drawings being not always completely true to the text. But both languages of the story, the visual and the textual, conform to the prevailing notions of overcoming of materiality in mirror encounters, and we shall glide through both of them simultaneously. If we add the above-mentioned sculpture, which is a hundred and fifty years older, to the representational bundle, we see that all forms of language (textual, visual, and material) follow the same structural lines. It might be that mirror narratives were still the same in 1990, but it might as well be true that Jeanne Argent complied with the structural rules of the Victorian fantasy that allowed *Through the Looking Glass* to exist.

The *fabula* of *Through the Looking Glass* is quite famous and its outline is well-known. It picks up the story of Alice six months after she returned from her trip to Wonderland. Alice is

[220] For Tenniel's illustrations and their social and political background and implications, see Michael Hancher, '*Punch* and *Alice*: Through Tenniel's Looking-Glass,' in *Lewis Carroll: A Celebration. Essays on the Occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the Birth of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson*, ed. Edward Guiliano (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1982), 26-49.

now ‘exactly’ seven and a half years old, but her imagination remained restless. Her mindscape is full of dreams and stories, and her life revolves around her favorite sentence ‘let’s pretend.’ ‘I could tell you half the things Alice used to say,’ says Carroll,

> beginning with her favourite phrase “Let’s pretend.” She had had quite a long argument with her sister only the day before – all because Alice had begun with “Let’s pretend we’re kings and queens;” and her sister, who liked being very exact, had argued that they couldn’t, because there were only two of them, and Alice had been reduced at last to say, “Well, you can be one of them then, and I’ll be all the rest.”[221]

From the very beginning of the story, even before she climbs the fireplace and reaches for the other side, Alice’s world is fictional and unstable. *Through the Looking Glass* being a children’s story, we could ascribe Alice’s worldview to the perspective of a child enraptured by the creations of the mind, before the reality kills the wonder. But, childish as this amazement by things not possible or logical may seem, Alice’s world perfectly embodies the Victorian culture itself. As we approach the mirror in the story, ‘let’s pretend’ and ‘as if’ become *modus operandi* of the narrative, and we are asked, alongside Alice, to assume the possibility of the impossible, to expect a transgression that brings joy, *jouissance* expected. For Alice, the journey through the looking-glass she is about to take is not the first fantastic trip. She has already visited Wonderland. But, unlike the imaginative introduction to the mirror encounter in *Through the Looking Glass*, where we are being prepared, invited and promised a fairyland before the story even started, *Alice in Wonderland* does not involve this language of excess. In *Alice in Wonderland* we are pushed straight into the fantasy itself, chasing the white rabbit as he disappears underground literally on the first page of the book. There are no mirrors in the story, no ‘let’s pretend’ or ‘as if’ to make the language of the fantasy work anticipatively. We cannot be sure that it is a fantasy at all (except for the rabbit with a watch). *Through the Looking Glass* introduces the mirror properly, as a mirror should be introduced; it promises a transgression instead of just pushing the subject into it. There is no joy without a promise.

At this moment – the moment of a fantastic promise – the adventure starts. But whose adventure? Alice’s? Perhaps, but also the adventure of Victorian commodified, fetishized

[221] Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass,* 18.

materiality itself. Once the looking-glass is introduced, we immediately witness, the now familiar story of transcendence of materiality.

> "Let's pretend that you're the red Queen, Kitty! Do you know, I think if you sat up and folded your arms, you'd look exactly like her. Now do try, there's a dear!" And Alice got the Red Queen off the table, and set it up before the kitten as a model for it to imitate: however, the thing didn't succeed, principally, Alice said, because the kitten wouldn't fold its arms properly. So, to punish it, she held it up to the Looking-glass, that it might see how sulky it was – "and if you're not good directly," she added, "I'll put you through into Looking-glass house. How would you like *that*?"[222]

We are still on 'this' side of the looking-glass – on the 'right' side, the firm side – and the morphing of materiality comes both as a promise and a threat. On this side of the mirror, humans and animals are what they seem to be – they are alive and animate. On this side of the mirror the kitten resists the guise (or materiality) of a chess-piece; it resists the form of a thing. What Alice needs to do, then, is to introduce it to the 'other side' – she has to promise something more than just a game. Alice has to promise a *possibility of transgression*; she has to threaten the kitten with the looking-glass. When things and beings refuse to morph by themselves, a mirror always does the trick. 'How would you like *that*?'

Alice turns to the mirror – a barrier between the worlds and a conduit of desire – just to realize that the only thing she cannot see is the very spot on the fireplace where she is standing. 'I can see all of it,' she says, 'when I get upon a chair – all but the bit just behind the fireplace. Oh! I do so wish I could see *that* bit!'[223] As soon as she encounters the mirror, Alice's eye searches for wholeness of vision, a completeness eclipsed by the point of view. What she sees, though, is not what she wishes to see, so the desire for exposure and wholeness drives her toward the mirror. All the sentences end with exclamation marks, accentuating Alice's wish to see what escapes the eye, what is beyond. She needs to appropriate her image completely, to catch herself in the visual spectacle of the mirror reflection. This is a Victorian mirror narrative *par excellence*. As it will be discussed in one of the chapters to follow, the Victorian culture was above all voyeuristic and exhibitionistic. In accordance with the secretive lines of

[222] Ibid.
[223] Ibid., 19.

Victorian voyeurism, Alice, though a female and conveniently veiled by the asexuality of a child, still expresses *Lewis Carroll*'s fantasy. 'You can just see a little *peep* of the passage in Looking-glass House,' decides Alice,

> "if you leave the door of our drawing-room wide open: and it is very like our passage as far as you can see, only you know it may be quite different on beyond."[224]

The very language, as well as the idea of the paragraph, hints at something that should not been seen, something that the subject feels apprehensive about witnessing. Alice does not look openly at what she wishes to see; she 'peeps' – secretly and alone. She wants to embrace an empty wholeness in the mirror, an invisible and unreachable spot behind the glass, a lure that pulls the desire towards the unattainable coherence of the reflection in the mirror. But what lies 'beyond' might be quite different from what it appears to be. The subject is caught in the act of voyeurism.

The only thing left for Alice to do now is to actually step through the looking-glass and see what the reflection in the mirror is all about. It is very important to bear in mind that the workings of imagination are what we are dealing with here. We are dealing with Lewis Carroll's imagination – the male subject's imagination – embodied in the character of Alice. The moment Alice passes through the glass, we are immediately transported into the dream that characterizes the Victorian commodity culture – things immediately become alive. Invoked by the language of lack and excess – something too small, something too big, something smaller and bigger that the crude materiality itself – things are summoned to invade the imagination of the subject and to embody the cultural tendencies of the Victorian material anxiety.

What is the first thing that hints at a wonderland when Alice finally touches the mirror? What is the first thing that is promised to the subject in the mirror? 'Let's pretend that glass has got all soft like gauze,' calls Alice, 'so that we can get through. Why, it's turning into a sort of mist now, I declare!'[225] Alice 'declares,' by the right and by the might of the imagination, that the first thing to happen is for materiality to change. The glass becomes soft and liquid and the subject is immediately invited to experience it, to enjoy the transformation of the mirror image

[224] Ibid., 21.
[225] Ibid.

and the materiality itself, as the 'glass [is] beginning to melt away,' tells us Carroll, 'just like a bright silvery mist.'[226] It is almost impossible to imagine any other description of this transgressive experience, than in terms of something 'silvery' and 'bright,' something that flares up the imagination and hints at a fairyland beyond. As we move through the text and through the encounter with the mirror, it becomes increasingly clear that *Through the Looking Glass* shares the same explosive, excessive language with the rest of the mirror narratives of the nineteenth century. It almost seems that the language appropriates the excitement that promises, but as in all other mirror stories, what comes about is far from satisfaction. If a mirror promises something that cannot be, then what comes next always manifests itself as troubling at the level of meaning. And what comes for Alice is a very grotesque aspect of the Victorian material culture itself.

That Horrifying Materiality

We are still at the very beginning of the story, but if we look at the scene from the proposed angle – from the angle of a change in materiality in the face of a mirror – we shall see that this scene is so powerful and so important that it sustains the rest of the story. As soon as Alice passes through the glass, formerly inanimate things come to life. '[T]he pictures on the wall next the fire seemed to be all alive,' noticed Alice in amazement,

> and the very clock on the chimney-piece (you know you can only see the back of it in the Looking-glass) had got the face of a little man, and grinned at her.[227]

The mirror creates a crack in the representation of materiality, a void born of the split subject himself. At this frontier things are talking and running, while animate beings – like Alice herself – slowly deteriorate to 'object-ness' by the end of the book. And Carroll is not the only one to play upon this theme. If his mind had resonated with the wider ideas and anxieties of materiality at the moment of the book's creation, Tenniel was in no way bound to push the same idea himself. But not only do we *read* about things becoming alive – 'The chessmen were walking about, two and two!' – and not only do we *see* (in Tenniel's illustration) the mentioned clock on the mantelpiece smiling, but we also see the vase on the other side smiling too![228] (fig.

[226] Ibid.
[227] Ibid., 22.
[228] Ibid.

13). Tenniel was having a hard time illustrating the story in accordance with Carroll's wishes, even though they were both operating within the same framework, within the same Victorian fantasy. Here we depart from the textual narrative for a moment and shift our focus to Tenniel's illustration of the scene. Nothing in the text describes the smiling vase, but the vase in the drawing is smiling all the same. The moment Alice steps through the mirror is the moment things assume their new faces and bodies – in the text, as well as in the independent elements of the illustration.

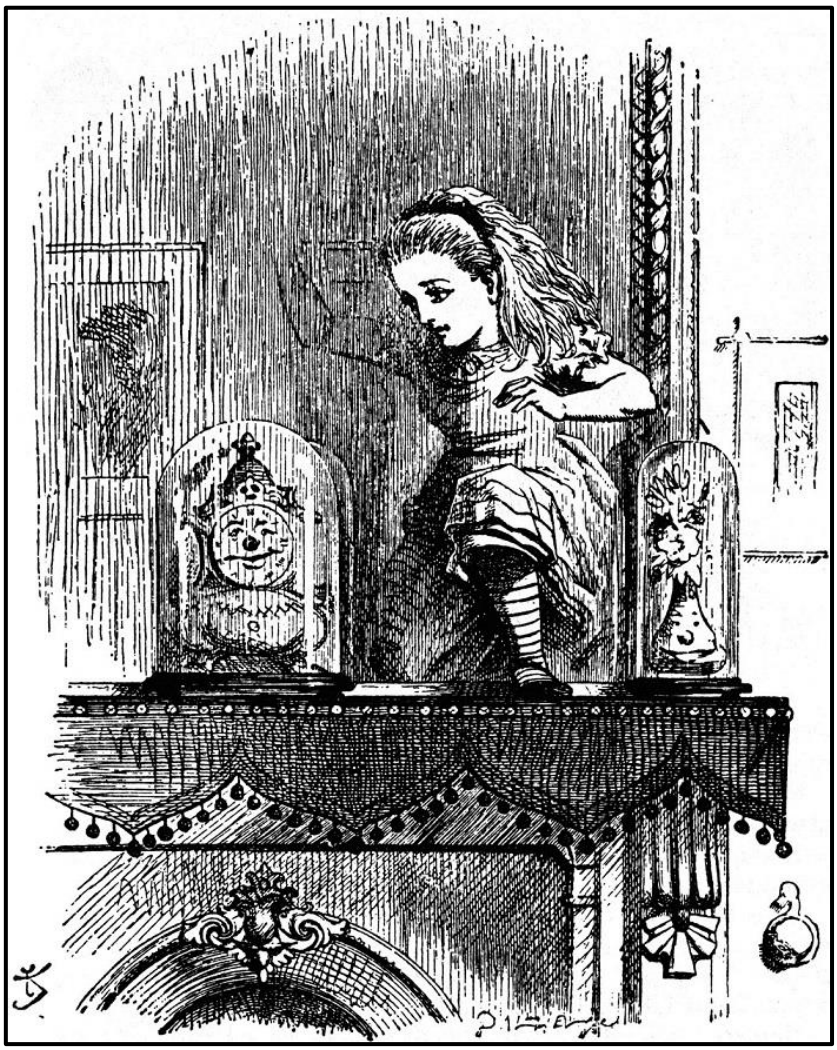

Figure 13 John Tenniel, 'Alice on the other side of the Mirror,' in *Through the Looking Glass* (1872)

These new, animate things embody the same fear and fantasy as Victorian fetishized commodities, overstepping the limits of forms, and postulating a semiotic implosion as the essence of their existence. The things are freed from their crude inanimate materiality and are running loose in the same fashion as the commodities flee the Great Exhibition in the drawing

by George Cruikshank. Becoming alive, they establish a new relationship with people. Agamben calls this anxiety a 'bad conscience with respect to objects,' but Shelagh Wilson has a better term: she calls it the 'double body' of Victorian commodities.[229] Discussing the grotesque design of many Victorian objects (such as the 'Man-eating tiger mounted as an Arm Chair' (1896) or earrings made from stuffed hummingbirds (c. 1875)), Wilson analyzes the debates concerning the widespread Victorian design that invoked fear and apprehension by clashing different species and forms one with another. This kind of design was 'ritually labeled monstrous by design reformers and Modernists.'[230] A story by Henry Morley, 'A House Full of Horrors,' from *Household Worlds* illustrates vividly the contemporary preference towards this grotesque material miscegenation. The story satirically deals with the new Museum of Manufactures established by Henry Cole, a Victorian authority on design, and its collection of objects that was to instruct the population on the 'false' principles of decoration. In the story, Mr. Crumpet, after visiting the collection, comes home only to find that 'he had been living among horror up to that hour.' Since he has educated himself on the false principles of decoration, he takes up his butterfly cup (a cup with a little butterfly at the bottom that appears when the liquid is gone), and exclaims in horror: 'Butter-fly-inside-my-cup! Horr-horr-horr-horr-ri-ble![231]

In *Through the Looking Glass* we see the same clash of species and forms. Human faces are literally crafted onto the hard materiality of everyday objects and the only reason why these objects do not exhibit a visible grotesqueness is because they are situated within a children's story, where the semiotic incoherence of materiality and monstrosity are disguised by the sanitization of the narrative. But otherwise, the materiality in *Through the Looking Glass* follows the same principles as the materiality of the grotesque Victorian design – a design that disturbs and frightens. From the beginning of the story to its very end, *Through the Looking Glass* follows the Victorian script of transcendence of materiality. The story itself is a perfect example and embodiment of the split subject that we are after in his many expressions and guises.

[229] Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (Minneapolis and London: Minneapolis University Press, 1993), 47. Shelagh Wilson, 'Monsters and Monstrosities: Grotesque Taste and Victorian Design,' in *Victorian Culture and the Idea of the Grotesque*, ed. Colin Trodd, Paul Barlow and David Amigoni (Brookfield: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1999), 151.
[230] Wilson, 'Monsters and Monstrosities,' 151.
[231] Henry Morley, 'A House Full of Horrors,' *Household Worlds* (December 1852): 266-270.

And what about Alice? If previously inanimate things strive towards their new materiality as alive and animate, humanoid and grotesque, what happens to Alice as she passes through the mirror?

The story of Alice goes in the opposite direction, it seems. As soon as she is in the *beyond*, she appears to be broken, incoherent, and insufficient. She sees the White King and Queen (chess pieces) struggling to get out of the ashes of the fireplace – the graveyard of things – and she tries to help them by lifting them to a nearby table. 'I don't think they can hear me,' Alice observes, 'and I'm nearly sure they can't see me. I feel somehow as if I were invisible –'[232] As in so many other mirror narratives, the reflection that the mirror shows is troubling, strange, uncanny, ghostlike. At this point, Alice acknowledges herself for the first time since she arrived at the 'Looking-glass House' (the house on the other side of the mirror), but she does it only in reference to the Other who does not recognize her existence. And this Other, in this scenario the White King, breaks the lines of visibility too: '[…] the King took no notice of the question: it was quite clear that he could neither hear her nor see her.'[233] The invisible and voiceless Alice is Alice's own reflection in the mirror-world and it shows the fundamental fantasy of wholeness we have been talking about. What the subject wants (coherence, wholeness, totality) and how he expresses it in his fantasy is never the same thing. The subject dreams about the wonderland, something he cannot have, and this impossibility of his desire turns into a nightmare, albeit a sweet and sugared one like Alice's. On this side of the border, where everything slips away like too much water in an open palm, it is Alice that instills horror in others by her monstrous split – invisible to everything and everyone but herself. As she lifts the White King into the air the only thing the King can see is a void – nothingness lifting him out of nowhere. 'The horror of that moment,' […] admits the King, 'I shall never, *never* forget!'[234] For Carroll, it was obviously not enough to voice the dread once and deal with the horrific void of the silent subject; it was necessary to repeat it, and them to *italicize* it, too.

Fantasies and narratives are rarely what they seem on the surface. If we dig deeper beneath the surface of the words, we find hidden motives for representation, usually the ones at least partially shared by the rest of the culture. The narrative of the rest of the story is a good example. Throughout the book, Alice encounters many extraordinary creatures and goes through many, sometimes obscene and irrational, adventures. The world beyond the mirror is actually a chessboard, and Alice has to go through all the fields in order to reach the end of the

[232] Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, 22.
[233] Ibid., 24.
[234] Ibid., 26.

game of chess. What happens there, at the end of the mirror world? Alice is to become a queen. But not any kind of queen: she is to become a *chess piece* herself. So here is the two-way street of a classic Victorian mirror fantasy: while everything previously inanimate becomes animate and alive in the encounter with the mirror, Alice (the dreamer, the perceiver, the voyeur) strives to become a *thing* herself. Alice arrives as a silent and invisible subject, and her ultimate goal is to transgress against her own humanity by becoming a full-fledged chess piece. But this fantasy beyond the mirror has its drawbacks, as ever. The *jouissance* expected is a myth, a lure, and it never says 'That's it!'

In the Beyond

After the mirror scene is over, Alice starts her journey towards objectification. What Alice would not do to become a thing! She boards a train full of strange talking animals; she mediates between Tweedledum and Tweedledee; she loses her name in the nameless forest and she eats a cake only to cut it afterwards. Alice's journey through the looking-glass is very much like Homer's *Odyssey*, with temptations and curious events lurking at every corner of the newly discovered world. There is even Circe in the guise of the Red Queen (also a chess piece). Just as Circe explains to Ulysses what ordeals lie ahead, so does the Red Queen explain to Alice what she has to do to become a thing. In a way, Alice's odyssey is an odyssey of the Victorian materiality. But this world, the world behind the looking-glass, has its own rules. Seemingly, Carroll imagined the looking-glass world to have no rules at all, except maybe that not having rules *is* its only and thus basic rule. Martin Gardner says that

> any work on nonsense abounds with so many inviting symbols that you can start with any assumption you please about the author and easily build up an impressive case for it.[235]

That is why Alice and her adventures inspired such diverse readings, ranging from reflections on Carroll's own life as Charles Dodgson, to the psychoanalytic reading of Alice's tears as the amniotic fluid and the birth trauma in 'The Child as Swain.'[236] Since *Through the*

[235] Gardner, *Annotated Alice*, Introduction, no page indicated.
[236] William Empson, 'The Child as Swain,' in *Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland: Authoritative Texts of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Through the Looking Glass, The Hunting of the Shark, Backgrounds, Essays in Criticism. A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Donald J. Grey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971), 337-365.

Looking Glass was conceived as irrational and without a reference point, it easily makes the commentators of Alice 'amateur head-shrinkers,' as Alexander Woollcott says.[237] Gardner might be right. But if we drop the idea of psychoanalyzing Carroll's life and analyze the culture he came from instead, there is a very strong argument for the resonance of *Through the Looking Glass* with wider cultural tendencies and fears.

By now, Alice has left the Looking-glass House, and the first place she arrives to is the 'Garden of Live Flowers.' As the name of the chapter indicates, in the Garden Alice encounters talking roses and lilies and daisies, as the story continues to unravel in ever more fantastic ways. But this Garden has very specific rules of physics: wherever Alice goes and whichever way she chooses, she always comes back to the house – she always returns to the mirror.

> [W]andering up and down, and trying turn after turn, but always coming back to the house, do what she would. Indeed, once, when she turned a corner rather more quickly than usual, she ran against it before she could stop herself.[238]

The house, and the mirror in it, is the central reference point for Alice; it is the place where her adventure starts and it is where it ends, too. Thus, the house stands as a border itself, the barrier between fantasy and reality, the place where materiality transforms into a fluid and disturbing concept – it stands for a looking-glass. If Alice's adventure through the looking-glass is a journey in pursuit of wholeness as a thing, pushing the fantasy of transgression to the extreme, the mirror is where it all ends: the end of desire, pure enjoyment, the *jouissance* expected. That is where Alice is going, in the end – back home – but before she can do that, desire lures her the other way in pursuit of material completeness and semiotic stability. 'I'm not going in again yet,' declares Alice running into the house again. 'I know I should have to get through the Looking-glass again – back into the old room – and there'd be an end of all my adventures!'[239]

The return back is the ultimate satisfaction, but the insatiability of desire always takes the subject on a longer route, never a straight one or the shortest one. 'Full satisfaction implies a kind of "psychical death,"' says Adrian Johnson discussing the *jouissance* in Lacan, 'an evacuation of the tension of dissatisfaction that perpetually drives the libidinal economy.'[240]

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[237] Alexander Woollcott, ed., *The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll* (New York: The Nonesuch Press, 1939), 15.
[238] Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, 31.
[239] Ibid.
[240] Adrian Johnston, *Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 239.

There is no pure *jouissance* in the end, and Alice will not pass through the glass again to go back home, so going back is not an option; it would mean the end of desire, the end of the subject's 'psychical life.'

In the 'Garden of Live Flowers' (the name of the chapter, as well as of the garden), we are deep inside the subject's fantasy, and we find ourselves lost in the confusion that the Garden presents us with. But in terms of the Victorian mirror fantasy, the Garden perfectly embodies the elements of a labyrinth of meaning that pervades the Victorian language. The garden is where everything comes to itself, but also where things are not what they seem. On the one hand, we have the semiotic labyrinth opened by the looking-glass through which Alice arrived; on the other, the 'Garden of Live Flowers' is the 'Garden of the Real' – the one which always comes back to the same place.

Let us take the encounter with the Red Queen as an example. Alice has found a way around the Garden by walking 'in the opposite direction.'[241] This turning away from the Real leads her deeper into the semiotic confusion that lurks behind the Garden and, eventually, she stumbles upon the Red Queen. Like all other animate chess-pieces, the Red Queen is a walking and talking thing too. But, whatever comes out of Alice's mouth appears to actually be something else, just like in the Victorian mirror fantasy of commodified materiality.

> "I only wanted to see what the garden was like, your majesty –"
>
> "That's right," said the Queen, patting her on the head, which Alice didn't like at all, "though when you say 'garden,' – *I've* seen gardens, compared with which this would be a wilderness."
>
> Alice didn't dare to argue the point, but went on: "– and I thought I'd try and find my way to the top of that hill –"
>
> "When you say 'hill,' the queen interrupted, "*I* could show you hills, in comparison with which you'd call that a valley."
>
> "No, I shouldn't," said Alice, surprised into contradicting her at last: "a hill *can't* be a valley, you know. That would be nonsense –"
>
> The Red Queen shook her head. "You may call it 'nonsense' if you like," she said, "but *I've* heard nonsense, compared with which that would be as sensible as a dictionary!"[242]

[241] Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, 37.
[242] Ibid., 38-39.

We are not dealing only with nonsense to be rejected or discarded, since even nonsense does not stay still here. We are dealing with a perversion of meaning where the hill becomes a valley, and the garden a wilderness, with a *displacement* of meaning, with the Being postponed, where things turn into each other and slide down the spiral of signification *ad infinitum*. This perversion is a characteristic of the Victorian mirror language, as well as of the Victorian language in general, just pushed to its obvious extreme in the *Alice* books – the structure of the Victorian language stripped bare and exposed. But this exposure makes it tame and funny, allowing the perversion of language to hide in plain sight. Like in *Alice in Wonderland*, the subject is falling down, down, down the rabbit hole ('Would the fall never come to an end!'[243]), only there is no hole or rabbit here, just a mirror and an endless *différance* of meaning in the never-ending labyrinth of semiosis. The garden started as a promise of the real, of wholeness, of an end; it started as 'The Garden of the Real' that always came back to the same place, but as soon as Alice found her way through – 'walking in the opposite direction' – the Real kept receding, wrapping Alice in layers of semiotic displacement, pushing her away from the house, away from the mirror, deeper into the mirror-world, towards the final transformation of her humanity into thingness. For a moment, it almost seems that the mirror fantasy will bring the final satisfaction, but the chain of signification moves on, carrying Alice on its tide. She will have to find another way out.

The Small Shop of Consumerist Curiosities

The odyssey of materiality that Alice fantasizes about consolidates itself again pages later. By that time, Alice had passed through the Third and the Forth Square of the chess-board, and all of a sudden she found herself in a small, very curious shop (fig. 14). In this shop, the story of Victorian commodities comes to its fullest. Asa Briggs says that 'Lewis Carroll […] was almost as interested in things as in numbers, recognizing just how important things – and their names – were for the secure scaffolding of Victorian life.'[244] All the other places in Wonderland and the looking-glass world aside, the small shop of the Fifth Square is where Briggs's words ring truest. Here Tenniel's illustration penetrates the story again. The shop in the illustration that Alice mysteriously arrives to is faithfully modeled on a real grocery shop at 83 Saint

[243] Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 13.
[244] Asa Briggs, *Victorian Things* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing, 2003), 3.

Aldgate's Street in Oxford.[245] Although Alice (and the reader) sees the Sheep sitting behind the counter, knitting in an arm-chair, making small pauses to look at Alice through her spectacles, this shop is as far as the book goes in the representation of the 'reality' of the Victorian Oxford.

Figure 14 John Tenniel, 'The Shop,' *Through the Looking Glass* (1872)

And as in the 'real world' of the nineteenth-century England, Alice decides to just 'look around' adopting a real-time Victorian attitude to consumption that triumphed at the Exhibition in 1851. 'My Dear, it is so very agreeable,' says a reporter from *Punch*:

> "You cannot tell how amusing it is! It is much better than going a-shopping. The whole place is full of some of the prettiest things in the world – laces-silks-brocades – and such lovely jewels – and the beauty is you may look at them ever so long, without being expected to buy a single thing!"[246]

Thus, on this side of the mirror, the Victorian fantasy becomes scopic again. 'You may look in front of you,' says the Sheep, 'and on both sides, if you like, […] but you can't look *all*

[245] Sidney Herbert Williams and Falconer Madan, *A Handbook of the Literature of the Rev. C. L. Dodgson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931), 19 (Note 10).
[246] *Punch* 20 (1851): 212.

round you – unless you've got eyes at the back of your head.'[247] Alice, unfortunately, does not have them, so again she is faced with the impossibility of complete visual satisfaction and the tension escalates as she stares at the goods carefully arranged along the shelves.

Like a visitor to the Crystal Palace, where all the wonders of the commodities shine bright and tempting and where the visitor can look but not possess, Alice turns to the goods in this little shop of curiosities just to find that what she desires, what she wants to *have*, is always slipping away.

> The shop seemed to be full of all manner of curious things – but the oddest part of it all was, that whenever she looked hard at any shelf, to make out exactly what it had on it, that particular shelf was always quite empty: though the others round it were crowded as full as they could hold.[248]

This is the place where Victorian commodities fully express their disturbing semiotic state – things fleeing the Exhibition, things fleeing ownership, things slipping to the semantic afterlife of fetishism from where they lure desire. We have already discussed in the introduction that for the Victorian subject, commodities were much more than things; they were out of reach, their significance surpassed the simplicity of man-made objects. Following Freud, Lacan calls these sublimated and unreachable coordinators of libidinal life – the *objet a* – the Thing (*das Ding*), and it is hard to imagine any other term to stand for the unattainability of commodities.[249] The subject always reaches for the Thing – as Alice will – but the Thing belongs to the Real, so its attaining would mean the end of the psychic life. Instead, the subject substitutes the Thing with many different things throughout life, always expecting that the next one will be 'it.' In our analysis of the nineteenth century, the subject seeks the wholeness promised by the mirror at the entrance of the Symbolic (the culture). But since it is only a promised *illusion*, it exists only by being absent (like the empty shelf in the shop), a phantasm that the subject's split self exhibits in many monstrous, semiotically incoherent forms, commodity being one of them. The nineteenth-century capitalist production that went (and still goes) hand in hand with commodity culture is all about desire, all about a promised fulfillment if the alienated and estranged product – the commodity – is attained. But the very incoherence

[247] Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, 86.
[248] Ibid.
[249] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, trans. Dennis Porter (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 138.

of the commodity resists possession, it resists satisfaction, always asking for more and more – more things, more objects, more phantasmal 'it.' Lewis Carroll belongs to the era one hundred years before Lacan, but a reader familiar with Lacanian psychoanalysis would be hard-pressed not to interpret Alice's shop scene in terms of the Thing.

> 'Things flow about so here!" she [Alice] said at last in a plaintive tone, after she had spent a minute or so in vainly pursuing a large bright thing, that looked sometimes like a doll, and sometimes like a work-box, and was always in the shelf next above the one she was looking at. "And this one is the most provoking of all – but I'll tell you what –" she added, as a sudden thought struck her, "I'll follow it up to the very top shelf of all. It'll puzzle it to go through the ceiling, I expect!"
>
> But even this plan failed: the "thing" went through the ceiling as quietly as possible, as if it were quite used to it.[250]

Alice is reaching for the Thing – and we can freely capitalize it here, since it is obviously a specific thing whose nature and description is not evident even to Alice – but the Thing keeps running away, making Alice want it even more. Seen in the context of a shop, a consumerist space *par excellence* (even identifiable as a real space in Oxford), the workings of the consumerist desire are evident, since the things 'flow about so here!' Things in this shop, as in the Crystal Palace and other 'places of pilgrimage of commodity fetishism' are unstable and incoherent; they cannot be possessed for they reveal their monstrous nature, which is constantly changing along the signifying chain. The Thing Alice wants the most is, of course, 'large' and 'bright' as only the spectacularized Victorian commodities could be, and it keeps changing its shape and meaning from a bright, unnamed 'something' into a doll, from a doll into a work-box; it flees Alice's desire on the shelf and all around the shop. Things in this shop are like things at the Exhibition, and the 'modern exhibition always means things out of place,' says Armstrong.[251] They are never where one expects them to be. In her fantasy, Alice thinks she is saved – she thinks that she has found a way of chasing the Thing, the object of her desire, to the top shelf, but the Thing knows no bounds, has no beginning and no end, because it was

[250] Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, 86.
[251] Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 221.

never there in the first place. So the Thing disappears through the roof, forever escaping Alice's grasp.

The Thing always belongs to the Real.

Alice's temptation is not over, though. The rest of the scene follows the same pattern of insatiable desire. The knitting Sheep and she are in a boat now – the naturalness of the transition being understandable in a dream – and Alice is rowing down a river. All around her are 'darling scented rushes,'[252] so alluring, provoking, and enchanting that Alice has to pick them up.

> "Oh, *what* a lovely one! Only I couldn't quite reach it." And it certainly *did* seem a little provoking […] that, though she managed to pick plenty of beautiful rushes as the boat glided by, there was always a more lovely one that she couldn't reach.[253]

The Thing from the shop – the one always changing into something else – continues to evade Alice's reach, as the boat keeps moving further downstream. Nothing can satisfy Alice's desire, not even the beautiful rushes. As soon as an 'it' is acquired (all those 'its' that present themselves to us as embodiments of the Thing which literally is *not*), there is another 'it' even better than the previous one, more beautiful, brighter and more alluring. 'The prettiest are always further!'[254] says our sad Alice. Not even the beautiful, darling rushes that she has already picked up can make her feel less empty, because as soon as an 'it' is acquired, desire loses interest in it and rejects it. Like a bird of prey, the nature of desire is to conquer the unconquerable, to appropriate the unappropriable, and to reach the fullness promised at the beginning, in front of the mirror. But this fullness is an illusion, and the desire surpasses all the conquered 'its,' moving forward (or in spirals), ever forward. Desire – the 'primer of my culture,' as Kristeva remarks about the abject.[255]

> What mattered it to her just then that the rushes had begun to fade, and to lose all their scent and beauty, from the very moment that she picked them? Even real scented rushes, you know, last only a very little while – and these, being dream-rushes, melted away almost like show, as they lay in heaps at her feet.[256]

[252] Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, 89.
[253] Ibid., 90.
[254] Ibid.
[255] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 1.
[256] Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, 90.

Even the real scented rushes cannot fill the void of the subject, cannot stand for the wholeness of Being, forever gone before it even existed. Along the signifying chain, down, down, down the spiral of representation, the Victorian language leads desire further and further away, morphing the 'it' into something else, into some new illusion, while 'dream-rushes' – rushes made of dreams – 'melted away almost like snow.'

Where does it end, this odyssey of Alice's desire? Where does the Thing lure the subject to? Does it end at all? Of course it does not, because Alice's desire runs in circles, so before she even realizes it, she (and the Sheep, for sure) are back inside the small shop of curiosities – at the Exhibition of commodities – at the heart of the Victorian material (and consumerist) culture. 'Now what *do* you want to buy?' asked the Sheep. All the way around, down the river and through the beautiful rushes, we are back at the consumption point where the shop scene started. Somehow, it seems that the whole boat trip was just a ride in circles that always comes back to its source.

> "To buy!" Alice echoed in a tone that was half astonished and half frightened – for the oars, and the boat, and the river, had vanished all in a moment. And she was back in the little dark shop.[257]

Like the reporter with *Punch* magazine - the visitor at the Exhibition from the previous chapter, who always comes back to the Crystal Palace – Alice always comes back to the place where the fascination with the Thing started, a murderess coming back to the crime scene. Riding in circles, on the wings of desire, the crime scene – the shop, the Exhibition – brings joy and fear, 'astonishment' and 'fright.' In order for Alice to get anywhere, she has to find another way out again; she needs to do things backwards. Thus, she stops 'looking around' and she settles down for something not so bright, not so shiny, not so enchanting or everlasting – an egg. Is it finally over? Can Alice finally move on with the egg in her hands?

> [S]he groped her way among the tables and chairs, for the shop was very dark towards the end. "The egg seems to get further away the more I walk towards it." […] However, the egg only got larger and larger, and more and more human: when she had come within a few yards of it, she saw that it had eyes and a nose

[257] Ibid., 91.

> and mouth; and when she had come close to it, she saw clearly that it was Humpty Dumpty himself.[258]

No, it never ends. The Thing never stays still, because it is not absent, it is literally *not*. The bright, shiny 'something,' the doll, the work-box, the beautiful rushes, the egg – all things made of air, all the 'its' made of dreams, of illusions. As the Thing lures Alice towards the 'very dark end' of the shop, deep towards the black heart of the subject's desire, a place reachable only in a dream or a fantasy, things become alive once again – with eyes, and noses and mouths. And as in a final stroke of irony, or maybe of a psychical justice, the egg Alice thought she acquired, the egg that turned half-human – Humpty Dumpty himself – falls from a wall and breaks into pieces as Alice experiences the fall as a subject. The chain goes on and on, never ending and never pausing, while the boundaries disappear, commodities flee and change and change and change. 'Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else,' says Benjamin rightly from the fringes of the Victorian age. 'With this possibility a destructive, but just verdict is passed on the profane world.'[259] And on this side of the mirror, everything ends in the fantasy of transformation of materiality and in the fall of the subject in the face of the impossible, incredible, world-breaking *jouissance* expected. 'Well, this is the very queerest shop I ever saw!'[260] concludes Alice. Wouldn't we agree?

The Violence of the Fall

As the story draws to an end, the transformation of materiality on this side of the mirror is getting more and more violent. Alice has passed all the Squares and now she is at a dinner party in her honor. She has finally achieved her goal – she has become a Queen, a full-pledged chess-piece. She is seated between two other figures with a weird material transformation, the Red and the White Queen, as they celebrate her successful journey through the looking-glass world. Over the brooks and through the squares, Alice came to her final destination. But is it really an end? In Carroll's marvelous story, does the subject, our Alice, get satisfaction in the end? Has she redeemed herself in the face of the semiotic monstrosity of slippery animate/inanimate

[258] Ibid., 92-93.
[259] Walter Benjamin, *On the Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), 175.
[260] Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, 92.

phantasms by pushing her objectification to the extreme, to its own logical conclusion – the chess-piece?

As it is always the case in mirror narratives, the subject reaches for wholeness, for the pure *jouissance* expected, but he always falls short of it. This fall is always beyond words, beyond description, something lacking and excessive at the same time; there is always a certain degree of violence involved. Alice's destiny is no different, it seems. She can only fantasize about the end, about completeness, but its impossibility always turns the fantasy into a nightmare. As she sits at the table, where all the impossible things have found their place – from a walking leg of mutton to a talking pudding (not to mention the talking chess pieces we are accustomed to by now) – the fantasy of 'queenhood' (or rather, of 'thinghood') turns into a violent mess.

> And then […] all sorts of things happened in a moment. The candles all grew up to the ceiling, looking something like a bed of rushes with fireworks at the top. As to the bottles, they each took a pair of plates, which they hastily fitted on as wings, and so, with forks for legs, went fluttering about in all direction: "and very like birds they look," Alice thought to herself, as well as she could in the dreadful confusion that was beginning.[261]

The dream turns into a nightmare, as things go completely berserk. They are running loose, just like in the previous chapter, jumping in a bowl of soup or just simply fleeing the (crime) scene. It almost seems like George Cruikshank had this scene in mind when he drew 'The Dispersion of the Works of All Nations from the Great Exhibition of 1851.' Or it might be that the similarities are so striking because *Through the Looking Glass* shares the theme with the Crystal Palace – a grand mirror-fantasy of material transcendence and the subject's impossibility to grasp wholeness. The moment the subject thinks to himself 'That's it!' the desire says 'That's not it!' and in the violence of the fall, the subject experiences the horror of the *jouissance* obtained. 'I can't stand this any longer!' cries Alice in desperation, 'as she jump[s] up and seize[s] the table-cloth with both hands: one good pull, and plates, dishes, guests, and candles c[o]me crushing down together in a heap on the floor.'[262]

At the end of the fantasy, violence and dissatisfaction are waiting; a feeling, or an awareness that, after everything, the *objet a*, the Thing, is still out there, out of the subject's reach. It still

[261] Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, 163.
[262] Ibid., 164.

calls, lures, and fascinates desire, transforming a dream into a never-ending nightmare. After a fantasy – a fall. After the fall – an awakening. Is it? That would be too easy; that would be a way out. This dream does not have one, as Alice asks in the end: 'Which dreamed it?' Thus, after the awakening there is no salvation. The subject is forever haunted by the mirror image, by the phantom of fullness, roaming through the endless maze of the Victorian language.

Still she haunts me, phantomwise,
Alice moving under skies
Never seen by waking eyes.[263]

[263] Ibid., 173.

PART TWO

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD OF DEATH

The Sirens, say one, are the charms of the Gulf of Naples. No, says another; they were chaste priestesses. They were neither chaste nor priestesses, but exactly reverse. They were sunbeams. They were perilous cliffs. They were a race of peaceful shepherds. They were symbols of persuasion. They were cannibals. They were planetary spirits. They were prophets. They were species of Oriental owl. They were harmonious faculties of the soul. They were penguins.

Penguins! This is the final pronouncement of commentatorial erudition. [264]

Norman Douglas

A long time ago, in a past so distant that one finds it imperceptible and hence natural, somewhere in the Mediterranean Sea, on a pile of pallid bones and rotting flesh, stood two creatures called Sirens, waiting to offer ignorant sailors the joys of ultimate knowledge and bliss. We could not see them, the shape of their bodies being so utterly wrong that it was eclipsed by their voices. On a pile of cadavers they sang of glorious deeds, promising future and everlasting happiness, luring equally the innocent and the guilty, and abusing the deepest desires of souls. The water was deathly calm in this baleful place of desiring sorrow, there was no wind to warn or distract, and no omen that the grace of their seductive voices was an entrance to Hades itself. For whoever approached these bodiless, aural beings, left everything they possessed behind, all the loved ones, all the hated ones – they left behind the reality and firmness of life itself. And in return they got nothing but blue depths, a watery grave, waiting on the other side of the promised bliss.

[264] Norman Douglas, *Siren Land and Fountains of the Sand* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1957), 15.

But there have always been those who managed to escape, whose eyes bore witness to death and joy, beauty and decay, cruelty and love, without succumbing to any of them. Their ears were stopped; their arms tied fast; and their ships sailed steadily between desire and demise, silencing the great lure of the most intimate depths of their Being. Those extraordinary men fought wildly to fulfill their destinies and bequeathed the antidote to the Sirens' call to the generations of men to come. From the farthest corners of the Greek epics to nineteenth-century Europe, all men, each in their own way, bore the name of Ulysses.

In this chapter we will introduce us with the history of these chimerical beings. Examining their history in its entirety is beyond possible, considering that sirens – and all their sisters mermaids, naiads, nymphs, *rusalkas* – span the whole history of humankind, defying the natural borders created by oceans, mountains, rivers and continents.[265] There are no imaginary and mythical creatures more familiar to people in all corners of the world, in almost every known historical era. Sirens, in their local versions, roam the Andes as well as Russian lakes; they are known in Japan and are spotted combing their hair and beckoning to sailors in both northern and southern seas. And in all the accounts, their beauty and voices are pervasive, the ecstasy they offer is unending: existentially unbearable and historically indestructible. And as if it were not enough this geographical and historical omnipresence bestowed upon their melodious sounds and everlasting grace, sirens assumed another unsurpassable feature: a staggering ability to change. Ancient feathered enchantresses or medieval fish-tailed whores, sirens and mermaids never cease to morph, mutate, to transcend their impossible corporeal existence, merging into one another, abandoning feathers for tails, the instruments they play for the fish they hunt, the fish for mirrors, mirrors for souls.

Facing their worldly pervasiveness, both spatial and temporal, and a constant fantastic flux of their bodies, the desire for a comprehensive survey collapses exhausted, depressed. This chapter, as well as the rest of the book, deals with only a fragment, located narrowly in the Western European countries at its widest, Victorian Britain at its narrowest. The Victorian sirens and mermaids underwent profound changes during the nineteenth century, changes even more radical than their bodily transmogrification. The only assets that loyally remained with their figures since their Homeric Genesis – their voice – and the medieval/modern one – their mirror – disappeared into thin air in Victorian times. For that reason, this book draws an arbitrary dividing line at the time of Hans Christian Andersen's conception of *The Little*

[265] The sheer range of topics coming from all parts of the world and all historical periods in the collection of essays *Music of the Sirens* by Linda Phyllis Austern and Inna Naroditskaya serves as a good example of this extraordinary versatility.

Mermaid (Den Lille Havfrue) in 1837, discussing siren and mermaid narratives of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in greater depth. But if we want the argument to be fruitful and intelligible, if we want the reader to truly understand the dramatic change and the turning point in the history of sirens, a short introduction, or better a survey of the main representational traits should precede it. This task follows or precedes every work on sirens ever written, and for that reason we will go though it briefly, leaving more room for some new insights on the Victorian times.

In the Beginning, All Things Shine Bright

Before we start with the basic concepts of 'sirenology' it is very important to understand that sirens came to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – and thus to us – in two different monstrous forms. For the population that came of age with Disney's adaptation of Andersen's heartbreaking story, it might come as a surprise that mermaids and sirens are actually not the same (though they could be), and that the modern Victorian, post-Victorian and post-modern era all suffer from a major misconception regarding their nature. Mermaids – those professedly lovely, fragile beings we sympathize with – are fish-women, that much is clear, but sirens (bird-women) are of a different sort altogether.

