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FLESHING GENDER OUT: MALE FANTASIES AND FEMALE BODY ISSUES IN PETER CAREY'S "PEELING"

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RESUMO

Em "Peeling" Peter Carey retrata a relação que um homem mais velho impõe sobre uma enfermeira de abortos. Esta mulher remodela bonecas como criaturas brancas, tornando-as representações simbólicas da mutilação implícita para a construção social do "feminino" e da própria morte. Proponho "pelar" algumas das camadas interpretativas do texto: o monologismo "Mulher", fantasias masturbatórias masculinas, desejo homo-erótico reprimido, e a abjeção ameaçadora à identidade de género.

ABSTRACT

In "Peeling" Peter Carey depicts the relationship an older man imposes on an abortionist. This woman refashions dolls as white creatures, thus acting as symbolic representations of the mutilation implicit to the social construction of "feminine" and of death itself. I propose to "peel away" some of the possible interpretative layers: the monologic construction of "Woman", male masturbatory fantasies, repressed homo-erotic desire and the threatening abjection to gender identity.

"Time is a man, space is a woman, and her masculine portion is death."

William Blake, *Vision of the Last Judgement*.

Despite the predictable critical variation any literary work receives, Peter Carey's fiction tends to be characterised in a similar vein. His writing, argues Bruce Woodcock, "explor[es] borderlands, though the effect of his work is rarely the consoling one of suggesting transformational possibilities. Instead, he is interested in disruption, disturbance, menace" (1996: 12). Graham Huggan recognises Carey's fiction conveys a "visceral pleasure" (1996: 1); it is a type of writing which is "bizarre, disturbing, but uncannily familiar: it reflects a world involuntarily drawn to play out its own worst nightmares" (Huggan, 1996: 1). Anthony J. Hassall says that "[a]ll of Carey's stories offer [...] fierce and dangerous pleasures; but despite the terrors they enact and arouse, they also create a wild, apocalyptic beauty" (1994: 1).

Speaking of *The Fat Man in History* collection, in which “Peeling” is included, he describes it as “pointillist narrative fragments of problematic status and varying degrees of self-consciousness, which contain a heady mixture of nightmare, fantasy, science fiction, but remain linked in eerier and disturbing ways to the more commonplace cultural fictions of our time” (1994: 7). Peter Carey’s fiction is undoubtedly political in the sense that it examines issues of our time, as Hassall puts it, particularly those to do with the postcolonial condition in Australia, the forms and effects of capitalism and gender relations. This paper proposes to address the latter and how the disquieting, anatomical style Carey adopts contributes to his exploration of gender, that is, how “gender” is fleshed out in the sense that at a conceptual level it is politically clothed with meaning through a given fictional management of bodies.

In “Peeling”, Carey holds the cultural distortion of eroticism as his main subject matter as he depicts the relationship an older man constructs imaginatively and imposes through the control over his own sexual impulses on his neighbour. An abortionist and a collector, this woman refashions her dolls as white creatures whose eyes and hair she proceeds to remove with purposefulness. Nile, as she is called, shows up to clear up the flat which, allied to her obsession with dolls, points to the monologic male fantasy of femininity; she is at the same time a maid and a child. To this equation is added the element of the female as sexual object. When they prepare for their first sexual experience and Nile stands naked in front of him (notice he has no name, thus identifying with a general idea of manhood) he finds himself unable to control his desire, though he had been determined to delay the moment as much as he possibly could. Only an earring remains on her which, as he removes it, starts peeling off a layer hiding a young male. He too has a zip-earring which serves to peel off another layer, this time of a smaller woman dressed in typical pornographic attire: stockings and suspender belt. When he removes the stockings, her legs vanish and eventually she is dismembered altogether as he touches her.

Nile embodies the male fantasy of Woman and does not represent in any way a real individual (her name recalls exoticism and liquidity, as opposed to something material or “real”). She is a fetish, an inanimate doll or a prostitute in the sense that he wishes to control every aspect of both their sexualities and indeed of the contours of

their relationship¹. He cannot and does not care to remember about her husband and son to the point of failing to register her confession that they are mere inventions; he is deaf to her opinions on her work; he decides that their love-making should be stalled and she does not but as he succumbs to his own desires he disrespects her only firm opinion that he should not touch the earring. In the first instance there is a manifestation of his indifference to her as a social and family-contextualised person; in the second to the equation of the professional versus the feminine and perhaps even the ethical; in the third it is noticeable his annoyance regarding her disrespect of the rules governing the relation customer/prostitute as she expresses her own desire/will². The latter allows him to blame her for the ultimate breaking of the fantasy; if things go wrong and he does not keep to his resolution, it is her fault. As Bruce Woodcock has noticed, Carey's stories often deal with the issue of power and the disposition of power which in this particular case is materialised around the matter of control and the loss of it (1996: 1).

