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In Search of "Humanity Before Law": A Lacanian Reading of the Dead End in Nelly Arcan's *Whore*

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Abstract

This research article examines Nelly Arcan's *Whore* (originally *Putain* in French) by drawing from the theoretical frameworks of psychoanalysis by Jacques Lacan and poststructuralist feminism by Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Judith Butler. Departing from an interpretation that the unnamed narrator in *Whore* fails to reach what Lacan terms the mirror stage, the article counters that claim and argues that the narrator does, in fact, achieve the mirror stage where her dead older sister, Cynthia, retroactively functions as the idealizing mirror image. As a result, the narrator proceeds to the next stage that is the entrance into the symbolic order. However, the narrator's problem lies in her longing to fully transcend the Name-of-the-Father and go completely beyond the symbolization of the existing order. As a result, she finds herself in a dead end, reflected by the novel's repetitive and circular narrative form, where she is traumatized at a glimpse of the impossibility of the Real.

1. Introduction

The novel *Putain* (2001) by Nelly Arcan (1973-2009), with the only translation into English by Bruce Benderson in 2005 under the title *Whore*, was a shocking sensation that brought its author almost immediately to international fame, being a debut novel shortlisted for both the Prix Femina and Prix Médicis, two of the most respected literary awards in France. A not insignificant part of the success of *Whore* came undeniably from its shocking and scandalous subject matter which rapidly captured the public's attention. In this semi-autobiographical novel, Nelly Arcan, who herself used to work as a sex worker while studying at the University of Quebec in Montreal, relates the turbulent and poignant experience of the protagonist who goes down the same path that she took. With the literary style that is akin to a stream of consciousness, the novel is plotless with a dense narrative where all the sentences in a paragraph always running into each other without a full stop except at the end of the last sentence. When not dealing with the experience of being a sex worker and serving her clients, the novel, in a circular or repetitive manner, keeps going back to the narrator's hatred for her mother, whom she refers to as a worm, and the sexual obsession with her father, as the narrator foresees that one day he would open the door and end up being another one of her clients.

Most criticism of the novel revolves around the fact that the novel blurs the line between fiction and reality and examines, in general, the narrator's sufferings in the midst of patriarchy. For example, Smart (2017) probes in the last chapter of her monograph how *Whore* can be categorized as autofiction and how this genre actually fits with how Arcan may wish to fuse fiction with her own life events without the whole novel being strictly taken as her autobiography. Departing from the notion that the novel itself reads like a confession, Delvaux (2005) demonstrates through *Whore* the imbrication between the confession [l'aveu] in religion and in pornography. Examining Arcan's entire oeuvre, Sperti (2014) focuses on the contrast between the agency that comes with the genre of autofiction and the submission shown in the narrated events. However, not having the autofictional aspect of the novel as my focus, and wishing to make the most of the novel that is extremely rich for psychoanalytic examination, I intend to close-read Arcan's *Whore* in the frameworks of Lacanian psychoanalysis and poststructuralist feminism, the feminist branch on which Lacan himself exerts great influence. My study, as will be

clearly shown later on, draws heavily from, and is more in conversation with, Hanania (2010) and Henry-Tierney (2019) who also approach the novel through a predominantly psychoanalytic lens. This research article argues for the interpretation of *Whore* that views the dead sister Cynthia as the narrator's own reconstructed ideal ego according to Jacques Lacan's theorization of the mirror stage. Amidst the attempt to completely transcend the Name-of-the-Father of the existing symbolic order, the narrator, so the argument goes, comes up short as she finds herself at the border of symbolization, traumatized by the stark impossibility that, for Lacan, defines the Real.

2. The Mirror Stage[1]

In her attempt to come to terms with the identity of Nelly Arcan's narrator, Hanania (2010) utilizes Lacan's concept of the mirror stage (stade du miroir) to put forth the pivotal argument towards the end of her article that "the women portrayed by Arcan seem incapable of reaching the mirror stage, or rather, constantly being put to the test in front of the mirror; they make of it an inverse experience, not constitutive but destructive"[2] [Les femmes mises en scène par Arcan semblent incapables d'atteindre ce « stade du miroir », ou plutôt, constamment mises à l'épreuve du miroir, elles en font une expérience inverse, non pas constitutive mais destructrice] (p. 121). Building up her

[1] Henry-Tierney (2019) also argues that, because there is a period of 3-4 years where the narrator claims that she can only see her mother's hair as her mother is lying abject under the bedsheets, the mother therefore functions as the fragmented body-image in what Henry-Tierney claims is "a queered version of Jacques Lacan's Mirror Image" ("Maternal Imagery" section, para. 1). This, then, shows that "the narrator's subjectivity is precariously contingent upon the relationship to the mother" ("Maternal Imagery" section, para. 1). However, I decided not to factor Henry-Tierney's argument on this front into the research article, the reason being that, firstly, this interpretation is still underdeveloped as it is brought up only briefly by the author. Secondly, to follow Henry-Tierney's logic, the narrator would have to assume the position of the ideal ego in the mirror stage. Considering the intense identity crisis that the narrator suffers throughout the novel, not to mention how her position should align with the child looking in the mirror, not the reflection in the mirror itself, I find the suggestion that the narrator is an idealizing self in the mirror, presumably with the semblance of mastery of movement, still lacking.

[2] Since Hanania writes her article in French and the English translation is my own, the original passage in French is provided in square brackets after a translation. This practice continues throughout the essay whenever I translate from French myself.

argument, Hanania first remarks on how the narrator's mother is referred to in the narrative not by her name but primarily as a worm or *larve* in French. Despite being most commonly translated as "worm" in English, as is also the case in Bruce Benderson's translation of *Putain*, the French word *larve* would more accurately be translated as "larva," signifying "the juvenile form many creatures inhabit before their metamorphosis into adulthood" (Henry-Tierney, 2019, "Maternal Imagery" section, para. 3). Hence, being situated in the chrysalis or the second stage of an insect where she does not actively ingest anything, just nesting herself inside the silken cocoon, the narrator's mother is in the state of a nymph or a pupa; both of the terms point, again, to the immature form of an insect before turning into an adult, with the origin of the word "pupa" being from Latin meaning a girl or a doll, thus the close similarity to the word *poupée* or doll in French. Hanania (2010) therefore takes this rich opportunity for a play on words to make a consanguineous connection between the indolent worm of a mother and the dolled-up whore of a daughter: "being called 'nymph' or 'pupa,' of '*pupa*'[3]: 'teat, breast' which gave rise to 'doll,' the term with which the narrator also identifies herself" [appelé « nymphe » ou « pupe », de « *pupa* » : « mamelle, sein » qui a donné « poupée », terme dont se gratifie aussi la narratrice] (p. 121). "Larva or doll, neither the mother or the daughter," so Hanania's argument continues, "seem to have reached the final point of the metamorphosis, the adult state, described in zoology by a very interesting term, 'imago,' of 'image' "[4] [Larve ou poupée, ni la mère ni la fille ne semblent avoir atteint le point final de la métamorphose, l'état adulte, qualifié en zoologie d'un terme fort intéressant, l'« imago », de « image »] (p. 121).

[3] Unlike in English where the Latin *pupa* is also *pupa* in a dictionary, the word *pupa* appears as *pupe* in a French dictionary. Therefore, in my translation here, the former *pupa* (not italic in the essay) is translated from the French *pupe*, whereas the latter *pupa* (italic in the text) is where Hanania refers to the Latin *pupa*.