The linguistic distinction between sirens and mermaids still troubles the authors who let themselves become immersed in this wonderland of joy and suffering – of joy *in* suffering. On the one hand, the mermaid hybrid form – chilling, aquatic and soothing, but diabolical and covertly dangerous – appears more or less unambiguous. When the term 'mermaid' is used, it always means a fish-tailed maiden. But the 'siren,' believed to be a *feathered* creature, is far more complicated; the term covers the *fish-tailed femme fatale* form too, and is truly worthy of a Victorian monstrous narrative. The 'siren' is a linguistic and semiotic battleground of elements, merging water with air and *vice versa*, accommodating every meaning the history of sirens and mermaids brought to light. Sleek as a mermaid's tail, evanescent as the siren song, the term itself dwells in a place of the in-between, leaving a blank representational space to be filled with dreams, fears and fantasies. As such, it comes as no surprise that the Victorian male subject – the split, tortured and hollowed one – emerges through the language of this creature to express his otiose desire for completeness.

Sirens are old, very old, and when they appear in the European imagination, they descend from the sky with wings widely spread, and claws sharp and ominous. Both sirens and mermaids, more or less until the nineteenth century, share the same narrative traits – they sing

and lure and deceive men to their doom. But their histories, intertwined as they are, can still be separated and distinguished, at least as far as ancient sources are concerned.

Winged sirens arrive at the dawn of European literature. What better place for a fantastic, mythical creature to be born from (especially from a Victorian perspective) but the heart of the Homeric epics? A famous passage from Book XII of the *Odyssey* sets the stage for the sirens' long and complicated history. Since this particular episode has already been discussed from the Victorian perspective in the prologue, we will just give the basic overview here, beginnings and roots always being essential to historians.[266]

Ulysses has just broken Circe's spell and is eager to continue his journey home. Although it has been more than ten years since he left his beloved Ithaca, Penelope and Telemachus, his desire for life and return is inextinguishable. He is prepared to survive all the ordeals that gods (mostly Poseidon) have prepared for him. Three millennia later, in 1833, Tennyson's Ulysses will lament his unbearable, sedentary life; he will be tired of waiting, benumbed by the boredom of mundane existence.[267] But at the beginning, 'when [things] emerged dazzling from the hand of a creator or in the shadowless night of the first morning,' as Foucault says of the beginnings, Ulysses' desire for return was insatiable, leading him even into Hades itself.[268] Circe warns Ulysses that once he leaves her enchanted home, many hardships await him, and the first of these is the dreaded isle of the Sirens. These ephemeral creatures are irresistible and unique, in ancient Greek culture always capitalized and personalized. They sing, they kill and their promises strike in the dark recesses of the listener's soul:

> First the shrill Sirens, couched among the flowers,
> Sing melodies that lure from the great deep
> The heedless mariners to their fatal bowers,
> Where round about them, piled in many a heap
> Lie the bleached bones of mouldering men that sleep

[266] For a summary of the genealogy of sirens, see Silla Consoli, *La Candeur d'un monstre: Essai psychanalytique sur le mythe de la sirène* (Paris: Éditions du Centurion, 1980), 11-52; Leofranc Holford-Strevens, 'Sirens in Antiquity and the Middle Ages,' in *Music of the Sirens*, ed. Linda Phyllis Austern and Inna Naroditskaya (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 16-19; Meri Lao, *Sirens: Symbols of Seduction*, trans. John Oliphant of Rossie in collaboration with the author (Vermont: Park Street Press, 1998), 23-29; as early as 1908, Wilfred P. Mustard systematically discussed the classical, medieval and Renaissance sources on sirens and mermaids, see Wilfred P. Mustard, 'Siren-Mermaid,' *Modern Language Notes* 23:1 (1908): 21-24.
[267] Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'Ulysses,' in *Tennyson: Poems Published in 1842* (London: Claredon Press, 1947).
[268] Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,' in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 74.

For ever, and the dead skin waste away.[269]

Ulysses follows Circe's advice: he stops his shipmates' ears with wax and gets himself leashed to the mast lest he should succumb to the song of the Sirens. For all those who had heard their silky, enthralling song lost their minds in the ecstasy of sound, ending up on the Sirens' isle, inanimate, hollow and putrefying. Ulysses withstands the Sirens, though their song is forceful, their promises euphonious and canning, and he yells and begs and orders and threatens to be released and allowed to drown in the *jouissance* promised.

Thus in the beginning was a word: the dulcet, destructive word of death. In the beginning was the end itself, the desire promised, *la petite mort*. In the three thousand years that followed, this episode of seduction, death and desire remained at the heart of the siren legend. While mortals had to let themselves be mollified, drowned, devoured or to simply disappear, occasionally, in cracks and crevices of history, there had been those who annihilated the Sirens, but those were largely gods, demigods and undisputed heroes of old. Ancient tradition knows of these obliterating occasions that persisted as borderlines of the siren myth.

From the moment Ulysses stepped on his adventure-bound ship to Ithaca (in the tenth to seventh century BC, depending on the school of classical scholarship we follow), Sirens had been feathered and winged creatures.[270] True, in the *Odyssey* itself we cannot see their form. Intentionally or not, this information was denied to us, possibly because the general bardic audience had already been introduced to their shape. J. R. T. Pollard claims that scenes from the *Odyssey* are rare in the seventh century BC visual art and that the earliest depiction of the episode comes from a black-figure Corinthian *aryballos* from the second half of the sixth century.[271] This is to be expected, since the Greek Dark Ages suffered from an almost complete loss of human representation. After centuries of silence, following the collapse of the Mycenaean civilization, the Geometric style of pottery decoration gave way to human figures only at the end of the eighth century BC.[272] Discussing, like Pollard, the prominence of Sirens

[269] *The Odyssey of Homer, vol. 1, Books I – XII*, trans. Philip Stanhope Worsley (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1861), XII, verse 7, 289.
[270] Ian Morris, 'Periodization and the Heroes: Inventing a Dark Age,' in *Inventing Ancient Culture: Historicism, Perodization, and the Ancient World*, ed. Mark Golden and Peter Toohey (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 96-131, reprinted in Morris's *Archaeology as Cultural History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000); and Michael Shanks, *Classical Archaeology of Greece: Experiences of the Discipline* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) are two very informative works on this inexhaustible subject.
[271] J. R. T. Pollard, 'Muses and Sirens,' *The Classical Review* 2:2 (1952): 63. The *Aryballos* is now property of Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, 'Oil flask (*aryballos*) with Odysseus confronted by Sirens,' nº 1.8100.
[272] The scholarship on this topic is vast and diverse, but I am, very subjectively, singling out certain studies: for the geometric style of pottery decoration and the Dark Age Greece in general, see, for example, James Whitley, *Style and Society in Dark Age Greece: The Changing Face of a Pre-literate Society, 1100-700* (Cambridge:

in visual arts, Leofranc Holford-Strevens holds that at the beginning (as in the *Odyssey*) their number was always two, but that shortly after, they began appearing in trios. When there were only two, one of them would play the *aulos* and the other the *kithara*. When coming in threes, the remaining one would assume the role of a singer.[273] This formula persisted for two millennia.

On the famous Attic *stamnos* from Vulci in Italy, dated ca. 475-460 BC (fig. 1, mentioned and shown in the prologue), the one that inspired John William Waterhouse to paint his timeless work *Ulysses and the Sirens* in 1891, we find Ulysses' ship surrounded by three Sirens. Two of them are perched on the nearby cliffs, while the remaining one is diving headfirst into the sea. The scene may represent the Siren's suicide as a result of the defeat that never happened before, but it is quite possible that the diving Siren represents the same one perched on the rock above.[274]

Unlike their medieval descendants, classical Sirens all had names; their figures assumed a place in the overall universe of gods, men, heroes and monsters, as developed by Homer and Hesiod.[275] Nevertheless, the facts of their characters, their names as well as their number and parentage, were an issue of dispute in ancient times. The *Catalogue of Women* gives Sirens their family tree and history for the first time, elaborating on their unending story: '[T]heir names are Thelxiope or Thelxinoe, Molpe and Aglaophonus' ('Charming-with-her-voice' (or 'Charming-the-mind'), 'Song,' and 'Lovely-sounding').[276] According to *The Library*, an ancient source previously attributed to Apollodorus of Alexandria of the second century BC, Sirens were daughters of Sterope and Achelous, an Aetolian river god, whom Hercules wrestled

Cambridge University Press, 1991), 97-136; Anthony Snodgrass, *The Dark Age of Greece* (Abington: Psychology Press, 1971), 22-105; Morris, *Archaeology as Cultural History*, as well as works of V. R. d' A. Desborough, *Protogeometric Pottery* (Oxford: Claredon, Press, 1952), *The Last Mycenaeans and their Successors* (Oxford: Claredon Press 1964), *The End of Mycenaean Civilization and Dark Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964) and *The Greek Dark Ages* (London: Ernest Benn, 1972). All the authors mentioned are leading authorities in the field of classical studies and entire body of their work is considerably larger.

[273] Holford-Strevens, 'Sirens in Antiquity,' 18.

[274] Servius's *Commentary on Aeneid of Virgil* is of this opinion. On the other hand, the events from the *Argonautica* presumably happened before the Odyssey, so this discrepancy breaks the plot of the Greek myth a bit.

[275] For the resonance of Homeric epics with a wider cultural context, see a beautiful study by Barbara Graziosi and Johannes Haubold, *Homer: The Resonance of Epic* (London: Duckworth, 2005).

[276] *Catalogue of Women* is a compendium of myths presumably attributed to Hesiod. The work itself does not exist anymore, though, and the edition in circulation is a compendium of later references by various ancient authors. Hesiod, *The Homeric Hymns, Epic Cycle and Homerica with an English Translation by Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Catalogue of Women)* (Cambridge, (Mass.): Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1914), fragment #47. Holord-Strevens, in 'Sirens in Antiquity,' 40, n.8, translates their names more romantically and with much more charm as 'Beguiling the Mind' (Thelxinoe) or 'Beguiling of Speech' (Thelxiope), 'Song' (Molpe) and 'Illustrious of Voice' (Aglaophonos).

in one of his tasks.[277] Though this has become their most common lineage, in Epitome 7.18ff of the same source, we find a Muse to be their mother and we learn the Sirens' names too:

> [n]ow the Sirens were Pisinoe, Aglaope, and Thelxiepia, daughters of Achelous and Melpomene, one of the Muses. One of them played the lyre, another sang, and another played the flute, and by these means they were fain to persuade passing mariners to linger.[278]

Melpomene was first the Muse of Singing, before she became the Muse of Tragedy, both of her aspects suiting the imagery of Sirens. Other sources, though, had a different opinion on the Sirens' genealogy. According to one of Sophocles' lost tragedies, Sirens were daughters of the old Phorcys, the father of the Gorgons and other menacing creatures of the Greek mythology. In this Sophoclean fragment, Ulysses places the Sirens at the heart of the ravenous Hades: 'I came to the Sirens, the daughters of Phorcys, the two that sing the lays of Hades.'[279] Siblings of Echidna, Medusa and possibly Scylla, they were born out of darkness, lethal elements – poison, death and destruction – forming the very tissue of their noxious bodies.

Although they come to us as sinister enchantresses of a half-human nature, Sirens have not always been under the curse causing them to look like animals. In ancient Greek culture, being half animal to some extent meant being less than a human, the vertical scale of being descending from gods to men and ultimately to animals. Demigods and hybrid creatures existed in this vertical universe precisely to mediate these fluctuating and historically contingent concepts.[280] There are a number of versions of the tale how sirens became half-birds, and most

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[277] Apollodorus, *The Library, with an English Translation by Sir James George Frazer, 2 Volumes* (Cambridge, (Mass.): Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1921), 1.7.10. *The Library* or *Bibliotheca* is a compendium of myths similar to the *Catalogue of Women*, sourced from old Greek epics and plays of the Tragedians. The work was traditionally attributed to Apollodorus of Alexandria, a Greek scholar who flourished in the second century BC, but his authorship has now been rejected. The work is generally believed to be a second century AD compilation.

[278] Ibid., E.7.18.

[279] *Tragicorum Greacorum fragmenta 4: Sophocles*, ed. Stefan Radt (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), fragment #861., translation by Leofranc Holford-Strevens in Holford-Strevens, 'Sirens in Antiquity,' 40, n.12. In Hesiod's *Theogony* we read: 'And again, Ceto bore to Phorcys the fair-cheeked Graiae, sisters grey from their birth: and both deathless gods and men who walk on earth call them Graiae, Pemphredo well-clad, and saffron-robed Enyo, and the Gorgons who dwell beyond glorious Ocean in the frontier land towards Night where are the clear-voiced Hesperides, Sthenno, and Euryale, and Medusa who suffered a woeful fate: she was mortal, but the two were undying and grew not old' (Hesiod, *The Homeric Hymns, Epic Cycle and Homerica with an English Translation by Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Theogony)* (Cambridge, (Mass.): Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1914,) 270-275).

[280] Developing a vertical, structuralist, co-ordinate system of Greek culture and mythology, Marcel Detienne shows in *The Gardens of Adonis* how exciting and fun classical scholarship can be. See, Martin Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis: Spices in Greek Mythology*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1994.

of them, if not all, tell us that their avian form came as a kind of punishment, a personal story gone wrong. According to the *Catalogue of Women*, Sirens earned their feathers as a result of their incessant virginity, a behavior that Aphrodite, the goddess of love and their nemesis, could not bear. After acquiring their feathered wings, they left for the Tyrrhenian Sea and settled on an island called Anthemoessa.[281] In a different version, rewriting the Sirens' fate centuries later, Ovid tells us in the first century AD *Metamorphoses*, that they grew wings so they could search for Proserpine, Ceres' daughter, after she disappeared into the Underworld:

> The Gods were kind:
> ye saw your [Siren Maids] limbs grow yellow, with a growth
> of sudden-sprouting feathers; but because
> your melodies that gently charm the ear,
> besides the glory of your speech, might lose
> the blessing, of a tongue, your virgin face
> and human voice remained.[282]

Sirens have always been on the side of oblivion, their existence marked by the word of death. Chaos has always lurked close to their velvety voices and hideous bodies. The ancient world, starting from Homer was enthralled by their otherworldly scent, producing endless versions of Sirens' histories, transformations and destinies.

Being the symbols of the gates of the Underworld, in Ancient Greece, Sirens not only perched atop rocky cliffs, waiting for new souls to arrive, but also lamented the deceased, as their statues decorated tomb stones.[283] Holford-Strevens asserts that, being frequently represented on graves, Sirens 'constituted a poetic commonplace, being made into mourners themselves,' placed even in the Underworld itself, like in Sophocles' mentioned fragment or Euripides's *Helen*.[284] In this play from 412 BC, Helen cries: '[w]inged maidens, virgin

[281] Holford-Strevens, 'Sirens in Antiquity,' 18; Hesiod, *Catalogue of Women*, fragment #47.
[282] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Brookes More (Boston: Cornhill Publishing Co., 1922), 551-557.
[283] The Siren from Xanthos is a good example of sirens appearing along with harpies, see Catherine Draycott, 'Bird-Women on the Harpy Monument from Xanthos, Lycia: Sirens or Harpies?' in *Essays in Classical Archaeology for Eleni Hatzivassiliou 1977-2007* (Oxford: Stelios Ioannou School for Classical and Byzantine Studies, 2008), 145-153. A. A. Barb interprets the Siren from Xanthos as a child-steeling Lilith, see A. A. Barb, 'Antaura. The Mermaid and the Devil's Grandmother: A Lecture,' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 29 (1966): 8.
[284] Holord-Strevens, 'Sirens in Antiquity,' 19.

daughters of Earth, the Sirens, may you come to my mourning.'[285] At the time, Euripides' Sirens were at least five centuries old, and in Ovid's time almost a millennium; they had been defeated or punished for their insolence. But one thing was constant: whether to call mariners to the Underworld, to ironically mourn them after they died (the nineteenth century will playfully exploit this irony), or to lure their souls (Pseudo-Plutarch preferred this option), Sirens preserved their puissant voices, those enchanting tones throbbing with desolation and death.[286]

Never having any allies, the Sirens were essentially creatures of solitude, and the wrath of gods was their only faithful companion. Male heroes were able to defeat them (which says a lot about gender roles hidden in the myth), but female goddesses and demigoddesses encountered the Sirens only in contests. Besides Ulysses and his crew, only the Argonauts were important enough to be remembered as the survivors of the siren song, thus they represent the first group of siren conquerors: the male heroes. All of the siren tales are strikingly aural, their *visual* potency overruled the narrative only in the Victorian vast and in-depth rewriting of the myth. As such, the story of Jason, Nestor, Philoctetes and Hercules (to name only a few of more than eighty-five members of the *Argo*'s crew) follows the same route of ravishment, ruin, and vocal ecstasy. In the only surviving Hellenistic epic (the third century BC), *Argonautica*, Apollonius Rhodius tells of their heroic encounter with the Sirens on their quest for the Golden Fleece, one generation before the Trojan war and the events of the *Odyssey*. We learn again that Sirens are daughters of a Muse, this time Terpsichore (the Muse of Dance), and that 'they were fashioned in part like birds and in part like maidens to behold.' But Orpheus, famous for the power of his voice and lyre, 'rung forth the hasty snatch of a rippling melody so that their ears might be filled with the sound of his twanging; and the lyre overcame the maidens' voice.' One of the shipmates, Butes, jumped overboard nevertheless, almost proving that sirens always receive their share. But before he arrived to their flowery island Anthemoessa, the one we already know from the *Catalogue of Women*, he was rescued by Aphrodite, leaving the Sirens empty-handed.[287] A much later version of the same tale, *Argonautica Orphica* from the fourth century AD or later, adds an interesting moment to the plot: defeated by Orpheus' song, the

[285] Euripides, *The Complete Greek Drama (Helen), 2 volumes,* ed. Whitney J. Oates and Eugene O'Neill, Jr. (New York: Random House, 1938), 167-170.
[286] '[T]he power of their music is not inhuman or destructive; as souls depart from this world to the next, so it seems, and drift uncertainly after death, it creates in them a passionate love for the heavenly and divine, and forgetfulness of morality; it possesses them and enchants them with its spell, so that in joyfulness they follow the Sirens and join them in their circuits.' Plutarch, *Plutarch's Moralia in Fifteen Volumes with an English Translation by Edwin L. Minar, Jr.* (Cambridge, (Mass.): Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1961), 279-281 (745D).
[287] Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica*, trans. R. C. Seaton (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1912), 892, 894-895.

Sirens dived into the sea.[288] In the beginning was the word of death, but if reflected back, reproduced, the word could be vanquished and banished into oblivion.

Muses belong to the second group of those proving that sirens can be overcome and punished: the divine contests. The Greek mythology is full of these, as contests between gods, mortals and demigods served as moral and historical guidelines. The myth of the Sirens and the Muses has been retold in a number of sources, namely Pausanias (the second century AD), Julian the Apostate (the fourth century AD) and Stephanus of Byzantium (the sixth century AD).

Figure 15 Signed S. Olrik, *Musernes Kamp mod Sirenerne* (ca. 1900)

Pausanias informs us that the Muses, elsewhere considered to be mothers of the Sirens, were challenged to a singing contest by the Sirens, foolish enough to offend the gods. Doomed to defeat, the Sirens were punished for this daring attempt at vocal supremacy. The Muses plucked the Sirens' feathers, turning the loot into extravagant accessories and mortifying Sirens by this mutilation.[289] A relief on a sarcophagus from Villa Nero, Rome, dated to the third century AD

[288] Martin Litchfiled West, ed., *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 25, 32.

[289] 'On the market-place of Coroneia I found two remarkable things, an altar of Hermes Epimelius (Keeper of flocks) and an altar of the winds. A little lower down is a sanctuary of Hera with an ancient image, the work of Pythodorus of Thebes; in her hand she carries Sirens. For the story goes that the daughters of Achelous were persuaded by Hera to compete with the Muses in singing. The Muses won, plucked out the Sirens' feathers (so they say) and made crowns for themselves out of them' Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, trans. W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Omerod (Cambridge, (Mass.): Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1918), 9.34.3; Julian, *Selected Works of Julian the Emperor and Some Pieces of the Sophist Libanus, 2 volumes*, trans. John Duncombe (London: J. Nichols, 1784), volume II, 108; Stephaus of Byzantium, *Stephani byzantii Ethnicorum quae supersunt*, ed. August Meineke (Berlin: G. Reimar, 1849).

commemorates this event.[290] This aggressive story of song and demise will be quite popular in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century painting. Signed S. Olrik's (1874-1921) despondent *Musernes Kamp mod Sirenerne* (fig. 15) is plunged into an azure, aquatic mermaid palette in the manner of Edward Burne-Jones's *The Depths of the Sea* (1886), chromatically merging (or confusing) the Sirens' avian nature with the mermaids' marine one. Much more disquieting and malevolent in the choice of colors and strong, rough surfaces, is Rupert Bunny's (1864-1947) *The Muses Plucking the Wings of the Sirens* (ca. 1922) where the Sirens' pale, otherworldly bodies provide a sharp contrast to the pinkish flesh and carnal, red hair of the Muses (fig. 16).

The Muses and the Sirens have moved in tandem since the beginning of the Sirens' journey. Both were believed to have the power of voice and the ability to bestow eternal knowledge upon heroes.

Figure 16 Rupert Bunny, *The Muses Plucking the Wings of the Sirens* (ca. 1922)

Iliad beseechingly opens with Achilles' wrath and an invocation of the omniscient Muse: 'The wrath sing, goddess, of Peleus' son, Achilles [...].'[291] And so embarks the European

[290] The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 'Marble sarcophagus with the contest between the Muses and the Sirens,' nº. 10.104.
[291] Homer, *Iliad with an English Translation by A.T. Murray, 2 volumes* (Cambridge, (Mass.): Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1924), 1.1

literature on its epic journey, and along the way it summons the Muses to reveal what was ('[...] who was far the best among them do thou tell me, Muse [...]'[292]) by using their 'sweet voices'[293] resonant of the Sirens' seduction. Like the Muses, the Sirens from the *Odyssey* promise knowledge and satisfaction with their song that brings rapture:

> We know what labours were in ancient day
> Wrought in wide Troia, as the gods assigned;
> We know from land to land all toils of all mankind.[294]

Holford-Strevens holds that the Sirens were symbols of 'the false and the trivial,' contrasted to the 'truthful and serious Muses.'[295] Generally, it was hard to mistake these two kinds of beings one for another, the Sirens being utterly sinister and Muses personifying everything beauteous and praiseworthy, as Porphyry says in *The Life of Pythagoras* in the third century AD:

> Of pleasures there were two kinds; one that indulges the bellies and lusts by a profusion of wealth, which he compared to the murderous songs of the Sirens; the other kind consists of things honest, just, and necessary to life, which are just as sweet as the first, without being followed by repentance; and these pleasures he compared to the harmony of the Muses.[296]

Nevertheless, occasional equalizing of the two was bound to happen, like in Alcman's fragment #14 ('The Muse crieth aloud, that Siren clear and sweet').[297] One of the rare places, though, where this merging of Sirens' and Muses' attributes is evident, is an obscure passage from Plato's *Republic* that recounts the myth of Er (the myth about the Underworld). Here we find celestial Sirens that stand on top of the eight spheres that represent stars and planets. They all revolve around the spindle of Necessity:

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[292] Ibid., 2.734.
[293] Ibid., 1.568.
[294] *Odyssey*, XII, verse 27, 295.
[295] Holford-Strevens, 'Sirens in Antiquity,' 21.
[296] Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras*, visited 20 June 2014, http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/porphyry_life_of_pythagoras_02_text.htm.
[297] *Lyra Greaca, Volume I: Terpander, Alcman, Sappho and Alcaeus*, trans. J. M. Edmonds (Cambridge, (Mass.): Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1922), fragment #14.

> And the spindle turned on the knees of Necessity, and up above on each of the rims of the circles a Siren stood, borne around in its revolution and uttering one sound, one note, and from all the eight there was the concord of a single harmony.[298]

In this passage, the menacing Sirens are closer than ever to the benevolent Muses, and some critics claim that the myth of Er represents the very dawn of a parallel siren mythography, one that paints them in benign and propitious shades.[299] It would be tempting to search for the roots of the Victorian virgin-like sirens in this soothing image. Pollard even undertook the task of distinguishing the Sirens and the Muses once and for all, arguing against Ernst Buschor's view that the Sirens were the Muses' infernal counterparts. He states that their natures are so radically 'opposed that is seems misleading to describe one, however loosely, in terms of the other.'[300]

Defeated, beaten, plucked or killed by their celestial superiors, the Sirens still held an unprecedented dominion over their mortal inferiors. They were believed to 'tear them [mortals] to pieces,'[301] as Pliny the Elder suggests in *Historia Naturalis*, and their song was an invitation to an ecstasy that should never be, devastating the minds and souls of sailors and depriving them of their property, bodies, and, ultimately, of their lives. It might seem surprising that what we, modern readers, find to be the most familiar aspect of the Sirens – their penetrating *sexual* lure – consolidated itself firmly only in the late Middle Ages with the arrival of their fish-tailed, demonic sisters. But the Sirens' sexual nature was introduced at least as early as the third century BC if not earlier, if we are to believe a writer named Heraclitus:

> They [sirens] were harlots outstanding in both instrumental music and sweetness of voice, very beautiful; those who approached them found their property eaten up. They were said to have birds' legs because they departed with speed from those who had lost their money.[302]

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[298] Plato, *Plato in Twelve Volumes (Republic)*, trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge, (Mass.): Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1969), 10: 617 B 4-7.
[299] Elena Laura Calogero, '"Sweet Alluring Harmony": Heavenly and Earthly Sirens in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Literary and Visual Culture,' in *Music of the Sirens*, ed. Linda Phyllis Austern and Inna Naroditskaya (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006).
[300] *Ernst Buschor, Die Musen des Jenseits (Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1944); Pollard, 'Muses and Sirens,' 60; J. R. T. Pollard, Seers, Shrines and Sirens: The Greek Religious Revolution in the Sixth Century B.C.* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1965).
[301] Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, trans. John Bostock (London: Taylor and Francis, 1855), 10.70.
[302] Cf.Holford-Strevens, 'Sirens in Antiquity,' 24.

We find the same theme seven centuries later in Servius' *Commentary on the Aeneid of Virgil* from around 400 AD:

> Those whom they enticed with their music they led into shipwreck. But in fact they were harlots; it was because they reduced passers-by to beggary that the fiction arose of their causing shipwrecks. Ulysses, by scouring them, brought them to death.[303]

Since the dawn of their mythical creation, theirs was the realm of air and water, merging the fantasies of sexual excitement with deep, dark dreams of dissolution and drowning. These two aspects went hand in hand and the Sirens' promises hinged on this will to die, the necessity of perishing, the desire to encounter the great *beyond* of water, of matter, of life. Whenever they spread their nightmarish wings, the wind would die out, calm would ominously creep in on a hot, sunny, dog-day of the high noon, matter would transform itself, life would turn into death, solid bodies into putrefying half-liquid cadavers, steady minds into voracious insanity. Their monstrous, voluptuous bodies and their devouring lustrous voices – their punishment and reward – persisted for centuries, millennia, surviving wars and nations. As it will be seen, many of the elements rising from the bottom of the siren history endured until the present day: some changed, some did not. But some faded away completely, and this book, despite all the meandering and delaying, aims at this representational death that is more than just a change of fashion. Once the Sirens were annihilated and silenced, they rose as heralds of a new modernity to come.

At the Fish-Tail Apocalypse and Beyond

With the Middle Ages and the wide spread of Christianity, the siren myth began meandering and gaining additional complexity, meaning and confusion. Its structure remained virtually unchanged: sirens were still luring men to death with their song. But new elements appeared in their iconography. Mermaids (fish-tailed sirens) from the park-fountains of European

[303] '[…] quae inlectos suo cantu in naufragia deducebant. secundum veritatem meretrices fuerunt, quae transeuntes quoniam deducebant ad egestatem, his fictae sunt inferre naufragia. has Vlixes contemnendo deduxit ad mortem.' Maurus Servius Honoratus. *In Vergilii carmina comentarii. Servii Grammatici qui feruntur in Vergilii carmina commentarii; recensuerunt Georgius Thilo et Hermannus Hagen,* ed. Thilo Georgius (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1881), 5.864; translated by Leofranc Holford-Strevens in Holford-Strevens, 'Sirens in Antiquity,' 24.

capitals, celluloid tapes and the Starbucks logo and coffee cups, were a late arrival in written European history. It was quite queer, this beautiful metamorphosis that the sirens' bodies slowly underwent in the course of the 'dark' centuries. Not many fantastic beings were allowed to change their corporeal form so profoundly, becoming almost unrecognizable. Sirens came to the Homeric mind in the shape of a void – two invisible, unison voices, singing the song of omniscience and desire. In Classical times they grew wings, soared into the sky and mastered the sweet, irresistible sounds of their instruments. And then, in the Middle Ages, they exuviated their feathers, as their lower-bodies crystallized into scaly, aquatic, sexless tails, splashing the water and capturing desire once again. This being said, it is not implied that the classical Sirens simply changed their feathers for tails. Sirens have not actually *transformed* into mermaids, but *fought* them for the representational space in the Middle Ages.

Mermaids have their own personal history. The term itself came into use only after the battle between them and their winged sisters was partially over. We know them by this name since Chaucer noted that 'mermaydens' is English for 'sereyns.'[304] The story of their beginnings is far more obscure and veiled than the sirens,' as they do not surface at the dawn of the European imagination. For almost a century, authors searched for the earliest representations of human-fish hybrids, female as well as male, in the old Babylonian culture: the Syrian goddess Atergatis was known as a 'fish-goddess,' and the Babylonian Ea or Oanness was represented as part man and part fish.[305] But, this pursuit for the origins of human-fish hybrid iconography is brimming with methodological issues and leads inevitably into comparative religion studies at best. These waters are too far removed from the purposes of this chapter and not directly pertinent to them.

In visual arts, creatures with fish tails have been known since ancient Greece, some of them in the proper siren context. Half-fish half-women, the monstrous hybrid bodies remained

[304] 'Song of mermaydens of the sea; / That, for her singing is so clere, / Though we mermaydens clepe hem here / In English, as in our usaunce, / Men clepen hem sereyns in Fraunce.' Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Romaunt of the Rose,' in *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Complete Poetical Works,* ed. W. W. Skeat (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894), 680-684. See also, L. A. J. R. Huowen, 'Flattery and the Mermaid in Chaucer's Nun' Priest's Tale,' in *Animals and the Symbolic in Medieval Art and Literature*, ed. L. A. J. R. Houwen (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1997), 77-92.

[305] There is a possibly some truth in this idea, having in mind Martin Bernal's influential argument about the Middle Eastern roots of ancient Greek culture, see Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003). On the Babylonian origins of mermaids, from the nineteenth century to the 1960s, see Llewelynn Jewitt, 'The Mermaid of Legend and of Art,' *The Art Journal (1875-1887), New Series* 6 (1880): 117-118; F. S. Burnell, 'Ino and Her Veil,' *Folklore* 60:1 (1949): 202; Arthur Waugh, 'The Folklore of the Merfolk,' *Folklore* 71:2 (1960): 73-74; Margaret Robinson, 'Some Fabulous Beasts,' *Folklore* 76:4 (1965): 276; Gwen Benwell and Arthur Waugh, *Sea Enchantresses: The Tale of the Mermaid and Her Kin* (London: Folklore Enterprises, Ltd., 1962), 14; Michel Bulteau, *Les filles des eaux* (Monaco: Éditions du Rocher, 1997), 7-26; Richard Carrington, *Mermaids and Mastodons: A Book of Natural and Unnatural History* (London: Chatto and Windus, Ltd., 1957), 6-8; Boria Sax, 'The Mermaid and Her Sisters: From Archaic Goddess to Consumer Society,' *ISLE* 7:2 (2000): 44.

vehicles for the power of voice. We can see this representational confusion on a bowl from the third century BC found on the Athenian Agora. On the bowl, Odysseus is shown tied to the mast of his ship in a trance of the siren song, surrounded by two human-fish beings, along with figures that Homer A. Thompson identified as Scylla and Charybdis.[306] Fish-tailed sirens appear in a similar context on a lamp from Volubilis from the second century BC, which Michel Ponsich discussed in his exhaustive study on more than five hundred lamps found in Mauretania Tingitana.[307] Ever since ancient Greece, sirens and mermaids have occasionally been mistaken for each other, their power over elements of both air and water not equal, but existent. But what had been sporadic iconographic confusion in the classical world, became a continuous, enduring reality of the Carolingian Middle Ages.

The first written record of fish-tailed sirens appeared in the seventh century AD with *Liber Monstrorum*, an Anglo-Saxon catalogue of marvelous creatures. For the author of this compendium, sirens

> are sea-girls, who deceive sailors with the outstanding beauty of their appearance and the sweetness of their song, and are most like human beings from the head to the navel, with the body of a maiden, but have scaly fishes' tails, with which they always lurk in the sea.[308]

As we can see, the accent was still on the 'sweetness of their song,' but with the introduction of tails, the 'outstanding beauty of their appearance' strengthened. This change, small and insignificant as it may seem in the seventh century, will gradually advance in anticipation of the nineteenth century and the annihilation of the sirens' voices by their bodies.

Like many things ancient, the siren/mermaid iconography was gradually appropriated by Christian mythography, and sirens throughout the Middle Ages (and later) became a graveyard of all the earthly sins mortals were accused of. Passages from the *Septuagint* (Greek Bible) and

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[306] It is hard, if not impossible, to discern whether the depicted hybrids are mermaids (as Homer A. Thompson believed in 1948) or tritons (as Susan L. Rotroff believed in 1982). Simpson described the scene as 'a figured piece rather more ambitious' than the rest of the Megarian pottery found on the site. Led by the obvious narrative of the *Odyssey*, he remarks that the whole scene is 'apparently a fantastic contamination of the story of Scylla and Charybdis with that of the Sirens. See, Homer A. Thompson, 'The Excavation of the Athenian Agora Twelfth Season: 1947,' *Hesperia* 17:3 (1948): 160-161; Susan L. Rotroff, *Hellenistic Pottery: Athenian and Imported Moldmade Bowls, The Athenian Agora 22* (Princeton: The American School of Classical Studies in Athens, 1982), 67, #190 (catalogue).

[307] Michel Ponsich, *Les lamps romaines en terre cuite de la Maurétanie Tingitane, Publications du Service des Antiquité du Maroc 15* (Rabat : Service des Antiquités du Maroc, 1961), 54, #176-177.

[308] Andy Orchard, 'The *Liber monstrorum*,' in *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the 'Beowulf' Manuscript* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), 263.

the forth-century AD St. Jerome's *Vulgate* (Latin Bible) laid the foundation for a meaning of the siren myth far more malevolent than its ancient predecessors. While the ancient Sirens had been pernicious and all-knowing, the medieval sirens were straightforwardly diabolical – they were creatures of sin and the world's suffering. *Isaiah* 13.21-22 says in the description of the destruction of Babylon that '[n]ow beasts make their home there,' in the ruins of the erring city, 'and an empty echo is heard in the houses. Sirens have their habitation there and demons dance.'[309] No one could mistake these sirens for Muses anymore, as their nature became generic, bleak and demonborn. From this moment on, they have no names or parentage; they are only abstract symbols of everything wrong with the mortal flesh of the world. Their image has been hollowed, used to describe an 'empty echo' of a devastated city. 'And nettles shall sprout up in their cities,' prophesied *Isaiah* 34.13 in the destruction of Edom by the Lord, 'and in the securest places in the land and the hamlet shall be full of sirens and the house shall be full of sparrows.'[310] In biblical texts and the medieval ethics of purity, sirens had no right to be capitalized any more. They were turned into pure signs of destruction and desolation, embodying fear and suffering, but most importantly signifying the iniquitous pleasure. 'But wild beasts shall rest there,' St. Jerome's *Vulgate* adds, recounting the destruction of Babylon once again, 'and the hairy ones shall dance there and owls shall answer one another there, in the houses thereof and sirens in the temples of pleasure.'[311] William J. Travis has sagaciously observed that from the Greek to Latin translation of the Bible, everything became 'darker, eerier, [and] noisier.' In the Latin version, the 'empty echo' of the houses is gone, and the melancholic cries of owls fill the air instead. He notes that sirens changed too: in the Greek Bible 'their existence recalls the desolation of Babylon, but in the Vulgate they desecrate the very idea of worship.'[312] Steering through the medieval sources, Travis makes a powerful argument about the role of the medieval siren imagery. He concludes that, read in the wider context of Christian iconography, sirens invoked images of the Apocalypse, their unholy bodies signifying all the undoing of the world's order. Being essentially female, sirens embodied the Original Sin, their sleek lower-bodies becoming more dominant and connected to the body of the Snake. Sirens became harlots once again, but this time the moral lesson of the narrative drew on an ever wider context of the Christian mythology. Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*,

[309] See *Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum*, ed. Joseph Ziegler (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 172f. (Cf. William J. Travis, 'Of Sirens and Onocentaurs: A Romanesque Apocalypse at Montceaux-l'Etoile,' *Artibus et Historiae* 23:45 (2002): 33).
[310] Ibid.
[311] See *Vetus Latina: die Reste der altlateinische Bibel, vol. 12, part 1 (Esaias)*, ed Roger Gryson (Beuron: Vetus Latina Institut, 1987), 9-29, 388-390 (Cf. Travis, 'Of Sirens and Onocentaurs,' 59, 20f).
[312] Travis, 'Of Sirens and Onocentaurs,' 34.

from the seventh century, stole the description of the sirens from Servius's *Commentary on the Aeneid* almost word for word, but still succeeded in transforming them into creatures of pure flesh.[313] By the twelfth century, the meaning of the sirens expanded from '*luxuria* and *voluptas*, to vice, vanity and vainglory, pride and presumption, flattery, hypocrisy, betrayal, sloth, greed, malice, false happiness, demons, evil portents, and Hell.'[314] As centuries went by, sirens kept attracting more and more sins and negative connotations. *Physiologus* or *Naturalist*, written in the second century AD and translated into numerous languages throughout the medieval period, played a significant role in the process. Its Latin version came into existence around 600, and, in the words of Travis, 'based on scripture, easy to understand, and colorful, the *Physiologus* became a medieval bestseller.'[315] Depending on the version, sirens were half-birds or half-fish, generally fish predominating in earlier versions. *Physiologus* was the ancestor to numerous bestiaries rampaging through the Middle Ages, introducing, describing and composing natures and histories of a plethora of fantastic beings that populated the margins of medieval manuscripts and fringes of the Christian world.[316] In a version of *Physiologus* by Bishop Theobald, who was believed to have lived in the eleventh century, sirens finally became beautiful fish-virgins, a melancholic image that was to reign over the nineteenth century.

> Those who have seen them will say, that the nature / of them is as follows, / From the waist upwards they're shaped in the form / of a beautiful virgin, / What makes the wonder so great, is from thence / lower down they are fish like.[317]

Feathered sirens and fish-tailed mermaids had unobtrusively begun their battle in classical times, but through the Middle Ages the fish-demon prevailed. From the twelfth to the

[313] 'People imagine three Sirens who were part maidens, part birds, having wings and talons; one of them would make music with her voice, the second with her flute, and the third with a lyre. They would draw sailors, enticed by the song, into shipwreck. 31. In truth, however, they were harlots, who, because they would seduce passers-by into destitution, were imagined as bringing shipwreck upon them. They were said to have had wings and talons because sexual desire both flies and wounds' (*The* Etymologies *of Isidore of Seville*, ed. Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach and Oliver Berghof (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), XII. iii.30-31, 245)
[314] Travis, 'Of Sirens and Onocentaurs,' 39-40.
[315] Ibid., 36.
[316] Already in 1880, Llewellynn Jewitt, a Victorian illustrator, writer and natural scientist, covered a wide range of Bestiaries and medieval manuscripts describing or representing siren/mermaid images. See, Llewellynn Jewitt, 'The Mermaid of Legend and of Art,' *The Art Journal (1815-1887), New Series* 6 (1880): 232-233. Travis, 'Of Sirens and Onocentaurs,' and Holford-Strevens, 'Sirens in Antiquity,' both comment extensively on medieval sources. My favorite study on medieval fantastic creatures is John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000). Umberto Eco in *Baudolino* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003) has masterfully transposed the fantastic fringes of the Christian medieval world (the kingdom of Prester John) into a novel.
[317] Theobald, *Physiologus, a Metrical Bestiary of Twelve Chapters*, trans. Alan Wood Rendell (London: John and Edward Bumpus, Ltd., 1928), 87.

fourteenth century, the clash raged in written and visual sources, but as the medieval period drew to a close, the scaly, voracious virgin-like whores were winning.

Both versions would continue to exist until the present day, dominating different contexts that emphasized classical or medieval imagery in turns. It is quite interesting to observe how in the thirteenth century – the period marked by indeterminacy regarding this matter – authors expressed this shifting notion of sirens' fantastic, monstrous existence. 'Syrenas, popularized in poetic fable, are marine monsters,' says Augustus Magnus,

> whose upper body has the figure of a woman with long pendulous breasts with which it suckles its young; its face is horrible and it has a mane of long free-flowing hair; bellow they have eagle's claws, and above are aquiline wings, and behind a scaly tail used as a rudder to guide their swimming.[318]

A number of images echo this description of sirens and mermaids clashing, merging into one body, a female body with claws, wings and a fish tail, like in the late thirteenth-century *Psalter* from Artois (fig. 17) or Brunnetto Latini's *Li livres dou tresor* in the century that followed.[319] The artists could not decide what kind of body suits the sirens best, pilling up centuries of their history onto these images.

[318] Albertus Magnus, 'Man and the Beast: De Animalibus,' in *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 47*, trans. James J. Scanlan (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1987), 412.
[319] *Psalter*, late thirteenth century England (Oxford: Bodleian Library, MS Douce 118, fol. 9r); Brunetto Lattini, *Li livres dou tresor*, fourteenth-century France (London: British Library, MS Yates Thompson 19, fol. 50v); Brunetto Lattini, *Li livres dou tresor*, fourteenth-century France (St. Petersburg: National Library of Russia, MS Fr. F. V. III, 4, fol. 47r).

Figure 17 *Psalter Artois*, late 13th century
(Oxford: Bodleian Library, MS Douce 118, fol. 9r)

With the advent of the early modern era, the Age of the Encounters began. Boria Sax notes that the image of the mermaid known to us today emerged in maritime culture with the expansion of trade at the end of the Middle Ages. Aboard ships, the folklore of cultures from around the world blended.[320] All over the world, seafarers, condemned to months of solitude and surrounded only by miles of deep, dark, moody aquatic fantasies, began reporting the sightings of sirens and mermaids on their travels. Still dangerous and cruel, these beings now populated the uncharted waters of the unknown gloomy sea, their bodies signifying the unfathomable and the unexplored: the place where no ship has ever sailed to was marked on the map with words: 'hic sunt sirenae' ('here be sirens'). In 1625, Henry Hudson testified to the existence of sirens by recounting his voyage to Novaya Zemlya:

> This evening (June 15) one of our company, looking overboard, saw a mermaid, and calling up some of the company to see her, one more of the crew came up, and by that time she was come close to the ship's side, looking earnestly on the men. A little after, a sea came and overturned her. From the navel upward, her back and breasts were like a woman's, as that saw her; her body as big as one

[320] Sax, 'Mermaid and Her Sisters,' 47-48.

