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POSTMODERN INTERPRETATIONS OF THE CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN SHORT STORY

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Сања Ј. Игњатовић

ПОСТМОДЕРНА ТУМАЧЕЊА САВРЕМЕНЕ КАНАДСКЕ КРАТКЕ ПРИЧЕ

ДОКТОРСКА ДИСЕРТАЦИЈА

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Abstract:

Inspired by discussions on postmodern theory, the dissertation deals with irony and parody as methods reflective of the political and ideological dimensions of a literary work. Moreover, the dissertation problematizes postmodern representation and examines the manifestations of irony and parody in contemporary Canadian short fiction with the aim of uncovering the manner in which they may serve as a prism for critical examination of culture, as well as the extent to which the mentioned methods render this selection of fiction political. Dealing with the postmodern and contemporary short fiction, the dissertation explores the purpose and effectiveness of postmodern methods – irony and parody – in Canadian short stories published between 1999 and 2016. The interpretations of these short stories uncover the persistence of a 'double-edged' or 'double-voiced' sensibility achieved by the use of postmodern irony representing the authentic expression of contemporary authors, even when the postmodern philosophical basis and the short story form, in terms of the genre conventions, do not allow for further elaboration. Moreover, the sensibility of the contemporary Canadian short story reflects the postmodern philosophical refusal to situate its vision in a critical or ethical center in its emphasis on the interrogative process. The manner in which postmodern techniques are used reveals the

awareness of the constructed nature of the discourse shaped by the inheritance of tradition which the storytelling process explores. In those terms, the discourse of these contemporary authors is a product of the exploration of the cultural and the socio-political affinities and *distinctions* of the contemporary society. Therefore, it represents both a manifestation of the postmodern *difference*, from the cultural and political perspectives of the storyteller, and the acute awareness of narrative as an instrument of interpellation addressed at the reader. Contemporary authors recognize both the act of storytelling and its product – the narrative discourse, as continuous with the discourses of the past, but also as the product of the present moment, which underscores the very dialogical relation between the two – the past and the present – in a decentered exploration.

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Ментор: др Милена Каличанин, ванредни професор Филозофског факултета Универзитета у Нишу

Наслов: Постмодерна тумачења савремене канадске кратке приче

Резиме: Дисертација се бави иронијом и пародијом из угла испирисаног расправама о постмодерној теорији као методама у којима се огледа политико-идеолошка димензија стваралаштва, а самим тим, испитује се проблематика постмодерне репрезентације као и њене манифестације у савременој канадској фикцији на примеру кратке приче са циљем да истражи како то савремена (канадска) књижевност служи као призма за испитивање културе у којој настаје, и у којој мери је израз којим се користи политичан. Бавећи и феноменом постмодерне и постмодернизма у савременој фикцији, истражује се реторичка сврха ироније и пародије, у канадским кратким причама објављеним у периоду од 1999. до 2016. године.

Тумачења ових кратких прича откривају присуство „другог гласа“ у приповедању, односно посебног квалитета постмодерне ироније која представља аутентичан критички израз савремених аутора, чак и када постмодерна филозофска премиса и форма кратке приче, односно њен жанровски оквир, не дозвољају елаборацију. Такође, долази се до увида да је овај сензибилитет савремене канадске приче одраз постмодерне филозофске мисли која води даље од визије критичког или етичког центра наглашавајући критички процес. Начин на који су постмодерне технике коришћене открива свест о вештачкој природи дискурса, уоквиреној траговима наслеђа, чиме се у процесу приповедања експериментише. У том смислу, дискурс ових савремених аутора и сам је одраз преиспитивања културолошких и социо-политичких афинитета и *разлика* савременог друштва, и тиме

представља како одраз постмодерног *другачијег*, из културолошке и политичке перспективе приповедача, тако и разумевање да је наратив сам по себи метод интерпелације читаоца. Савремени аутори препознају да су чин приповедања, и сам производ тог процеса – наратив, у континуитету са дискурсима прошлости, али и производ садашњег тренутка, па нагласак на процес дијалога прошлости и садашњости не дозвољава ништа осим децентриране перспективе.

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INTRODUCTION

In *Splitting Images – Contemporary Canadian Ironies* (1991), in the Introduction, Linda Hutcheon elaborates on what she calls "[the] strange title" (1) as pertaining to the phrase from the report in the *Canadian Forum* which conducted a survey on the Canadian understanding of their own national identity – against the conception of American culture as they perceive it, but also in terms of their own *Canadianness*. Implicitly recognizing the historical tendency to define the Canadian against the American socio-cultural and political influence, Hutcheon notices that Canadians had little trouble defining *Americanness*, and yet "when confronted with 'as Canadian as…,' they would falter" (1991: 1). The source of the issue, it seems, becomes evident in the light of the Canadian demographic make-up and the complex networks of ethnic and racial profiles determining the mutable or fluctuating Canadian mosaic. Hutcheon suggests, "perhaps the most Canadian of answers would be that of a woman responding to a recent survey with the words of my title: 'As Canadian as possible under the circumstances'" (1991: 1). It is in this particular response to the elusive question of what it is to be Canadian that Hutcheon finds the underlying "self-deprecating irony" (1991: 1) crucial to potentially understanding why it is that Canadian culture and literature abound in such "paradoxes and anomalies, governed only by the compromise and kept strong only by moderation" (1991: 1). Similarly, in "Literary and Popular Culture," a chapter in *Canadian studies in the new millennium* (2013), Andrew Holman and Robert Thacker deal with certain aspects of Canadian literature and popular culture – as defining Canadianness – yet observe it "as a loose grab bag of seemingly distinctive activities, only vaguely connected" (185). The powerful influence coming from the notorious neighbor, "the driving animus of American culture so close by – and in many ways so similar," (Holman & Thacker 2013: 185), leads Holman and Thacker to believe that "Canadian popular and literary culture is often best understood as 'the distinction of small differences'" (2013: 185). The distance between Hutcheon's study, *Splitting Images*, and Holman and Thacker's chapter "Literary and Popular Culture," the three decades, seems to offer the latter no particular critical insight that would differ from Hutcheon's.

With this in mind, with an even lesser distance towards the object of investigation, it seems almost futile to endeavor to answer the question of what makes Canadian contemporary short fiction particularly Canadian, especially considering the historical and colonial legacy it has undertaken

to revise and explore critically. Even if this study does implicitly, at this point, and explicitly in the interpretative section, restate Linda Hutcheon's cautious claim – that it is irony: self-deprecating, probing, interrogating, tentative, unassertive, sometimes defeatist, sometimes loud – that defines Canadianness: an introspective, self-reflexive and interrogative mode of coexisting amidst the paradoxes and contradictions of multiculturality, *Postmodern Interpretations of the Contemporary Canadian Short Story* attempts to deal with the specificities of contemporary Canadian short fiction in terms of what it is that participates in its poetics, with the premise that contemporary Canadian short fiction remains in the framework of postmodern interrogation, in spite of claims that contemporary fiction has gone beyond the poetics of postmodernism.

To digress, in the Introduction to the collection *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English* (1995), Margaret Atwood finds the issue of "Canadianness" a crucial distinguishing quality of fin-de-siècle Canadian short fiction, but also a peculiarity that undoubtedly contributes to its poetics. However, in Atwood's words, this particular quality, "the gene for Canadianness," seems to be impossible to describe or explain:

> In a country thousands of miles wide and almost as tall, which covers terrain as diverse as the frozen Arctic, the Prairies, the West Coast rain forests, and the rocks of Newfoundland; in which fifty-two indigenous languages are spoken – none of which is English – and a hundred or so others are also in use; and which contains the most cosmopolitan city in the world, the erstwhile true-blue Toronto the Good – it's kind of difficult to pin such a thing down. (1995: xiii)

The "Canadianness" of contemporary Canadian short fiction, the endeavor to discover the true nature of Canadian identity and not merely against another cultural variable, but rather against the changing socio-political global and regional backdrop, becomes more difficult to define with the late twenty-century turn away from the seemingly grander questions of national identity and the historical legacy of the colonial past. Contemporary Canadian short fiction, overwhelmingly aware of the residue of its socio-political and historical transitions, becomes focused on the processes of the present. In *The Canadian Short Story*, an anthology published in 1988, Michelle Gadpaille talks about "this exceptionally strong genre of Canadian literature" (vii) as revealing a visible shift in the direction which no longer relies on American postmodern trends or philosophical and

literary influences. However, Gadpaille explains this development as a reaction to deconstruction and the postmodern attempts to, apparently unsuccessfully, recover from it. The implications of Gadpaille's claim that postmodernism merely serves as a 'void-filling' or transitioning stage in the continuum of the Canadian short story (1988: vii-viii) may further be discussed in terms of the poetics of the contemporary Canadian short story although the attitude of this dissertation strongly disagrees with such a claim. However, this critic's insight that Canadian short fiction sets up a trend of its own, "to affirm story-making force for exploration, understanding, and healing, and to create a literature out of everyday life that compels immediate recognition and identification" (Gadpaille 1988: vii-viii) offers an invaluable contribution to the general discussion on the subject of "Canadianness" – as Canadian critics and authors see it, the defining qualities of the contemporary Canadian short fiction, as well as its postmodern character, as the author of this dissertation sees them.

What Gadpaille calls the "new" story (1988: vii-viii), the form of short fiction emerging at the end of the twentieth century indeed exhibits a different "brand of subtle subversion" (1988: vii-viii) – the subversion that no longer tackles the intangible socio-political forces by dealing with their apparent historical and ideological aspects, but the subversion that dissolves them in the recognition of their material presence and manifestation at the level of individual narratives. It is this approach that essentially enables the life-affirming qualities of the contemporary Canadian short fiction, regardless of Gadpaille's claims against its postmodern quality, or rather her comments against the quality of American postmodern trends in general. In fact, any disagreement with Gadpaille's interpretation of the defining qualities of the Canadian short story at the end of the twentieth century would reduce it to a petty theoretical debate on postmodernity and postmodern poetics, which are, as will later be discussed in the section Theory, Criticism and the Schisms, highly problematic as a framework as it has become impossible to determine which particular 'postmodernism' critics are referring to when casually dropping the term. Gadpaille's crucial insight validating the already mentioned shift, "the story's recent tendency to turn inward, towards the body, the emotions, and ultimately the mind – territories that have not received sustained or primary attention by male writers in Canada" (1988: vii-viii) additionally confirms the postmodern turn of Canadian short fiction, as well as the plasticity of the postmodern methods – by no means innovative or ground-breaking, essentially modernist, but employed analytically to the individual and subjective experience of the present moment. This dissertation will argue that

it is precisely the underlying philosophical and ideological bases of the postmodern methods that make postmodern criticism highly expedient and constructive for the analysis of the multiplicity of experiences in contemporary society, and this is what Gadpaille acknowledges in terms of the emergence of new trends in Canadian short fiction.

Additionally, in *The Canadian Short Story*, a study concurrent with the first edition of Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Gadpaille discusses the short story genre through the wider Canadian cultural and political practice and distinguishes a notable movement "towards the body, the emotions, and ultimately the mind" (vii). This already mentioned tendency in the Canadian short story, according to Gadpaille, not only underscores the effort to "affirm story-making force for exploration, understanding and healing" (vii), drawing on the material of everyday life, but also in strongly emphasizing the topicality with regard to cultural, social, political and economic changes. It is quite ironic that the postmodern undercurrent guiding this movement towards the creation of a new kind of short fiction form receives negative criticism from Gadpaille even though the postmodernist impulse is essentially conducive to it. In other words, it is the postmodern insistence on foregrounding the liminal and the unvoiced, essentially creating a space for the unexplored dimensions of the contemporary experience, from the viewpoint of a multifocal-subject, that allowed for the emergence of both authors with authentic and subjective interpretations of the narratives of the Canadian society, but also female authors whose authorial scope no longer holds any restrains pertaining to the domestic or public space. Gadpaille distinguishes the female short story authors' practice from that of their male counterparts in terms of there being a visible change, if not a shift, in the poetics of the period. This critic's characterization of postmodern (male) literature being an attempt to "fill the void left after the (largely male) American post-modernists deconstructed the well-made story" (vii) is not unproblematic, but it certainly sheds light on the emerging or yet forming trends in the poetics at the very end of the twentieth century, and confirms the position that it is precisely the postmodern turn that facilitated the incursion of female authors, spurred on by the postmodern political inquisitiveness, with radically different perception of contemporaneity. Qualifying postmodern literature as aspiring to fill a gap or 'void' left by modernism only draws attention to the extent of the theoretical abstraction pertaining to both modern and postmodern poetics, but more so the postmodern critical practice.

However, it would also be imprudent to disregard the coexistence of, at the very least, two sensibilities, female and male, diverging from each other in culturally and politically colored directions. These two sensibilities, at the end of the twentieth century, do not necessarily diverge in exclusive manners, but rather they reflect the nature of the subjective experience in terms of the social, political, economic and the overall cultural experience. This is to say, postmodern literature at the end of the twentieth century marks a point where uniform experience of gender roles and so-defined identity no longer holds. The discussion on postmodern poetics should shed more light onto what it is that makes a literary work postmodern, whether there exist certain distinctive trends within the larger framework of postmodern poetics; and the analysis of contemporary Canadian short stories should provide insight into the qualities of the contemporary poetics, as well as reveal whether there indeed exist such distinctive qualities contingent upon the gender of the author, though this is not the primary focus of the study.

Gadpaille sees the tension between the "modernist and post-modernist" directions in Canadian literature as "a sign of vigour" (1988: 118), which is in line with the argument that the postmodern critical thought, and postmodern literature, does present an unpretentious evolution from modernism to a more comprehensive, perhaps equally but *differently* subjective, interpretation of contemporaneity. Additionally, Gadpaille singles out "the diversity of the origins" (1988: 118) and the grass-root support on the local and national levels as the source of the variety and multiplicity of voices constructing the literary discourse at the end of the twentieth century, and the interpretative section tentatively addresses this *event* in two of the selected stories.

In the preface to *Other Solitudes – Canadian Multicultural Fictions* (1990), a study by Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond, the latter comments that even though Canada has been "a cultural mosaic since its early times, Canadian literature has not reflected that until the late 1940s when "a new generation of writers looked to their cultural roots for inspiration," and that is four decades before the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (July 1988), "declaring as its goal the preservation and enhancement of Canada's multicultural heritage" (Hutcheon & Richmond 1990). In the Introduction to their study, Hutcheon and Richmond emphasize that the exploration of "both the *lived* experience and the *literary* expression of multiculturalism in Canada," at the very end of the twentieth century, stand for "conversations frequently [addressing] crucial issues, such as racism and cultural confusions and tensions, in a direct, even confrontational manner" (1990: 1),

without censorship or any particular effort at their placing within a preferred or compulsory socio-cultural or political framework, suggesting, therefore, a practice that is politically legitimated by the Canadian Multicultural Act. The critics further this argument with regard to the absence of the term 'ethnic', or rather its substitution with the term 'multicultural' in the dialogical space dealing with questions of the ideal of multiculturalism, but also its foundational ideology in terms of "*all* Canadians [being] ethnic, including French and British; the fact that the word is *not* so used points to a hierarchy of social and cultural privilege that this collection wants to challenge" (Hutcheon & Richmond 1990: 2). In a manner, Hutcheon's and Richmond's study reflect the late twentieth-century influence of postmodern trends on the discourse of Canadian multiculturalism, the postcolonial critique, in the effort to avoid the tendency to equate "ethnic" with "foreign," which, in these critics' words, "has to do with the social positioning of the 'other', and is thus never free of relations of power and value" (1990: 2). As Hutcheon and Richmond see it:

> Multiculturalism, for all the extremes of 'hype' and cynicism, is real and immediate for Canadians. […] The multiracial and multiethnic nature of this country is made real to us – is written into our consciousness of what it means to be Canadian – by Canadian writers. […] to recognize that literature depends on the whole of culture, of history and social traditions, without reducing diversity to ethnocultural enclaves. (1990: 5)

Almost thirty years later, Amy Ransom and Dominick Grace in "Introduction: Bridging the Solitudes as a Critical Metaphor," a chapter in *Canadian Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror: Bridging the Solitudes* (2019), see Canada "as a nation [that] owes its roots to twin European colonizing powers, Great Britain and France" (1). However, this historical colonial legacy, on their view, reveals in the Canadian literary practice "anxiety" of "varying degrees" in that literature has served as a space for "[writing] back to the empire, questioning imperial prerogatives, deconstructing foundational myths, and asserting the ongoing presence of aboriginal communities and the arrival of new ones" (Ransom & Grace 2019: 1). The new communities imply a wide category of individuals sharing and participating in the co-creative process of defining Canadianness, "[exposing] the limitations of the solitudes concept so often applied uncritically to the Canadian experience" (Ransom & Grace 2019: 2). Even though Ransom and Grace specifically discuss science fiction, or rather, whatever clearly swerves away from the realist tradition, their insight might be extended to contemporary Canadian short fiction as well since they observe the

genre of science fiction, in the contemporaneity context, as a world “in which the global rather than the national context is central to an understanding of self and place” (2019: 3). For Ransom and Grace:

> Canada is *not* two solitudes, internally. Another standard metaphor for Canada is the mosaic, reflecting Canada’s official commitment to multiculturalism and representing the nation not as one thing or even two things (Québec and The Rest of Canada, or TROC, as MacLennan’s paradigm often gets rephrased) but as a glittering array of different things that make up a whole by juxtaposing and contrasting very diverse cultures and perspectives. (2019: 2)

Coextensively to the implications of Hutcheon’s and Richmond’s assertion in *Other Solitudes* that diversity should not be reduced to “ethnocultural enclaves” (1990: 5), Ransom and Grace see contemporaneity as a space “in which disturbing trends in current politics are working to build walls rather than bridges and therefore threaten the very idea of bridging cultural, political, and ideological differences” (2019: 3), and reject “the antiquated notion of Canada as two (or more) solitudes” (2019: 3). More importantly, Ransom and Grace see the socio-political trends as the source of “the gaps (perceived or otherwise) between superficially separate groups, regions, and ideologies” (2019: 3), and call for “the more productive attitude toward nationhood and cultural engagement” (2019: 3) focused on *bridging* rather than their being emphasized as a source of multiplicity, divergence, division, or other. Holman and Thacker’s article “Literary and Popular Culture” echoes this position in terms of the question of “how […] Canadians perform *Canadianness*” (2013: 187), and they suggest that:

> Perhaps more than others, Canadians perform their culture with a palpable sense of self-awareness that stems from an inability to clearly define themselves. Canadian culture has never been one thing; it has always been many, sometimes conflicting, things – French, English, Native; eastern, western, northern; Catholic and Protestant; British and American. Moreover, Canadian culture has always been marked with the dominant impression that it, like the country it represents, was and is in transition; it is *on the road* to cultural certitude but in no danger of arriving there anytime soon. (2013: 187)

In her study, *Double Voicing the Canadian Short Story* (2016), Laurie Kruk addresses this propensity of the Canadian sensibility to cogently and judiciously reflect on the matrix of their socio-cultural mosaic, and remain in the perpetual state of its interrogation while contributing a subjective perspective on the networks of discourses participating in its flux. Kruk suggests that "the twenty-first century has brought us to a time when, more than ever, individual voices clamour to be heard, and the short story […] embodies diverse perspectives more powerfully and immediately than any other narrative form, including the novel" (2016: 3). Drawing on Margaret Atwood's elucidation of the forces active in the Canadian society as reflected in literature, the "violent dualities" (in Kruk 2016: 1), Kruk sees the Canadian "national body of writing is attracted to conflicts and tensions experienced […] encompassing, but not limited to, the binaries young/old, regional/international, British/American, French/English, urban/rural, north/south" (2016: 1). The dualities and oppositions, the "long-standing contradictory identities" (Kruk 2016: 1), have been the source of "Canada's particularly apt literary reflection" (Kruk 2016: 1) through the medium of the short story. Interestingly, as a form that so persistently explores the Canadian socio-cultural and political realities, proliferate and varied, Kruk notes, the short story can be "described as old and young, marginal and popular, modernist and postmodernist, shorter and longer" (2016: 1), but in all its modalities, it remains within "a particularly Canadian perspective: the double voice" (2016: 2). In her study, Laurie Kruk argues that "it is in the short story that double-voiced discourse is most powerfully and persuasively experienced" (2016: 4), which is incidentally the premise and object of this study, especially with regard to irony and parody as the employed rhetorical and pragmatic textual strategies.

Coral Ann Howells, the author of *Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction: Refiguring Identities* (2003), a textbook and course-reader mapping out the works of nine Canadian women authors published since the mid-1990s, observes contemporary Canadian fiction in the selection of nine novels and one short story collection as a "a textual space where competing voices insistently articulate differences" (12), which the author closely relates to "the sociocultural space of Canada" (2003: 12) revealing the individual experiences populating it. Additionally, Howells notices "the condition of liminality and culturally hybridized identities" (2003: 7) even outside of the frame of immigrant fictions, which is also a theme arising in the analyses of the selected contemporary short fiction in this study. In discussing the voices emanating what seem to be "different perspectives [converging] at a very significant point" (Howells 2003: 10), Howells perceives a consistent trend

in women's contemporary fiction working to "challenge traditional nationalist approaches to the definition of what 'being Canadian' means" (2003: 10), but also "to interrogate cultural conventions around private and public formulations of identity" (2003: 10) within the multicultural space of contemporary Canada in which social and cultural-historical identities come into tension with the socio-political and cultural trends of contemporaneity. Howells sees the notion of national identity, or "national affiliation [as] one component of identity construction" (2003: 1), but one that might be overshadowed by the interrogation into other identity markers perceived in her selection of fiction. Her study reveals "race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, or education and social class (Howells 2003: 1) as more prominently explored in the works of women's contemporary fiction, and in the selection of contemporary Canadian short fiction in this study, these concerns persist as relevant as ever, both in terms of female and male authors, though the selection here encompasses even more recent works. Additionally, what Howells notices in her study, that "[the] emphasis will often fall on women's counter-narratives to discourses of patriarchal authority in the home, the importance of maternal inheritance, and women's revisions of traditional narrative genres" (2003: 2) coincides with the conclusions drawn from the analyses of the selected short stories in this study, and may be complemented by the insight that these counter-narratives are extended to the voices of the politically unrecognized, socially and politically marginalized, culturally displaced individuals – in women's and men's narratives, standing for women's and men's voices and perspectives – all negotiating their identities against the fluctuating discourses in the contemporary Canadian society.

Dissertation Aims

Postmodern Interpretations of the Contemporary Canadian Short Story investigates the modes of postmodern representation with the emphasis on irony and parody as methods that highlight the philosophical, ideological and political dimensions of literary art, and in this case, contemporary short fiction. The aim of the dissertation is to analyze the manifestations of these postmodern methods in the selection of contemporary Canadian short stories and uncover how they reflect on the culture from which contemporary literature emerges and which shapes it, as well as to identify the cases in which the postmodern method serves to emphasize the potentially new political dimensions of contemporary literature. The dissertation considers the rhetorical and political

dimensions and scope of postmodern representation in the analysis of the selection of contemporary Canadian short fiction, arguing against the position that the postmodern critical thought in literature serves as the de-politicizing force in society. In the light of such claims that have prompted a number of attempts in the academic circles to terminologically and even theoretically describe the contemporary literary practice as anything but postmodern, the study also briefly treats these trends. These attempts, loosely innovative and only in terms of terminology in the critical and theoretical practice, represent desperate reactions to the satiated theoretical and critical discourses of our time, yet offer nothing more than a reactionary and escapist reversion to the aesthetic prescripts of modernism.

This study focuses the role of irony and parody in a selection of contemporary Canadian short fiction, and their character with regard to what is generally termed as postmodern poetics, but also the supposed trends emerging from it. The discussions focus on the use of postmodern methods, irony and parody as methods of representation, and mention the converging and diverging postmodern trends within the selection of contemporary Canadian short stories selected on the basis of their topicality (gender, cultural and racial stereotypes as reflective of political, economic and social changes in the first decade of the twenty-first century) and the narrative, formal and rhetorical strategies employed, all with the objective to more closely contour the framework, the poetics, within which the narratives operate, as well as investigate how irony and parody, as methods of representation, are employed for the purpose of criticizing the socio-political and ideological foundations of the social and cultural discourses in question. The proposition is that the contemporary Canadian short fiction operates well within the framework of the postmodern critical thought, but also that the new trends emerging within the vast body of contemporary short fiction, reflecting certain topical changes cannot be considered original or straying from the main poetic paradigm. On the contrary, any such improvements on the existing paradigm serve to support the claim that postmodern poetics retains its plasticity due to its analytical propensity reflected in its representation methods.

The theoretical basis of this study takes as the main premise Linda Hutcheon's claim in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* that the quintessential issue of postmodern contradictions remains relevant for as long as literature is interpreted "through its surrounding theoretical discourses", as a phenomenon removed from theory and criticism, rather than as "continuous with theory" (2004:

14). In effect, a literary work is observed as a critical work in terms of society and culture, and it is inherently a part of a broader critical and political thought of its time. Therefore, the problem of the definition of postmodernism in literature will be one of the starting discussion points in the dissertation (in the section Theory, Criticism and the Schisms), followed by a discussion on the postmodern use of irony and parody (in the section Representation Methods: The Postmodern Blend), a chapter introducing contemporary Canadian short story (Another Introduction: Contemporary and Canadian and Short), the interpretative section where the use of irony and parody as rhetorical and pragmatic instruments is illustrated on the selection of fifteen contemporary Canadian short stories (Tests, Trials and a Vignette), followed by a chapter dealing with the short story genre and its postmodern modalities (The Postmodern Fender-Bender), a chapter dealing with the phenomenological exploration of women's gender and sexuality (Constructing Stories about Women), a chapter on the nature of the contemporary-postmodern condition as related by the selection of contemporary short fiction (The Postmodern Migrants), and the Concluding Remarks chapter.

The review of the relevant philosophical and critical works inspiring the postmodern critical thought – those by Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, among others – is provided in order to explicate the philosophical, political and critical premises at the core of the approach. The phenomenon of postmodernism is ultimately explored with the view of explicating the manner in which irony and parody perform the function of subversive criticism in contemporary Canadian short fiction. That is, the dissertation examines the poetics of postmodernism as the context in which irony and parody evolve as the only viable and sensible form of influential and potent socio-political criticism that rejects the exclusion of the marginal. By extension, the section discussing the theory and poetics of postmodernism also reflects on the recent, contemporary, discussions about emerging literary and theoretical trends that essentially reject postmodernity and the postmodern literary traditions in favor of modernist poetics and its philosophical and ideological propositions. This discussion, brief as it may be, presents a necessary digression precisely in terms of how and why modernism-inspired, occasionally Marxist, but mostly metamodern, contemporary theoretical and critical practice disregards irony and parody as unproductive and essentially ruinous to artistic expression, but also for any socio-cultural and political progress. As it may be inferred, the position of the author of the dissertation is to disagree with such provisional and subjective claims, and provide illustrations from a selection of

contemporary Canadian short stories ranging from 1999 to 2016 in support of the position that the subjective contemporary views of irony and parody regarding their aesthetic value do not annul their critical, rhetorical and pragmatic, potency in the postmodern context.

Even though the attitude that irony and parody provide space for subjective interpretation of the social, political and ideological dimensions of literary works might strike as apologetic in favor of the postmodernist idea of decentralized and highly subjective meaning, the dissertation, in fact, aims to explicate how the disputed lack of vision in the postmodern, and contemporary, practice liberates Theory from modernist liberal humanist illusions, and how irony and parody as instruments of criticism provide insights for fundamental change precisely because of their indiscriminate treatment of truth values and messianic visions as human constructs.

By analyzing the formal and rhetorical roles of these methods in the narratives of the selected contemporary Canadian short stories, the dissertation explores the persistence of a very specific, Canadian, trend belonging still to the broader framework of postmodern poetics, and yet one that is continuous with the, however loosely, established literary canon of Canadian literature. This trend is based on the postmodern rejection of clear and uniform value systems and is reflexive of the singular Canadian sensibility. At the same time, the integration of pluralist values of global culture into the social, cultural and political contexts of today, reveals in the selection of contemporary Canadian short fiction a search for a new mode of political, social, economic and cultural performativity.

The theoretical framework presented here will serve as key to interpret the selection of contemporary Canadian short stories, and it will more closely define irony and parody as rhetorical or pragmatic instruments in the context of contemporary literature. Therefore, the review of relevant theory, among other, encompasses Linda Hutcheon's study, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, published in 2005, which will be used as the basis in defining these (rhetorical) instruments, and the two opposed views on postmodern theory and literature, among other views, will serve as the basis for the discussion on postmodern poetics – that of Linda Hutcheon and Terry Eagleton; a critic who sees the phenomenon of postmodernism as an authentic critical expression, and one of the most reactionary critics of postmodernism, respectively. Hutcheon sees postmodernism through its relationship with "the dominant, liberal, humanist

culture" (2004: 6), and she notices that postmodernism examines the dominant culture through the prism that does not recognize a single, visionary or universal thread of reconciliation of humanist contradictions. Hutcheon and Eagleton in their respective studies, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (first published in 1988) and *After Theory* (first published in 2003) discuss whether postmodernism and its theory, as well as the poetics of postmodernism, should be analyzed as the possible cause of the socio-political and cultural crises in the western world (Eagleton), or if they are a response to the crises and a mode of individual resistance (Hutcheon).

This theoretical framework is constructed as the interpretative key for the selection of fifteen Canadian short stories published between 1999 and 2016 in five volumes of *The Journey Prize Stories* and two short story collections by Zsuzsi Gartner. The process of short story selection reveals a certain number of themes and topics persisting as relevant over the course of almost two decades, at the very end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century. The critical interpretations illustrate the scope and effect of postmodern influences in the contemporary Canadian short fiction in terms of the formal level, the narrative structure, representation and rhetorical instruments all through the use of irony and parody. Therefore, the study deals with irony and parody not only as the source of humor or the devices for achieving humorous effect, but rhetorical vehicles for social, cultural and political criticism. The study will also touch upon the issue of genre conventions, formal and other limitations that impact the poetics of the contemporary narratives selected for this study.

Furthermore, the discussion on postmodern contemporary Canadian short story will attempt to provide an answer to the question of whether postmodern literature is indicative of a chronic state of creative paralysis that does not recognize a mode of expression other than pastiche and parody for the sake of humor and self-indulging, defeatist, lament. A positive answer to this question would justify the dismissive attitude in literary theory and criticism pertaining to the possibility of overcoming "the postmodern condition" (Lyotard 2004), and yet another related question must be considered, and that is the question of whether this *postmodern* condition truly prevents one from overcoming the epistemological paralysis and political impotence in contemporaneity, or whether it is, in fact, the postmodern critical thought that has provided the necessary problematizing instruments in its interdisciplinarity, and thus the space for unguided exploration, learning and

potentially criticism that is unburdened by ideology, messianic vision and liberal-humanist philosophy.

The attitude entertained here is that the contemporary Canadian short story, reliant on the plasticity of postmodern techniques, generates a space in which literature is permitted to exhibit its political function in the context that cancels any reactionary connotation – the context of the individual and the specific, the subjective and particular, continuous and coextensive with the Canadian cultural mosaic. The contemporary author experiences the mutually incongruent and exclusive discourses, but is able to observe their own 'condition' critically, ironically and compassionately within the context of the contemporary situation, and find solutions not in "little narratives" (Lyotard 2004) but in subjective explorations of their personal ones, in close ties with tradition and the historical legacies and therefore their presence in contemporaneity. It is this trait of contemporary Canadian literature, reliant on irony and parody due to its self-reflexive and introspective nature, that negates the finality of the alleged postmodern position on epistemological and ontological paralysis.