[4] The term *imago* here is a double entendre. As an entomological term, it signifies, according to Oxford Languages, "the final and fully developed adult stage of an insect, typically winged"; in terms of psychoanalysis, Oxford Languages describes it "an unconscious idealized mental image of someone, especially a parent, which influences a person's behavior." The word *imago* in this context — aptly followed right after by Hanania's evocation of the word *image*, which originates from the Latin *imago* — thus points to the failure in arriving both at the mature state of an insect and the fully realized image of a person or a parent.

What is referred to as the mirror stage for Lacan is “the moment in a child’s psychosexual development (around 6 to 18 months of age) when he or she identifies with his or her own image (what Lacan terms the ‘Ideal-I’ or ‘ideal ego’)” (Felluga, 2015, p. 179). In this stage, it is necessary for the infant to recognize its own image in the mirror (or any reflective surface including the mother’s face); this mirror image represents the ideal ego[5] or “the ideal of perfection that the ego strives to emulate” (Felluga, 2015, p. 142). As the child identifies itself with this ideal ego, it derives pleasure from seeing the mirror image move as the child itself moves, therefore feeling a “sense of completeness and mastery,” albeit “in contrast to the child’s experience of its own body, over which it does not yet have full motor control” (Homer, 2005, p. 25). Lacan (1949/1977) himself captures the mirror stage as follows:

> The *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation — and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic — and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development. (p. 4)

Following from Lacan’s own explanation, Felluga (2015) points out how recognizing one own’s image in the mirror stage is therefore “fundamentally self-alienating” since, upon seeing its own self reflected back, the infant recognizes itself as an “I” while also at the same time recognizing itself in the mirror as other (p. 180). In the similar vein, Homer (2005) also explains that, since, in the midst of the mirror stage, a sense of mastery over the body which the infant receives comes from the mirror image outside of itself, “the subject is not alienated *from* something or from itself but rather alienation is

[5] This is not to be confused with the *ego-ideal* which for Lacan is associated with the symbolic order, as opposed to the *ideal ego* in the imaginary order. The ego-ideal is the ideal point the subject must measure themself by; never being able to measure up to that ideal, the subject is bound to receive the Name-of-the-Father’s disapproval — what Felluga (2015) describes as “a situation one cannot escape since the subject, by definition, can never fully meet the symbolic order’s expectations” (p. 142).

constitutive of the subject — the subject is alienated *in* its very being" (p. 26). Remarking the "ambivalent affects" of first being jubilant at recognizing one's own image and later being afflicted with the realization that the moving reflection is not real, Paccaud-Huguet (2006) views "the function of the image as our first mediator and our perpetual other," whom we will always seek to unite and identify with, and whom "we will look for in adult life, whether in the social or the familial mirror: in the other's eyes" (p. 281).

For Lacan, it is where alienation and pleasure with the self's image meet that the ego materializes itself. The incongruity between, on the one hand, the ideal ego or "the idealizing image in the mirror" that is "bounded, whole, complete" and, on the other hand, what Lacan describes as "a fragmented body-image," the tumultuous state of one's reality and body at 6-18 months of age, builds "the logic of the imaginary's fantasy construction that would dominate the subject's psychic life ever after" (Felluga, 2015, p. 142). Hence, Lacan's theorization of the mirror stage is central to the imaginary order, which, for Lacan, does not cease to influence the subject throughout their adult life and therefore does not end when the child proceeds to the symbolic order or enters into language and is subject to the dictates of society.

To circle back to Hanania's argument, the narrator of *Whore* can, indeed, be deemed short of reaching the mirror stage, if we consider her identity crisis. In her article, Hanania (2010) directs our attention to how the narrator's self-image collapses in the reflection (p. 121). For instance, addressing Mr. Psychoanalyst, whom she has just challengingly referred to a few lines earlier as Mr. Parrot, the narrator admits, "I really am losing myself in all this house of mirrors, so that I don't know who I am anymore because of being so much like somebody else" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 88). Also, when the narrator bathes herself in the tub, spending hours there waiting for her clients, she makes sure that "no part can be out of the water [...] only the head and ears, making it easy to imagine that they don't belong to the same woman, that there are actually two women under the water, one alive and the other drowned"; she imagines her body being cut into two at the torso by a magic trick, "a woman in a box being cut with a saw" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 115). In addition, Hanania (2010) points out that it is also of no help that the narrator also lives in a world that dictates what ideal femininity should look like, so that "she seems doomed to mold her body and perceive it according to the external norms" [elle semble vouée à façonner son corps et à le percevoir selon

des modèles extérieurs] (p. 121). Nothing allows her to form her own identity, and this is not to mention how she does not even have her own name in the narrative except for "an assumed first name which belongs to a cadaver" [un prénom d'emprunt qui est celui d'un cadavre], that is, Cynthia, the older sister who died before the narrator was born (Hanania, 2010, p. 122). So, Hanania (2010) concludes, the mirror stage is perceived by Arcan as "a loss of corporeal and psychic unity" [une perte d'unité corporelle et psychique]; "with a surface hard and cold, the mirror has the edge of a castrating blade that cuts the woman from her being and her sexuality" [Surface dure et froide, la glace a le tranchant d'une lame castratrice qui coupe la femme de son être et de sa sexualité] (p. 122).

However, at the same time, even taking into consideration her troubled sense of her identity at times, it is difficult to perceive the *Whore* narrator as someone who, due to the failure in the mirror stage, is perpetually stuck in infancy, thus being akin to a girl doll and far from a full-grown woman, or, considering how she often admits to having her mother basically dominate her body and mind,[6] a pupa that will never grow wings. If anything, by being capable of dissecting the Law or Name-of-the-Father (nom du père) in such an incisive manner, the narrator in *Whore* attests to her firm and solid entrance into language and her place in the social world of the symbolic order. According to Lacan, once a child enters into language, which is the same thing as entering into the symbolic order, and submits themself to the rules and laws of society, that is when they also enter into a community of others. The social world of the symbolic order is one of "linguistic communication, intersubjective relations, knowledge of ideological conventions, and the acceptance of the law" (Felluga, 2015, p. 307). However, this *law* is what Lacan (1949/1977) refers to as the Name-of-the-Father: "It is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law" (p. 67). Representing "the laws and restrictions that control both [our] desire and the rules of communication," the Name-of-

[6] I concur with Hanania that the *pupa* (the mother) and the *poupée* (the daughter) are not far apart; in fact, they almost share the same entity. The narrator herself confirms it as such: "I'd have to think of her only a single time for my head to become hers, I think I already said, I have my mother on my back and in my arms, hung around my neck and rolled into a ball at my feet, I have her in every way and everywhere at the same time" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 126).

the-Father, as the term readily suggests, is not only closely tied with the symbolic order but also the super-ego, the Phallus, and the Oedipus complex (Felluga, 2015, p. 182). Indeed, connoting "the adult, normative, patriarchal, rational world," the symbolic order is "dominated by the phallus" (Watkins, 2001, p. 99). Therefore, needless to point out, in the throes of the Name-of-the-Father given support by the castration complex happening in the phallic stage — the third stage experienced at between 3-6 years of age (after the oral and the anal stage) which both Freud and Lacan consider to be pivotal to our psychosexual development — girls are a mere afterthought defined by lack, plagued by what Freud calls *Penisneid* or penis envy, bound to harbor animosity towards her mother, very much like the narrator in *Whore*, for failing to provide her with a penis and failing to possess that powerful phallus herself. Ultimately, girls, who will one day become women, will share the contempt that men direct towards them for being thus lesser.