> of us, her skin very white, and long hair hanging down behind, of colour black. In her going down they saw her tail, which was like tike the tail of a porpoise, speckled like a mackerel. Their names that saw her were Thomas Hilles and Robert Rayner.[321]

Hudson's description is formulaic of a siren encounter in the modern era, and these encounters were abundant. Sir Richard Whitebourne, a sea captain of Exmouth in Devon, reported one in 1620 and published the account in his *Discourses and Discovery of New-found-land*.[322] In 1610, Captain John Smith encountered a mermaid in the West Indies, with 'large eyes too round, finely shaped no […], well-formed ears, rather too long, and her long hair imparted to her an original character by no manes unattractive.'[323] Sirens and mermaids were always witnessed by someone else, their existence always both second-hand and undeniable at the same time. Richard Carrington humorously observes that in the seventeenth century the 'existence of sirens was as firmly established as the existence of shrimps,' while Celeste Olalquiaga comments in *The Artificial Kingdom* that precisely in the age of reason, when one would expect otherwise, 'an unprecedented number of mermaid sightings took place on the European coasts, witnessed and legally certified by highly respected professionals and community members.'[324] Like all fantastic creatures, sirens reflected dominant epistemologies and construction of knowledge. Their bodies resided between observers, inside words and sentences, their split hybrid skin invoking fantasies and delineating the humanity itself. But as the eighteenth century began, sirens and mermaids started their steady descent into zoological taxonomies or outside of them; one part of their narrative was reduced to natural history, the other to folklore. François Valentijn, a Dutch colonial chaplain, published his *Natural History of Amboina* in 1726. In the book, in the caption underneath the drawing by Samuel Fallours, the official painter to the Dutch East India Company in 1718, Valintijn describes the siren:

> ZEE-WYF: A monster resembling a Siren caught on the coast of Borneo in the administrative district of Amboina. It was 59 inches long and in proportion as an eel. It lived on land for four days and seven hours in a barrel filled with water.

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[321] Cf. Carrington, *Mermaids and Mastodons*, 9.
[322] Richard Whitebourne, *A Discourse and Discovery of New-found-land* (London: Felix Kingston, 1622), 97-98.
[323] Waugh, 'The Folklore of the Merfolk,' 80; Horace Beck, *Folklore and the Sea* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 248; Douglas, *Siren Land*, 3-4.
[324] Carrington, *Mermaids and Mastodons*, 9; Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of Kitsch Experience* (New York: Pantheon, 1998), 252.

> From time to time it uttered cries like those of a mouse. Although offered small fish, mollusks, crabs, crayfish, etc, it would not eat. After its death some excreta, like that of a cat, was found in its barrel.[325]

As far as zoological nomenclature and natural history were concerned, the siren myth was officially dying. Facts mattered now – length, proportion, life span – not lure, voice or grace. This poor, wretched creature with a voice of a mouse from Valentijn's record, was so profoundly different from the Sirens of the *Odyssey*, or even the demons and harbingers of the Apocalypse. The siren from Valentijn's account was so degraded and debased that it died inside a barrel, helpless, leaving only excrement behind, the final proof of her wretched nature. In Erik Pontoppidan's 1755 *Natural History of Norway* we find a similar, though still fantastic, story of a merman who spoke Danish fluently and foretold the birth of King Charles IV. Pontopidan says:

> When such fictions are mixed with the history of Mermen, and when that is represented as a prophet and an orator; when they give the Mermaid a melodious voice, and tell us that she is a fine singer; one need not wonder that so few people of sense will give credit to such absurdities; or that they even doubt the existence of such a creature.[326]

Lynda Phillis Austern says that the 'siren's body and voice were severed by scholars during the eighteenth century as completely as her literary and natural scientific histories.' Pontopidan testifies to this new attitude. Sirens became, Austern continues, 'silent objects of systematic inquiry or creatures of the human imagination.' They were banished to the 'fields of history, folklore and the manifold realms of the poetics and the mind.'[327]

These realms of the poetics and the mind are exactly what we are concerned with in the book, because the nineteenth century banished sirens even in the deepest recesses of the poetic and literary imagination. This death was not in vain – it expressed a new Victorian epistemology and a new Victorian desiring subject.

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[325] Cf. Carrington, *Mermaids and Mastodons*, 11.
[326] Erik Pontoppidan, *The Natural History of Norway* (London: A. Linde, 1755), 187; Carrington, *Mermaids and Mastodons*, 12.
[327] Linda Phyllis Austern, '"Teach Me to Heare Mermaids Singing": Embodiments of (Acoustic) Pleasure and Danger in the Modern West,' in *Music of the Sirens*, ed. Linda Phyllis Austern and Inna Naroditskaya (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 72.

Literature notwithstanding, the Victorian sirens fell even deeper into the silencing abyss that opened within their monstrous bodies. On the wings of the eighteenth-century natural history and the nineteenth-century Darwinian evolutionism, sirens were further petrified into grotesque exhibits intended for mass consumption, entertainment and advertisements. Skeletons and 'stuffed mermaids' became an enormous attraction in London and the States, P. T. Barnum's famous 'Fiji Mermaid' being only one of many.[328] Francis Buckland mentions a number of these exhibits in *Curiosities of Natural History* published in 1889.[329] All of them ended up being elaborate hoaxes, mostly made of upper parts of monkeys and lower parts of fish. Richard Carrington explains how a whole little industry of these grotesque silent things existed in Japan, supplying the British market.[330] In this sad commodified and still state, sirens embodied the 'grotesque design' we have already discussed. Artificially produced, two or more species were merged into one another, causing the collapse of the Linnaean classification, and exhibited for the visual pleasure of the audiences. Sirens were completely tamed by capitalism, consumerism and industrialism. Sax might be right in saying that the mermaids' power waned as the ocean lost its terror.[331] The Egyptian Hall at Piccadilly or the White Hart at Spitalfields' walls and exhibition chambers were the final resting place of sirens.

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In the light of this short exposé on the history of sirens and mermaids, we have to agree that, in their own respective ways, both the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries scientifically silenced, tamed or killed sirens so profoundly that the image that remained has been one of benevolence until the present day. Sirens became mere toys, exhibits, objectified on the shelves or under glass, offering themselves to the gaze of visitors and scientists. This image still remains with us, for example in the movie *Splash!* (1984) where we see Daryl Hannah as a mermaid, literally falling apart in a tank of muddy water, an image reminiscent of the three centuries old Valentijn's story. It seems that sirens have been dying for centuries now, the length of their death reminiscent of the length of their fantastic lives.

Now, on the verge of the Victorian times, the ones that we care about the most in this book, we hear the melody that all these traits played in the minds of Victorian and post-Victorian

[328] 'Fiji Mermaid' was a very popular mid-nineteenth-century hoax devised by the American entertainer, P. T. Barnum. It was a 'mermaid' skeleton made of fish and monkey skeletons glued together.
[329] Francis Buckland, *Curiosities of Natural History* (New York: Rudd and Carlton, 1859).
[330] Carrington, *Mermaids and Mastodons*, 14-15.
[331] Sax, 'Mermaid and Her Sisters,' 51.

artists and writers. The Victorian sirens assumed a role quite specific to the Victorian culture. Their myth was being rewritten in such peculiar ways that one feels compelled to ask what this rewriting actually meant to the Victorians. Every monster is a culture waiting to be read, a palimpsest of cultural fears, dreams and desires, but what characterized the Victorian sirens, and truly separated them from the rest of their history, is the literal meaning of 'reading.' In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we *read* about them as frequently as ever. The Victorian sirens were pushed into the very heart of popular culture: novels and poems and countless multivolume works. Certainly, sightings of sirens continued, the inquiry into their nature undying. In 1809, a letter from a certain Mr. William Munro, was published in *The Times* with the headline 'The Mermaid Seen on the Coast of Caithness,' where Mr. Munro described the mermaid he had seen as 'combing its hair.'[332] Five years later, *York Chronicle* wrote that their 'curiosity has been greatly excited by appearance of a mermaid on th[at] coast.'[333] Even today, YouTube is full of 'real' mermaid videos.[334] But sirens of the nineteenth-century live mainly in the realm of the poetic mind and in literature, and it is here that we encounter the real object of our study: the Victorian male desiring subject. Contrary to the three-millennia-long history of reading about the sirens' voice or threat, in the nineteenth century we read about their *lives*. The sirens have become the *protagonists* of their own stories. They suffer in silence, but what they truly want is something new; something shiny and worth living for; something that represents the unprecedented fullness of existence; something that constantly keeps receding; something dreaded and desired at the same time; something that mirrors *jouissance* promised; something the male subject might want too – a soul as the signifier of the fullness of death.

Mirrors and Souls of Victorian Sirens

Two characteristics of medieval and Renaissance sirens have been left for this small, separate sub-chapter, so that their significance could be emphasized. Throughout their long history, sirens and mermaids have appropriated a number of objects as their symbols, but from the Middle Ages right up to the beginning of the nineteenth century, their iconography was inseparable from the *fish* and the *mirror*. The depiction of these two objects in medieval and

[332] *The Times*, 'The Mermaid Seen on the Coast of Caithness,' (8 September 1809); Carrington, *Mermaids and Mastodons*, 3-4.
[333] *York Chronicle* (1 September 1814); A. R. Wright, 'Mer-Folk in 1814,' *Folklore* 40:1 (1929): 87-90.
[334] At the link https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=mermaid+caught+on+tape, viewed 24 September 2014, the first five hits are 'Mermaid 3000 Feet Deep Off the Coast of Greenland Mermaid Caught on Film,' 'Real Mermaids Caught on Tape,' 'Dog Sees Mermaid Caught on Tape (Amazing Footage!),' 'Real Mermaid Caught on Camera (Seen on Animal Planet),' and 'Real Mermaid Attack Caught on Camera! (Insane Home Footage).'

Renaissance times could be discussed in relation to one another, but that analysis would go well beyond the scope of this thesis. Since, in medieval Christian iconography, fish was a symbol of the soul and mirror was a symbol of lies and deceit and/or of the purity of soul, the connection between these two objects could seem obvious. The middle ages were the times of sirens and mermaids as soul-catchers, frequently represented holding fish in their hands or having them inserted between their two tails, if they had them. Most of the examples come from bestiaries (fig. 6), or other medieval manuscripts.[335]

Figure 18 *Bestiary*, 13th century England
(London: British Library, Sloan 3544, fol. 28v)

Victorian sirens are closely connected to the soul narrative and symbolism, but, as we shall see shortly, in an altogether different fashion. Medieval sirens *devour* men, hunting their souls as trophies and food; Victorian sirens *desire* them, even at the expense of their own monstrosity.

As far as mirrors are concerned, most of the authors writing on the subject of siren lore agree that the mirror is the siren's inseparable traditional iconographic accessory, as the voluminous medieval and modern material confirms.[336] Again, as with the iconography of the fish, most

[335] *Bestiary*, thirteenth-century England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Library, MS Ii. 4. 26, fol. 39r); *St. John's Manuscript* (Cambridge: St. John's College, MS 61, folio 47); *Bestiary*, thirteenth-century England (Oxford: Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 1511, fol. 65v); *Bestiary*, thirteenth- and fourteenth-century England (Oxford: Bodleian Library, MS Douce 88, fol. 21vb), etc.

[336] Lao, *Sirens*, 108-111; Holford-Strevens, 'Sirens in Antiquity and Middle Ages,' 36; Carrington, *Mermaids and Mastodons*, 5; Sax, 'Mermaid and Her Sisters,' 53; Jewitt, 'Mermaid of Legend and of Art (II),' 172. Examples of mermaids with mirrors: Cesare Ripa, 'Falsita di Amore,' in *Iconologia del Cavaliere* (Perugian: Piergiovanni Constantini, 1765); painting *St. Christopher* by Jost Aman, second half of the sixteenth century (lower right-hand corner); *Book of Hours*, fifteenth-century France (Oxford: Bodleian Library, MS Douce 62, fol. 51r); *Psalter Artois*, late thirteenth century England (Oxford: Bodleian Library, MS Douce 118, fol. 9r); Jan Van Eyk's *Annunciation* (1435) (tiles on the floor); *Bestiary*, thirteenth- and fourteenth-century England (Oxford: Bodleian Library, MS Douce 266, fol. 56ar); *Queen Mary Psalter*, fourteenth-century England (London: British Library, MS Royal 2 B VII fol. 96v); *Bestiary*, thirteenth- and fourteenth-century England (Oxford: Bodleian Library, MS Douce 6, fol. 4r); *Bestiary*, fourteenth-century England (Oxford: Bodleian Library, MS Buchanan e 18 fol. 60r);

medieval examples come from manuscripts like *The Book of Hours* (fig. 19) or *Artois Psalter* (fig. 17), while Renaissance examples come as emblems in books.[337] There are also examples of the already mentioned conflation of sirens and mermaids, but now with mirrors, like in Henry Peacham's *Minerva Britanna*.[338]

Figure 19 *Book of Hours*, France, ca. 1400 France (Oxford: Bodleian Library, MS Douce 62, fol. 51r)

All the authors, unequivocally, or maybe simply uncritically, assume that this tradition has continued uninterrupted until the present day. Meri Lao believes that mirrors in the siren hand mean to 'speculate, in the sense of searching, examining, investigating, sounding, scrutinizing, meditating […] *knowing*.'[339] Although the nineteenth century could be the right place for this interpretation, we would not go so far as to claim that it is applicable to the medieval history and symbolism of mirrors. Taken in a different context, medieval mirrors could be interpreted as symbols of speculation, scrutiny and knowledge, but in the context of the representation of sirens, the message appears far more religious and moralizing – the sin of flesh, vanity, femininity, witchcraft, and the devil.

Sax reads the siren and the mirror as an image that 'anticipates the self-absorption that is characteristic of consumer society,' an opinion close enough to the view of the book, except

Crest of British family Ellis from Lancashire, in *Fairbairn's Book of Crests of the Families of Great Britain and Ireland, vol. 1* (London, Edinburgh: T. C. & E. C. Jack, 1905); Zennon Church, sixteenth-century Cornval, Ireland (one of the two remaining church bench-ends); St. Lawrence Church, thirteenth-century Ludlow, England (misericord), the examples go on and on.

[337] For example, the emblem 'Youth,' in Richard Brathwaite, *The English Gentlemen* (London: Printed by John Haviland, 1630)

[338] See Henry Peacham, *Minerva Britanna or a Garden of Heroical Deuises* (London: Wa. Dight, 1612), 58.

[339] Lao, *Sirens*, 109.

for the fact that mirrors disappear from the siren/mermaid iconography *exactly* during the Industrial Revolution and the boom of consumerist society.[340] Sure enough, her reading will prove true for the twentieth-century consumerism. For Austern, the mirror was a symbol of vanity, having a 'longstanding association with the female pudenda,' while Calogero explains the siren and mirror connection in terms of the 'sixteenth- and seventeenth-century revival of equation of sirens with prostitutes.'[341]

But probably the most famous example of this famous duo comes from *Nuremberg Bible* (1483). This image, apart from combining mermaids and mirrors in one biblical scene, reinforces the story of the sin of siren reflection in the mirror (fig. 20).

Figure 20 *Nuremberg Bible*, woodcut (1483)

It tells the story of Noah as he embarks on his voyage toward salvation of human(animal)kind, carrying his family, and two of each animal species onboard. But sirens are left behind. Sure, they are aquatic monsters, capable of surviving the biblical storm, but the apocalyptic waters of the obliterating *diluvium* were more than mere waves and thunder. The Noah story is about one's worthiness for salvation, absolution from sin, and starting again with a clean slate. There is no place for mermaids and their inviting flesh in the new world order, their vanity and the Original Sin of seduction and femininity emphasized by the mirrors they are holding. It is not just vanity, though, that keeps the gates of the Ark closed to them, since peacocks, traditional symbols of vanity, are depicted as allowed to enter (the upper right-hand corner of the Ark). It must be something else, then: it must be the reflection of their monstrous skin.

[340] Sax, 'Mermaid and Her Sisters,' 53.
[341] Austern, "Teach me to Heare Mermaides Singing," 80; Calogero, "Sweet Aluring Harmony," 152-153. For prostitutes and mirrors in the Renaissance, see Santore, 'Tools of Venus.'

Figure 21 P. T. Barnum's Pamphlet for 'The Fiji Mermaid' (ca. 1850)

In the nineteenth century, portraits of sirens holding mirrors conspicuously disappear. While the soul theme has been rewritten, turning sirens from soul-catchers into soul-seekers, mirrors have entirely vanished, with only a couple of examples left that continued to linger on as remnants of the medieval and Renaissance tradition.

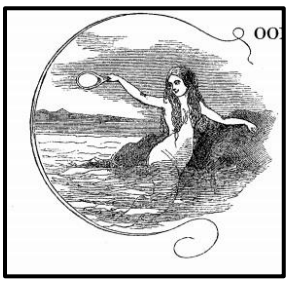

Figure 22 W. M. Thackeray's *The History of Pendennis* (1848-50)

The only examples to be found are P. T. Barnum's pamphlet for the mid-nineteenth century attraction *The Fiji Mermaid* (fig. 21), an illustration from Thackeray's *The History of Pendennis* (1848-50) (fig. 22)[342], and his description of mermaids in *Vanity Fair*:

> "They look pretty enough when they sit upon a rock, twanging their harps and combing their hair, and sing, and beckon to you to come and hold the looking-glass; but when they sink into their native element depend on it those mermaids are about no good, and we had best not examine the fiendish marine cannibals, reveling and feasting on their wretched pickled victims."[343]

[342] William Makepeace Thackeray, *The History of Pendennis* (London: H. Frewds, 1851), 686.
[343] William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963 [1848]), 617.

Even in Thackeray, mermaids do not hold the mirrors themselves, but they invite victims to come and hold the mirrors for them.

Figure 23 August Moreau, 'The Siren' (ca. 1900)

In the sphere of material culture, there is an unnamed mirror made by the French artist, August Moreau around 1900, later wrongly dubbed 'The Siren,' although it depicts a nymph with human legs (fig. 23).

Our overall conclusion is that in the age of mirrors, when mirrors could be found at almost every corner, the monsters that for centuries firmly held onto their mirrors were denied them. This change is striking, and not even a couple of examples we were able to find reduce the severity of this iconographic transformation.

Since we are interested in the relationship of various mirror and siren narratives, and their relevance for the Victorian desiring male subject, this sudden, sweeping change seems pivotal to the argument of the book. It gives an impetus to the crucial question we are to proceed with, the one around which all other questions revolve: what does this change mean for the Victorian concepts of monstrosity, materiality and subjectivity? How do we approach the illusion of fullness created by the mirror, the monstrosity of sirens and desire of the male Victorian subject from this point?

The Victorian Subject's Monstrous Skin

In this conclusion on the life of the siren myth, all the scattered pieces of the puzzle called 'Victorian male desiring subject' will be put together, in order to show that Victorian literature was one of the places where the subject assumed his monstrous form. The main argument of the chapter, as well as of the book in general, is that in the age of the mirror's commodification, something went amiss at the epistemic level of the production of meaning, and slipped into language. A void opened inside language, introducing a differential order of meaning in representation. Seduced by the mirror's promise, by an illusion of fullness and semiotic coherence, the subject fell through a signifying rabbit hole, and from that moment on he has not stopped spiraling down the signifying chain. His eyes were blind to this semiotic maze that put up walls tall and firm, leading the subject through the corridors of *différance*, never allowing him to attain the object of desire that the illusion promised – the wholeness of the self, the subject's *objet petit a*. This pursuit is both compulsory and futile, because the object he has been searching for has never been there to begin with, the subject falling prey to his own nightmarish fantasy. In front of the mirror, the subject looked at himself; he gazed into his exteriorized image and could not look away. At the end of the nineteenth-century, his image was everywhere, the subject's externalized corporeal fullness transfixing his eye at every corner, in every café, in every shop, in every room. If there ever was a perfect embodiment of the capitalist desire, the mirror was it and conquered this realm.

Since the nineteenth-century, commodities have embodied the capitalist production of desire, leading the subject through an ever darker maze of symbolic displacement. The language of commodity holds onto a shady, unsignifiable place in representation, from where it signals the subject that there is always some new object to have, a new place to see, a new thing to desire. Entangled into the alienating, enchanting, and acutely desiring nature of the nineteenth-century capitalism, the Victorian subject stared into this place for too long, reaching for the tenebrous flame of the inexistence of the desired object. Friedrich Nietzsche immediately comes to mind: 'Whoever fights with monsters should see to it that he does not become one himself. And when you stare for a long time into an abyss, the abyss stares back into you.'[344] Writing these chilling words he might as well have had the commodity or the

[344] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 69.

Victorian subject in mind. The subject appropriated his mirror image, taking it for its own inner coherence. He fell for this sly illusion of totality, and remained trapped between the reality of his inner chaos and the fallacy of coherence – split, disjointed, and interminably seduced by obscurity of the desiring void. He truly stared into an abyss for too long.

The game of appearance and reality brought about by the mirror's flight into commodification and ubiquity – where the 'real' reality was taken as something whole, pure and bright, something that transcends the crudeness of materiality, as well as the power and the incoherence of language – had another important consequence for the subject. From now on, as a split subject, he produces split ontologies, too. How can an estranged subject produce anything but an estranged object, a commodity, a thing robbed of its 'thingness,' as Heidegger says. In the heart of the subject dwells a void of the split, a little death, thus nothingness dwells in the heart of his produced, commodified progeny too.

It was shown how this split subject, the Victorian dreamer, expressed his own inner rift in the narratives about the very commodity that drew a veil of fantasy over his eyes in the first place – the mirror. It is worth remembering that when we talk about the split subject as a result of the mirror's omnipresence in Victorian culture, we do not assume that the subject had previously been whole. The fantasy of wholeness appears only as a consequence of the mirror image; but it is still only a fantasy, a supporting, dreamy web weaved around the missing object. Its role is that of a script, a scenario that supports circles of desire, all of which revolve around the *objet a* – semiotic wholeness. Before the nineteenth-century mirror, there had been other dreams, other fantasies, as well as other desired objects; before the Victorian age there had been other splits and other scripts to support desire. But for the Victorian subject, the *object a* was within the language itself. The language (*langage*, structure of representation) of the Victorian epoch, being both the subject's creation and the place of the subject's entrance into culture, exposes itself as differential and split against the background of the Victorian holistic fantasy. In the nineteenth century literature, monsters (as embodiments of the differential organization of language) became words in the sentence of the subject's existential anxiety and chaos. Monsters became textual, visual and material bodies of the subject himself.

The illusion of the wholeness of the mirror image, thus, introduced a historically important *objet a* – the semiotically coherent Self – or rather a *dream* that there was a coherent Self on the other side of materiality, language, and desire. At one level, the Victorian subject was having a nightmare; he was dreaming of monsters – of vampires and the Frankenstein's monster, of golems and mermaids and sirens. The abominations of his dreams were substantially incoherent, figments of his imagination acquiring hideous forms, split skins and

shifting bodies. But beneath this outer, phenomenal layer, beneath the veil of fantasy, beneath this straightforward language of the 'subject of the statement' that always lies by telling the truth, we find a desire for wholeness, for the coherence of the Self, hidden and buried in these monstrous bodies, in these palimpsests of the historical contingency of language. This desire, in literature or painting, is not expressed straightforwardly (I desire a cake, so I dream about/write about/paint eating one), but we can 'paranoically' read it off the material we analyze, and will continue to analyze. It appears as Lacan's 'subject of enunciation' – that which in an analyzed narrative is not said, what is omitted, barred from sight, like the split, barred subject himself. It is the language of the unconscious; the very structure of knowledge in its historical contingency. Thus, since the subject lives and breathes within the supportive, indispensible dream he will never fully realize (because it is only a dream), he expresses his desire for a coherent self (that he cannot have) in all the incoherent, fragmented bodies he manages to imagine, continuously re-enacting his own fall. He expresses his own shattered Being through monstrous bodies, monumentalizing his existential agony of rupture in their broken skin.

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It is from this perspective that sirens of the Victorian era are to be approached. It is the book's aim, and desire, to show that many, if not all of the traits of the split subject that we have found in the mirror narratives, *can be found in siren and mermaid narratives too*. This structural overlap of the languages of monstrosity and the mirror's commodification, leads to a conclusion that siren and mermaid bodies of the century hold for us a topology of the male desiring subject, seduced into a nightmarish fantasy by the reflective surfaces of the Victorian glass/mirror culture.

Though one would never guess it, judging by the lack of scholarship on Victorian sirens, literary works starring sirens and mermaids are abundant to say the least. There are famous pieces that have been discussed extensively, and they appear in almost every survey on sirens and mermaids written in the second half of the twentieth century. The most famous one, especially for the generation coming of age watching Disney in the 1990s, is, of course, *The Little Mermaid*, by Hans Christian Andersen, written in 1837. Its conception is taken here as

an artificial starting point for the modernity of sirens, or rather for the historical moment signaling their crossing from myth into literature, where they began expressing the male subject. Andersen was Danish, and thus not so far from the Victorian cultural circle. His enormous popularity in the *fin-de-siècle* culture, and the first translation of *The Little Mermaid* in 1872, puts him in the center of this study.

As a piece of siren literature, *The Little Mermaid* was a flash of thunder in the blue sky, its uniqueness unrivalled. It was the first literary work to turn the three-thousand-year old history of siren representation on its head. Its main character, the Little Mermaid (in Disney's version called Ariel, like the air spirit from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*) is a young, innocent aquatic virgin, in love with a human prince and enraptured by the idea of a human soul. Another story with the same blasphemous crime perpetrated against the traditional siren lore is *Undine* by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué published in 1811, and written with the French folk-tale of Melusine in mind. Undine is a young, willful nymph and she too is in search of a soul, but her being a nymph and not a siren makes her inappropriate for our analysis.

Another famous piece of siren literature is Oscar Wilde's *The Fisherman and His Soul*. Published in a book of short stories, *A House of Pomegranates*, in 1891, Wilde's story revolves around the destiny of a fisherman who, in order to be loved by a siren, banishes his soul. The main protagonist of the story is actually the soul itself, roaming the world in search of its fullness, an interesting twist on the sirens' nineteenth-century quest.

The next famous piece, though not as famous as the previous two, is an infrequently read, atypical short novel by H. G. Wells, *The Sea Lady: A Tissue of Moonshine*, written in 1902. Wells conjures a mermaid who has come to land to teach men 'better dreams' of limitless actuality. The story has a very strong political substratum (as most of Wells' fiction). We find an overwhelming mermaid, a creature existentially both more and less than the limited existence of man, a creature of the Great Beyond. She belongs to what we consider the last phase of the modernist siren lore, when sirens became abstract to the point of total representational emptying. In a way, *The Sea Lady* anticipates the *The Professor and the Siren* by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa from 1957, a short story that, in our view, closes the era of the modernist Victorian siren fiction. This story was written long after Queen Victoria's death in 1901, even long after everything Victorian had been refuted and discarded as sentimentalism and kitsch. It comes from the period of Victorian revival, but structurally and in terms of the problems it explores, it continues the Victorian siren tradition. The same applies to a short parable from the 1920s, written by Franz Kafka, entitled *The Silence of the Sirens*. All three of them belong to the nineteenth-century's closing act or to the Victorian dying throbs, whose

nature is close to the Victorianism of Walter Benjamin. But once analyzed, their importance for the Victorian times becomes undeniable, so they are all included in the analysis. If nothing else, they show that the West essentially continued to live in a post-Victorian age, a time culturally removed from its etymological source by the length of a four-letter prefix and a hyphen.

These are the cornerstones of all previous analyses. In the world of siren and mermaid literature, these titles have been, and still are, pop stars. They have been analyzed for their melancholic tone, psychoanalytic value, structural inversion of the human and aquatic worlds, for their dreams. But, all around, underneath, and above them, the Victorian space was teeming with siren/mermaid poems, stories and novels, and it is our intention to bring at least a couple of them up to be discussed within this book.[345] Henry Carrington's poem about a desiring and tormented siren, entitled *The Siren*, will be of particular importance, as well as *The Siren* by F. Anstey (Thomas Anstey Guthrie), *The Story of the Siren* by E. M. Forster and couple of other distinctive short siren stories. Many of them are, unfortunately, left out, the textual space being of an insufficient size to accommodate close readings of all of them properly. Such a fate will befall *The Siren* by Thomas Trollope, a three-volume novel that would require a separate book to analyze it.

The fragments of the subject's fundamental illusion, his pursuit of transcendental wholeness, were not just accidental and occasional occurrences, separated by decades of silence and darkness rising between the most famous siren-related creations of the age. Sirens and mermaids populated the mindscape of the nineteenth century so densely that it *might* come as a surprise that their literary proliferation remained unnoticed. However, for those of us who read between the lines, pursue voids and blank spaces, and love unuttered 'paranoid' truths, this critical silence becomes the most fertile analytical ground imaginable.

Sirens and mermaids of the nineteenth century arrive on the Victorian stage in a number of awkward forms, their mixed avian-aquatic nature being only one of them. Their skin is still pale, and, in some instances, the fatality of their nature and song still persists. But in general, Victorian sirens break the bonds of the classical and medieval lore, becoming consistently more

[345] Only a couple of examples will be mentioned here, in poems: Thomas Moore, 'The Origin of the Harp,' in *The Poetical Works of Thomas Moore, Complete in One Volume* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1863), 239; William Butler Yeats, 'The Mermaid,' in *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, vol. I: The Poems* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), 222; Zavarr Wilmshurst, *The Siren* (San Francisco: unspecified, 1876); Miss Crumpe, 'The Siren's Song,' *The National Magazine* 2:2 (1831): 196; H. C. 'The Piper and Mermaid,' *The Dublin Penny Journal* 2:104 (28 June 1834): 415; Allen Upward, 'The Mermaid,' *Poetry* 2:6 (1913): 195; in notes, John A. Scott, 'Patrick Henry and the Siren,' *The Classical Journal* 17:4 (1922): 1922; in novels, Grant M. Overtone, *Mermaid* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1920); Lilly Dougall, *The Mermaid: A Love Story* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1985); Thomas A. Trollope, *A Siren* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1870).

and less than their previous nature allowed. It would not be too harsh a judgment to say that in the nineteenth century sirens were reborn. In short, the most important changes fall into the following themes:

1. Sirens become *protagonists* of their own narratives;

2. Sirens *lose their mirrors*, their representations almost completely divorced from their centuries-old weapons;

3. Paradoxically, in the face of the previous theme, sirens *grow overly visual*, their appearance becoming the focus of their changed powers;

4. Sirens *become silenced*, or the narrative of their skin deals with the issue of silence in some way;

5. Ulysses and the Sirens begin *shifting their places* back and forth, sometimes even in the same narrative, suggesting that they convey a message of semiotic confusion *together*, and that they cannot be separated;

6. In the post-Victorian twentieth century, sirens become *transcendental* beings, portrayed by the same language of lack and excess discussed in the context of mirror narratives, only from the perspective of fullness instead of a lack;

7. Finally, sirens begin expressing, and embark on, a deep search for a *transcendental wholeness*, structurally identical to the subject's search from the mirror narratives.

At the bottom of this overview of modern siren traits a conclusion awaits: sirens became an expressive vehicle of the Victorian male desiring subject who created them, the one seduced by the illusion of coherence of his omnipresent mirror image.

SPIRAL 1: 'THE LITTLE MERMAID'; OR, SPLIT SKIN FROM THE INSIDE OUT

> *She knew it was the last night that she would breathe the same air as he, and would look upon the mighty deep, and the blue starry heavens; an endless night without thought and without dreams awaited her, who neither had a soul, nor could win one.* [346]
>
> Hans Christian Andersen

Sirens have shed their mythical veil to reveal the interior of the male Victorian subject. In the ages past, they had embodied cultural dreams, fears, and religious morals; in the nineteenth century they embodied desire itself, and their face grew theatrical. Victorian sirens ceased being just *objects* of desire, they became desiring *subjects* themselves. They stopped being a conditional limit for the understanding of danger, punishment, and sin, and assumed the leading role in their dismal narratives: *they became protagonists of their own stories*.

This is the first and the most significant change pertinent to the argument that the Victorian siren bodies hold for us a topology of the subject, hidden in their scaly or feathered (or neither) bodies. As the nineteenth century progressed, sirens migrated from the corners of imagination – from the margins of manuscripts, hidden or less exposed architectural ornaments, from the fringes of scientific inquiry – into the heart of popular literature. Book pages no longer featured accounts of heroes' wayward encounters with sirens in uncharted waters of the moody mother sea; now the pages became the playground of sirens as the main characters, allowing us to read about their quests, dreams, and desires. Haraway's 'limits of community in Western imaginations,' and Butler's 'zones of uninhabitability' collapse, faced with an overwhelming number of examples where Victorian monsters were positioned as *subjects* of literary works, not as the subject's limits. In this overwhelming buzz of subjectified hideousness, nineteenth-century literature was swarming with inversed 'Ulysses and the Sirens' episodes, where the reader could not distinguish the huntress from her prey. Leaving Frankenstein's monster, Lucy Westenra (or Mina Harker) and Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde aside, as the examples too obvious to even be considered, a couple of examples from siren literature would back up this new emergence of monstrous subjectivity.

Undine (being a nymph) aside, Hans Christian Andersen introduced this change of perspective, inventing the Little Mermaid and inviting the reader to identify not with the siren's

[346] Hans Christian Andersen, 'The Mermaid,' in *Faery Tales from Hans Christian Andersen*, trans. Mrs. E. Lucas (London: J. M. Dent, 1910), 19.

victim, but with this melancholic and melodramatic heroine whose only wish in life was to get human love and a human soul. In Andersen's story we find most of the traits characteristic of modern sirens converging. The younger audiences inculcated with Disney's sanitized version of the fairytale could be convinced otherwise, but the original story of *The Little Mermaid* is hard, grievous, dramatic and overly abject. The story starts under the sea, in the dark recesses of the 'primordial mother's body,' as Silla Consoli describes it, where five mermaid sisters, each a year older that the next, are waiting for their fifteenth birthday to come to be allowed to go to the surface and witness the glorious world above.[347] Their father, the king, is a widower and the mermaids are raised by their grandmother, a strong-willed figure who teaches them an important lesson in life: mermaids do not have souls. Instead, they live a long, long life, spanning almost three hundred years, turning to foam at the end. The only way for a mermaid to acquire a soul is to marry a human being.

> "Man […] have a soul which lives forever, lives after the body has become dust; it rises through the clear air, up to the shining stars! Just as we rise from the water to see the land of mortals, so they rise up to unknown beautiful regions which we shall never see."[348]

The youngest mermaid is the prettiest and the most restless one. She has been dreaming of the surface for too long, and when her time comes she surfaces in the night, only to witness a storm wrecking a ship having a prince on board, a human the Little Mermaid falls in love with. Although she is not to get involved in the fates of men, the Little Mermaid rescues the prince, brings him to the shore, and sings gently to him until he wakes up. But when his eyes open, she hides from his view and prince never gets to find out about her heroic deed. Desperate, the Little Mermaid decides to visit a sea-witch's cave, where she trades her captivating voice for human legs. In a painful act of splitting of her tail she arrives to the surface as a professedly human being. But then, she cannot express herself vocally, all her powers leaving her millennia-old aural nature and moving to her body. 'With every motion her grace and beauty became more apparent,' says the narrator, 'and her eyes appealed more deeply to the heart than the songs of the slaves.'[349] It is her appearance and not her voice that enchants humans, while every step she takes feels like knives slashing her feet, the enormous pain being the price of

[347] Consoli, *Candeur d'un monstre*, 77-78.
[348] Andersen, 'Mermaid,' 10.
[349] Ibid., 15.

her bodily transformation. The Little Mermaid has to suffer if she wants the love of the prince and a human soul that would grant her the immortality she longs for. Unfortunately, although the prince grows very fond of her, he never really falls in love with the Little Mermaid, deciding to marry a princess from another kingdom instead. During the wedding, on a boat far away from the coast, the Little Mermaid is given the last chance to save herself and undo the unfortunate mutilation of her fragile body. Her sisters rise from the sea, hairless because they have sacrificed their beautiful braids for a magic dagger that would help their sister in her doom. Now all the Little Mermaid has to do is kill the prince with the dagger, and when his blood splashes her legs, she will turn into a mermaid once again. This being a tale of unrequited love and sacrifice, the Little Mermaid decides to give up her own life, and her desire for a soul, so the prince can live. 'Once more she looked at the prince,' the storyteller says, 'with her eyes already dimmed by death, then dashed overboard and fell, her body dissolving into foam.'[350] But the tragic story has a moral: the Little Mermaid is rewarded for her sacrifice with ascension to the celestial realm of daughters of the air, to a world of spirits even higher than the world of men, where she earns her immortality by bringing smiles to children around the world.

It was necessary to recount this famous story because it has all the elements we are to find in most of the nineteenth-century siren narratives. Critics have observed that the world down below mirrors the world above, with fish swimming through the sea like birds flying through the air, and that there is a plain hierarchy of worlds in the tale which cries out for a structuralist analysis.[351] Our goal here is of a different kind, for we are approaching the tale from the perspective of the change in the mermaid's representation that characterizes the Victorian subject.

It seems that the tale falls into the category of impossible love stories, but the Little Mermaid also intrinsically embodies the topology of the Victorian male subject, the creator of the story, whose spasmodic, incoherent self is expressed by the mermaid's monstrous skin. As in the mirror narratives from the same century, the subject, epitomized this time by the body of the mermaid, is in search of wholeness, of crossing the limits and boundaries of materiality and language. The longing mermaid, being a nineteenth-century male fantasy, expresses the desire for a corporeal totality, an illusion offered by the ubiquitous mirror reflection and appropriated as an illusionary core of the self. The story, in its plot and its details, reveals all the traits of the new modern siren lore, traits characterizing the body of the subject. The mermaid is a *mirror-*

[350] Ibid., 20.
[351] For an interesting overview of different readings of *The Little Mermaid*, see Pil Dahlerup, et al., 'Splash! Six Views of "The Little Mermaid,"' *Scandinavian Studies* 63: 2 (1991): 140-163.

less, silent being, her *visual nature eclipsing her aural one*. She is a sad *protagonist* of her poignant story, and the reader is pushed into *her* perspective, into *her* body, instead in that of Ulysses, or another siren/mermaid victim. Now we look at the story from behind the mirror, gazing *inside* the mermaid's selfhood instead. And this selfhood craves wholeness, a transcendental experience of the human soul, an *object a* that keeps escaping through all the material and spiritual transformations she endures.

As a monster, the Mermaid bears a void; there is a blank space inside her, a nothingness that lures the desire that drives her forward. The human world constantly 'seem[s] so infinitely bigger than hers,' says the narrator, in the same fashion as the human soul seems better than her long, carefree life undersea.[352] Willful as she may seem, she is still slave to a specific fantasy, to the illusion of an object in front of her that says: 'This void you are feeling could be filled, if only you acquired a human soul.' The soul is her *objet a*, a dark, empty space of desire waiting to be touched, attained, possessed and impossible to describe. There is a distressing love story between the mermaid and the prince, but scratching the surface of the text (the plot that gives itself to us) we find more existential issues raised by the Little Mermaid's quest. In the center of the tale, just as in the mirror narratives we analyzed, there is a *jouissance* expected, a promise of pure pleasure beyond desire and the split existence. It is interesting to note that the same could be said of commodities of the century, the soul becoming the ultimate commodity that never stops slipping away down the signifying chain of *différance*. The Little Mermaid is prepared to endure an otherworldly pain, she is even prepared to renounce her nature and take human legs, just to get closer to acquiring what she has been dreaming of – that which she finds again and again in its absence – a void beyond language, beyond signification, beyond materiality; the Little Mermaid is in search of semiotic coherence and immortality promised by the breaking of the Law leading to *jouissance*, promised by the highest commodity of the age – the soul.

But this final *jouissance* will never happen, just as it never happened for Alice. In so many ways, the story of the Little Mermaid distressingly resembles that of Carroll's favorite heroine. Both of them are on the path to transformation and they both succumb to the illusion of wholeness that the mirror of the age promises. Alice and the Little Mermaid both live out their personal odysseys, following in the footsteps and taking advice from old, powerful women who know everything about the marvels and dangers of the world. With Circe as a role model, Alice listens to the Red Queen, while the Little Mermaid has her grandmother and the sea-witch, all

[352] Andersen, 'Mermaid,' 10.

of whom are summoned into existence by the Victorian male obsession with grandiose, female, magical figures and their power of transformation. In both stories, the male subject is hidden behind a fictional female character, expressing his fragmentary self through a seemingly innocent narrative of a wandering child/adolescent. But there is an important disparity between *The Little Mermaid* and *Through the Looking Glass*, a difference that strikes us as odd in the face of their structural similarities: there are no mirrors in the Little Mermaid's world.

Since the Middle Ages sirens and mermaids have been represented with mirrors (and combs), mirrors symbolizing their demonlike, insidious, wicked nature. The reflections in the mirror witnessed their carnal sin that left them outside the Ark, while the world was being drowned into oblivion. Because of them, sirens were literally beyond redemption, envoys of the Apocalypse, flesh related to the voracious nature of sex and seduction, demons of the noon-day heat, huntresses of souls. But the nineteenth century obliterated this connection to the point of obscurity, and *The Little Mermaid* stands at the inception of this new siren lore. Now there is a gap in their representation, an emptiness dwelling where their mirrored images used to be.

This gap is the center of this book: the gap of missing mirrors. It is always there, behind every narrative that is to be analyzed, not always called upon explicitly, due to its conspicuous absence (the fact that the mirror is *not* there). In the age of glass and mirrors; at the time when mirrors populated every corner of the Victorian world; at the moment when the language of the subject's representation was reshaped by them; precisely when this subject, seduced by the mirror image, began expressing himself in the monstrous siren/mermaid form that had been the symbol of the mirror's deception for centuries – sirens lost their mirrors. If nothing else, one would expect to find mirrors in every monstrous image, in every hideous figure, every siren narrative. How do we read this change? How do we account for this sudden transformation of the age-old narrative? The disappearance of mirrors from the representation of sirens is actually the main trait of the male Victorian desiring subject; it is where the languages of the Victorian commodity and monstrosity converge. As the nineteenth-century went on, and as mirrors became more and more present in everyday life, reflecting desire and a haunting strangeness of the Self, monstrosity became the focal fantasy of the subject, his fierce expression, his prime vehicle of unconscious speech. In this kind of monstrous universe, where the monster is an identity worthy of a leading role and not the margins of the subject's possibility, where the monster *is* the subject, sirens became the subject's mirrors themselves, acquiring all the characteristics of the mirror's language. Mirrors themselves disappeared from the representation; alienated and culturally naturalized, their materiality was absorbed into the sirens' split skin. The monstrosity of sirens became the strangeness of the subject's shattered

Being, a mirroring surface put in front of the subject's face uncovering desire and fear; it became the fabric of his profound dream of the Real beyond the signifying chain, of his sleep he was never to awake from.

Although the structure of *The Little Mermaid* perfectly expresses the path of the subject's desire for coherence beyond the incongruity of the Victorian representational language, we will not dwell on it too much, focusing more on the details of the mermaid's image than on the overall narrative. The plot that expresses the subject's search for fullness is characteristic of many siren/mermaid narratives of the time and we will delve deeper into it in the next chapter, giving voice to a literary work not written about as extensively as *The Little Mermaid*.

Silence and Sight

Introducing an insightful idea of deafness as a critical modality, Lennard J. Davis observes that 'from the eighteenth century onward, the reading public has increasingly valorized sight over hearing.'[353] This is not a new insight for us, the scopic turn in the visuality of mirrors, exhibitions and voyeurism already having been touched on in the previous chapters. What is interesting and important in his observation, though, is that sight *overtook* the realm of the voice, reading eclipsing hearing as a modality of narration. Further, Davis concludes that while blindness has been the primary expression of insight in the West (we just need to remember Homer), deafness has signified a simple absence of language.[354] From this perspective silence arrives as the *outside* of language itself, appearing from pauses in speech or in a sentence, from between words, from empty visual spaces. Turned upside down, silence becomes nothingness from *within* the language, *nihil* that gives meaning to representation itself. Silence as a critical modality, assumes the role of Derrida's silent *a* of *différance*, the part of meaning that cannot be read or heard, but which essentially conditions the existence of a continuously postponed meaning.[355] We will approach the silence of sirens from Davis' perspective. At this point, we are not interested in scopic regimes of the Victorian culture, leaving this issue for the part on the visuality of sirens in the Pre-Raphaelite painting. We are interested in the move away from orality, the absence of speech gaining precedence. If we could agree that the narratological shift

[353] Lennard J. Davis, 'Deafness and Insight: The Deafened Moment as a Critical Modality,' *College English* 57:8 (1995): 890.
[354] Ibid., 886.
[355] Jacques Derrida, 'Différance,' in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982), 5-8.

pushed sirens into the role of protagonists, the subject's very own monstrous bodies, we would like to explore the ways in which the silence of sirens develops the idea further.