The selection of contemporary short fiction includes fifteen stories by various contemporary Canadian authors, published between 1999 and 2016, and those are: "Pest Control for Dummies™" and "How to Survive in the Bush" by Zsuzsi Gartner (*All the Anxious Girls on Earth*, 1999); "My Husband's Jump" by Jessica Grant (*The Journey Prize Stories*, 2003); "Conjugation" by Lee Henderson, "The Baby" by Craig Boyko and "Split" by Clea Young" (*The Journey Prize Stories*, 2006); "Summer of the Flesh Eater" by Zsuzsi Gartner (*Better Living Through Plastic Explosives*, 2011); "Monsoon Season" by Lori McNulty, "How to Tell if Your Frog Is Dead" by Julie Roorda and "Hashtag Maggie Vandermeer" by Nancy Jo Cullen (*The Journey Prize Stories*, 2014); "The Perfect Man for My Husband" by Andrew MacDonald and "Mercy Beatrice Wrestles the Noose" by K'ari Fisher (*The Journey Prize Stories*, 2015); "The Origin of Jaanvi" by Mahak Jain, "Mani Pedi" by Souvankham Thammavongsa and "How the Grizzly Came to Hang in the Royal Oak Hotel" by J. R. McConvey (*The Journey Prize Stories*, 2016).

The aim of this study is to illustrate the critical, 'double-edged' dimension in narratives generated by the use of irony and parody as principally representational instruments in the selection of contemporary Canadian short fiction; to highlight the plasticity of irony and parody in their postmodern quality and contemporary use, and discuss how the phenomenon of postmodernism

treats the general qualities of the social, political, cultural, philosophical and ideological messages in the selected short stories. Bearing in mind the inescapable and excruciating complexities in defining the phenomenon of postmodernism (and postmodernity), its poetics and therefore its instruments, this dissertation retains a highly self-reflexive and auto-ironic tone in exploring and defining the theoretical framework and interpretative key, and its applicability in interpreting the contemporary Canadian short story.

THEORY, CRITICISM AND THE SCHISMS

In the Preface to *Modern Literary Theory*, a volume first published in 1989, Waugh and Rice notice a 'paradigm shift' in literary studies caused by "the sudden erosion of boundaries across philosophy, political theory, psychoanalysis, social theory and literary criticism" (xiii), and a shift that foregrounds an epistemological crisis of sorts (xiv). Rice and Waugh define this shift – the phenomenon commonly referred to as postmodernism – as an "intellectual movement" that turns on itself, as well as against modernity, as a "modern doubt turn on the instruments of its own articulation and analysis, so that all objects of knowledge seem to be more artifacts constructed through and within language" (2011: xiii). This definition resounds the voices of the great thinkers of the second half of the twentieth century, among which are: Jacques Derrida – whose deconstruction and theory of sign opened the door for political criticism of the inherited traditions of modernity, Roland Barthes – who illustrated Derrida's logocentrism and Eurocentrism in his *Mythologies*, Michel Foucault – whose explication of the forces constructing and interpellating individuals in society exposed the insidiousness of the Western ethos, and Jean-François Lyotard whose work on postmodern narrative practices substantiated the arguments of the thinkers of the 1960s whose debunking of the myth of logocentrism gave impetus to a range of theoretical discourses and movements operating under the platform of the postmodern critical thought.

In "Hear the Voice of the Artist: Postmodernism as a Faustian Bargain[1]" (2003), Lena Petrović explores postmodernism in terms of the philosophical, cultural, political, ideological and even ethical implications in the literary and critical practices at the very beginning of the twenty-first century. Exploring the crucial question of what postmodernism is in essence, Petrović turns to Heiner Müller's remark that postmodern art is both "a contradiction" and "inconceivable" in itself. Petrović's comment on Müller's "endemic romanticism" (2011: 278) addresses the modernist conception both of an artist and art supportively in terms of the postmodern lack of such enthusiasm for imaginative and prophetic vision, and translates it as a view that, if such a thing as postmodern art or artist does exist, it is "an obliteration of this [modernist] kind of the creative self, its dispersal, to use the current idiom, into a plurality of subject positions inscribed within language" and ultimately, "the negation of art" (2011: 278). Although Petrović does not

[1] First published in Klaus Stierstofer (ed.), *Beyond Postmodernism: Reassessments in Literature, Theory, Culture*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, New York, 2003, 51-77.

necessarily reject the necessity for a term encompassing the consequences of "the massive material and political changes – all contributing to the triumph of a neo-conservative global society – that marked the end of the millennium" (2011: 278), the author sees postmodernism as a general and global state of mind in which the rejection of modernist ideas, or their implied failure, either cause a defeatist and escapist plunge into the supposed postmodern indifference and ambiguity; or the state in which the alleged postmodern ambiguity and "anti-humanist propositions" (2011: 278) reveal an attempt of the academic circles "to the intellectual and moral compromise by which the postmodernism's leading proponents have hyper-adjusted themselves to postmodernity; and their theories, on closer inspection, to be a sophisticated example of hypocritically correct political thinking" (2011: 279). In the article, Petrović explicates the transition from the modernist paradigm to the de-individualized and essentially anti-humanist postmodern paradigm as exemplified by American and European (foreign) politics and education. Petrović's interpretation of critical thinkers, retrospectively termed postmodern by the academic community, focuses on the implied hypocrisy of the anti-humanist acceptance or glorification of the neo-liberal capitalist system and its socio-political and subsequently cultural manifestations. In fact, the author fervently targets not only the conscious absence of "a revolutionary vocabulary" in the postmodern discourse, but also its critical focus on "those traditional thinkers who did possess the kind of revolutionary vocabulary that they themselves lack" (2011: 280). Lena Petrović's argument contra postmodernism and the postmodern critical thought, or rather, against the specific critical thinkers at the end of the twentieth century, touches upon a very specific and most often cited imputation to postmodernism, especially against the background of modernism, and unambiguously in terms of the problematics of defining postmodernism. "[Blaming] the cultural catastrophe of the sixties on what only could have prevented it", that is, on modernism, Petrović suggests that postmodernists "justify their anti-humanism by seeking not only to instill the view that the liberal humanist tradition has proved definitely wrong in its emancipatory hopes, but, in fact, to blame it for the failure of these hopes" (2011: 280). Following this line of thought, this dissertation, and to a great extent upholds the supposed 'anti-humanist' position that it is precisely the failure of the modernist liberal humanist tradition that has proved, not "definitively wrong" but rather evidently ineffective in its emancipatory efforts, and especially in the second half of the twentieth century, and that the persistent refusal to admit such a painful defeat of the entire modernist visionary endeavor opened the door for a forcefully evolved, and belated, investigative approach to the

social, cultural and political discourses, the philosophical and ideological foundations of their production and their implications for contemporaneity.

This approach, generally implied by the heuristic label of 'postmodernism', however, stands as an autonomous yet modified modernist paradigm and, in those terms, I agree with Petrović in her claim that "postmodern literature does not exist" (2011: 277) since literature must exist outside any theoretical and critical paradigm imposed on the discourse by the academic or other circles seeking obstinately a totalizing framework to explain any cultural or political production. The emphasis, it must be noted, is on the term 'approach' for that is what postmodern criticism principally stands for – a mode of critical and analytical investigation that rejects any preconception of the existence of a totalizing and unifying explanation for the human condition on the whole, the individual and highly subjective experience, and especially in the face of the fast-paced global political and cultural changes. Postmodernism, then, practically stands for the perceived rupture point in the socio-political and cultural continuum of what we term the period of modernism and its implosion after the sixties, but particularly from the angle of the artistic or literary forms, although they have inevitably evolved; nor merely in terms of the terminological peculiarities of the socio-political or cultural discourses, but, more significantly, in the distinctive approach to the critical considerations in the analysis of the political, economic, cultural and artistic products of our contemporaneity.

As Jeffrey Nealon suggests in the chapter "Postmodernism" in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Literary and Cultural Theor*y (2018), "'[postmodern]' is an adjective that loomed heavily over late twentieth-century academic discourse on cultural production" (151), and being ascribed almost exclusively retrospectively, it often stands to refer to "a certain sense of style […] a sense of disjunction or deliberate confusion, irony, playfulness, reflexivity, a kind of cool detachment, a deliberate foregrounding of constructedness, a suspicion concerning neat or easy conclusions" (151). The very term, however, can be reduced to a terminological necessity – a necessity to differentiate between an ideological position with a predetermined terminus *ad quem* (modernism) and an approach that focuses on the process of reaching any philosophical, ideological, political, economic, cultural or other conclusions. In *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Fredric Jameson observes postmodern experience in terms of "paradoxical slogan: namely, the proposition that 'difference relates'" (30), emphasizing on heterogeneity and

"profound discontinuities at the work of art, no longer unified or organic, but now a virtual grab bag or lumber room of disjoined subsystems and random raw materials and impulses of all kinds" (30). Jameson's view of postmodernism as paradoxical, in the above definition specifically, further supports the necessity of the postmodern critical thought. What is conveniently omitted in his view of the postmodern approach is the emphasis on the impossibility of the "unification" (Jameson 1991: 30) within a totalizing framework, be it liberal humanist or other. He suggests that "[the] former work of art […] has now turned out to be a text, whose reading proceeds by differentiation rather than by unification" (Jameson 1991: 30), which is precisely the problem of modernity. It is not that the work of art has "turned out to be a text," but that it has been a text all along – a text imbued with philosophical and ideological discourses projected onto the image of reality and emanated in the discourses permeating and perpetuating its existence. At the same time, Jameson tacitly recognizes the false-totalizing value of art before the postmodern *fall* in observing postmodernism "symptoms and expressions of a new and historically original dilemma [involving] our insertion as individual subjects into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities, whose frames range from the still surviving spaces of bourgeois private life all the way to the unimaginable decentering of global capital itself" (1991: 412). Reductively speaking, postmodernism represents a reaction to the disillusionment with modernist corruption of the very liberal humanist ideas it is founded on. Or, in Jameson's view, a "fragmented and schizophrenic decentering and dispersion" (1991: 412), or "the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses […] must make their way" (1991: 5). Jameson, much like Terry Eagleton, among others, sees the introduction of the heterogeneous cultural impulses as a threat to "some general sense of a cultural dominant" (1991: 5) implicating that the creation of an artificial sense of such a construct compensates for its falseness. The potential that "we fall back into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable" (Jameson 1991: 5), however, stands unsubstantiated in the light of postmodern literature. Neither does postmodernism negate history, nor its own continuity with it and the inevitable interpellation. Nealon notices that in his treatment of postmodernism, and postmodernity, Jameson "looks more closely at the changing *function* of art in the twentieth century: the first historical era where we saw the commodification and mass technological distribution of art" (2018: 154), but notes that in the world "where factory production is the economic dominant mode, there's still room for art" (2018: 154). On the matter, Nealon also notes

that "postmodern cultural artifacts are constantly calling attention to the ways in which both the work and the viewer are constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing meaning" (2018: 151), and in those terms, this critic finds that postmodern art can, in fact, reach Jameson's undefined, yet universal, standard by "[working] against the cultural or economic dominant of fordist factory production" (2018: 154), which has been validated throughout history, regardless of the ever-changing heuristic labels – art has always sought to work against the dominant, it only seems that the modernist dominant, with the liberal humanist connotation, remains the source of romantic nostalgia in the academic circles.

To claim, however, that postmodern critical theory is anti-humanist merely because it readily exposes the visible and appalling hypocrisy of the liberal humanist discourse, and the privileged and elitist practice, seems awfully reactionary, yet it is a phenomenon that is to be expected since the proponents of the so-called modernist liberal humanism in the critical circles necessarily speak from the positions of institutional power, and the hypocrisy imputed on the postmodern discourse – its adamant refusal to remain at a univocal position – both expose the invalidity of the exhausted modernist rhetoric and the duplicity of those in position whose insistence on perpetuating and maintaining the idea that the romantic liberal humanist visionary and prophetic future is possible in the neo-liberal capitalist society.

Furthermore, the propagation of the hollow liberal-humanist rhetoric, and particularly in the academic circles, completely disregards the reality of contemporary politics and economy, and artificially creates a space for the perpetuation of the bourgeois ideas for the sole purpose of maintaining their own socio-political and economic stability. Petrović deems it "insidious" that the supposed enforcers of postmodern ideas resorted to placing "the responsibility for 'the social catastrophe of the sixties' precisely on those who sought to avoid it by a democratization of institutions, and a change in relations of power" (2011: 279) suggesting that the failure of the modernist liberal humanist idea lies not in the vision itself, but other factors. Agreed, it would be difficult to argue that such a movement should be chastised for its failure to enforce a vision of a society in which economy does not regulate politics, and in which the philosophical and ideological foundations do not run on human fuel. It is unclear, however, if Petrović finds the correlation between the applicability of the almost utopian vision(s) of modernist artists and thinkers, and the ultimate failure of their implementation in the second half of the twentieth

century, with the fact that those very liberal humanist ideas represent a very selective and uniform remnant of the bourgeois politics and ethics. Perhaps the failure to implement the modernist vision can be found precisely in the convenient fact that the 'catastrophe of the sixties', much like many other economic, political and cultural crises affected mostly the working class, leaving the bourgeois with the luxury to promote the modernist, ultimately unrealistic, ideal while retaining their positions of economic and political power.

In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon discusses postmodernism as impossible to define or describe other than in terms of very complicated continuity and, at the same time, discontinuity with modernism in aesthetic, philosophical and ideological terms which renders the relationship profoundly and genuinely contradictory (2004: 18). The question of whether its poetics testify to "the decline or the salvation of contemporary art" remains of immense importance even in the first two decades of the twentieth century, or especially so (Hutcheon 2004: 38), which evidently creates a divide in the critical circles between those who find the cultural dominant necessary for political and social stability opposed to postmodernist practices, and those who find the process of examination of that very dominant necessary. On this matter, critics seem to cover a specter of positions, but what Hutcheon, among others, decidedly emphasizes, is that the concept of a stable cultural dominant is merely a construct. It might be added, that such a construct cannot seem to hold in the twenty-first century.

Hutcheon raises another important subject, and that is one of the consistent use of the term in the cultural discourse (2004: 38) – the point being the seemingly irresolvable issue of the definition of the phenomenon itself, its philosophical and ideological grounds, as well as its evolution through its recognized manifestations in the second half of the twentieth century and stretching into the twenty-first century social, cultural, political, scientific and other discourses. Hutcheon builds upon Fredric Jameson's understanding of "theoretical discourse" as being one of the manifestations of postmodernism and notes that "this would include, not only the obvious Marxist, feminist, and poststructuralist philosophical and literary theory, but also analytic philosophy, psychoanalysis, linguistics, historiography, sociology, and other areas" (Hutcheon 2004: 15) which adds support to the argument that what is generally understood as the phenomenon of postmodernism cannot merely be placed in the category of poetics or stand as a convenient periodization demarcation – it is ultimately a highly analytical approach to cultural and other

discourses, and in this vein, Hutcheon comments on Jacque Derrida's work as indicative of the general framework of self-reflexive cultural production, and not a particularly instructive, prescriptive or didactic corpus or manifest that it is perceived to be. Derrida's works, Hutcheon argues, "belong solely to neither philosophical nor literary discourse, though they partake of both in a deliberately self-reflexive and contradictory (postmodern) manner" (2004: 12), which essentially represents a work of exploration from the position of the perceiving subject, but also the investigation of the vantage point itself, and the constant questioning in terms of "[f]rom what position can one "theorize" (even selfconsciously) a disparate, contradictory, multivalent, current cultural phenomenon?" (2004: 13). The postmodern impulse to theorize is not innovative in itself, yet its tenacious insistence on the demystification of certain meta-narratives and grand-narratives of the Western societies, and, at the same time, the acceptance of the position that "any knowledge cannot escape complicity with some meta-narrative" (Hutcheon 2004: 13), all render the postmodern theoretical discourse an instrument, and its unfailing and consistent deconstructive propensity the foundation for its poetics. In the *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism* (2001), Taylor and Winquist define discourse as "a meaningful passage of spoken or written language; a passage of language that reflects the social, epistemological, and rhetorical practices of a group" (2001: 101) and this definition recognizes both the existence of various interpellated discourses, and builds upon the implication that they possess the potential to mutually affect each other because discourse can also be described as "the power of language to reflect, influence, and constrain these practices in a group" (2001: 101). This definition is useful in determining what it is that the postmodern critical practice focuses on and why, among others, Jameson sees the theoretical discourse as the genuinely postmodern phenomenon. The postmodern critical thought has long been discussed in relation to deconstruction and its insistence on the framework of absence, and granted, the postmodern critical thought does function from the place of dubiousness and incredulity not only towards the grand narratives identifiable in the discourses of the present, but also their manifestations in socio-political, cultural, economic and, virtually, all practices since it extends its incredulity to any metalanguage, its own included.

You Know Nothing, Jon Snow[2] – The Late 1960s

In *The Canadian Postmodern*, Linda Hutcheon reflects on the groundworks of the postmodern critical thought, as well as the object of its criticism, if the term 'object' could be used loosely in this context. Tracing "the impulse behind the postmodern" back to the 1960s, Hutcheon notes that:

> […] those years also come under severe attack from postmodernism, which always contests as well as exploits the values that gave it birth. In the sixties, the buzz-word of culture was (paradoxically) the 'natural', the authentic: flower power, rock music, sexual desire, communes, 'hanging loose' – all were manifestations of the 'natural'. What postmodernism has done is show how the 'natural' is in fact the 'constructed', the made, the social. (2012: 12)

Following the line of thought proposed by Hutcheon above, that the postmodern critical thought emerged as a reaction to, among other things, the concept of "the natural" and "the authentic", in the 1960s, this chapter deals with the period that prompted the postmodern critical thought (postmodernism as generally understood) as a phenomenon or even a philosophical approach (as opposed to a mere heuristic label or literary category), and focuses on deconstruction, not particularly as a prominent intellectual movement developed by American critics in the second half of the twentieth century, but as a concept and phenomenon popularized by Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology*, first published in 1967. In addition to that, considering that the critical discourse on postmodernism, and even the contemporary one, often evokes the concepts and terminology of the 1960s, or uses these in a reprocessed and reconditioned fashion, it is vital to establish the criteria of how these concepts, and the terminology, are treated and used in this study. This is not to say that the attitude here should be taken as pretending to be the only adequate interpretation of the complexities of the post-structuralist ideas emerging in the second half of the twentieth century, but their interpretation is argued here as narrowly and precisely as possible –

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[2] Otherwise completely unrelated to the study, the quote, spoken by the character of Ygritte, a Wildling, in George R. R. Martin's *A Storm of Swords*, stands to both, hopefully humorously, and sincerely relate the disorientation and uncertainty of the author of the dissertation facing the massive and daunting task of untangling the knot of the formidable legacy of the philosophical, political and theoretical discussions of the 1960s and relating them to the study of postmodernism, and contemporaneity. The effort, granted, has little to do with the severity of the existential struggle the addressee of Ygritte, the character of Jon Snow faces, and yet, the sentiment is emblematic of the naiveté and confusion emanating from this character's face in the popular HBO television series *The Game of Thrones*. (Martin, George. R. R. *A Storm of Swords*. Bantam Books, 2011. pp 213)

both in terms of the discouraging awareness that the vastness of the critical and philosophical discourses that still influence our contemporary discussions on postmodernism, and with the view of the objective of this study, which is ultimately to provide a theoretical framework that would illustrate the postmodern, and the pragmatic, nature of irony and parody as instruments in contemporary Canadian short fiction. If the insight drawn from the achieved framework acquire a wider scope and applicability, it will be a fortunate accident an author can only hope for.

In *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (2005), Jonathan Culler interprets Derrida's use of the term as "close engagement with various texts" (16), engagement that does not necessarily involve an interpretation or, at least, not in terms of what interpretation customarily entails. Culler's interpretation of Derrida's deconstruction as involving "no deference to the integrity of the text, no search for a unifying purpose that would assign each part its appropriate role" (2005: 16), and yet as an endeavor that seeks to discover some kind of internal and external logic to the production of the text itself, "to reveal an uncanny logic that operates in and across texts, whatever they say" (2005: 16), stands emblematic to the reception of deconstruction in America as a tool or an approach to understanding the vast body of literary, as well as non-literary, production and their interconnectedness. For Culler, "we have no convincing account of the role or function of literature in society or social consciousness" (2005: 6), but "literature is not a simple aggregate of discrete works but a conceptual space which can be coherently organized" (2005: 8).

In the chapter on Jacques Derrida in *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers: From Structuralism to Post-Humanism* (2008), John Lechte underscores the philosophical foundation or influences in Derrida's approach. More precisely, the "concern to reflect upon and undermine philosophy's dependence on the logic of identity, which is also a logic of purity and the maintaining of borders," as well as why traditional philosophy has never treated such and other questions pertaining to the authority pertaining to writing and literature (Lechte 2008: 130) form the basis of Derrida's *deconstruction*. Lechte, in fact, treats Derrida's deconstruction as "a fundamental investigation into the nature of the Western metaphysical tradition and its basis in the law of identity," the outcome of which reveals "a tradition riddled with paradox and logical aporias – such as the following one from Rousseau's philosophy[3]" (2008: 131). In essence, "[the] process of

[3] The scope of this study does not allow a more in-depth discussion of the particulars, so hopefully John Lechte's summary of Derrida's argument against Rousseau's philosophy stands sufficient to facilitate the reading of the

‘deconstruction’ does not aim to remove [the] paradoxes or [the] contradictions” (Lechte 2008: 132) as encountered in the interaction of the discourses inherited and the discourses produced in contemporaneity since any “[escaping] the exigencies of tradition and [setting] up a system on its own account” (Lechte 2008: 132) neither seems possible, nor viable, nor desired, ultimately.

In *Jacques Derrida*, a 2003 Routledge Edition of Critical Thinkers, Nicholas Royle wittingly condenses the philosophy behind the work of Jacques Derrida as the attitude of interrogation. “If there is a key idea in Derrida,” Royle says, “it has to do with an interrogation of the ‘key idea’ (Royle 2003: 13). Undertaking the task of deconstructing Derrida’s works, in the sense in which Derrida refers to deconstruction, one can understand the reactionary attitude towards the entire endeavor of postmodern interrogation.

The discussion on Derrida with regard to the insight it could provide about the foundational ideas of the postmodern critical thought, postmodernism in literature, and postmodernity in general – as a general trend in the second half of the twentieth century and marking the beginning of the twenty-first century – requires a brief reflection on the post-structuralist thought, and his appropriation and transformation of the term deconstruction, as well as the deconstruction of what he termed logocentrism – “the centrism of language in general” (Royle 2003: 16), as practiced, manifested and produced in the (narrative) discourse, by the subject, institutions or in the very interaction of discourses. By extension, basically, Derrida deals with the idea of the centrality of meaning and truth, and their validity, and puts them under scrutiny that reveals structures as constructs having center both within and without them. That is, the “centre goes together with structure” (in Royle 2003: 16), and “the notion of a structure lacking any centre represents the unthinkable itself” (in Royle 2003: 16). Moreover, ‘de-construction’ as an interpretative mode, as a reading or experience of a structure, would not be possible if we did not perceive certain creations as solid and structured, and as Royle notes “deconstruction interferes with solid structures, “material” institutions, and not only with discourses or signifying representations” (Royle 2003: 17). However, deconstruction as Derrida uses the term, is not an approach, or at least not in the sense in which the American

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remainder of the chapter: “Rousseau argues at one point that the voice of nature alone should be listened to. This nature is identical to itself, a plenitude to which nothing can be added or subtracted. But he also draws our attention to the fact that nature is in truth sometimes lacking – such as when a mother cannot produce enough milk for the infant at her breast. Lack now comes to be seen as common in nature, if it is not one of its most significant characteristics. Thus self-sufficient nature, Derrida shows […] is, according to Rousseau, also lacking” (2008: 131).

academic circles have assumed it, but an almost natural disruption of language, discourse or any structure that is interacted with, "an earthquake" (Royle 2003: 25). In Derrida's words, it is "what happens," or "ce qui arrive" (in Royle 2003: 25) in such contexts where the implied absence – of meaning – is supplemented, for, according to him contexts are "always being open and non-saturable" (Royle 2003: 18). The idea behind context as "open and non-saturable" is the finiteness of language that invites, or even requires, "a force of irruption that '[disorganizes] the entire inherited order'" (Royle 2003: 25). The earthquake of deconstruction, Royle notes, "happens in relation to a specific context, even if the crack or fissure detected opens up into a far more general effect" (Royle 2003: 25). In more detail, Royle explains:

> It is about shaking up, dislocating and transforming the verbal, conceptual, psychological, textual, aesthetic, historical, ethical, social, political and religious landscape. Its concern is to disturb, to de-sediment, to deconstruct. But these seismic transformations are in crucial ways always already in the texts he reads. In a sense he does little more than describe what happens when reading, say, a passage of Shakespeare or a Plato dialogue or a short story by Kafka. Hence the strange notion of describing and transforming. (2003: 26)

Royle's "dislocating and transforming" specifically addresses the underlying thought throughout Derrida's works, that structures are unavoidably inherited, and as such they not only require but compel the interpreter to deconstruct them, in order to appropriate them in the present moment. More explicitly, they compel the interpreter to identify both the structures inherited, and the traces residing on the margins of the discourse, resisting adherence to the inherited order. The process of deconstruction, often comprehended as a formalist analysis of a text, discourse or narrative, has nothing to do with the structuralist or post-structuralist desire to uncover the underlying principle behind what is produced, even though the very process of deconstruction inevitably exposes these principles. The manner in which Derrida uses the term deconstruction implies "describing and transforming," "it is just a matter of what happens when you describe it" (Royle 2003: 26). The process of deconstruction as described by Derrida involves subjecting the discourse, text, trace (and there are many different terms that this philosopher uses in his dealing with the concept of deconstruction which are not necessarily relevant for this study), to the "effect [of] new kinds of discourses, acts and institutions" (Royle 2003: 27), new 'languages' and what goes beyond language itself. The fact that Derrida was so concerned with the possibilities of language

potentially explains the critical reception of his works in America, and the subsequent deconstructionist movements and schools. The very idea of deconstruction as a method, potentially comes from Derrida's fascination with the relation of presence and absence in language, and the 'other' in the speech act itself, as well as in writing. However, contrary to Derrida's own understanding of deconstruction, not as a method, but as an unavoidable phenomenon that occurs in the production of language in context, almost inherently: "There is always already deconstruction, at work in works, especially in *literary* works" (in Royle 2003: 85), and it is a "strange strategy without finality" (in Royle 2003: 35).

In 1966, Jacques Derrida publishes the famous "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" article in which he proposes that no discourse can be composed "out of nothing" (Derrida 2011: 202), arguing that such a view of narrative or discourse structure is theological and mythopoetic in its essence because it presupposes the possibility of an 'engineer' and creation that is not based on the existence of previous structures. The odds are, he says, "that the engineer is a myth produced by the bricoleur[4]" (Derrida 2011: 202), an 'assembler', to loosely paraphrase. Explaining the use of the term 'bricolage' as "the necessity of borrowing one's concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined" (Derrida 2011: 202), Derrida concludes that every narrative or discourse must be a "*bricoleur*" – a construction, in a figurative sense of that word, and a complex structure in which other structures are recognized, in one form or another, and to varying degrees. This definition, however, does not only relate to the postmodern pastiche that quickly comes to mind, but to the nature of discourse reproduction and reception as discussed in *Of Grammatology* (1967), a work that deals with the nature of the sign, phonocentrism, logocentrism and Eurocentrism, among other things. The bricoleur, the discourse, always exhibits its philosophical and political heritage, and when deconstructed, reveals the traces and contexts of the logos that moved it to existence. The discourse, in fact, is the movement of language – finite in itself and restricted in terms of not only unstable and limited vocabulary, but also in terms of the limitlessness of the 'play' of its elements. Building upon the structuralist view that language represents sets of distinct elements, or structures, in their interplay, Derrida moves beyond the position that the 'structurality' of a structure implies that there is such a thing within it that would

[4] The term is used by Claud Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind*, and Derrida argues against his conception of the assumed totality of systems, be they linguistic, syntactic, or other, behind discourse.

provide it this distinctive quality, and the implied center of the structure, in the structuralist view, would suffice. Language itself "excludes totalization", that is, the nature of language is such that it is operated by the field of "play", "a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite […] because instead of being an inexhaustible field, as in the classical hypothesis, instead of being too large, there is something missing from it: a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitution" (Derrida 2011: 205). Derrida's proposition that there exists no center position in the field of 'play' that a sign could occupy and therefore "exhaust totalization" (Derrida 2011: 206), leads to his famous notion of "the movement of supplementarity" (Derrida 2011: 206) in which the absence of the center is supplemented by a surplus sign, "a supplement" (Derrida 2011: 206) which Nicholas Royle interprets, in the context of Derrida's mischievous language-play, as trace or context, among other things. The sign becoming a supplement for the absence of the center does not replace the center per se, nor does it create a totality for that would be impossible. What it does, however, is create a situation of supplementarity in which the centrality of the structure is provided by a sign, previously shaped by the logos, formulated and designated by the philosophical, political or other inheritance – a bricoleur. And this event of contextual and momentary substitution, for a lack of a better word, reveals "the tension between play and history", but also "between play and presence" (Derrida 2011: 208). The event of the 'play', as Derrida explains it in this article, is "the disruption of presence" (2011: 208) in which "being" itself is a fluctuation between presence or absence, "on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way round" (Derrida 2011: 208). The possibilities of the field of play lead Derrida to conclusions that directly influence the postmodern critical thought, and the field of social sciences in general, in that he sees the potential for two interpretations of interpretation "of structure, of sign, of play" (Derrida 2011: 209), in which one, the first, "seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile", and the other "no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism" (Derrida 2011: 209). The second interpretation is the modus operandi of the postmodern critical thought – an interpretation that no longer sees the possibility of uncovering 'a new humanism' in the ruins of the historically exhausted artifacts. The two interpretations of interpretation are irreconcilable[5], in Derrida's view (2011: 209), but "together

[5] The reconciliation of the two interpretations can be related to the article "Notes on metamodernism" in which Vermeulen and van den Akker attempt to integrate the specifically modern and postmodern philosophical and

share the field which we call, in such a problematic fashion, the social sciences” (2011: 209). At the same time, however, the impossibility of reconciliation between the two does not imply that there should be no attempt at finding a common ground at the intersection – the point of what Derrida calls ‘différence’, and this is where deconstruction ceases to be a stereotypically nihilist endeavor. The nihilism ascribed to Derrida, much like the one ascribed to postmodernism, reflects the paradigm shift in the philosophical task and mode of interpretation of the historical and knowledge conditions and parameters at play in contemporaneity, but has little to do with the popular understanding or misinterpretation of Nietzsche’s term.