Hence, it is no wonder why the narrator of *Whore* feels deeply a sense of lack which, for her, is further intensified to be closely bound with death, the ultimate state of void or lack, engendered by the inundation of the Law of the Father: "it has to be that it's not what I have or what I lack that's killing me, no, it's the feeling of death that comes before all that, speaking through what there is or in place of what's lacking, my father's Flood plowing its path through everything" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 144). Also, in the first paragraph (of the proper narrative after the preface), the narrator affirms her whoredom and says that "I didn't dream these thousands of men in my bed" (p. 13). At the end of the last paragraph of the book, which does not really provide any resolution or a sense of closure and even, indeed, circles back to the beginning, signifying no way out of the Law of the Father, the narrator still catches herself wishing to turn the relationship between her and her psychoanalyst into that of a whore and a client; however, she realizes right after, "but it will never happen, one last time, it can't happen since those things never occur when you're me, *when you're calling out to life from death's side*" (p. 172; my emphasis). This implacable sense of fatal void at the core of her identity should prove that, having undergone the mirror stage, the narrator has at least entered into the phallogocentric language that defines her and our symbolic order, being made to constantly feel a sense of lack by the Oedipal Name-of-the-Father.

Not only does Arcan's narrator attest to her passage into the symbolic order by harboring the void-inducing *Penisneid*, she also, again, proves her capability beyond that

of some creature in the larval stage by showing us how well-versed she is when it comes to how the Name-of-the-Father operates itself. For example, thinking about how her clients would admit to her that “they would never, ever like [their daughter] to be a whore, because it’s nothing to be proud of,” the narrator shoots back a mental response: “but who do you think I am, I’m the daughter of a father like any other, and what are you doing here in this room squirting sperm in my face if you wouldn’t want your daughter to take her turn in it” (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 98). The soliloquy that ensues will lay bare one of the central themes of the novel where women in society are already “whores,” not by profession, but by the notion that, under patriarchy, it has been instilled in them since when they were little girls that they have to make themselves desirable amidst the male gaze. Hence, the narrator tells us right from the beginning that “I was a whore before I was one” (p. 9), and that “[p]rostituting myself was easy, since I’d always known I belonged to others” (p. 8). By the narrator’s logic, her clients’ daughters are also already whores:

> first of all, who says she’s not a whore herself [...] and what’s caused such a horde of whores to accumulate like this, without public interest knowing about it, how did your daughters manage to open their mouths to the first comer, well, it happened on the way to school, don’t forget that little schoolgirl skirt lifted by the wind to show those little white undies, it happened with that look they were given, and they’ll keep at it right to the end, to the point when old age catches up with them (pp. 98-99)

Just like how the narrator always anticipates her own father to open the door and become her next client, she also imagines her clients not being able to believe themselves when one day they meet the whores that are their own daughters: “you’ll ask yourself why her and why me and you won’t understand, you won’t understand that it takes two to play this game, one to knock on the door and the other to open it” (p. 99). How the narrator ends this section in her narrative demonstrates that she understands even better than

her wealthy male clients,[7] who are supposedly at the top of the patriarchal pyramid, how the politics of desire and desirability between men and women helps to uphold the Name-of-the-Father. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, this is the kind of insight that the narrator would not possess, had she not, in the first place, recognized the self's image in the mirror and proceeded to understand, in the next stage, that image of the self as it stands amidst the larger social order that is the symbolic order.

3. Cynthia and the Narrator

Acknowledging how the narrator in *Whore* cannot have failed at the mirror stage, I therefore divert from Hanania's application of Lacan's theorization and argue that, indeed, the self's image reflected back at the narrator herself is Cynthia, her deceased older sister, and that the narrator's identity crisis stems, instead, from the discord between the ideal ego that is Cynthia and the fragmented body-image that the narrator herself embodies. Nevertheless, because Cynthia died a year before the narrator was born, it must be remarked that the narrator, amidst the first-person point of view and the confessional mode of her narrative, identifies with her late sister retrospectively. Despite their not having seen each other in the flesh, Cynthia still perfectly functions as the narrator's haunting mirror self as shall be explicated in this section.

First of all, as a prostitute, the narrator, who does not evince her real name anywhere in the narrative,[8] goes by the name Cynthia, solidifying the notion that they share the same entity: "I never talk about Cynthia because there's nothing to say, but

[7] The narrator's clients are supposedly wealthy and powerful since, according to her, "all I needed was to leaf through the anglophone daily, the *Gazette*, and find the escort agencies page, all I needed was to dial a number, the number of Montreal's most prestigious agency, and according to the ad, the agency hired only the best escorts and accepted only the best clientele, meaning the youngest women and the richest men, the two have always gone together, everybody knows that" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 9).

[8] Before adopting the name Cynthia, the narrator used to be called Jamie, which her clients said "didn't suit me, it was too American and vulgar, and it seems I'm the sophisticated French type" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 109). However, Jamie cannot be her real name either, since the narrator also tells us later on that "there isn't any name that can replace the one I've lost, my baptism name, which I reject and which you're not going to know since it was chosen by my mother" (p. 110).

as a whore I use her name, and not just by chance, since each time a client uses it, *it's her he's calling back from the dead*" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 6; my emphasis). Whereas the narrator is afflicted by her turbulent and chaotic sense of self, Cynthia, as an idealizing image in the mirror, represents the opposite. Dying very young at eight months old ironically empowers her; being freed from the influence of her parents — the narrator believes that one can only feel that influence after at least four or five years — Cynthia serves as a perfect ideal ego for the narrator to strive to emulate:

> my older sister who's taken over everything I didn't become, death has let her have everything, any future at all, yes, she could have been this or that, been a doctor or singer, the most beautiful woman in the village, become anything you want since she died so young, free of any possible defining mark one way or another, dead without any tastes or attitudes, and if she'd lived, I wouldn't have been born, that's the conclusion I've had to reach, her death gave me life, but if some miracle had made both of us survive my parents' goal of having only one child, *I definitely would have resembled her, been like her* (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 5; my emphasis)

Considering how *Whore* is categorized as autofiction, the neologism coined by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977 to describe the genre of written works that stands between the novel and the autobiography, the mirror image here is almost kaleidoscopic. Just like how Cynthia is a professional name for the narrator in *Whore*, Nelly Arcan is actually a pseudonym used by Isabelle Fortier. Having Initially adopted the name Nelly Arcan to avoid incurring any scandal for her family, a decision that she made at the last minute without thinking too much of it, Isabelle Fortier came to deem the pseudonym as "precious": "it serves as barrier between me and the personage of Nelly Arcan, between me and the others who read my books. It is sort of the same in prostitution: adopting another name, it is purely symbolic" [il sert de barrière entre moi et le personnage de Nelly Arcan, entre moi et les autres qui lisent mes livres. C'est un peu la même chose que dans la prostitution: porter un autre nom, c'est purement symbolique] (quoted in Laurin, 2015, para. 25). As for the scandal surrounding *Whore* where the novel that

she wrote became a shocking phenomenon for the general public in both Quebec and France, the author also stated that:

> "my book was not a project of scandal. I had no wish to scandalize anything. People perceived it that way because they might be in a sort of conformity, where prostitution equals scandal, sex equals scandal [...] I do not seek to arouse or pleasure, or gratify anyone when I write. I deconstruct. It is making one lose their hard-on,[9] not arousing someone." (quoted in Laurin, 2015, para. 26)[10]

Interestingly, Laurin (2015), who wrote the article in memory of Nelly Arcan following her suicide in 2009, also describes the moment when the author no longer wanted to remain anonymous to the press and the general public as "passing from the other side of the mirror" [passer de l'autre côté du miroir] (para. 19). In the hall of mirrors where Isabelle Fortier, Nelly Arcan, the *Whore* narrator, and Cynthia can see and absorb one another, the collective yearning seems to be that of deconstructing the kind of conformity that constrains sexuality, which encompasses far more than just women's role in an act of copulation. "Sexuality," for Nelly Arcan, "is not just the sexual practice nor the genitalia, but everything about every kind of comportment that surrounds seduction, and an encounter with the other sex in all forms" [la sexualité, ce n'est pas la pratique sexuelle, ni la génitalité, mais l'ensemble de tous les comportements qui entourent la séduction, et la rencontre de l'autre sexe sous toutes ses formes] (quoted in Laurin, 2015, para. 26). The mirror image that is represented by Cynthia, who, according to her father, "can't have a real personality" because "she died too young" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 5), thus

[9] This translation comes from the French word *débandant*, which is an -ing form of the verb *débander*. The word *débander* is a double entendre; it could mean either to unbandage or (in a very informal use) to lose one's erection.

[10] The original passage: "Mon livre n'était pas un projet de scandale. Je n'avais pas envie de scandaliser. Les gens l'ont perçu comme ça parce qu'ils sont peut-être dans une sorte de conformité, où prostitution égale scandale, sexe égale scandale [...] Je ne cherche pas à exciter ou à faire plaisir, ou à flatter dans le sens du poil, quand j'écris. Je déconstruis. C'est débandant, désexcitant."

stands in for the fluidity of identity, including its sexual aspect, which is sought after by not just her sister, the *Whore* narrator, but also by Isabelle Fortier/Nelly Arcan.

However, for the reason that the act in which the child recognizes its own self's image is, as has already been discussed, inherently self-alienating, the child's feelings towards the mirror image are "mixed, caught between hatred ('I hate that version of myself *because* it is so much better than me') and love ('I want to be like that image')," what Lacan himself terms the "primordial Discord" (Felluga, 2015, p. 180). Homer (2005) confirms this notion when he explains that, for Lacan, "from the moment the image of unity is posited in opposition to the experience of fragmentation, *the subject is established as a rival to itself*" (p. 26; my emphasis). This explains why the narrator feels at least, on the one hand, a hint of pressure originating from how she realizes she will never measure up to her dead sister: "my sister's been dead forever but still floats above the family table, she grew up there without anybody mentioning it and settled into the silence of our meals [...] *my older sister who's taken over everything I didn't become*" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 5; my emphasis). Later on in the novel, the narrator will go on to remind us of her adopted name and the feeling of inadequacy that haunts it: "my name is Cynthia, you know that already, it's not my real name but it's mine, it's my whore's name, the name of a dead sister I had to replace, *a sister I've never been able to compensate for*" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 109; my emphasis).

Even then, on the other hand, there exists this affection between Cynthia and the narrator. At one point, for example, the narrator envisions two sisters who are there to love and protect each other; presumably the stronger one of the two, who represents the ideal ego, will rescue the other one who, aligning with the fragmented and chaotic self, has fallen prey to the Name-of-the Father: "two sisters in free fall loving each other despite everything because they don't have a choice, I'd like her to be here with me to guard the door before the next clients, who'll also take their time, until the arrival of my father, whom she'd shield me against" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 138). Furthermore, the narrator sometimes tells her psychoanalyst about the "magic sister" whom she dreams of, referring to her as "*my double*, my wonder woman who seems to have been growing forever larger in my mind" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 66; my emphasis). In a dream of this nature, the narrator would have "*a sister whom I looked like*, we'd be *inseparable twins*" (p. 66; my emphasis). As the child who is bound to be both excited and perplexed by

the completeness and the mastery of the mirror image, mistaking those skills as its own, the narrator, in this dream, would also confuse between her own shortcomings and the ideal sister's plenitude, suspiciously claiming that "she'd succeed where I'd fail and vice versa, each of us would have our strengths and weaknesses" (p. 66). Nevertheless, it could not be clearer that these two sisters in the dreams, like the narrator and Cynthia, are the same entity with two selves reflecting each other amidst Lacan's mirror stage: "we'd both be a mirror for each other in which we recognized ourselves respectively, we'd be one and the other at the same time, the same woman split in two to the point of conquering the world" (p. 66).

In addition, the misrecognition or *méconnaissance*, according to Lacan (1949/1977), that stems from coming into contact with an ideal ego while the child's body itself is fragmented and turbulent "characterizes the ego in all its structures" from then on out (p. 6). This is what gives rise to what Lacan calls the imaginary order that will continue to exert its influence on the subject throughout their adult life, since "this creation of an ideal version of the self gives pre-verbal impetus to the creation of narcissistic phantasies in the fully developed subject" (Felluga, 2015, p. 180). In other words, all that the ego is will be tied to this *méconnaissance* as it refuses to perceive itself as actually fragmented and alienated. Homer (2005) points out that "Lacan insists that the ego is based on an illusory image of wholeness and mastery and it is the function of the ego to maintain this illusion of coherence and mastery" (p. 25). According to Lacan (1975/1991), the formation of desire depends on this narcissism of the Imaginary:

> The primary imaginary relation provides the fundamental framework for all possible eroticism. It is a condition to which the object of Eros as such must be submitted. The object relation must always submit to the narcissistic framework and be inscribed in it. (p. 174)

What this means is that the ideal ego then functions as a point of reference or a model for any desire to be mapped onto. Felluga (2015) further explains that, for Lacan, "love begins here; however, to make that love 'functionally realisable' (to make it move beyond scopophilic narcissism), the subject must reinscribe that narcissistic imaginary relation into the laws and contracts of the symbolic order" (p. 308). However, that our

desire must be filtered through the play of language in the symbolic order — since, after all, entering into the symbolic order means to enter into language — it must always fail in the presence of the Real,[11] which is "the state of nature from which we have been forever severed by our entrance into language" (Felluga, 2015, p. 264). By entering into the symbolic order, which is defined by the laws and dictates of society, we cut ourselves off from "the materiality of our bodily drives," essentially choosing culture over nature or the Real; therefore, desire, which, for Lacan, is associated with the symbolic order, has almost nothing to do with our material body or sexuality and almost everything to do with "social structures and strictures" and "the fantasy version of reality that forever dominated our lives after our entrance into language" (Felluga, 2015, p. 264).

In the end, desire's incessant failure before the Real has the effect of keeping us desiring: "desire in the symbolic order could, in fact, be said to be our way to avoid coming into full contact with the Real, *so that desire is ultimately most interested not in obtaining the object of desire but, rather, in reproducing itself*" (Felluga, 2015, p. 308; my emphasis). In other words, for Lacan, desire does not wish to be fulfilled, since to be fulfilled would mean to possibly come into contact with the materiality of the body which we have been deprived of up until that point, to potentially see *jouissance*, which is "the lost plenitude of one's material bodily drives given up by the subject in order to enter the symbolic order and access the symbolic power of the phallus, something that occurs upon the adoption of language and acceptance of the rules of the Name-of-the-Father" (Felluga, 2015, p. 158). Since *jouissance* belongs in the Real and therefore exceeds language or our ability to name it, encountering it would just be, according to Lacan, traumatic for us (Felluga, 2015, p. 158).