After she got her legs, the Little Mermaid is doomed to silence, all her formerly vocal powers now fleeing into her body, accentuating visual pleasures of the Victorian culture and making the tale revolve around the mermaid's corporeal mutilation, and the insufficiency of her human body. Two main issues here are the lack of voice and visual nature of the Victorian culture, as two inseparable semiotic moments. To make the argument stronger, we will include other siren narratives into analysis to show that they all involve substitution of voice by visual pleasures.

One of the most popular examples – the most straightforward one at least – is the famous parable by Franc Kafka, *The Silence of the Sirens*. In the space of just three superb pages of rewritten siren lore, Kafka managed to capture and immortalize the epistemic shift from vocal to written knowledge discussed by Davis, the voyeuristic nature of (post)Victorian culture and the subject's silenced Being. Ulysses has approached the Sirens, we read in Kafka's parable, but this time he had his ears stopped with wax. In this slightly distorted encounter, distorted from the perspective of the original story, the Sirens have already learned their lesson too: they have learned that their silence is stronger than their song, and decided not to sing at all. However, that proves to be insufficient for Ulysses, for in his mind, in his fantasy, he actually *sees* their voices nevertheless:

> For a fleeting moment he *saw* their throats rising and falling, their breasts lifting, their eyes filled with tears, their lips half-part, but believed that these were accompaniments to the airs which died unheard around him.[356]

Ulysses has always been a cunning hero, but Kafka's parable gives us an example of a new, visual, modern nature of his encounter with the Sirens: what matters here is not some fragile idea of reality, of truth or objectivity; the *appearance* of the Sirens' voices is what matters, the fantasy that materialized in Ulysses' mind. We are not able to distinguish the huntresses from their prey anymore, the Sirens being seduced by Ulysses' appearance in turn:

[356] Franz Kafka, 'The Silence of the Sirens,' in *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories & Parables*, ed. Nahum Glatzer (New York: Quality Paper Book Club, 1983), 431; my emphasis.

> [T]hey – lovelier than ever – stretched their necks and turned […] They no longer had any desire to allure; all they wanted was to hold as long as they could the radiance that fell from Ulysses' great eyes.[357]

The visual nature of the siren story converges with its aural death as well as with the semiotic confusion that pervades the episode as a whole. The protagonists are confused, the insubstantial nothingness of appearances becoming the very foundation for the establishment of reality. The silence of the Sirens' voices collapses under their power of visuality, and absence as the core of the story – absence of voice, absence of action – crushes the participants in this floating theater of shadows. Semiotically merging Ulysses and the Sirens, and merging them into one and the same subjectivity, seduced by the power of appearances, a form without content (nothingness, death), Kafka's parable depicts a modern Victorian subject, devoured by the power of the signifier. Meanwhile, both Ulysses and the Sirens remain mute, subdued, tamed, broken.

In *The Siren* by F. Anstey, published in 1884, a siren is sitting on a rock on a faraway island, singing to passing ships and bringing them destruction and doom, as usual. But one day, as she gazes into the distance, she misses a small boat drifting close to the shore. She sees it only as a man disembarks on the beach, and the Siren decides to let him approach her, because she feels a strange curiosity to *hear his voice*, a feeling she has never felt before. Here the inversion begins. After the man approaches her without going mad, the Siren realizes that 'it was only her voice – nothing else, then – that deprived men of their senses.'[358] So the man sits on a rock below and reveals to her what love is: unconditional care for the other as an equal. The Siren is puzzled by this notion, since she never knew of such a thing as love; but then, she never knew of death either. The tide claims all the men who perish on her beach, and she never sees their dead or dying bodies. 'I did not know,' she says, 'I did not mean them to die. And what can I do? I cannot keep back the sea.'[359] If she knew what love was, she would certainly have to die. So she starts singing to the man at last, weaving her irresistible song around him, as everything he has ever known fades away from his memory. Her voice '[takes] away his power to speak,' and as he gazes at her radiant beauty, '[h]e wished for nothing better now than to lie there, following the flashing of her supple hands upon the harp-strings and watching every

[357] Ibid.
[358] F. Anstey, 'The Siren,' in *The Black Poodle, and other Tales* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1896 [1884]), 172.
[359] Ibid., 175.

change of her fair face.'[360] But as the waves begin rising to claim the body of the wretched man, the Siren notices she cannot part from him, that she wants him forever to stay by her side. In the final stroke of her song, her *voice gives up on her*, and she falls silent and in love with the man she was leading to destruction. She decides that she cannot go on with this loathsome act, and as the result of her finding love, she jumps into the sea and dies. For a siren, the experience of love brings only silence, an emptiness that can only be ravenous and annihilating.

The story tries to be a vocal one, but its Victorian nature surfaces in the end. The man cannot stop looking at the Siren, at every detail of her face. The Siren is thoroughly scrutinized by the man's gaze, stripped bare in the act of enchantment. She is seduced by the thought of his voice at the beginning, but her victim falls silent in the end. Than the tables turn: the Siren falls in love with her victim, her voice disappearing, as her existence is torn by desire. At the end of the path, the Siren is promised absolution, a re-appropriation of coherence, but the price is, as usual, death.

As the last example of the sirens' vocal deaths, we shall briefly analyze E. M. Forster's *The Story of the Siren*, dating from the same time as Kafka's *The Silence of the Sirens*, 1920s. In The Blue Grotto on the island of Capri, traditionally the 'Siren Land,' a 'magical world apart from all the commonplaces that are called reality,' [361] an unknown Sicilian boy is telling a siren story to a girl whose book he is about to rescue from the water. 'Have you ever seen her [the Siren]?' she asks.

> "Often and often."
> "I never."
> "But you have heard her sing!"
> He put his coat and said impatiently. "How can she sing under the water? Who could? She sometimes tries, but nothing comes from her but great bubbles."[362]

The Siren of the story is impossible to hear, all her vocal properties disappearing within her monstrous body. But the image of her body is ever more dangerous than her voice now. The Sicilian boy continues the story of his brother Giuseppe who, diving into the big blue for the pleasure (and money) of British tourists, encountered the Siren, and went mad. 'We pulled him

[360] Ibid., 178.
[361] E. M. Forster, *The Story of the Siren* (Richmond: Leonard & Virginia Wolf at the Hogarth Press, 1920), 7.
[362] Ibid., 8.

into the boat,' the boy says, 'and he was *so large* that he seemed to fill it, and *so wet* that we could not dress him. I have never seen a man so wet.'[363] How wet a man who dived into the sea can be? In this siren story, even objective facts like this are exaggerated, being too much or too little for language to express their fullness. 'We put him to bed, though he was not ill. […] He was too big – like a piece of the sea.'[364] Giuseppe went mad and was ostracized from his village. Having found a girl who was as mad as he, who had the same 'silent demons,' he married her and got a child. 'They loved each other,' the boy says, 'but love is not happiness. We can all get love. Love is nothing. Love is everywhere since the death of Jesus Christ.'[365] Like in so many siren stories, death (as nothingness) and love (as fullness) converge to express their mutual ambiguity: love is just the other face of death, fullness is just the other face of nothingness. Song is just the other face of silence. Death and love both transcend the radical incongruity of language, and sirens and their victims both yearn for this illusionary place, because they are all subjects now.

Giuseppe's wife was killed in the end, and he left the village. But an old witch prophesized that their child would return to the sea and 'fetch up the Siren into the air and all the world would see her and hear her sing,' as she brings the Apocalypse about.[366] 'I do not suppose there is anyone living now who has seen her,' concludes the boy.

> "There has seldom been more than one in a generation, and never in my life will there be both a man and a woman from whom that child can be born, who will fetch up the Siren from the sea, and *destroy silence, and save the world!* […] *Silence and loneliness cannot last forever*. It may be a hundred or a thousand years, but the sea lasts longer, and she shall come out of it and sing."[367]

The siren of this narrative is part of a distinct literary fashion of post-Victorian sirens, transcendental beings of the beyond that leave men not dead, but in a profound existential crisis. As such, she is the topic of the last chapter of this part and we shall get back to her shortly. But there is the prophesy that 'silence and loneliness cannot last forever': the world has been plagued by silence; both sirens and their victims – these inseparable, shifting embodiments of modern visual pleasures, of alienating human condition and of a split, visually exposed

[363] Ibid., 10; my emphasis.
[364] Ibid.
[365] Ibid., 11.
[366] Ibid., 12.
[367] Ibid., 14; my emphasis.

(exhibited) subject – are mute and tamed, lost in a maddening signifying maze of the Victorian and post-Victorian language. 'Silence equals death, absence, meaninglessness,' Davis tells us. 'Silence becomes the modernist's answer to words, to narrativity.'[368] If this is true, than the siren body becomes the answer to her silence, and she carries the answer to the silence of the Victorian subject inside her skin. Time and again, we are seduced into empathizing with sirens' silent destiny, just so we could be moved into the human skin of their victims. The narrative of *The Story of the Siren* silences the Siren's voice, and accentuates her body as a vehicle of Victorian scopic regimes. At the time when reflective surfaces invaded the subject's existence, sirens lost their mirrors, but their nature, though broken and subdued, became fundamentally *visual*, their bodies saturated with voyeuristic pleasures.

Hide that Monstrous Skin

After this brief digression, we come back to the beginning, to the Little Mermaid, her silence and her disappearing monstrous skin. In *The Little Mermaid*, although monstrosity assumes the leading role, the reader almost forgets that he/she is reading about a monster. This is another characteristic of the new siren lore, or better, of the sirens' crossing from myth into the poetic realm of literature. Just like a commodity – an alienated thing, naturalized to the point of its own cultural imperceptibility – Victorian sirens became exploited as protagonists, while the incongruity of their representation sank into cultural naturalization. This attitude would progressively continue into the early twenty-first century. Paradoxically, though, the reader of the nineteenth-century siren narratives is pushed into the viewpoint of a monster who is (now we can say 'who,' because the monster is a subject) agonizingly *aware* of her/his own physical (or emotional) odiousness. Victorian monsters – and at this point we are not talking only about sirens, but about other creatures of the dark like Dorian Grey or Frankenstein's monster, too – are all self-conscious, they *understand* that they are different, nefarious and ugly, that they do not belong. Frankenstein's monster is compelled to roam on the fringes of social space, his shameful escape leading him to the North Pole; Dorian Gray's picture is hidden in an attic; the Little Mermaid pushes her own nature away, hiding it behind human legs. Victorian monsters have monsters of their own, their hidden skeletons; they shed their skin and appropriate the other's image. These monsters appear inconsolably human, slowly burying their monstrosity under piling layers of humanity. But, actually, monsters are not the ones to have become aware

[368] Davis, 'Deafness and Insight,' 888.

of themselves: rather, it is their creators who became aware of their monstrosity. For sirens, along with their desire for wholeness and their falling prey to the illusion of semiotic coherence, dwelling somewhere beyond the fathomable world of materiality and language (be it a soul or death or love or a heart), they loathe and despise their cursed destinies as split subjects, expressing the Victorian subject, their Creator, to the fullest.

It is interesting, this change in Victorian siren monstrosity that compels the sirens to hide their monstrous skin. Their repulsiveness has been tamed, and sirens of the age are becoming sorely aware of the inappropriateness of their skin. The Little Mermaid's shrewd grandmother teaches her grandchild the lesson of the times well: 'That which is your greatest beauty in the sea, your fish's tail is thought hideous upon the earth.'[369] So the Little Mermaid tries to hide it, to hide the essence of her aquatic nature and the fierceness of the price she is willing to pay is excruciating. 'You have to endure pain for the sake of the finery!' exclaims the grandmother in one of her lessons, and she hits the bull's-eye as far as the Little Mermaid (and the Siren from our next chapter) is concerned.[370] For Victorian sirens nothing is too high a price for humanity, nothing is as valuable as a human heart or a human soul. This narratological twist in their destinies leads the reader towards a place in their representation that has never been explored before in literature. As we browse numerous pages describing sirens' rising self-consciousness and self-abjection, we are invited into the very heart of these aquatic monsters, whatever that heart may be and whatever it may consist of. As the perspective oscillates between sailors, marines, doomed souls, putrefying bodies and the emotionality of sirens, we dive deeper into the sirens' inner lives, into their merriments, obsessions, sadness and, most often, misery. In the same representational sweep that turned the mirror from a moral and religious symbol of lies into the language of Victorian desire, the sirens' diabolic, apocalyptic nature has been turned into the reflection of the subject's desired object. Now we see her fears, we stare into her passionate life, as she tries to hide her nature from our view. There is something profoundly voyeuristic in this new attitude towards Victorian sirens. In the nineteenth century, these creatures are exposed, presented to the public in a new fashion, resembling world fairs and commodity culture once again. In a way, literary sirens have been dissected and depicted as more solid than their fake, material counterparts from the last chapter could ever have been. For our eyes and pleasure, their souls (or the lack thereof) have been delivered to us, their bodies turned inside-out, forcing their monstrosity to flee, to hide from

[369] Andersen, 'Mermaid,' 11.
[370] Ibid., 6.

our penetrating gaze, behind an ostensible humanity that is bound to be exposed as a fraud. Victorian sirens moved from the marginal medieval space and Renaissance uncharted waters into the heart of popular literature, but in this flight our gaze followed them every step of the way, robbing them of their monstrosity. 'Surely I have caught all the fish that swim […], or some thing of horror,' exclaims Wilde's Fisherman, as he pulls the heavy fishnet into his boat. 'But no fish at all was in it nor any monster or thing of horror, but only a little Mermaid lying fast asleep.'[371] There is no horror in the siren body for the Fisherman, only a sleepy, inert, peaceful Mermaid. Leaving myth and entering literature, sirens became literary expressions of textual pleasures, fears and dreams of the male Victorian desiring subject. They became words referring both to his desire for semiotic wholeness and his nightmarish dream, bestowing upon him, and upon themselves, a hellish fantasy that would last till the present day.

[371] Oscar Wilde, 'The Fisherman and His Soul,' in *A House of Pomegranates* (Rockville: Arc Manor, 2008), 49.

SPIRAL 2: 'THE SIREN'; OR, THE ANGST OF THE SPLIT

"Yourself shall writhe with every cry,
With every death yourself shall die."[372]
Henry Carrington

The change of perspective, the point of view from which we witness the monstrosity of sirens, is crucial in a marvelously written poem by Henry Carrington, simply entitled *The Siren*. Written in 1898, this siren story structurally resembles *The Little Mermaid*, as it fits perfectly into the modern siren literature. It addresses many, if not all, issues raised by this book. We shall see how a familiar siren narrative, in its very structure, manifests the path of the subject's desire, as the subject repeatedly reaches for his *objet a* only to experience *jouissance* in the fall.

The poem follows the eponymous Siren in her epic, inner struggle for a gentle and compassionate heart, a gift that has been allowed to mortals only. Having been previously denied this glorious thing, not even being aware of its existence (or of the lack of it) the Siren was spending her immortal days with her two sisters in reckless mirth. Singing to the passing ships was undeniably in her nature, love and compassion meant nothing, anguish and pain even less. Drowned bodies and rotting cadavers had been piling up on her faraway shore, but the sight of them meant little to her, death of men being the very air she breathed. Then one day, as she was swimming with a triton, the Siren realized that the triton could understand the animals that swam by their side, so she turned to Jove (Jupiter) to grant her this provoking gift. The new knowledge of animal speech opened a whole new world to her, one in which she began longing to know, have, and possess. She learned from the animals she now could understand, that she was the vilest and the most despised of them all, because, while they hunted for food, she killed for nothing, not even for joy. Something irreversibly changed inside of her; a desire for a heart that can feel invaded her immortal peace. She turned to Jove once again, but Jove was wise and compassionate enough to warn her that the heart of mortals would bring her excruciating pain and eternal sorrow, a kind of suffering that inevitably leads to craving death in the end. Though kind and compassionate, she would still have to perform her task of lethal singing, bodies and shipwrecks would still suffocate her rotten shore. But, in her resolution, she noticed that now she wanted it even more, so Jove promised her a gentle heart, but to her future suffering he added a one-time way out: when the Siren could bear the anguish

[372] Henry Carrington, *The Siren* (London: Elliot Stock, 1898), 98.

no more, she would be allowed to take the heart of stone once again. After her transformation into a compassionate being was complete, the Siren, being able to feel, fell into a dark abyss of desperation and agony. For now she empathized with the men she was luring to death, but she was a slave to her voice, to her own monstrous nature, both killing and morning her victims, going round in circles unable to stop the endless horror of her own monstrosity. Incapable of coping with her fate any longer, and repulsed by the peaceful evil with which her sisters continued performing their deadly task, the Siren fled to an isolated island, where the beginning of the poem finds her, grieving the rotting fruit of her thralldom, desiring only one thing – to die.

The poem is dramatic and tragic from its first verse almost to its very last and, like *The Little Mermaid*, it is a story of sacrifice and pain. At the very end of the poem, Jove decides that Circe is going to release Ulysses (who appears only then in the story), and that the Siren must be tested, so she could prove her worthiness. So Ulysses continues his journey home, passing the Siren's two sisters unscathed on the way. In disbelief, or despair, not understanding how it could happen that a mortal did not succumb to their voices, the two sisters fall from a cliff into the sea, where they are saved by Neptune and turned into nymphs. The Siren itself is offered the heart of stone once again, or the gift of death instead. Of course, the Siren realizes that the lives of innocent men are worthier than her own, so she jumps from a cliff in a final act of sacrificial desperation. But winged Hermes catches her in the fall and Jove proclaims her queen of her island, bringing back to life all the men who had fallen prey to the Siren's song.

Heart-breaking and dramatic, *The Siren* is, in my view, the most beautiful piece of Victorian siren literature ever written. *The Little Mermaid* is overly melancholic and predictable, written as a fairytale, and as such it succumbs to the vanity of a love story that melts hearts of stone. Its approach is moralizing and Christian, and in the last instance, it builds upon the medieval notion of the mermaid as a soul catcher. *The Siren*, too is a story of love and sacrifice, but it pushes the narrative of *The Little Mermaid* to the extreme, delving deep into the realm of desire and 'psychical life' of an individual, thus having a tremendous importance for the understanding of the male desiring subject. The poem is a most curious combination of the Homeric siren episode and the modern mermaid plot introduced by Hans Christian Andersen. As such, as we discuss the inception of the subject's desire typified by the Siren's hurting image, a slightly comparative approach would be useful. We will proceed with a closer reading of the poem and show that the poem beautifully weaves a net of the *objet a*, it tells a tale of the invocation of the subject into/by language/culture; it describes the never-ending path of desire, on whose nonexistent, illusionary end death (the object of desire) awaits, death that is the very

nature and echo of all other desired objects. Death is pure void, a dark flame of desire burning fiercely, and, as with a mirror, if we approach it too openly we risk losing that which we name *ourselves*.

Monstrosity of the Subject

The Siren is a poem written for audiences familiar with the classical Homeric narrative, but at the same time it clearly speaks to its own age. The setting draws heavily upon the Roman version of the Greek mythology, featuring Neptune and Jupiter, Hermes, Ulysses and Circe, and the very 'Ulysses and the Sirens' episode is constructed so as to explain and expand on the events in the *Odyssey*. Although he is mentioned sporadically throughout the poem, we actually meet Ulysses only in one of the last chapters. By then, the emotionally ruined Siren had already fled to her isolated island, far in the west. The Siren had earned her poisonous voice as punishment for assuming she could sing better than the Graces (Muses), and we are also given a solution to another issue that troubled ancient authors: the Sirens had previously been three, but due to the events described in the poem, only two of them remained to witness the passing of Ulysses. For a knowledgeable audience, this is a very shrewd invention, playing both with the ancient lore and its modern counterpart. In a true Victorian spirit that finds everything classical sacred, we are invited to revel in the imagination of Henry Carrington, clearly brought up on classical scholarship. On the other hand, the differences with the *Odyssey* might be more than just a pleasant guessing-game for specialists – they might give us more than an outline of a creative mind. In Carrington's poetic imagination, the famous companion of the Sirens, namely Ulysses, has been reduced to a single chapter – one out of thirty-two. The roles have been reversed: instead of following Ulysses on his epic journey around the Mediterranean Sea, we follow the Siren on her spiraling journey around a desired object. Instead of being oriented towards an outside adventure, a physical voyage home, the narrative of *The Siren* revolves around the Siren's inner journey, around her thorny path to the heart of desire. As much as it struggles to be classical, the poem ends up being devastatingly modern in nature, with the Victorian take on siren lore being the core of the narrative, transforming the classical myth into the Siren's odyssey instead. Though abundant, scenes of voracious shipwrecking are not the focal point of the plot – the main emphasis pushes us towards the Siren's crumbling *within*. We are beckoned to understand, empathize with and pity her cursed existence, her grief-stricken life and her intrinsically split self. The Homeric Siren turns into a profoundly Victorian one, the very reverse of her monstrous nature – she assumes the role of the human subject.

The poem goes a long way to establish the candor and sincere mildness of the Siren's nature, suppressing her monstrous body as the result. We are told that the Siren's beauty is beyond compare: her face, her hair, her lips, her eyes.[373] But, the question of whether this beauty hides hideous monstrosity is what interests the narrator as he paints the Siren's glittering portrait:

> Not so! That form no fraud we find,
> No veil by Nature's freak designed
> To hide the foul reality;
> The monster ill, that lurks behind!
> Her face did not her heart belie;
> But 'twas an index of the mind;
> Where all its secrets you may know;
> Or 'twas a mirror framed to show
> The charms, that in her spirit lie.[374]

The verse gives us an image of the Siren after her transformation, and if we read the Victorian siren lore closely we shall find that normalized monstrosity is a prerogative of most stories. The monster has to abandon its monstrous nature; it has to keep its murderous, unacceptable features and impulses hidden. Some other analysis could make a clear parallel between Foucault's view of the nineteenth century, as the time when normalization of the subject occurs, and this tendency towards normalization of monstrosity.[375] But for us, this normalization leads straight to humanity that lurks beneath the monstrous skin, straight to the subject who created the monster, infusing it with his own alienated humanity. As we shall see, the issue at hand in the poem is our Siren's trying *not* to be a monster. Her face reflects her genuine kindness and empathy, but she carries on performing her fatal task all the same:

> She, but the passive instrument.
> The slave, that doth his lord's command. […]
> The Siren is compelled to sing:
> A captive longing to be free.

[373] Ibid., 13-14.
[374] Ibid., 18.
[375] His argument is best developed in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), but, see also *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin Books, 2008).

And, that her song must ruin be […][376]

The Siren is not to blame for her monstrous actions; she is but a thrall, slave to her 'lord's command': she is a slave to Jove, to the highest power, thus to the Law, to the Symbolic, to culture (in the same fashion as F. Anstey's Siren says 'And what can I do? I cannot keep back the sea.'[377]) Other aspects of her figure having been sanitized – her body beautiful and pure, her gorgeous face reflecting a candid heart and a caring mind – the only monstrous part left is her 'poisonous voice,' that 'intoxicating balm / That all around, above, beneath, / Through soul and senses found[s] its way'[378] The monstrosity of the Siren has been cornered into this small part of her existence, but this part, a remnant of her true nature, is exactly the one she cannot resist. She is still compelled to sing, bound to her monstrous nature. Like a proper creature of desire, she is swept away by this vocal stream that leaves her in the jaws of fate.

Once again, Victorian monstrosity becomes a vehicle of desire. Bound by the heavenly Law that does not allow her to cease to sing and that makes her crave one thing over all others, death establishes itself as that which is beyond the Law, beyond materiality, the place of *jouissance* expected. A desired object (heart equals death, as we shall see) had been promised to the Siren, but this promise was bound to bring pain. As I have already discussed in the *Exhausted at the Lake's Shore* chapter, there is no *jouissance* without a Law to be broken, without a limit to be transgressed. In the same fashion, there is no abject without a 'border that has encroached upon everything,'[379] without the shifting notion of *the beyond* promised. Going back to the prologue of the book, we see more clearly that this poem corresponds well with Ulysses' desire, with his unfathomable wish to, against all warnings, indeed *exactly because of them*, touch the dark flame of desire and encounter death itself.

The Heart as Commodity

As the subject of the poem, the Siren sets off on her dim, consuming inner path. The approach the poem takes on desire, as well as the language and expressions used to describe it,

[376] Carrington, *Siren*, 18, 20.
[377] F. Anstey, 'The Siren,' in *The Black Poodle, and other Tales* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1896 [1884]), 175.
[378] The phrase 'poisonous voice', or the 'poisonous nature' of the Siren's singing is a constant throughout the poem (pages, 9, 19, 21 etc); 2.
[379] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

are so curiously Lacanian, that if we had not known that the fate of this Siren was originating in the late nineteenth century, we would have placed it into the Lacanian times. On the other hand, the similarity with the psychoanalytic notion of desire shows, once again, Lacan's profoundly Victorian imagination, the one he inherited from Freud. From the very start of the poem, even before we are introduced to the Siren's sable journey that led to her miserable state, we face a subject ravished by an inner split. The Siren is perched on a rock as she gazes into the distance, fearing that another ship might come and compel her to destroy it by her irresistible singing, and we feel that the state of her existence is intolerable, that she explicitly has only one wish – to die.

> When she at last may sink to rest,
> All pains and wrongs and woes forgot.
> Upon the earth, her mother's breast,
> Or in the ocean's stilly deep.
> Where motion, sound, and sight are not,
> Find that unbroken stilly sleep.
> The happy envied mortal lot.
> The only boon she asks; – to die.[380]

She feels torn, split inside between the Law that forces her to kill, and her kind heart that rejects the aggressiveness of destruction. But even more, she is torn by her inability to attain absolution for her deeds; she is torn by the impossibility to reach the nothingness of fullness that once was her existence. The Siren is in a desperate need of stillness, of silence, of the gift bestowed upon mortals – she is in a desperate need of death. There is a Promised Land: beyond materiality, beyond sound and motion. It is in the 'ocean's stilly deep, where motion, sound, and sight are not'; it is the safe place on the mother's breast; it is where mortals go when everything is over and done, and they are allowed a totality of existence – a darkness that sooths 'all pains and wrongs and woes,' an emptiness that promises oblivion. She wants it, she needs it and envies mortals for it, and she desires it – death.

How did it come to this? How did the Siren become insufferably tormented by the specters of her murderous deeds? Before the fateful events described in the summary took place, before

[380] Carrington, *Siren*, 23.

she understood animals and came to the realization of her lack, the Siren was semiotically *whole*. There were no waves in her soul, no cracks in her selfhood. 'She felt her life,' the narrator says, '[w]ithout a want, without a pang.'[381] She never knew what loving, hating or desiring meant. Incapable of any inner motion aside from a 'reckless joy' that has been established in the poem as wholeness of her existence 'performed in mirth and peace,'[382] the Siren had a direct access to others' *objet a*, she *was* the *objet a*, thus she was a perfect *objet a* for others, for men unfortunate enough to stumble upon her faraway shore. She could not desire herself, thus everyone desired her.

> Her beauty sank into the heart.
> And stole the heart away, it left.
> *Once seen, instead, ne'er to depart.*
> *A hunger, thirst, a longing void,*
> *A craving never satisfied*:
> The captive soul, by love subdued,
> Of all resistance was bereft;
> And thus, the charms her singing wrought
> Were by her loveliness renewed;
> Which, though but for a moment viewed,
> *Was ever loved, and ever sought*.[383]

The Siren of the poem, the honeyed, seductive voice and face of the 'pleasure in pain,' was a wholeness incarnate, the subject's fantasy of coherence prior to invocation into language, into culture, before the appropriation of his external coherence that would imprison the subject inside his split ego forever. She was death personified, the creature of the Real: for her victims she was what haunted their minds, souls and Beings – their own lack, their own *objet petit a*.

Then the word arrives: the enticing, shattering word of death that will crush the Siren's 'reckless' wholeness and introduce her as the subject to her lack. Taken over by curiosity, like

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[381] Ibid., 80.
[382] Ibid., 24.
[383] Ibid., 15-16; my emphasis. Her voice and her face (we are in the modern siren narrative after all, thus the visual aspect must come to the fore), could easily be read as Lacanian partial objects, embodiments of the fetishistic absence – gaze and voice. Freud establishes four partial objects in his psychoanalytic framework: mouth, breasts, penis and anus. Lacan adds voice and gaze. Slavoj Žižek goes further adding smell to the list. The *object a* is characterized by the absence of its presence and by establishing what the subject cannot possibly attain. The Siren has direct access to *objet a* – the wholeness of language – thus she is what her victims' libidinal lives revolve around.

a toddler in front of a mirror, the Siren asks the highest power (Jove) to grant her the knowledge of the animal tongue. The summoning of the subject into culture begins: the moment she understands the language around her, the Siren hears the animals talk of something precious, bright and worthy; from them she learns that 'she lives for ever, dispossessed / Of all most joyous, brightest, best / Among the gifts that fortune deals'; she lives without a heart, so she begins desiring it.[384] The circle of wanting is open and the Siren will never be the same again.

> That much she longed to know, to feel,
> What could that strange possession be,
> Which all the forms of life reveal
> As height of all felicity.
> *True, she herself no guilt could own,*
> *Nor want, nor lack; yet, all the same,*
> *Compassion like she not, not blame* […]
> And long this thought possessed her mind,
> And with desire strong and strange,
> She more and more became inclined
> To claim of Jove the promised change.[385]

It is interesting to see how slowly desire creeps on the Siren. She is not consumed by it immediately in an inextinguishable fire that burns flesh and blazes bones into dust. She is introduced into the Symbolic by the power of language, of the animal tongue; the understanding of the world around her is revealed to her, a landscape that we call culture. A crack opens within her, and she cannot fathom this 'desire strong and strange.' In the above passage we see that previously she has not been able to understand want nor lack, wanting and lacking taken as two sides of the same coin, same as the above opposition between compassion and blame, one leading to another in a game of desire. The moment the game began, an eternal displacement of the language took place, a substitution of one object of desire for another. 'If I entreat thee to resume,' prays the Siren to Jove the Father,

> That former gift, and one bestow,

[384] Ibid., 86.
[385] Ibid., 87; my emphasis.

Which all thy creatures here below,
Whose speech thou gavest me to know,
Have made me long for – in its room.[386]

The knowledge of animal language is not enough anymore, as nothing is ever enough where objects of desire are concerned. There is something better this time, a shiny thing everyone (animals) is talking about, an elevated substitution for the last gift given. It is almost distressing to read how the inner life of this modern Siren develops in a fashion familiar to 'everyone who has entered a supermarket or been exposed to the manipulation of an advertisement,' as Agamben ironically says.[387] The narrative of the poem revolves around the heart, death and desire – and the heart, appears as just another commodity, just another facet of the already mentioned commodified soul, to be asked for, given, taken, or otherwise acquired. Thus Siren asks for a gentle heart, she wants to feel and she wants to know. The object of desire moves away from speech to the heart, which

Is the best boon that from on high,
Thy bounty to creation deals;
A heart that pities, loves, and feels.[388]

The heart is the shiny thing that lures desire; it is the 'it' of the moment. It is better than the previous 'it,' better than the ability to understand animals. As much as Carrington would have liked it to be classical in theme and structure, *The Siren* consistently shows an essentially modern, consumerist nature of its narrative.

Warning of Death as Jouissance *Expected*

At this point in the narrative the poem structurally converges again with its classical role model. In fact, at this point it merges with all the texts on sirens and mirrors we have analyzed, showing once again that the structure of the mirror narrative persists at the heart of the modern

[386] Ibid., 89.
[387] Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (Minneapolis and London: Minneapolis University Press, 1993), 38.
[388] Carrington, *Siren*, 90.

siren narratology. As it was in the case of Ulysses, Alice and the Little Mermaid, a moment of warning comes. This moment is crucial for them all, because under the surface of praise-worthy bravery (Ulysses), curiosity (Alice), and sacrifice (the Little Mermaid), a profound desire for an utter dissolution of selfhood, devastation of Being, and transcendence of the limits of language is hidden. In a word, the moment carries in its pregnant womb a dream of escaping the semiotic incoherence, of exiting the maze of signification, of awakening and reaching out for the absolute – it holds on to the Victorian fantasy of the beyond. On her journey towards becoming a chess-piece, Alice was reaching out for a material transgression leading to the beyond of the materiality promised by the mirror. In her departure from the sea, the Little Mermaid was reaching out for a spiritual and bodily transgression leading to the beyond of her hideous body and soulless being. *The Siren*, being an authorial creation and expressing the self of the author in question, reflects the same desire to transcend existence that we have seen in the analysis of *Ulysses and the Sirens* by John William Waterhouse in the prologue. They both embody a subject who, seemingly against all odds, decides to 'sleep with the woman of his dreams but be hanged afterwards.' But only apparently, I would argue. The transgression the Siren and Ulysses are both rushing to is a transgression of the boundaries of *life* itself, an abject desire to reach the desired object that in Victorian culture stands behind all desired objects – death. Being of an impossible nature and essentially nonexistent, always found again only as an absence of the object desired, every *objet a* is in its essence a death epitomized – nothingness without a beginning and an end, the Real beyond every reality, *ex nihilo* that gives birth to life itself. When I say death, I do not necessarily mean the physical death (as death of the body), but what Adrian Johnston calls 'psychical death' as death of desire, as stillness of meaning, pure enjoyment beyond language. At least since the nineteenth century, every desired object has always relied on the realm of death as a pure signifier – a signifier without a signified, without Being. Every commodity ever produced has been a small death incarnated, carrying an impossible unsignifiable void that lured desire ever forward, ever in circles, promising fullness at the end, promising a *jouissance* pure as death itself.

Every death needs a prophet, though, a benefactor and a limit setter combined. Otherwise, there is no expectation; the subject does not know that there is a *jouissance* waiting for him on the other side. Alice was warned by the Red Queen of all the ordeals, hardships and sufferings she would endure (funny as they may seem, veiled as an ostensibly children's narrative of *Through the Looking Glass*). The Little Mermaid had the witch, a monstrous figure woven out of Victorian male misogynist fear. Ulysses had Circe, another witch-whore, a figure

representing dangerous female sexuality, promising death to those who do not follow her advice. Our Siren has Jove, and his warning, or should I say his 'promise' is as follows:

'Tis doomed by fate that you must sing,
And doomed by fate you must bring
Ruin, and death, on all that hear; […]
But soon as by this heavenly guest,
This loving, melting human heart,
Your bosom's threshold shall be crossed, […]
Then shall those other guests depart,
That now within your bosom throng –
Laughter and mirth, and piece and joy,
The careless, jocund company […]
But every note [of thy song] shall wound you ear,
And shall hate you late-loved song,
And feel its witching powers pierce,
The soft kind heart for which you long. […]
Yourself shall writhe with every cry,
With every death yourself shall die. […]
Anguish unheard of, and unknown,
Shall so consume your life with grief,
That you shall supplicate for death:
To sleep the earth or waves beneath,
As sole succor and relief,
From terrors that your soul appal.
Ask death with eager vehemence,
With longing, craving more intense
Than you can e'ver imagine now.[389]

The Siren has been warned, though this warning comes as a long promise of pain, anguish and misery. It was necessary to quote this long passage, so that the reader becomes aware of how intensely disturbing is the warning/promise given to the Siren. I have quoted only the

[389] Ibid., 94-99.

smallest piece of it, the horrendous promise stretching through two whole chapters! Compared to this, the price the Little Mermaid pays seems ridiculously naïve – her loss of voice and bleeding feet (along with possible death in the end), appear almost benign comparing to this promise of an abiding infernal agony. The Little Mermaid at least had a chance at winning the prince and the soul; Ulysses at least had a weapon – the wax, and mast and cords. But for the Siren the price is not only death; there is no advice for her, no tools of salvation. Her destiny has been promised to her clearly from the start: 'Yourself shall writhe with every cry / With every death yourself shall die.' The price of a heart is eternal damnation, searing pain and an endless fall. Faced with this choice, we would have thought that the Siren would side with the Kantian perspective, at least: no being would choose enjoyment if promised not death, but perennial horror afterwards. Thus the answer that the Siren gives to Jove, becomes important. 'The words, the danger, you disclose,' she says,

> *Increase, not lessen my desire:*
> An impulse that I strive in vain
> Myself to fathom, or explain,
> Such as I ne'er have felt before,
> Makes me all future chance disdain,
> This unknown region to explore:
> This craving fills and rules my soul,
> And brooks not reason or control.[390]

Desire works in roundabout ways, as I have discussed in the chapter on the language of excess in mirror narratives; it does not strictly follow historically contingent rules of rationality though it follows culturally contingent objects of desire. Alice does not go back home through the mirror right away. What all of the above mentioned characters have in common is that they have all been warned, and that every single one of them decided to pay the price. Even more, desire begins consuming them from the moment the warning is uttered, the warning itself becoming a spark adding flames to the fire already burning in the void within, waiting to be filled. They all follow their *objet a* towards the promised *jouissance*, a pure enjoyment beyond the limits of materiality, body, language, life, existence. They all crave the *nihil* where it all began, and the *jouissance* of transgression gets pushed to the extreme and explicitly framed in

[390] Ibid., 102; my emphasis.

the poem we are analyzing. Enjoyment does not have to be pleasant; *jouissance* can be pleasure in pain. But it has to be promised – a line has to be drawn somewhere, so that the subject can be seduced by the fantasy of crossing it. This line, the promise made, signals an emotional overflow, a semiotic surplus; it lures with images of purgatorial ecstasy, transcendence worthy of life itself. The fiercer the price, the more the Siren wants it: 'The words, the danger you disclose, increase, not lessen my desire,' she says, as her monstrosity is fading away. The monster is seduced by the promise of death itself, suppressing its abject nature and bringing out, through its doomed monstrous skin, the male Victorian subject in its stead.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, what is desired when a demand is made to another is, in its essence, a cry for love. 'I love you,' says Lacan, 'but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than you – the *objet petit a* – I mutilate you.'[391] This desire for something more in a person, more in a thing, signifies the absence of the desired object. What I love in you is not something you have, but something I find in you and recognize as my own lack. Taking this symbolic absence further, one could say that every desire is a cry for death, driven by the impulse of nothingness that can be acted upon, but it cannot be satisfied, it cannot be fulfilled. We could say that every desire, as a reaching out for this emptiness, is ecstasy in itself, a little death, *une petite mort*. In the image of a siren, especially a Victorian siren, epitomized by our torn heroine, is there a difference between love and death? They both merge with each other, just as the huntress and her prey merge in this extraordinary, (but historically conditioned), inversion of the plot of 'Ulysses and the Sirens.' The mirror, the Victorian symbol of desire, structurally sharing its narrative with that of monstrosity, stands between the subject and his Victorian monstrous face, merging them into an epiphany of *jouissance* waiting on the other side of the subject's monstrous nature.

The Fall, and What Happens After

The last episode of the Siren's inner journey arrives with the Fall. As the Siren begins to understand animals, as the crack opens within her allowing desire to appear, the signifying chain moves on, in an everlasting substitution of desired objects. Never will an object be enough, though, because the fundamental dream that supports desire is one of pure wholeness delivered only in death. As long as there is a subject who desires, as long as there is a desire which, along its path, constitutes the subject, satisfaction is bound to be postponed, always

[391] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1963-1964*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London and New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 268.

introducing new objects to the game. The poem we are analyzing presents us with this scenario, making explicit the mechanics of longing. Since it is unattainable, reaching out for the *objet a* inevitably leads to the fall of the subject, to the place where the subject falls short of *jouissance* expected, of the ecstasy mythically promised by the Prophet of Death. Instead, the subject experiences *jouissance* obtained, an extreme emotional overflow barely within the limits of the Law, at the gates of the Purgatory, excessive enough to allow the substitution of objects, but insufficient enough to bring a semiotic resolution of death to the split subject.

In the prologue I called this void, this death in a desired object and in the subject himself, a dark flame of desire burning fiercely. I painted it in somber, monstrous colors because of a strong belief that this unsignifiable part of the self is the very core of the subject's existence as well as of his modern Victorian monstrous skin. Desire lures the subject to approach it, to look at its ebony, blazing heart, but since that heart is present only as its own absence, as nothingness, the subject cannot actually arrive at the point of encounter. The subject always misses the appointment with the Real. An encounter not missed would be the end of the subject's 'psychic life,' as Adrian Johnston says; it would mean Alice coming straight back through the mirror home; it would mean Ulysses breaking the ropes and dying at the Sirens' shore or at the bottom of the sea; it would mean the Little Mermaid acquiring an immortal soul. Finally, it would mean the Siren ceasing to exist.

Is that what happens to our wretched heroine? Does she succeed in reaching death? At the end of her libidinal existence the Siren would have to die, she would have to actually see and touch the flame of her desire. Is that what happens in our story? Almost. In her search for wholeness, for silence, stillness and peace, the Siren approaches the limit of existence, of life itself. After the promise and her acceptance of the price, the transformation begins as an aggressive experience of the fall. We have seen the same scenario in *Through the Looking Glass*, with things going berserk in a mad semiotic haze of the final dinner, and Alice crashing things and falling short of her goal, falling short of a complete material transgression. We also saw it in *The Little Mermaid*, with the eponymous heroine jumping overboard and dissolving – turning into foam, just so she could ascend once more, falling short of her spiritual transgression, a soul.

The Siren goes through the same, agonizing, excessive experience, worthy of an ecstatic fall of the subject. She is ready to receive her gift, the thing that is the momentary 'it' (a gentle heart) embodying her *objet a* (death). She is put to sleep by Jove, so she could survive the aggression of the transformation, and first to visit her are Furies, sinister creatures of Hades

whose task is to suck out all the poison from her stony heart. The black flame of desire approaches:

> From Pluto's realms of ghastly gloom,
> From the black land of pain and death; […]
> Bade the fell snake-haired sisters come
> Nor dare the Furies to delay.[392]

The following scene, in which the Siren is transformed into a modern diva worthy of our sympathy and pity, is a horrifying experience of bitterness and pain. The Furies approach the Siren with their 'icy touch' and they press their 'deadly lips' on the Siren's pale face. 'Terror and anguish [are] such,' the narrator says, that 'her soul amazed [is] seek[ing] to fly.'[393] The Furies lay their 'cold hands,' on the Siren's chest, and

> [W]hile each shuddering fibre quakes,
> With threat'ning hiss and livid fold,
> Entwine and mix the Furies' snakes,
> Amid her locks of tangled gold.[394]

The Siren's soul is attempting to flee, the experience of the transfer being too much even for her immortal body. She is covered in the Furies' snake hair, the drama of the scene rising in an agonizing crescendo. In the apogee of ecstasy, her beautiful body is tainted; her golden locks that covered her lower part like a fish tail are full of snakes, as the Furies hiss and her body quakes. The Siren's Being is literally dying away, '[f]rom her soft cheeks, in horror sped, [t]he blood, and all her colour fled.'[395] Her body is losing its natural properties, turning into stone, into a monstrous nothingness of inanimate matter, reaching out for the other side of life itself. At the gates of Hades, the siren's natural habitat reserved for human victims since time immemorial, the Siren is on the road to death, the *objet a* upon her reach. Death is encroaching on her:

[392] Carrington, *Siren*, 106.
[393] Ibid., 107.
[394] Ibid., 108.
[395] Ibid.