In 1967, Jacques Derrida publishes *Of Grammatology*, the work that essentially introduces and popularizes the term deconstruction – a concept that remains difficult to define unequivocally, and a concept that would, in different academic interpretations, yield a very productive intellectual movement in American academic circles, an approach to text analysis, as well as a problematics for all those who would attempt to take Derrida’s deconstructive approach as prescriptive. Derrida’s investigation in *Of Grammatology* begins with an examination of “the metaphysics of phonetic writing” which is “nothing but the most original and powerful ethnocentrism, in the process of imposing itself upon the world, controlling in one and the same order” (1997: 3). Ethnocentrism and logocentrism, as Derrida defines them, stand coextensively for the practice of the dissimulation of history, as it is produced in writing – a phenomenon “by which the origin of the truth is assigned to the logos, or the sign that seeks the perpetuation of its truth value in authorities external to it, the very authorities that disseminate it as truth” (1997: 3). Derrida, however, does not deal with historical relativism, but the constructedness or artifice of history and discourse in essence, throughout history. In addition to that, Derrida specifically deals with the issue raised by de Saussurean structuralism in linguistics, and then in theory – the idea of a book as a “natural totality” (in Taylor & Winquist 2001: 53) seems to be “profoundly alien to the sense of writing” (Taylor & Winquist 2001: 53) because it implies a polysemy, as opposed to the supposed fixedness of meaning of speech. Signs are always already artificially defined by the proposed truth of the logos, the historico-metaphysical position of the moment, to use Derrida’s words, and therefore, “reading and writing, the production or interpretation of signs, the text in

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ideological positions under the heuristic label of ‘metamodernism’. As will be discussed in the chapter Metamodernism: *I Love the Way You Lie*, the attitude here is that such reconciliation is impossible due to the philosophical incongruities between the two starting premises.

general as fabric of signs, allow themselves to be confined within secondariness" (Derrida 1997: 14), the "secondariness" that is implicit, and entirely provisional. Metaphorical language "confirms the privilege of the logos" (Derrida 1997: 15), for it is on this level of language that it is the most obvious how logos transforms the conventional, artificially assigned, meaning, into 'literal', "a sign signifying a signifier itself signifying an eternal verity, eternally thought and spoken in the proximity of a present logos" (Derrida 1997: 15). In "the three implicit inscriptions engraved in Western culture", Derrida investigates the "scientificity" of the logos (1997: 3), the notion that our entire written history has been based on the conventionally accepted truth values verified and challenged by the supposedly scientific logic – the philosophy and ideology of the Enlightenment. The origin of this truth is assigned to the logos, or the sign that seeks the perpetuation of its truth value in external authorities. However, the logos has no intrinsic truth value since its validity and veracity exclusively depend on the authorities that disseminate it as the truth.

Derrida grapples with the idea that all writing, or all theoretical or literary discourse, is inevitably contingent upon the already assigned relationships of meaning among signs, and between speech and writing (1997: 4) – the relationships that are essentially arbitrary, conventional and dependent on the authorities that perpetuate their employment. For this philosopher, the question of primacy of spoken or written language ultimately testifies to the evident instability of linguistic representation (Derrida 1997: 35): neither speaking nor writing could be completely faithful to the principle of expression of ideas, therefore, one's primacy over the other is merely artificial, provisional and, ultimately, potentially irrelevant. Both the spoken and written language are affected by the instability of artificial and conventional stability of the sign, of the signified. This is why the signified becomes the signifier of another signifier, and so on, so that the center cannot be reached – there is no first signified in the chain of meaning because meaning itself has never been, nor could be, stable in terms of there existing a stable relationship between the center and the sign, the sign and the signified as a convention. Even the first possible signified has no meaning intrinsic in itself, but reflects a linguistic agreement, and so "no practice is ever totally faithful to its principle" (Derrida 1997: 39). Meaning is generated by signs, and so is the reality in which we operate, and therefore, as Derrida says, "one could call play the absence of the transcendental signified as limitlessness of play, that is to say as the destruction of ontotheology and the metaphysics of presence" (1997: 50), and so the inflation of the sign, the utter instability of the

language-conveyed or represented, stands as “a symptom” and “crisis”, as “the totality of its problematic horizon” (1997: 6). Language is not only limited within “the play” or convention and authority, but also threatened by the “limitlessness, brought back to its own finitude at the very moment when its limits seem to disappear, when it ceases to be selfassured, contained, and guaranteed by the infinite signified which seemed to exceed it” (Derrida 1997: 6). The inflation of the sign Derrida argues for “betrays a loose vocabulary, the temptation of a cheap seduction, the passive yielding to fashion, the consciousness of the avant-garde, in other words – ignorance” (1997: 6) – ignorance as utter lack of meaning at the level of discourse, because “writing […] comprehends language” (1997: 7), but at the same time, the instability of the signified, in de Saussure’s terms, reveals the instability of the signifier. The ‘signifier of the signifier’ is basically a language about a language, a discourse about a discourse – the linguistic movement that is supplemented, that recognizes not the absence of the center, but the impossibility of its fixedness. A language about a language, or discourse about a discourse only situationally or contextually, supplementarily, positions itself, and is valid only in that precise moment of reference, that specific moment of both absence and supplemented presence, that is, of context. It is characterized by temporary validity for it is essentially an interpretation, or a ‘deconstruction’. In Derrida’s own words, “the ‘signifier of the signifier’ describes […] the movement of language: in its origin, to be sure, but one can already suspect that an origin whose structure can be expressed as ‘signifier of the signifier’ conceals and erases itself in its own production” (1997: 7). The volatility of the sign’s meaning is concealed by the language, but the process of production itself is a dissimulation.

> Producer of the first signifier, it is not just a simple signifier among others. It signifies ‘mental experiences’ which themselves reflect or mirror things by natural resemblance. Between being and mind, things and feelings, there would be a relationship of translation or natural signification; between mind and logos, a relationship of conventional symbolization. And the *first* convention, which would relate immediately to the order of natural and universal signification, would be produced as spoken language. Written language would establish the conventions, interlinking other conventions with them. (Derrida 1997: 11)

In the vein of structuralism, de Saussurean binary divisions, Derrida contrasts two kinds of relationships with regard to language: one of natural signification, pertaining to spoken language;

and one of conventional signification, pertaining to the written language. In that sense, Derrida lends provisional primacy to the spoken language as being the source of the very first conventional relationship between the mental idea, the sign and language. However, with the "interlinking" of conventionalized relationships between signs, in writing, he identifies the loss of the strength between the signified and the signifier as reflected in the logos – the assigned truth and meaning rationale in language and discourse. Behind the implied meaning, value, truth or reference of the signified, there is already a chain of other signifieds, and therefore every signified becomes a signifier of what is next in the chain. The essence of the premise, then, is plurality rather than singularity of meaning. The de-centeredness of meaning is not an absence, but a range that never has its, supposed, 'center' fixed somewhere inside the examined structure. The nature of the implied center is such that it is formulated within the language describing or interpreting it, but it is also essentially external to that language. Therefore, for Derrida, "the signified always already functions as a signifier" (1997: 7), and:

> The secondarity that it seemed possible to ascribe to writing alone affects all signifieds in general, affects them always already, the moment they enter the game. There is not a single signified that escapes, even if recaptured, the play of signifying references that constitute language. (1997: 7)

Derrida's argument is that inherent 'secondarity' of written language against primary speech does not necessarily exist, or at least not in strict terms. The structuralist, de Saussurean binary opposition of speech and writing, speech (parole) and language (langue), with the stability of the conceptual, albeit conventional, links between the signified and the signifier, no longer holds. The context of written language, written speech, much like that of spoken, is only authentic in itself in the moment, or context, of supplementarity. "Either writing was never a simple 'supplement,' or it is urgently necessary to construct a new logic of the 'supplement'" (Derrida 1997: 7), and for Derrida, this supplement is context.

Another one of Derrida's important concepts for understanding the guiding principle behind postmodern analysis is "the reappropriation of presence" (1997: 10), an act by which history and knowledge are deconstructed in the present moment, and not necessarily for the purpose of interpreting them, but uncovering the nature of the contexts of their initial construction, and the

manner in which they interact with the discourses of the present. Derrida explicitly treats history and knowledge as human constructs, and therefore investigates the conditions in which they originate and evolve, 'inflating', at the same time, the signs surrounding them.

> History and knowledge, *istoria* and *episteme* have always been determined (and not only etymologically or philosophically) as detours for the purpose of the reappropriation of presence. (1997: 10)

The reappropriation of presence, then, in postmodernism is an attempt to understand the conditions under which etymological, ideological, philosophical or other values are assigned to the givens of the present moment. Additionally, of course, the negotiation of the validity of these values stands for a negotiation of the givens themselves. Derrida, ironically a traditionalist, sees both history and knowledge as constructs that are continually negotiated, and especially in the context of contemporaneity, yet constructs whose foundational essence remains ungrounded. The truth, and the rationality behind its assigning, according to Derrida, is "more or less immediately inseparable from the instance of the logos, or of a reason thought within the lineage of the logos, in whatever sense it is understood" (1997: 10), but the reasoning behind it "inaugurates the destruction, not the demolition but the de-sedimentation, the de-construction, of all the significations that have their source in that of the logos" (1997: 10), because the logos operates only with external validation and permission, or is rendered inconsequential or meaningless. In those terms, Derrida argues that the sign cannot exist outside the "history of (the) philosophy (of presence)" because it is "systematically and genealogically determined by that history" (1997: 14). Furthermore, "the order of the signified is never contemporary" (Derrida 1997: 18) because its signified, "sense or thing, noeme or reality" (Derrida 1997: 18), attains meaning in "its proximity to the logos as phone is the privilege of presence" (Derrida 1997: 18). The sign is, therefore, always dependent on the logos, or rather, the signified is modified by the logos and evolves with it. This is why deconstruction, as Derrida sees it, works from the inside:

> borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work. (1997: 24)

Derrida's concept of deconstruction, is essentially a "strange strategy without finality" (in Royle 2003: 35) in the process of the reappropriation of language and of discourse, a "critical questioning of any and all kinds of religious or political discourse that make dogmatic assumptions about the nature of presence and what might be meant by 'the end'" (Royle 2003: 35). As opposed to the presumed emancipatory promise of liberal humanism in modernism, with Derrida's deconstruction, there is a move away from any fixed desirability of the logos. In the process of deconstruction, "what remains irreducible to any deconstruction, what remains as undeconstructible as the possibility itself of deconstruction is, perhaps, a certain experience of the emancipatory promise" (in Royle 2003: 37). This insight of Derrida's is crucial for the poetics of postmodernism in that the postmodern critical thought recognizes the presence of the historically conditioned logos in its manifestations, in its own literary and non-literary discourses, and even its own metalanguage, and seeks to deconstruct it in such a manner that would uncover its contemporary traces, the scope of contemporary logos, its viability and sustainability. This gesture cannot be ascribed to Derrida alone.

On the contrary, Susanne Lüdemann, in *Politics of Deconstruction: a new introduction to Jacques Derrida*, speaks about "the *genealogical* or *archeological* gesture of uncovering forgotten origins and repressed pasts that one encounters, in different forms" (2014: 17) originally in the works of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Freud, and subsequently Derrida whose deconstruction ultimately questions the potentially "problematic inheritance whose ontological and epistemological value stands to be questioned" (2014: 5). According to Lüdemann, the classical philosophical tradition, as challenged by Nietzsche, no longer serves as a stable foundation for the systems of knowledge – history is challenged, but so is the episteme – leading Derrida to notice an onto-theological fissure. The legacy of the past, in all its complexity and aspects, is no longer "taken as a self-evident matter; it is inherently heterogeneous, contradictory, and divided" (Lüdemann 2014: xi), and Derrida's fervor to interrogate it, but not repudiate or reject it, relates significantly to the vision of the postmodern inquiry and critical thought. In fact, it is particularly reflected in Derrida's "continuation of the inaugural gesture of deconstruction", that moves "from the theory of signs toward open political critique" (Lüdemann 2014: 38). The impudent accusation against the nihilism of postmodern inquiry, the supposed indifference and apathy, as well as its supposed destructive streak against the liberal-humanist tradition, echoes the criticism directed toward Jacques Derrida and his insistence on assuming the responsibility for the implications of the

inherited philosophical and political traditions (Lüdemann 2014: xi). What this responsibility represents for Derrida is constant political awareness and examination of discourses shaping our logos and reality, and it is precisely what the postmodern critical thought advocates. With regard to this responsibility to interrogate the inherited traditions, Susanne Lüdemann explains the relationship between Derrida's specific definition and use of the term deconstruction as an adaptation of Heidegger's "program calling for the 'destruction' of the history of ontology", Freud's 'dissociation' (2014: 5), but also Nietzsche's 'nihilism' as the "occidental culture's loss of faith in its highest values", "a diagnosis" proposing a change in the task of philosophy, or the approach to traditional values – an interrogative, genealogical approach (2014: 15). Nietzsche's philosophical turn to unrightfully infamous nihilism undoubtedly serves as the basis for the postmodern critical thought. As Lüdemann explains it, "it is due only to our fundamental forgetting or repression of the origin of our value judgments that we have come to believe in oppositions between values as something absolute" (2014: 17), and Nietzsche's genealogy does not merely destroy beliefs and value judgments, but asks how it is that these are formed, against what philosophical, historical or political background, and what processes needed to be involved in order to arrive at a seemingly absolute value. However, in this process of determining the nature of beliefs and values, the tradition is inevitably undermined since the belief in the absolute, universal or given is no longer possible (Lüdemann 2014: 17). In this vein, Derrida's deconstruction, much like Heidegger's destruction and Nietzsche's nihilism, as the process of reading, "entails the responsibility of engaging critically with metaphysical inheritance" (Lüdemann 2014: 27), but without necessarily aiming for its rejection, or "fixed acquisition" (Lüdemann 2014: 27), which strongly resonates with the postmodern critical thought.

According to Lüdemann, "Derrida always insisted that it is not enough to come up with new names, to assign new values to old concepts, or to declare the "end" of this or that (be it history, metaphysics, patriarchy, or anything else) in order to escape the *structure of the inheritance*" (2014: 28), and yet, ironically, it is Derrida's works that purposefully abound in terminological novelties that serve not only to additionally obscure the theoretical discourse, or the process of deconstruction, but also to demonstrate the instability of linguistic expression. What Lüdemann understands as the "unbridled individualism" of postmodernism (2014: 28), the tendency for this very novelty, as well as the approach to interrogation that is unrestricted and unconstrained, echoes in Eagleton's view of postmodernism in terms of excessive particularism, in a negative sense.

Eagleton's viewpoint, of course, resonates with the culture of Eurocentrism – the very logos Derrida strived to deconstruct, and un-ironically, logically so – as an Algerian Jew, frequently victimized and discriminated against by the logos of the culture in which his seminal work, *Of Grammatology*, gained such popularity. Lüdemann argues that Derrida's entire critique, from the theory of the sign to the political that emerged from it, represents a critique of the "metaphysical premises" (2014: 39) of phonocentrism, logocentrism and Eurocentrism, all of which have, for centuries, been understood as reflexive of high culture, a more 'intelligent' one as opposed to cultures dependent on spoken language and oral tradition, or in our contemporaneity, those which are technologically less advanced. Furthermore, Lüdemann sees the process of textual deconstruction as providing a "(historically determined) context within which to situate the act of interpretation" (2014: 44) even if it does not necessarily decode or uncover the 'exact' meaning of the text. The commentary that follows deconstruction represents an attempt at determining the historical context in which the analyzed signified, whose meaning has always been outside the text and the language describing it, came to attain a specific implication (Lüdemann 2014: 44).

In the words of Henry Sussman in "Deconstruction," *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Literary and Cultural Theory* (2018):

> 'Deconstruction,' as a general epithet for cultural debunking and the demolition of long-standing core-concepts in the operating systems of Western philosophy and culture, has indeed wandered far from the readings in Enlightenment and German idealistic philosophies, twentieth-century phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and a broad swathe of modern experimental fiction and poetry – the textual environment in which Derrida initially launched it. (112)

However, as Sussman also notes, even if deconstruction "started out as a philologically and etymologically informed" (2018: 112) approach to texts, the practice itself, deconstruction, resulted in something that is "far less glamorous than 'deconstruction[6]', the antipodal pose beloved by skeptics and hipsters of many stripes and now contested by the Alt-Right" (2018: 112).

[6] It seems particularly important to clarify Henry Sussman's interpretation of Derrida's deconstruction as "commitment to the truth, albeit of a certain kind, and to the disclosure of every arbitrariness in the structure and exercise of power [that] marks precisely the point where [deconstruction] separates paths from demagoguery of every persuasion" (2018: 113). As Sussman emphasizes in his own conclusion to "Deconstruction," for Derrida, "deconstructive reading was text-specific and that the range of its implications was no greater than the textual

In 1968, Roland Barthes publishes "The Death of the Author", a study dealing with the nature of narrative discourse and the authorial role of the producer of the text. The article resonates with the previously discussed article by Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," published two years earlier and his seminal work *Of Grammatology*, published a year prior. More specifically, it resonates with the idea that the act of writing in itself represents a dissimulation of sorts, and that there is a discontinuation of meaning that occurs in the process. According to Derrida, this happens in the process of discourse production naturally, or automatically, and in the sense that deconstruction simply occurs ('ce qui arrive'). However, for Barthes, the act and the process of narration imply a disconnection in which "the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins" (2011: 185). A structuralist, Barthes basically presumes the secondarity of written language, and therefore proposes that the act itself presents intransitive communication, "acting directly on reality […] finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself" (2011: 185). Barthes' 'death' of the author echoes Derrida's claim against the discourse or narrative 'engineer' in "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," and Derrida further insists that the discourse cannot be anything but a 'bricoleur' created in the process of 'bricolage', an assembling of sorts rather that creation "out of nothing" (2011: 202). In Barthes' words, "a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (2011: 188). Where Derrida notices the logos permeating the (narrative) discourse, and the impossibility of genuine or accurate center substitution, or stability of meaning, Barthes sees the text as "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture" (2011: 188). What Derrida explores as the cause of the inherent uncertainty and instability of discourse, Barthes treats from the viewpoint of the consequence. Starting from two seemingly different positions, Barthes and Derrida still arrive at a similar conclusion. Whereas for Derrida the instability of language structure and meaning has little to do with the primacy or secondarity of written language, but with the inherent arbitrariness of the meaning-structure of the sign and its dependence on the logos, for Roland Barthes, writing is implicitly understood as secondary to speech – it is an intransitive act of play with the symbol,

environment (or 'local difference') in which it had highlighted the *contresens* of what might have otherwise seemed patent, well-established, and self-evident" (2018: 113).

with the language – the meaning of which has been conditioned by culture; and with the vast body of history, politics and culture as emanated in the existing discourses that serve as the symbolic basis for subsequent production. There is no genuine authenticity in such creation, according to Barthes, and:

> [we] are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer by the arrogant antiphrastical recrimination of good society in favor of the very thing it sets aside, ignores, smothers, or destroys; we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author. (2011: 189)

What the language "sets aside, ignores, smothers, or destroys" relates to the absence perceived by Derrida – an absence that always creates a possibility in the field of play. An absence, in this sense, that is a context in itself, a surplus or the situation of supplementarity, however contradictory it may sound.

If the discourse stands for a play within the symbolic order that no longer presents authentic creation for Barthes, and a contextual language play that invites deconstruction for Derrida, for Foucault it is an instrument and vehicle of political and social control. In "The Order of Discourse," initially published in 1971, Michel Foucault deals with discourse production as "at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality" (2011: 210). Derrida's work regarding the theory of the sign, phonocentrism and logocentrism as manifested in Eurocentrism, the controversial emphasis on deconstruction and the subsequent focus on political criticism, all explicitly testify to the significance of the phenomenon of discourse that embodies the philosophical and political legacy in society. Barthes' work, too, focuses on the power of discourse as both generating and enforcing systems of beliefs, but this anthropologist's efforts to expose the procedures by which this is done rely heavily on the structuralist propositions – a translation of de Saussurean linguistics into the study of 'otherness' that is either created by the discourse purposefully, or perceived in its prescribed or even compulsory absence. Michel Foucault, however, directly deals with "the procedures of exclusion" (2011: 210), and specifically in the above mentioned article, he tackles the so-called "taboo on the object of speech, and the ritual of the circumstances of speech, and the privileged or exclusive

right of the speaking subject" (2011: 210), isolating "the play […] of prohibitions which intersect, reinforce or compensate for each other" (2011: 210). Derrida and Barthes both deal with "the privileged or exclusive right of the speaking subject," and in terms of the social and political forces regulating the generating of discourses, they perceive them as inevitable and undefeatable – the crux of Derrida's deconstruction as the uncovering of the forces present in a discourse in the form of the logos, disseminated by the authorities of contemporaneity.

In "The Order of Discourse," however, Foucault proposes that "discourse is not simply that which manifests (or hides) desire – it is also the object of desire" (2011: 211), and placing the discourse as the object of desire echoes Derrida's claim that there exist two interpretations of interpretation – one that strives to locate the humanist origin of an individual, in history and subsequently in contemporaneity; and the one that finds the endeavor futile. Both, however, place their claim on the discourse, and in their 'irreconcilable' interplay produce "systems of domination," and the discourse is "the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized" (Foucault 2011: 211), as an object of desire, on the one hand, and that which regulates desire at the same time. Introducing "the speech of the madman" (Foucault 2011: 211) as the contravening force to the privileged discourse, Foucault echoes Friedrich Nietzsche's nihilist proposition that the possibility of belief in the absoluteness of established beliefs and values, and in this case, the liberal humanist philosophy and ideology as generated in the form of privileged discourse, and explicitly so by the academic circles, as a form of prohibition, is no longer possible. This madman's speech that Foucault identifies in the theatre as the place where "he was only symbolically allowed to speak […] where he would step forward, disarmed and reconciled, because there he played the role of truth in a mask" (2011: 211) illustrates the power of the Eurocentric logos and its authority through the institutions of power. The idea, then, underlying Derrida's theory of the sign, as well as his concept of the limited language and limitless play of language, come from the same place as Foucault's claim that:

> [for] centuries in Europe the speech of the madman was either not heard at all or else taken for the word of truth. It either fell into the void, being rejected as soon as it was proffered, or else people deciphered in it a rationality, naïve or crafty, which they regarded as more rational than that of the sane. (2011: 211)

Moreover, the very character of Derrida's style in *Of Grammatology*, the purposeful ambiguity and indeterminacy of language, the forceful, yet effortless, intentional disruption of the sign, and the purposeful interruption of the logos-governed discourse, all testify to this privileged discourse take-over, the take-over of the privileged speaking-subject position and a reappropriation of both the discourse and presence. This is, of course, not an attempt at characterizing Derrida as a madman, but it is an insinuation that Derrida's deconstruction essentially represents an attempt at a paradigm shift Foucault refers to when he says that:

> […] all this attention to the speech of madness does not prove that the old division is no longer operative. You have only to think of the whole framework of knowledge through which we decipher that speech, and of the whole network of institutions which permit someone – a doctor or a psychoanalyst – to listen to it, and which at the same time permit the patient to bring along his poor words or, in desperation, to withhold them. You have only to think of all this to become suspicious that the division, far from being effaced, is working differently, along other lines, through new institutions, and with effects that are not at all the same. (2011: 212)

For Foucault, and fundamentally for postmodern thinkers, critics and artists, the exhilaration of Derrida's deconstruction only falls short in the light of realization that the capacity of the forces regulating the privileged discourse, although grounded in historical tradition, possess great plasticity in transforming, adjusting and amending their own workings yet retaining the same modes of power relations that prohibit, exclude or seduce. The "historically constituted" (Foucault 2011: 212) division between the privileged, allegedly rational discourse, or the logos for Derrida, and the madman's speech, reveals "something like a system of exclusion, a historical, modifiable, and institutionally constraining system" (Foucault 2011: 212), and this system is what "governs our will to know (notre volonté de savoir)" (Foucault 2011: 212). Foucault calls this "the will to truth" (2011: 213) and explicates the systems of exclusion operating in the field as relying on "an institutional support: […] both reinforced and renewed by whole strata of practices, such as pedagogy, of course; and the system of books, publishing, libraries; learned societies in the past and laboratories now" (2011: 213). The already mentioned plasticity of these systems, as Foucault notices, thrives on self-replication through controlled (desired) production and its distribution (economy). Postmodernism, often criticized for its lack of revolutionary vocabulary, illustrates the

resistance to the malleability of the systems of prohibition and exclusion, serving as the voice of madmen plunged in the institutionalized rhetoric of neo-liberal capitalist liberal humanism. In Foucault's own words:

> […] I believe that this will to truth – leaning in this way on a support and an institutional distribution – tends to exert a sort of pressure and something like a power of constraint […] on other discourses. I am thinking of the way in which for centuries Western literature sought to ground itself on the natural, the 'vraisemblable', on sincerity, on science as well – in short, on 'true' discourse. I am thinking likewise of the manner in which economic practices, codified as precepts or recipes and ultimately as morality, have sought since the sixteenth century to ground themselves, rationalize themselves, and justify themselves in a theory of wealth and production. I am also thinking of the way in which a body is prescriptive as the penal system sought its bases or its justification, at first of course in a theory of justice, then, since the nineteenth century, in a sociological, psychological, medical, and psychiatric knowledge: it is as if even the word of law could no longer be authorized, in our society, except by a discourse of truth. (2011: 213)

The "natural" and the "scientific" as constituting the concept of the 'true' discourse are tackled by Derrida in the political criticism of the phonocentric and Eurocentric logos representing the Western ethos in the totality of its discourses operating as the forces verifying and justifying the practices prescribed by those very discourses, and so Foucault resonates both with Nietzsche's and Derrida's understanding that truth value is neither historically faithful, nor attainable. Moreover, this rational, 'true' discourse that Foucault deals with in his article, "cannot recognize the will to truth which pervades it; and the will to truth, having imposed itself on us for a very long time, is such that the truth it wants cannot fail to mask it" (2011: 214). The claim that the will or desire for truth is conditioned by the discourse it seeks to employ with the aim of uncovering that which constitutes the truth, unsurprisingly, presents an impetus for the postmodern critical thought. In fact, one of the most important insights in terms of Foucault's understanding of "the order of discourse" revolves around the accessibility to the privileged role of the speaking subject – the producer, reinforcer and disseminator of discourse. Foucault notices "a rarefaction […] of the speaking subjects" (2011: 219) by which accessibility is restricted and controlled, and "not all the regions of discourse are equally open and penetrable; some of them are largely forbidden (they are

differentiated and differentiating), while others seem to be almost open to all winds and put at the disposal of every speaking subject, without prior restrictions" (2011: 219). The discourse networks, "differentiated and differentiating", formulate a system that replicates its ideologies and ethics in the economic, political and cultural spheres of life, and create an illusion of vertical and horizontal mobility, but restrict it, at the same time, in terms of the condition of general subservience to the ruling doctrines. Ironically, the entire discussion on the emergence of postmodernism revolving around discourse reveals a profoundly hypocritical, if not insidiously deceptive fabrication – that we live in a society of discourse, and not of doctrines, and that the discourse networks operating at the intersection of economy, politics and society do not represent, essentially, historically evolved doctrines. Foucault explains these as being the device of "reciprocal allegiance" (2011: 221), subtly supported by the discourses surrounding them using "the procedures of exclusion and the mechanisms of rejection which come into action when a speaking subject has formulated one or several unassimilable statements" (2011: 221). More explicitly:

> […] the doctrine puts the statements in question on the basis of the speaking subjects, to the extent that the doctrine always stands as the sign, manifestation and instrument of a prior adherence to a class, a social status, a race, a nationality, an interest, a revolt, a resistance or an acceptance. Doctrine binds individuals to certain types of enunciation and consequently forbids them all others… (Foucault 2011: 221)

Foucault's discussion on the nature of doctrine, as opposed to what discourse should represent, testifies, to an extent, to the inflexible nature of the discourses of the past, persisting in contemporaneity without their economic, political or other momentum. More concretely, if we consider the modern philosophical and ideological paradigm, its basis in liberal humanism, and its applicability or mere sustainability in contemporaneity, the discourse surrounding it exhibits an expected inflexibility and therefore, in its desire to sustain itself, it requires a system of exclusion that would protect it against dissolution. For example, modernist criticism against postmodernism would not ignore the postmodern anti-elitist approach to both theory and practice, and especially theory, of course. Therefore, a discourse whose governing-logos can no longer sustain itself in presence, becomes dogmatic and creates a system of discourses that would, even forcefully, justify its existence.

The Unbearable Lightness of (Postmodern) Poetics

The scope and definition of the term poetics poses itself as one of the starting points of the discussion about postmodernism and the diverging critical and theoretical directions at its peak in the twentieth, but also at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As a general theory or configuration of form and genre, intention, meaning and interpretation, as well as mode of representation and production, poetics can be traced back to Aristotle and his broad definitions of genre and form in his treatment of tragedy and comedy. Alternating between prescriptive and descriptive approaches to literature, both in theory and criticism, the concept of poetics has been repeatedly redefined to adhere to such frameworks that would restrict it, to a greater or lesser degree, to a more objective or methodological direction, and that is, to the formal features of a particular text, or texts produced within a period. Especially with the rise of modern linguistics, structuralism, and subsequent post-structuralist theories and trends, any narrow or prescriptive definition of poetics as a field examining exclusively "the internal structure of the literary work and its formal constitution" (Taylor & Winquist 2001: 291) becomes potentially too restrictive and reveals a necessity to observe individual works as part of a larger body of literary production influenced by socio-political concerns of the moment, as well as interacting with other cultural artifacts. In other words, in post-structuralism, poetics expands to encompass not only the investigation of the formal and structural features of a text, but rather those dimensions pertaining to the social, political, ideological or other relations to culture, within the period or within the context of literary production in general. Yet, despite the general consensus on what a poetics may imply, or how individual literary works could be placed within the scope of theoretical and practical tenets of a poetics, contemporary discussions reveal a lack of agreement on whether poetics should be defined by its practice or theory, and this is one of the major questions the discussion on postmodern poetics attempts to answer. The former would suggest a more descriptive approach, with theory representing a co-extensive reflection on the cultural production of the period, whereas the latter presupposes a distinct link between theory that precedes practice, and dictates the scope and extent of creative expression as if it were possible, at all, to contain it within a theoretical framework.

In *The Pursuit of Signs* (2001), Jonathan Culler comments on what he calls "symptomatic interpretation", a practice that dismisses "appreciative interpretation" of the New Criticism, and

"takes the work of art as the symptom of a condition or reality thought to lie outside it" (xvii), examining the narrative discourse as a product of the socio-political or historical reality, and the experience of that presupposed reality. Using *semiotics* and *poetics* as separate, yet at times interchangeable or synonymous terms for the systematic interpretative and analytical practices in literary criticism, Culler notes that symptomatic interpretations focus on "the discursive conventions and mechanisms of the text, whether we see those mechanisms as the brilliant achievements of a great author or as defenses against realities that impose themselves on whoever writes" (2001: xviii). Culler's distinction between interpretation and poetics is based on the end-result of the applied process: an appreciation of the "new dimensions of literary structure and signifying possibilities" (2001: xviii), and "an understanding of the operation of literary and cultural discourses" (2001: xviii). Therefore, poetics could be employed as a more methodical approach based on the idea that literature is a "discursive system" (Culler 2001: xxi) and that understanding narratives has to imply understanding the relations between literary and non-literary production of the period. However, Culler rejects appreciative interpretation as part of the methodical process of narrative analysis thereby expulsing the reader as an integrative part of the critical practice of the period. In addition to that, Culler perhaps fails to recognize the coextensive nature of the processes binding literary and non-literary production, and their overall influence on the poetics of the period understood as the methodical and systematic approach to artistic production. In Culler's view, discovering the inner workings of narratives, literary or non-literary, stands for an objective, methodological analysis, one potentially reluctant to embrace the subjective appreciative connotations even if such belong to the interdisciplinary space between literary criticism and cultural studies. Culler concludes the discussion on the role and difference between semiotics and poetics by proposing that "it may be opportune to promote poetics as a central enterprise of cultural studies in general" (2001: xxi). This particular suggestion resonates with the general tone of this study in terms of investigating literary (practice) and non-literary (criticism and theory) production of a period with regard to the general and specific cultural conditions in which the production (and reception) takes place with the view of uncovering the nature of the relationships between them. However, such an approach does not pretend to retain the utmost level of objectivity desired by critics such as Culler, nor does it reject appreciative or interpretative positions. As mentioned, the issues and implications of defining a poetics present a challenge, and especially in terms of discussing the phenomenon of postmodernism, or

postmodernity in general (and the scope of this dissertation does not appreciate the possibility that it could provide, even tentative, solutions for this issue), and Culler's insistence on methodology prompts the question of undertheorized interpretation in terms of postmodern literature because any postmodern critical model, structured or unstructured reflection on literature, culture or ideology promises only a position that problematizes and relativizes. Postmodern critical theory does not set its own objective because it is acutely aware of the social, political and economic transformations taking place at a rapid rate, and the utter impossibility of reverting to a philosophical or ideological position of a modernist, or a Marxist for that matter, who fervently defends a vision of society and political system against corporate capitalism or the identified *other*. Moreover, the postmodern critical thought refrains from setting such an objective specifically because its investigative potential is not focused on the discovering or re-verifying of a suitable grand narrative, but rather uncovering the remnants of such obsolete or unsustainable master narratives still affecting the meta-narratives of contemporaneity. Speaking from the position of the accepted failure of modernism, in a manner, the postmodern critic may only strive to share their heightened sense of understanding of the mechanisms by which the lives of others are conditioned by economy, economy-driven politics, mass culture and globalization, and twenty-first century social dynamics. The postmodern critical thought, in fact encourages the impulse by which not only are the discourses of contemporaneity deconstructed, but also the forces of interpellation exposed. It is a practice by which the perceiving subject comprehends the structure and rhetorical power of the discourses participating in the creation of their narrative.