Cynthia, the dead sister, therefore represents the ideal ego who has to provide, in Lacan's own terms, "the fundamental framework for all possible eroticism" of the narrator, her living sister. In other words, what Cynthia embodies will have to be a point of reference or a model for the narrator to map her pattern of desire onto. However, whereas Cynthia stands in for the kind of fluidity of identity that aligns with the notion of freedom and liberation for women — "death has let her have everything, any future at all" (p. 5) —

[11] In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the imaginary order, the symbolic order, and the Real make up the three major structures of the psyche; the three are interconnected and work together to create a psychodynamic self throughout our entire life.

the narrator, on whom the concept of feminine fluidity also rubs off, instead, perceives this fluidity of identity as both repressive and oppressive. This I read as a result of the narrator having to reinscribe the narcissistic imaginary relation into the Name-of-the-Father of the symbolic order in order to render her desire, to use Lacan's own words, "functionally realisable." To illustrate, when she thinks about "what makes me a woman, about that femininity I have a reputation for," the narrator pinpoints it as not being "so much the result of a practice or a technique but *a kind of infinite fluidity I have*" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 15; my emphasis). Going on to describe this "infinite fluidity," she says:

> femininity is a fluidity that's never over and done with, and it exhausts itself by dint of not being able to sustain itself, and if I always crumble everywhere, in the most diverse situations, crumble into apprehension, joy, boredom, it's because even sitting or lying down, I'll never be fluid enough to come to the end of my fall, I'd have to fall below my chair, below my bed, the ground would have to open so I can hurtle infinitely into the depths of the earth, even farther down, down leaving my arms, legs, head behind, all those parts that, tangled together, knot me into a woman, and at the end all that would be left would be the heart of a princess freed of her swaddling clothes, a tip of a world chasing its own trajectory in the hope of coming out onto a sky that men don't know about. Yes, I can already imagine such a heart beating about itself, for itself, with nothing to hold on to, a heart that's useless but full to the brim. (pp. 15-16)

Recognizing that no matter how much she shapes and molds herself to fit the societal expectations of a desirable woman, a practice that is integral to both her position as a whore and a woman in general, the narrator realizes that somehow she will never be "fluid enough." To be free of these constraints, however, she would be obligated to "hurtle infinitely into the depths of the earth" and lose all that makes her a woman altogether; in order to obtain her autonomy, "a heart beating about itself, for itself," she would have to escape to somewhere that "men don't know about," thus no longer under the Name-of-the-Father — a life that would be considered "useless" for having

no currency in the sociocultural structure of patriarchy but most fulfilling, “full to the brim,” to the one leading it.

The manner in which the narrator perceives her own fluidity vis-à-vis how the Name-of-the-Father expects, controls, and polices how to perform femininity in society dovetails with how the narrator comports herself in her own profession. The narrator realizes that her own individuality as a person has nothing to do with her clients’ gratification; what arouses them is the fact that there is a woman there, any woman at all, to stroke their ego, turned on enough by them that she is willing to do whatever wild things with them:

> it isn’t me they’re getting hard for, never has been, it’s my whoredom, the fact that I’m there for that, to suck them over and over, gulping down these cocks one after another as if I were going to empty them once and for all, finally get what they have to say out of them, but anyway, I’m nothing when it comes to all this gushing out, it could just as well be somebody else, not even another whore but some doll made of air, a piece of some spun-sugar image, a mouth positioned at a leaking point that opens as they come from the idea that they have what it takes to make you come (p. 13)

Since “the idea that they have what it takes to make [her] come” exceedingly matters to her clients, she then loses herself in their expectations, letting herself be fluid enough to be the right shape for what they need:

> And it isn’t my life making me act, it’s theirs every time, each time my body starts moving, somebody else has ordained it, shaken it, someone else has made me take on that way of acting, kneeling like a little dog or wide open, on my back, my body reduced to a site of resonance, and the sounds coming from my mouth aren’t mine, I know because they’re a response to an expectation (p. 14)

Therefore, while both the narrator and Cynthia point to the state of feminine fluidity, they would not be on exactly the same page when it comes to what purpose that fluidity should serve or what sort of sentiment it is meant to envelop. Nevertheless, to view feminine fluidity in accordance with what Cynthia embodies would, indeed, be to follow in the footsteps of Luce Irigaray. In her essay "When Our Lips Speak Together," Irigaray (1977/1985) puts forth the notion that patriarchal language is ill-equipped to do justice to the many facets that women's sexuality and experience could assume; she therefore advocates for a new kind of language and gestures that would be better equipped to contain female pleasure which, for her, aligns with flux and fluidity:

> You remain in flux, never congealing or solidifying. What will make that current flow into words? It is multiple, devoid of causes, meanings, simple qualities. Yet it cannot be decomposed. These movements cannot be described as the passage from a beginning to an end. These rivers flow into no single, definitive sea. These streams are without fixed banks, this body without fixed boundaries. This unceasing mobility. (p. 215)

Similar to the dynamics between Cynthia and the narrator, the ideal ego and the fragmented body-image, both sharing the entity of a prostitute who has to pleasure men, Irigaray also talks about a You and an I separating from one another "for their pleasure," an outside and an inside, and urges for the self-sabotagingly fluid one — the one that could be aligned with the *Whore* narrator — to refrain from conforming to the external law, i.e. the Law of the Father:

> You/I become two, then, for their pleasure. But thus divided in two, one outside, the other inside, you no longer embrace yourself, or me. Outside, you try to conform to an alien order. Exiled from yourself, you fuse with everything you meet. You imitate whatever comes close. You become whatever touches you. In your eagerness to find yourself again, you move indefinitely far from yourself. From me. Taking one model after another, passing from master to master, changing face, form, and language with each new power that dominates you. You/we are sundered; as you allow yourself to be abused, you become an impassive travesty. You no longer return indifferent; you return closed, impenetrable. (p. 210)

While Irigaray's way of seeing femininity, which aligns, again, with what Cynthia embodies, can be freeing, effecting feminine fluidity in the fashion that Irigaray advocates would, however, be akin to rejecting and undoing the Name-of-the-Father itself. It would risk transporting the *Whore* narrator to the point before the entrance into the symbolic order or the play of language that is dominated by the Law of the Father, She herself would be stranded in the world that does not yet exist, the world without the symbolic power of the phallus where she does not have to be a whore, which is not just a job for her but, as has already been pointed out, an identity that is ingrained in her very being as a woman in a patriarchal society, her raison d'être. Therefore, it is fitting that the narrator should not be capable of Irigaray's flux since that would mean that she could potentially come into contact with *jouissance*, or the lost plentitude given up amidst the entrance into the symbolic order, and therefore be traumatized. In other words, it is necessary that the narrator does not perceive feminine fluidity in the way that Cynthia, her ideal ego, does; her desire, though having Cynthia as its framework, has to continue to not be fulfilled so that she does not have to acknowledge the materiality of her own existence, which was taken away from her upon entering into the symbolic order. All in all, she cannot risk having her "reality" threatened and being put in a traumatic state.