Her own [eyes], then shrinking ‘neath the sway,
Appeared to die, to fade away,
Burnt out to darkness by dismay;
Then closed again, and all had said,
So white, so cold, the maid was dead. […]
When these Tartarean forms had left
The Siren, as of life bereft,
She lay, pale, cold, and motionless;
A marble statue, you had said,
To represent some beauteous maid,
Who died of terror and distress.[396]

It may seem that the Siren finally arrived at the end of her path, that the search for the *objet a* is over; she has found wholeness again, her body turning into stone, into a ‘marble statue,’ the *jouissance* experienced being pure, leaving only an empty shell behind, ‘pale, cold, and motionless,’ empty as death itself. But this, of course, cannot be. After Furies had departed, love, pity and compassion were poured into her heart by Graces, restoring the Siren back to life, and instilling the void, the split into her once again. What appeared to be an end, what appeared to be the *jouissance* promised to her, was only the Siren’s fall, an experience of *jouissance* obtained, an extreme emotional overflow at the limits of the Law, at the gates of the beyond. Before the fall – desire; after the fall – desire again; an indestructible circle of objects lining one after another, a never-ending chain of signification that is the alpha and omega of desire never ceasing to exist and to instill the *différance* into the heart of the subject’s split.

The Siren came a long way on her inner odyssey, and at the end of her long journey there is only the beginning to be rediscovered – the infinite circle of horror of alluring nothingness. She wanted the ability of animal speech, and then she craved a gentle heart. The poem starts with the Siren desiring death, desiring absolution, a way out, and it returns to the same place of sorrow and misery, reproducing the narrative structure of the *Odyssey*, along with the libidinal structure of the Ulysses’ desire. After the split, after she has received a gentle heart, she moves to an island in the far West, in the land of death, where tormented souls find their final resting place of peaceful wholeness. Even space itself betokens the Siren’s desire for death. Far in the West, in this Land of the Dead, we see the Siren sitting on a rock, mourning the devastated and

[396] Ibid., 109-111.

decaying bodies of dead and dying men scattered across the landscape that seems to be her whole world. Her nature is fundamentally abject, bound to her monstrous voice, unable to attain what she desires the most.

At the end of the poem and of our analysis, we turn briefly to the last scene: the Siren jumps into the sea, but is saved by Hermes from her fall, and restored as a queen to her island. The moral of the story follows: only an external higher power can bestow absolution; the subject is mercilessly immersed in the culture that shapes his libidinal existence, and is incapable of making the transition alone. After the warning, after the promise of death, the only thing the subject is capable of is the *jouissance* obtained, an ecstasy of the fall from a cliff into the sea, right into the embrace of his own dream that does not allow him to awake from the libidinal circle. If not reached and saved by gods, by the winged Hermes or the almighty Jove, without a *deus ex machina* the sea envelops him, lulling him into sleep once again, turning the *jouissance* obtained into just another turn of the deathless circle of desire. The sleeping subject, the Victorian dreamer, be it a Ulysses or a Siren, dreams his dream of transcendence, unaware of the agonizing circles, time and again thinking he has been saved.

SPIRAL 3: 'THE SEA LADY'; OR, THE OTHER SIREN

"It is illusion," he said. "It is a sort of glamour. After all. Look at it squarely. What is she? What can she give you? She promises you vague somethings… She is a snare, she is a deception. She is the beautiful mask –" He hesitated. [397]

H. G. Wells

As the twentieth century opened and parts of the Victorian culture began descending towards a new modernism or oblivion, in terms of its relationship to the issue of desire, siren lore apparently came full circle, returning to the same place where it had been before the nineteenth century. The history of the lore arrived at the point we have been calling, lacking a better term, 'post-Victorian' siren literature, whose two main examples are *The Sea Lady* by H. G. Wells and *The Professor and the Siren* by Guissepe Tomasi di Lampedusa. 'Post-Victorian' mainly serves the descriptive purpose of referring to the siren lore of the first half of the twentieth century, but it also emphasizes its fundamental connection with the preceding century. The two stories appeared in the following order, separated by more than five decades, the first one written in 1902, the other in 1957. In our view, these two works respectively mark the beginning and the end of a new phase of siren representation, the issues raised in *The Sea Lady* having their logical climax in *The Professor and the Siren*.

As the twentieth century moved on, sirens regained their traditional properties, namely their mirrors. We find examples on cover pages of *The Siren* advertisement magazine,[398] as well as in Hollywood movies that were gaining momentum at the time (*Mad About Men* (1954), or *Mr. Peabody and the Mermaid* (1948)). In Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* from 1928, we find the mermaid/siren and the mirror conflated again, with Orlando gazing at her mirror reflection:

> [T]he glass was a green water, and she a mermaid, slung with pearls, a siren in a cave, singing so that oarsmen leant from their boats and fell down, down to embrace her; so dark so bright, so hard, so soft, was she, so astonishingly seductive that it was a thousand pities that there was no one there to put it in

[397] H. G. Wells, The *Sea Lady: A Tissue of Moonshine, A Critical Text of the 1902 London First Edition, with an Introduction and Appendices*, ed. Leon Stover (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2001).
[398] *The Siren* 3:1 (September 1913). We see a beautiful, modern siren looking at herself in a mirror, while a young man with a cane and a cigarette looks at her. The image of a mermaid holding a mirror also appears around the title of the magazine in number of the magazine's issues, for example *The Siren* 2:1 (October 1922).

> plain English, and say outright, "Damn it, Madam, you are loveliness incarnate," which was the truth.[399]

In the light of the proposed approach to the relationship between the subject, the mirror and monstrosity of sirens, the return of reflecting surfaces becomes indicative of a new configuration of humanity/monstrosity. If sirens began reappropriating mirrors, as visible parts of their representational language, the subject's relationship to their bodies must have changed again to account for this reappraisal. And sure enough, sirens *did* change, their bodies and their nature displaying some old/new properties.

The main characteristic of post-Victorian sirens, as portrayed by Wells and Lampedusa, is their *otherworldly, transcendental* nature. While the Victorian sirens mainly assumed the roles of heroines in pain, virgin-like creatures worthy of pity and sympathy, seeking a soul, a heart, love and death that would never be, the post-Victorian sirens are immense, overpowering creatures, their nature is semiotically *whole*, transcending materiality reserved for mortals, and almost exclusively expressed by the language of excess. Their existence and their revelation to mortals, is literally beyond language, their presence impossible to be fully described and conveyed by words. Their agenda is not to catch a human soul, like in the medieval times, not even to acquire one through sacrifice and pain like the Victorian sirens; their purpose is to *bestow* souls on mortals, to teach them how to dream 'better dreams,' better than their small, harrowing existence allows them.

The Sea Lady is the first one to introduce this theme, but we will be analyzing both works as we go along. One reason is that, apart from sharing the idea of a utopian, limitless existence hidden in the mermaid's body, they actually cross-reference each other while characters of both stories read the same source, *Undine* by Motte Fouqué.

The Sea Lady tells a story of a gorgeous, enchanting mermaid, who, rescued from a fake drowning, manages to insinuate herself into the household of her rescuers, the Bunting family. The family is large, and the characters are many, but the important for ones are Mrs. Bunting, the matriarch; Adeline, her elder daughter, a serious girl with her head in books; and Harry Chatteris, Adeline's fiancé, socialist, the victim of the siren in the novel. The story is mostly told from the perspective of a nameless narrator, who acquired all the information on the curious events at the Buntings from Melville, his second nephew. Melville actually plays the

[399] Virginia Woolf, 'Orlando: A Biography,' in *Selected Works of Virginia Woolf* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2005), 489.

leading male role in the story and is a partial victim of the mermaid's song himself. After she is rescued, and the Buntings in horror realize she has a fish tail, the Buntings take the poor 'girl' in, Mrs. Bunting taking it as her duty to teach the mermaid what being human is all about. The mermaid gets a proper name, Miss Waters, pays the Buntings for her stay with gold from a hidden treasure chest and confesses that her real agenda has been to come to the world of men and learn all about their existence. On the surface, the story is just a slightly updated Victorian siren narrative, but Miss Waters is not what she seems to be: as the plot unfolds, we find out that her real target is Mr. Harry Chatteris, and that she came to land to teach men 'better dreams,' to show them their blindness and their essentially illusionary existence. She enchants Harry with her promises, as she lures him to his doom.

The other story in our analysis, *The Professor and the Siren*, is of a completely different narrative. Paolo Corbera, having been left both by his mistress and his girlfriend, spends time in a loud bar frequented by intellectuals in Turin, in 1938. There he meets a curious, misanthropic professor, a famous Italian Hellenist, whom he befriends in the course of several nights. During one of Paolo's visits to the professor's house, the professor confides in him a story from his youth he never told a soul, an extraordinary tale of his encounter with a siren, portrayed as an otherworldly, omniscient being, whose full existence escapes the comprehension of mortals. After he had related the story to Paolo, in what was for him an unprecedented outburst of loquaciousness, he sails away to Portugal, only to disappear somewhere in the blue depths of the Mediterranean Sea.

At the level of the plot, these two stories could not be more different. Wells' story is highly satirical and political, Mr. Chatteris being a liberal political figure and Miss Waters' 'better dreams' hinting at utopian totalitarian future.[400] Lampedousa's story is a romantic piece on the disease called the 'human condition.' We are not interested in the structure of the plot, though, and we will leave the political notions for some other, more suitable occasion. What we are interested in is the language of siren representation. We will discuss the image of this larger-than-life aquatic creature and see if we could find a solution to the question: what is the relationship of this character to the subject's split self? It has been said so far that the Victorian sirens are topologies of the Victorian subject who created them, and the argument was supported by discussing the disappearance of mirrors from siren representations; of the

[400] This is mostly how Leon Stover, the annotator of the novel's 2001 edition, reads the plot. See, Leon Stover, Editor's Introduction to H. G. Wells, *The Sea Lady: A Tissue of Moonshine, A Critical Text of the 1902 London First Edition, with an Introduction and Appendices*, ed. Leon Stover (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2001).

oscillation between Ulysses and sirens as protagonists of narratives; of the silence of sirens and their victims, as signs of a suppressed monstrosity and the split of the subject himself; and of the self-awareness of monsters as the language of the subject's split. Victorian sirens were fundamentally split beings, like haunting images breaking loose from the subject's mirror reflection. They sought souls and craved wholeness; they were not the subject's desired objects, they were Victorian desiring subjects themselves.

What happens, then, in the twentieth century, when sirens/mermaids return to being full again, not split like the subject seduced by his mirror image? How do they relate to his notion of the self, previously conveyed by siren bodies proper? Not seeking fullness anymore, but being fullness themselves, sirens stepped out of the subject's body becoming his *objet a* again and bringing about the semiotic absolution that the subject sought. These sirens are not oddities anymore, nor nightmares looking from the mirror, but the mirror's promise itself, the wholeness of the corporeal illusion the mirror offers, the very dream the subject has been dreaming for more than a century at least. Sirens now come to teach the subject 'better dreams,' to expose the illusionary nature of reality to him, to save his split self and give him a soul, but, as we shall see, they just deepen the subject's dream further, their fullness being another, and necessary, face of the subject's fantasy.

Becoming a Cripple; or, the Victorian Face of Miss Waters

The Sea Lady is a watershed in the modern siren lore, a borderline identity whose two-faced presence reflects what was and what shall be. Appropriately, she appears at the very turn of the century. Behind her is the long nineteenth century whose sirens suffer, loathe and despise their abject nature; in front of her is the even longer twentieth century, in whose first half sirens bath in a godly omniscience. The Sea Lady's nature is of the latter kind, but her appearance is of the former.

As she infiltrates the Buntings' household, her image is shown to be fragile, her nature pure and sincere. Her body is held back by her monstrosity, her tail making her a cripple in the land of humans. The moment she is rescued, the horror of her inappropriate skin begins.

> "Mother," said Nettie [the younger daughter], giving words to the general horror. "*Mother*. She has a *tail*!"
>
> And then the three maids and Mabel Glendower [a family friend] screamed one after the other. "Look!" they cried. "A tail!"

> "*Oh!*" said Miss Glendower, and put her hand to her heart.
>
> And then the one of the maids gave a name. "It's a mermaid!" screamed the maid, and then everyone screamed "It's a mermaid."[401]

The mermaid tail is where the horror of her body begins; it is the place of her dread's inception. She is both a monster and a protagonist of the story, revealing to the Buntings the secrets of life undersea and learning about life on land. As a mermaid she inspires fear, so she must be hidden, her monstrosity must be suppressed. As a subject/protagonist she breaks down at her waist, the split of the subject appearing where her monstrous tail begins. Here, in the land of men, everyone is appalled by her tail, the wretched thing ruining the mermaid's chance at seduction. 'She had a beautiful figure, I understand,' says the unknown narrator, 'until that horrible tail began.'[402]

The Sea Lady enters the home of the Buntings and pays them in gold to teach her humanity. This desire for humanity presents itself as a two-way normalizing process. Both of the parties want it: the Sea Lady wants it; the Buntings want it. 'She wants to be treated exactly like a human being,' Mrs. Bunting confesses to Mr. Melville,

> "to be a human being, just like you or I. And she asks to live with us, to be one of our family, and to learn how we live, *to learn to live*."[403]

From Mrs. Bunting's perspective, there is only one way of living, and that is *not* the underwater way, that is *not* the monstrous way of a mermaid. Her stigma and taint needs to be covered so that the threat of her body is disposed off. By now, we have learned the lesson from other Victorian siren stories – a monster can never fully become human, thus the Sea Lady could never become a flawless woman. Conveniently, in order to hide her embarrassing, horrid tail, Mrs. Bunting turns Miss Waters into a cripple. '[F]or everyone except just a few intimate friends,' continues Mrs. Bunting in her confession to Mr. Melville,

[401] Wells, *Sea Lady*, 28.
[402] Ibid., 32.
[403] Ibid., 44; my emphasis.

> "she is to be just a human being who happens to be an invalid – temporarily an invalid – […] and we shall dress her in long skirts – and throw something over It, you know –"[404]

The mermaid tail is so dreadful, or more precisely, inappropriate, that it is hard to say the word, at first. It lingers in silence of the unfinished sentence, in an empty space of the unutterable dash, turning the tail into nothingness, canceling existence of the mermaid's very nature.

The Sea Lady's transformation needs to be all-encompassing, the erasure of her nature complete. Since in the sea she has been denied a name, on the land she takes one of Miss Doris Thalassia Waters, leaving the fullness of her nameless existence behind and entering the shattered realm of the mortal language. Her material possessions speak the language of her transformation, too. One could ask how a mermaid pays mortals for their normalizing deeds. Miss Waters points the Buntings to a place on the beach where she hid a rope with a treasure chest attached. The treasure belonged to some shipwrecked sailor (whom she had seduced to his death, no doubt), whose name was Tom Wilders, as the name on the chest testifies. As she turns her monstrous skin inside-out and appropriates a human name, the name Tom Wilders disappears from the chest, only to be substituted for Miss Doris Thalassia Waters. 'Wilders' as 'the one who leads astray' is erased, in this act of cultural oblivion of writing, and water, the element obviously susceptible to humanization in this novel, takes its place instead. The deceiving face of Miss Waters – the Victorian face of hers that has the appropriate traits of humanity – is the face that will lead Mr. Chatteris astray. When all is said and done, all the changes in the physicality of Miss Waters finished, 'save for her exceptional beauty and charm and the occasional faint touches of something a little indefinable in her smile, she had become a quite passable and credible human being.'[405]

The Great Outside of Better Dreams; or, the Post-Victorian Face of Miss Waters

That 'something indefinable in her smile' will never go away, because her nature can never be normalized completely. This impossibility of her complete taming occurs due to the fact that this 'something indefinable in her smile' belongs to the nature of her other face, the one

[404] Ibid., 45.
[405] Ibid., 63.

that Miss Waters is so eager to hide. This other face is the face of post-Victorian sirens, and Miss Waters arrives as their harbinger. In the above passage, these two faces collide; they both dwell in the same sentence hinting at each other, the otherworldly presence of a twentieth-century siren not capable of diminishing its intense and ravishing radiance. The Buntings are completely fooled by this game of appearances, or at least Mrs. Bunting is. As a real audience for the Victorian siren, Mrs. Bunting actually empathizes with and pities the mermaid's soulless destiny. The connection of Miss Waters' image with the rest of the modern siren lore is made explicit:

> "You know it's most extraordinary and exactly like the German story," said Mrs. Bunting. "Oom – what is it?"
> "Undine?"
> "Exactly – yes. And it really seems these poor creatures are Immortal, Mr. Melville, – at least within limits, creatures born of the elements and resolve into the elements again – and just as it is in the story – there's always a something – they have not Soul! No Souls at all! Nothing! And poor child feels it. She feels it dreadfully. But in order to get souls, Mr. Melville, you know they have to come into the world of men. […] To get a soul. Of course that's her great object […]"[406]

The Sea Lady's first face is the face of a Victorian siren *par excellence*. It belongs to *Undine*, whose translation into English was a great success. In preparing her disguise the Sea Lady has studied her recent history well. But, though it might seem that the novel is going in this direction, that we are about to read of one more tormented siren/mermaid in the pursuit of a soul, death or love, it becomes evident that it is only a mask, only an outer layer, a veil hiding the future of the siren image. The Sea Lady pretends to be what all her Victorian predecessors and cousins had been, namely Undines, but beneath the fragile skin, easy to manipulate and easy to normalize, another face lurks, more glorious and overwhelming that any of the Buntings could imagine.

The post-Victorian face of Miss Waters has been hinted at from the beginning, all the participants in this little drama sensing something, but unable to put their finger on it.

[406] Ibid., 43-44.

Inexpressible, incomprehensible – that is the Sea Lady's real nature. 'There were times when it seemed to [Melville],' says the narrator,

> you might have hurt her or killed her as you can hurt and kill anyone – with a penknife, for example – and there were times when it seemed to him you could have destroyed the whole material universe and left her smiling still.[407]

As soon as we see the Other face of Miss Waters (we might appropriately capitalize it, to express its otherworldly, transcendental nature), everything that could possibly be described begins to elude language, escaping the possible images and existing words, scattering blank, unexplainable spaces and silence around the sentence. This Other mermaid is not a subject; she is not a split being in search of fullness, peace, or stillness of the beyond. She *is* the stillness beyond language and materiality, beyond the small, limited world of mortals. She is the illusion incarnate of the reflection in the mirror. As Adeline, the elder daughter, points out, Miss Waters comes from 'an Inconceivable World,' 'the strangest World,' the one mortals cannot attain, since it exist only as an absence, as the presence of an absence.[408]

> She [the Sea Lady] regarded them for a moment with a frank wonder, the undying wonder of the Immortals at that perpetual decay and death and replacement which is the gist of human life.[409]

The very core of human existence is what this grandiose figure lacks: the replacement – the never-ending circle of reproduction, of life and death, of *différance*; of a continual re(dis)placement of meaning. Being beyond language, on the side of death, as a pure signifier, she has the ability to influence things, to control the flow of meaning, never succumbing to it. 'It is a digression,' says Adeline to Mrs. Bunting, sensing the alienating power behind the frail story of an Undine. 'She diverts things. She puts it all wrong. […] She alters the value of things.'[410] Wherever there is death, things lose their meaning, transcendence is revealed to subjects as a Promised Land that will never be reached.

[407] Ibid., 40.
[408] Ibid., 51.
[409] Ibid., 53.
[410] Ibid., 72.

* * * * *

This is the right moment to bring the other story into the analysis, if only to emphasize the transcendence in the Sea Lady's image. Lampedusa's professor encountered the same type of a siren, the one that alters the value of things, leaving the professor in an agony of disenchantment that was the real source of his misanthropy. '[Y]ou people,' exclaims the professor, 'slaves to decay and putrescence, always with ears strained for the shuffling steps of Death.'[411] The disgust for humanity as an incurable disease is, for the professor, the consequence of a 'diverting of things.' During the hot summer that the professor spends with the Siren, she reveals herself as a creature of the beyond, the fullness of her image being the embodiment of death and emptiness. 'I am everything because I am simply the current of life,' says the Siren,

> "with its detail eliminated; I am immortal because in me every death meets, from that of the fish just now to that of Zeus, and conjoined in me they turn again into a life that is no longer individual and determined but Pan's and so free."[412]

Death is just another name for fullness, just another name for the ultimate object of desire. The siren is everything and thus nothing; she is all the possible deaths in one, merging into the stream of life. Death is life generalized, without waves, without motion; it is the final, promised resting place of the split subject.

The same alteration of values is encountered in Forster's already mentioned 1920 *The Story of the Siren*, falling historically within the frame of the post-Victorian siren lore. Giuseppe is saved from the water where he encountered the Siren and returns onboard 'so large [and] so wet' that he is pulled into the boat with difficulty. He looked 'like anyone who has seen the Siren. […] Unhappy, unhappy, unhappy because he knew *everything*. Every living thing made him unhappy because he knew it would die.'[413] Giuseppe looked the fundamental illusion of life in the eye, and saw the illusion of the life's reality. The Siren has changed the value of things for him; she has seemingly 'put it all wrong,' as Adeline said. All Giuseppe 'cared to do

[411] Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, 'The Professor and the Siren,' in *The Siren and Selected Writings*, trans. Archibald Colquhoun, David Gilmour and Guido Waldman (London: The Harvill Press, 1995), 72.
[412] Ibid., 81.
[413] E. M. Forster, *The Story of the Siren* (Richmond: Leonard & Virginia Wolf at the Hogarth Press, 1920), 10; my emphasis.

was to sleep.'[414] But, in fact, the Siren put everything right, as she revealed to Giuseppe that the life he was living was a dream, a nightmare as haunting as the strangeness behind a reflection in the looking-glass.

This is the real purpose of the post-Victorian siren, of the Sea Lady, the professor's and Giuseppe's Sirens – to ostensibly expose the fraud of reality, to confront the subject with his soulless existence and give him a real, eternal soul in return. This Other Siren comes to the Victorian subject to shake off his exhausting dream. '[A]ll the elements of your life,' explains the Sea Lady, finally revealing her real nature and intentions to Melville,

> "the life you imagine you are living, the little things you must do, the little cares, the extraordinary little duties, the day by day, the hypnotic limitations, – all these things are a fancy that has taken hold of you too strongly for you to shake off."[415]

Her transcendental nature starts revealing itself, and the Sea Lady admits why she has come. And as she unveils her towering existence, Melville cannot help but feel like he is drowning.[416] Looking at her eyes 'was like looking into deep water. Down in that deep there stirred impalpable things.'[417] The mermaid's figure is becoming larger than life, pulling the subject to a dark, deep bottom, textually enacting Edward Burne-Jones' *The Depths of the Sea*. With this image in mind, that Melville saw a long time ago, 'of a man and a mermaid rushing downward through deep water,' the Sea Lady is pulling him 'elsewhere,' a metaphysical place that is, in Haraway's words, promised by the monster.[418] She is here to seduce Harry Chatteris and explain this 'elsewhere' to humans. 'He is a man rather divided against himself,' says Melville of Harry Chatteris, '[w]e all are.'[419] The human subject is desperately divided against himself, eternally seduced by the mirror's fantasy of reality. But there are places that do not belong to reality, places not real but *of* the Real. 'What you too are beginning to suspect…,' continues the Sea Lady,

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[414] Ibid.
[415] Wells, *Sea Lady*, 94.
[416] Ibid., 100.
[417] Ibid., 99.
[418] Ibid., 102; Donna Haraway, 'The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others,' in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 131, 328, 330.
[419] Wells, *Sea Lady*, 98.

> "[is t]hat other things may be conceivable, even if they are not possible. That this life of yours is not everything. That it is not to be taken too seriously. Because… *there are better dreams*!"[420]

There are better dreams… the promise of the monster. These dreams are what the Other Siren brings to the subject. She is not yearning for these dreams like her Victorian ancestors – she *embodies* them with the semiotic fullness of her Being, with a coherence that is simultaneously both fullness and emptiness. In the final act of desperation, after Harry Chatteris has been seduced, Adeline begs Melville to tell her, to explain to her '[w]hat is this Being who has come between him [Harry Chatteris] and all the realities of life?'[421] At this point, for Wells it was impossible *not* to capitalize the word 'being,' since it became obvious that this Being is beyond all other earthly creatures, that there is a difference between Her and everything that exists. 'What *is* the difference?' Adeline insists. As ever, the answer comes as a broken discourse, as a silence within the human language. 'There are impalpable things,' replies Melville, '[t]hey are above and beyond describing.'[422] The Sea Lady is 'above and beyond' language, but just like in the encounters with reflective surfaces, the subject tries to describe this impossibility nevertheless, to appropriate it by language, the very falling short of the illusion's appropriation bringing *jouissance* obtained. 'She is – she has an air of being – *natural*,' says Melville as he struggles to reach for this inexplicable fullness.

> "She is as lax and lawless as the sunset, she is as free and familiar as the wind. She doesn't […] respect him when he is this and disapprove of him highly when he is that – she takes him altogether. She has the quality of the open sky, of deep tangled places, of the flight of birds, she has the quality of the high sea. That I think is what she is for him; – she is the *Great Outside*."[423]

The post-Victorian siren is the *Great Outside*. She crosses the boundaries of language and meaning, she leads the subject to the illusion of wholeness, 'she takes him altogether,' as a coherent, not a split subject. The Sea Lady is the illusion incarnate; she whispers that 'other things may be conceivable, even if they are not possible.' She is not a strangeness of *différance*,

[420] Ibid.
[421] Ibid., 124.
[422] Ibid.
[423] Ibid., 125-126; my emphasis.

an uncanny familiarity of something postponed or repressed, but still the same; she is a difference, an opposite, the subject's limit of existence and possibility, the *condition* of his possibility. 'She comes,' Melville sighs,

> "whispering that this life is a phantom life, unreal, flimsy, limited, casting upon everything a spell of disillusionment […] She is a mermaid, she is a thing of dreams and desires, a siren, a whisper, and a seduction. She will lure him [Harry Chatteris] with her –"
>
> He stopped.
>
> "Where?" she whispered.
>
> "Into the deeps." "The deeps?" They hung upon a long pause. Melville sought vagueness with infinite solicitude, and could not find it. He blurted out at last, "There can be but one way out of this dream we are all dreaming, you know."[424]

Death. We arrive again at the beginning of our introduction and at the ultimate nature of the post-Victorian siren – nothingness, emptiness, absence that '[hangs] upon a long pause': the inexplicable, unattainable, inappropriable non-nature of desired objects that weave the dream that dreams about awakening. 'You are young and handsome,' implores the professor's Siren,

> "follow me now into the sea and you will avoid sorrow and old age; come to my dwelling beneath the high mountains of dark motionless waters where all is silence and quiet, so infused that who possesses it does not even notice it. I have loved you; and remember that when you are tired, when you can drag on no longer, you have only to lean over the sea and call me; I will always be there because *I am everywhere*, and your thirst for sleep will be assuaged."[425]

For all the differences between Victorian and post-Victorian sirens, there can be only one way out of the subject's hellish dream of the semiotic maze called reality, in which he constantly falls short of the fullness he is yearning for – death. Harry Chatteris, Giuseppe, Melville, and the professor have all been promised a one-time way out, the same exit point that

[424] Ibid., 127.
[425] Lampedusa, 'Professor and the Siren,' 81; my emphasis.

Jove promised the Siren from the previous chapter. The Sea Lady, as well as the professor's Siren, comes as a savior of humanity, she comes to give humanity a soul, but this soul is just another dream, another absence of the *objet a*, another call to death that resides in the corners of every desire, in the hidden recesses of every desired object. 'She is nothing' says Melville finally. 'She is the hand that takes hold of him, something that stands for the thing unseen. […] Something we never find in life […]. Something we are always seeking.'[426] The image of the Sea Lady is both death of the subject and his birth, like the death of the subject *at* his very birth, this Lacanian image of *aphanasis* perfectly embodying the Derridean *différance*, an absence within the signifying chain that keeps the chain moving on and on. It is the place where 'every death meets,' 'the current of life, with its detail eliminated.' Destruction by the Sea Lady or the professor's Siren leads to a birth 'elsewhere' where there are 'better dreams' than the subject's small, finite existence – it leads to an illusion of awakening. 'So small, so infinitely small!' the Sea Lady cries, lamenting the human condition. But that 'elsewhere' is just a dream, 'a blind mute place of formless waters, eternal, without a gleam, without a whisper,' attainable only in death, thus essentially forbidden to the subject. The Sea Lady, the post-Victorian siren, is the presence of an absence, a creature of the Real calling the subject to step out from the circle of language, to enter the Great Outside and transcend his limited existence. She whispers to his sleep-bound mind that the appropriated exteriorized fullness is just a chain that binds him to the bottomless pit of his reverie. But she does that from *within* this dream, from *within* the subject's fantasy. Once again the subject steps out, reaching for an absolution, thinking he has finally attained it. In a way, the Sea Lady has come to fulfill the promise of Anstey's witch, to 'destroy the silence, and save the world,' because '[s]ilence and loneliness cannot last forever.' But it is all just a labyrinth that includes its own exits. It is all just an ineluctable vortex of dreams…

[426] Wells, *Sea Lady*, 128.

PART THREE

THE AGE OF THE WORLD PICTURE: ULYSSES' ARRIVAL

To the extent that necessity is socially dreamed, the dream becomes necessary. The spectacle is the nightmare of imprisoned modern society which ultimately expresses nothing more than its desire to sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of sleep.[427]

Guy Debord

So far we have discussed the impact commodifiction of mirrors had on the perceiving male Victorian subject, as well as the changes in monstrosity of Victorian sirens/mermaids. We have seen how the new, omnipresent mirror pulled the subject into a spiraling loop of representation and conveyed the language of semiotic incoherence of commodities, thus revealing the monstrous fragmentedness of the subject himself. At the same time, the representation of sirens underwent profound changes introducing a new, quite original narrative of sirens/mermaids as virgin-like, occasionally religious, victims in pursuit of their happily ever after. They have lost their two faithful weapons – their voices and their mirrors. Arguments were provided for the existence of the monstrous semiotic incoherence of the male subject himself by analyzing his monstrous dream of haunting, uncanny mirrors and of the split sirens'/mermaids' skin. It was shown that narratological and representational changes in sirens lead to a conclusion that their monstrosity is not a condition *sine qua non* of the subject's humanity, but that the sirens topologize the Victorian male subject himself.

An important issue of the changed modality of the sirens' powers was also raised. Previously essentially aural seductresses, Victorian sirens stopped singing, the power of their voice shifting into their bodies. They became profoundly *visual*, epitomizing nineteenth-century scopic regimes of visual pleasure and voyeurism. In this last part of the book, that is entirely dedicated to the Pre-Raphaelite painting, we will discuss this visual pleasure in connection with the dreaming labyrinth of language we have been deconstructing all along. We will discuss the place where the two previous sections intersect – the Pre-Raphaelite visual field populated by images of sirens. By analyzing the role and place of mirrorless sirens/mermaids in the Pre-

[427] For an extraordinary discussion of the modern society as a society of spectacle, where spectacle is the 'heart of the unrealism of the real society,' see Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983). My debt to this book is tremendous. The above quotation is the thesis 21.

Raphaelite painting, we shall see once again that the age-old *topos* of 'Ulysses and the Sirens,' comes in a new, essentially visual form.

'Ulysses and the Sirens' is a *topos* that has retained its strength for millennia. As we have seen from the prologue onwards, Ulysses' ordeal of seduction, love, knowledge and death is, in a word, timeless. In every era, this struggle against seduction expressed the immediate fears and dreams of the culture in question. Harry Vredeveld has shown that this *topos* in the Renaissance, for instance, had a different meaning: Ulysses actually stopped his ears and became deaf to the cries of the feral Sirens.[428] The whole *Part Two* of the book emphasized, in different ways, the fact that, throughout the nineteenth-century, Ulysses and sirens kept changing places, being irrevocably interlocked in one and the same image. But in *Spiral 1: 'The Little Mermaid'*, we saw how, at the fringes of the Victorian era, Kafka turned this *topos* up-side-down, making Ulysses use his *eyes* and not his *ears* as the tools of his hallucinatory revelation. In all the narratives we tackled – in the new, modern siren lore – visuality as a modality of knowledge eclipsed the previous predominance of orality. The Pre-Raphaelite visual field was no different regarding historical contingency: the Pre-Raphaelite artists shared their reveries and desires with the age that gave rise to them. But in the Victorian culture, this episode exploded in such a great number of images that James Joyce's so obviously titled *Ulysses* is just one example from the edges of the Victorian age. Sirens, symbols of seduction and death, were called into existence in the nineteenth-century to epitomize and deal with a new form of modernity – with new gender roles and subjectivities, new types of spectacular pleasures. Their monstrosity, transformed into silence and virginity through the works of literature, was just one facet of the changes that pervaded the age as a whole.

In this part, the book builds upon the conclusions of the previous chapters regarding changing places of Ulysses and the Sirens, as each other's mirror images. We follow the change of 'Ulysses and the Sirens' *topos* further into the Victorian visual field, with a clear understanding of the relationship of the *topos* with a peculiar Victorian scopophilia, reading Ulysses in different places, even if he is not represented – sometimes *exactly* because he is *not* represented. Sirens are monsters that are essentially relational: like Medusa and unlike the centaur, they need an object in order for their monstrosity to emerge. Without an object, without a Ulysses somewhere on the horizon, their existence is benign and meaningless. Thus we will see that in the images of mirrorless sirens in the Pre-Raphaelite painting we can always find a

[428] Harry Vredeveld, '"Deaf as Ulysses to the Siren's Song": The Story of a Forgotten *Topos*,' *Renaissance Quarterly* 54:3 (2001): 846-882.

Ulysses lurking, craving the gift of death they can bestow. In their mutual, sometimes silent relationship, in their narrative, sometimes expressed only in fragments, we can again find the topology of a male desiring subject and his appropriation of his own mirror image. This subject is essentially incoherent, bound to the Victorian scopic field in the corridors of the visual labyrinth, where he sleeps and dreams – of himself, of sirens. Not every nightmare is an ugly one.

The Pre-Raphaelite Love

September 1848, the year of revolutions: three young friends, painters and enthusiasts met in a house in Gower Street, off Bedford Square, London and signed a secret pact that marked the foundation of a group that would forever change the artistic face of England, if not Western Europe altogether. Their names were William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti and they swore to oppose the traditional painting of the Royal Academy of Arts and express their own original world view. Their fervor was most in earnest and – being young and gifted – they felt it their duty to transform modern painting and give something different and true to the world: a new way of structuring perception. What they did not know, however, was that the little movement they called 'Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood' would prove as powerful as any social, political and artistic earthquake shaking Europe on a global scale at the time. Robin Ironside calls it 'a small explosion,'[429] but another late twentieth-century authority, Christopher Wood, asserts that 'they set in motion an artistic revolution that was to have momentous consequences.'[430] Derek Stanford even goes so far as to insist that '[i]n whatever direction we turn in the later nineteenth century, whatever seems new, proves, as likely as not, to have its roots in Pre-Raphaelitism.'[431] So the importance of Pre-Raphaelitism, in its broadest sense, was tremendous. Their enthusiasm was a prophetic one, best captured in the words of Holman Hunt himself:

> If an open road ended in an impassable waste, we had to make a new way; it might be to push through the forest darkness, to root out venomous

[429] Robin Ironside, *Pre-Raphaelite Painters* (London: Phaidon Press, 1948), 13.
[430] Christopher Wood, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), 9.
[431] Derek Stanford, ed., *Pre-Raphaelite Writing: An Anthology* (London and Totowa, New Jersey: Dent, Rowan and Littlefield, 1873), xxiii.

> undergrowth, to substitute wholesome stock, grafting these with shoots, to ripen hereafter for the refreshment of travelers overcome by their toilsome march.[432]

The Brothers' mission was to make a novel, fresh path for generations to come. Soon after the formation of the Brotherhood – an event that left history and transcended into a myth – four new members arrived; William Michael Rossetti, a writer, critic and chronicler of the Brotherhood, and also brother to Dante Gabriel Rossetti; James Collinson, a narcoleptic painter who soon left the Brotherhood and entered a Jesuit college in pursuit of priesthood; Frederick George Stephenson, who quit painting, became a critic and loyally defended the Brotherhood to its end; and Thomas Woolner (1825-1892), the only sculptor in the Brotherhood, who soon left for Australia after the initial founding of the alliance.[433] With them a seven-member group had been established and the official story of the movement began. But Hunt the 'reformer,' Millais the 'executant' and Rossetti the 'dreamer,' as Percy H. Bate called them in 1901, were the real heart of the group, and each of them, in their own fashion, paved the way for others to follow.[434]

On the first day, the Brothers signed a manifesto that would guide them in their efforts to oppose the institutionalized contemporary painting. Michael Rossetti, who never truly became a painter, but took the role of the chronicler of the Brotherhood, said that what they fought for 'was simply this:

> to have genuine ideas to express; to study Nature attentively, so as to know how to express them; to sympathize with what is direct and serious and heartfelt in previous art, to the exclusion of what is conventional and self-parading and

[432] William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, vol. 1* (New York: AMS Press, 1967), xii.
[433] The bibliography on the legend of the founding of the Brotherhood is immense. Almost every volume on Pre-Raphaelitism includes, one way or another, a section on the founding. See Wood, *Pre-Raphaelites*; Ironside, *Pre-Raphaelite Painters*; Stanford, *Pre-Raphaelite Writing*; Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism*; William E. Fredeman, ed., *The P.R.B Journal: William Michael Rossetti's Diary of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood 1849-1853, Together with Other Pre-Raphaelite Documents* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); Audrey Williamson, *Artists and Writers in Revolt: The Pre-Raphaelites* (Newton Abbot, London, Vancouver: David & Charles, 1976); John Dixon Hunt, *The Pre-Raphaelite Imagination, 1848-1900* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968); Raleigh Trevelyan, *A Pre-Raphaelite Circle* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978); Percy H. Bate, *The English Pre-Raphaelite Painters: Their Associates and Successors* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1901). For general notes on Victorian painters, see Christopher Wood, *Dictionary of Victorian Painters* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Baron Publishing, 1971). The best bibliographical work on Pre-Raphaelitism, up to 1965, is William E. Fredeman, *Pre-Raphaelitism: Bibliocritical Study* (Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1965).
[434] Bate, *English Pre-Raphaelite Painters*, 5.

> learned by rote; and most indispensable of all, to produce thoroughly good pictures and statues.[435]

The manifesto spoke against the prevailing tide of triviality of the Grand Style that was embodied in the teachings of the Royal Academy of Arts. The Academy had utmost institutional power over the recognized artistic production at the time. And although the Brothers were all part of the community that they condemned fiercely, they continued to oppose the artificial chiaroscuro of the preceding centuries, determined as Wood says, 'to paint with complete fidelity to nature, studying each figure from a model, and painting landscape on the spot, out-of-doors.'[436] The walls of the annual Summer Royal Academy exhibition, the most prestigious event in the lives of young, aspiring artists of the time, were populated by uninventive historical scenes, still lives and portraits, all subjugated to the same rules of composition painted with one purpose: to be 'beautiful.' Madox Ford Brown, one of the external associates of the Brotherhood, who was for a short time a teacher of D. G. Rossetti and a precursor of their ideas, thought that the art of the age was caged in by conventions and rules that were utterly obsolete; that instead of rendering a painting beautiful, the focus should be on the reality of the represented action.[437] The prevailing color of paintings tended to be dim-brown, engulfing them in a veil of somber despondency. The Brothers, on the other hand, argued that the real, true expression died after Raphael, and assumed the name 'Pre-Raphaelites' so as to distinguish themselves from centuries of mannerisms, conventions and traditions of the Old Masters that came after, killing expression and suffocating the painting's life, as the Brothers saw it. They found their inspiration in the Italian Quattrocento, venerating painters such as Giotto, and Fra Angelico, and resuscitated painting by using white plaster as a background on which colors shone vividly, luminously and full of life. The effect that their colors had on the public was astounding. Lionel Stevenson maintains that 'their brilliant coloring almost hurt the eyes of the mid-nineteenth century, […] by the contrast of high lights and dim shadows and by death of perspective.'[438]

The subjects they usually chose to depict were revolutionary as well. Historical scenes were commonplace in British painting, but the Pre-Raphaelites painted contemporary scenes under

[435] Fredeman, *The P.R.B Journal*, 104.
[436] Wood, *Pre-Raphaelites*, 10.
[437] Bate, *English Pre-Raphaelite Painters*, 5.
[438] Lionel Stevenson, *The Pre-Raphaelite Poets* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 15.

the guise of historical ones.[439] As we shall see, this technique was one of the true expressions of the age, when a distance emerged between the subject and the world. For Victorians, only by assuming a distance from the present, by shrouding it in the robes of historicism, history itself could be perceived and reality could be approached. But for now, it is sufficient to note that in their crusade for a different worldview, the Pre-Raphaelites, at times, emphasized contemporary social issues, addressing 'risqué subjects,' as John Dixon Hunt referred to them: fallen women, prostitution, brothels, madhouses, slums, anything that would '*épater le bourgeois*.'[440]

The Wider Picture

Before we delve into a more detailed analysis of Pre-Raphaelite painting, it is very important to remark that what the Pre-Raphaelites did, what they fantasized about and craved for, was by no means an event *ex nihilo*, a revolution out of a cultural vacuum that abruptly discharged its electric power over the British artistic landscape. Nor was the revolution limited, in its reveries and its new worldview, to the Island and the Pre-Raphaelites alone. Wood argues that many of the novelties, in the technique as well as in the ideas, traditionally attributed to the first Pre-Raphaelites, actually had their antecedents during the 1830s and the 'hungry' 1840s. The technique had been anticipated by artists such as William Mulready, who used white backgrounds for his paintings to emphasize their colors in the early 1840s. William Henry Hunt was ardent in his detailed visual rendering, 'anticipat[ing] the Pre-Raphaelites' reverence for the minutiae of nature.'[441] Oriental scenes of John Frederick Lewis were familiar to the Pre-Raphaelites, and the writings of Lord Lindsay and Mrs Jamesone had already played a part in resurrecting the interest in the early Italian 'Christian' art. Ford Madox Brown himself was engaged with another romantic German group called the Nazarenes who worked along the lines similar to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.[442] On a wider scale, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood inspired, directly or indirectly, a great number of painters, sculptors, poets, artists of all kinds, widely across Europe. Dixon Hunt's discursive analysis of the Pre-Raphaelite imagination makes a particularly strong case for Pre-Raphaelitism as an aesthetic introduction into

[439] Graham Parry, 'The Pre-Raphaelite Image: Style and Subject 1848-56,' *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society* 17:1 (1978): 37-8.
[440] Dixon Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelite Imagination*, 212.
[441] Wood, *Pre-Raphaelites*, 12.
[442] Ibid., 10-12.

Aestheticism and French Symbolism of the *fin-de-siècle*.[443] French Impressionists, although disliked by the Pre-Raphaelites on the grounds of 'mere transcription of the surface of nature,'[444] also shared with them the ideational and technical mindscape, in their application of light, distinction between daylight, sunset and sunrise, and practice of painting *en plein air*. The formidable effect that Pre-Raphaelite ideas had on wider European audiences is the reason why William E. Freedman, in his seminal work *Pre-Raphaelitism: A Bibliocritical Study*, calls for broadening the term 'Pre-Raphaelitism' to include three different, but not mutually exclusive, stages of the phenomenon: The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of the mid-century, the Pre-Raphaelite Movement, and Pre-Raphaelitism, as 'sequential terms descriptive of a continuous, if not unified aesthetic force.'[445] This tripartite scheme corresponds to Wood's first, second and third stage: the first stage is foundational for the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (1848-1860), embodied by the Brothers themselves, the period Quentin Bell calls 'hard edge'[446]; the second corresponds with Pre-Raphaelitism and the Aesthetic Movement (1860-1890), adding William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones into the picture; their death, around the end of the century inaugurated the third phase (1890-1920), incarnated, most importantly, in the work of John William Waterhouse, whom Peter Trippi calls 'the modern Pre-Raphaelite.'[447]

'Although the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was established as a rebellion against Victorian art,' observes Dixon Hunt, 'it soon manifested interests and anxieties that link it intricately to the movement of mind and art in the period.'[448] Something stronger than a simple artistic revolt manifested itself in the vehemence and devotion of the Brotherhood, an epistemic change burning its way behind their eyes and their brushes – a new visual order of representation that would restructure reality itself and become one more expression of the void out of which the Victorian subject, Ulysses the Spectator (accompanied by the sirens, or the other way round), would emerge. We will try to descend into that very void.