Extending here Jonathan Culler's proposition that poetics is the platform that binds social sciences and literary criticism (2001: xxi), the focus turns to contemporary critical theory and Stuart Sim and Borin van Loon, the authors of *Introducing Critical Theory – A Graphic Guide* (2012), who introduce critical theory in general by commenting on the concept of "The Theory of Everything" as being the basis for the development of cultural studies, "one of the major success stories of interdisciplinary enquiry" based on the assumption that "any area of our culture is amenable to the application of the latest theories" (3), as well as the assumption that their application "will lead to a significant increase in understanding of how our culture works" (3). In this whimsical, yet systematic and thorough, review of the most influential literary and cultural theories and phenomena, Sim and van Loon notice that "one no longer studies 'literature', but literature plus the full range of critical theories used to construct readings of narratives" (2012: 4), as a general

practice applied to all areas of humanities and social sciences, and for the purpose of not only understanding the mechanisms by which culture operates, but also "to identify its power relations, offer some strategies for resisting – and where possible undermining – these" (2012: 164). Defining critical theory as "an innately pluralist exercise" (2012: 165), Sim and van Loon emphasize not only its potential in terms of applicability in contemporaneity, but also the context of the produced cultural artifacts as reflective of the artificiality and multiplicity of cultural paradigms, which is essentially a postmodern position, and a position that allows critical theory to be more than "merely an academic exercise for 'intellectual mandarins', but a perspective on awareness" (2012: 165). Postmodern critical theory focuses on the social realities that it problematizes in terms of the broader context – be it economic, political, cultural, social, ideological or other; and shows how this context, the totality of its transformative effect, impacts the individual. It does not purport to match or exceed the determination of modernism, or suppose the fixedness of the cultural, political or social *other* it attempts to theorize against, but rather explores the effects and conditions from a subjective standpoint embracing the plurality of experience, as well as the universal quality of the human condition. This 'subjective' standpoint, it might be added, is both contemporary, but also historically informed, for contemporaneity is not understood as removed, somehow, from the continuity with the past, as will be proposed, to a degree by the proponents of metamodernism. In those terms, the modernist, and metamodernist, claim that postmodernism is essentially an anti-humanist paradigm does not hold, even if, in the end, it may well be anti-liberal-humanist.

Encyclopedia of Postmodernism (2001) defines the phenomenon of postmodernism as originating in the final decades of the twentieth century and standing for "those practices that exemplified the cultural effects of those systems of production, replication, and consumption whose logic necessitates that all experience be mediated, stored, fetishized, and commodified in accord with ideological and economic goals" (Taylor & Winquist 2001: 19). This definition, based on Umberto Eco's interpretation of the "material, ideological, philosophical and cultural" (Taylor & Winquist 2001: 19) foundations of postmodernism in itself remains somewhat abstract and provides little insight into the visible implications in the actual postmodern practice, which, it might be added, echoes the absence of the presumably visionary momentum ascribed to its predecessor poetics – modernism. Defined specifically against modernism, generally speaking, the phenomena of postmodernism and postmodern poetics are described in terms of lack – of historical, political,

social and collective vision or foresight in general. In fact, such views on the phenomenon of postmodernism are inspired by the same line of thought as the above quoted Eco's definition of the foundations of postmodernism, which, more thoroughly observed, mainly stands for the criticism of the outcome of the modernist enterprise, as discussed in the introductory section of this chapter. What is essentially problematic about his interpretation on the principles of the postmodern critical thought and practice is that the critic equates the general economic, social, political and economic climate with the emergence of a line of thinking that brings into question the ideological, philosophical and ethical foundations of the Western society that allowed for the plummeting into the practice of commodification and fetishization of the economic interests of the political elites. The malfunction in the institutional implementation of the liberal humanist ideas supposedly emanated in modernism, then, is effortlessly and shamelessly imputed on the nature of the reaction that postmodernism (or postmodernity) embodies. Therefore, it is not surprising that the multitudes of viewpoints on postmodernism consider the phenomenon – the literary practice and its co-extensive theoretical, non-literary discourses – in opposition to the discourses accompanying the modernist practice. However, this sort of criticism, based on the supposed and alleged philosophical and ethical tenets of postmodernism, is not only misdirected but also invalid since postmodern critical and artistic practice does not really base itself on any designated philosophical, ideological or political practice, theory or idea guiding it in one direction or another. In fact, the postmodern insistence on the investigative process automatically excludes the existence of such authoritative basis. And philosophical basis-wise, at the very core of postmodern criticism, there is a presumption that all authority is false, simulated and constructed, which obligates the postmodern thinker to question it and, in the process of postmodern, eclectic, de-construction, potentially arrive at that which remains viable and vital in contemporaneity – that which may be 'emancipatory'. Following this line of thought, Linda Hutcheon, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, notices that postmodern literary and critical practice explore the dynamic interaction of various present discourses, theoretical and other, and that in this exploration it is the legacy of modernism that is brought into question: "Instead of a 'poetics,' then, perhaps what we have here is a 'problematics': a set of problems and basic issues that have been created by the various discourses of postmodernism, issues that were not particularly problematic before but certainly are now" (2004: 224). This particularly relates to the postmodern impulse to investigate its own discourse production, the self-reflexive propensity to expose the meta-narrative of its own language.

However, the proliferative nature of the postmodern critical thought and discourse create a complex problem of the unique manifestations of this approach in different fields. In *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, Taylor and Winquist make a distinction between the two terms often used interchangeably to stand for the theoretical approach investigated in this dissertation, i.e. postmodernism and postmodernity. This phenomenon is exceptionally problematic precisely because the application of the postmodern critical thought, and the subsequent creation of distinctive theoretical discourses, reveals not only diverging trends in terms of theory and practice, but also a significant disparity in the starting points of the postmodern inquiry in different fields. They distinguish postmodernity as follows:

> Derived from the etymologically baffling combination of 'post' (after) and 'modo' just now), and with attributes which can be traced through the history of modern thought but which take present shape after the Second World War, postmodernity now loosely encompasses or relates to a series of movements, sometimes incompatible, that emerged in affluent countries in Europe and of European descent in art, architecture, literature, music, the social sciences and the humanities. (Taylor & Winquist 2001: 304)

Additionally, these authors comment on Andreas Huyssen's understanding that postmodernity is the result, or outcome, of the "schism between two modernist enterprises, the consciously exclusionary 'high' modernism, and the historical avant-garde which, like postmodernity, questioned the aesthetic notions that underwrite the idea that high culture is self-sufficient" (in Taylor & Winquist 2001: 304). Postmodernity, then, can be understood as the general trend of inquiry of the modern thought and its discursive legacy in the arts, social sciences and humanities, and science as well. The specific approaches emerging in the period referred to as postmodernity, or the "descriptions of the 'postmodern condition,' which describe our current knowledge state, emerge in the face of the modernist search for authority, progress, universalization, rationalization, systematization, and a consistent criterion for the evaluation of knowledge claims" (Taylor & Winquist 2001: 304). Therefore, postmodernism is most generally defined as the counteracting of the modernist categorical insistence on universal and natural truth conditions governing the socio-political and existential realities. Both as a philosophical approach and a poetics, postmodernism challenges the discursive reality produced by modernism and investigates the nature of that referential reality, as well as its own representation of it. The scope of research in this dissertation

does not allow space for the exploration into the specific reasons for the, sometimes radical, divergence within the postmodern trends operating in postmodernity on the whole – in philosophy, science, arts, etc., however, this disparity seems to be unsurprising, especially in consideration the definition of postmodernity by Taylor and Winquist by which it "involves a radical questioning of the grounds upon which knowledge claims are made, and is thereby linked to a sense of liberation from limiting earlier practices" (2001: 304).

Understood in this manner, the postmodern critical thought presents a range of approaches specific to a particular field, at the core of which is the challenging of the idea that there exist consistent criteria for the evaluation of knowledge claims, universal and natural truth and value conditions. While the postmodern condition, in a manner, not only invites a sense of liberation from such illusions, it also recognizes that the practices of the past are modifiable discursive constructs whose sustainability in contemporaneity is contingent upon their reexamination. Additionally, Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* suggests that, postmodernism achieves a seemingly contradictory attitude towards the culture it interrogates, and the contradictoriness is found in "its inherently paradoxical structure" that not only "permits contradictory interpretations," but in that the nature of the "forms of aesthetic practice and theory both install and subvert prevailing norms – artistic and ideological" (2004: 222). Postmodern forms are "both critical and complicitous, outside and inside the dominant discourses of society" (Hutcheon 2004: 222), implying a high awareness of the metalanguages operating both in the referent reality and the discourses postmodernism produces about this reality, and at the same, the inherent artifice of both. In Hutcheon's words, it is the "contradiction" at "those points of intersection of art and theory today" that is "the basis for a poetics of postmodernism, an open and flexible descriptive structure by which to order our current cultural knowledge" (2004: 222), and a descriptive structure that explores the nature of the relationship between theory and practice, and the object of their interrogation at the same time, "that which they contest: the ideological as well as aesthetic underpinnings of the cultural dominants of today – both liberal humanism and capitalist mass culture" (2004: 222). The discussions on postmodern poetics, inspired by its presumed lack of a visionary intention, expose the redundancy of the misdirected criticism in that such accusations essentially assume the verifiability of the philosophical and ideological tenets of modernism. This sort of criticism, in reality, seeks to justify its philosophical model – the model that is, incidentally, only sustainable in modernist theoretical, and artistic (solipsist) practice. With regard to this,

Hutcheon explains postmodernism in fiction, and this extends to the general discussion on the postmodern thought as well, as a phenomenon that:

> [paradoxically] uses and abuses the conventions of both realism and modernism, and does so in order to challenge their transparency, in order to prevent glossing over the contradictions that make the postmodern what it is: historical and metafictional, contextual and self-reflexive, ever aware of its status as discourse, as a human construct. (2004: 53)

Postmodern poetics represents not a set of experimentally and intentionally contradictory theoretical and other discourses in relation to the past, nor a discontinuity with its chronological 'predecessor' poetics, that of modernism. As Fredric Jameson notes in *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, postmodernism stands for "an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" (1991: viii). However, Jameson sees this as possibly "[amounting] to not much more than theorizing its own condition of possibility, which consists primarily in the sheer enumeration of changes and modifications" (1991: viii), and this pessimism seems belated in the light of the failed modernist project. The question of what it was that the modernist vision offered that in spite of its artificiality stands to weigh more than postmodern interrogative rationale stands yet to be answered, but Jameson's perspective seems to be that:

> The moderns were interested in what was likely to come of such changes and their general tendency they thought about the thing itself, substantively, in Utopian or essential fashion. Postmodernism is more formal in that sense, and more 'distracted,' […]; it only clocks the variations themselves, and knows only too well that the contents are just more images. (1991: viii)

Even if both merely stand for heuristic labels, or literary categories, in discussing their philosophical task, postmodernism stands for the critical approach that strives to uncover and expose its own ideological and philosophical inheritance, the cultural and political context and the justifiability and sustainability of the discourses of the past that persist in contemporaneity – the discourses of modernism as reflected in the grand narratives that have served as the foundation of the Western ethos, or their residual traces in the now fragmented discourses of contemporaneity, theory included. Ultimately, what characterizes postmodern poetics is the endeavor to interrogate

its own apparatus and philosophical attitude in order to question not only the established conventions, institutionalized and ideological authorities, but also the dimensions, nature and implications of the discourse production in contemporaneity.

Postmodernism and Its Persistent Discontents

In *After Theory* (2003), Terry Eagleton viciously criticizes postmodernism as a phenomenon and a consequence of a futile "abstraction" (15), especially in academic circles where the postmodern thought, he notes, is endorsed as a deliberate attempt to skew the normative and achieve an artificial sense of plurality of values. What Eagleton terms "a general rejection of uniformity" and "cultural relativism" (2013: 13), the postmodern tendency to speak not only from the marginal spaces, but also recognize the validity of disparate individual experience of culture, may be translated into a rejection of the modernist normative, which causes "discontinuity and heterogeneity" (2013: 13). However, Eagleton equally criticizes norms as "oppressive because they mould uniquely different individuals to the same shape" (2013: 14), and validates the necessity for the "marginal, perverse and aberrant" (2013: 14) voices and perspectives to enter the discourse and interrogate its values. Undoubtedly, Eagleton's position comes from the vantage point of the established modernist enquiry, however, it reveals, ironically, a myopic character as expressed by his insistence on criticizing the phenomenon of endless abstraction – the direct outcome of postmodernism, according to him, even if the postmodern practice utilizes the modernist interrogative paradigm comprehensively; and, as expressed, again ironically, in the recognition of contemporary pluralities as observed by postmodernism (and postmodernity). The major issue for Eagleton, in his interpretation of the postmodern critical thought, seems to be the postmodern need to reject all and any conception of political, social or historical authority, as well as tradition, and, therefore, the concept of the normative as universally beneficial. Philosophically, Eagleton appears to see the need for postmodern criticism, but ideologically, he rejects it for a more comfortable, traditional, socio-political sensibility. Undeniably, Eagleton's view of norms, rooted in the modernist enterprise to bring down the political system based on corporate capitalism even today echoes a liberal-humanist tone in criticizing the perceived postmodern shortcomings. Eagleton's critique of the lengths at which postmodern literature and theory take social, cultural and political interrogation without actually providing a center to which criticism could be attached

and turned into corrective measures beneficial for the community revolves around the premise that the tenets of postmodern practice and criticism are an abstraction, or rather that "only an intellectual who has overdosed on abstraction could be dim enough to imagine that whatever bends a norm is politically radical" (2003: 15). And if such an intellectual would be dim, then "the postmodern prejudice against norms, unities and consensus" is not only "a politically catastrophic one," but also "remarkably dim-witted"[7] (Eagleton 2003: 16). For Eagleton, such a position destroys the possibility of political consensus and solidarity – unity and solidarity based on the values of "old fashioned bourgeois society" which are now, weakened by incessant social changes and political uncertainties, bound to dissipate, much like that society, "into a host of sub-cultures" (2003: 16). The subjective, yet valid nature of individual experience, as related by the postmodern practice, understood by this critic, is "a murky subcurrent of masochism [that] runs beneath this exoticizing, laced with a dash of good old-fashioned American puritan guilt" (Eagleton 2003: 21), and Eagleton sees the innate propensity of the postmodern critical theory to question all cultural artifacts and givens as an absurd overreaction to sensible tradition.

What Eagleton notices as snobbery and elitism in "the postmodern cult of the migrant" or "a hangover from the modernist cult of the exile" (2003: 21), a twentieth-century outsider or twenty-first-century hipster, does expose the weaknesses of the postmodern critical practice – available now to anyone and everyone because of its leftist and liberal aspirations, but existing in a space in which the critic does not have "a sense of tradition and belonging" (2003: 21), not even in terms of the practice itself, which is particularly visible in the academic circles, now that we mention it. Eagleton's firmness in the attitude that "there is nothing retrograde about roots" (2013: 21) and that "capitalism has always pitched diverse forms of life promiscuously together" (2003: 49) does hold ground in a profusion of the postmodern lack of any *terminus ad quem*, to use Georg Lukacs' turn of phrase. In his article "The Ideology of Modernism" (1962), Lukacs comments on the modernist psychopathology of escapism that is in itself purely "artistic intention" (2004: 198) characterized by "a lack of definition" and the act itself being "an abstract gesture; the rejection of reality […] containing no concrete criticism," "a gesture, moreover, that is destined to lead

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[7] The ease with which Eagleton authoritatively qualifies the participants of the general critical and literary discourse, his peers and potentially students, myself as his reader among others, inspires appreciation and admiration for its brilliant rhetorical effect, even if it is reminiscent of the mentioned "rarefaction […] of the speaking subjects" (Foucault 2011: 219) Foucault thoroughly explains in "The Order of Things." The "remarkably dim-witted" participants would, after this remark, ideally show themselves out.

nowhere […] an escape into nothingness" (2004: 198). Following this line of thought, granted, postmodern criticism does succumb to the allure of complacency at the notion of the very gesture of criticism. However, the inability of postmodernism, literature, criticism, the practice in general to offer any sort of radical political or social action cannot be attributed to its faulty instruments, but to the general conditions in which it operates. Eagleton's admonishment of postmodern criticism resonates with Lukacs' criticism of "any protest against particular social conditions" (2004: 198) that lacks grounding in a central position – the center of meaning, essentially. And yet, what seems to be the central issue of Eagleton's repulsion at the often fluttery postmodern act is criticism aimed at what he calls "traditional communities" (2003: 49) – those very same communities that produced such individual modernist thinkers who questioned the nature of the values upholding the tradition that marked their experience: James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Joseph Conrad, to name only the most celebrated. Lukacs' impression of Franz Kafka and his "*angst*" as "the experience *par excellence* of modernism" in which an individual is "at the mercy of incomprehensible terrors" (2004: 202) deeply resonates with the postmodern understanding of the human situation – the postmodern condition – of being systematically oppressed by social, political and economic forces beyond any individual control, and yet being compelled to identify, recognize and comprehend their impact. Eagleton continues:

> Those for whom 'dynamic' is always a positive term might also care to reconsider their opinion, in the light of the most dynamically destructive system of production which humanity has ever seen. But we are now witnessing a brutally quickened version of this melt-down, with the tearing up of traditional communities, the breaking down of national barriers, the generating of great tidal waves of migration. Culture in the form of fundamentalism has reared its head in reaction to these shattering upheavals. Everywhere you look, people are prepared to go to extraordinary lengths to be themselves. (Eagleton 2003: 49)

What is particularly problematic with this undoubtedly accurate observation is the blatant denial of the cause, root and source of the "shattering upheavals" Eagleton mentions above. If modernist vision strove to slow down the "dynamically destructive system of production" its critical powers and practices failed miserably in as much as they did not influence, or at least not significantly enough, the changes in social, political and economic paradigms of precisely those traditional

communities Eagleton seems overly nostalgic about. If modernist thinkers saw any prospect in the acutely painful criticism of their own cultures, then it is the bourgeois society that resisted to adopt and implement the criticism with the purpose of evolving and growing out of the corporate capitalist political leviathan-mentality. It is precisely the resistance to the crux of the modernist thought that produced fertile ground for cultural fundamentalism, and Eagleton's nonchalant criticism of the postmodern attempts at de-masking this almost imperceptible defeat, exposing the romanticized and white-washed version of a failed reconstruction of post-war European Western societies, reveals a malignant fiber in the academia that devours its own theory only to perpetuate its own status and power. The bourgeois society, clothed in a liberal corporate suit, self-righteously propagates a severing of ties with now indeterminate shameful past immersed in racism and classism, while subtly feeding the insolent plebs breadcrumbs of hope provided by mass-media, global culture and the solace that the West has evicted its troublemaking external-agents elsewhere therefore eradicating the need for any significant cultural change. In fact, Eagleton's reproaching postmodern critical thought with going against progress is an instance of blatantly defending the neo-liberal capitalist discourse that knowingly refuses to recognize that the progress in question is merely an image, a visual branding in the form of culture of the politico-economic system. Eagleton would describe this view as radical since it implies a level of severing of ties with the past that is, granted, almost forced upon an individual. Commenting on cultural politics, a "phrase [that] is deeply ambiguous" (Eagleton 2003: 46), and the attempts following the changes of 1960s, Eagleton notices the crucial role of capitalism in the creation of an illusion of diversity, individuality and global cultural awakening:

> There had long been a recognition in radical circles that political change had to be 'cultural' to be effective. Any political change which does not embed itself in people's feelings and perceptions - which does not secure their consent, engage their desires and weave its way into their sense of identity – is unlikely to endure very long… A whole new kind of human being was needed for the new political order, with altered sense organs and bodily habits, a different kind of memory and set of drives. And it was the task of culture to provide it. (2003: 46)

Eagleton's comment that culture is "crucial" and "indistinguishable from" capitalism at the end of the twentieth century (2003: 48) unequivocally refers to the failed modernist vision of a reformed,

or re-envisioned, political system, and therefore the cultural politics which practically idealize modernism as some sort of force that could have, almost biologically, transform individuals so that every and each could share in the visionary prospect of unity. However, it also reveals a pessimist, or defeatist and ultimately useless, quality to Eagleton's critique of what he ascribes to have been the objective, cultural politics-wise, of the "radical circles" and their aspiration to provide the foundation for political change through culture – the postmodern radicals. The failure of the romanticized modernist undertaking, Eagleton's version of it specifically, or its utter impossibility due to the powerful interconnectedness between capitalism, and now neo-liberal corporate capitalism, and politics and culture, renders postmodern criticism all the more necessary. What Eagleton proposes instead of postmodern enquiry is an escapist dream to which only the few are privileged, those whose race, class, status and wealth enable them to pessimistically reject the criticism of the modernist vision, essentially an illusion that is sustainable only when existential needs are a remote issue; and those who, indulging in the advantages of their position, need not reject the idea of uniformity. "For some postmodern thought," Eagleton notices, "consensus is tyrannical and solidarity nothing but soulless uniformity" (2003: 13), and albeit the careful phrasing, this sort of provisional claim supports the argument that in the aftermath of the failure of modernist thought, the salvaging is not of the visionary potential that modernism claims to have birthed, but indeed a narcissistic attempt at preserving the status quo of the minority that is unaffected by the damaging effect capitalism has had on politics and culture. Eagleton's definition of postmodernism in *After Theory*, equally cautious as the attempt to vindicate uniformity against, as implied, "soulless" pluralism, goes as follows:

> [the] contemporary movement of thought which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence and the possibility of objective knowledge. Postmodernism is skeptical of truth, unity and progress, opposes what it sees as elitism in culture, tends towards cultural relativism, and celebrates pluralism, discontinuity and heterogeneity. (2013: 13)

And, indeed, the postmodern impulse is to reject elitism in culture, politics and theory proposed by grand narratives that no longer serve individuals or the collective, but also to inspire the process of attaining knowledge through skepticism and the acceptance of plurality and heterogeneity that grand narratives effortlessly remove from the discourse. The very idea that knowledge could come

from heterogeneous sources, and that there is no cultural, political or other monopoly or authority over the truths by which society operates may disturb the academia and create a challenge in terms of sustaining a fixed position within a discourse. Eagleton's definition above brings into question the postmodern attempt at problematizing contemporary culture and ascribes it the quality of being almost backward in its thinking, which it might well be, in a sense, since it goes 'back to' the impulse behind the modernist realization that realism cannot suffice to explicate the experience of the artifice of reality. The proposition is that by questioning the very foundations of culture (or cultures), specific as Eagleton would label them, and questioning theory as the main perpetuator of the social, political and economic practices, postmodernism hinders progress and obstructs political and social consensus, which is a preposterous and hypocritical claim if the critic defines theory as "this critical self-reflection… [which] comes about when we are forced into a new self-consciousness about what we are doing" (2003: 27). What the reader, peer or student, apparently needs to infer is that theory is only valuable for as long as self-reflection is adequately based on the ideological models that have proven their value and existence in the realm of contemporaneity, such as Marxism, among other.

Eagleton points out the general nature of theory (2003: 74) emphasizing that if it implies "a reasonably systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions, it remains as indispensable as ever" (2003: 2), but another implication of such a claim exposes what is behind Eagleton's 'reasonably systematic reflection', and that is only the reflection guided by the necessity to preserve the conservative bourgeois impulse. The "aftermath of what one might call high theory" (2003: 2), our contemporaneity, he notes, is satiated with "the insight of thinkers like Althusser, Barthes and Derrida," but the critic also notices that this theory has also "moved beyond them" (2003: 2), and such conclusions are precisely the starting point of postmodern enquiry. The questions that postmodern literature and theory ask specifically address the notion, or even the given, that Western society has "moved beyond" the enquiries of the twentieth century or mastered them. Not only does postmodernism expose the superficiality of such claims, but it seeks to also expose the mechanisms by which we have been deceived into believing that the lessons of the past have been mastered, and that the postmodern obsession with questioning the tenets of contemporary society represents nothing more than a useless academic preoccupation – a topic Eagleton wittingly discusses in an amusing and even seemingly self-deprecating manner providing an alibi for not being able himself to move further than criticize the failure of modernist enthusiasm in the evolved,

even if all too realist, guise of the postmodern probe. Eagleton practically accuses the postmodern critical thought of establishing history, the past, as the object of its study, as opposed to the present, its contemporaneity. The imputation is, of course, highly problematic in its supposition that the legacies of the past should not be interrogated and assessed for their viability in the present. What is more, such a position implies the very discontinuity that Eagleton seems to fervently stand against, and the sought consensus and unity that this critic desperately calls for seem nothing more than a rhetoric in service of blatant academic elitism and bourgeois conservativism. However, Eagleton thoughtfully avoids addressing the fact that postmodern literature, and criticism, does investigate the past as well as its impact on the present, albeit doing so without the supposedly required romantic and idealistic attitude towards it. What Eagleton sees as "radical political action" (2003: 15), the theorizing in the academic circles, based on the tenets of postmodernism remains nothing more than a materialization of the "postmodern prejudice against the normative" (2003: 16), a political failure and an indication of consequential dissipation of the conservative bourgeois class, and the dissipation of culture into subcultures (2003: 16), which is problematic on Eagleton's view because postmodernism offers no alternative or novel vision of the normative – a vision that modernism, in its moment, provided through art, theory and criticism. Of course, Eagleton's reluctance towards accepting the postmodern critical attitude might naively be understood as a refusal to recognize the polluted nature of the values of the bourgeois normative, whereas in fact, it is a blunt manifestation of Eurocentrism that allows for criticism only in the areas of its discourses that do not necessarily grant economic or political power. Eagleton's general criticism of postmodernism illustrates Foucault's concept of the privileged speaker who operates within the discourse, pledges allegiance to it and distributes its truth values as logos, to use Derrida's term. Without the undertone of criticizing the modern critical thought through an ad hominem approach, I suggest that Eagleton's supposed optimism and naiveté could reverberate simply with a conscious rejection of that which would bring the tower on the foundations the Western ethos – the foundations that currently have no alternative, or rather, no alternative that could satisfy equally those already in power, and those controlled by it.

In *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* (2001), Stuart Sim defines postmodernism as "a rejection of many, if not most, of the cultural certainties on which life in the West has been structured over the last couple of centuries" (vii), as well as a process in which the political system of the West, and its vital beliefs, are brought into question precisely because of the major failure

to uphold the "cultural progress" once promised by modernity (vii). Of course, the cultural certainties that Sim mentions are not rejected purely for the sake of change, but are the result of an interrogation process – of culture and politics of the western societies. In an article published in *International Postmodernism – Theory and Literary Practice*, "The Debate on Postmodernism" (1997), Hans Bertens almost ambivalently describes postmodernism as "an ever-widening circle or, to reverse the metaphor, a vortex that sucks everything that it comes in contact with into its center" (Bertens 1997: 4). The implication of such a metaphor echoes Linda Hutcheon's position that postmodernism is a problematizing force, though, perhaps Bertens' undertone would not resonate with Hutcheon's certainty of its effectiveness. Ironically, Bertens' metaphor would probably be rejected as invalid by Eagleton who would see no 'center' in the vortex of the postmodern black-hole. In the foreword to the volume in which Bertens publishes "The Debate on Postmodernism," there is a tacit recognition that "varying literary and cultural conditions in this world are bound to produce endless varieties of postmodernism" (Bertens & Fokkema 1997: ix), a thought that diagnoses the production of the diverging interpretations on the postmodern methodology or mode of criticism in contemporary literary criticism and theory. The author of the article "The Politics of Postmodernism after the Wall," published in the mentioned volume edited by Bertens and Douwe Fokkema, Susan Rubin Suleiman, comments on the almost universally accepted modernist claim that "postmodernist theory is incapable of furnishing either an ethics or politics" (1997: 55), and that it is "irremediably compromised by its own relativism" and thus has "no moral foundation" and occupies, for the same reason "no firm epistemological ground" (Suleiman 1997: 55). However, in the same article, Suleiman's discusses these values, the foundations of contemporary societies, as "context-bound, not discovered in some Platonic sky but fashioned by historically situated human beings" (Suleiman 1997: 55) and therefore, inevitably, liable to change. The quality of this unavoidable change seems to be out of our conscious control, and this is precisely what bothers Eagleton in terms of the major economic and socio-political perturbations, but Suleiman as well in terms of the supposed relativism present in the postmodern critical practice that refuses to provide definitive judgment on the process it recognizes, exposes and leaves-be. If modernism dealt with consequences, postmodernism deals with the process (or processes) in the aftermath of the modernist spontaneous project. Taylor and Winquist deal with the issue of relativism and lack of visionary determination in *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism* indirectly by asking the question of whether "imagination can survive in the era

of postmodernism" (2001: 187) claiming that if it exists, "it is an imagination engaged in its own self-destruction and self-parody" (2001: 187). Postmodernism, understood and defined in this manner, stands as a practice of pure relativization, as Eagleton and Suleiman suggest, as well as Bertens, though less directly. The very use of the term *imagination* instead of *vision of society*, or *vision* of change, *terminus ad quem*, or centre, is a convenient handle for contemporary critics to devalue the problematizing power of the postmodern critical thought. This supposed aimlessness, the focus on the interrogative process rather than corroboration of the validity of faith already invested in the fundamental values of culture and society, resonates with respective economic, political, social and ideological changes globally. Postmodern criticism acts against treating the terminal economic and socio-political disease with vitamins and bogus nutritional products disguised in the sleek consumer product that always promises 'more jam tomorrow' while snatching this 'tomorrow' from the masses of individuals distracted by existential struggles and perceived real and imagined local and global threats. It is precisely because of this that qualifying postmodern practice or theory as self-destructive and self-parodying, with the negative connotation that follows the stipulation, suggests an unwillingness to scrutinize the objective conditions of contemporaneity. In fact, any attempt at bringing into question the authoritative, economy-bound, socio-political discourse, disguised in the hypocritical rhetoric of liberal humanist, provokes the relativization argument against the postmodern critical thought. It would probably seem quite uncouth to mention that the postmodern critical thought does not have the privilege to deal with the scope of the liberating artistic imagination of the modernist sort since it is preoccupied by the existential concerns of latent capitalist slavery at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century. To use the word disillusionment to describe the position of the postmodern thinker would be to underestimate their intellectual capacity, and the same is achieved by the imputation of relativization on the postmodern critical thought. In fact, postmodern discourses do not merely relativize, but discredit and debunk such grand narratives and phenomena that have been taken as authoritative givens for centuries and have led us to an economy-driven politics dictating the socio-cultural trends of contemporaneity. The criticism against the postmodern critical thought, its pragmatic nature, might be legitimate since as a counteracting discourse, or plethora of discourses, it offers no alternative to liberal humanist visionary certainty. However, it is precisely its pragmatic nature, its insistence on the distanced revision of the modern philosophical tenets, that might, in the long run benefit contemporaneity.