Delaying is, in this context, a crucial factor which is supported by the repeated references the narrator makes to the subject. As with all other aspects in "Peeling", it is invested with overlaying skins of signification. One of those possible layers must refer to the male anxiety of precocious ejaculation which arouses both male dissatisfaction and humiliation before his partner, a partner who in "Peeling" he very much strives to annul as a person (he mentions a case when he made love to a woman for thirty-two hours during which

¹ He is admittedly a consumer of prostitution. See Peter Carey, "Peeling", 1994: 16. The master/servant dichotomy suggested by the image of the woman as maid and that of master/slave hinted by her name reinforces the underlying matrix of control. Later, he will refer to stripping her down as an exploration, implicitly giving himself the role of the explorer and her that of unknown territory. See Peter Carey, "Peeling", 1994: 17. Graham Huggan emphasises Carey's fiction as a discourse of monstrosity (see page 10) and the author's concern with postcolonial issues: there is a "*racial* dimension to the monster. Blacks are the alien 'others' that vindicate the colonialist's violence; their demonisation also secures the prohibition of sexual contact, of an alliance that might produce that 'degenerate' creature, the racial hybrid", (1996: 73. Italics in the text). The point is much more evident in other instances of Carey's work but it is also suggested here. As I shall argue, the concepts of hybridity as a form of abjection as well as of fear of hybrid procreation are chief themes in "Peeling". Nile is notoriously not black (a necessary factor in view of the relation whiteness/abjection) and the specific representation of hybrids in this case is monstrosity.

² As she rambles about herself, he thinks that she "reveal[s] more than she should at this stage. I am disappointed in her. I thought she knew the rules". Carey, "Peeling", 1994: 19.

the woman was often asleep. He therefore bypasses confrontation). In the same line of thought, coming is equated with the end, the end of pleasure and the end of the simulacrum of relationship. He comments with respect to that sex marathon: “I say, the pity was it was only thirty-two hours, because after that I had to go home, and I had nothing left to do. There was nothing for years after that. It should be possible to do better than thirty-two hours” (1994: 23). He disregards altogether the possibility of a relationship established beyond the limits of fleshhood where sex represents the end of the idyll. After consummation, he lives on the leftovers of sex, indicating the sort of nihilistic desires evoked with the sleeping woman (presumably, Sleeping Beauty is she who never wakes up or bothers men with her desires). Before, he nourishes the illusion with archetypal associations of food and sex; though he is unemployed and has barely enough to survive, he saves as much as he can from his pension to buy the *oysters* she loves. He craves for an eternal limbo:

I am in no hurry. There is no urgency in the matter. Sooner or latter we shall discuss the oysters. Then it will be time to move to other more intimate things, moving layer after layer, until I discover her true colours, her flavours, her smells. The prospect of so slow an exploration excites me and I am in no hurry, no hurry at all. May it last forever. (1994: 17)

The quotation also makes clear that Nile is a product for consumption. Milk is the other consumption-related component in the story. This element adds a further meaning to food: it goes bad. His flat stinks with the smell of bad milk and she wears milk bottle tops stitched to her clothes. Milk also connects to the rest of the story through its allusion of whiteness. Nile’s room is white, she paints her dolls white, her throat is white, and she becomes a white doll³. Colour and smell come together (he gets to know her “true colours”) at the very moment when the consummation becomes inevitable, and he is taken over by a nauseating wave, as if he were “drown[ing] in a million gallons of milk” just as before, while looking into her eyes he felt he was drowning in milk (1994: 23). Milk summons up the forgotten experience of breast-feeding and a non-differentiation state with the mother’s body. This lack of distinction between the maternal body and the child, and specifically the son, has been theorised by Julia Kristeva as abjection:

³ Bruce Woodcock argues that whiteness recalls semen. See *Peter Carey*, 32.