Although the Brotherhood, as such, existed for a very brief period of time, after which it formally fell apart – Hunt went on his religious journey to Palestine, Woolner to Australia, Stephenson turned to art criticism, and Rossetti to his new 'Oxford boys', to Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris – their ideas continued to live on in the form of a 'continuity of

[443] Dixon Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelite Imagination*.
[444] Ibid., 9.
[445] Fredeman, *Pre-Raphaelitism*, 1.
[446] Quentin Bell, 'The Pre-Raphaelites and their Critics,' in *Pre-Raphaelite Papers*, ed. Leslie Parris (London: Tate gallery, 1984), 17.
[447] Wood, *Pre-Raphaelites*; Peter Trippi, et al., *J. W. Waterhouse: The Modern Pre-Raphaelite* (London: Royal Academy Books, 2009); Peter Trippi, *J. W. Waterhouse* (London: Phaidon Press, 2002).
[448] Dixon Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelite Imagination*, 16.

admiration,'[449] as Dixon Hunt describes it. Their dream was trans-cultural; their legacy trans-temporal. But what intrigues us here the most is how this dream of a new visual reality resonated with the rest of the Victorian culture; how, without even knowing, it absorbed the convulsions of the cultural unconscious and reproduced these spasms of imagination in the least conspicuous cultural products. We have already connected the Brotherhood with wider artistic tendencies of the nineteenth century, but it should be understood that something greater, stronger, more prodigious and innate to the age crept into their dreams, shaping their desires, inviting their eyes into the gaze of the world, personifying an epistemic change that transformed the cultural world from the ground up. The Pre-Raphaelites where children of the society of the spectacle, the one that brought the dream to the subject in the first place. As they painted their adulteresses, fallen women, saints in ragged clothes and angels, a new ocean of visual possibilities opened up in front and around them. It rested behind the eye, in a place emptied of meaning, in an unreachable place of the object of Pre-Raphaelite desire that gave birth to a new visual subject feeding on a void, on a distance of the subject from the world, from Being, from the 'Real.' Over this empty ocean without a beginning or end, the protagonist of our visual epic sails to embody the world that becomes a picture – Ulysses the Spectator has arrived.

The Spectacle of the World

> It was, at first, as if the Brotherhood looked at the world without eyelids; for them, a livelier emerald twinkled in the grass, a purer sapphire melted into the sea. On the illuminated page that nature seemed to thrust before their dilated pupils, every floating, prismatic ray, each drifting filament of vegetation, was rendered, in all its complexity, with heraldic brilliance and distinctness; the floor of the forest was carpeted not merely with the general variegation of light and shadow, but was seen to be plumed with ferns receiving each in a particular fashion the shafts of light that fell upon them; there were not simply birds in the branches above, but the mellow ouzel was perceived, fluting in the elm.[450]

This elegiac paragraph, taken from Robin Ironside's book *The Pre-Raphaelite Painters*, exquisitely captures the nature of Pre-Raphaelite naturalism. This new visual phenomenon

[449] Ibid., 1-15.
[450] Ironside, *Pre-Raphaelite Painters* 13.

could be approached in terms of realism, which – taken in a wider artistic, literary and cultural context – would prove useful and true. But Holman Hunt himself insisted that the 'Pre-Raphaelite Brethren were never realists.'[451] True, they were always more romantic than realist, which is why Ironside sees them as 'one expression of that phase of the Romantic movement that was the flower of European reaction amid the ruins […] of the ambitious generalizations of 1789.'[452] But in their effort to represent nature as accurately as possible, to 'make us feel that every blade of grass is a window into the infinite,'[453] sometimes they went to great lengths to dissolve the vision into details of reality. A couple of examples will, without doubt, throw some light on this new phenomenon: when painting *Ophelia*, a beautiful stream-bound cadaver of a young drowned female, Millais had Elisabeth Siddal lying in a tub full of water until she got sick, so that he could catch all the peculiarities of a half-submerged physicality[454]; when dealing with a subject of the underwater world in his *The Depths of the Sea*, Burne-Jones actually borrowed a large tank filled with a green-blue tint from his friend and colleague Henry Holiday who used it for the same purpose while creating his picture *Das Rheingold*[455]; Ford Madox Brown borrowed some pictures of Italy from William Michael Rossetti which he used for painting the background for his Romeo and Juliet,[456] and so on. On the surface, it seems as if the artists were just concerned with the exactness of their representation, but seen in a wider cultural context, what they expressed, every single one of them, was a new vision of reality. This panoptic approach to the real, penetrating the interstices of physicality, was an artistic counterpart of the wider 'exhibitionary' issues of the Victorian culture.

At the time of the Brothers' most fervent efforts and their greatest struggles with the authority of the Academy, other important events took place in London, Europe and the western world in general. We are going back to the event we have already discussed from another perspective, namely, the perspective of commodities and visual and semantic overload. On May 1st 1851, the same day the annual Royal Academy exhibition was held, a monstrous glass project of Sir Joseph Paxton, the Crystal Palace, opened its doors to the public in Hyde Park. The Great Exhibition of 1851 began and in the six months that followed, about six million people visited the exhibition, which, at that time, corresponded to one-third of the British

[451] William Holman Hunt, 'The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood: A Fight for Art,' *Contemporary Review* XLIX (May 1886): 740.
[452] Ironside, *Pre-Raphaelite Painters*, 10.
[453] Parry, 'Pre-Raphaelite Image,' 7.
[454] Gay Daly, *Pre-Raphaelites in Love* (Fontana: Collins, 1990).
[455] Fiona MacCarthy, *The Last Pre-Raphaelite: Edward Burne-Jones and the Victorian Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2011), 367.
[456] William Michael Rossetti, ed., *Rossetti Papers, 1862-1870* (London: London Sands, 1903), 226.

population. The audiences were stunned. Inside the Palace the whole world was put on display. The bedazzled visitors wandered through the architectural giant and encountered new miracles of technology, experienced a new magic of Orient, or consumed a new commodity at every corner. The official descriptive and illustrated catalogue of the event (the monstrously confusing one) lists exhibitors, not only from all over Britain, but also from its 'Colonies and Dependencies' and 44 'Foreign States' of Europe and the Americas.[457] 13,000 in total, the exhibits included a Jacquard loom, an envelope machine, kitchen appliances, steel-making displays and a reaping machine sent from the United States.[458] An average rate was 42,823 visitors per day, culminating on October 7th with 109,915 visitors.[459] For an ordinary visitor, it must have seemed like the whole world was there within the reach of the hand, contracted into one building, one single piece of space and time, and in that piece, the whole history of human progress appeared to be enveloped. In this new visual spectacle, every spectator could find their own place in the general grid of things, which unfolded backwards into the past and forward into the future. Walter Benjamin, in *The Arcades Project*, cites A. J. Wiertz, a Belgian romantic painter and sculptor, who commented on the Exhibition:

> What strikes one at first is not at all the things people are making today but the things they will be making in the future. The human spirit begins to accustom itself to the power of matter.[460]

This illuminating insight from the 1870s reflects profoundly on the way people interacted with the phenomenon of world fairs. The Great Exhibition was not an exception but part of a trend, an expression of a new visual ordering of the reality that was uniquely Victorian.[461] All at once, the world was in a place where the reality presented itself in one stroke of spatial architecture, as the world and the age became a picture.

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[457] *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations, 1851* (London: Spicer Brothers, 1851), 1.
[458] Ibid.
[459] *Appletons' Annual Cyclopaedia and Register of the Important Events of the Year: 1862* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1863), 412.
[460] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 176.
[461] On the subject of the nineteenth-century representational shift towards Being, Martin Heidegger says that this could not have happened in any other age except the modern age, because in no other age the world had ever been appropriated as picture. Martin Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture,' in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 71.

The evolutionary, orientalist and epistemic causes and consequences of world fairs have been thoroughly investigated, and studies on these issues will prove useful for the background of our search for the Victorian subject.[462] But our focus is on how this new way of perceiving the reality, or rather the new way of producing the reality as such, corresponded to the structural level of Pre-Raphaelite painting. As we draw lines between these two revolutionary phenomena, we will see a new, peculiarly Victorian subject emerging from a void in representation in the age the world became a picture. He emerges from the illusion of coherence of his own appropriated mirror reflection, the illusion that introduces the subject into language where he dies as Being so he can emerge as meaning. The age of the world picture is the age of the mirror image. The age of the mirror image is the age of the subject's birth as *aphanasis*.

'Initially, the word "picture" makes one think of a copy of something,' says Martin Heidegger, as he penetrates the spectacle of the modern era. 'This would make the world picture, as it were, a painting of beings as a whole. But "world picture" means more than this. We mean by it the world itself.'[463] As we stand in front of the world picture and grasp a new reality in the optical order of 'the Panorama, the Cosmorama, the Diorama, the Europorama and the Uranorama'[464] we are witnessing not the representation of the world, but the world itself, emptied of Being and shrunk to a sign. As we look at it, this world keeps receding, because the nineteenth-century perception of reality keeps losing itself in the circles of representation. Timothy Mitchell marvelously deconstructs the phenomenon of exhibitions, concluding that world exhibitions represent the world and construct reality *as* a representation, as something different and detached from reality itself. But, as it was obvious to the eastern visitors – whose ordering of reality did not follow the same structural rules of a distance between representation and Being – once they had left the exhibition, they realized that the rest of the city – and the western world for that matter – kept producing the same representation in circles. 'Everything seemed to be set up as though […] it were the model or the picture of something,' explains Mitchell, 'arranged before an observing subject into a system of signification, declaring itself to be a mere object, a mere "signifier of" something further.'[465] However, this labyrinth of representation that kept reproducing itself was a precondition and a

[462] In addition to all the works cited in Part One, see also three studies crucial for this section, Raymond Corbey, 'Ethnographic Showcases, 1870-1930,' *Cultural Anthropology* 8:3 (1993): 338-369; Timothy Mitchell, 'The World as Exhibition,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31:2 (1989): 217-236; Tony Bennett, 'The Exhibitionary Complex,' *New Formations* 4 (1988): 73-102.
[463] Heidegger, 'Age of the World Picture,' 65.
[464] Mitchell, 'World as Exhibition,' 220. These are all devices for conveying a panoptic view – invented, constructed and displayed over the course of the nineteenth century. Their names differ according to their objects.
[465] Ibid., 222.

consequence of the dream of modernity. 'The real has to be sought beyond the dream – in what the dream has enveloped, hidden from us,'[466] says Lacan, and, as we have seen in mirror and siren narratives, modernity kept dreaming this *beyond*. It was a fundamental fantasy that supported the existence of a new shattered subject, a subject that mirrored within himself this perpetual reaching out for the Real that never stopped backing away. In this labyrinth, the Victorian male subject was born as a sign, at the expense of his own Being.

Heidegger argues that this fundamental change in perception, where the representation of Being is foregrounded, put in front of us as a reality, *is* the condition of Being in the modern era. To represent something means that

> the matter itself stands in the way it stands to us, before us. […] Understood in an essential way, "world picture" does not mean "picture of the world" but, rather, the world grasped as a picture. […] Whenever we have a world picture, an essential decision occurs concerning beings as a whole. The being of beings is sought and found in the representedness of beings. Where, however, beings are *not* interpreted in this way, the world, too, cannot come into the picture – there can be no world picture.[467]

In the age where the world has become a picture, a being acquires its Being only by being represented, so the main epistemic condition for the modern being to come to being is to be absorbed and eclipsed by meaning. This paragraph leads us to the conclusion that in order for the subject to *be,* he has to acquire a *distance* from Being. So, paradoxically, in order to be, the subject has to die as Being, so that a sign – understood as radically divorced from Being – can be born. For Heidegger, the 'representedness' of Being and the emergence of the subject are two sides of the same coin, the essence of modernity.[468]

Distance is exactly what we have been aiming at in the age of the world picture. The moment when the world became a picture, when the subject took his mirror image as his reality, when Being changed its epistemic precondition requiring a *distance* in order to be, is the moment when a new subject appeared, the one that required the same distance from Being itself. Therefore, in this new visual order of the world, the world was grasped as a panorama of reality,

[466] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1963-1964*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 60.
[467] Heidegger, 'Age of the World Picture,' 67-8.
[468] Ibid., 69.

from a specific panoptic and deeply penetrating viewpoint – from the outside of the reflection. As a precondition of his own arrival, this new subject, had to die as Being so that he could be born as a sign – *aphanasis*.

The nineteenth century assumes this new way of capturing reality through a process that Tony Bennett calls the 'exhibitionary complex,'[469] but the term 'denuding of culture' would suit it better, emphasizing its voyeuristic nature. Tony Bennett quite shrewdly observes, building upon the work of Michel Foucault on prisons and asylums that the world had transformed into a public spectacle in the nineteenth century by opening previously restricted areas of culture to the public, like museums and fairs. Timothy Mitchell adds theaters, zoos and botanic gardens to the list – all the little heterotopias where the world was put on display.[470] But, these public spaces were not all there was to it. By the turn of the century, Dean MacCannell notes, visitors to Paris

> were given tours of the sewers, the morgue, a slaughterhouse, a tobacco factory, the government printing office, a tapestry works, the mint, the stock exchange and the supreme court in session.[471]

This process of disclosing restricted spaces to wider audiences is much more than an exhibition. It is an exhibition, for sure, but by gazing at the intestines of the society and culture, into excrement, dead meat and decaying human flesh, the Victorian era became not only exhibitionary, but also morbidly *exhibitionistic*, *scopophilic* and *voyeuristic*, revealing a new desire that revolved around an abject wish to *see* and *be seen*. Bennett sees this as a structural panopticon by concluding that the world on display at exhibitions was, in return, visually controlled by visitors who were also on display.[472] But, being concerned with other issues, he failed to perceive the profound resonance between this panopticon and the voyeuristic desire of the age. In this novel sweep of scopic fantasy, the spectator, the tourist, stands not only as a perceiver of things, he stands as a voyeur, taking pleasure in this distance, inviting the Other, the culture he is peeping at, into his own exhibitionistic fantasy, enacting the loop of the scopic drive out of which Ulysses the Voyeur appears.

[469] Bennett, 'Exhibitionary Complex.'
[470] Mitchell, 'World as Exhibition,' 221.
[471] Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 57.
[472] Bennett, 'Exhibitionary Complex,' 82-87.

In Lacanian theory, a drive secures satisfaction (*jouissance* obtained) in the face of desire's inability to attain the impossible *objet a*, the only thing with which it *can* be satisfied. Lacan distinguishes the *aim* and the *goal* of the drive. While the *aim* of the drive is inevitably inhibited because ultimate satisfaction (*jouissance* expected) is impossible, the *goal* of the drive (*jouissance* obtained) is always attained because the very path and restlessness of the drive *is* its goal, a movement that always brings satisfaction. By circling around an *objet a*, the drive brings the Other into play, in enacting its passive aspect – for example, *to be seen*. This 'inviting of the Other' is fundamental for the drive's return and results in the appearance of the subject. 'The appearance of *ein neues Subjekt* [is] to be understood as follows,' says Lacan,

> not in the sense that there is already one, namely the subject of the drive, but in that what is new is the appearance of a subject. This subject, which is properly the other, appears insofar as the drive has been able to show its circular course. It is only with its appearance at the level of the Other that what there is of the function of the drive may be realized.[473]

Ulysses, as the other face of Victorian sirens, enacts his visual fantasy of strangeness, uncanniness and incoherence, reaching for a whole that has never been and will never be, perpetually caught in the dissatisfaction of desire, caught in the loops of the scopic drive, appearing *from* the loops of the drive. Therefore, out of the distance that opened up between Being and the subject, the spectator and the world, in a world that became a picture, a mirror image, the Victorian male subject emerged as a fundamentally broken, split subject, whose Being died as soon as he emerged as the effect of the signifier. *Aphanasis* of the subject was the new reality of the Victorian age.

From Naturalism to Exhibitionism

After this excursus into the exhibitionistic nature of the Victorian visual field, we shall go back to the naturalism, or 'realism' of Pre-Raphaelite painting. The intense Pre-Raphaelite insistence on a panoptic, overarching view of their chosen subjects – a 'cult of detailization' or

[473] Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 178-179.

a 'poetry of particulars'[474] as Derek Stanford calls it – stands in line with the process of cultural voyeurism. Some time before the actual founding of the Brotherhood, in a period when Hunt and Millais were still only discussing their desire for change in their work, Hunt came to Millais with a copy of *Modern Painters*, burning with enthusiasm and urging his friend to read the book that he felt was talking directly to him. In it the author, John Ruskin, one of the most loyal defenders of the Brotherhood, brought the importance of their artistic ideas to the fore by saying:

> [The artist] should go to Nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thoughts but how best to penetrate her meaning, and remember her instruction; rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scoring nothing; believing all things to be right and good, and rejoicing always in the truth.[475]

The influence Ruskin and other figures, such as Rossetti, had on Hunt, especially the astonishing eloquence and pertinence of *Modern Painters*, cannot be emphasized enough. The book itself and this quote in particular, went straight to the heart of the Pre-Raphaelite myth. Audrey Williamson describes it as a 'revolutionary work, which helped to inspire a whole generation of young artists; and it set a pattern for descriptive and imaginative criticism, in all branches of the arts […].'[476] Although, of course, it is impossible for an artist to grasp everything and omit nothing, it is clear that some of the Pre-Raphaelites – Holman Hunt particularly – took Ruskin's words almost religiously, as a sacrament leading him to his own artistic enlightenment. We can see this clearly in his *Awakened Consciousness* (1853) (fig. 24), where a fallen woman is caught in the act of adultery, while a hyper-abundance of objects and details threatens to drown the eye of the spectator in the confusion and sharpness of the new naturalism. We can also see this in the more class-aware *Work* (1863) (fig. 25) by Ford Madox Brown, a painting that takes a truly panoramic and panoptic view of a workday street; or we can see it in a masterpiece *Ophelia* (1852) (fig. 26) by John Millais, where the realism of the plants was, at the time, almost uncanny.

[474] Stanford, *Pre-Raphaelite Writing*, xviii.
[475] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters. Edited and Abridged by David Barrie* (Worcester: Ebenezer Baylis & Son Limited, 1987), 178-179.
[476] Williamson, *Artists and Writers in Revolt*, 19.

Figure 24 William Holman Hunt, *Awakened Consciousness* (1853)

This new attitude towards composition, a way of divulging reality to the eye of the viewer, an overload of details that exhaust the viewer, runs parallel with the exhibitionism of Victorian world fairs. Annual Royal Academy exhibitions, or the exhibitions in the prestigious, more progressive, Grosvenor Gallery in Bond Street, were structurally not so different from the rest of the exhibitions of the age. Dozens of paintings hung densely on the high walls of the Academy, lined one next to the other, every painting a miniature of the world, the gaze of the era caught in between. In an age without television, cinema or the internet, nineteenth-century artists were like movie stars, and the annual exhibitions places of worship and rejection. In these halls, visual rules of culture were being established; a new bare, devastated and distressed modernity was being created. In order for the Victorian modernity to be, a representational distance towards Being was necessary, and we can see this act in the strength of Pre-Raphaelite naturalism that stripped the reality bare, so that it could expose it (as though) at an exhibition. Culture was stripped bare in these paintings, leaving a void in representation, a distance or a blank space of Being, allowing the Victorian subject to appear.

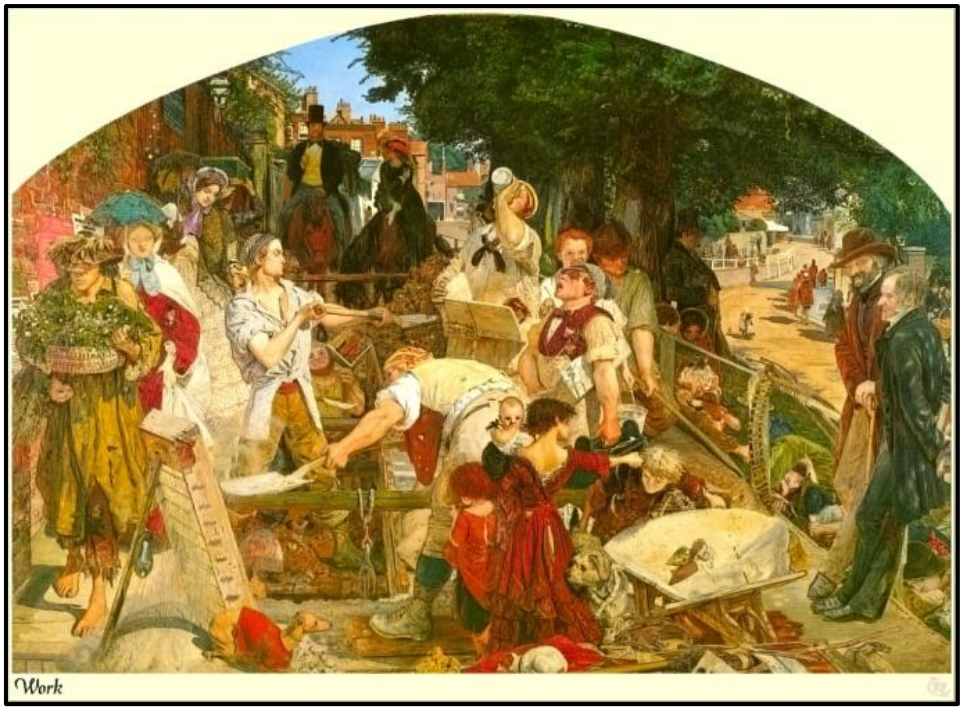

Figure 25 Ford Madox Brown, *Work* (1863)

But in dealing with the emergence of the subject, in dealing with his birth, it is not possible to order events in a linear fashion, arguing for the precedence of one over the other. We are still dealing only with the symptoms of the age, where what we are looking at is not what we wish to see. And our wish is to go deeper into the existential register of the age, and delimit a particular desire that revolves around this core, this distance, around this *objet a*, a phantom object that the desiring subject is yearning for but cannot reach, permanently circling around that void that cries, implores, and beseeches him – coherence, Being, the Real, death. This void got unleashed across all forms of cultural expression – material, visual, and textual, but in this part of the books we shall deal with the visual aspect of the representational rupture, ever searching for the hopelessness of the Victorian desiring subject. And we shall find the subject emerging from the void in the wake of the voyeurism of the scopic drive, to express and re-signify a denuded, exposed culture, and we shall follow him back to the nothingness of his mirror image from which he came, only to be born again in loops of never-ending representational horror.

Figure 26 John Everett Millais, *Ophelia* (1852)

The Arrival

Let us imagine: from a far-away, half-forgotten time Ulysses steers a vessel of dreams. On the deck, chained to the mast of a broken, disrupted representation, the eternal voyager-dreamer gazes into the terrifying Sirens' faces. He is struggling, trying to break free, but the more he struggles the stronger the ropes get. Every new effort, every new dream of congruity, every effort of transcending his mirror-induced split, is getting him closer to his own doom. We assume that his ship struggles bound for the putrid, decomposing island of the Sirens, but as we can see with John William Waterhouse (fig. 1) and Herbert James Draper (fig. 27), the Victorian sirens/mermaids are not waiting on the rotting shore, but are besieging him from up close.[477] He listens, but the sirens are silent; he gazes, but what he sees is only an illusion, a fantasy, Franz Kafka says.[478] Ulysses is in a trance as his desire pulls him towards the dark, watery depths and he leaves his small isolated piece of ground rocked by the waves, says Edward Burne-Jones, to drown his soul and his Being in an irresistible embrace of a mirrorless mermaid.[479] This is to be the final resting place of the Victorian Ulysses, at the somber and troubling bottom of the sea, inside the horrid crack of representation. Ulysses is to fall through his own mirror image, reaching out for coherence. But his desire for Being comes as a nightmare, because Ulysses actually desires death itself.

[477] *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1891) by John William Waterhouse and *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1909) by Herbert James Draper.
[478] Franz Kafka, 'The Silence of the Sirens,' in *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories & Parables*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Quality Paper Book Club, 1983), 430-432.
[479] *The Depths of the Sea* (1886) by Edward Burne-Jones.

Figure 27 Herbert James Draper, *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1909)

The game of seduction and restraint had been played for centuries and millennia, until Ulysses finally arrived at the Victorian shores and landed in their visual field. And there – he drowned, so as to be born again as a sign. For Ulysses had not been prepared for the void that opened up in front of him – on his very boat, between his very feet – in the form of a whirlpool that devastates and consumes all life and all knowledge. And as he gazed into nothingness, and gave himself to the empty horror of desire, his Being left his body never to return, morphing him into a picture, a spectacle, a performance, chaining him to a seat in an all-consuming and all-representing show. The eternal Wanderer became a Spectator, peeping through a keyhole at the society of spectacle, his body slowly turning into a commodity, and his soul into an exhibit, just one more commodity, like the heart of Carrington's Siren. Seeing himself at the ever-lasting exhibition of humanity, Ulysses died as Being and rose from the ashes as a sign, caught in the voyeurism of the Victorian culture.

Figure 28 John William Waterhouse, *Circe Offering the Cup to Ulysses* (1891)

Ulysses – our Victorian hero and the Siren's inalienable complement – the Siren's mirror image, if we are to believe the siren literature of the age, could appear in the world that became a picture only at the expense of his own Being, because the Ulysses we are talking about is the one that manifests himself only as a sign. We can see this, for instance, in the painting *Circe Offering the Cup to Ulysses* (1891) (fig. 28), by John William Waterhouse. The witch Circe is seducing our Ulysses into a corporeal transformation, but he appears only in a mirror behind her tremendous, arcane body, revealing his coherent existence only as a reflection, only as a sign, a call of the Other on the threshold of subjectivity.

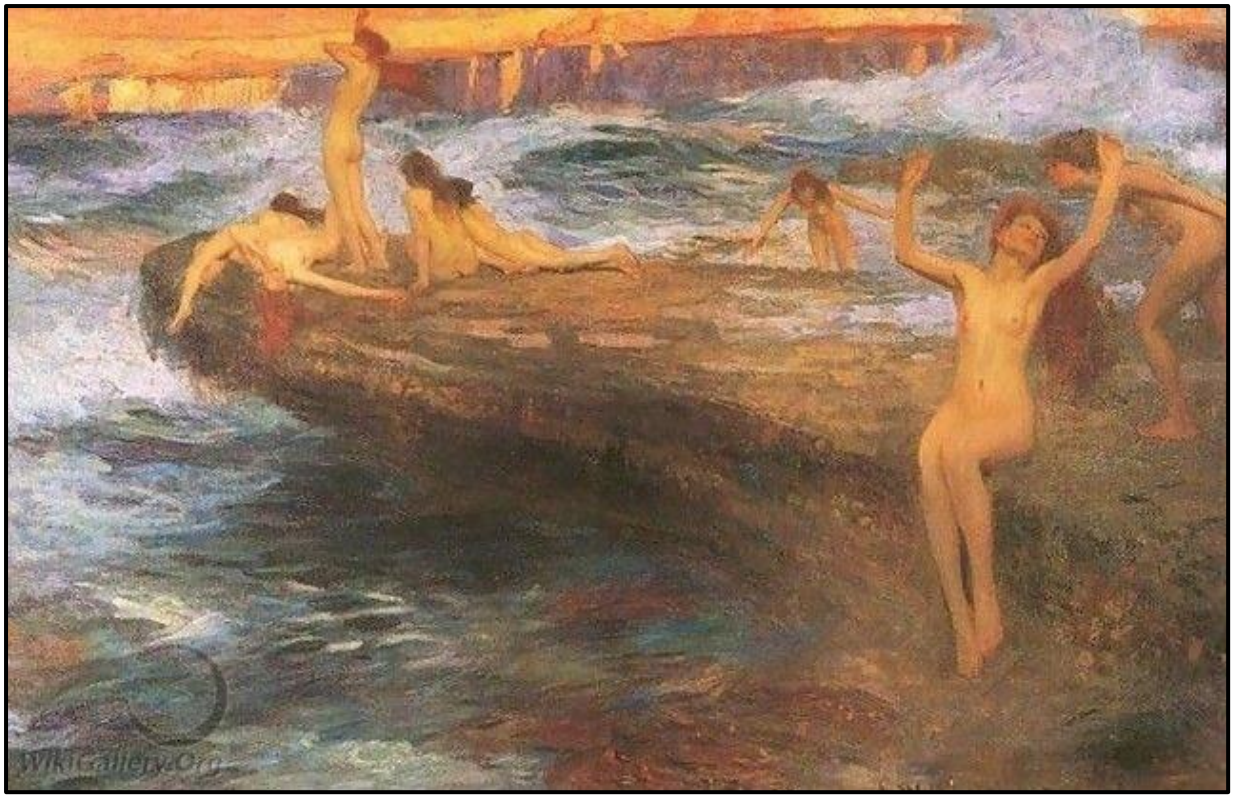

Figure 29 William Whitley, *A Sail!* (1898)

William Whitley also caught this moment perfectly in his work *A Sail!* (1898) (fig. 29). In this painting, we see a jugged sea rock engulfed by a hysterical, raging sea, waves crashing onto the hard surface of the sirens' rocky lair. On the rock, the sirens in their human disguise call and lure the ship in the distance, exposing their bodies to the voyeuristic gaze of the nineteenth century. These sirens are human, they have legs, but the context of the painting is obvious. The plainness of the scene would be enough to show us the bareness of cultural expression, but we should account for the ship that *disappears* in the upper left-hand corner, hinted at only by the title. The ship is all but invisible, rendered as a mirage amid dense sunset fog, and it reveals itself only to a very keen eye. The only reason we would even look for it are the nude bodies of the seductresses that signal Ulysses for us, and the title that signals to us that there is *A Sail!* in the picture. So we gaze into the painting only to understand that the Ulysses we are looking for has disappeared altogether, turned into a sign, conveyed only by language of his arrival. Ulysses has been chained in the visual spectacle of the age of the world picture, and what he left behind is a void that he himself brought on his vessel woven out of dreams.

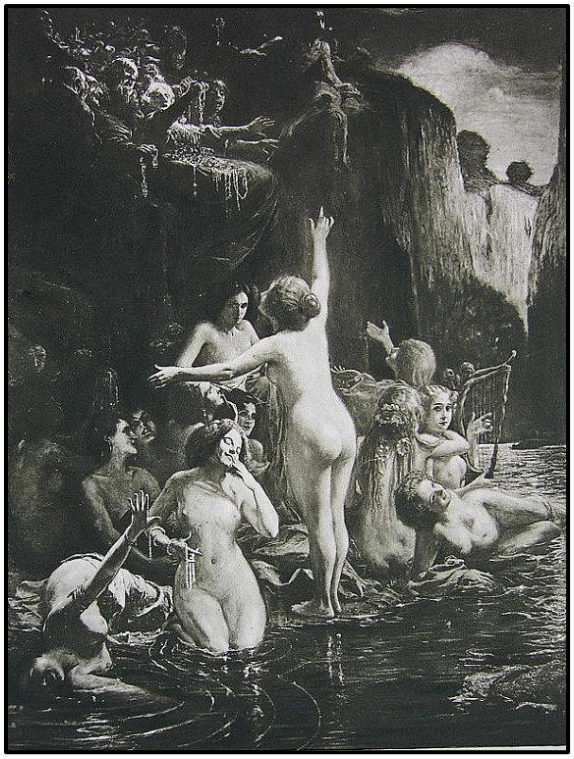

Figure 30 Lajos Márk, *Sirens' Nest* (1900)

In 1900, at the Universal Exhibition in Paris, Lajos Márk, a Hungarian painter, exhibited a painting called *Sirens' Nest* (fig. 30).[480] Following the usual line of *fin-de-siècle* 'idols of perversity,' Dijkstra describes it as

> showing a nest of sirens stylishly coiffed in turn-of-the-century hairdos, all remarkably naked, receiving offers of gold and jewelry from a massed throng of madly desirous – who could blame them? – males of all ages. It was abundantly clear from Márk's image that the impetuous fervor of their male admirers was likely to end in a fall from the precipitous cliffs on which they were huddled in the throes of temptation.[481]

Yet, keeping in mind the argument about the exhibitionism of the era, and the role the Victorian painting of sirens and mermaids played in it, what we discover in the painting is a nest of sirens on display, bodies exhibited as if on stage, a performance of a denuded culture to be consumed, a culture whose representational loops never end. As we gaze into the picture,

[480] Anthony Geber, 'Lajos (Louis) Márk: His Life and Art,' *Hungarian Studies* 8:1 (1993).
[481] Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 259.

we become aware of the painted audience's gaze and, in the loop of the drive in its search for satisfaction, the gaze of the audience is diverted back to us, transforming the spectator into Ulysses the Voyeur once again. There is only a slight slip of the tongue between Ulysses the Voyeur (the Spectator) and Ulysses the Voyageur (the Tourist), and not even that much cultural space between them.

Many other contemporary paintings structurally deal with the topic of the sirens' exhibitionism and the death/birth of the Victorian male subject.[482] All of them feature a more or less secluded scene, where the spectator sits behind a peephole in a show, feeling like an uninvited guest, participating in the loop of the visual drive of the painter's desire. The paintings all appear from this loop, pushing the split subject into the fore. Close framed, submerged into silence and calm backgrounds, as in a somewhat later painting *The Echo* (1911) (fig. 31) by Jean-François Auburtin, these paintings bring the void of the sirens' representation into the picture. Victorian mermaid and siren paintings actually stand for the picture of the world. They are a playground of the visual coquetry that circles around the rupture, the unfathomable *objet a*, around the lack of the world in the process of appropriation of its reflected image – the loss of Being, of the self, eternally caged in an abject call of the Other.

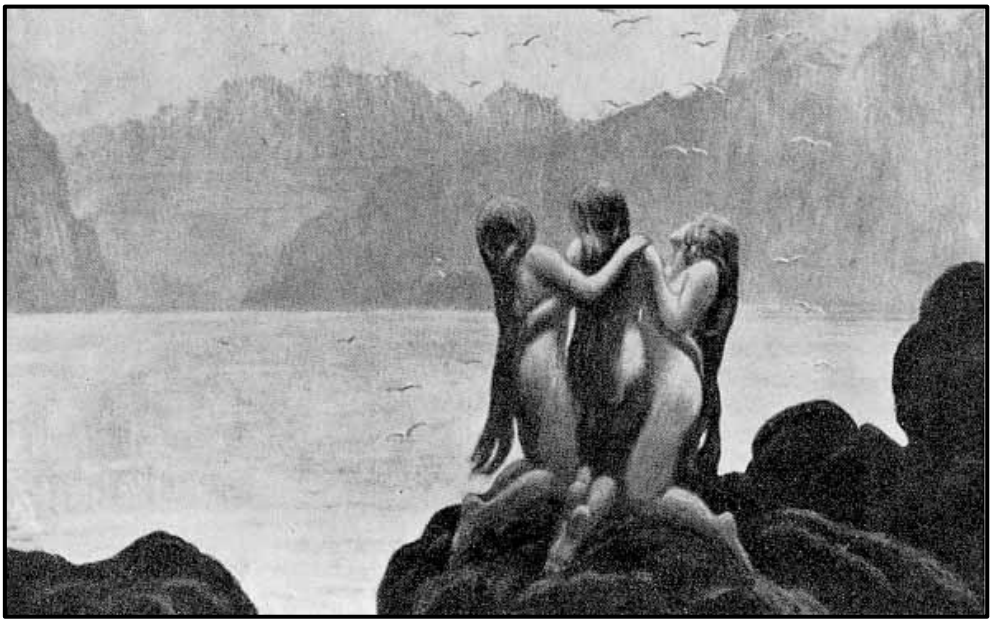

Figure 31 Jean-François Auburtin, *The Echo* (1911)

[482] For instance, J. Humphreys Johnston's *The Mystery of the Night* (1898), Gustav Moreau's *The Poet and the Siren*, all the mermaid paintings of John William Waterhouse, Arnold Böcklin's *Calm at Sea* (1887) and many others.

Introducing the Fragments

Edward Burne-Jones and John William Waterhouse were stars of the Victorian art world. Both of them were, at least for a time, members of the Royal Academy, but the thoughts and creations of both were part of the Pre-Raphaelite mindscape.[483] John William Waterhouse was the younger of the two, and his more classical choice of topics occasionally got him excluded from Pre-Raphaelite studies. Wood assumes that he was excluded from one of the first comprehensive works on Pre-Raphaelitism, that of Percy H. Bate, on the grounds of his being a follower of Leighton, who dedicated himself more to classical than medieval imagery.[484] On the other hand, Edward Burne-Jones was a clear, bright, shining star of the movement, tapping the very source of Pre-Raphaelite inspiration. He was a *protégé* of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and artistically came of age on the wings of Dante's uniquely charismatic and medievalist imagination. He followed the philosophy of the Brotherhood in his own way, with a bent for fantasy, painting angels, sirens, knights, sorceresses and other characters of his extraordinary dream world, earning the title of a 'licensed escapist'[485] in the process. D. G. Rossetti called him 'one of the nicest fellows in Dreamland,'[486] while Aubrey Beardsley considered him 'the greatest living artist of Europe.'[487] Both of the artists – together with everything Victorian for that matter – ostensibly faded away after World War I, Waterhouse dying in 1917, as the war raged on, Burne-Jones long before that, in 1898. But, during the Victorian revival, after the World War II, and particularly during the 1970s, they both came into the spotlight, as the academic material on Pre-Raphaelitism started piling up. John Russell Taylor said in *The Times* in 1978 that Waterhouse was 'not a forgotten painter; it is just that nobody remember[ed] him.'[488]

A thing that Burne-Jones and Waterhouse had in common, a passion that they shared with their age, was their obsession with female beauty – a particular type of beauty that Dixon Hunt

[483] Burne-Jones was a member only briefly. During that short period he exhibited *The Depths of the Sea*, the work we shall be dealing with. After that, he never exhibited at the Royal Academy again, staying loyal to the more progressive Grosvenor Gallery until its closure in 1887.
[484] Wood, *Pre-Raphaelites*, 141. In the last quarter of the century, parallel with the works of Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris, emerged another stream of romantic painting, connected to the Pre-Raphaelite ideas in terms of the employment of painting techniques, but more concentrated on the classical imagery. John William Waterhouse was the most prominent figure of that style, following in the footsteps of Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Frederick Watts and Frederick Leighton who, in 1878, became the president of the Royal Academy of Arts. Wood thinks that Waterhouse was actually the only painter to have successfully reconciled the purely classical and the Pre-Raphaelite visual thought.
[485] MacCarthy, *Edward Burne-Jones*, xix.
[486] Cf. Stanford, *Pre-Raphaelite Writing*, xx.
[487] Williamson, *Artists and Writers in Revolt*, xxxi.
[488] Aubrey Noakes, *John William Waterhouse* (London: Chauser Press, 2004), 6.

calls 'Rossetti's ideal.'[489] This gorgeous, majestic, fantastic figure, that was 'ubiquitous in her desultory existence'[490] would eventually be appropriated by Art Nouveau artists, where its grandeur of expression would become a vehicle of design, a mere decoration, emptied of its raging, irrational fullness.[491] But this wide-eyed, red-haired glamazon appears with both painters as a devious virgin-monster, hiding behind its relationship to Ulysses the topology of the Victorian male subject. This larger than life figure is the one we will be dealing with.

Waterhouse and Burne-Jones approached sirens in their own unique fashion: Waterhouse being overzealous where details of facial expression were concerned, Burne-Jones painting them in a transcendental, otherworldly fashion. While Waterhouse's 'nymphs and goddesses [as] flesh-and-blood people'[492] call the viewer to drown in the depth of their minutely painted faces, Burne-Jones's are offering nothingness, as if their being was all but erased. Nevertheless, both types convey their monstrosity at the level of visual language. By penetrating the surface of two impressive siren/mermaid paintings created by these unique minds, we shall show that the realism, abstraction and plainness of Burne-Jones' mermaids, and the naturalism of their Waterhouse's counterparts, although on the surface the antipodes of one another, were actually two sides of the same phenomenon that ran deeper in their background. Both nothingness and hyper-naturalism were parts of a new visual approach to Being, expressions of a denuding of culture in the voyeuristic spectacle of consumption. Sirens and mermaids of the era stood in the center of the world picture, signifiers robbed of their signified. Their monstrosity was an expression of the inability of language to convey the impossibility of their existence, and this inability was a uniquely Victorian issue; it carried the subject away from 'here' to the 'elswhere' of the void – the non-Being of language. In the next two chapters/fragments dedicated to two of the most cherished Victorian painters, we shall see how monstrosity appears in the field of the visual drive announcing once again the chained Ulysses of the modern age. The Pre-Raphaelite mermaids/sirens are as much subjects and protagonists as the mermaids/sirens from the literature – protagonist of their own visual narratives, succumbing to the same relationship of the male subject to a female monstrous body. We shall follow the language of Waterhouse's *A Mermaid* and Burne-Jones' *The Depths of the Sea* focusing on the ways in which it conveys the never-ending horror of the Victorian male subject – Ulysses the Chained, the Spectator, the Voyeur. Both representations of mermaids have the same nodal

[489] Dixon Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelite Imagination*, 178.
[490]Ibid., 196.
[491]Ibid., 200-210.
[492]Wood, *Pre-Raphaelites*, 142.

reference point, an unapproachable black heart of desire that Lacan calls *objet a* – an inexpressible break in signification rising from the appropriated mirror image of the age.

FRAGMENT 1: PEEPING OF THE VICTORIAN SUBJECT

Whatever it is, I must go there.
Sigmund Freud

The semiotic incongruence of a monster's body leads the eye of a viewer through uncanny, peculiar loops: not to the image of the body, not even through that image, but right back to the eye itself. Although every representation involves this interplay between a viewer and an image, looking at a monstrous figure results in a particularly painful restructuring of the eye in the process. The viewer's gaze vivisects this impossible representation, but this game of meanings, the restlessness of signs as they unfold in a signifying chain, is only a game of appearances. What happens beyond appearances? What becomes of the desiring subject in this game? Or, pertinent for this book, what becomes of the male desiring subject that comes into existence only as the effect of a sign? A picture is always only an external screen, a façade hiding the subject from the unwanted, meddling gaze, but it is possible to peer into the picture and plunge through, to pierce the screen of the image and go deeper into the background, if one only knows how to look. The act of looking is at stake here, because 'what I look at is never what I wish to see.'[493]

How does one look at a picture and insinuate oneself into the world of the visual? What is there to be witnessed beyond a picture and how does the subject relate to the act of witnessing? What is needed is a *cautious* gaze, not one that feeds on the obvious and the given, but one that lingers between words, between signs, detecting meaning, and thus, desire itself. When one plays in the field of the scopic drive, in the realm where what matters is not so much *what* one sees, but *where* the act of seeing comes from and leads to, one has to lose oneself completely in order to find one's way. The heart of every picture is an elusive, hollow place where the object of desire resides. It cannot be reached nor seen, but it lingers there signalling, conditioning, and challenging the desire that will never be satisfied. Thus visual drive, once awakened and feeding on desire's desperation, relapses into its source, delimiting the phantom object, re-enacting the subject's fall. It is exactly this path, the boomerang-shaped path of the scopic drive, which we will try to pursue here. As we meditate on the painting *A Mermaid* by John William Waterhouse, the pleasures of visual coquetry of seeing and being seen will lead

[493] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1963-1964*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 103.

us, through the artist's desire, to the nineteenth-century male desiring subject who created it and his relation to visual representation. It shall become clear that *A Mermaid* is the Victorian male subject's (Waterhouse's, in the last instance) mirror image, a screen that merges Ulysses and his Siren into one and the same image. Victorian sirens lost their mirrors because they came to embody the desiring subject himself, and we shall see that the structure we found in the written siren narratives, persists through the visual mermaid/siren culture as well: Ulysses is always 'in the picture,' even if he is not there. As it was the case with all the other siren/mermaid narratives analysed so far, monstrous bodies are, essentially, the male subject's expression of, and interaction with, himself.