In *After Theory*, Eagleton is confident that theory "remains indispensable" (2003: 2) and that the process of its redefinition has already begun. Theory, self-reflective criticism, Eagleton says, "is a symptom of the fact that we can no longer take those practices for granted" (2003: 27), practices that have led to the failure of the modernist vision of political and economic liberty, social equality and groundedness in humanist values. However, what is striking in Eagleton's insistent rejection of postmodernism is the underlying assumption that the postmodern refusal to adhere to the ideals and visions of modernity necessarily implies the rejection of humanist values and, by extension, modernist values. The epilogue of this rejection is Eagleton's call for redefining theory, but in such a manner that it reverts back to its modernist ideal – a call for rebranding of modernism. This critic, among others, treats postmodern critical theory as insubordinate or prodigal offspring of modernism, an ill-bred child that needs boundaries – boundaries in terms of educating them on what is allowed to be questioned, and what remains in the domain of the given, the necessarily traditional and progressive. And yet, Eagleton suggests that the obsolete or damaging practices "must now begin to take themselves as objects of their own inquiry" (2003: 27), which implies an interrogation into their origins, nature, historicity and tradition, as well as implications in contemporaneity. It is as if this interrogation, this political, cultural and economic, even biological, re-modelling Eagleton sees as imperative must only be done according to a preconceived image. Moreover, it is as if this interrogation has not been an ongoing process, both in literary practice and criticism, since the 1960s. What we call 'postmodernism' has, in those terms, indeed been more objective than the modernist thought because it does not seek to confirm its beliefs and principles only to fall back on a vision if the results are not satisfactory. Self-reflexively, Eagleton notices that, "[t]here is thus always something rather navel-staring and narcissistic about theory, as anyone who has encountered a few prominent cultural theorists will be aware" (2003: 27), but the overt narcissism appended to the postmodern thought remains more reflective of the fear, albeit understandable, that the results of philosophical, ideological, economic, political and cultural enquiry of our contemporaneity would not only reveal a deep schism between everyday life and this abstraction of the heuristic labels philosophized ad infinitum by the academic circles, but also that any sustainable and enduring change is not a destination, but a process in itself. It is, in fact, a process of becoming, rather than being, against the background of change.

Eagleton's acceptance of the necessity of theory comes from his profound understanding of its ideological and political nature, but his characterizing it as a "narcissistic" endeavor (2003: 21) is

more revealing of, perhaps, this critic's acute perception of the auto-ironic and self-parodying traps one is bound to fall into, on the one hand, blindly protecting a position that only exists for the over-privileged, often academic or economically superior, minority; and, on the other, participating in the great abstraction that postmodernism is often taken for by rendering it even more abstract, ultimately, the field of language-play.

The most problematic aspect of the definition of the postmodern critical thought in general, or rather the differences between concepts such as the postmodern, postmodernity, and postmodern philosophy, literature, cinema, theory, criticism, etc. is that the level of their abstraction has been and still is so provisionally understood, but also largely welcomed by the academic circles. The relativization of values, moral and ethical foundations of the contemporary society ascribed to postmodernism, as well as the rejection of the traditional ideological or philosophical visions and positions, modern or other, does not in itself confirm, define or explain postmodernism or postmodernity. It is rather that the postmodern critical thought's rejection or dissection of the previously relied-upon values creates a repulsion towards the trend in the critical circles who only feel comfortable scrutinizing culture from a secure academic position since the prerogative to pretentiously theorize contemporaneity, as well as the past, rarely rouses interest in those whose existential security hangs by a thread. Eagleton sees it as ironic "that postmodern thought should make such a fetish of difference, given that its own impulse was to erase the distinctions between image and reality, truth and fiction, history and fable, ethics and aesthetics, culture and economics, high and popular art, political left and right" (2003: 46), but, the irony is in that the postmodern thought has established a powerful practice of the evaluation of grand narratives that seek to prescribe such boundaries and relations of presupposition and belief; it is not that the postmodern thought has made "such a fetish of difference," but that it has exposed the artifice of totalizing explanations and their deceptive nature as unitary. It is because of the postmodern thought, in all of its variations and forms, in literature, critical theory, philosophy and other areas, that difference can finally be attributed a quality outside of the formerly prescribed norm. It is not a process of fetishizing differences and plurality, heterogeneity and relativism, but a process of examination of how it is possible that these have been ignored, disregarded or subjugated under the romantic guise of uniformity and tradition. Additionally, it is a process of understanding how these, seemingly binary, opposites co-exist and co-extend, how they maintain their existence within a larger social, political, economic, or other contexts, as well as how they, in turn, are affected or influenced by

the mainstream discourses. The main issue with the postmodern critical thought, it seems, is that it may be too observant of the duplicity of ideologies weaved into the fabric of contemporary society, economy and politics, and too obstinate to cease its analytical treatment of them.

Contrary to Eagleton who rejects postmodernism, and what he calls the postmodern cult of the cultural and political migrant (2003: 21), in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (2004), Linda Hutcheon sees the postmodern creator not as an unrooted and tradition-devoid individual, but as a critic who "problematizes" (xi) the foundational values of society and culture. This postmodern critic integrates the contradictory position of being inside the system of the values being evaluated, as well as the inability or impossibility to exist outside that system or discourse. Whereas Eagleton tacitly admits the failings of modernism and pessimistically rejects what he basically describes as petulant postmodern scrutiny, Linda Hutcheon sees the postmodern practice as the sharpening of methods and forms contemporary enough to adequately perceive the social and historical moment, but also offer a political commentary. In fact, Hutcheon notices the "short circuit" between the "intense self-reflection and parody" as a consequence of the attempt to understand history (2004: x) and not merely reject or relativize it, as is often suggested. Moreover, it is precisely these postmodern contradictions that suggest an awareness of the "ideological implications in the dominant culture" (Hutcheon 2004: x). By investigating the presence of the past in the present moment, the strength of its hold in contemporaneity, and by exposing the artificial nature of philosophical, political and ideological bonds, postmodern literature addresses all the invalid pre-conceptions about society on the whole.

In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon deals with the concept of poetics in terms of its aesthetics and politics, and reaches the conclusion that the fluidity of formal and aesthetic characteristics in literature emerges from this postmodern compulsion to seek the source of social, cultural or political contradictions. Additionally, for Hutcheon, the analytical postmodern attitude, fairly devoid of romantic visions or illusions, is the result of the inherent historicity of postmodern texts manifested through intertextuality or the blurring of lines between formal and genre-specific characteristics in literature (2004: 11). Even the pastiche, frequently criticized by the proponents of, for example, metamodernism, testifies to the acute awareness of historicity in postmodern discourses and literature, if indeed it is so pervasive in contemporary literature, which is questionable.

Hutcheon approaches the issue of postmodern poetics from the angle of it being a cultural phenomenon (2004: ix), and explores the idea that postmodern poetics is comprised of "our discourses both about it and adjacent to it" – literary and non-literary discourses in the form of "a flexible conceptual structure" marked by "points of significant overlap of theory with aesthetic practice" (2004: ix), and:

> The points of overlap that seem most evident to me are those of the paradoxes set up when modernist aesthetic autonomy and self-reflexivity come up against a counterforce in the form of a grounding in the historical, social, and political world. (2004: ix)

This is not to say that modernism disregarded the historical, social and political reality, but that postmodern literature is fully aware of the necessity to interrogate these realities and their part in the creation of the present moment before reaching any potential vision of a (revolutionary) change. Contrary to Eagleton's views on postmodernism, Hutcheon sees postmodern theory and art, as attempting to find that thread of continuity that would allow insight into how contemporaneity is rooted in the historical past in addressing this "short circuit" analytically and critically (2004: x). Reflexivity, irony and parody in postmodern art serve this very purpose of approaching the past and challenging its social, political and ideological legacies. Hutcheon notes that the "unresolved postmodern contradictions" question our understanding, and "our entire concept of both historical and literary knowledge, as well as our awareness of our ideological implication in our dominant culture" (2004: x). Even though Hutcheon focuses mostly on postmodern art, literature and criticism, and Eagleton additionally reaches into the realms of postmodern philosophy, politics and ideology in his discussion on postmodernism, there is a serious divergence in the manner in which the two critics interpret postmodernism, which is unsurprising considering that one of the most complex aspects about the phenomenon of postmodernism is a visible disagreement in what its considered features are in terms of, on the one hand, literature and, potentially, art in general, and philosophy and science, among other fields, on the other. In fact, the phenomenon of postmodernism seems to be perceived in diametrically opposed, incongruous, inconsistent, conflicting and ambiguous ways in its manifestations across a wide array of disciplines and topics, all directing our attention to the present crisis in Theory. Both critics, nevertheless, recognize this crisis in literary studies, and Hutcheon explains it as being "caught as it is between the urge to essentialize literature and its language into a unique, vast,

closed textual preserve and the contrasting urge to make literature "relevant" by locating it in larger discursive contexts" (2004: x). It is no wonder that Eagleton would contest any integrative approach to this problem, and the crisis summarizes the positions of the two critics clearly. If postmodern literature is unable to reconcile its contradictions and reduce them to fit the historical, social, and especially the economic, political and cultural contexts, then it has failed in Eagleton's eyes. The failure largely being the uncovering of the weak links in the chain of tradition, uniformity and the socio-political vision rooted in post-war Europe – a vision, undoubtedly idealistic, but ultimately a smoke-screen preventing the exposure of the socio-political system based purely on exploitative economics. Unable to provide an atmosphere of political unity, cultural uniformity and social authority, postmodernism deeply disappoints this Marxist. Hutcheon, on the other hand, sees postmodernism as a mode of thinking that integrates rather than disintegrates. The disintegration of values, structures, institutions and belief systems remains the foundation of Eagleton's criticism against postmodernism, whereas Hutcheon proposes that:

> Postmodern art and theory both incarnate this very crisis, not by choosing sides, but by living out the contradiction of giving in to both urges. (2004: x)

What is frequently disapprovingly referred to as relativization in the postmodern critical thought, or postmodern art, is, in fact, the insistent postmodern refusal to ground itself in grand narratives, and commenting on Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), Hutcheon notices that this "negativized rhetoric" enveloping the postmodern critical thought revolves around "discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentring, indeterminacy and antitotalization" (2004: 3). The postmodern critical thought, simply put, misbehaves by persistently allowing for the incongruities of the contemporary condition to surface, and by tenaciously refusing to soften them by consciously applying the ideological fixes proven useful, the grand narratives of our cultures. In Hutcheon's words:

> Paradoxes, in general, can delight or trouble. Depending on temperamental make-up, we shall be either seduced by their stimulating teasing or upset with their frustrating lack of resolution. There is no dialectic in the postmodern: the self-reflexive remains distinct from its traditionally accepted contrary—the historico-political context in which it is embedded. (2004: x)

The entirety of criticism against postmodernism as the maleficent force contesting an imagined reality, a reality imagined by modernity, is summed up by Hutcheon's remark that the paradoxes of postmodernism do delight, and occasionally, to the extent of pure, uncontrollable, abstraction in the academic circles. The very act of defining the postmodern critical thought using "disavowing prefixes – dis, de, in, anti" (Hutcheon 2004: 3), does postmodern work. Postmodern methods, neither novel nor particularly innovative, essentially modern, inherited, emanate Derrida's deconstructive impulse in recognizing their origin and rejecting the idea of ideological determinacy, which seems to be unfathomable for 'post-modernists', or modernists existing in post-modernist times.

Taking into consideration its "contradictory" nature, and the fact that it "works within the very systems it attempts to subvert" (Hutcheon 2004: 4), Hutcheon sees postmodernism as operating within the same paradigmatic framework as modernism. Furthermore, this author argues that postmodernism "has not replaced liberal humanism, even if it has seriously challenged it" (Hutcheon 2004: 4), which complicates matters further in terms of defining the entire endeavor of this specific critical practice, and Hutcheon cannot avoid but step into the trap of contemporary modernism-inspired critical circles that impute anti-humanist labels to the postmodern attitude. If postmodernism essentially asks the questions, liberal humanism-wise, of what it is that is natural and universal, what constitutes freedom and liberty in terms of the contemporary experience and against the background of the tenets of the bourgeois liberal humanism, where the individual stands in terms of their cultural origins and (contra) distinctions, then it certainly challenges the philosophical basis of modernism, and exasperates the late-twenty century bourgeoisie. Ideologically, modernism has provided a convenient vindication for profound economic, social and political inequality by foregrounding pragmatically such narratives that would perpetuate myths of political and cultural progress in the interest of the economically and politically powerful elites. Postmodernism, in those terms, is an intense reaction against the entire modernist establishment. Rather than merely probing the weak spots of modernist grand narratives, liberal humanist smoke screens and veils of hypocrisy by the highest authoritative political, social and cultural instances, it is the attitude here that even if the postmodern paradigm remains validly within the modern paradigm, it signals the emergence of a different type of global critical consciousness.

In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon defines postmodernism as “a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges” (2004: 3), and investigates it through its relationship with what can be called “the dominant, liberal, humanist culture” (2004: 6). The postmodern current sees the dominant culture through the prism that does not recognize a single, visionary or universal possibility of reconciliation of humanist contradictions. The fundamental postmodern argument in support of this is found in its critique of modernism, or rather in the modernist rejection to acknowledge the “illusory” (Hutcheon 2004: 6) nature of the virtually messianic narratives found in art and myth which are supposed to quench the thirst for epistemological or ontological grounding of reality. However, what Hutcheon also notices is that the postmodern thought does not change the modern paradigm significantly form and instruments-wise, except that it critically assesses and demystifies modernist, equally as its own, narratives and therefore purposefully renders them ineffective artifacts of the past wherever contemporaneity has no (other) place for them. This apparent contradiction of postmodernism’s use of modernist methods, or merely one of many, reveals one of the most significant gaps between the two philosophical positions: the unifying socio-political factors forced on reality by the modernist discourse and practice through such grand narratives, and subsequently meta-narratives, investigated and deconstructed by the postmodern critical thought, are ultimately exposed as artificial human constructs that contemporaneity no longer recognizes as actual ‘contradictions’. Subsequently, there is no practical or sensible need for those to be reconciled.

Hutcheon argues that what postmodernism actually acquires and, as a result, fosters, “is the constant attendant irony of the context of the postmodern version of these contradictions and also their obsessively recurring presence as well” (2004: x). This is precisely the reason why Hutcheon, in her key definition of postmodernism, explains it as:

> [...] a problematizing force in our culture today: it raises questions about (or renders problematic) the common-sensical and the “natural.” But it never offers answers that are anything but provisional and contextually determined (and limited). […] postmodernism has certainly created its own problematic, its own set of problems or issues (which were once taken for granted) and possible approaches to them. (2004: xi)

It is explicitly because of the postmodern propensity for problematizing that Hutcheon proposes the use of the term ‘problematics’ instead of the ‘poetics’ of postmodernism, even if postmodern art, and literature specifically, do share the aesthetic and political dimensions that could be said to pertain to a singular poetics. Moreover, such a terminological distinction of the phenomenon also implies the idiosyncrasy of postmodernism that is frequently criticized, as above discussed – its tendency to generate (theoretical) discourses without offering totalizing answers in the form of distinctive master narratives. In a similar manner, Michel Foucault sees the notion of problematizing as a proclivity to generate discourse, the very generation of discourses that theoretically and critically reflect on the phenomena of contemporaneity, or the past for that matter, without reverting to the previously authoritative discourse or narrative. In Hutcheon’s words, it is “the concept of process that is at the heart of postmodernism” (2004: xi), and this insight not only exonerates the postmodern critical thought from the unrealistic standards of ineffective modernist ideals, but also demonstrates the humanist streak that is at the core of the postmodern endeavor: “[…] it is the process of negotiating the postmodern contradictions that is brought to the fore, not any satisfactorily completed and closed product that results from their resolution” (2004: xi). What Hutcheon refers to as the postmodern contradictions are, in fact, the incongruities between the economic and socio-political, as well as cultural, realities of contemporaneity and the grand (master) narratives on which the operating discourses in society are based. Unsurprisingly, these ‘contradictions’ or discrepancies between the believed-in and experienced economic and socio-political realities, become acutely evident in the process of globalization and the impossibility of socio-political isolation on the local or higher level. Hutcheon, among others, views postmodernism in the late second half of the twentieth century as a largely American phenomenon, however, even if “it does not really describe an international cultural phenomenon, for it is primarily European and American (North and South)” (2004: 4), as a *problematics*, it operates beyond any specific culture and is a global phenomenon with idiosyncratic qualities. Moreover, postmodernism operates across genres in terms of bending the normative by exposing the artificiality of the conventional forms, and exploring the limits of technique. The controversy, unsurprisingly, arises out of such efforts that (successfully) expose the fictional plasticity of genres that traditionally uphold certain narrative reliability. It is not that postmodern art merely explores the validity of the contemporary and traditional normative, which are often one and the same, but that the very concept of the normative is contrasted against the experience of contemporary

realities. The very investigative process deals with what Hutcheon calls "the familiar humanist separation of art and life (of human imagination and order versus chaos and disorder)" (2004: 7), and reveals a failure to maintain this binary opposition in contemporary reality. The value, then, of the postmodern investigative process is not in offering the illusion, or even delusion, of a reality ordered by the product of human imagination, endeavor, the socio-political and cultural traditions as presented by the grand narratives and discourses of modernity, but rather bring to awareness the mechanisms by which our everyday experience is ultimately structured, and consequently guided by the constructs taken as givens. This is supported by Hutcheon's argument that postmodernism "works to show that all repairs are human constructs, but that, from that very fact, they derive their value as well as their limitation" (2004: 7), which strongly challenges the liberal humanist bourgeois tradition that presumes authority over the natural and universal givens, in its philosophical essence, and in whatever of its different forms. The irony in the argument against this challenging of liberal humanism finds its culmination in such circumstance where the ineffectiveness of modernist ideas is tacitly recognized by their proponents, and yet when the argument against their scrutiny stops at the postmodern attitude that, as Hutcheon says, "[a]ll repairs are both comforting and illusory" (2004: 7), which is, indeed, a painful recognition of the practical inadequacy of traditional narratives in neoliberalism of contemporary societies for both sides, and, in the words of Hutcheon, "postmodernist interrogations of humanist certainties live with this kind of contradiction" (2004: 7). Contrary to Terry Eagleton who recognizes, though implicitly, the failures of modernism and insists, regardless, on the necessity to revert to a traditional (modernist) paradigm that would, at least in theory or public discourse, stabilize the mass of unsustainable values, Hutcheon, among others, does not hesitate to concede the hypocrisy of inauthenticity of modernist ideas in contemporary society, at the end of the twentieth century.

Another one of Linda Hutcheon's proposed definitions in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, that postmodernism "as a cultural activity that can be discerned in most art forms and many currents of thought today […] is fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political" (2004: 4) reflects on the issue of the late capitalist economic and socio-political incongruities, and relates it to the postmodern concept of "the presence of the past" (2004: 4) – the past being emanated in the modernist liberal humanist narratives that in contemporaneity visibly negate the consequences of the economic-political power relations at play since the second half of the twentieth century. However, what this author terms "fundamentally contradictory" in her

definition above pertains to the contradictions of the realities that are at play in contemporaneity: the divergence of discourses, a certain discontinuity of the foundational narratives, be they economic, social, political or cultural, with the experience of collective and subjective realities. Investigating the meta-historiographic novel, Hutcheon finds the postmodern practice to be "resolutely historical" and yet, the postmodern critical thought does not necessarily burden itself with such an endeavor in terms of deliberate investigation of the elapsed events, phenomena or such. Postmodernism is not necessarily interested in re-experiencing the past because of its awareness of the nature of historicity – history as a human construct narrativized and pragmatically transformed into rhetorical and ideological discourses that further, by means of unavoidable, predictable and even preordained interaction dictate the course of economic, political and socio-cultural development, for a lack of a better term because it is quite questionable whether certain legacies of the past indeed steered Western and other societies in the course of the progress envisioned by liberal humanism, even at its purest. Therefore, even though Hutcheon deals with a very specific sub-genre in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, the author's view on historicity as inherently present in postmodern, and I argue contemporary literature, strongly holds. Any investigation into the validity of grand narratives that affect the mundane through the economic, socio-political and cultural discourses, be they local, regional or global, starts from the position that brings to foreground the legacies of the past, and, sometimes even forcefully, juxtaposes them against contemporary realities. Speaking of postmodern architecture and painting, Hutcheon notices that with postmodernism there never appears a "nostalgic return" (2004: 4), no reverting to the values that proved ineffective or unsustainable even if the current reality offers no authentic vision of the present or future. And this is certainly true for contemporary Canadian short fiction which, very sensibly, contemplates its contemporaneity and the mechanisms by which its specific, historical legacies affect the unfolding of the economic, socio-political and cultural forces dictating the conditions of subjective experience in the twenty-first century Canada. The postmodernist has, in fact, nothing specific to return to, and it is frequently this refusal to 'suspend the disbelief' of the validity of the exhausted visions and grand narratives that is regarded as reactionary disillusionment with modernism. I use the term 'reactionary' because it is a typically postmodern quality that the socio-political, and other, criticism works within the existing paradigms, and from within the existing discourses, in order to subvert the object of its criticism. Explicitly, the object of criticism is the object consumed, and much in the vein of my implicating Derrida's contribution

to the theoretical discourses of postmodernism, so does postmodern criticism, always – in one way or another, implicate the existing discourses in interaction with the subversive opposing discourses. It may be imputed on postmodern literature, fiction and non-fiction in general, that it overuses pastiche and too heavily relies on intertextuality, rendering the produced cultural product inauthentic, and even useless in terms of original artistic or other contribution to contemporaneity and the canons, but such practices testify to the heightened awareness of historicity, as well as the vast body of cultural production that is understood as a collective endeavor. It is especially the case with twenty-first century production, globalization, global consumerism, the massive waves of migration, dynamic cultural exchange, as well as the general confusion and disorientation caused by information technology and global media. The condition of the twenty-first century individual and the collective is such that no totality of belief is either conceivable anymore, or feasible because the socio-political and cultural constants have been put under such scrutiny that their validity is relentlessly challenged by the dynamics of contemporaneity – the plurality of contemporary experience. Therefore, the postmodern critical thought cannot be deemed reactionary. Moreover, in terms of the label of 'cultural dominant' attributed to postmodernism and the postmodern critical thought, it can be argued that it habitually serves as a negative umbrella term for any criticism of what the "late capitalist dissolution of bourgeois hegemony and the development of mass culture" (Hutcheon 2004: 6) bring to culmination at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century. The totalizing power of liberal humanist values and modernist ideals constructed the basis for economy driven politics and global mass consumerist culture. This "increasing uniformization of mass culture [as] the one of the totalizing forces that postmodernism exists to challenge" (Hutcheon 2004: 6) is the direct product of modernist bourgeois hypocrisy, and its translation into the institutions and foundations of our societies. In those terms, postmodernism can hardly be labeled as reactionary. It is a mirror to all the modernist falsities and unfinished idealistic liberal humanist endeavors that observed 'otherness', yet instead of recognizing the validity of its existence strove to erase it forcefully by means of integration and uniformization. Postmodernism, however, recognizes difference and multiplicity, variety and range, refusing to treat them, at the same time, as a point of reference 'against' which one's subjective, or collective, experience of mass culture should be defined and regulated.

Commenting on the paradigm of postmodern literature in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon focuses on historiographic metafiction, however, her insights go beyond this particular sub-genre

of fiction. The "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs" (2004: 5) that Hutcheon notices as the basis of postmodern "rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (2004: 5) stands in support to the above discussed quality of postmodern discourses and literature as naturally and deliberately working from within the existing paradigms with the view of exposing their falsity or unsustainability in the present moment. These differences, Hutcheon says, "in the plural, are always multiple and provisional" (2004: 6), and this, in theory, is certainly not novel to postmodernism. It does operate within the paradigm of modernism that recognized the separation in the collective psyche. However, it is also not surprising that the modernist paradigm could not move further away from investigating its own tenets *against* the paradigmatic *otherness*, and subsequently employ such grand narratives, revived or revitalized only to assimilate the perceived otherness into its own totalizing core (or Bertens' 'vortex'). The resistance initially expressed by the oppressed Other translated itself onto the oppressor, and this is why it is tragically ironic, and disappointing, to hear the academic circles' banter against the postmodern critical thought as a reactionary plague. Hutcheon wonderfully explains this conflicted relationship by saying that postmodernism contests modernism "from within its own assumptions" (2004: 6), and clarifies an often ignored fact that the postmodern thought and its (theoretical) discourses do not challenge humanism in itself, or the desire for a "profoundly humanistic […] paradoxical desire for stable aesthetic and moral values" (2004: 6), paradoxical because of the impossibility of the existence of such universals. She considers the poetics of T. S. Eliot and James Joyce as the most paradigmatic representatives of this longing for a totalizing artistic framework that could be translated onto the socio-political, economic and cultural plains. And what seems to guide the critics of postmodernism is a kind of a romantic loyalty to the untenable narratives of the modernist dreamers, which in itself is, granted, understandable and admirable, but escapist and impractical in such instances where it limits itself to aesthetics. On the other hand, this supposed idealism is both damaging and sinister when it is propagated by empowered, socio-economically well-off, political elites, and the academia, whose existential reality can only be perpetuated by the elusive myths of a modernist liberal humanist dream world. Juxtaposed with the conditions of the individual and the collective living in neo-liberal capitalist society at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the modernist ideals take the form of Disney produced fairytales, and it is offensive to the rational individual that liberal humanist, bourgeois ideas are refused the benefit of transmutation and change, the opportunity to

be modified in the spirit of a different time and circumstance. Their impracticality need not even be discussed, and yet, the impracticality of enjoying the consolatory qualities of modernist grand narratives remains the privilege and the prerogative of the modern bourgeoisie. Commenting on the grand narratives of modernism, Hutcheon says that "such systems are indeed attractive, perhaps even necessary," but, as she notices, "this does not make them any the less illusory" (2004: 6). The modernist discourse remains highly elitist not only because of its evident disregard for the realities in which it would operate in contemporaneity, but because it is unreachable and obscure, even in its escapist-consolatory form to the average individual. For the modern narrative of the romantic idealist artist to survive and to disseminate the ideas of liberation in contemporaneity, a consensus on the necessity of that sensibility would be required. The illusion of consensus is precious to the modernist because it validates the grand narrative that totalizes the vision of the socio-political order that sustains them at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, and that is the most detrimental effect of modernism. Modernism finds it difficult to navigate the realm of 'language-play' and its proliferative nature, and this is justifiable. However, the persistence of the efforts to willfully ignore the circumstance of contemporary reality is a highly idealistic, romantic, and ultimately, a bourgeoisie-controlled attempt to obliterate the perceived otherness on the external and the perceived contradictions on the internal level, as well as the tangible economic and socio-political issues, by creating a complex, yet narcissistic, ideology-driven grand narrative that essentially only sustains itself and those who benefit from the notion of universality and totality. Even more explicitly, it is a modern myth that maintains an illusion of a traditional circumstance, publicized as socio-politically progressive and morally unifying narrative. This sort of social reality structured by unsustainable, exclusive and excluding discourses is what postmodernism strives to expose as the illusion of reality by explicating how they shape reality and how reality itself is a human construct:

> Whatever narratives or systems that once allowed us to think we could unproblematically and universally define public agreement have now been questioned by the acknowledgement of differences – in theory and in artistic practice. In its most extreme formulation, the result is that consensus becomes the illusion of consensus, whether it be defined in terms of minority (educated, sensitive, élitist) or mass (commercial, popular, conventional) culture, for both are manifestations of late capitalist, bourgeois,

> informational, postindustrial society, a society in which social reality is structured by discourses (in the plural) – or so postmodernism endeavors to teach. (Hutcheon 2004: 7)

The systems that Hutcheon discusses, the artificial consensus-generating institutions, groups or collectives, are the main targets of the postmodern critical thought, and postmodern literature, both in a direct and indirect manner, "from the media to the university, from museums to theaters" (2004: 9). And these institutions are the formations of the very liberal humanist hypocrisy that, on the one hand, sustains the capitalist agenda, and on the other, persists to control the socio-political imperatives. The embittered criticism against, specifically, the academic circles, the liberal-humanist modernists, the literary and critical circles, that refuse to accept that the tenets of their ideology are no longer valid or productive, is not reactionary. It is the only restorative power for the individual and the collective in contemporaneity, and it is there that we might find emancipatory solutions. It is an anti-escapist approach to the modernist legacy, the economic, social and political catastrophe of the second half of the twentieth century, stretching into the beginning of the new millennia with its deceitful and insidious translation into the politics of economy and war, the relativization of human life according to the criterion of one's perception of the desired uniformity, the duplicitous interpretation of the liberal humanist legacy of the western world in contact with the consequences of its own inhumane, imperialist politics as has been seen in the migrant crises, and, ultimately, its own inability to concede to the fact that the late capitalist monster unleashed on the world under the guise of modernist enthusiasm cannot be subdued. The postmodern critical thought strives to explicate precisely how these modernist discourses, interest-driven liberal humanist visions of a unified society, spun out of control, and how easy, in fact, it has been to create discourses that would construct and re-construct our experienced realities in such a manner so as to suit the purpose, necessity and ambition of various groups' or nations' shareholders. Yet, postmodernism does not object to the idea of the possibility of consensus, nor does it make any attempts at placing the marginalized as the new center around which consensus should be achieved (Hutcheon 2004: 12), which is another point of criticism against it. The postmodern interrogation into the validity of what has so far been considered universal, given, traditional or natural, the entire liberal humanist setup, offers no alternative from the perspective of the liminal or marginalized – there is no privilege to the role of the discourse producing subject,

no designated authority[8]. Hutcheon says that "the questioning of the universal and totalizing in the name of the local and particular does not automatically entail the end of all consensus" (2004: 12), but that, at the same time, the "complex networks of local and contingent conditions" dictate only "positional" (2004: 12) certainty.

The Postmodern Bargaining

In *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, Taylor and Winquist deal with yet another distinction between modernism and postmodernism pertaining to "the assumed […] possibility of a last word and of language as a closed system" (2001: 53) that postmodernism challenges at every available occasion. They suggest that "the death of the author and the closure of the book refer to the end of the presumption of totality and the belief in meaning as a closed and fixed system" (2001: 53), and whereas Taylor and Winquist use the term 'preferred', one could be as free to say that the line of thought reflected in Barthes' phrase, 'the death of the author', establishes such grounds for the 'indispensable' postmodern pluralities to be underscored against the current of the universalities and givens propagated by modernism. Modernist art and theory, as well as its critical practice in service of the perpetuation of theory, comments on the supposed postmodern ethics as relativizing in terms of their propensity for deconstructing the narrativized myths of the modernist tradition. The defensiveness, however, reveals the vulnerability of modernist ideology, liberal humanism and their perpetuating grand narratives. Contemporaneity is, Taylor and Winquist comment, satiated by the traditional, and not solely because of its obsession with the binary oppositions that the underlying myths and the subsequent narrativized discourses preserve, but also because of the modernist reaction to what postmodern criticism directs at it (2001: 58). The disambiguation of the modernist relationship to the *other* and the exposing of the artificiality of its constructs have only brought to the foreground the messianic nature of the modernist myths that necessitate great-lengths to make believable in contemporaneity. As mentioned earlier, postmodernism neither denies the value of humanism, nor does it dispute its necessity, however, it strongly opposes the certitude imposed by modernism about the nature of universals, naturals, and givens in their

[8] The reluctance to grant discourse privilege to one elite, or another, but a minority in any case, might be one of the reasons behind Eagleton's reactionary categorizing of postmodernists as intellectually backward, and this additionally exposes Eagleton's, perhaps understandable, lack of faith in humanity on the whole since he finds plurality dangerous and 'catastrophic'.

interpretation of liberal humanism, and specifically in the context of late capitalism and contemporary neo-liberal capitalism. The grand narratives of modernism not only lose their potency in terms of providing knowledge that unifies and solidifies the foundational tenets of society by being unraveled due to their incongruity with the economic, political and social realities, but they are additionally interrogated for their politico-rhetorical function upon the revelation of their inherent inconsistencies. The latter may especially be accredited to the postmodern critical thought and its disputation of the credulity of such pretentious certainty with which, particularly contemporary modernism-inclined critics, insist on the sustainability of the visibly ineffective master or meta-narratives (Hutcheon 2004: 6). Moreover, the difference in the conditions under which modernism operated as a counteracting force to the economic and political discourses of capitalism, cannot be equated to those in contemporaneity.