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Along with sight-clouding dizziness, *nausea* makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and the father who proffer it. 'I' want none of that element, sign of their desire; 'I' do not want to listen, 'I' do not assimilate it, 'I' expel it. But since the food is not an 'other' for 'me', who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same notion through which I claim to establish *myself*. (1982: 3. Italics in the text)

Abjection thus recalls one's genesis and our parents' sexual pleasures. Moreover, it revives the union with the mother's body, that state when one is not yet a subject. Its segregation is necessary for the establishment of boundaries between the 'I' and the maternal and whenever those boundaries are attacked, there is a threat of return to non-selfhood, an extraction from the Symbolic order. Such crises are characteristically of a violent nature:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It is 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. (1982: 1)

Kristevan abjection theory evolves around the categories of the impure whose physiologic nature denotes a Bakhtinian influence. Among these categories are blood, vomit, semen, and excrement. However, the most abject waste is the cadaver insofar as it represents the inability of the body to be purged of its own uncleanness, the defeat in the face of the threat of abjection: "The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall) that which irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; [...] [R]efuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. [...] If dung signifies the other side of the border, 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 everything" (1982: 3. Italics in the text). The narrator's drive to perform sexually with a sleeping woman is therefore also a mark of his abject desire and the situation a substitution for necrophilia. In due course, I will argue that Nile's death, literally at his hands, enacts the hallucinatory fulfilment of this desire or, alternatively, its realisation through murder. As Graham Huggan puts it, in "Peeling" "real and dream worlds seem to cancel each other out, leaving a void – or interference" (1996: 16).

The ambiguity of the male's desire is reflected on the one hand on his obsessive deferral and on the other on the dual nature of the

objects of his desire, the latter being the reason for the surfacing of feelings of abjection insofar as bisexuality is not an accepted form of male behaviour in a patriarchally-oriented society. The emergence of the masculine body under Nile's skin is thus viewed by Bruce Woodcock: "The male desire for the feminine harbours narcissism, a displaced desire for a hidden male body, an awareness that rather than being biologically determined, gender identity is a culturally imposed demarcation which splits men off from their polymorphous potentialities" (1996: 31). As one of the narrator's friends, Bernard, had pointed out, this relationship had "a boyscout flavour about it" (1994: 15). As to the narcissistic trait, and as Woodcock noted, it is reinforced in the story through the reference to Bernard's compulsive masturbation (1996: 15). Woodcock is right in asserting the homoerotic nature of the image but I would argue that, instead, since beneath the young male there is another female, the repressed desire must be of a bisexual type, a sort of hesitation that concurs both with the narrator's experience of abjection through indifferenciation and with his perpetual postponement of sexual activity. The repression of gay or bisexual desire results in unconsciously self-imposed impotence ("I am in no hurry, no hurry at all. May it last forever").

Moreover, the very characterisation of the young male is purposefully confused, suggesting the gender ambiguity of this being: "His face is the same as her face, his hair the same. [...] She (for I must, from habit, continue to refer to her as 'she') seems as surprised as I am. She takes her penis in her hand, curious, kneading it, watching it grow. I watch fascinated" (1994: 24). Androgyny, as a mark of indifferenciation, adds yet another element of abjection. "Peeling" constructs a universe where sexual and gender ontologies are blurred, almost playing with the Derridean concept of *différance*, allowing the interpretative plurality of the text to offer different meanings and a definitive one is perpetually deferred. Deferral is worked therefore at the conceptual and thematic levels.

Neither Bruce Woodcock nor Anthony J. Hassall pays attention to the second body beyond the pornographic content and of its relation to the fantasist construction of women. But this is a chief symbol in several aspects: it confirms the bisexual desire of the male, it completes the nature of male desire for women in terms of destruction (and not just as inanimateness) and it relates with the abortion theme. The impulse towards destruction through sex realises in this story the conflict between *thanatos* and *eros*, in situating the activity not just in mere voyeuristic pornographic terms but in sadistic ones that

culminate in Nile's mutilation and ultimate lifelessness. My suggestion is that such lifelessness, being akin to death, is not, as has been argued, a mere symbol; what the interpretative diversity of the text also proposes is that Nile dies at the narrator's hands⁴. There are early insinuations of a murderous disposition from the preponderance of the aforementioned voyeuristic urge (revealed in hesitation and feared impotence), to his reserved nature, to his search for prostitution, to his annoyance at her for not respecting his unspoken rules, and to his blaming Nile, the victim, for *his* lack of control. Control is conventionally regarded as a major factor among serial killers' deviant behaviour and, in fact, the narrator speaks repeatedly about it. When Nile starts to talk about the abortions she performs, about the killings she participates in that is, he is immediately drawn to examine her hands. At that precise moment, his intention of taking things slowly is lost. His reaction is not expressed in mere frustration and disappointment; instead he feels every "single organ in [his] body quivering. It is bad. [...] [I]t is all coming too fast, all becoming too much" (1994: 21). Faced with whom he regards as another murderer, he turns to his own hands:

To remove now, so early, an item of clothing, perhaps the shawl, perhaps it would do me no harm to simply remove the shawl.