The male Victorian subject appears in all his glory as an essentially disrupted self, one that gorges himself on his own dissolution and destruction. In other places, we called him Alice, we called him The Little Mermaid, and we called him the Siren. Here, we call him Ulysses (and we will call him A Mermaid), owing to his essential dependence on his murdering enchantress, the mermaid (in accordance with the painting we are about to analyse). Ulysses arrives as a fundamentally seduced subject in the spectacle of the world. He appears as a split, spasmodic self once the world becomes an exhibition, once the mirrors are widely introduced into everyday life, and once he dies as Being in order to be. In his core, gasping for air from the dark chasm of his non-Being, lies the same note, the same rhapsody of a gap and a perpetual lack around which the unconscious weaves its web. What is this formidable place and how can we approach it? By following *A Mermaid* in a spiral, centrifugal stroke, we shall empty the painting of its meanings and reach out for the unsignifiable part of the subject's desire – his *objet a*. This attempt – both rewarding and futile from the very start – will leave us empty-handed. But these empty hands are exactly what we need, for in them we shall find that which is lacking – the object of Waterhouse' desire – the lost, fundamentally absent, core of the Victorian subject.

The best way to approach nothingness and depict the path of the visual drive in pursuit of its lacking goal, is to start from the obvious, from what we know and what has already been given to us – what 'gives itself' to us. Searching in a picture for an object always already lost, the *objet a*, is never an easy task for a viewer. He (we will presume a 'he,' since we are dealing with the male phantasy of sirens and with a male subject) has to follow the crumbs left by the artist, he has to dive into a mosaic with no order and no meaning, and what he brings back with him is, in the last instance, his own lack, his own desire. Thus, these crumbs do not lead anywhere, because the object has been lost in the first place. Nevertheless, this is precisely where the viewer's gaze has to go, so he has to lose himself right from the start.

This crusade for emptiness involves two separate modes of temporality at the intersection between perception and consciousness, forming the 'interval that separates them, in which the place of the Other is situated, in which the subject is instituted.'[494] At one level, the viewer *sees* the picture, he *perceives* it as a whole, arranging all the crumbs, all the clues that the drive – in its return to the source – has left for him. At this point, the viewer is drawn into the picture; the picture ensnares him, flashing his own desire back at him. At another level, the viewer discerns the marks of the path; he becomes conscious of the symbolic baggage left for him. On the surface, he decides to abandon his desire and to go along the path, hoping to attain the mysterious object that imperceptibly seduces him from the heart of the picture. This conscious abandonment is just an illusion, though, because one way or another, the subject who looks at the painting merges with the subject that emerges from the painting. This merging disrupts the ostensible continuum of the picture, enlisting the subject in the gap of the unconscious that Lacan, after Freud, calls *die Idee einer anderer Lokalität*,[495] the Other's playground between perception and consciousness.

The Fall

A Mermaid, John William Waterhouse's final diploma work for the Royal Academy, saw the light of day in 1900, when it was shown in a public display for the first time (fig. 32). The painting stands at the end of a relatively long line of sketches and exercises on the same subject. On a 96.5 x 66.6 cm canvas, we face a mermaid in a private act of combing her hair. She dwells in a secluded alcove walled by rocks, her tail 'tucked almost felinely beneath her.'[496] Her red, burning hair falls softly down her curved body, long red wisps touching the body's nonhuman lower part. Her arm is stretched fully in the act of combing, while her gaze disappears somewhere in the distance, halfway between the spectator and the background. Right next to her, we see a cornucopia of pearls in a shell that reminds us of a seaborne treasure washed upon the shore.[497]

[494] Ibid., 45.
[495] Ibid., 56.
[496] Meghan Edwards, 'The Devouring Woman and Her Serpentine Hair in Late Pre-Raphaelitism,' last modified 26 December 2004, viewed 14 December 2012, http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/prb/edwards12.html.
[497] Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1982), 64.

Figure 32 John William Waterhouse, *A Mermaid* (1900)

The water in the alcove is tranquil, as gentle waves roll pebbles in the shoal. Titanic rocks enclose the little dwelling place of this sensuous, calm and benevolent being. The scene is luminous, indicating (like in every Victorian siren narrative) high noon, the siren's time, where everything gets dispersed and all secrets are revealed, as low tide brings forth the marvels of sea depths.[498] The mermaid's lips are slightly apart, suggesting a millennia-old siren song. The

[498] The heat of the summer or high-noon is traditionally the sirens' time. Almost every siren narrative from the Odyssey to the Victorian England features this element. Apart from the *Odyssey* where we see wax malting in

general sentiment of the painting follows a soft mermaid lullaby: familiar with the mermaid/siren lore, we can almost feel her caressing us with her soothing voice, the heat of the hour making us dizzy and sleepy, the velvety waves rocking our half-conscious mind. But as it is always the case with paintings of mermaids, the creature begging for our company with her indolent gaze and the hypnotic movement of her hand attaches herself to the core of our own ruptured self, the stretched hand reaching into the split, right into our unconscious, uncovering fear, anxiety and desire. In every painting there is always more than meets the eye. Exhibitionistic like the age it embodies (and a clear objectification of monstrous flesh), this painting spreads out of a violated coherence that is introduced by the mermaid's inconceivable body. As Nina Auerbach says, commenting on another Victorian, Pre-Raphaelite mermaid, 'the mermaid arrests us because nonhumanity in human form looks out at us.'[499] We, the viewers, are Ulysses too, subjects born out of the enticement of the visual spectacle, and if we look deeper into the painting, beyond the gentle gaze of the mermaid, we will see our own ejected Being and perceive the path of desire that encompasses the visual field of the late nineteenth century. In this painting something is missing, something is eluded and refused, something that preys upon the ecstasy of the gaze, where the subject faces his own loss, his own lair of monstrosity. Between the obvious and the expected, between what one sees and what one wishes to see, lies an infinite punctiform space of creation and fear that spreads centrifugally from the heart of the picture. If we look hard enough into the place which is not there, we will meet the lack of the subject who created the painting, which is the same as the lack of the subject who emerges from the language of the painting. Ultimately, we are bound to see our own lack as well.

Right from the start we are faced with two different viewpoints in *A Mermaid*, two lines of eyesight that shape the picture and give it a twist through the space delineated by that-which-is-not-there. We might say that we are presented with two gazes, mapping for us the field of the visual drive, out of which the male Victorian subject appears. One of them is obvious and starts from the mermaid's enthralling eyes, it follows the line of her hand, tracing the long, carnal-red mane of her hair, ending somewhere outside the picture. Although it is tempting to

Ulysses' hands, in Bret Harthe 'The Mermaid of Lighthouse Point' in *Under the Redwoods* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1901) a mermaid appears on 'a bright summer morning' (97) and during 'the hottest hour of the day' (112); The Siren of Henry Carrington sings two times per day: once at noon and once at midnight; in *The Sea Lady* by H. G. Wells, the mermaid appears on 'a bright blue day in August' (21), etc. Educated on this issue, we imagine the same element in this painting. But the low tide, that reveals the treasure by the mermaid's tail, cannot occur at high noon, but when the moon is high. There is an obvious discrepancy in the painting, since Waterhouse painted daytime scene and daylight is seen through the rock in the background. Thus, either it is not low tide, or Waterhouse made an (un)conscious mistake.

[499] Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*, 94.

assume that her gaze falls upon the viewer himself, it would be too easy, too obvious and gratifying, if we restricted ourselves to this interpretation exclusively. For, after all, what we are searching for in the picture is that which is outside meaning, where the male subject irrupts, surprising us in his abyssal 'fullness.' He simultaneously appears both full and broken because his abyss, his lack, is fundamental for his life-sustaining miscomprehension of his own psychic unity. The chasm of absence creates the mirage of wholeness. This unity, 'that is introduced by the experience of the unconscious, is the *one* of the split, of the stroke, of rupture [...] not the non-concept, but the concept of the lack.'[500] Thus the mermaid gaze does not lead to the viewer directly, but to the viewer's own lack, his *objet a* which is literally *not*. There is nothing surprising in a mermaid luring a subject into an abyss, thus rather than saying that the gaze falls upon us, spectators, we shall say that it passes right *by us*, leaving an impression that if we move a bit to the left, we will be able to catch it, and drown in the mermaid's eyes. Bram Dijkstra shows that at the time of the painting's creation, the curious and wicked gaze was particularly fashionable in Britain and France, where the tradition of the *femme fatale* thrived. He observes that 'diabolic women with the light of hell in their eyes were stalking men everywhere in the art of the turn of the century.'[501] As an example he takes Arthur Hacker's Sir Percival stalked by a cat-like lady, but he also turns to our hero, John William Waterhouse in a brief analysis of his *Hylas and the Nymphs*. If, as Dijkstra argues, it became fashionable to paint ladies 'looking malevolently at the viewer from under partially lowered eyelids,'[502] we could assume that our painting appears against the same iconographic background. But our mermaid has a different kind of look, not the one that tells all its secrets up front, but one that reveals things precisely by not disclosing that which it hides. By following the mermaid's look slightly aside, somewhere towards the lower left-hand corner of the painting, what we experience here is the fall of the subject right at the moment when he leaves the scene, when he tries to walk away, his guard down. The subject has been caught.

The Redeemer of Victorian Modernity

There is also another gaze in the painting, but in order to see it, in order to trace its move and penetrate the game of visual pleasures that is essential to the Victorian subject, we need to

[500] Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 26.
[501] Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in* Fin-de-Siècle *Culture* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 252.
[502] Ibid.

restructure the image of the mermaid and look for the lines that are not visible. 'In our relation to things,' says Lacan,

> in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree elided in it – that is what we call the gaze.[503]

That which is omitted in the picture is the gaze around which the picture revolves; it is the object of Waterhouse's desire, since he himself is the Victorian subject who emerges from the language of the picture. Later on, we will be able to describe this apparition of an object more precisely, but for now let us follow the path of the scopic drive in the painting and its return to the source.

At this point we must ask what *is* beyond the appearance of this painting. What structural demarcations can we perceive in the unspoken field of the split, in the sombre cave where the unconscious dwells?

To answer these questions and return to the gaze, it is important to address again the issue of what we know, by virtue of it being presented to us. The end of the nineteenth century was the age of fierce gender struggles. This issue has been raised in the prologue, so now we will go back to it shortly. In his fantasy that had a profound impact on reality, the Victorian male subject created an obedient female being, caged inside a drawing room, an 'angel in the house' waiting for him to come home after a hard day's work. But, as Auerbach already perceived, the Victorian era was engulfed in images that expressed the other side of this fantasy, a dark, sinister side hunting the souls of men.[504] Dijkstra argued, rightly, that scientifically and historically autopsied woman was a culturally base creature, appearing from the previous stages of the evolution to serve as a bowl for misogynous attitudes at the *fin-de-siècle*.[505] On the other hand, Auerbach shrewdly perceives that textual, material and visual manifestations of female wickedness were also an empowering element of female representation.[506] Born out of male fear, this new image promote the idea of infinite female power of transformation that

[503] Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 73.
[504] Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*.
[505] Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*; see, also, Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies: Women, Floods, Bodies, History (vol. 1)*, trans. Stephen Conway in collaboration with Erica Carter and Chris Turner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987), or Patrick Bade, *Femme Fatale: Images of Evil and Fascinating Women* (New York: Mayflower Books, 1979).
[506] For a different version of the female myth (the female aquatic evolution), see Elaine Morgan, *The Descent of Woman* (London: Souvenir Press, 1985).

transcended the shrinking male world of reason by appropriating the traditional border-images of expected womanhood, such as devils, sirens, fallen women and spinsters, recreating them in the light of woman's immense power over the material world. 'As woman and character,' says Auerbach about Diana Verno, using Walter Scott's character as an embodiment of new devastating Victorian femininity,

> [she] is realer than her fiction, wiser stronger, and freer than the historical man who imagined her; her independence of love and marriage leads to transcendence of all that does not enhance her own enlarged existence. She alone possesses an infinitely expanding life, animating by the richness of her presence those limited beings, her novel, her author, and her reader. The freedom she promises is both aesthetic and cosmic, a grand and tantalizing hint of possible human divinity.[507]

The male fear of loose sexual boundaries and gender roles created this immense creature called woman, summoning it from the realms of obsession and anxiety. We have seen them as Prophets of Death in the Victorian siren literature (The Red Queen, Circe in her Victorian skin, the sea-witch from *The Little Mermaid*, as well as the Little Mermaid's grandmother). The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood imagined it along the same lines, where painting female models was a release from hard Victorian sexual taboos imposed on the middle class. As Gay Daly shows in her almost heart-breaking biography of the five most prominent members of the Brotherhood, while painting women obsessively, they actually knew quite little about them, and even less about sex itself.[508] Desire, fuelled by the barred object, a constant attraction without a possibility of getting close to it, created an impossible atmosphere of anxiety, which, in their case, exploded in the images of sirens and mermaids.

We are already familiar with the story of Victorian cultural misogyny, since it provides the canvas of this book, as something already discussed extensively by other authors. It was important to reintroduce it here since it is a cultural milieu that provided the backdrop against which our painting was created. This was the language that invited the Pre-Raphaelite painters into existence as subjects, filling them, like empty receptacles, ready to be impregnated with the fears and desires of their times. *Man's desire is the desire of the Other*.[509] Although the

[507] Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*, 182.
[508] Gay Daly, *Pre-Raphaelites in Love* (Fontana: Collins, 1990), 19.
[509] 'Man's desire is the desire of the Other' is one of Lacan's immortal phrases.

issue of femininity was, and still is, quite obvious and we have no attention of diminishing its importance, what the Pre-Raphaelite artists also painted – as they drew the balmy, inviting bodies of their models with tails, wings and claws – was not just misogyny or praise of earthborn goddesses; they painted their own shattered selves. So, what we are interested in here is not the representation of women *per se*, at least not exclusively, nor the ways in which femininity became constructed/subjugated in various monstrous images. We are not interested in what offers itself as self-evident in Pre-Raphaelite painting. We are interested in the *subjects who constructed/subjugated* this femininity: the painter himself tells us about the cultural perception of women by painting it, but the language of the painting, its unconscious structure – the one emerging from *within* the language of the painting, from *between* the 'words' – tells us about the male Victorian subject himself, about the painter himself. The painter (the artist in general) cannot obliterate himself while painting – on the contrary – he exposes himself in the act of painting fully. Ulysses, in a constant struggle to save his soul from the attacks of marine, submerging dreams that sing repeatedly about death, destruction and joy, paints his own tattered self on a mermaid canvas, once again expressing the love/death from the 'underground,' as Bataille would say, from the *souterrain* that resides in his brush stroke. *A Mermaid* (as does *Ulysses and the Sirens*, in the last instance), having been painted by Waterhouse, always comes back to Waterhouse himself; it represents Waterhouse' own desire, selfhood and his abject face; it shows his own desire for death, fear, decay and everything perversely divine. It represents Waterhouse's horrid nest of monstrosity, his split subjectivity itself.

One cannot approach the abyss within oneself, which opens the moment one is called into the Symbolic. It is too painful – this primal trauma – too dreadful and unbearable. One cannot even paint it directly, nor write about it. That is why one fantasizes about it, veiling it in unrecognizable images. The gulf of Being belongs to the Real, the domain that always escapes us and stays always beyond our reach; it belongs to the awakening from the dream, to the final appropriation of a desired object. This gulf calls us to meet it, to understand the beyond of the signifying chain – Being itself – cursing us with 'an appointment to which we are always called [...] that eludes us.'[510] We cannot follow the Real because it always comes back to the same place, to itself, the only place we are not allowed to go. But fantasy makes the trauma bearable; it makes it lucid and viable, because we believe that our fantasy has no rules. However, fantasy follows the same path of desire that always leads us back to our own loss, our own unattainable

[510] Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 54.

object – always back to our own gaze. That is why there is always more in a picture than is depicted. Being fundamentally a visual medium, it is only natural that this truth that disguises itself as a lie, appears somewhere along the lines of the scopic drive – between the pleasures of seeing and being seen.

The Curse of the World as a Stage

So far we have seen that *A Mermaid* is a veil. In its structure it hides a lack, an elision that keeps the whole painting together by simultaneously disrupting its meaning, obstructing its semiotic coherence. Somewhere between the eye of the viewer and the eye of the mermaid (*qua* the eye of the artist), lies this stygian hole of the Victorian language, structuring and deconstructing the painting through a gaze that resides in its background. What this gaze *is*, is our final issue. It is the *objet a*, the always already list object. It is the fullness, the Being, the exit, the awakening. But, in order to face the gaze, in order to understand its onerous and illusory nature, all we *can* do is go around it, circle it, and weave a net of meaning that will, hopefully, present us with the gaze in the end. Thus, we have to go back to the painting again. In its cracks and crevices, it still hides the path of the scopic drive, it still fulfils the reveries of the Victorian subject.

One of the ways of approaching desire of the subject is addressing a disturbing feeling that the calmness of the picture conveys. Caught in a beautifying act of combing her hair, the mermaid radiates a void. Plain, almost smooth rocks are nothing like the jutted peaks of *The Merman*, a 1885 painting by the same author (fig. 33). These two paintings should be considered counterparts in a way, since both came into existence on the wings of Tennyson's poems, *The Mermaid* and *The Merman*. With Tennyson, these poems were obviously parts of the same structure of thought.[511]

[511] These two poems are quite parallel in structure and language. See Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'The Mermaid,' in *The Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, ed. Karen Hodder (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), 21 and Tennyson, 'The Merman,' in *The Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, ed. Karen Hodder (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), 20.

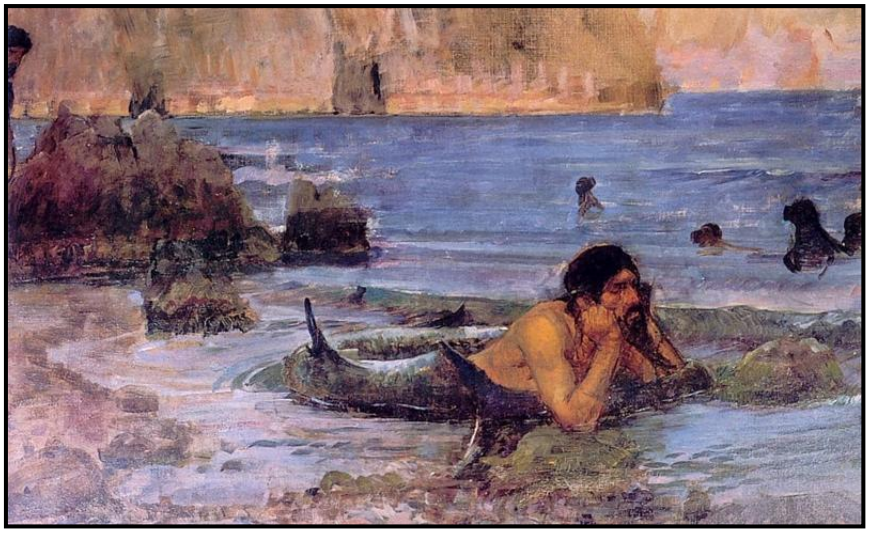

Figure 33 John William Waterhouse, *The Merman* (cc. 1985)

But while Waterhouse' *The Merman* oozes the sharpness and violence of rocks, figures and water – of brush strokes in general – *A Mermaid* is sunk into an almost lethargic state. The rocks in the distance, the peaceful surface of the water, the plainness of the alcove; everything calls oblivion to the scene, drowning the aggressiveness, lure and sexual seduction coming from the mermaid. Oblivious to the danger and death that the mermaid embodies, of the dread that a monstrous existence hides in the folds of her deviant skin, the male subject strays to the excluded grounds of desire. The abject face of Waterhouse, the mermaid, from whom our Victorian subject does not part, is, as Julia Kristeva says in another context, 'a *land of oblivion* that is constantly remembered.'[512] But as the background of the picture is an empty, stark surface of inactivity, falling upon itself in a trance of lethargic desperation, the mermaid, in a sharp and visible contrast to the merman, is rendered so vividly and in such detail, that it comes as a flash of consciousness in a half-forgotten dream. 'The time of the abjection is double,' continues Kristeva, 'a time of oblivion and thunder, or veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts out.'[513] With her hand hypnotically stroking her hair, the mermaid reveals the return of death into the picture, waking the dreamer who gets confronted with the painful abject realization that nothing can be hidden, nothing can be simply put away or subtracted from the land of shadows which is called the unconscious, the navel of dreams that the abject feeds upon. Her pale, almost marble skin flashes the unconscious right back into the picture. The 'once-upon-a-blotted-time,'[514] when our subject was a bowl for the desires of the Other,

[512] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 8.
[513] Ibid., 9.
[514] Ibid., 8.

suddenly re-emerges from the abyss of the mermaid's monstrous skin, arousing fear and apprehension, turning fascination into shame. What should be salvation – the love, the bliss, the fantasy – has been invaded by death. The uncanny feeling, the disturbing sense of strangeness that creeps up into the picture, signals that the subject that emerges from the language of the painting has been caught. He faces his own gaze.

Let us image once again: there is a painter in front of a canvas, and the painter paints a mermaid. Only, while painting a mermaid – an expression of his deepest desires – he is actually painting, topologizing, himself. The painter and the mermaid, the painter and the canvas, stand against each other as in a mirror but for a fact that the mirrored image does not stare directly back, its gaze falling next to the painter. The painter stares at himself as through a peephole, in a perverse (distortive) act of voyeurism. Thus, at this point, in the act of voyeurism that the painting facilitates, there is a spiralling relationship between the painter and the subject that appears from the language of the painting. In the exhibitionistic spectacle of the mermaid's exposure, the painter sees himself looking through a keyhole. He is surprised by his own gaze. He enters a loop of the scopic drive circling around his loss, around his absent object. This is the point where the boomerang trajectory of the drive in the painting manifests itself. Our male Victorian subject descends upon the scene in an act of self-awareness. In the painting, the painter is shown to himself from the only, utterly paradoxical, point that potentially brings the pleasure of the circling drive – he sees himself from the geometral point from where he sees the others. In this game of lines of visions, he sees himself from the 'flesh of the world,'[515] he sees himself from the geometral point of the painting that is his distorted mirror reflection. But, from that point on, the painter disappears as such, he is 'scotomized,' he vanishes in the blind spot of the world's vision, deriving pleasure from the act of being seen, as long as he is not aware of it. But as soon as the awareness of the gaze breaks in, the lines of voyeurism are broken, and the painter's surprise turns into fear, into an awkward, shameful, abject feeling.

This is the curse of our painting, of the male subject's mirror image, at the age when the world became a stage.

Death by Drowning

[515] 'The flesh of the world' (*la chair du monde*) is an expression that Maurice Merleau-Ponty uses in his book *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. William Cobb (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), arguing that 'the perceiving mind is an incarnated mind' (3) In our case, the term is used to refer to that phenomenological 'other' space of human intentionality, the material world, that 'sees' us from the point of view of material totality.

Through the voyeuristic tendencies of the nineteenth-century visual field, the male subject, objectified and banished from his own representation, is paradoxically drawn back into it. *A Mermaid* presents us with this paradox, but in order to grasp it fully we have to turn to the givens once again.

The Pre-Raphaelite painters revolutionized Victorian painting around the middle of the nineteenth-century, in such a profound way that by the end of the century Pre-Raphaelitism became a driving artistic force on the Island. The way the Brothers approached reality and nature itself, as an everlasting source of artistic inspiration, emerged as a result of their discontent with the trivialities of the Grand Style of the Academia. At the structural level of their art, the old/new approach to naturalism resonated with issues related to the subject and his relationship to representation. Graham Parry says that '[f]or the Pre-Raphaelites, naturalism meant basically a particular way of confronting the object, an attitude of mind which considers the object more important than the style.'[516] Thus, although light-coloured canvases overthrew the brownish, dim atmosphere of the Grand Style, their interest lay in a peculiar dissolution of the subject. *A Mermaid* shows this aspect of their legacy, albeit in a hidden fashion. The alluring curves of her body, her arm stretched in the act of calling, her slightly open mouth signalling the joy of *jouissance*, implore the viewer to drown in the picture and lose his misunderstood subjectivity. In a slightly different context, Parry calls this dissolution an

> imaginative penetration of the subject which makes us conscious of the life within. [...] [W]hen a painter can force us into a feeling of becoming part of the subject. And they [Pre-Raphaelite painters] were right to concentrate on the intensity of the scene, to emphasize those eyes which are almost mesmeric – for it is the kind of mesmerism which effects a union between the viewer and the object. The most effective paintings depend on this relentless staring between subject and object until the distinction is broken down and we move into the painting.[517]

In *A Mermaid*, the distance between the viewer and the object – the mermaid veil topologizing the male Victorian subject – vanishes, and with a flashing intensity we are called right into the mermaid's mesmeric eyes. Through the mermaid's image, the viewer is called to

[516] Graham Parry, 'The Pre-Raphaelite Image: Style and Subject 1848-56,' *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society* 17:1 (1978): 5.
[517] Ibid.

dissolve in the details of her face and body, to disappear in the over-consciousness of the material world, to kill the distance. This desire of disappearance of the distance is what the nineteenth-century has brought into the cultural West in general – cultural maintaining of a distance that creates a desire to completely succumb to it. The world on display has caused the breaking of the lines of vision, where losing one's own reflection in fetishized mirror-commodities left the modern subject empty and abject, it left him monstrous. The 'hypertrophy' and 'elephantiasis' of ornaments and details, that we have discussed in the *Exhausted at the Lake's Shore* chapter, found their way into Victorian painting, where, as Perry argues, '[t]he Pre-Raphaelites really envisaged a style in which naturalism merged into supernaturalism.'[518] Ascending from the pacifying, still, almost meek background of the picture, from the land of oblivion in the long-gone field of the Other, the mermaid in our painting appears as that double time of the abject, as the thunder clad in details that ravishes the picture's fullness. The scales of her tail, the strands of her hair, her burning lips and hypnotic eyes, claim the ecstasy of the visual, where '[t]he naturalist painter denies himself in favour of his subject.'[519]

The Loss

From the mermaid's gaze, as the abject gaze of the male Victorian subject (our Ulysses, John William Waterhouse), through his dissolution in the act of peeping at himself, we have come full circle, returning to the field of the scopic drive. But in order to complete this journey (though when dealing with infinite loops of loss, completion is never possible) and round off the peeping of the Victorian subject, we shall return to the beginning once again and ask: what happens to the subject in this canvas, in this game of meanings and appearances?

[518] Ibid.
[519] Ibid.

Figures 34, 35, 36 John William Waterhouse, Studies for *A Mermaid* (1982)

A painting is a 'function in which the subject has to map himself as such,'[520] Lacan says, and if we line up the painter's studies for *A Mermaid*, we shall see the subject's topography appear. As the face of the mermaid becomes more specific, stronger, clearer and more enrapturing from study to study, the self-awareness of the male subject emerges; he reveals his abject, monstrous face. In the same act, the dehumanization of the female subject unfolds: a serene female portrait turns into a seductive monster. From a vague and crude female face (fig.34), through a fleshier one against a blurred background (fig.35), once again we are back to the mermaid's monstrous body and the male subject's split skin (fig.36). Structured by the nineteenth-century visual and iconographic ecstasy and fantasy of female unbridled sexuality, the male subject appears once again in the form of a female monster. Painting an object of his desire and fear, John William Waterhouse, mapped himself for us, in an uncanny topography of a *parapraxis*, of a disturbed body, arising from the trauma of separation caused by the entrance into the symbolic, when the subject died as Being and appeared as meaning. *A Mermaid*, a 'topology of catastrophe,'[521] is a painting in which an expression of love and desire corresponds with a symbolic cry of need for these feelings. But this catastrophe is exactly where our Victorian subject of the scopic field finds himself, ejected and devastated in no man's land, between the eye and the gaze, in a whirl of the drive whose wandering does not satisfy the subject in the end; but it *shows*. It *shows* the split, it *strips naked* the subject in question, bringing forth the monstrosity of the mermaid's body in a desperate act of desire, denuding the culture that invoked the subject in the first place. As soon as it appears from the void of the

[520] Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 100.
[521] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 9.

signifying chain, the monster brings violence to the scene, disrupting the pleasure of the voyeuristic nature of the nineteenth-century visual representation, turning joy into shame, dejection and repulsion. Through the monstrosity of the mermaid's body, the Victorian subject interacts with himself, merging Ulysses with the Siren (or, in this case the mermaid) once again, his craving insatiable, despairing over the lost object, that one object that is behind all other objects of his desire. He reaches out for the wholeness promised to him at the gates of the Symbolic, in that forgotten, forbidden and suppressed time when he stood in front of the mirror, falling for the fantasy of escape from semiotic incongruence, deepening the incongruence in the process. So, in that precise moment, he was deceived; he mistook his mirror image for his own coherent self, opening up his Being to the meaning, desires, fears and obsessions of the Other, believing in the Real, somewhere beyond language and meaning. And from that day on, embodied in many monstrous forms he had been roaming the labyrinth of language, the dream that never ends, misrepresenting himself in the acts of representation, not realising that at the core of his existence, at the end of the bottomless pit, in that ravenous, menacing and unreachable non-existence of 'psychical death,' stands *méconnaissance* in which the world is a stage.

From this perspective, the Victorian subject is literally objectified in the spectacle of the world, the legacy of the nineteenth century. Our painting is not named *The Mermaid*, like the above-mentioned *The Merman*, but *A Mermaid* instead, the choice of an indefinite article indicating a vague existence of the creature. She is both *a* distant mermaid and *any* mermaid. Linda Phyllis Austern assumes that her parting lips sing the siren song, known for centuries for its destructive, seducing power over victims.[522] But could we imagine that this mermaid sings another song – the familiar song of silence? Objectified, commodified and broken, she still lures and prays, but being the subject herself, manifesting the male subject in her abject face, her lure is not the same. Her song now lures by what it does not say – like in Kafka's parable – it lures by the void, slip of the tongue, *parapraxis*. It lures by the imperceptible powers of objectified modernity. As at the Great Exhibition, where the whole world was put on display, the Victorian subject crops up from the split between the eye and the gaze, in the voyeuristic pleasures of the visual field. From this unholy lair of monstrosity, over the hypnotic hand of *a* mermaid, through the Pre-Raphaelite painting and right onto the stage of the world, the subject's abject face revolves around an imperceptible object, the one which is not there, that

[522] Linda Phyllis Austern, '"Teach Me to Hear Mermaids Singing": Embodiments of (Acoustic) Pleasure and Danger in the Modern West,' in *Music of the Sirens*, ed. Linda Phyllis Austern and Inna Naroditskaya (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 64.

cannot be sustained and cannot be represented, namely, the lack, the loss, the gap, the void – death as a pure signifier.

FRAGMENT 2: AT THE GATES OF LANGUAGE

Monsters symbolize alterity and difference in extremis. They manifest the plasticity of the imagination and the catastrophes of the flesh.[523]

Allen S. Weiss

In this last chapter on the Victorian visual field, we will gaze into another nineteenth-century Pre-Raphaelite masterpiece and we will read it as the representation of a crucial moment in the life of the Victorian subject – his birth. Through a scopic game of presence and absence, we will expose ourselves to *The Depths of the Sea* by Edward Burne-Jones, and show, once again, the essential dependence of Ulysses on his Siren (in this example, it is again a mermaid).

Edward Burne-Jones is especially suitable for this task, because, as Wood observes, '[t]he world of Burne-Jones is a Victorian dream world, and epitomizes the spirit of late Victorian civilization.'[524] If we want to deal with the Victorian visual imagination, with Edward Burne-Jones we know we are on the right track.

Late Victorian painting, particularly that of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, was characterized by displaying the subject on the stage of the world, or better, in the world *as* a stage, as a picture. The representational exhibitionism of Pre-Raphaelite paintings and their female characters that often crossed over into the distant past or a mythological scene, is a hallmark of the Victorian era. A distance appeared: a distance that allowed the subject to see himself from the outside, from the eye situated in the field of the Other, 'the flesh of the world,' experiencing reality in a constant, escapist loop of the visual drive. We named the hole that opened within that distance – between the eye and the gaze – the *birthplace* of the subject himself, the void, the 'irreducible element' of the Victorian language, as Foucault says. Now we are interested in the visual expression of this distance, so we are turning to a painting that could be read as the gates of language, where the male Victorian subject is born.

The Depths of the Sea

The Depths of the Sea (fig. 37), just like the great majority of recognized Pre-Raphaelite paintings, appeared at the Royal Academy exhibition in Burlington House in 1886. It belongs

[523] Allen S. Weiss, 'Ten Thesis on Monsters and Monstrosity,' *The Drama Review* 48:1 (2004): 125, thesis vi.
[524] Christopher Wood, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), 134.

to a late phase of Edward Burne-Jones's oeuvre, to a period by which he had already developed his distinctive dream world of 'lunar landscapes'[525] and otherworldly 'gods and goddesses enacting a cruel myth on a remote, barren planet.'[526] Its subject is, for most of the critics, straightforward enough: Wildman and Christian see

> a mermaid, [that] having seized the body of a drowning sailor, drags him down to the depths of the sea; her smile expresses her sense of triumph, and she is unaware that he is already dead.[527]

Wood considers it to be a 'subject based simply on his own [Burne-Jones's] private dream world,'[528] while Fiona MacCarthy sees in it 'images of passion but in the end bleak pictures of men's and women's incompatibility.'[529] Dijkstra is, in his own stylistically superior fashion, a bit more elaborate:

> In Burne-Jones's *The Depths of the Sea* […] a woman with hypnotic eyes and a vampire's mouth has already completed her seduction and is carrying her prey – as if it were a huge, flowery bouquet of lost male morality – into the oblivion of her sensuality, where, we can be quite certain, he is to suffer the brain death which unfailingly accompanied the state of perpetual tumescence promised by the hollows of siren's cave.[530]

[525] Ibid., 119.
[526] Ibid., 126.
[527] Stephen Wildman and John Christian, *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-Dreamer* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), 264.
[528] Ibid., 122.
[529] Fiona MacCarthy, *The Last Pre-Raphaelite: Edward Burne-Jones and the Victorian Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2011), xxiv.
[530] Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in* Fin-de-Siècle *Culture* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 296.

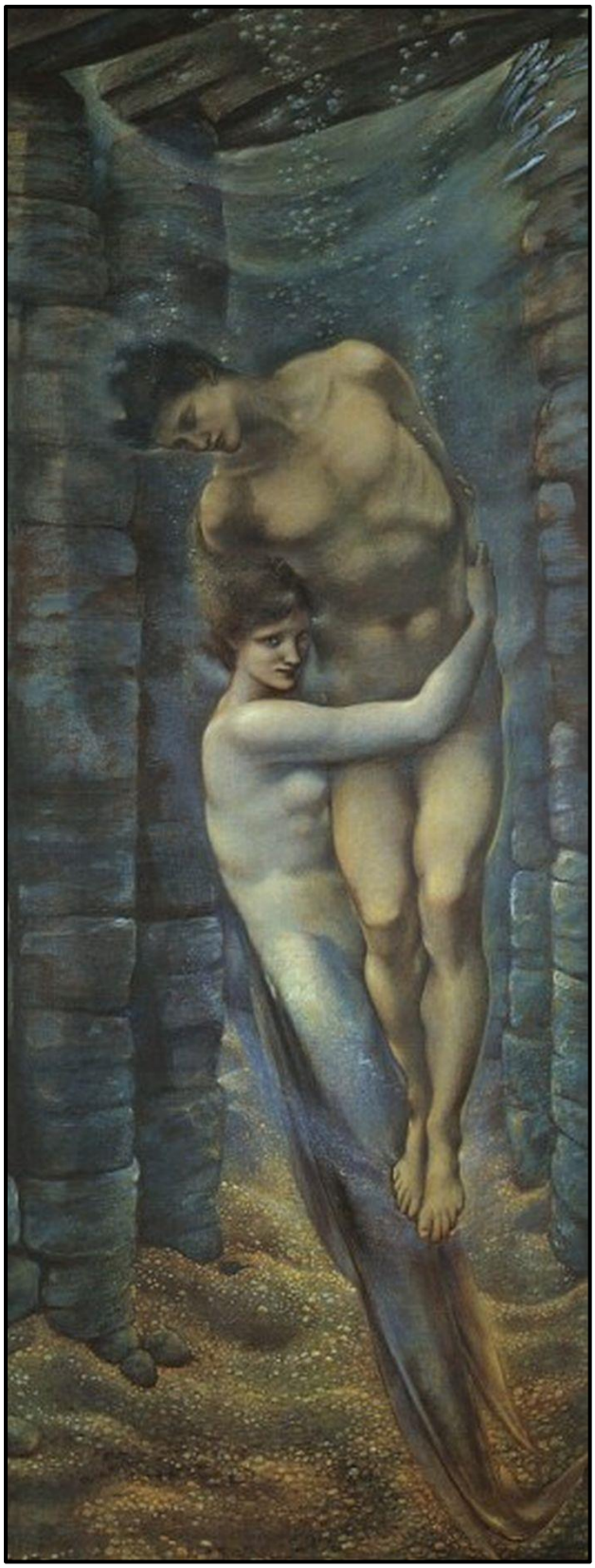

Figure 37 Edward Burne-Jones, *The Depths of the Sea* (1886)

So once again, we are behind a keyhole, peeping at a distant and private scene of death, destruction, and – due to the presence of a mermaid – we presume of love. The lovers are abandoned by the world, the forlornness and stillness of the picture interrupted only by a small school of fish moving swiftly in the upper right-hand corner, and by the stiffness of the mermaid's tail. A pale, almost surreally smooth and evanescent mermaid's body is pressed tightly against the strong, masculine and grim human body of her male victim. His eyes are closed, as in a puzzling act of intoxication, dream or death; his arms are invisible, 'castrated,'[531] as Kramer says, behind his back. His groins are gone too, substituted by the crook of the mermaid's arm, as the couple slowly descends into the depths of the sea. By contrast, the mermaid is vital and alert, her pallid body fading away into her livid tail that hales the picture strongly towards the bottom, in straight, stiff strokes of the fins. The whole scene is submerged in cobalt despondency in so many different ways, that it does not come as a surprise that we may imagine the image rocking us to sleep once again, while we are being penetrated by the firmness of the mermaid's gaze. This palette of blue seduction is hopelessly empty, the

[531] Lawrence Kramer, 'Longindyingcall: Of Music, Modernity, and the Sirens,' in *Music of the Sirens*, ed. Linda Phyllis Austern and Inna Naroditskaya (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 194.

surroundings disclosing a 'somewhere' like the dusky corners of a sea grotto, where everything known dwindle away, except for the pebbles that spark at the bottom of the cavern.

The first contrast with our previous painting, *A Mermaid*: while the surroundings of *A Mermaid* reveal the waves wash sea treasures up to the shore, in *The Depths of the Sea* the light of awareness and knowledge is slowly dying away. While *A Mermaid* lights up the scene, bathing us in the midday sun, here we are submerged deep into the unknown, where everything is transformed or simply dissolved. '[T]he water that thus transforms substance into shadow,' comments Kramer on the everlasting human obsession with the deep,

> leaving only the hard bones behind, also serves as a medium that jumbles, blurs, and transforms the constituents of the world above while still preserving their intelligibility. The preservation is both dangerous, because irrational – fluidity here belongs as much to categories as to bodies – and transfiguring.[532]

Gazing at the death in the deeps, the viewer is provoked into drowning symbolically; he (we will assume it is a 'he' again, for the same reasons as before) is provoked to take a leap into the unknown.

We are tempted to call the cave of *The Depths of the Sea* a grave; even more so if we are familiar with another image by Burne-Jones, called the *Grave of the Sea* (fig. 38). It is an illustration from *The Flower Book*, a series of 38 small watercolors, each about fifteen centimeters in diameter, made by Burne-Jones from 1882 to 1898. In 1905 they were posthumously published by his wife Georgina.[533] *Grave of the Sea*, Plate XVI, features a dead male lover in the depths of a mermaid's cave.

A mermaid is swimming in the upper left-hand part of the composition, the sight of her fallen lover, for whose death she is probably responsible, appears to have left her in a state of disbelief. A bell above his head, sinister and gloomy in equal measure, tolls away the last hour of his earthly existence.

[532] Ibid., 199.

[533] On making of *The Flower Book*, see MacCarthy, *The Last Pre-Raphaelite*, 312-314. For a more detailed account on Edward Burne-Jones, his personal life and relationship with his wife – his dreams, passions and desires, see Gay Daly, *Pre-Raphaelites in Love* (Fontana: Collins, 1990).

Figure 38 Edward Burne-Jones, *Grave of the Sea* (ca. 1890)

These two pictures structurally complement each other; the *Grave of the Sea* semantically reveals what *The Depths of the Sea* is hiding: the male lover is dead and we are invited to meditate upon his inert body. A proposition for reading *The Depths of the Sea*: the male figure is the actual center of the picture; his is the body that acts in the painting, the body that transforms it, giving it a meaning at the moment of the male subject's death. F. G. Stephens, one of the founding Brothers who decided to quit painting and dedicate himself to art criticism, wrote in *Athenaeum* that *The Depths of the Sea* was 'a picture of importance, representing a new and difficult subject. It possesses noble and subtle charms of color, it is finished with extraordinary care.' But he considered the male body to be 'the weak portion of the work' in comparison to the intoxicating effect of the mermaid.[534] Not many things can compete with the seductiveness of a mermaid's simplicity and curves of her body. However, by gazing into the nothingness that the lifeless male body semantically introduces into the painting, the viewer is pressed to allow himself to face the Other once again.

As always, we are not interested in the givens in the painting, because the givens always lie. In an act of self-miscomprehension, in which the painter takes himself as the locus of (visual) speech and meaning – in the act of miscomprehending himself for a coherent whole capable of unambiguous speech and meaning – whatever comes out of his mouth/brush is bound to be a lie before it has even been conceived, since this locus of speech is an illusion. What we are interested in is the structural language of the painting, the language of the unconscious, the one that lies in order to tell the truth – the language of desire that emerges from *within* the painting. In empty places of a visual sentence, in disturbance of an ostensible semantic coherence, in

[534] Frederic George Stephens, *Athenaeum* (April 24, 1886): 561; *Athenaeum* (May 1, 1886): 590.

what one does not represent (or even think), we seek the meaning beyond appearances, beyond a sentence or an image. It is true that dealing with the unconscious is always an interpretation. But just because it is an interpretation, it does not make it less true or valuable. It is not just any interpretation we seek; it is not just any connection we are looking for. 'Interpretation is not open to all meanings,' says Lacan.

> It is not just any interpretation. It is a significant interpretation, one that must not be missed. […] What is essential is that [the subject] should see, beyond this signification, to what signifier – to what irreducible traumatic, non-meaning – he is, as a subject, subjected.[535]

Interpretation is, in a sense, identical with desire; it is desire itself. But how can one face a desire? One does not face it, one circumscribes it.

Therefore, transposing visual to textual is never an easy task, but here, in the linear space of a sentence, we are to delineate the subject's visual dreams, fears and fascinations – which are precisely the dreams, fears and fascinations of the Other – facing an event that comes to us in the form of death. We read *The Depths of the Sea* as the birth of the Victorian male subject, the radical separation of his Being from meaning: *aphanasis*.

The Birth

How does one face a semiotic birth? Where is the place that the subject comes from? It comes from the lack, from the illusional *objet a* that is always hidden, always already somewhere else. So in order to approach this lacunal, horrendous place of non-existence and catch the Victorian subject in the process of becoming, we have to go deeper into the structural level of the painting and see what the picture is hollering by being silent about.