In "Late Capitalism," *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Literary and Cultural Theory* (2018), Henry Giroux notes that "[within] neoliberal ideology, an emphasis on competition in every sphere of life promotes a winner-take-all ethos that finds its ultimate expression in the assertion that fairness has no place in a society dominated by winners and losers" (269), which is further to suggest that not only have the liberal humanist values proved to be provisional and conditional on the socio-cultural basis, but also that such notions of unifying philosophy or ideology simply do not correspond contemporary reality. Giroux further explains that "[neoliberalism] fosters the viewing of pain and suffering as entertainment, warfare a permanent state of existence, and militarism as the most powerful force shaping masculinity" (2018: 272), which is precisely the outcome of the hypocrisy of the modalities in which liberal humanist values have come to be institutionalized and integrated in the public discourse, yet in clear disagreement with reality, or at least for the great majority globally, since liberal humanist values – modelled upon the utopian ideal of a universal experience – do not even feign interest external to the source of this desired experience: bourgeois, white, Western and male. In his article, Giroux goes on to recognize divorce between politics and economy and ethics, respectively (2018: 272). "[The] ideological metrics of political zombies" (Giroux 2018: 272), as this critic describes the present state of values, this "atomization" (Giroux 2018: 272), reveals "the crisis of memory, thinking, hope, and agency itself" (Giroux 2018: 275), which is precisely why the postmodern critical approach – for once a manifestation of sobriety in the face of what Jameson calls a "new and historically original dilemma" (1991: 412), but which

is rather the demystified state of mankind, since ‘the moment’ of Derrida’s logos – presents a necessity rather than a source of pessimism.

In “Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?” (1986), Jean-François Lyotard makes an interesting claim that “a work can become modern only if it is first postmodern” (2011: 335). The statement, contradictory as it may sound, maintains that postmodernism, as a philosophical task or critical and literary paradigm, does not merely emerge from modernism, or represents “modernism at its end,” but rather that postmodernism is what one could label modern, “in the nascent state,” which is, in fact, “constant” (2011: 335). One need not agree with Lyotard’s position that postmodernism is a counterintuitive predecessor of modernism, but there is a sensibleness behind the rationale that recognizes the inquisitive propensity of the postmodern critical thought, considered in a very general sense, seeking not to re-construct (modernism) against an idealized, romantic image of liberal humanism, but de-construct the inherited traditions, philosophical and political foundations, as well as the economic circumstances of contemporaneity, and doing so while remaining persistently aware that there would never be any eternal or universal solutions to the human condition, and that there would persist a need to reevaluate our narratives. Lyotard supports this claim by arguing that “all that has been received, if only yesterday […] must be suspected” (2011: 335) – a claim that identifies a crucial divide between the modernist line of thinking, or philosophical task, and that of the postmodern critical thought. The inversion that creates the schism between the two diverging critical paths is reflected in the fact that postmodernism does not pursue to validate the traditions it inherits from the past, but rather de-constructs them in search of such answers that would provide the building blocks for constructing, potentially, a new philosophy, a humanism corresponding contemporary reality – a humanism whose outline need not be envisioned before the end of the interrogative process; whereas modernism sees this task as nihilist, anti-humanist and destructive because it inevitably implies an abandonment of such traditions that have artificially been kept alive – traditions that may well be at the foundation of the Western culture and ethos in general, but undeniably constructs that have been resuscitated so many times that they might just be braindead by this point. However, the nostalgia of modernism unconsciously, and often consciously, disregards the economic and political realities, and willingly refuses to appreciate their implications – in reality or for the future. When Lyotard discusses how “capitalism inherently possesses the power to derealize familiar objects, social roles, and institutions to such a degree that the so-called realistic representations

can no longer evoke reality except as nostalgia or mockery" (2011: 331), he directly condemns the liberal humanist rhetoric of "the *Salons* and the *Académies*," the established hybrid-bourgeoisie, pseudo-liberated and pseudo-liberal, the bourgeoisie of the late twentieth century whose "function as purgation and to grant awards for good plastic and literary conduct under the cover of realism" (2011: 331) can no longer sustain itself under the sway of neo-liberal capitalist economic politics. If, at the end of the twentieth century, modern critical thought and literature, satiated with its own rhetoric, arrives only at "an occasion for suffering rather than for satisfaction" (Lyotard 2011: 331), then the postmodern pragmatic nihilism (Nietzsche), destruction (Heidegger) and deconstruction (Derrida) reveal signs of intellectual sensibleness and maturity refusing to remain wedged between romanticizing the past and the solipsism that transpires from it. Artistic experimentation, a modernist endeavor originally, takes the form of direct criticism against "political academicism" and the "*a priori* criteria of the beautiful" (Lyotard 2011: 332), and this is, according to Lyotard, the cause of such fervent and reactionary attacks on the postmodern critical thought: "aesthetic judgement would only be required to decide whether such or such work is in conformity with the established rules of the beautiful" (2011: 332), and even at the end of the twentieth century, we still encounter strong academic, and political, Eurocentric in essence, resistance of the elitist bourgeoisie against the reevaluation of the aesthetic, political and cultural ideals rooted deeply in liberal humanism. And the aesthetics of postmodernism are profoundly based on the metafictional nature of the exploration into the historical circumstance and their manifestation in the present moment. This resistance, "the diverse invitations to suspend artistic experimentation" (Lyotard 2011: 330), the opposition to the impulse to expose the artificiality of the discursive reality, Lyotard notices, "is an identical call for order, a desire for unity, for identity, for security, or popularity" (2011: 330). In his article, Lyotard, calls for the reintegration of artists and writers "into the bosom of the community" (2011: 330), as opposed to ostracizing them for deviating from the aesthetic, but ultimately political, norms of the supposed realism as modified by the bourgeois modernist ideology.

Lyotard's exposition of modern and postmodern poetics bases itself, fundamentally, in the politics of its aesthetics, and modernism-wise, he explains that:

> […] modern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unpresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its

> recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure. Yet these sentiments do not constitute the real sublime sentiment, which is in an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain: the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept. (2011: 337)

Postmodernism, on the other hand, "puts forward the unpresentable in the presentation itself" (Lyotard 2011: 337), and seeks no "solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable" (Lyotard 2011: 337) purely because the elitism and –centrism of modernism, as exposed by postmodernity, and postmodern literature, cannot possibly operate under its own hypocritical guise of (liberal) humanism in contemporaneity. As uncompromising and blunt as it may sound, the excessiveness of modernism in terms of its aesthetic practice and its highbrow self-righteousness in terms of the discursive privilege of the subject, and especially the object of art and politics, dissipates its philosophical validity and political relevance under the weight of its own ideological legacy. Postmodernism, according to Lyotard, and this view coincides with Derrida's, but also Nietzsche's, reflects not a new aesthetic or methodology, for it certainly does not shy away from the modernist interrogative paradigm; postmodernism, rather, reflects a substantial shift in the philosophical task of the artist who can no longer "be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work" (2011: 337). The postmodern artist, in his very work, reevaluates the categories of the past, modernist or other, and works "without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*" (Lyotard 2011: 337) in order to articulate that which is unpresentable in the presentation, and reappropriate its presence in contemporaneity through examining the past, to evoke Derrida again. With regard to this, Lyotard explicates the term 'postmodern' as, ideally, to be understood as "the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*)" (2011: 337):

> We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, and the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror for the realization of the fantasy to seize

> reality. The answer is: let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name. (2011: 337)

Lyotard's call to "wage a war on totality" and "be witnesses to the unpresentable" (2011: 337) reflects a profound disbelief in the illusion of a genuine unity and totalization under liberal humanist values in modernist literature, theory, philosophy, but also politics of the twentieth century that operate in the same manner as modernist theory. Lyotard's "war on totality" is a war against the impression of tolerance, guised under the liberal humanist endeavor for economic, political, cultural, philosophical, ideological and aesthetic uniformization. Much like Hutcheon understands it, the postmodern mission, the process of problematization, need not "supply reality but […] invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented" (Lyotard 2011: 337), and it is an objective-less, process-oriented mission that "is not to be expected […] [to] effect the last reconciliation between language games […] and that only the transcendental illusion […] can hope to totalize them into a real unity" (Lyotard 2011: 337).

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, originally published in 1979, Jean-François Lyotard explores the condition of knowledge in Western societies, "the most highly developed societies" (1984: xxiii) – an unsurprising Eurocentric label – and uses the term 'postmodern', initially used by American theorists and critics, to describe "the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts" (1984: xxiii). The quintessence of this author's investigation into the grand narratives of the West, the very weave of the Western logos, is the investigation into the conflict between science and the narratives that it, inevitably, de-constructs. What Fredric Jameson sees as the typically postmodern variety of theoretical discourses, a natural outcome of the investigation into the nature of narratives, practices and theories present, a manifestation of the inquisitive spirit of this, essentially, philosophical position, Lyotard formulates by explaining that "science does not restrict itself to stating useful regularities and seeks the truth," forcing itself to also seek ways in which it would "legitimate the rules of its own game" (1984: xxiii) the outcome of which is the perceived multiplicity of theoretical discourses. However, using the term 'postmodern' or 'postmodernism' in a general manner to designate the multiplicity of the evaluations and revisions the Western discourses undergo after the 1960s seems to be quite unappreciative and even counterproductive in terms of the customary expectation that the

postmodern-turn would produce a similar result when applied, say in science, philosophy, literature, etc., which is certainly not the case. Lyotard notices this, and even if the phrasing that "a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status, a discourse called philosophy," (1984: xxiii) refers only to the manner in which scientific, technological and informational advances predictably influenced every aspect of our existence, the human condition, it also refers to the plasticity and the unrestricted nature of these changes. The legitimation of the discourses mentioned here seems to manifest itself singularly in specific instances so that speaking about postmodernism at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century requires a cautious approach because, on the one hand, the very condition of 'being postmodern' is always explained ex post facto. On the other hand, this broad phenomenon Lyotard primarily ascribes to the rise of the scientific discourse, in its essence, produces such varied results that render it impossible to interpret it in traditional ways. More precisely, our customary expectations imposed by the modernist anticipation of a totalizing theory or objective, fail when faced with the postmodern philosophical turn that fundamentally rejects the hypothesis that there could be such a thing as universality or natural givens at the core of things, or a uniformity that could stretch its unifying influence along a line of disciplines. Again, for Lyotard, it is the scientific leap that is at the core of the postmodern, philosophical, departure[9], for Derrida it is the deflation perceived in the centralized and sequestered, but ultimately unstable discourse, for Barthes it is the realization that the very process of discourse production operates within an already set value-system in which 'play' is only symbolic – the death of the author in the act of indirect communication; and for Foucault, it is the inescapable economic, social and political interaction of discourses operating within ideologically and philosophically interrelated networks of power in which all discourse privilege is assigned with the view of perpetuating itself, interpellating manipulatively, the human subject.

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[9] I use the word purposefully to further elaborate the argument proposed in this study that postmodernism is a project of evaluation and revision rather than discontinuity and rejection, an enterprise that does not set its objectives prior to allowing the process of inquiry to take place. Essentially, this position coincides with that of Derrida and Lyotard, among others, in terms of understanding postmodernism as an enterprise that legitimates and systematizes the discourses of contemporaneity, relieving them of the inherited ideological, philosophical or political burdens that visibly strive for the demythologized totalization and uniformization of liberal-humanist, modernist, philosophy – a project, granted, whose end-goal seems highly biased and unachievable, whose method remains unreliable and unstable due to the nature of the philosophical proposition that they too must only be perceived as constructs and therefore must eventually change; yet, a project whose process provides invaluable awareness of the reality of contemporaneity, which is ultimately more appreciated than any illusion.

Lyotard's perception of the Western society as drastically changing after the 1950s leads him to associate the technological transformations, the "research and the transmission of acquired learning" (1984: 4) that follow from it, with the epistemological turbulence of "the postmodern age" (1984: 3). More precisely, Lyotard relates the transition from the postindustrial to postmodern 'age' to the specific kind of commodification of knowledge in which it "cannot survive unchanged within this context of general transformation" (1984: 4), and this change is reflected in the event of knowledge becoming highly "operational" (1984: 4), economy and progress driven, transmitted to perpetuate its own new basis of performativity: "knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange" (1984: 4). This may potentially explain Lyotard's opening lines of *The Postmodern Condition*, the qualification of the setting of the object of his study being termed as "the most highly developed societies" (1984: xxiii) – the technologically developed West. At the time Lyotard writes this study, the late 1970s, he perceives science as the dominant language not only of economy, but also politics, which in itself is not a discovery per se in terms of the interrelatedness between the philosophical, ideological, and therefore political and cultural evolution on the whole, and especially since the period of Enlightenment in which "a metanarrative implying a philosophy of history is used to legitimate knowledge" (1984: xxiv). This legacy of legitimizing knowledge on the bases of grand narratives as repositories of ultimate and universal truths bring to question "the validity of the institutions governing the social bond" (Lyotard 1984: xxiv). Lyotard brilliantly explains the insidious nature of this method of legitimization – of knowledge, institutions, 'the social bond', justice, etc. – in finding that "against all expectations, a collectivity that takes narrative as its key form of competence has no need to remember its past," by which "the narratives' reference may seem to belong to the past, but in reality it is always contemporaneous with the act of recitation" (1984: 22) because the act of the reiteration of the narrative in the present moment subtly bridges the gap between the moment of the reception of this narrative truth, and the idea-turned-factual that this transmitted truth would persist in the future with the same weight of universality and value. Furthermore, "a culture that gives precedence to the narrative form doubtless has no more of a need for special procedures to authorize its narratives than it has to remember its past" (Lyotard 1984: 22), and Lyotard elaborates this argument by practically exposing the nature of authority as accumulated by grand narratives – authority that is, essentially, assigned or ascribed to them by means of transmission itself, the very act of recounting

them, “but also by listening to them and recounting themselves through them; in other words, by putting them into ‘play’ in their institutions” (1984: 22). Without the voluntary participation in the ‘play’ in which narratives are made alive in the act of (passive) reception and (active) production, the self-recognition and realization in the process, the grand narrative would not hold any authority. It is in this process that the narrative is legitimized, and its unifying and totalizing functions in social setting achieved. “Narratives […] determine criteria of competence and/or illustrate how they are to be applied” (Lyotard 1984: 23), and their authority encompasses the assigning of the roles of the privileged subject and object of the discourse, as Foucault would explain it. The authoritative value of narratives and their legitimization, therefore, are not external to them, but rather, their ‘truth’ is internal and emanating from their own internalized systems of beliefs and values that become, at the same time, legitimizing values, with each cycle of transmission, reception and reproduction, regulating the specific roles of the “narratee and diegesis as well as the post of narrator” (Lyotard 1984: 22). The term Lyotard uses here, “diegesis” is particularly interesting from the point of view of literary theory, conveniently reminiscent of structuralist terminology, for it suggests that in grand narrative dissemination, the process of interpellation virtually drags the addressee into the world of that narrative – a fictional world that they become a part of, therefore legitimizing their own subsequent dissemination of the narrative, by means of which they achieve the strengthening of the social bond, and the nature of the power relations with the community they address, and in which they are being addressed in their specific, assigned role. Grand narratives, “thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do” (Lyotard 1984: 23). Lyotard sees the core of the issue in the institutional presence of grand narratives, their didactic dissemination as a matter of implied truth consensus (1984: 24). Didactics, according to him, “ensures that this reproduction takes place” (1984: 24), which is potentially why the call for discourse legitimization caused by the commanding rise of the scientific discourse, the technological and informational age, could not ‘exterminate’ grand narratives as models of cognitive perception of our reality, but rather defragment them. The narrative mode of thinking, undoubtedly, is a cognitive prerogative of the human species. On the individual level, it solidifies the overall understanding of one’s embodied experiences, and mentally and psychologically shapes behavior. On the social level, it not only shapes the collective experience, but formulates the social performatives. The narrative experience

of the world is inevitable and essential, on both levels. However, the phenomenon of grand narratives, the concept of the implied consensus of truth as embodied by them, their fictional nature, or rather, the artifice of grand narrative as a prescriptive collective cognitive experience, all become problematic when the operative values and truth become strikingly contradictory to the circumstance of reality – when the identification with the narrative requires blind faith and voluntary 'suspension of disbelief'. Unsurprisingly, Lyotard argues that even the scientific narrative "finds it necessary to de-emphasize higher education" (1984: 31), much like, I argue in this study, all grand narratives do. Lyotard associates this paradoxical phenomenon with the existing corruption in the scientific community that ensures its desired progress by complacently allowing for the politics of economy to define the mode in which this progress is achieved. The truth-seeking purpose of the scientific discourse, in liberal capitalism, becomes restricted within the framework of economic sustainability, profitability and interests, and therefore, there is no purpose in knowledge that does not bring profit.

Lyotard contrasts the knowledge as structured by the scientific discourse to non-scientific knowledge, and finds that "that the former's existence is no more – and no less – necessary than the latter's" (1984: 26) – both belonging to the 'language game' in which both types of 'knowledge' are:

> composed of sets of statements; the statements are 'moves' made by the players within the framework of generally applicable rules; these rules are specific to each particular kind of knowledge, and the 'moves' judged to be 'good' in one cannot be of the same type as those judged 'good' in another, unless it happens that way by chance" (1984: 26).

On the formal and structural levels, Lyotard's claim is a logical and a valid one – both kinds of knowledge, understood as specific frameworks for structuring cognitive experience, allow for the 'play' or 'game' to run under certain conditions, and those are regulated by the nature of the framework in such a manner that it would be "impossible to judge the existence or validity of narrative knowledge on the basis of scientific knowledge and vice versa: the relevant criteria are different" (1984: 26). The "modern proclivity to define the conditions of a discourse in a discourse on those conditions" (Lyotard 1984: 30), is a practice that, according to Lyotard, has been operative since "Renaissance Humanism and variously present in the Enlightenment, the *Sturm und Drang*,

German idealist philosophy, and the historical school in France" (1984: 30), and not only does postmodernism show no propensity to terminate the practice, but it has made it its instrument, quite unoriginally, all things past considered. However, what is authentic about the postmodern approach to narrative, is that even in the process of narrativization, the postmodern outcome resists any totality, closure or self-assuredness of its process. If Lyotard's claim that the "explicit appeal to narrative in the problematic of knowledge is concomitant with the liberation of the bourgeois classes from the traditional authorities" (1984: 30) is taken to be valid, and that the subsequent attempts at narrativizing our experience of reality represent efforts to assign meaning to "the new authorities" (1984: 30), the specific conditions of the reality that is no longer in accord with the economic or socio-political reality of the early twentieth century, or the narratives operating around the period, then postmodernism, and specifically postmodern literature and criticism, grants authority to the individual rather than another sort of authority – be it past, present, or visionary. Lyotard argues that, in postmodernity, legitimacy, unsurprisingly, takes the form of consensus, as it has before, but that the consensus "combines with the new scientific attitude: the name of the hero is the people, the sign of legitimacy is the people's consensus, and their mode of creating norms is deliberation" (1984: 30), echoing Foucault's account of the scientific community in which, instead of operating under the sway of the dogma, the discourse, ideally, evolves with the plurality of input. However, the accumulation of knowledge, the prerequisite for socio-political progress, as seen by Lyotard, leads only to technological progress because, driven by economy-based politics, it perpetuates its own validity and purpose, and regulates the mode in which its discourses are formulated – much in line with Foucault's account of the manner in which dogmatic social groups operate in "The Order of Things".

If the criteria for the validation of scientific 'narratives' or discourses would be applied to what we have known as grand narratives, few of these would sustain the test of reality (contemporary), or their internal structure would collapse under the burden of 'rational' scientific proof. Lyotard very tactfully finds the problem of legitimization inappropriate when applied to these two contrasting frameworks of our capacity to make sense of the world around us, and legitimization, according to him, becomes in itself "a heuristic driving force" (1984: 27) in the postmodern critical thought. Lyotard potentially sees a problem with this postmodern, but primarily scientific project in that "it leaves behind the metaphysical search for a first proof or a transcendental authority" (1984: 29), it appropriates the conditions of truth and the authority to decide what these conditions are (1984:

29); and that ultimately, since the scientific approach, too, is a language game, a platform with designated rules, “there is no other proof that the rules are good than the consensus extended to them by the experts” (Lyotard 1984: 29). The mere condition of practicality, the “heuristic driving force” of the legitimization process inspired by the scientific discourse, simply does not meet the condition of applicability to all kinds of human constructs:

> It is not inconceivable that the recourse to narrative is inevitable, at least to the extent that the language game of science desires its statements to be true but does not have the resources to legitimate their truth on its own. If this is the case, it is necessary to admit an irreducible need for history understood, as outlined above – not as a need to remember or to project (a need for historicity, for accent), but on the contrary as a need to forget (a need for metrum). (Lyotard 1984: 28)

What Lyotard notices at the onset of the technological and informational expansion that would produce unseen economic, political and, inevitably, cultural global changes, is that “science will maintain and no doubt strengthen its preeminence in the arsenal of productive capacities of the nation-states” and that “this situation is one of the reasons leading to the conclusion that the gap between developed and developing countries will grow ever wider in the future” (1984: 5). The dissolution of knowledge as source of value-judgements that marks the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the information-technology era, quite ironically even if expectedly, may be traced to two major phenomena - the scientific and informational shift that radically changes both the nature of knowledge production, transmission and acquisition, and the subsequent abandonment of the grand-narratives that no longer possess the mysticism necessary to compete with the existential realities and the pragmatic nature of the unique economic, social and political reality. Knowledge, Lyotard says, “ceases to be an end in itself” and “loses its ‘use-value’” (1984: 5), and albeit the fact that “scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge” (1984: 7) its strategic production and dissemination, in the interest of liberal capitalist economic politics, viciously, yet almost imperceptibly, render obsolete those forms of unscientific knowledge Lyotard calls grand narratives for they neither provide useful insight into the reality of contemporaneity, nor can they stand the test of scientific legitimization without suffering ‘the earthquake’ of inevitable deconstruction that either completely annihilates them, or allows only for certain fragments to continue to exist. In explaining the nature of narrative knowledge, Lyotard

essentially highlights the potential problematics of the highly pragmatic contemporaneity that no longer sees any possibility of organizing knowledge production, and transmission, except around the economically, therefore, politically desired goals:

> I do not mean to say that narrative knowledge can prevail over science, but its model is related to ideas of internal equilibrium and conviviality next to which contemporary scientific knowledge cuts a poor figure, especially if it is to undergo an exteriorization with respect to the 'knower' and an alienation from its user even greater than has previously been the case. The resulting demoralization of researchers and teachers is far from negligible (1984: 7)

One could easily fall into the trap of romanticizing what Lyotard calls narrative knowledge, the grand narratives, "ideas of internal equilibrium and conviviality next to which contemporary scientific knowledge cuts a poor figure" (1984: 7), but that remains the legacy of liberal humanism and modernism in general, a reactionary resistance to the realities of contemporaneity. The perceived necessity, the idealistic obligation, and the compulsion to seek scientific, as well as unscientific, models according to which the grand narratives of the West[10] could recover their potency and justify their presence in the socio-political constructs, against the backdrop of the economic setting that, in all actuality, cannot yield satisfying results. For Lyotard, it is the metadiscourse of narratives that has "an explicit appeal" (1984: xxiii) in certain cases, "such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth" (1984: xxiii), but the appeal falls short. The knowledge offered by grand narratives – traditional narrative knowledge, as subjected to scientific legitimization, becomes interpreted as the "obscurantism" of the "minorities" or "separatist movements" (Lyotard 1984: 30). The narratives that emerge in postmodernism serve the purpose of providing validity

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[10] This is not to suggest that other cultures have not or still do plunge into similar idealistic, yet ultimately destructive, delusions of aggrandizing their own historical, cultural and ideological heritage. That would be an uninformed and ridiculous claim. Quite the contrary, our 'imaginary communities' thrive, in the forms in which we know them, potentially for this very reason, but the scope of this study restricts the author from dealing with the problematics of the phenomenon in the capacity required to clear the potential for being misunderstood for singling out the Western culture, its ethos, as having monopoly over this perceived entitlement. It might be unsurprising that the author of this dissertation has become so engrossed with Canadian literature and culture, on the one hand, and its critics and theorists, on the other, because there seems to endure, in this 'Canadianness', an awareness of the unrealistic nature of the grand-narrative entitlement so forcefully retained elsewhere, if one could be allowed to generalize in this manner, for a moment, without being academically stigmatized for it.

for a certain kind of knowledge, and Lyotard sees "two routes, depending on whether it represents the subject of the narrative as cognitive or practical, as a hero of knowledge or a hero of liberty" (1984: 31), and neither can be adequately represented in a narrative because the very nature of the process of legitimization would imply a constant reevaluation of the narrative produced. Moreover, as Lyotard suggests, the demand for legitimation entices the process of delegitimation, and vice-versa:

> The 'crisis' of scientific knowledge, signs of which have been accumulating since the end of the nineteenth century, is not born of a chance proliferation of sciences, itself an effect of progress in technology and the expansion of capitalism. It represents, rather, an internal erosion of the legitimacy principle of knowledge. (1984: 39)

The already discussed principle of knowledge as the guiding force behind the scientific turn, the postmodern scientific discourse proliferation and the desire to legitimize the scientific language game and transfer the 'rules' to other discourses as well, is sourced in the powerful link between economy and politics, or rather the economic interests as reflected in politics. On the one hand, "the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation" (Lyotard 1984: 37), and Lyotard explains it as the outcome of the failure of certain socio-political and ideological alternatives to capitalism that have disastrously failed in the twentieth century, but also as the effect of "the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the Second World War" (1984: 37) – the shift to the practical and pragmatic, the supposedly utilitarian economics and politics, that find the scientific discourse a more suitable framework for its social performatives. However, the problem of legitimation pervades the scientific discourse as much as it does others, and the deconstruction *qui arrive*[11] spares nothing in its way:

> A science that has not legitimated itself is not a true science; if the discourse that was meant to legitimate it seems to belong to a prescientific form of knowledge, like a 'vulgar' narrative, it is demoted to the lowest rank, that of an ideology or instrument of power. And this always happens if the rules of the science game that discourse denounces as empirical are applied to science itself. (Lyotard 1984: 39)

[11] Derrida, deconstruction as "ce qui arrive" (in Royle 2003: 25).

Lyotard observes a tendency to short-circuit the problem of this obscure, "prescientific" or "vulgar" knowledge by substituting grand narratives by the so-called "language games" (1984: 10), a different mode of discourse in which the rules of the "game" are a matter of contract "between players (which is not to say that the players invent the rules)" (1984: 10), in which the game is only valid if the rules are respected and abided by; and in which "every utterance should be thought of as a 'move' in a game" (1984: 10). Essentially, a discourse understood in this manner, when legitimized by means of formulating the rules of the game – be it terminology, ideology, or other – acquires a narrative of validity, and by extension, the validity of the game in question, as well as all the moves by all the players, become validated in the same manner grand narratives validate or vindicate specific experiences. The postmodern scientific discourse should, according to its own implied philosophical task, remain an open discourse – a discourse that does not privilege a speaking subject – rather than become narrativized or narratively validated, which would imply a different kind of relationship within the community. However, the commodification of knowledge, the undermining of higher education, the economic emphasis on practicality and the pragmatic politics managing the dynamics of knowledge production, transmission, reproduction, and ultimately value, render the scientific discourse and its propensity for legitimation vulnerable to grand narratives. Therefore, the necessity for unscientific knowledge persists, regardless of the dissipation of grand narratives, for "nobody speaks all of those languages" (Lyotard 1984: 41), the various languages of contemporary discourses – the postmodern multiplicity:

> they have no universal metalanguage, the project of the system-subject is a failure, the goal of emancipation has nothing to do with science, we are all stuck in the positivism of this or that discipline of learning, the learned scholars have turned into scientists, the diminished tasks of research have become compartmentalized and no one can master them all. (Lyotard 1984: 41)

There is a sense that the postmodern condition, and potentially even more so the 'contemporary condition' emulates a new sort of dissociation of sensibility – one that is grounded in (information) technology, in which the technological "'reality' is what provides the evidence used as proof in scientific argumentation, and also provides prescriptions and promises of a juridical, ethical, and political nature with results" (Lyotard 1984: 47), and this "decision-making authority" (Lyotard

1984: 47) it acquires by providing concrete results in terms of technological advancement, and by extension, the image of overall progress, only reinforces itself by multiplying its game-rules, its language-game, onto the surrounding discourses, and onto all the aspects of our existence.

Commenting on the likelihood in the change of the paradigm in the emancipatory narrative of education, Lyotard argues that "the partial replacement of teachers by machines may seem inadequate or even intolerable" (1984: 51), however, there is certainty that the nature of the emancipatory myth has drastically changed. If knowledge is commodified – assessed in terms of its economic value, then the motivation for acquiring knowledge necessarily changes the paradigm of the narrative of education, and of emancipation. In the multiplicity of language games, the compartmentalization of work, the narrative of the hero of knowledge becomes either a privilege of the financially established elite, or an impossibility. The narrative of the hero of liberty remains in the field of fiction – modern fiction, to be more precise, because it is this grand narrative that postmodernism seems to be the most critical of. Lyotard defines postmodernism as an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (1984: xxiv), incredulity that "is now such that we no longer expect salvation to rise from these inconsistencies, as did Marx" (1984: xxiv), the incredulity that is rooted in the technological "operativity criterion" (1984: xxv), but also a form of dissention (Lyotard 1984: xxv) that "refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (1984: xxv) without reverting to grand narratives of the past, the philosophy or ideology that has no substance or even potential to validate the contemporary condition. It is "the little narrative [petit récit]" that "remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention" (Lyotard 1984: 60), even if those stand for pagan strategies that merely provide a notion of fluidity of contemporariness rather than a totalizing explanation of the human experience. According to Taylor and Winquist in *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, "little narratives emphasize dissension within a discursive horizon of consensus that is never reached," and they belong to the realm of language games whose "moves call into question the efficacy of grand narratives or scientific paradigms and allow complexity to emerge" (2001: 231), even if the complexity itself remains unsolvable.