4. Humanity Before Law

In her article, Henry-Tierney (2019) examines the *Whore* narrator's intense matrophobia and explores how "prostitution and death are seen as subversive strategies to disrupt and ultimately reject the maternal cycle" (Introduction Section, para. 1). Elaborating on the idea of matrophobia, Adrienne Rich sees it as "a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers' bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr" (Quoted in Henry-Tierney, 2019, Introduction Section, para. 4). Henry-Tierney, then, argues that, considering how submissive the mother in *Whore* is, her body becomes "a monstrosity" for the narrator as she "fears the inheritance of a body that is ravaged by the constraints of female domestication" ("Corporeal Matrophobia and Dialectics of Sexuality" section, para. 2). Henry-Tierney cites prostitution and death as the ways for the narrator to break the cycle; the former functions as "a symbolic rejection of heteronormative coupledom" and "a force to disrupt the socially constructed institutions of marriage and motherhood, which have instigated the mother's demise" ("Performing Radical Surgery through Sex and Death" Section, para. 2). Invoking the passage where the narrator fantasizes about killing her mother off — "I should bury

her once and for all, cover her with the strongest metals so she can't come to the surface again and hunt me down with her octopus's grip" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 73) — Henry-Tierney points out that the mother's death would also spell the daughter's death ("Performing Radical Surgery through Sex and Death" Section, para. 3): "I'd have to be myself less, my mother less, my mother would have to kill herself [...] and then have us kill each other to the point of no longer having any reason to bear a grudge or love each other, to the point of becoming mutilated strangers" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 46). Contending that the death of both the mother and daughter symbolizes "the rejection of the way in which maternal relations have been fashioned and fixed according to phallic order," Henry-Tierney concludes that Arcan aims for "a dramatic overhaul of the patriarchal-driven social constructs and frameworks of reference, which position women in such a way that matrophobic angst becomes part of the fabric engrained in maternal relations" ("Performing Radical Surgery through Sex and Death" Section, para. 4). Taking a leaf out of Irigaray's book, Henry-Tierney ultimately puts forth the claim that the demise of both the mother and daughter, which would enable both to become strangers to each other, is required to create a clean slate "particularly at the level of the imaginary, in order to reinscribe new patterns of mother-daughter relations that assert women's subjective agency" ("Performing Radical Surgery through Sex and Death" Section, para. 4).

In this section, I will take a cue from Henry-Tierney's study, concurring with her that ultimately Arcan's narrator longs to create a different social order than the one she finds herself trapped in. That being said, my interpretations will depart from the notion that prostitution enables the narrator to disrupt the socially constructed institutions of heteropatriarchy, the reason being, as I have already pointed out in the previous section, that prostitution in *Whore* functions as an avenue for the narrator to actually uphold and perpetuate self-erasing societal expectations of how to perform feminine sexuality. In addition, while Henry-Tierney propounds that the objective for Arcan is one of "a dramatic overhaul of the patriarchal-driven social constructs and frameworks of reference," I argue that this "dramatic overhaul" is more likely a full-scale transcendence, and, regarding that, I doubt that both her and Nelly Arcan (who was herself a student of literature and psychoanalysis at the University of Quebec in Montreal) could really believe that such full-scale transcendence is feasible. In the logic of Lacanian psychoanalysis, to do so would mean to undo the symbolic order and the language through which we are constituted, which would mean, in turn, to go beyond symbolization and our social "reality" and access the real — exactly what Lacan himself insists is impossible to do after we already entered into language.

To start with, it has to be pointed out that the novel does not only try to push the idea that Cynthia the narrator and Cynthia the dead sister actually share the same entity, it also brings the reader's attention to the notion that the narrator's identity is also subsumed into that of her larval mother. As has already been brought up earlier, her brain is actually her mother's: "and I say that this isn't my brain, it's my mother's, because it's taken on her worm's caliber as it gets older" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 126). However, it is to be noted that this absorption of the narrator's identity into that of her mother, unlike her relationship with Cynthia the dead sister which represents a natural step in the narrator's own psychosexual development, does not originate from the narrator herself, but from the authority of her father, who, it goes without saying, stands in for the Name-of-the-Father in this narrative.

The narrator's father is characterized as an extremely devout Christian, who, for example, was on the verge of hitting his daughter when she once showed him the Host that she secretly and sacrilegiously took back home from church — "a fragile white circle that I suspected of not containing anything at all, why would God lower himself to reside in that, what a flattening out" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 5). Moreover, upon the narrator's moving into her own apartment for college, her father made sure that there was a blessed crucifix in every room; these crosses, though challenged by the narrator, are meant to serve as the policing eye of the traditional patriarchal state: "the reason he put crucifixes all over my apartment was to keep me under surveillance and to let visitors know he was there, nothing said that I don't hear, nothing done that I don't see, by this emaciated body of Christ, but I never understood how you could have a dead person for a god" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 7). Due to the specificity of Quebec where both Arcan and her narrator reside, it is important that the narrator's father who symbolizes the Name-of-the-Father has to be closely associated with the kind of conservatism represented by devout Christianity. These exceedingly traditional values which tend to be very strict about gender role are what Louise Forsyth emphasizes as being deemed vital if the province of Quebec is to still remain as a Francophone community in an Anglophone continent; she goes on to add, "The mother was allowed no identity in this very system; she was seen solely in terms of her maternal function within the family unit, recognized and appreciated for her domestic virtues alone. The daughter was usually a mother's projection or else her replacement" (Quoted in Henry-Tierney, 2019, "Corporeal Matrophobia and Dialectics of Sexuality" section, para. 2). For this very reason, it is indispensable that the father needs to passionately decree that the narrator's identity be subsumed into that of her larval mother: "my father calling me by my mother's name

when he got worked up, he'd forget in anger that I wasn't her, he'd call me by her name, and that's not all, he also called my mother by my name when he got worked up" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 127).

Therefore, whereas Cynthia, whose name the *Whore* narrator calls herself by, represents the idealizing mirror image for the narrator herself, the fusion between the narrator and her mother — the fact that no matter how much the daughter tries to reject her mother, the daughter keeps finding herself being pulled back under the shadow of the mother — I interpret as the narrator's need to adjust the imaginary framework granted by Cynthia to the laws and dictates of the symbolic order in order to render her love, according to Lacan, "functionally realisable." To elucidate, it is obvious in the narrative that the narrator blames her mother's degradation on her own submission to her husband and the Law of the Father that he stands in for: "and I'm telling you that she needs him to sleep or to wake up or even to eat, she needs him even though he doesn't want any part of it, even though she follows every gesture he makes that isn't addressed to her, with the eyes of a dog waiting to be walked" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 30). This is why, for the narrator, her mother has turned into an abject worm who lies in bed all day with her "too-thin lips and that downward smile full of self-pity, what is there except that witch's slit that can't substitute for a mouth, no, it's just a line that gives her face a funereal look, and her fingers that have been gnawed into eighth notes, crooked from uselessness" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 27).