'Everything emerges from the structure of the signifier,' tells us Lacan, and if we manage to deconstruct the painting properly, we will see the Victorian male subject appear. By 'everything' Lacan precisely means 'the subject,' namely, the subject of the unconscious, the unfathomable one, the subject of desire that spreads in the unconscious like a mycelium.[536] The

[535] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1963-1964*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 250-251.
[536] Lacan uses this phrase to discuss Freud's notion of the central point of a dream. 'Everything that blossoms in the unconscious spreads, like mycelium, as Freud says about the dream, around a central point.' (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 26). This central point is *objet a*, to which the subject clings.

proposed reading of the painting revolves around as an essential dependence of the siren/mermaid language on her victim (and the other way around), of Ulysses on his Siren, of meaning on Being. *The Depth of the Sea* epitomizes the moment in which the subject arrives as a signifier, a time when Ulysses appears from the split. Kramer shrewdly argues that

> Edward Burne-Jones's painting pretends nothing else is involved by the simple device of showing exactly that. It gives us virtually nothing but a male form in the fatal grip of a female one. […] But this nothing is not a mere absence; it signifies.[537]

Here, Kramer follows an idea very close to ours. By going further and beyond of what the picture says, what the picture wants us to see, Kramer investigates the symbolic climate that stands in the background of the picture. But in his analysis, he ends up following the old interpretation of the mermaid's monstrous existence in the *fin-de-siècle* culture by emphasizing social and gender elements of the event. 'The loving but mindless grip of the mermaid's femininity,' Kramer continues,

> effaces not only her victim's masculinity but also the symbolic foundation of his identity, his whole familiar world of signs, projects and possessions. The painting makes this explicit in the bareness of the cavern to which its couple sinks, and it all but explicitly presents this effacement as a double castration – his arms gone, his loins a slot for the crook of her elbow.[538]

It is not frequent to find an interpretation of sirens'/mermaids' monstrosity that surpasses this point of equating their monstrosity with the fantasies of changing gender roles in the Victorian culture.[539] That is the reason why Kramer's analysis is of the greatest importance for us. For, even if he gives the usual, generally approved opinion, he manages to transform it in

[537] Kramer, 'Longindyingcall,' 195.
[538] Ibid.
[539] On gender readings of the monstrosity of sirens, see Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1982), 7-11, 88-96; Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, 235-271; Kramer 'Longindyingcall'; Elaine Morgan, *The Descent of Women* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972); Laura Sells, '"Where Do the Mermaids Stand?": Voice and Body in *The Little Mermaid*,' in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas and Laura Sells (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 175-192. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, vol. 1* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987); Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

the end. 'But far more is being effaced here than simple masculinity,' he finishes, '*[c]ulture itself is stripped bare.*'[540] This idea, that the culture ceases to exist as soon as masculinity is 'castrated,' might be read as part of the same misogynist fantasy in which the masculinity *is* 'culture' (while femininity is 'nature'). But the act of drowning, in Kramer's eyes, goes beyond the expression of a cultural misogynist phobia. It stands as a canvas on which the whole culture, the whole era in question is represented by way of what has been omitted. With *The Depths of the Sea* we are presented with much and more than a simple act of gender-based romantic homicide, of a dying 'steely-browed and lean-loined Ulysses,' as Dijkstra would say.[541] We are witnessing the Victorian culture itself becoming exposed.

At this point we shall just briefly recall the examples we went through, so that we can proceed to the interpretation of *The Depths of the Sea* by way of the previously gained insights into the Victorian male desiring subject. In *Ulysses and the Sirens* we encounter sirens invading the realm of the subject. In his insatiable desire to jump over the edge, to plunge into the sea, Ulysses expresses a new distance of modernity, the distance of desire, necessary for the subject to succumb to it, to succumb to the distance: the distance he needed to become modern, the 'representedness' of Being, as Heidegger puts it. Sirens paint his abject face, his unattainable yearning to eject his selfhood in the precipice of the Other. Through many siren/mermaid literary narratives, Ulysses and the Sirens kept changing places, sirens becoming protagonists and subjects enchanted by Ulysses, their former victim (The Little Mermaid and the prince, F. Anstey's Siren and her prey, Henry Carrington's Siren and all her victims, etc.). We saw that their relationship is essential, that Ulysses and the Sirens mirror each other in their subjectivity (thus the disappearance of the mirror itself), and that, in the last instance, the Sirens are Ulysses abject faces again. In *A Mermaid* we were faced with a lone, wooing mermaid, and we followed the path of the scopic drive in its loops around death as *objet a*, concluding that the visual flirting of the mermaid topologically mapped the male subject for us, the subject that lost his mirror reflection in the devastating sweeps of the commodified culture of spectacle. But in *The Depths of the Sea*, we face Ulysses (the male body, the victim) in the last act of his life, which is, consequently, his first one. Desire does not have a beginning and an end; it does not culminate in a reachable object that concludes our life-long quest for 'it.' Desire always returns to itself, it returns to us, to our own fall, to the place that we cannot face and will not directly describe, so we dream about it. It always leads us back into the nothingness that we came from,

[540] Kramer, 'Longindyingcall,' 197; my emphasis.
[541] Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, 235.

to the trauma at the gates of language. If we follow the desire, we will always end up in front of a mirror, searching, hoping, wanting. In the proposed reading, *The Depths of the Sea* embodies this age-long quest by capturing the male Victorian subject in the act of drowning, read as the moment of his appearance – by the fact of his death – as a sign in the field of the Other. We are not talking only about the male body here, but about the painting as a *whole*. So far it was maintained that the siren/mermaid body held the topology of the subject who created it, and that this body was essentially dependent on, and reflective of, the body of her victim. *The Depths of the Sea*, that show us these two bodies in a fatal embrace, linked by a bond that cannot be broken, as a *whole* presents the topology of the male Victorian subject.

'The subject is born insofar as the signifier emerges in the field of the Other,' says Lacan. 'But, by this very fact, the subject – which was previously nothing if not a subject coming into being – solidifies into a signifier.'[542] The subject appears as meaning, only insofar as his Being has disappeared somewhere else. Lacan calls this effect of the signifier on Being of the subject the *aphanasis*. In *The Depths of the Sea*, we see a mermaid, in whom the Victorian subject is mapped, looking directly into our eyes, summoning us into the picture, but maintaining the distance nevertheless. The male figure appears as her counterpart, her symbolic residue, gripped tightly in the process of becoming.[543] As life is leaving the motionless, castrated body of the male, carrying with itself the Being of the subject-to-come, Ulysses, the male Victorian subject, arrives wrapped in the split skin of the mermaid's monstrous body that invades the picture with its symbolic incongruence.

The Depths of the Sea is a rare example of a siren holding a dead body of her lover, deep down at the bottom of the sea. This time we are on her territory, we are playing in the field of the Other. Burne-Jones's painting is a priceless representation of this field. Although *fin-de-siècle* culture was overloaded with images of sirens and mermaids, most of them frolicked on the surface of the sea or on the shore, calling souls into their embrace to drown them in the blue deeps.[544] As we gaze at the mermaid in our painting we see the embrace of bodies, a bond born

[542] Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 199.

[543] 'Symbolic residue' is desire itself. It is what is left of the subject after need is subtracted from demand. Need is any natural necessity, such as the need for food, air, water, while demand is a need transformed through language in the moment of its verbal articulation. By being articulated by language, the need enters the symbolic (the culture) and acquires a 'surplus' that is always more than just its satisfaction. When a child asks for food by using the code of language, he/she also asks for attention, so for Lacan, every demand is, in a way, a demand for love. Thus this 'surplus,' or 'symbolic residue' is what is left of the subject upon his entry into the symbolic – desire. Lacan even provided a formula: demand - need = desire.

[544] A selection of various contemporary artists across Europe would include Herbert Draper, *The Sea Maiden* (1894), Adolph La-Lyre, *A Nest of Sirens* (ca. 1906), Constantin Makovski, *The Roussalkas* (1890s), Otto Greiner, *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1902), John William Whiteley, *A Sail!* (1898), Gustave Moreau, *The Poet and the Siren* (1895), Charles Shannon, *The Mermaid* (ca. 1900), Aristide Sartorio, *The Green Abyss* (ca. 1895), Friedrich

out of a distance between Being and meaning, the boundary beyond which Being of the subject, the male body, is left a shell – motionless, inert, ostensibly insignificant, but with a force of agency. It is this dead male body, the beautiful cadaver, that makes the birth of the subject mapped in the body of the mermaid possible. The mermaid and her lover are one and the same image; they are the *aphanasis* of the subject, the eclipse of his Being and the arrival of his meaning in the monstrous field of the empty cave's nothingness.

The Void

Nothingness, nullity, invalidity are the central theme of this picture, for if we read the image as the birth of the subject, we also read the void that the subject comes from and brings into the picture with him. From the dawn of their image, Ulysses and the Sirens deliver emptiness into the representation, the stillness snatched away from the gates of Hades, that place of the Other that embodies death itself. On his ship of dreams Ulysses carries the void of the Sirens' bodies, over the centuries, arriving into the visual field of the Victorian painting. As Kramer observes, the desolation of the cavern and the blankness of the mermaid's face is what reveals the nudity of culture, its essential exposure.[545] We can observe the same theme in a poem of another contemporary artist closely connected to the Pre-Raphaelite circle – William Butler Yeats' *The Mermaid*.

> A mermaid found a swimming lad,
> Picked him for her own,
> Pressed her body to his body,
> Laughed; plunging down
> Forgot in cruel happiness
> That even lovers drown.[546]

Yeats' poem resembles the subject of our discussion in so many ways that it is hard not to include the poem in it. As Kramer also observes, *The Mermaid* expresses the same emptiness

Heyser, *The Fisherboy and the Water Nymph*, John William Waterhouse *Hylas and the Nypmhs* (1896), *The Siren* (1900), *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1891), etc. The list of *fin-de-siècle* paintings representing sirens on the surface of the sea or on the shore is overwhelmingly long.

[545] Kramer, 'Longindyingcall,' 197.

[546] William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, vol. I: The Poems* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), 222.

as *The Depths of the Sea*, pretending to say only what it says.[547] But in the simplicity of the verse, in the awkward, uncanny bleakness that weaves its way through the poem, again we see the exposure of culture, exposure of the poem's silent background by its simplicity. *The Mermaid* is as exhibitionistic as any Pre-Raphaelite painting, disrobed in front of the reader's eyes. We are faced with a mermaid in the act of careless love that obliterates Being of the male figure, reducing it to herself, to meaning. Its textual poetics resonate with the visual imagery of *Grave of the Sea*, where a mermaid mourns the death of her lover. The culture exposes itself to the subject in the poem, in a final, alienating, distancing effect of theater.

But we are not interested in cultural attitudes *per se*, we are interested in the deeper epistemic register of the Symbolic that is always more and less than the culture itself. This register is what calls the subject into being, what creates the spark of life just so that it can take it away by the same act. At this level, the subject appears not in attitudes, but in *non-attitudes*; in what has gone wrong, what manifests itself as misleading and untrue; not in cultural codes, or in their enactments and reflections, but in the lived experience at the level of what Foucault calls the 'discourse.' At this level, the bareness of the cavern in our picture says much more about the discourse than about the cultural attitudes; the cave's eerie stillness and emptiness adds to the monstrosity of representation. In it, in the siren's sunken lair, there is literally nothing – nothing to be seen, nothing to be described. But this nothingness speaks; more than that, it *beseeches* us to drown with the subject himself.

The void of the cave revolves around the center of the picture, in which, once again, we see a mermaid's face. But this face is different than the one we encountered in *A Mermaid*. While the latter shows us parted lips and a gaze that captures the fall of the subject, this face is wholly taciturn. Its lips are sealed, its hair is gone, and the gaze transfixes us as a viper's, in the act of saying nothing whatsoever. The mermaid's face is a void – cold, distant, silent. This kind of face became the trademark of Burne-Jones's female characters. We can see it in *The Last Sleep of Arthur in Avalon* (1881-98), *The Baleful Head* (1886-87), *The Sleeping Princes* from *Briar Rose series* (1873-90), *The Golden Stairs* (1880), etc. In all Burne-Jones's paintings, female characters are marble-like, expressionless, abstracted, cold, alienated, otherworldly. But at this point, it would have been of the greatest help if we compared it with the faces of Waterhouse's mermaids.

[547] Kramer, 'Longindyingcall,' 195.

John William Waterhouse pursued a single artistic vision for most of his carrier. Wood describes his success by saying that he 'had one song to sing, but he sang it very beautifully.'[548] He dedicated a great part of his life, time, and talent to painting mermaids, sirens, nymphs and naiads. But there is a curious feature in many of his paintings that might be discarded as a minor deficiency of his oeuvre: many of his paintings of mermaids and female characters have thoroughly identical faces. We can see that in *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1891), *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896), *The Awakening of Adonis* (1900), *A Tale from the Decameron* (1916), *The Enchanted Garden* (1916), etc. But having overcome the literal reading of works of art, what we see here now is a slip of the tongue, or rather a slip of the mind; an expression of numbness and sameness, of objectification and obliteration of individual traces. As Ulysses arrives carrying the void in his waterborne vessel, on the surface of the Victorian culture women are commodified and fetishized in the works of the greatest artists of the time, like those by Waterhouse. But elsewhere, in the works of Burne-Jones, this emptiness appears from beyond the aloof faces of mermaids and female characters, rendering them monstrous and desirable. From their monstrous bodies, dread appears to violate the structure of a sentence, break the coherence of an image, shatter the consistency and solidity of things. The subject without a center, reliving over and over again his everlasting entrapment in the field of the Other, searching for his mirror image, appears once again to announce a new attitude towards things, towards Being, meaning and representation – a new attitude towards reality itself – the attitude of the world as a stage.

If we moved now to the face of the mermaid in *The Depths of the Sea*, or any other Burne-Jones's female character for that matter, we would see the same blank space of the distance from Being as in his other works. *The Depths of the Sea* belongs to a phase when, as Wood observes,

> his work has become incredibly austere, monumental and withdrawn. His figures move as if hypnotized in stark, barren landscapes, their robes glittering as if woven from metallic thread. Henry James, who remained a faithful admirer, noted how his late work was growing 'colder and colder,' and 'less and less observed,' the picture becoming almost abstraction.[549]

[548] Wood, *Pre-Raphaelites*, 142.
[549] Wood, *Pre-Raphaelites*, 126.

Audrey Williamson says that Burne-Jones always preferred the simplicity of design over the complexity of painting.[550] All Burne-Jones's female characters assume a plain, divinely radiating emotional restraint; an expression that can be called nothing but 'expressionless.' For Williamson this was 'a quite deliberate reduction of the human factor to a symbol,'[551] and Stephenson described it as 'a marvel of wicked witchery.'[552] But here again Kramer hit the bull's eye by saying that the mermaid reflects

> the world of culture […], blank-faced and simpering, her arms tightly enwrapped about the naked man doubly castrated (loins and arms effaced) by her grasp and brought down to a cavern that contains, precisely, nothing.[553]

Her face is a melancholic void, an opening into the vortex of cultural dreams and anxieties, the central feature of the painting, its *objet a*, death incarnate. This is a face without a face, a face without a reflection. Both Waterhouse and Burne-Jones's paintings map their own shattered selves in a semiotic game of presence and absence of mermaids' faces and bodies.

But there is a difference between our chosen paintings, there is a directional mismatch between *A Mermaid* and *The Depths of the Sea*. As structural lines of the visual field revolve in a centripetal whirl around the mermaid's face in *A Mermaid*, pulling the whole image into her gaze, through her face and right back to the painter himself, the mermaid from *The Depths of the Sea* radiates the void in the opposite direction, enveloping the painting in a centrifugal stroke. One draws the language of representation in and through, while the other disperses it out; one pulverizes it while the other discharges it. But death as a signifier without the signified, in both paintings invades the language, drowning the subject in the watery depths of *jouissance*; two monstrous faces, and in them more than a culture preserved.

At the Gates

As we get entangled in the visual play of the Pre-Raphaelite exhibitionism, our eye gives in to the loop of the scopic drive that again turns around a visage, an expressionless face that stands for the unattainable *objet a* of the artist's desire – death. And in the process we find

[550] Audrey Williamson, *Artists and Writers in Revolt: The Pre-Raphaelites* (Newton Abbot, London, Vancouver: David & Charles, 1976), 156-57.
[551] Williamson, *Artists and Writers in Revolt*, 149.
[552] Frederic George Stephens, *Athenaeum* (April 24, 1886): 561; *Athenaeum* (May 1, 1886): 590.
[553] Kramer, 'Longindyingcall,' 194.

ourselves standing behind a peephole, as it were, a peephole constructed by the gaze of the painting. But this time, as we read the silence of the subject's birth, we are exposed to the force of the mermaid's 'neither human nor diabolic'[554] gaze that stares directly at us. Her gaze locks us in the interruption of the painting's structure, our eye consumed by the violence of emptiness and implosion of the dead body in its submerged tomb. The voyeuristic nature of the painting becomes apparent if we accept Lacan's view that 'what the subject is trying to see […] is the object as absence.'[555] So, the instant the painting opens up from the inside out, in the act of staging Ulysses' birth to the world, the eye of the viewer is seduced into the loop of the drive, drawn into the absence of the mermaid's face. We assume that presence is what we are looking for, but we end up being enthralled by the very absence breaking loose, once the distance between the subject and his mirror image appears. 'What the voyeur is looking for and finds is merely a shadow, a shadow behind a curtain,'[556] continues Lacan, and in the restructuring of our own eye, which the painting imposes on us, we reach out for the lost object, never to be retrieved. In the last instance, every interpretation reveals our own lack, our own *objet a*, our own desire. Ostensibly safely hidden behind the distance of the picture, behind our own gaze – a looking-glass turned keyhole – we can fantasize about 'lost' coherence, hunting for the Real that forever escapes us. 'It is not only victim who is concerned in exhibitionism,' finishes Lacan, 'it is the victim as referred to some other who is looking at him.'[557] In their eternal embrace, the language of the mermaid's monstrosity calls Ulysses into existence, and the only way that he can arrive at the scene of birth is as the unreal, articulating itself as the negative of the real. For after all, Ulysses comes to the nineteenth century from the space of oblivion, from the 'once-upon-a-blotted time' of the abject.

The Depths of the Sea functions as a dream, as a fantasy, a vessel for the Victorian subject, an expression of his entry point into the eye of the viewer. The mermaid calls Ulysses into existence, as mermaids have been doing from the beginning of time, but now she also gives him her monstrous body to be a vehicle of his birth. And Ulysses comes, drawn from the void, from the split between the subject-to-be and the mirror, but he comes as a broken self. Through his relationship with the signifier, he comes as a 'subject with holes' (*sujet troué*).[558] The painting we are analyzing is one of these holes. In it, Ulysses appears as if at an exhibition, called upon by the loop of the scopic drive as *ein neues Subjekt* that appears in so far as the

[554] *The Times* (1 May 1886): 10; *The Times* (8 May 1886): 8.
[555] Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 182.
[556] Ibid.
[557] Ibid., 183.
[558] Ibid., 184.

drive has been able to show its circular course – in so far as the *jouissance* obtained has been experienced.[559] He is castrated, exposed, revealed, but still enchained by his own birth. This reading proposes the painting as exposing of the Victorian subject, of an objectified Being, a Being that can *be* only if represented, as Heidegger says. The picture is his stage to which he is tied, as a spectator and as an exhibit, without visible agency, in a trance. Adorno and Horkheimer captured this moment at its height: 'The prisoner [Ulysses] is present at a concert, an inactive eavesdropper like later concertgoers, and his spirited call for liberation fades like applause.'[560] He is sitting in the audience looking at himself, overloaded with cultural products and images, looking at everything and never seeing what he wishes to see – his own coherence, his own 'psychical death.' And he dreams, not realizing that the dream is not reality, not realizing that the exit from the labyrinth of language, the beyond he is dreaming of, is just another turn on the path of desire.

The Depths of the Sea has told us many things about the visual field of the late Victorian culture so far, that when we turn to one of the most important biographers of Edward Burne-Jones – Fiona MacCarthy – we find an unconscious truth in her words: 'The life is there, self-evident, embedded in [his] art.'[561] 'Unconscious' because the life is there, but not self-evident. It is in a significant interpretation that is not to be missed. It is, finally, in our own desire, as we play with the painting, reaching out for our own lack.

The painting reveals itself to us as a void, as a birthplace of the subject, of the mermaid's monstrosity and of cultural creation, as a vessel for the monstrosity of the male Victorian subject himself, to whom sirens/mermaids are his abject faces. We call it the arrival of Victorian Ulysses – the Spectator, the Voyeur, the Tourist, the Wandered, the Chained – but it is equality the arrival of Victorian sirens too. The subject, in both of his faces, both as Ulysses and as the Siren, arrives at the gates of language – and he dreams. In the painting he looks exactly like he does in *Ulysses and the Sirens* by Waterhouse, with his arms chained, this time not by cords but by his profound dream. *The Depths of the Sea* is a fantasy that supports his desire; it is a life-sustaining dream, the only thing that holds the pieces of reality together. And

[559] By circling around an *objet a*, the drive brings the Other into play. This invitation of the Other is fundamental for the drive's return and results in the appearance of the subject. Lacan says that 'the appearance of *ein neues Subjekt* [is] to be understood as follows – not in the sense that there is already one, namely the subject of the drive, but in that what is new is the appearance of a subject. This subject, which is essentially the Other, appears insofar as the drive has been able to show its circular course. It is only with the appearance at the level of the other that what there is of the function of the drive may be realized.' (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 178-179).
[560] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London, New York: Verso, 2008), 34.
[561] MacCarthy, *Last Pre-Raphaelite*, xxiv.

he must dream, as he must die as Being, if he wants to become modern. He must become a signifier.

Kramer argues that

> [t]he sirens were called back to life in the nineteenth century not simply to help cope with modern forms of identity and desire, but to help cope with the form of modernity itself. In a multiplicity of versions and variants, the sirens and their song represent precisely what modernity and modern subjectivity have lost, precisely that which they must lose or alienate from themselves to become modern. For that very reason, the sirens also represent that which the modern must fantasize about regaining, even only in treacherous glimpses […].[562]

What modernity has to fantasize about regaining, what Ulysses has to dream of, is the beyond of language and meaning, it is death as an eternal stillness of the Real, his *objet a* that haunts Victorian modernity through many monstrous forms. Ulysses dreams about the void, because *objet a* appears always as an absence only. His reveries are always about attaining the lost object, meeting with the Real that he keeps missing. In his dreams, he always leaps into the unknown where he is chained to the mast of the void, somewhere between words, in the empty spaces of sentences, in the cracks and crevices of images, enchanted, intoxicated, deaf or drowned. These are all the most adored topics of the Victorian era.[563] He needs to look death in the eye, so as to be able to fantasize about himself, and stay in the state of *méconnaissance*. But on his ship, or chained to a concert seat, he leaps into the unknown all the same.

And the sirens are always there to welcome him.

In *The Depths of the Sea*, Ulysses is shown at the moment of the leap, in the act of drowning that gives birth to him as a subject. The space of the canvas is a crack in the image that unveils the space that sailors of the modern era used to mark as unexplored waters by writing the sign *hic sunt sirenae* ('here be sirens') on their maps. The painting represents the unknown waters of the void, of the subject's split, where the monstrous silence of the mermaid is the signifier that calls Ulysses into existence in the field of the Other. But they are two faces of the same subject. The monster is an unsignifiable place in language, a place of semiotic violence, an

[562] Kramer, 'Longindyingcall,' 197.
[563] For the examples of sleep, see Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*, 42; for death, suicide and drowning, see Margaret Higonnet, 'Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century,' *Poetics Today* 6:1/2 *(The Female Body in Western Culture: Semiotic Perspectives)* (1985): 103-118; for death and fetish of sleep, see Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, 25-64.

expression of a cultural trauma conveyed by language. Sirens and mermaids embody this sullen, desolate, uncharted space of the self, they embody Ulysses' fantasy of death, dissipation and destruction in the face of an emerging distance, in the face of the Victorian modernity. In the game of fetishism and substitution, sirens and mermaids stand for the subject's fundamental illusion brought about by the mirror, accentuated by the fact that throughout the whole era sirens and mermaids are always represented without it, without the mirror. Like the Victorian male subject's abject faces, they appear with Ulysses from the rupture between words and things, expressing the anxieties of materiality that introduced the loss in the first place. The modernity they represent is not only an exhibited, visual, voyeuristically interrupted, but also a *Beingless* modernity, in which the subject is radically alienated from himself. This alienated subject, chained by his own dream that never ends, sees himself only from the field of the Other, he sees only his mediated, represented Being. As a consumer, he looks into a mirror and sees a commodity. Without Being, he arrives as a meaning through the semiotic incoherence of commodities.

In his dream, in all the narratives analyzed as expressions of this dream, the Victorian male subject tries to break free to become modern, but he doesn't understand that it is this fall, this enchainment, this dreaming maze, this mermaid's grip that makes him modern in the first place. The more he struggles, the more strongly he is tied to the mast, as the *Odyssey* says. So he drowns and dreams. He dreams of the loss that he will never extinguish, he paints it, sculpts it, and writes about it. Ulysses represents. He is John William Waterhouse, as well as Edward Burne-Jones. He is Henry Carrington, Hans Christian Andersen, Lewis Carrol, he is F. Anstey. He maps his soul for us on the canvas that he names *Ulysses and the Sirens*, *A Mermaid*, *Grave of the Sea*, *Through the Looking Glass* and so on, until he arrives at his own birthplace – the void. And there, in *The Depths of the Sea*, he finally stands before a mirror. In the painting we see him in the arms of the Other, his monstrosity and his subjectivity are one. The mermaid introduces him to his own mirror reflection – the gates of a labyrinthine language, the entrance of modernity. She is facing us, gazing at us, holding Ulysses in her arms, but what does she want from us – *what does the other want*? The mermaid is everywhere in the picture and nowhere, overwhelming and insufficient, like Wells' the Sea Lady or Lampedusa's Siren; she is pulsating with the desire of the Other, which is the male subject's own desire. This question of a lack that the mermaid poses to the subject, Ulysses answers with his own death, appropriating the false image of wholeness which he is shown in the beginning. To the lack he answers with a lack, creating a link between him and the Other which will finally allow him

the everlasting fantasy about his own completeness. He will finally become modern. Ulysses thinks he is saved.

CONCLUSION

We all have something to hide, some dark place inside us we don't want the world to see. So we pretend everything is ok, wrapping ourselves in rainbows. And maybe that's all for the best, because some of these places are darker than others.[564]

Dexter

A myth persists that a monster can be written about or painted on a canvas. In the nineteenth-century literature, we read about vampires, golems and sirens, and in these words we believe we see a whole, we are convinced that we have experienced the creature's fullness. But the experiential fullness of a monster does not actually exist, because the monster has no Being, it has only meaning. For a monster to be fully representable, that monster has to stop shifting. In order for words to capture a monster, to assign a specific and permanent image or a written word to it, the monster has to enter the language and be *represented* in it as Being: in other words, it has to *be*.

If there is a place where a monster can exist in the Victorian culture, though, even as a haunting glimpse of possibility, that place is precisely in language. While language cannot capture it, it can channel its impossible existence. Only words and images are capable of translating and overcoming what cannot be approached by Being. The Victorian monster is an abject subject, an expelled and forbidden entity, whose nature is one of the protagonist, and language is its signifier. Writing about Victorian monstrosity means giving existence to the impossible, the monstrosity that changes even as it is articulated.

Accordingly, reading monstrosity is reading a text without an object – a signifier without its signified. That is why a Victorian monster always destroys semiotic systems, assuming the role of the subject in the process – it cannot be (re)presented, yet there it is, on a sheet of paper or a piece of linen, veiling itself in empty words and hollow images, crying, loving, hating and suffering. In the last instance, the Victorian monster lurks in the eye, mouth, and hand of the beholder.

This fundamental existential impossibility of the monster in the Victorian era is closely connected to the notion of linguistic space. If it is non-representable, and still stares at us from a painting or a page, where does it come from? What is this place that allows it to be, to spread

[564] Tim Schlattmann, 'Once Upon a Time…,' *Dexter*, episode 602, directed by S. J. Clarkson, TV show (2011; USA: John Goldwyn Productions, 2012), DVD.

and fill this blank, still unexplored, creative space? Like an apparition born from the interruption of a sentence, the Victorian monster dwells in the unknown white zone betwixt words, flanked by two signs, referring to neither of them. In Victorian representation, the margins of imaginable possibilities collapse, opening up a new world seemingly free of subject-object desperation, where non-imaginable impossibilities have a place as subjects. The world of abject bodies, tenebrous and icy passion, is a universe of plausible ambiguities and equally plausible transgressions.

This place where meanings implode, is a place where the subject of Victorian monstrous representation is born. Its viewers/readers cannot but be seduced and admit that the cry of the damaged bodies is too sweet and beyond horrifying. They must resign themselves and lend their eye to the structuring of these repulsive corporealities. As they read, they transform themselves from the inside out, because text (graphic, visual or material) is coming from within, even if it has been written by others. Through readers/viewers, through their textual pleasures, the text frees its own shackled soul, and ejects itself in a boomerang-shaped flight path. Invading the eye and recreating the self of the consumer, the text continuously recreates itself by simultaneous self-construction and deconstruction, luring the viewers/readers closer to the heart of darkness that flickers inside of their dreadful desire. The readers become 'tireless builders' – they stray, to use Julia Kristeva's expression.[565] The reader wanders blindly,

> on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding. He has a sense of the danger, of the loss that the pseudo-object attracting him represents for him, but he cannot help taking the risk at the very moment he sets himself apart. And the more he strays, the more he is saved.[566]

The viewers/readers, as vagabonds, nomads, or strays, without a beginning or an end, wander through the monstrous text, searching for salvation, for catharsis that never comes because this kind of text leads nowhere but to itself, to its own rejected world, the Netherworld of creation. In the Victorian monster the readers/viewers face their own shattered selves.

Today

[565] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 8.
[566] Ibid.

Snapshot one: every year, since 1983, on the Saturday closest to the summer solstice, Coney Island USA art group has been organizing a parade that celebrates 'the artistic vision of the masses.' A procession of people, mainly (but not exclusively) New Yorkers, streams through streets named Mermaid and Neptune, in a district 'often regarded as entertainment.'[567] They are a curious group of people: led by a King and a Queen, riding in huge vehicles or simply following on foot, the crowd enacts life under the sea, and the event is named the 'Coney Island Mermaid Parade' for a very simple reason – everyone is dressed like a mermaid. In this colorful walking theater, we can spot high fashion mermaids, mermaid nurses, Hindu mermaids, drag mermaids, mermaid bodybuilders, as well as mermaid kids whose birthday happened to be on the same date so their parents arranged for places in the parade to be provided for them. For a day, it seems that mythology accidentally spilled hundreds of fantastic creatures in a carnivalesque explosion of public joy. And it seems only natural, to dress as your favorite Disney character, to assume Ariel's, the Little Mermaid's, role – at least for a day.

This is the contemporary monstrous subject's snapshot number one.

Snapshot two: as a passionate mermaid-lover, for the last couple of years I have been following the trend of 'mermaid professionalism.' Yes, this term actually exists. Who are mermaid professionals? Mermaid Melissa, Hannah Mermaid, Mermaid Kariel: these are all women who dedicated their professional lives to entertainment, channeling the mermaid myth. They bought or made customized mermaid tails of all shapes and colors, and they perform mermaid theatricals in large water tanks. Most of them are green activists, raising their voices against pollution, whale killing, and rainforest eradication. The example of Mermaid Melissa will make the phenomenon clearer: Mermaid Melissa (says the home page on her website), is the 'only woman in the world legally named Mermaid!' Her slogan is: 'Let's help save the oceans before all creatures become mythical.' She performs with Mermaid Entertainment Aquatic Company, which includes 'trained professional mermaids, mermen and pirates.' She performs underwater breath hold showcases and does 'live featured performances in aquariums, poolside parties, marketing promotions for companies, and VIP events for clients.' Just a bit further down in the text on the home page, the visitor has an option to 'Hire a Mermaid.' 'It was an ultimate fairy-tail for any young girl who has watched *The Little Mermaid* and *Splash!*' comments Mermaid Melissa on the reasons for becoming a mermaid, 'a way that I viewed to find a balance between staying human, and joining their world as part dolphin. […]

[567] 'The Mermaid Parade,' viewed 29 September 2014, http://www.coneyisland.com/programs/mermaid-parade.

Our belief in dreams coming true,' she concludes, 'can be lived, with each new passion that we pursue.'[568] Mermaids are going professional, before humans turn into myth.

This is the contemporary monstrous subject's snapshot number two.

Snapshot three: '2014 Is the Year of the Mermaid,' informs us Groupon.com, a large and very popular website that features discounted gift certificates usable at local or national companies. Twenty-two-year-old designer Eric Ducharme, who is spending time tailoring mermaid tails and using them in his own private life, is also the CEO of Mertailor, LLC, a company he founded when he was only thirteen. There is a thing about Eric: he 'does not only believe in mermaids – he can help you become one,'[569] by making perfect custom mermaid tails that will allow you great agility underwater. In 2013, Eric appeared in TLC's show 'My Crazy Obsession,' talking about his obsession with mermaids, about his merman lifestyle, and the problems he has with other people because of it. His 'mother' and his boyfriend have been interviewed too, expressing appreciation, understanding and support for Eric's curious lifestyle. 'Eric is obsessed with mermaids,' said Candy Ducharme, self-proclaimed merman's mother. 'We have our own passions. That's Eric's life.' 'When I put on a tail, I feel transformed,' Ducharme says in an interview. 'I feel like I'm starting to enter into a different world when I hit the water. Being under water I feel, I'm just totally away from the world.'[570] Seen from the perspective of Eric and his family, 2014 might indeed be the year of the Mermaid.

This is the contemporary monstrous subject's snapshot number three.

* * * * *

It is the year 2015, and mermaids are literally everywhere. In major European and American cities, at every corner there is a Starbucks coffee shop with its two-tail mermaid shining bright. Every cup of Starbucks coffee bears this sign too and so do their other commercial products. Mermaids are used in advertising everywhere, even in the places where you would, never, ever, expect them, like shoe stores (fig.39).

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[568] 'Professional Mermaid Performer "Real-life Mermaid" Mermaid for Hire,' viewed 29 September 2014, http://www.mermaidmelissa.com/.

[569] '2014 Is the Year of the Mermaid,' viewed 29 September 2014, http://www.groupon.com/articles/2014-is-the-year-of-the-mermaid-sb.

[570] 'Eric Ducharme: Meet Real-Life Man Mermaid, AKA "Merman," and Owner of The Mertailor [VIDEO],' viewed 29 September 2014, http://www.ibtimes.com/eric-ducharme-meet-real-life-man-mermaid-aka-merman-owner-mertailor-video-1171525.

Figure 39 A Berlin shoe store (2013)

From the above snapshots, we can conclude that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the mermaid, as a creature and as an idea, has become a profession, immersed deeply into the fabric of consumption and capitalist desire. The professional mermaids are not only 'professional' at what they do; not only do they earn a lot on money (some Eric's tails cost $2,759 and his customer list includes celebrities, like Lady Gaga); professional mermaids are all beautiful, voluptuous, sexy and alluring, their image and their bodies selling the products they advertise, or rallying people around a cause. Their monstrosity is erased: little girls, like the one that met Mermaid Melissa, want to be mermaids. They advertise shoes despite the fact that they do not have legs; their bodies are turned human, appropriated as signs referring to consumption. When thinking about contemporary mermaids, the words of Benjamin Disraeli from a faraway context echo true: 'the East is a career.' Well, in 2014 I say: 'the mermaid is a career.' And no one can deny it.

But there is a far more important issue at work here. Sirens have been luring men to their doom since the time immemorial, so in the era of high capitalism, it seems only natural that their powers have been transformed into visual pleasures of commodities. This has been

happening over the entire twentieth century. We have discussed, in many different ways, the relationship between the monstrosity of sirens and the language of commodities throughout the nineteenth century. But, once again, we need to ask the question: what does this new fashion, of sirens taking possession of human bodies completely, mean for the subject?

This is not a question to be analyzed here, in the conclusion, and I would like to raise it only as a graphic way of taking the pulse of the contemporary Western society. In all the snapshots above, in the example of the Coney Island Mermaid Parade, Eric the Merman and Mermaid Melissa, beneath all the commercialism and consumption, we can see a new relationship of the subject to monstrosity, a configuration of their game that we, contemporary consumers, find natural, if a bit eccentric. In 2014, the examples of monstrosity we have discussed so far are such that compared to them nineteenth-century monstrosity seems ridiculously naïve. In the Victorian era (early years of the twentieth century included), the monster was the subject and the bodies of sirens, in conjunction with the bodies of their victims, contained the topology of the male Victorian subject. On the surface, it seems that the same is true for the contemporary mermaids: Eric Ducharme lives his life as a merman – what can be more of subject nature than that? But on the other hand, this is exactly the radical difference between Victorian and contemporary monstrosity: *we do not need to read the monster 'paranoically' any more*. It is not hidden within the language, in the cracks and crevices of representation; it does not hide from view suppressing its monstrous skin. In the twenty-first century, there is a tendency for the monster to live *on the surface* of our body; there is a tendency not for the monster to be an implicit subject, but for the subject to be an explicit monster. In the snapshots above – and I have chosen only three out of many – monstrosity is shown off publicly, it does not live in literature or cinema, it does not need the language to exist. The monster of today is the one that tries, with all the representational power it has, to roam free: not in the semantic space like in our prologue, but the real public space of the Coney Island. The monstrosity of the nineteenth century has become an imperceptible reality of the twenty-first.

Strange as it may seem, I find this tendency to have monsters step into the public space of real life liberating. There are several reasons for this, the most obvious one being that, due to a new configuration of knowledge and meaning, the monster is not a monster any more. In 1889, lamenting mythical monsters, Joris-Karl Huysmans said: 'The monster in art does not exist anymore […].'[571] He might have commented on the twenty-first century. The monster has

[571] Joris-Karl Huysmans, 'Le Monstre,' in *L'Art moderne: Certains* (Cacém, Portugal: Gris Impressores, S.A.R.L., 1976), 379.

never been ‘just a monster,’ it has always been connected to other identities that were seen as different. But monstrosity, as a radical alterity to what is generally accepted, pales in the face of an endless stream of new monsters that the twenty-first century keeps producing by the tons. Monstrosity, as something disturbing and gloomy, something that implodes semiotic systems and crashes meaning, just does not stand as a concept today, when we turn on the television and just slide into the narratives featuring dismembered bodies and vampire-like blood-sucking creatures on every channel. I am aware that monstrosity is a historically contingent concept, and that if it dies in its nineteenth-century incarnation it will rise in a new one. That is way I emphasize the need to stop discussing monstrosity as liminality, as something ‘elsewhere,’ because, in doing that, we are applying a defunct concept with no real power in the contemporary pop-culture (understood broadly). In the world of monsters, nobody is a monster. Only in the twenty-first century, Lady Gaga can sport an image explicitly modeled on monstrosity, making of it a new fashion, an individual choice that involves ‘being a monster.’ Her esthetics is as eclectic as it gets, her costumes are comprised of inappropriate elements, things turned into something else, like cigarettes into eye glasses, or a police ‘crime scene’ tape into a bodice in her video *Telephone*. And Lady Gaga *is* the mainstream popular culture. Only in our times can Lady Gaga openly call for what I find the crucial feature of today’s monstrosity: a complete appropriation of the monster within.

> When they're young, all Little Monsters learn that they are scary.
> Ugly, stupid, shunned by Cupid, overweight, and hairy.
> But every Monster needs to find that secret deep inside
> that transfers Dr. Jekyll into sexy Mr. Hyde.
> All my Monsters are beautiful, discostoodiful, squarerootiful, oldcootiful.
> Monsters don't need implants or a bitchin' Monster car,
> Monsters only need to love the Monsters that they are.[572]

Psychoanalysis has been teaching us the same thing: we all need to turn to the inside and look at our own lack. We need to face it, and we need to embrace it. These are the essential tactics for survival in the contemporary world of alienation: the only way to deal with the monster within is to accept that this monster is exactly who we are. We need to accept that the

[572] Lyrics of Lady Gaga’s song ‘You Are All My Little Monsters,’ the phrase she repeatedly uses to refer to her fans.

loss we carry is our own reality and that the *objet a* that we are constantly reaching out for will never be attained. But out of this recognition an exit is born: a monster accepted is not a monster anymore, and in today's world of monstrosities (emerging as visible esthetic, political or individual actions against the alienation of the post-human man), I understand monstrosity as the very condition of the monster's absolution. The monster within, the one the European mind has been dreaming of for centuries, the one that epitomizes the labyrinth of language that included its own exists, the dream that dreamed about awakening, has to be pushed to its extreme in order to absolve itself from monstrosity – it has to be made visible and appropriated completely, if it is to stop being a monster. For the monster to disappear, a human has to become monstrous. The appropriation of the monster within, as the true incoherent self of the individual is the only way out of the dream that never ends; it is a way out of the search for the beyond of semiotic incoherence thanks to the ultimate revelation that there is nothing there and that the subject's core is this incoherent, monstrous self that needs to awake and face its own face in the mirror. It needs to face the mirror image as what it is: an illusion, a mirage, a dream that feeds on the dreamer's compulsion to sleep.

The final snapshot of the contemporary monstrous subject: Dexter is a man who, when he was only three years old, watched his mother being killed and dismembered with a chainsaw as he sat in a pool of her blood. Since then, he has an urge that consumes him, a passion that runs his life: he needs to kill and to feel another living being dying. And so he kills, he acts upon his dark, inappropriate desire, but he has a code given to him by his Father: Dexter kills only those deserving death – he kills only other killers. And most importantly, Dexter is the protagonist of the eponymous TV show, and we all root for him. Dexter is our (anti)hero of the alienated twenty-first century.

As a subject, Dexter is a split subject *par excellence*. He has two faces, one dark, substantial and confusing, the other 'normal,' superficial and friendly. I say superficial, because at the beginning of the show, this other 'normal' face is just a mask, a cover for his life of a serial killer. Dexter does not feel, he is a shell of a man, but his dark face is real and it even has a name: Dexter calls it the Dark Passenger. In his night life, Dexter tracks killers, and once they are his he wraps them in plastic, stabs them through the heart, cuts them into pieces and dumps them into the ocean. This way Dexter continually reenacts his primal trauma, from day to day recreating his mother's murder. Dexter, the real one, the one that lives out his dark passion, is born out of a sign, called into culture by the monstrous language of his mother's fragmented body. So the main theme of Dexter's life is coping with the stygian place inside him, coping

with his inappropriate desire. He needs to look into the heart of his desire directly, but in his inability to do so he moves from one dismembered body to the next, reaching out for satisfaction that none of the bodies can provide. They are all insufficient, they are all just a passing 'it,' while the real *objet a* always withdraws from him, and Dexter misses absolution, he misses the appointment with the Real. Dexter's desire remains insatiable, his thirst for blood (and for the life of his victims that is slowly dying away) unquenchable.

As described so far, Dexter perfectly epitomizes what I have called 'the male Victorian subject.' He personifies the Victorian quest for the exit from the labyrinth of language, and the ineptitude of the subject to find it, to stop dreaming. But Dexter has for us another message coming: the monster stops being a monster if appropriated as such. The whole critically acclaimed show, which lasted for eight years, conveys Dexter's search for wholeness. And the only way for him to achieve that wholeness is not to die, like our Victorian sirens, but to accepts himself as who he is: to accept himself as a monster. Only by accepting the Dark Passenger as the real core of his self, and understanding that the Dark Passenger is not something *beyond* him, but the very condition of his possibility, can Dexter find peace and release from his tortured state of mind. He needs to fully become a monster in order to be.

Dexter, our modern Ulysses whose desired object is his own self, is the true protagonist and redeemer of the twenty-first century alienated world. He pushes his monster to its extreme, so he can cease being one. He kills the monster with its own monstrosity.

There is a future for the monster, after all – that is for the monster with a human face.

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