The modernist treatment of little narratives would suggest a certain regression in terms of fragmentation, and granted, postmodernism does not shy away from admitting its own tendency and responsibility for creating negative trends. In *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, Taylor and

Winquist notice that the postmodern propensity for combining and embracing differences does not "always result in strategic mobility" but rather that the general acceptance and encouraging of diversity results also in such fragmentation that promotes "minoritarian politics" which are ultimately rendered politically ineffective (2001: 231), which is Eagleton's concern as well, as discussed. The two authors discuss the issue on the example of the disintegration of the feminist movement and its subdivision that ultimately brought forward postfeminism – a myriad of sub-movements within a larger framework, operating seemingly under the theoretical basis of the feminist discourse (Taylor & Winquist 2001: 231). Taylor and Winquist brilliantly explain this fragmentation by emphasizing the fact that postmodernism works both using and within the modernist paradigm:

> The political ambiguity of little narratives is further aggravated when we consider how easily they can be interpreted as plausible late capitalist strategies: Small capital investors, part-time career parents, corporate telecommuters represent highly successful little narratives in the context of capitalism. (2001: 231)

This "political ambiguity of little narratives," then, seems to be incredibly compatible with the modernist paradigm since it evolved in late capitalism, and it additionally points to the extent of hypocrisy of the modernist insistence on grand narratives, or rather, its great ability to assimilate, merge or adapt little narratives into master narratives. Or, that is, until such saturation of grand narratives occurred that the illusion of the possibility of a totalizing narrative imploded on itself. Modernism's impulse to universalize and totalize stands in opposition to the postmodern insistence on specificity and particularity that is the result of its insistence on the process of investigation – a scrutiny that unpretentiously claims its right to scrutinize, but not necessarily to provide a narrative, a broader framework, within which the results of the investigation would fit. Moreover, postmodern investigation often yields insight into that which is unclassifiable in the grand narratives, but still present or persisting in contemporaneity, be it patriarchy, modernism, capitalism or liberal-humanism. And as Bertrand Russel notices, postmodern art "asserts and then deliberately undermines such principles as value, order, meaning, control and identity that have been the basic premises of bourgeois liberalism" (in Hutcheon 2004: 13) in order to expose the fictionality of the idea that there could be such timeless or universal concepts as proposed by modernism, both in terms of ideological or other structures. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*,

Hutcheon notices that the postmodern interrogation brings into question the value of the asserted truth, but does not automatically deny it. As even such truths that still hold in contemporaneity are recognized as human constructs, postmodernism investigates their relations with other present "social, aesthetic, philosophical, and ideological constructs" (Hutcheon 2004: 13), and in such a manner that recognizes the inevitability of the existence of a certain ideological basis that is implicit in the interrogation itself. It is for this reason that postmodernism is a highly self-reflexive practice, even if such an approach requires provisionality in terms of assessment, the outcome of analysis and, ultimately, even in terms of its purpose in the wider network of present discourses.

As a practice, postmodernism is one of negotiation. In Hutcheon's words, it is "an ongoing cultural process or activity […] a "poetics," an open, ever-changing theoretical structure by which to order both our cultural knowledge and our critical procedures," and not "in the structuralist sense of the word" (2004: 14), but rather as an endeavor that pursues to establish a dynamic dialog between the established and emerging discourses in society, and this implies interpreting both literary and non-literary production, in this case, as "a matter of reading literature through its surrounding theoretical discourses" (2004: 14), as opposed to regarding them as contingent upon theory or dependent on other discourses, theoretical or other, preceding their production. Any cultural production is intertextual in varying degrees, and the degree to which it portends to exert dominance pertaining to universality and totality, must be brought into question. Contrary to Terry Eagleton's insistence on the reactionary nature precisely because of this presumably aimless self-reflexive propensity of postmodern inquiry, Hutcheon notes that the poetics, or rather the problematics of postmodernism, "must deal with both [art and theory] and can theorize only on the basis of all the forms of postmodern discourse available to it" (2004: 19). In this manner, the postmodern critical practice, as opposed to modernist, recognizes the socio-political implications of its involvement in the meaning-generating processes, and accepts the responsibility for the constructs it produces, as well as their inherent provisionality and context-bound validity:

> Within such a 'postmodernist' ideology, all a poetics of postmodernism would do would be selfconsciously to enact the metalinguistic contradiction of being inside and outside, complicitous and distanced, inscribing and contesting its own provisional formulations. Such an enterprise would obviously not yield any universal truths but, then again, that would not be what it sought to do. To move from the desire and expectation of sure and

single meaning to a recognition of the value of differences and even contradictions might be a tentative first step to accepting responsibility for both art and theory as signifying processes. In other words, maybe we could begin to study the implications of both our making and our making sense of our culture. (Hutcheon 2004: 21)

The idea resounding in Jacques Derrida's works, perhaps especially in *Of Grammatology*, that ultimately, the process of deconstruction should represent an instinctive effort to take responsibility for the presence of the inherited traditions and discourses, and an effort to assess them for their viability in the present moment, and reappropriate our contemporaneity by the act, echoes in Hutcheon's claim that the implied, conditional ideology of postmodernism constitutes a self-conscious effort to explore "the metalinguistic contradiction of being inside and outside," but also to abandon the idea that deconstruction could "yield any universal truths". This line of thought exposes the strong philosophical divide between the modern and postmodern paradigm. To be precise, in "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Derrida puts forward the idea that there are two diverging paths to interpretation of interpretation, the two modes of thinking that have already been discussed in the chapter dealing with the philosophical, ideological and political legacy of the 1960s[12] - the second of which being philosophically descriptive of the postmodern approach. What is implied by Derrida's formulation is that the process of deconstruction is by no means an innovation, but a mode of automatic or instinctive interrogation. However, this interrogation, in terms of the modern philosophical and ideological foundations, seeks to interpret the discourse, literary or non-literary, the inherited symbolic order and authority, as source of universality, truth and justification for its own philosophical and ideological propositions. On the other hand, the postmodern paradigm, essentially, method-wise, very similar to the modernist, seeks no universality or validation for the liberal humanist paradigm. Derrida's second mode of interpretation of interpretation stands for an effort that strives to simply deconstruct the logos, potentially in hope of there remaining such traces of inheritance that could sustain themselves in contemporaneity as emancipatory, but ultimately, without the goal of finding the romantic universal origin of man, or the idealistic universal order of society. The differences that Hutcheon notices, much like the traces and the marginal that Derrida discusses in *Of Grammatology*, have always been present – in discourse, in literature, in theory and practice – but

[12] You know nothing, Jon Snow – The Late 1960s

their presence is no longer neutralized, exoticized or romanticized in postmodernism. The "implications of both our making and our making sense of our culture" (Hutcheon 2004: 21) reflect the double-edged character of the postmodern interrogation. According to Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, there is a tendency in the modernist tradition to think of culture in terms of either "unifactory" or "contradictionist" (2004: 21), which is essentially a Marxist categorization, but also reflexive of the legacy of structuralist thinking and modernist insistence on truth value authority that inevitably engages in the process of othering, consciously or unconsciously. "The visible paradoxes of the postmodern," Hutcheon notices, "do not mask any hidden unity which analysis can reveal" (2004: 21) because the postmodern task is not to validate the logos within which it operates, but rather to explore it from both an internal vantage point, in a highly conscious (and conscientious) manner, and from an external vantage point which recognizes all the marginality created by the logos, by the inherited traditions, be they modern or other. What seems to be the cause of some of the most reactionary criticism towards postmodernism is its fundamental indifference towards the authority of truth nurtured by modernism.

Postmodern art, according to Hutcheon, "seems to be marked paradoxically by both history and an internalized, self-reflexive investigation of the nature, the limits, and the possibilities of the discourse of art" (2004: 22), and, of course, as this critic treats the genre of postmodern historiographic metafiction specifically, it can be discussed whether this applies to other genres or forms of postmodern art in the same range and to the same extent. The emphasis Hutcheon places on the process, as the main interest of postmodern inquiry, explicates the use of such devices as irony and parody because of the focus on the postmodern relation to the past as well. And this is perceived in contemporary literature even when its topicality seemingly fails to resonate with the concerns of the past. In contemporary literature, the "parodic relation to the art of the past" (Hutcheon 2004: 22) is reflected in the exploration of the discourses of the past, or the established discourses of contemporaneity that an individual can only ironically resonate with. Hutcheon describes parody as:

> [that] seemingly introverted formalism – that paradoxically brings about a direct confrontation with the problem of the relation of the aesthetic to a world of significance external to itself, to a discursive world of socially defined meaning systems (past and present)—in other words, to the political and the historical. (2004: 22)

This would mean that postmodern literature, and art in the case of Hutcheon's study, explores the relation between its own, contemporary aesthetics, and the external discourses and meaning systems. The ironic and the parodic are then introduced to examine the relation of the political and the historical, both in the discourses of the past and the discourses of the present moment. With the emphasis on the process itself rather than criticism with a particular objective, postmodern practice aims to confront the discursive systems with their own manifestations. The result of such an investigation that does not necessarily pretend to provide a decided position on the solution to the discrepancies or incongruities of the interacting discourses, must be presented in the form that considers the subjective nature of individual experiences and interactions with socio-political discourses in culture, and this is both what points to the essence of postmodern aesthetics, and explains the postmodern insistence on the impossibility of a totalizing system – of significance, meaning or values, translated in the discourses of contemporaneity. Furthermore, Hutcheon defines postmodernism as:

> a fundamentally contradictory enterprise: its art forms (and its theory) at once use and abuse, install and then destabilize convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionally and, of course, to their critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past. In implicitly contesting in this way such concepts as aesthetic originality and textual closure, postmodernist art offers a new model for mapping the borderland between art and the world, a model that works from a position within both and yet not totally within either, a model that is profoundly implicated in, yet still capable of criticizing, that which it seeks to describe. (2004: 23)

The label of postmodernism being "fundamentally contradictory" arises from the fact that postmodern literature, much like the postmodern critical theory, uses the paradigms of modernism and its instruments to expose their own falsities, limitations and inadequacies; that it uses modernist instruments, sometimes excessively experimenting with the purpose of exploring discourse limits and the nature of conventions; and that philosophically and ideologically, postmodernism does not necessarily negate modernist and liberal humanist ideas, but rather strives to invalidate and counteract the prevalent belief that these are universal and natural, which is not an act of rejection in itself. Moreover, the typically postmodern attitude towards the modernist line of thinking does not strive to annul history or the socio-political legacies of modernism for such

an endeavor would invalidate the entirety of human production. Rather, postmodernism, in most, if not all its manifestations, objects to the idea that any constructs of the past, including the modernist enterprise, deserve their place in contemporaneity due to their supposed philosophical, ideological, economic, political or other prerogative. Postmodernism puts the modernist enterprise to test by "destabilizing convention" and considering the outcomes and consequences in the aftermath. The sensitivity invited by the ironic interrogation of the discourses and narratives of the past, or those established as the socio-political or cultural norm, is precisely what postmodernism desires to neutralize, and, at the same time, this sensitivity is at the root of the modernist bitter criticism against the postmodern critical thought. Any parodic or ironic reference, therefore, Hutcheon notes discussing postmodern architecture, reopens a dialogue with the past in such a manner that foregrounds the necessity for political reconsideration (2004: 23) because the postmodern theoretical discourse wants to reconstruct the public discourse that is highly aware of the modernist self-righteousness, the fragility of its aesthetic and political values against contemporaneity, and ultimately "its attendant political self-marginalization" (2004: 23). It is the ideological core of not only modernist, but any discourses and narratives, that suffers under the magnifying glass of the postmodern critical thought, and the "self-marginalization" Hutcheon mentions directly relates to the modernist tendency to presuppose authority, in contrast to the postmodern tendency to challenge it automatically. By extension, this is not to say that postmodernism is somehow inherently more political than modernism, or at all for that matter. In fact, as previously mentioned, the problematics of postmodernism, as well as the "incredulity towards grand narratives" and the propensity for "little narratives" (Lyotard), both often diminish its political potential. In Hutcheon's words, postmodernism is a "contradiction and a move toward antitotalization" (2004: 42), and the 'contradiction' that the critical circles insist on associating with postmodernism remains merely a rationalization for the phenomenon, and the difficulty of envisioning an approach that involves simultaneous self-reflexiveness and self-disambiguation of the postmodern discourses. The "ironic ambiguities" (Hutcheon 2004: 43) often forcibly reconciled in modernist literature, or unsatisfactorily raised to the level of abstraction only to be placed under a totalizing ideological or philosophical umbrella, are contested in postmodern representation by the very recognition that their existence cannot be vindicated by a plausible totalizing discursive reality. Hutcheon argues that both modernism and postmodernism retain their own contradictions, but that postmodernism treats these contradictions as a confirmation of the co-

existence of multiple systems and orders without attempting to impose a unifying system that would create the illusion of some sort of socio-political, cultural, ideological or philosophical consensus (2004: 43), in spite of the supposed postmodern and contemporary consensus of "the people" operating under the platform of scientific progress (Lyotard). These contradictions are rather truth conditions, and the postmodern treats them as inevitable and necessary, yet provisional, transient and changeable "human constructs in history" (Hutcheon 2004: 43) – not only should the provisional nature of these construct and their implied truth conditions be openly explored, but such a practice does not necessarily negate the truth value attached to these conditions in the past.

Fredric Jameson emphasizes on the idea that the impossibility of the referent and history as the ultimate objects is unnegotiable in postmodernism (in Hutcheon 2004: 24). That is, Jameson insists that all referents and historical artifacts represent human constructs and are as such unsustainable as stable points of reference or universal, and even natural, value. Hutcheon notes that this "deliberate refusal to do so is not a naïve one: what postmodernism does is to contest the very possibility of our ever being able to know the "ultimate objects" of the past" (2004: 24), and, by extension, any basis for social, political, historical, or other 'reality' of the past is merely discursive and therefore unreliable. With regard to art, Hutcheon notes that the postmodern theoretical discourse explicates how "when it is used as the referent of art, and so the only "genuine historicity" [it] becomes that which would openly acknowledge its own discursive, contingent identity" (2004: 24). Postmodern, and contemporary literature, not only forefronts the discursive contexts that have prompted the production of the precedent cultural and other artifacts, but examines them against the discursive practices of contemporaneity, in the framework of intertextuality. The overload of information, the speed of transmission, the facility of reproduction and the scope of its production in the twenty-first century explains the phenomenon the almost in-built and intrinsic intertextuality in contemporary narratives. Hutcheon argues Jameson's position that postmodern art disregards, "brackets or effaces" history and states that history "is incorporated and modified, given new and different life and meaning" (2004: 24), and in terms of postmodern historiographic metafiction this insight holds. However, not all postmodern literature deals specifically with historical incidents by exploring them as discursive constructs and placing them in new contexts in order to deconstruct their socio-political, cultural, ideological, philosophical background or other. What is so peculiar about the postmodern interrogation, and especially contemporary postmodern literature, is its tendency to implicate the discursive remnants of the

past in the discursive reality of the present moment, and this juxtaposition or contrast need not have an explicit (discursive) referent in the past. The present is highly saturated with the discursive presence of the past, and necessitates not a regurgitating of these discourses or narratives so as to validate their original creation or persistence, but rather to remove their obsolete form and potentially salvage their humanist or emancipatory potential. The postmodern critical thought does not reject the context of the discursive constructs, but investigates the paradigms of their origins and operative values in the present coextensively with the interrogation of the contemporary economic, political, social and cultural context – an unfathomable complexity that no longer sees the value in explaining the tangled knots in its weave via a totalizing philosophical or ideological key.

Postmodernism, Postmodernism and *Canadian* Postmodernism

Taylor and Winquist, in *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, date the postmodern critical thought to the 1960s, as "a neo-Nietzschean variant of the practice of contesting the authority of forms of knowledge derived from Enlightenment philosophy" (2001: 302), and associate it, in addition to Nietzsche's widely misunderstood philosophical concept – nihilism, to Foucault's view of the power relations in Western society as exercised by the institutionally enforced discourses. Taylor and Winquist, much like the philosophers and critics discussed previously, relate this to the problematics of knowledge and language itself, so that the postmodern critical thought, according to them seeks to "delegitimize these institutional orders of knowledge by exposing the contingent nature of their authority and the oppressive power relations inscribed within them" (2001: 302). Jean Baudrillard, however, in his treatment of the conditions of knowledge, and the conditions of knowing, goes beyond the pre-postmodern[13] philosophical disillusionment, and observes reality itself as a complex network of discourses, which so powerfully exert their symbolic influence, that

[13] Even if the term coined here adds to the terminological confusion, as explained by Lyotard, what is implied by pre-postmodern pertains to the philosophical paradigms that disambiguate the ambitions of the Enlightenment ideological and philosophical core: Nietzsche's concept of nihilism as the ultimate understanding that the philosophical and ideological paradigms established by the Western tradition not only require substantial revision, but that there is an imminent sense that epistemologically these have never been, nor will be sustainable in the future. With Heidegger, Nietzsche, Freud, and the subsequent accumulation of epistemological uncertainty, the 'pre-postmodern' here refers also to Lyotard's understanding that the postmodern is modern in its 'nascent' state, only released from the illusion of an epistemological certainty as provided by modernism-appropriated narratives of liberation, freedom and imagination. Perhaps the heuristic label, counterintuitively, should have been termed 'pre-modernism'.

reality becomes a simulation of itself. More precisely, the discursive reality, as perceived by Baudrillard, is one of “serial signs… immanent in their repetition” and “who could say what the reality is that these signs simulate” (2011: 340). In “The Orders of Simulacra,” first published in 1983 as a chapter in his seminal study *Simulations*, Baudrillard explores the discursive reality of contemporaneity “in its entirety – political, social, historical and economic – that from now on incorporates the simulatory dimension of hyperrealism” (2011: 338), a proposition that implies an inversion of sorts between the perceived reality, on the one hand, and the nature of the subject and object of art, on the other. For Baudrillard, the essence of the postmodern experience of reality, and it might easily be speculated contemporary as well, is an “‘esthetic’ hallucination of reality” (2011: 338), a hallucination of the constructed idea of what the embodied experience of reality should resemble:

> The old slogan ‘truth is stranger than fiction’, that still corresponded to the surrealist phase of this estheticization of life, is obsolete. There is no more fiction that life could possibly confront, even victoriously – radical disenchantment, the cool and cybernetic phase following the hot stage of fantasy. (2011: 338)

The proliferation of discourses as operating within the paradigm of legitimation, the explosion of information technology providing an illusion of information free-flow and producing an impression of the discourse-producing ‘laisse-faire’ principle at work, all amount to the destruction of what Baudrillard terms “the surrealist phase of this estheticization of life” (2011: 338) in which “truth is stranger than fiction” (2011: 338). Truth, a construct of relative and context-bound value, as explicated by the interrogation into the discursive nature of the epistemological ‘certainties’ inherited from the Enlightenment philosophy, now becomes malleable and plastic, as contexts replicate and multiply uncontrollably. The distinction between reality, supposedly founded on existential and epistemological certainties, and art, as ‘grounded’ in the imaginative capacity, becomes vague or ceases to exist, “and so art is everywhere, since artifice is at the very heart of reality” (Baudrillard 2011: 340) – all of reality is discursive amounting even to an embodied discursive experience[14], and “so art is dead, not only because its critical transcendence is gone, but

[14] The concept elaborated in *The Matrix* (1999), a science fiction feature, written and directed, by the Wachowskis, in which humans physically exist in a dystopian reality governed by artificial intelligence that exploits their bodies for bio-energy while keeping them in a trance-like state, captivated in a mental and psychological virtual simulation providing a sense of normalcy and ordinariness. The controversial metaphor has been criticized by Baudrillard who

because reality itself, entirely impregnated by an esthetic which is inseparable from its own structure, has been confused with its own image" (Baudrillard 2011: 340). Reality is satiated with artificiality to such an extent that it no longer assumes its own authenticity, nor does it "even surpass fiction" (Baudrillard 2011: 340). According to Baudrillard, the transcendental function of criticism, the "pleasure" in "discovering the 'natural' in what was artificial and counterfeit" (2011: 339), becomes inadequate "when the real and the imaginary are confused in the same operational totality" (2011: 339) since artistic production no longer represents a space for the examination of reality, or the discovery of the 'true nature' of reality, because it is made merely "esthetic" (2011: 339) emulating the fictional nature of reality. Reality, as "contaminated by its simulacrum" (Baudrillard 2011: 339), fails to show its 'true' or real image since it is entirely composed of the discursively constructed 'truths' – it is hyperreal, and the direction of the emulative aspirations of realism, that art should reflect reality, fails, which is incidentally the reason why modernist philosophy ultimately fails to retain its operative value in contemporaneity. If reality is a simulacrum of itself, as proposed by Baudrillard, then the relationship between this hyperrealist reality and art (fiction) exposes a two-directional channel for symbolic interaction. At the core of the problematics, Baudrillard finds in the simulation of reality, "the metalinguistic illusion" that "duplicates and completes the referential illusion" (2011: 339). It is the consensus on the supposed metalinguistic stability that enables for the very phenomenon of the hyperreal, for the simulation, to exist, and for the simulacra to proliferate. Linda Hutcheon, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, suggests that "the postmodern still operates […] in the realm of representation, not of simulation, even if it constantly questions the rules of that realm" (2004: 230). However, it could be argued that the postmodern operates in the realm of representation *precisely because* it incessantly questions the rules of the realm of representation – the validity of the philosophical, ideological and other basis, as well as the metalinguistic stability of its own medium of this endeavor. In addition to that, postmodern literature not only interrogates the referent-world (reality), but also

refused cooperation with the Wachowskis due to their supposed misapprehension of the conceptual nature of *Simulations*. In his article "A French Philosopher Talks Back to Hollywood and *The Matrix*" (2002), Brent Staples, *The New York Times* author for the Editorial Observer column online, relates the words of the late French philosopher as an unexpected parodic twist in the e-mail correspondence interview as Baudrillard supposedly stated that "no movie could ever do justice to the themes of this book," which suggests that Staples himself might not have read the philosopher's study *Simulacra and Simulation*, or otherwise he would not have asked the question in the first place. Staples, Brent. "A French Philosopher Talks Back to Hollywood and *The Matrix*." *The New York Times Online: Opinion*, 24 May 2002, https://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/24/opinion/editorial-observer-a-french-philosopher-talks-back-to-hollywood-and-the-matrix.html. Accessed 29 May 2020.

the nature of its representation of the fictional. Baudrillard claims that “all closed systems protect themselves at the same time from the referential – as well as from all metalanguage that the system forestalls in playing at its own metalanguage” (2011: 339), whereby a duplication is produced in which the critique of the system is the duplication, another projection, of the metalanguage itself (2011: 339), and this too is recognized by the postmodern critical thought in its effort to sustain itself in the critical mode, rather than didactic, among other, even if this makes little difference in the system of knowledge production, replication and dissemination, at least according to Baudrillard. The self-reflexive motivation behind this study, at this point, requires an appreciation for the persisting modernist romantic idealism since the consideration of Baudrillard’s pessimistic and rather alarming idea of the inescapable simulation only suggests that any criticism, even postmodern criticism; any art or literature, even the postmodern kind – only describe an endless replication of the metalanguage under which it operates in the simulation, which can be understood both as daunting, unavoidable and inescapable regardless of all the experimentation, and ultimately, ‘pathetic’ (Baudrillard 2011).

In *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, published in 1997, Terry Eagleton highlights the “rejection of the so-called metanarratives” as the “definitive of postmodern philosophy” (2011: 341), though it is unclear whether this discussion, on postmodern philosophy, postmodernism in literature and postmodernity in general as a phenomenon, is executed from the same theoretical angle, or whether there is a certain hybridized Marxist-modernist eclecticism in his criticism. The framework behind Eagleton’s thought here is based on the idea that the postmodernist is either “enthused by a particular metanarrative, such as the story of technological progress or the march of Mind” (2011: 341), or fervently dedicated to maintaining “a plurality of tales” (2011: 341). Granted, at the core of the postmodern critical thought, one might discover the metanarrative of the scientific legitimation and incredulity of the degree in which as a phenomenon it becomes a metanarrative of suspicion (as Lyotard explains it); or the metanarrative of de(con)struction (Derrida), or anti-authoritarian criticism (Foucault), etc., all of which anti-totalize our philosophical understanding of the experience of the discursive reality. The difference between the two diverging, yet equally negative trends among the postmodernists, as Eagleton specifically sees them – both of which dare to assume that the privileged role of the discourse-producing subject is open and – and the kind of postmodernist that Eagleton can suffer to discuss, is that the latter, “the more intelligent postmodernist recognizes” (2011: 341) that there actually might be “a plurality of metanarratives”

(2011: 341). This prominent critic basically re-discovers modernism for the benefit and emancipation of the unintelligent postmodernist, but granted, Eagleton does not go so far as illustrate his claim by, potentially, listing the existing religious, ideological or other narratives and emphasizing on the idea that these indeed persist, coexist, successfully because multitudes firmly 'believe' in them, and that all of these are equally relevant, especially in the tolerant, liberal and humanist contemporary society. That sort of illustration would be highly condescending, and Eagleton shows great concert not to generalize, at this point, and place all postmodernists in the same basket. In fact, Eagleton's subdued criticism of the postmodern thinker focuses on the value of metanarratives, or grand narratives, and he highlights that:

> *grands récits* are significant for two reasons: first, because they are the cause today as in the past of a good deal of misery which needs to be put to rights, and secondly because if we do not do so they shall go on demanding enormous investments of energy and hence distract us from the pleasures of talking about something more interesting for a change. (2011: 341)

Both Eagleton's qualitative hierarchizing of postmodernists into more and less intelligent ones, and this profoundly hypocritical proposition that postmodernists reject grand narratives with the aim of erasing them thereby erasing the consequences of their being embedded in our cultures and our discourses, testify to how important a role the academic circles have played in the dissemination of the sinister hypocrisy of liberal humanism. The privilege to authoritatively qualify, as Eagleton does, also testifies to the lack of accountability, conscientiousness and responsibility on the part of the bourgeois academics who bring abstraction to perfection and self-validate their social, political and economic position by tacitly maintaining the state of social, political and economic political injustice they so fervently stand against. Eagleton's reaction to the reevaluation of the *grands récits* of the Western culture is not triggered by the postmodern rejection of their significance, but by the outcome of the interrogation of their validity and justifiability, especially in contemporaneity. The "good deal of misery which needs to be put to rights" (2011: 341), as caused by the festering contextual value of the grand narratives, is never overlooked by the postmodern critic, nor is there a call to abandon the inquiry into how such phenomena ever persisted to the extent of holding contemporaneity hostage. In 2020, it would be interesting to learn how Eagleton interprets the massive shootings against second-generation immigrants in Germany,

almost a century after the Second World War – attacks operating under the self-same classist, racist, homophobic, xenophobic, colonial, imperialist, white-European tradition, if not ideology – one of the most persistent and powerful network of interacting grand narratives. If there ever has been a concern that postmodern philosophy, literature or criticism would go so far as to distract us from the historical, political, philosophical or ideological burdens of the past, the concern should have been abandoned by now, at least due to the fact that postmodern literature and criticism have been so acutely aware of its historicity, that it has become saturated by its own 'archeological' undertaking. However, Eagleton's resentment must be understandable at this point, considering the "enormous investments of energy" (2011: 341) spent on attempting to vindicate the grand narratives that form the philosophical, political, cultural, but also traditional, bases of the West, of the academia, of the myth of the humanist, the modernist, the philanthropist, the hero of liberation, etc. Especially considering the potential of the ultimate failure of this endeavor, much like that of feminism, according to Eagleton, that "has made few major contributions to Marxist thought" (2011: 342), though, of course, Eagleton generously absolves feminism of that 'fault'. Without dwelling on the underlying idea that feminism should have somehow contributed to Marxism specifically due to its inherent superiority against the vast background of other totalizing ideologies, and without intending to pretentiously question the criteria Eagleton uses in classifying, and rather carefully and conveniently, certain narratives 'grand' in terms of "providing the matrix within which so many, but not all, of our practices take shape" (2011: 342). Somehow, Eagleton manages to turn into a postmodern thinker while arguing against postmodernism. If one naively, without any sense of history, assumes that it is possible to restrict grand narratives to a certain kind of space, time or occasion, then one is talking about provisory rituals, and not the powerful discursive entities that penetrate into the different aspects of communal life and create the discursive reality that replicates the values embodied by these grand narratives. Postmodernism, says Eagleton, "wedded as it is to the particular, would be reluctant to accept that there are propositions which are true of all times and places, yet which are not simply vacuous and trivial" (2011: 342), which is, again, an out-of-context and generalizing claim – a convenient one at that, implying godlessness, anarchy, destructiveness, an anti-traditionalist attitude, a blatant disregard for the past, a militant, cult-like force threatening to destroy all that is supposedly humanist in Western culture. The postmodern turn, its critical thought and literature, it can be concluded, may be equated with a home-grown terrorist cult whose sole purpose is to wreak havoc on the Western

order – an unjustifiable pest that prevents us from "[recovering] something of our naïve astonishment at what we have taken for granted" (Eagleton 2011: 342). Of course, what Eagleton seems to willfully disregard is that it is the process of defamiliarization of these grand narratives, and not necessarily only of the West, that is at the core of the postmodern problematics. Commenting on the supposed premeditation of postmodernism to destroy everything modern, Eagleton says:

> Postmodernism is in general allergic to any such trampling on the particular, and this ferocious abstraction trampled on it with a vengeance. It was also one of the greatest emancipatory ideas of world history, one which postmodernism has come so much to take for granted that it can apparently only identify it by its blindspots. […] It is an improvement not least because middle-class society could now be challenged by those it suppressed *according to its own logic*, caught out in a performative contradiction between what it said and what it did. (2011: 343)

Postmodernism indeed seems "allergic to any […] trampling on the particular" (Eagleton 2011: 343), but the question that poses itself, especially at the beginning of the twenty-first century, is why it has developed such an aversion to the totalizing grand narratives and myths, or why contemporaneity chooses, in the first place, to investigate the manifestations of these as institutionalized. Another question that necessarily raises itself would be why trampling on the particular persists as important for the maintaining of order and the illusion of unity, but also, how it is possible that the liberal humanist project still perceives class, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc., as the particulars that require a unification under the patronage of the inherited grand narratives. Could it be that it is simply impossible in contemporaneity to envision a universality that goes beyond these traditional differences, or could it be that the traditions of the past seem to operate in the system of exclusion to which postmodernism reacts in undesirable ways? Postmodernism, anti-elitist and anti-universalist (Eagleton 2011: 343), exhibits "a certain tension between its political and philosophical values" (Eagleton 2011: 343) that, according to Eagleton, result in the "short-circuiting [of] universality and returning to a sense of pre-modern particularism" (2011: 343) – an uncontrollable anarchist program that disturbs not only the relations of socio-economic privilege, but also the traditional hierarchy (2011: 343). This is not the emergence of a system supporting multiplicity or pluralism for Eagleton, but a problem of

“how a difference without hierarchy is not to collapse into pure *in*difference, so becoming a kind of inverted mirror-image of the universalism it repudiates” (2011: 343). If postmodernism entertained the idea of a structure at the philosophical or ideological core, Eagleton’s criticism would potentially be less zealous, but postmodernism does no such thing, and the postmodern critical thought’s insistence on the awareness of the ideological substance of the discourse, the artifice of economic, social and political constructs, as well as the inherited legacies of the past – be they sustainable and beneficial in contemporaneity or not – its lack of a specific, unitary, narrativized vision offer no generosity of hope of order or progress as abstracted by modernity and its persistent proponents.