That the mother upholds the Oedipal Name-of-the-Father is reinforced towards the end of the book when the narrator recounts how, as a child, she would occupy the space in bed between her father and her mother, "this boundary between them that wasn't supposed to be crossed, as big as a third person" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 159). The reason why the narrator wanted to be that "third person" is because "I absolutely had to put everything that separated them on myself" and "so I could be sure that there was no bond between them that didn't pass by way of me" (p. 160). I argue that this is a clear nod to the Oedipal cycle in which the three of them are stuck where a girl, realizing that she has been castrated, resents and depreciates her mother, who is also deprived of a penis, and ends up competing with her mother due to her unconscious longing to substitute her mother as her father's sexual partner. Hence, when the narrator, who, as a child, slept in the hallway close to her parents' room, could hear her parents having sex, she had the following very intense response:

> yes, they were fucking, I know it now and I would have had to have known it at that moment I went insane, I would have had to have understood it and leave the house forever with a sack containing an apple and a pear, leave with my braids falling down my back and my flowered bathrobe dragging on the ground, I would have had to burn down the house, put an end to what I never stopped imagining, I mean understanding that I wasn't there for anything, that it had nothing to do with me, and I truly believe that I knew it, I knew that what they were doing didn't have anything to do with me, that they were forgetting me to the point of moaning with pleasure (p. 165)

However, amidst this outpouring of Oedipal longings where she is seething at her parents "moaning with pleasure" without her being a part thereof, the narrator hints at wanting her mother to have put an end to it all, which the mother herself, of course, was not capable of:

> and if my mother hadn't already been a worm, she could have insisted and pushed me off the bed with her feet while spitting in my face, the way females do when they're fighting over a male [...] yes, my mother certainly could have done things to get me out of her home in the name of the couple that had to be preserved because it wasn't one, she could have but she didn't, she didn't do it but she should have, she should have put me out of harm and given me the chance to be normal, to live the life of a woman with a man, just one, not a thousand, a man who wasn't my father and who wouldn't grab my hair to vary the rhythm with which I sucked him, she could have given herself a chance to have a life and to make love in a bed that wouldn't already be occupied by somebody else, and who knows, maybe I wouldn't have become a whore, though I'll never know for sure (p. 161)

Therefore, on the other side of Henry-Tierney's argument about the mutual killing of both the mother and the daughter in order to turn the existing symbolic order on its head, there also exists the fantasy of mutual living, if only it had been possible for the larval mother to break the cycle.

Even then, it also cannot be denied that the narrator herself is also not that different from her worm of a mother regarding their conformity to the language of the symbolic order. Smart (2017) lays bare the imposed dichotomy that the *Whore* narrator is subject to when she, Smart, points out in her book that it is the fear of becoming her mother that "motivates [the *Whore* narrator] to become a prostitute, in a rupture which only forces her into the other stereotype reserved for women. Mother or whore, larva or Barbie doll are the only options for a woman in a male-dominated universe" (p. 267). Smart even goes as far as to contend that "the narrator gradually faces the fact that her life is an even sadder version of that of her mother" (p. 268). However, regardless of whose life is more tragic, hers or her mother's, the narrator herself hints at the notion that there are, indeed, only two options available to her in the Name-of-the-Father. Talking about the money earned from being a prostitute, the narrator goes, "yes, that's what the money's for, to cut myself away from my mother, give myself a face that belongs to me, to break away from that curse of ugliness that's so messily passed on, to the horror of young starlets and future Smurfettes"[12] (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 29).

Even then, Felluga (2015) admonishes us to constantly be aware that, for Lacan, "the Real and the Imaginary continue to play a part in the evolution of human desire within the symbolic order" (p. 308). Summarizing the Real as "the hard kernel around which symbolization fails, the resounding echo felt in the gaps of the Symbolic," Paccaud-Huguet (2006) emphasizes that it is "that which never stops *not being written* except in moments of traumatic encounter," where one is somehow made to come into contact with a glimpse of the Real (p. 285). Hence, we often find that, in spite of the narrator's whoring and becoming the epitome of playing into the desire politics of patriarchy, she often fantasizes either about another version of the existing symbolic

[12] The Smurfettes are adjacent to the whores in the narrator's worldview; they are women who are willing to assimilate into society's norms of beauty and desirability as rendered through the male gaze. This signification stems, of course, from the comic strip *The Smurfs* by the Belgian comics artist Peyo. Created by Gargamel, the evil wizard who is the Smurfs' archenemy, Smurfette is made to spy on the Smurfs and create discord among them. Wanting to be part of the Smurfs, she is later integrated into their community. As part of the transformation, that is, a spell cast by Papa Smurf, her hair is changed from black to blond, which also goes with her other feminine features such as long eyelashes, a white dress, and white high heels. Fitting the *Whore* narrator's analogy, Smurfette rouses romantic attraction of every Smurf.

order where the Name-of-the-Father is reconfigured to be less in favor of the phallus or about the natural state or the world prior to the Law, completely different from the one she inhabits altogether. For example, being angered and upset by the story of Hagar in the Genesis, who — being the Egyptian slave of Sarai (later Sarah), the childless wife of Abram (later Abraham) — was made the concubine to Abram in order to bear a child in her mistress's stead, the narrator wishes for a different history:

> but what kind of god are you to push men into the arms of their servant and to let servants play at being whores, and if I'd have been that servant instead, I would have killed myself, I would have challenged God to strike me down, change me into a pillar of salt and leave humanity outside of this crime, so that history could be something else, somewhere else, somewhere in the life of fathers and mothers walking hand in hand and making sure that the servant walks behind, somewhere in the life of children knowing who their parents are and what a servant's for (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 102)

In addition, amidst her fantasy about "two sisters in free fall loving each other despite everything," which has already been mentioned earlier, the narrator also harbors a radical fantasy of replacing the social foundations of the existing social order, creating "a new language," and breaking the Oedipal cycle by severing the ties with their parents, all of which would be equal to overturning all the current symbolization of the current symbolic order altogether:

> there's so much she and I would have to do, create a new language spoken by us alone, made of words that adjust to what has to be said, secret words that would make us invulnerable, end our connection to our parents, the clients, to everything that could disturb our ecosystem, and we'd have to refuse any man who wouldn't love us the same, who wouldn't give us an equal share of attention and caresses (pp. 138-139)

Finally, reminiscing about her experience at a rave among thousands of people all feeling joy under the influence of drugs and endless music, the narrator evinces her yearning to go back to “the beginning of time” and “humanity before law” amidst the atmosphere where, for once, she could feel that she could lovingly become one with other people around her:

> the crowd under the projection of multicolored lights, pulsating like an enormous lung, forming a single body, a warm, muscular organ, a compact, droning mass broken down into a million bouncing points, and this incredible loudness that would be unthinkable in any other context, the music seems to come from inside, from the belly, like an orgasm building, and everybody hugs and massages one another at random, they call it tribal, orgiastic, the beginning of time reactivated, the human community as it used to be way back, a humanity of ritual and possessions, excess and the supernatural, *humanity before law*, just instinct and goddesses, the cult of the moon before its mystery was pierced (p. 135; my emphasis)

In the passage above, the crowd forming one whole bodily mass in a both wholesome and awesome fashion — not to mention the hearkening back to the dawn of time where no language or order could have been formed fully, if at all — can be read as the narrator coming into brief contact with *jouissance*, or what Lacan sees as “the lost plenitude of one’s material bodily drives given up by the subject in order to enter the symbolic order and access the symbolic power of the phallus” (Felluga, 2015, p. 158). That the *Whore* narrator is having a glimpse of the real bodily *jouissance* is also reinforced by her associating the experience with the notion of “humanity before law.” To illustrate, in *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler (1990) discusses, by way of Michel Foucault, the dual function of systems of power where these systems do not just exercise their *juridical* capacity by regulating and controlling political life but also, in the same breath, *produce* the very subjects whom they claim to merely regulate: “But the subjects regulated by such structures are, by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures” (p. 3). In other words,

“[j]uridical power inevitably ‘produces’ what it claims merely to represent; hence, politics must be concerned with this dual function of power: the juridical and the productive” (p. 3). However, in order for their subjects not to question or challenge the power of the juridical systems, these systems have to conceal their productive capacity, making it seem like they are not actually the ones who produced those subjects; those subjects just happened to be born that way: “In effect, the law produces and then conceals the notion of ‘a subject before the law’ in order to invoke that discursive formation as a naturalized foundational premise that subsequently legitimates that law’s own regulatory hegemony” (p. 3).