I stretch my hand, move it along the bed until it is behind her. Just by moving it... a fraction ... just a fraction ... I can grasp the shawl and pull it slowly away. It falls to the bed, covering my hand.

That was a mistake. A terrible mistake. My hand, already, is searching for the small catch at the back of her pendant, independent of my will. I am doing what I had planned not to do: rush.

I say, I am old. Soon I will die. It would be nice to make things last.

She says, you are morbid. (1994: 21)

The invocation of morbidity (for the second time in the text) allied to the total loss of control and subsequent sense of panic indicate a pathological mind. As he undresses her, the reader feels the responsibility for the events about to take place being transferred by the narrator to Nile:

⁴ Though a minor reference, the only support I have found to my reading of the theme of murder, which I develop from the psychoanalytical notion of a sociologically sponsored male impulse towards the obliteration of an affirmative femininity, comes from Hassall. In his view, "Peeling", is "reminiscent of the Christie murders" (1994: 14). Carey's story is obviously of a much darker mood as it explores something common to every human being, that is, what could happen if one lost control.

She says, you are talking strangely today.
I say, it has been forced on me. (1994: 22)

The text develops strictly in the narrator's point of view, as if the reader is situated inside the psychopath's mind. However, certain hints are given to indicate that this indeed is a disturbed mind. He finds her insistence on talking about aborted babies a promiscuous behaviour⁵ and though initially Nile seems to be willing to have sex with him, she sets boundaries which he violates. "I am compelled to use force", he says when she refuses to let him remove her earring (1994: 24). His desire is literal: to know her from within, to dismantle her. Hence the dismemberment for which he takes no responsibility:

I take her hand, wishing to reassure her. It removes itself from her body. I am talking to her. Touching her, wishing that she should answer me. But with each touch she is dismembered, slowly, limb by limb. Until, headless, armless, legless, I carelessly lose my grip and she falls to the floor. There is a sharp noise, rather like breaking glass. (1994: 25)

There is, once again, an emphasis on the subject of hands, including his. Though she is dismembered with his touch, he does not stop his action until she is headless, armless and legless. Unable to face the ghastriness of his deed, he feels what he had refused to feel previously, he wishes she speaks. Nile's mutilation and dismemberment parallels her dolls' which act as symbolic representations of the social construction of "feminine", of Nile's death and of the deaths of babies at Nile's hands. It is worth recalling that in medical terms, an abortion can be carried out literally through dismemberment (usually when it is performed after a twelve-week gestation period). A reading that compares Nile's transformation/death to the aborted foetuses as a materialisation of a repressed guilt which surfaces through her own mutilation of dolls is a view which conforms to a patriarchal contextualisation. This view judges women for their unwanted pregnancies, regardless of rights over their own bodies or even of economic circumstances, leaving men outside of this frame of responsibility. Nile's insistence over the issue of abortion might reveal that she carries such guilt and the talk that she wishes to have with the narrator aims to alleviate the feeling. His refusal reveals instead that the share, even at the level of conversation, implies a transfer of unwanted accountability. The fantasy over an inexistent son, in fact of a whole fantasy family, indicates that Nile wishes to be a mother and

⁵ See Peter Carey, "Peeling", p. 19.

that her position on the matter of abortion is rationally supported. The inclusion in the story of an imagined but desired child counterbalances the imagery of dead babies and, through Nile's body, the cycle of life and death is closed.

The death-life cycle belongs to the poetics of the grotesque. "Peeling" displays features of a Bakhtinian type at a symbolic level (birth, death, regeneration, metamorphosis) as well as of a Kayserian sort in terms of its nightmarish mood. The ultimate goal of changing conventional, predictable views of the world of any theory of the grotesque is definitely present in "Peeling" as in much of Carey's fiction. In Bruce Woodcock's words, Carey's writing is "strange and disturbing. It disrupts the reader's perceptions in ways which are simultaneously conceptual and imaginative: our ideas and views of the world are stretched and challenged. The effect is that the supposed separations between normal and abnormal, the ordinary and the bizarre, the daydream and the nightmare, are undermined" (1996: 1)⁶.

Bodies erupting from the inside of other bodies convey the spirit of the grotesque while invoking simultaneously Matryoshka dolls (suggestively from the Latin "mater") and science-fiction imagery such as that in *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. This comparison is not surprising as Peter Carey's fiction has been

⁶ The grotesque quality of Carey's fiction has been recognised in passing. See Bruce Cook, "Misfits and Eccentrics", *Chicago Tribune* (5 Jan, 1992) Section 14, p. 6 and Brian Kiernan, "Short Story Chronicle 1994", *Meanjin* 34 (1975), p. 39. On the issue of the grotesque see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, and Geoffrey Harpham, *Strategies of Contradiction: The Grottesque in Art and Literature*. The subject of the grotesque in Peter Carey's fiction is too vast to be considered here but, in general terms, it is present in his concern with estrangement, horror, borderlands, marginality, bizarrerie, and the fusion of genres and categories such as high and low. By far the most attentive remarks have been made by Graham Huggan:

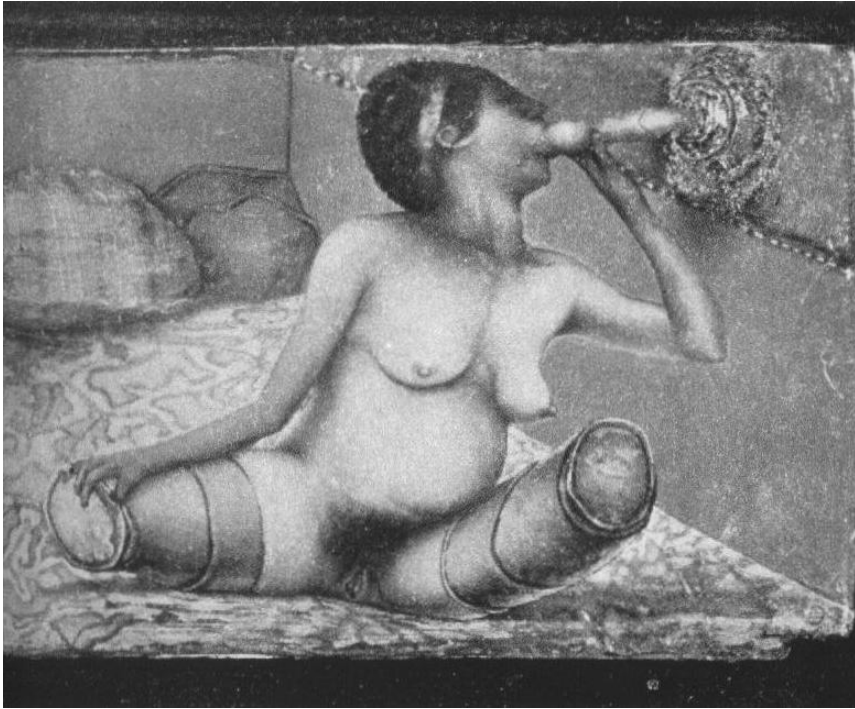
The grotesque is deployed, as an agent of perceptual transformation, as a means both of estranging "accepted" versions of cultural history and of celebrating the hybrid forms that traverse our western culture today. Yet the grotesque, in Carey's fiction at least, retains its darker aspect. [...] In Carey's work, those [demonic] aspects have little to do with malevolent occult forces, as with the absurdist metaphysics of a (universal) human condition. They refer, rather, to the array of violent, sometimes lethal, fantasies that are made available to us by the modern capitalist societies in which we live. Those societies – and the system that underpins them – have failed disastrously to give us outlets for us to express our desire to advance ourselves, to realise higher versions. Instead, they continue to feed us on a diet of destructive images that have the capacity to stultify, damage, or even imperil our lives. (1996: 81)

associated with science-fiction literature⁷. But the adjective Woodcock uses most in reference to Carey's fiction is "surreal"; he draws attention to Carey's "love of the bizarre, a fascination for the nightmarish, a delight in the sordid, the surreal, the lurid" and indeed argues for a connection with Surrealist Australian painting beginning in the 1930s (1996: 11). I feel that in "Peeling" one experiences the same "Magritte-like defamiliarisation" Bruce Woodcock feels with "Love & Death in the South Side Pavilion" (1996: 27). There is no doubt that his fiction has a visual quality about it (Hassall referred to it as "pointillist") and "Peeling" in particular brings to mind Gregory Gillespie's *Pregnant Female* (1967) in its grotesquery, the theme of pregnancy and the vision of mutilation aside desire. The picture evokes Freudian notions present in "Peeling" such as the castrated woman and the penis envy complex (I recall the delight of the female in the face of the discovery of the male genitalia attached to her body). Because Freudianism historically had a tremendous influence over the Surrealism movement, the argument of Carey's surrealist flavour is corroborated⁸.