Mapping the above theoretical framework onto Arcan’s *Whore*, it is clear that, by being obsessively enamored with the state of “humanity before law,” the narrator longs for the materiality of our bodily drives, our body as a tabula rasa, prior to the inscription into any social categories, be it sex, gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, etc. This is the reason why I venture to put forth that, even further than what Henry-Tierney terms as “a dramatic overhaul of the patriarchal-driven social constructs and frameworks of reference,” Arcan does not, in fact, content herself with just fixing what is broken, albeit the amount of fixing could be as massive as needed; she actually aims for full-scale transcendence, humanity completely before the Name-of-the-Father. The problem here is that this materiality of our existence, the plenitude of our being prior to entering any language or symbolization, which the *Whore* narrator longs for, requires our access to the Real, which, according to Lacan, is impossible. In fact, even our brief encounter with it as we experience *jouissance* can be traumatic since, in essence, *jouissance* is beyond language and therefore cannot be named.

5. Conclusion

The Lacanian feminist Kristeva (1980/1982) posits the association between the abject and the eruption of the Real. She states that “[t]he corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject” (p. 4). What Kristeva gets at is the notion that our coming into contact with a corpse leads to “the breakdown of the distinction between subject and object that is crucial for the establishment of identity and for our entrance into the symbolic order”; the corpse represents “death’s insistent materiality” and “[o]ur reaction to such abject material

makes us feel in immediate bodily ways what is essentially a pre-lingual response" (Felluga, 2015, pp. 3-4). As Kristeva (1980/1982) herself puts it:

> A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death — a flat encephalograph, for instance — I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or marks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. (p. 3)

It therefore follows that, for Kristeva, the abject is associated with *jouissance*. According to Homer (2005), although *jouissance* is a term that is commonly translated into English as "enjoyment," it actually entails "a combination of pleasure and pain, or, more accurately, pleasure *in* pain" (p. 89). This pain, as has already been pointed out, can be traumatic for us, since *jouissance* puts us in contact with the material bodily drives that we lost upon entering the symbolic order. The trauma, then, arises as our very "reality" is being threatened and as we are at a loss for a means to express our experience, since *jouissance* basically opens us to the glimpse of the Real, which always exceeds language. As Felluga (2015) puts it, "the very entrance into language marks our irrevocable separation of the Real"; hence, the reason why Lacan was fond of saying, "the real is impossible" (p. 264). Differently put, the experience of trauma

> also reveals how the real can never be completely absorbed into the symbolic, into social reality. No matter how often we try to put our pain and suffering into language, to symbolize it, there is always something left over. In other words, there is always a residue that cannot be transformed through language. This excess, this 'X' as Lacan will call it, is the real. (Homer, 2005, p. 84).

For Kristeva (1980/1982), the separation of ourselves from the animal in order to mark the clear boundaries between us and the abject dated back to the primitive times: “by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism” (pp. 12-13). Therefore, the *Whore* narrator’s interactions with the client whom she refers to as Michael the Dog does not only violate the distinction between humans and animals but also, amidst the grammar of patriarchy, the distinction between subject and object, that is, between a man and a woman respectively.

Being asked by Michael the Dog to do the role reversal where she, instead of being submissive, is supposed to slap and shout at him while he “yaps and whimpers like an animal,” the narrator afterwards finds herself in a daze: “how not to detest life after leaving such a scene, how not to look for what’s hiding behind the suits of all these men outside crossing the street on their way to work [...] how not to feel queasy about institutions and office buildings, in fact, about this whole system of dogs pretending to be businessmen” (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 55). Realizing that, excluding the inside of the room she uses for work, “in every other case I’m the dog,” the narrator toys with insanity when she imagines running into Michael the Dog and finding that he is no longer a dog: “if I run into him someday in the real world, outside this room, I’ll turn away for fear of not finding anything abnormal about him, for fear of not recognizing the mark of madness in him *and becoming a bit crazy myself*” (p. 55; my emphasis). Asking herself in the end, “don’t you have to be crazy to hit people just because they ask for it, *don’t you have to be a worm to whore like this, with dogs*” (p. 55; my emphasis), the narrator confirms the violation of the boundaries that brings her *jouissance* and allows her a glimpse of the Real. Although worms and dogs are not exactly abject in the way that corpses are, what transpires here all the same is the collapse of the distinction between subject and object where the narrator is no longer sure whether she herself is not a dog fit, in the context of the quoted passage, for being both physically and verbally abused; an abject slave, so to speak. Moreover, she also questions whether she is not herself a worm, which, in the novel’s context, always refers back to her abject mother rotting in bed. The Real flaunts itself when the experience makes the narrator realize that she has been made a dog or a whore where another reality could exist in which she would not have to assume those roles. Face to face with the materiality of her existence, before a passing sight at

what her identity could have been all along without the patriarchal inscription, the narrator becomes undone.

Ultimately, the narrator of Nelly Arcan's *Whore* is caught in a dead end, not unlike the convoluted narrative of which she is at the center. Towards the end of *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990) proclaims that "indeed, in my view, the normative focus for gay and lesbian practice ought to be on the subversive and parodic redeployment of power rather than on the impossible fantasy of its full-scale transcendence" (p. 169). What Butler means is that, since we cannot achieve the complete overturn of the existing symbolic system in the struggle against the hegemonic heteropatriarchy, the most effective tool available to us is to keep gradually subverting and parodying the very system in order to expose its manipulation and shortcomings. True to Butler's words, the narrator in *Whore* cannot achieve the full-transcendence of the symbolic order as coming into contact with the Real proves to be traumatizing. However, sadly, her attempt at parodying her clients, who represent the agents of the Name-of-the-Father, also proves to be pitiably futile, almost pathetic and farcical, since what seems to be the only means of her fighting back is the gray balls of her clients' body hairs which the narrator lets accumulate and scud around the room in an attempt to communicate to her clients that "they're only a stray item in a series of men passing through and that one day they'll find themselves in that undifferentiated pile on the floor" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 22). Although it is never mentioned in the novel how her clients react to those supposedly defiant balls of hair or whether they even notice them at all in the first place, it is hard to imagine in general any virile man who comes to relieve himself with a whore actually being bothered by mere tufts of hair scattering in the room. After all, it is not to be forgotten that Cynthia, the narrator's ideal ego, is reflected back to her from the place of death; while death grants Cynthia the endless possibility to be and to have anything that she would want, that fluidity still comes from the side of death. Therefore, again, the narrator is offered no exit. As has already been pointed out, the narrator, at the end of the book, still finds herself wanting to be a whore for her psychoanalyst, "calling out to life from death's side" (Arcan, 2001/2005, p. 172).

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