⁷ Bruce Woodcock associates Carey's early fiction to the generation of writers emerging from the 1975 Annual World SF Convention in Melbourne. He writes at some stage: Carey's "transgressive imagination challenges the reader's notions of the normal in literature and in life: it subverts any apparent division of fiction into separate categories such as realism, fantasy, science fiction; and it reveals the surreal beneath the surface of actuality" (1996: 14). But this quote also allows associations with magical realism which Woodcock describes, perhaps in too simplistic a manner, as the type of literature depicting "fantastic or surreal events" (1996: 11). Also in Graham Huggan's words: "His writing is nothing if not eclectic, drawing, on science fiction, social realism, fable, allegory, Gothic romance" (1996: 11).

⁸ For Graham Huggan, the grotesque in Carey's writing evolves from Freudian nightmares and the contemporary industry of spectacle and representation. See Graham Huggan, *Peter Carey*, pp. 8-9.

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Gregory Gillespie, *Pregnant Female*, 1967

« She takes her penis in her hand, curious, kneading it, watching it grow » (24)

The psychoanalytical perspective opens up the short story to other levels of signification. *Frankenstein* is a narrative haunted by primal fears to do with survival, sexuality, and parenthood, and "Peeling" seems to rework the one behind Victor Frankenstein's destruction of the female monster. Dr Frankenstein (who is a double of the creature, the female monster's would-be companion) dismantles the female body for fear of her procreative abilities. In a similar manner, the narrator in "Peeling" annihilates Nile whose maternal desires had become evident. In both cases, the ultimate fear of males of the fertility of the womb is enacted. Male authority and the delusional dream of women-free creation of life are threatened; the biblical myth whereby Adam's flesh created Eve established a hierarchy that must at all costs be preserved: "yet the grotesque, in Carey's fiction, is not solely an agent of disfigurement, nor yet the expression of a consumer society ravaged by its own internal conflicts. The grotesque is also a means of undermining established order and, more specifically, of challenging the dictates of a patrilinear heritage" (Huggan, 1996: 10).

“Peeling” and “fleshing out” are given an opposite metaphoric value, one suggesting the removal and the other the attribution of meaning, an opposition which is only superficial as the subtraction of a layer reveals a derivative one. Hence the importance of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque-grotesque to the short story: as a construction of a topsy-turvy world saturated with intersecting images of duality as well as in the sense that dismemberment recalls the primordial significance of “carnival”, the festival ritualization of taking away the flesh (“carne levaré”). As such, the issue of consumption emerges once again as flesh is turned into meat by reason of a cultural deformation of the erotic experience and rigid definition of gender.

This sort of paranoia, which sadistically enforces authority in the name of the Father, is recognised in the literary explorations of many women writers. In “The Snow Child” Angela Carter retells the story of Snow White while emphasising the patriarchal cruelty of familiar and social relationships by the author’s use of a new set of metaphors. The beautiful child, depicted as no more than a mute, selfless doll-like creature, is raped, melts down and relives according to the will of her Father. As Angela Carter argues elsewhere, “flesh tints have the sumptuous succulence of peaches because flesh plus skin equals sensuality” but, by the same premise, in a context of tyrannical imbalance of power, “flesh minus skin equals meat” (1979: 138).

In Bruce Woodcock’s point of view, one should take “Peeling” as a “stripping down” of male fantasies surrounding the feminine, a deconstruction of male mythologies about women” (1996: 30). This contention does not convey the idea that such mythologies are lethal for women insofar as they lead to the elimination of the female in the story. On the other hand, the text also allows a reading where the process of demythologisation, to use Angela Carter’s terminology, is what in fact destroys Nile, suggesting that there might not be an alternative system. The ultimate question is thus left unanswered: whether Peter Carey wishes to eliminate the stereotype or to reveal the necessity of its existence, regardless of his own repulsion towards gender and sexual constructions of that sort.

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