With regard to Eagleton’s insinuation that postmodernism may potentially slide into pure indifference and anarchy, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon comments on Fredric Jameson’s claim that postmodernism is “too involved in the economic system of late capitalism, too institutionalized,” and, perhaps more importantly, unable to share the fervor of “modernism’s repudiation of the Victorian bourgeoisie” (in Hutcheon 2004: 50), and Hutcheon notices the resistance in Jameson’s claim – a claim that strongly resonates with Eagleton’s attitude towards postmodernism in whatever form he understands or discusses it – against a philosophical standpoint that recognizes “its own inescapable ideological implication in precisely the contemporary situation of late capitalism” (2004: 50). Here, Hutcheon further contrasts the interrogative paradigm of the postmodern critical thought, its philosophical task, against modernist philosophy by underscoring that:

> […] this same modernism has also been accused of cultural élitism and hermeticism, political conservatism, alienating theories of the autonomy of art, and a search for transcendent, ahistorical dimensions of human experience (Russell 1981, 8). It would not be difficult to figure out what postmodernism challenges and what attempts at change it offers in the stead of such a list: cultural democratizing of high/low art distinctions and a new didacticism, potentially radical political questioning, contextualizing theories of the discursive complexity of art, and a contesting of all ahistorical and totalizing visions. (2004: 50)

Along with the, hopefully by-now evident, implicit elitism in Eagleton's interpretation of the postmodern critical paradigm, Hutcheon's arguments straightforwardly contest the modernist impulse (for the most part) that art should remain in the domain of traditional privilege – the domain of the obedient political and academic aestheticism as reflected by the investment in the exclusionary totalizing visions which have, undoubtedly, produced a methodology, but not necessarily a clear ethic or moral, humanist as proposed, vision in the domain of cultural, social or political progress. Hutcheon's explanation to why postmodernism produces such diversity of responses supports the claim that postmodern literature, but especially criticism, does not inherently strive to annihilate the structures of the past, but rather to produce such "forms of aesthetic practice and theory [that] both install and subvert prevailing norms – artistic and ideological" (2004: 222), which poses an issue in such instances where the dogmatic nature of established norms is put under scrutiny. And, as mentioned in the discussion on postmodern poetics in general, Hutcheon sees the essence of postmodern poetics precisely in its potential, both in terms of theory and practice – art, to "recognize their implication in that which they contest: the ideological as well as aesthetic underpinnings of the cultural dominants of today – both liberal humanism and capitalist mass culture" (2004: 222), without falling into the trap of granting privilege to either – theory or practice – which would render one, or the other, "either autonomous or parasitic" (2004: 53). It is the awareness of the potential entrapment in the privileging of theory over practice, as is the case in contemporary modern thought, or practice over theory, that serves as the cautionary framework for the postmodern "didactic and selfconsciously theoretical nature" (2004: 53). In contrast to this, perhaps, unintentional, legacy of modernism, postmodernism brings into focus the necessity for continuity and co-extensiveness between theory and practice, and according to Hutcheon, insists that "we should learn to theorize from the site of practice" (2004: 226), rather than the other way round. This echoes the sensibility and the issue at the heart of Lyotard's call to war and the rejection of the bourgeois institutionalized and politicized aesthetics that merely serve to perpetuate their own validity in an elitist subculture of the economically and politically privileged in his already discussed article "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" (1986).

In the Introduction to *The Canadian Postmodern*, first published in 1988, Linda Hutcheon discusses the prevalent poetics in the sixties and seventies, and the emergence of the postmodern novel, and fiction in general, with a typically Canadian "cultural form" even if it retains a

“seemingly provocative label” (2012: 1). The provocative label that qualifies what Hutcheon attempts to carefully disambiguate, perhaps even vindicate, but certainly more precisely define, are the qualities of the postmodern:

> [art] forms that are fundamentally self-reflexive […] art that is self-consciously art (or artifice), literature that is openly aware of the fact that it is written and read as part of a particular culture, having as much to do with the literary past as with the social present. (Hutcheon 2012: 1)

Hutcheon sees this self-consciousness of postmodern fiction as reflected in the use of parody and irony, and her insight extends to genres and forms outside of historiographic metafiction. However, Hutcheon also notices a very important similarity between modern and postmodern fiction that testifies to the continuity of poetics, and a similarity that enables us to, at the same time, better contrast modern and postmodern fiction. The divergence in the use of modernist methods, Hutcheon notices, is that:

> [in] the postmodern this self-consciousness of art *as art* is paradoxically made the means to new engagement with the social and the historical world, and that this is done in such a way as to challenge (though not destroy) our traditional humanist beliefs about the function of art in society. (Hutcheon 2012: 2)

It is this particular insight that, in a way, legitimizes the recent attempts by the academic circles to endorse such manifests of a contemporary poetics that testify to the supposed revival of modernist poetics, if consensus on what that entails precisely could be reached. These contemporary manifests, becoming prominent in the first decade of the twenty-first century, propose a theoretical paradigm that is based on neo-liberal humanism, and neo-modernism, so to speak. Among others, metamodernism invites attention due to the effort to challenge the very foundations of the supposed postmodern philosophy and ideology as reflected in art, mostly architecture, but also literature since the scope of the theoretical discussion appears to be general. More specifically, the metamodern theoretical narrative (and the use of the term ‘narrative’ as opposed to discourse here is deliberate), places modern and postmodern theory and practice, respectively, as binary opposites, revitalizing the discourse of contemporary modernists that postmodernism is, essentially, anti-humanist, devoid of vision, decentered and fragmented, and that its manifestation

through art represents nothing more than derivative pastiche aimed at destroying the liberal humanist, traditional, values and legacies of post-war Europe and America. This sort of narrative also indirectly shifts the apparently necessary blame of the failure of the liberal humanist political and social struggles of the sixties and seventies in the twentieth century on the postmodern practice, and its theoretical discourse. Metamodernism, therefore, attempts to be continuous with modernism, and yet, ironically, it rejects the essentially modern methods and instruments of interrogation, such as irony and parody, and endeavors to selectively reinstate the idealism of modernism largely abandoned in contemporaneity, which is why it will be discussed separately, though briefly, in the section that follows.

Both in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* and *The Canadian Postmodern*, Hutcheon draws the line of distinction between American postmodernism, and the very specific cultural form of postmodernism in Canada. On a more general level, these distinctions, specifically when reflected in the multitude of unsatisfactory definitions of postmodernism, expose both the plasticity of the modernist interrogation instruments as adopted by the postmodern critical thought, and the cultural variations of the poetics of what is commonly referred to as postmodernism. What is generally considered to characterize American postmodernism, "the extreme non-representational textual play and self-reference of 'surfiction'" (Hutcheon 2012: 2), still echoes continuity with late modernism in its aesthetics and its propensity for imagination (Hutcheon 2012: 2), whereas such aesthetics cannot be ascribed to Canadian postmodern fiction at the end of the twentieth nor the beginning of the twenty-first century, or at least not as a common or defining quality. Postmodernism, Hutcheon says, "is more paradoxical and problematic," and "it both sets up and subverts the powers and conventions of art" (2012: 2), but does this from the position that acknowledges the power relations, the discourses within which the interrogation is performed, and subsequently explores their validity. This approach has been perceived as unoriginal by the critics as it relies on intertextuality, irony and parody, and, more explicitly, the subversive invocation of the existing narratives and discourses. By extension, this interrogation exposes the autonomy of modernist imagination, but, ironically, confirms the extent to which its power and the power of art take hold on existential realities. I comment on this double-edge of postmodern criticism as ironic because it both exposes the limitations of modernist imagination as centered in liberal humanism, reluctant to acknowledge its hypocrisy and unsustainability, especially in contemporaneity, and demonstrates the power of imagination, art and narrative-production in uncovering the artificial

nature of the modern constructs. If early Canadian postmodern fiction was not influenced strongly by the typically American experimentation with form and the ideological dimensions of metafiction, Hutcheon argues that it is due to the Canadian writers' being "unencumbered by the 'ideological baggage' of American novelists" (2012: 2). The Canadian 'baggage', according to Hutcheon, directed writers towards the questions and issues of their colonial past, the lack of history as the basis on which American writers could operate, and, ultimately, the questions of national and (multi)cultural identity (2012: 3). However, this does not render Canadian postmodern fiction or criticism any less commanding in terms of examining the dominant cultural discourses from the "marginal or 'ex-centric' position with regard to the central or dominant culture, because the paradox of underlining and undermining cultural 'universals' (of revealing their grounding in the 'particular') implicitly challenges any notions of centrality in (and centralization of) culture" (Hutcheon 2012: 3). Hutcheon, therefore, proposes that "perhaps the postmodern ex-centric is very much a part of the identity of [the Canadian] nation" (2012: 3). The ex-centric, marginal or de-centered position of the Canadian writer, or artist, unburdened by the heavy weight of strongly established historical narratives tightly woven into the political, social and cultural discourses, allows for a more profuse postmodern interrogation, and a less triggering one, potentially. This is to say, the Canadian effort to establish its own authentic post-colonial narratives and discourses complements the mode of postmodern interrogation, or it might be vice-versa. In establishing its own national and cultural identity, both against the imperial, British influence and colonial history, and the American political and cultural pressures, but also against its own uncertainties, Canadian postmodern fiction and critical thought resort to interrogating history from a position that is removed from the center or source, and remain ungrounded in the process. Marshall McLuhan's humorous remark that Canada is "a 'border line case'" (in Hutcheon 2012: 3) serves Hutcheon to support the argument that the postmodern approach to its identity and culture comes from the absence of any geographical center (due to the vastness of the Canadian landscape), as well as the ethnic variety of its demographics – "the multicultural mosaic" (2012: 3). If postmodern inquiry implies an examination of history and myths on which social realities are built, Canadian postmodernism differs from the American and European version in that it spontaneously and unaffectedly assumes the ex-centric position within the multitude of discourses in which it operates, and the de-centered position from the narratives perpetuated by those discourses. I use the word 'spontaneously' because it describes the Canadian unbiasedness to the

narratives of the past, and resonates with the typically Canadian impulse to investigate the nature of their experience of culture, national and individual identity. By extension, I use the word as reminiscent of Derrida's own take on deconstruction as an instinctive, even unprompted, yet impulsive (almost biological) reaction to the (narrative) discourse one may be exposed to. On the other hand, there is an implied assumption that the Canadian experience of their social and cultural reality must be wide-ranging, heterogeneous and diverse, and this is why I use the word 'unaffected'. There is a tacit understanding corresponding the postmodern philosophical approach to the narratives and discourses of the past that resonates with the postmodern proposition that there are no universal, natural or given social, political or other values, and that the narratives and discourses of the past remain in the present as constructs with value limited to the economic, political and social moment. In other words, there is a level of objectivity or distance in Canadian postmodern fiction and criticism, which is one of the reasons why Linda Hutcheon's extensive theoretical work is chosen here as the framework for the theoretical discussion on postmodernism, and the analysis of the selection of the contemporary Canadian short story. Other reasons may revolve around the personal, unpretentious, agreement with this critic's reasoning.

Metamodernism: *I Love the Way You Lie*

The discussion on modernism might seem belated at this point considering the extensive review of relevant literature attempting to reach agreement on what postmodern poetics encompasses, and even more so considering that postmodernism is often defined in contrast to modernist poetics. What the discussions in the previous chapters strive to illustrate is the specificity of the differences in the modern and postmodern poetics, and particularly in their philosophical impulse, but also the continuity between the two, after all, heuristic labels of a continuous and co-extensive phenomena. Furthermore, the brief glance into metamodernism[15] in this chapter, as a contemporary trend or even a possible emerging poetics, serves to additionally clarify the precise points of overlap and

[15] Metamodernism as theorized by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, without extensive reflection on the prior, however infrequent, mentions of the term by critics and theorists in the fields of philosophy, literature, art in general or aesthetics, for the attitude here is that contemporary discussions on metamodernism, or similar trends – trends supposedly diverging from postmodern poetics – often do not emerge from the point of consensus on what postmodern poetics encompasses, and therefore require a substantial revision, which is not the focus of this study. "Notes on metamodernism" is taken to exemplify that very disagreement, illustrate the obvious complexity of postmodern poetics, as well as testify to its plasticity.

departure between modern and postmodern poetics, and parenthetically highlights the problematic nature of the discussions on modernism and postmodernism (modernity and postmodernity) in terms of terminology, and the philosophical and ideological understanding of the two by the critical academic circles. Again, the word 'departure' here is intentional and serves to emphasize that postmodern poetics does not imply a straightforward break from the poetics of modernism, but rather a progression into a circumstance-defined critical and creative form. The brief discussion into the character of metamodernism here is guided by the premise that the introduction of a new terminology does not necessarily constitute, effectively describe or explain a poetics, but also that the argument that we might be witnessing a shift in the poetic paradigm requires consideration. This consideration need not be guided by the idea that the critical discourse needs some sort of updating, as might be concluded on the account of all the attempts at introducing new terminology. However, an exploration into the *différance* that the circumstances of contemporaneity project onto what we may generally agree to be the postmodern paradigm, thereby modifying it, proves useful not only for the frivolous goal of enriching the critical discourse with topicality and ensuring that the academic circles would not be forced to regurgitate or recycle topics, but rather in uncovering the connections between our circumstantial and discursive reality as expressed in art, but by extension politics as well.

As a unique poetics, modernism is only circumstantially discussed in this dissertation, and the reasons though manifold, essentially may be summed up in there being too vast a review of literature that, though in varying degrees, still reaches agreement in what modern poetics encompasses; and in the idea that modern poetics will be dealt with extensively enough in the section dealing with (post)modern methods, and humor, since irony and parody, as postmodern literature employs them, and as the postmodern critical thought understands them, are neither a postmodern innovation, nor a specific product of postmodernism and postmodernity. In terms of their use in postmodern literature specifically, an authenticity may be recognized, but one that does not deny the evident continuity with the modern use, or the earlier source of these methods. At the heart of this approach is the premise that the postmodern use of irony and parody stems directly from the experimental breakthroughs of modern literature, but that the authenticity of the postmodern, as well as contemporary use, show a sensibility that reveals a shift in the philosophical task. In the chapter on "Postmodernism" in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Literary and Cultural Theor*y, Jeffrey Nealon classifies modernism as "[signifying] an international aesthetic movement

that began to take hold in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe and America and ended sometime after the Second World War" (2018: 152), as "a reaction to the European romanticism" (2018: 152), emphasizing form rather than the romantic feeling of its processor poetics, loosely speaking and in heuristic terms. According to Nealon, the essence of modernism is not located in its "[abandoning] the subjective feeling of romanticism or the narrative heft of Victorianism," but in the recognition of the condition of "the subject or self in a modern work [which] is troubled, psychologically and physically" (2018: 153).

In *Modernist Fiction: An Introduction* (1992), Randall Stevenson discusses modernist fiction, "at its height in novels published in the 1920s by James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence", as a poetics "defined on the grounds of its rejection of techniques and conventions apparently inappropriate or 'too clumsy' for new interests at the time (1992: 1). In the selection of modernist authors and works he discusses in *Modernist Fiction*, Stevenson sees "an urge to 'keep moving'" (1992: 4), but not as a defining characteristic of modernism against predecessor poetics because "neither its urge for novelty nor its commitment to change are new to literature" (1992: 4). Modernism's originality, according to Stevenson, can be identified as a new kind of "'psychology' - or heightened concern with individual, subjective consciousness" (1992: 1) in literature, visible even in the fiction of such authors as Henry James (1992: 2), but also the 'heightened concern' for the far-reaching economic, social and scientific changes at the very beginning of the twentieth century that resulted in an inquiry into the nature of the experience, and specifically, the artistic experience as the reality sense-making medium. Stevenson illustrates this movement as one from the genre of autobiography, "a gradual change from the *Bildungsroman*" (1992: 158), "towards the *Kunstlerroman*," which "is also a move towards self-examination: portraits of artists are most often self-portraits" (1992: 164). Stevenson recognizes the significant economic and political changes at the beginning of the twentieth century as the direct cause or source of the "shift of values and interests, and of the increasing centrality of art in fiction generally" (1992: 158). This shift, therefore, starts from the interrogation of reality, but extends to the very particular exploration of the transcendental realm of art and fiction, and produces, "a final extension of modernist self-consciousness about art, representation and language: it is also, as such, an antecedent for a self-referential, self-conscious writing" (Stevenson 1992: 195). From this vantage point, modernist exploration of the liminal and marginal, formal and traditional, and the philosophical basis of art, and art's relation to life – the artist – presents "a critical construct"

(Stevenson 1992: 8), but for Stevenson, "it was never a movement fostered through participants' contacts or collective agreement about aims, goals, ideas or styles" (1992: 8), and the "recognition, some years after writers completed the works involved, of substantial similarities, even a collective identity, in the initiatives they took and the styles and concerns which they made a priority" (1992: 8) constitutes the poetics of modernism as it is understood by contemporaneity. In discussing postmodern poetics, or its problematics, one recognizes a similar propensity for the retroactive labeling of artists and critics, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century, as postmodern in terms of their seemingly controversial problematizing of the socially constructed notions of truth, knowledge and language; and the contemporary artists and critics as reactionary, nihilist and apathetic, though there is no general consensus on either of the labels, which is, ironically, in the spirit of the supposed postmodern 'liberality'. Stevenson comments how "at least until the early twentieth century, 'modernism' was most often used to designate fashionable, newfangled ideas, the sort of innovation that betrayed the more solid values of tradition" (1992: 3), implying that what is endemic in modernism is the attitude to explore the viability of tradition against contemporaneity, the limits of the artistic experience as transcendental, and ironically, these remain paramount for postmodern poetics as well, and serve as the drive behind the criticism against the postmodern critical thought in contrast to the modernist. Stevenson, in fact, singles out the suspicion towards tradition "rather than innovation" as the impetus behind the "dismissive criticism" (1992: 3) against modernism at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the same is true in the relation between postmodernism and modernism, even if the latter sought to reexamine the traditions it perceived as ineffective or obsolete in a society facing manifold pervasive changes, "the general, radical reshaping of styles and structures [...] a result of the need to find new and subtler strategies to contain new, radical challenges in the life of the early twentieth century" (1992: 163). Following this line of thought, if modernist artists, in their often solipsist, attempts to re-appropriate the incomprehensible contemporaneity by projecting socio-economic and political truths in and to the realm of art, effectively, even if unintentionally, managed to expose the nature of the episteme and the framework of the traditional, the conventional and the envisioned – the desirable, the postmodern artist:

> radically extends such uncertainty, often assuming reality - if it exists at all - to be quite unknowable, or inaccessible through a language grown detached from it. Postmodernism

> investigates instead what worlds can be projected or constructed by language and text themselves. (Stevenson 1992: 196)

Furthermore, Stevenson sees the postmodern practice as "only the most direct illustration of ways modernism has affected later writing" (1992: 198). The modernist experiment, or the inevitable insight into the extent of artifice of both reality and art, from this viewpoint, inescapably produces a philosophical paradigm, one amended by the postmodern movement – if one could dare to label it that in retrospect – that essentially explores the limits of the already hyperreal experience, and the indistinguishable experience of art, imagination, fiction. The postmodern experience lives the conflict of the enigmatic nature of fictionality as exposed in the informational, institutional and discursive reality of contemporaneity.

In "Notes on metamodernism" (2010), Vermeulen and van den Akker discuss and attempt to more precisely define the concept of metamodernism – a vaguely defined concept present in literary, philosophical, aesthetic and critical theory at the turn of the century, and a concept that essentially tries to provide the critical and philosophical basis for the critical discourse, as well as art, in contemporaneity. It is quite unsurprising too that along with the term 'metamodernism', there appear many other terms, such as post-postmodern, post-contemporary, hypermodern, digimodern etc., which might be explained by the postmodern propensity to create discourse – to legitimate them by means of ascription, naming or other. In the article, the authors define metamodernism as an "emerging structure of feeling" (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010: 2) appearing at the very end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century as the outcome of the 'death' of postmodernism, the overload with the supposed postmodern apathy and play-for-play's-sake. The concept under discussion, the new 'modernism' "is characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment" (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010: 2), and its philosophical task is "situated epistemologically *with* (post) modernism, ontologically *between* (post) modernism, and historically *beyond* (post) modernism" (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010: 2). The implication is that metamodernism, or the emerging metamodern poetics – "the structure of feeling" – resonates with the postmodern epistemological uncertainty in its suspicion towards the existing structures of knowing, yet returns to the modernist potential of a knowable reality, and of tradition that need not be rejected; and, finally, a poetics and an aesthetics that see a continuity with history, in spite of the tacit understanding that history is a

human construct. The metamodern sensibility desires, or even works towards, a renewed sense of tradition, and such a sense implies the acceptance of the artifice of history, but a willing commitment to it for lack of an alternative. According to these authors, "new generations of artists increasingly abandon the aesthetic precepts of deconstruction, parataxis, and pastiche in favor of *aesth-ethical* notions of reconstruction, myth, and metaxis" (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010: 2). It is unclear whether Vermeulen and van den Akker here refer to the deconstructionist movement, or to Derrida's deconstruction as a philosophical approach – or a discursive practice even, as discussed in one of the previous chapters, but what is clear is that there is, again, a lack of consensus on what postmodern poetics (or problematics) encompasses, and that there is absence of agreement on what the postmodern paradigm inherently rejects – this "*aesth-ethical*" dimension as implied above, for example. The tendencies that Vermeulen and van den Akker notice in art and architecture "express a (often guarded) hopefulness and (at times feigned) sincerity that hint at another structure of feeling, intimating another discourse" (2010: 2), which leads them to notice a historical movement that goes "rapidly beyond its all too hastily proclaimed end" (2010: 2). The inference here is that postmodernism, in architecture, or in general since their considerations seem to be wide-ranging, rejects historicity or the continuity of history (Hegelian or Kantian[16]), which has extensively been discussed in the previous chapters as an inaccurate, even uninformed and reactionary, imputation to postmodernism. The authors quote Linda Hutcheon's call to define and potentially re-name the "heuristic label" of contemporary trends in the Epilogue of the 2002 Routledge edition to *The Politics of Postmodernity* (1989), saying:

> The postmodern moment has passed, even if its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on – as do those of modernism – in our contemporary twenty-first-century world. Literary historical categories like modernism and postmodernism are, after all, only heuristic labels that we create in our attempts to chart cultural changes and continuities. Post-postmodernism needs a new label of its own, and I conclude, therefore,

[16] For the purpose of narrowing the theoretical framework for this study to the relevant discourses on the postmodern critical thought, and specifically literary theory and criticism, I refrain from the discussion that would necessarily venture into the philosophical discourses on the nature of truth and knowledge (Heidegger, Nietzsche, at the very least), and history (Hegel and Kant, as discussed by Vermeulen and van den Akker in this article). The theoretical frame 'constructed' here recognizes the necessity for an interdisciplinary approach in any discussion about postmodernism – be it a general or specific one, yet it also recognizes the necessity to resist the impulse to fall into the abyss of delving into the massive body of philosophical literature at this point.

> with this challenge to readers to find it – and name it for the twenty-first century. (in Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010: 3)

What is problematic, however, with the authors' proposition to label contemporary artistic trends as 'metamodern' is the implication that by attempting to ascribe a supposedly novel sense of historicity to the contemporary trends, and historical continuity specifically, an allegedly newfound predisposition to tradition and myth-reconstructing rather than deconstructing, there is a sense of desperate regression, and, ironically, critical recycling. This is not to say that the hypothetical return to modernism would represent a negative trend, but such a predisposition does reveal an incongruence between the nature of the economic, socio-political circumstance of contemporaneity, and the contexts in which both modernism and postmodernism as 'poetics', with their aesthetics and politics, emerged. It, absolutely, stands for the recycling of the romantic impulse that sees contemporaneity as anxiously calling for a solution, but merely in the act of labeling of certain artistic practices that could not possibly explain the multitude of contemporary experiences. What Vermeulen and van den Akker's seek is a consensus on the necessity of consensus about the necessity of vision[17].

It would be condescending to suggest a different title for the article in discussion – perhaps something along the lines of "Death of Postmodernism"[18] – and yet that is the theme, even if Vermeulen and van den Akker cautiously thread around the symbolism. The authors:

> [seek] to relate to one another a broad variety of trends and tendencies across current affairs and contemporary aesthetics that are otherwise incomprehensible (at least by the postmodern vernacular), by understanding them in terms of an emergent sensibility we come to call metamodern. We do not seek to impose a predetermined system of thought on a rather particular range of cultural practices. Our description and interpretation of the metamodern sensibility is therefore *essay*istic rather than *scient*ific, rhizomatic rather than

[17] I apologize to the reader for my postmodern impulse to contribute to the language play.

[18] The pretentious title suggestion merely resonates with my personal bias to the postmodern irony, and attempts to diffuse the gravity of the idea that a return to modern solipsism, and even worse, to the modern impression that there could ever exist a totalizing framework for aesthetic or political performatives under the pretext of 'neo-liberal capitalist humanism', ecological awareness, the collective delusion of successfully resuscitating tradition, etc. Such concepts should precede any heuristic labels or literary categories, and exceed their economic value, even if they easily and readily fall into the scope of critical, theoretical, political, aesthetic or other considerations of the academic circles whose guiding premise seems to be some sort of prescriptive platform.

> linear, and open-ended instead of closed. It should be read as an invitation for debate rather than an extending of a dogma. (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010: 2)

Vermeulen and van den Akker's understanding of postmodernism as the "years of plenty, pastiche, and parataxis" (2010: 2) does fall into the category of "the postmodern vernacular" and illustrates the complex problem of the lack of academic agreement on the terminology, as well as the definition of concepts and phenomena, critically discussed in contemporaneity. This is not merely a matter of academic dissent, but the proof that the postmodern critical thought has not yet left contemporaneity, and that the proposition of the article itself exposes, contradictorily, the supposed major 'flaw' of the postmodern philosophical task that allows for plurality, multivocity – all of which lead to fragmentation, and, as in this case, even elitism of sorts – an outcome postmodernism primarily wishes to avoid. The issue at hand either originates in the inability to objectively and extensively observe our discourses – for it is truly a massive task; or the perceived necessity to produce original solutions, authentic academic contributions at the time of absolute satiation with critical and other discourses. After all, producing academic papers, contributing to the discourses of contemporaneity, or postmodernity, inevitably amounts to a vast body of recycling and academic affiliating. If postmodernism is, indeed, as Vermeulen and van den Akker suggest, a "'catchphrase' for a multiplicity of contradictory tendencies, the 'buzzword' for a plurality of incoherent sensibilities" (2010: 4), it is no wonder that there appears an integrative impulse that desires to both 'describe' and potentially 'prescribe' a sensibility that "is an opposition to 'the' modern – to utopism, to (linear) progress, to grand narratives, to Reason, to functionalism and formal purism, and so on" (2010: 4), if we could achieve agreement on modernism encompassing the above; and, "a new *sens*, a new meaning and direction" (2010: 4) of the metamodern feeling. Vermeulen and van den Akker suggest that:

> The current, metamodern discourse also acknowledges that history's purpose will never be fulfilled because it does not exist. Critically, however, it nevertheless takes toward it as if it does exist. Inspired by a modern naïveté yet informed by postmodern skepticism, the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility. (2010: 5)

Metamodernism, then, recognizes the discursive nature of history, yet willingly dismisses the insight with the objective of committing "itself to an impossible possibility" (Vermeulen & van

den Akker 2010: 5) of there being hope of a totalizing and unifying idea – ideology or philosophy – that remains an open discourse due to the skepticism of the possibility of its existence. Another implication is that postmodern skepticism does not observe the possibility of 'a new humanism', which is an unnecessary and reactionary imputation. The essence of the idea behind the integration of modernism and postmodernism into the concept of metamodernism then, according to these authors, is that "humankind […] are not really going toward a natural but unknown goal, but they pretend they do so that they progress morally as well as politically" (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010: 5), and somehow, this sort of movement appears to require an heuristic label, a manifest that would verify its validity and justify its sincerity in recognizing that "metamodernism moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find" (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010: 5). In other words, metamodernism, as explained by Vermeulen and van den Akker, is postmodernism, or if one would allow themselves to treat it separately, postmodernism's twin – its philosophical basis recognizing the impossibility of reaching any truth since the concept itself is the pinnacle of human artifice – yet a twin that decides to participate in the collective illusion for the sake of participation, not the illusion itself for that would be modern. In addition to that, the authors claim that "ontologically, metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern":

> [between] a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity. Indeed, by oscillating to and fro or back and forth, the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010: 5)

There is, yet again, the issue of the definition of what constitutes the modern and what the postmodern, and explicitly so because these authors seem to observe a distinct point of separation between the two practices that goes beyond the modality of their aesthetics and instruments, and additionally the emergence of a new poetics that retains the two, even if postmodern poetics, as discussed in the previous sections, precisely does that already. When defining metamodernism, the authors argue that the "metaxis" of metamodernism, in contrast to the "parataxis" of postmodernism, can be explained:

> [not] as a metaphor for an existential experience that is general to the *condition humaine*, but as a metaphor for a cultural sensibility that is particular to the metamodern discourse. The metamodern is constituted by the tension, no, the double-bind, of a modern desire for *sens* and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all. (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010: 6)

This is to imply that postmodern sensibility lacks the desire for "*sens*" that the modern inherently possesses, and that the metamodern somehow revives it in the supposedly innovative tension for a more meaningful sensibility of experience. This is to say, that metamodernism is merely an attempt at redefining terminology for the lack of a more pleasurable topic, to evoke Eagleton. To claim that the desire for *sense* is endemic to any particular heuristic label, literary or artistic category is simply a pretentious, elitist, prescriptive and ridiculous claim. To claim that an entire artistic and philosophical movement merely strives to "cancel out" or "counter" another, without recognizing its specificities – the context in which it describes the uniqueness of the experience – as well as its continuity with whatever preceded it, merely trivializes any human endeavor, including the critical one. The claim that "metamodern irony is intrinsically bound to desire, whereas postmodern irony is inherently tied to apathy" (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010: 10) exemplifies the sort of pretentious abstraction that renders a potentially valid insight completely meaningless. For one, that there is a certain change in sensibility, whether of a local, regional or global kind, as illustrated in the shift of topicality of contemporary literature, and that this shift could suggest an impending change in the aesthetics and overall poetics the characteristics of which we will be able to observe in a more objective manner given the temporal distance, is more than likely. However, to examine postmodern irony as "apathy", alongside which "pluralism" and "deconstruction" work to "counter a modernist fanaticism" (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010: 10) leads to a more profound question of whether, then, literature has contributed at all to the understanding of the human condition after the Second World War, after the pinnacle of modernist literature.

The authors further define metamodernism as a poetics that:

> [displaces] the parameters of the present with those of a future presence that is futureless; and it displaces the boundaries of our place with those of a surreal place that is placeless.

> For indeed, that is the 'destiny' of the metamodern wo/man: to pursue a horizon that is forever receding. (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010: 12)

The "horizon" that Vermeulen and van den Akker mention echoes the solipsism of modernism, its escapist and messianic, mythical propensity, but there is tacit recognition that its visionary potential and appeal are demystified.

In "Criticism and Metamodernism" (2014), Vermeulen and van den Akker see a change in the postmodern paradigm, one "[i]n stark contrast with the art of the 1990s, which tended to be characterized by irony, cynicism and deconstruction" and "contemporary practices [which] are often discussed in terms of affection, sincerity and hopefulness" (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2014). These critics' view on contemporary art, and literature by extension, focuses on the supposed refusal of contemporary art to conform to postmodern instruments. In the same article, they quote a renowned New York art critic, Jerry Saltz, to summarize the core values of contemporary art whereby:

> [the] genus of cynical art that is mainly about gamesmanship, work that is coolly ironic, simply cool, ironic about being ironic, or mainly commenting on art that comments on "other art" has become less popular. There is a new "attitude" that says I know that the art I'm creating may seem silly, even stupid, or that it might have been done before, but that doesn't mean this isn't serious. (in Vermeulen & van den Akker 2014)

Much like their article "Notes on metamodernism" (2010), "Criticism and Metamodernism" (2014), deals with the supposed "end to postmodernism" in terms of a transformation of the general (or popular) artistic or creative paradigm (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2014), but they also seem to suggest that the transformations take multiple forms in different fields. Self-reflexively, they notice an ironic streak in their determination to replace old terminology based on the necessity to reformulate theory that would explain the contemporary practice. It is precisely change and transformation that are inherent in postmodern art, as in any other for that matter, and it should be no wonder that they produce a multiplicity of forms and expressions, regardless of whether these regress or reflect authentically on the present moment. These authors suggest that what needs to be established is "a sense of how we may begin to think theoretically beyond the parameters we were taught in history classes in art schools and universities," and "a modality that allows us to

align our concepts with the intuitions so many of us seem to share" (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2014), but the question that comes to mind then is what kind of theory would be sufficient or advanced enough to "make sense of these changes" (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2014), if not the postmodern critical though that precisely allows for this open critical space. In fact, the nature of 'theory' Vermeulen and van den Akker strive to establish is quite questionable since it seems that what they are after is not a new theory, but a new philosophical or ideological framework – a vision, a goal and a collective objective. The inferred issue seems to be a desire in these authors for a theory that would provide sense: a traditional sense – one of continuity and aim-defined progress. Their suggestion somewhat resonates with Terry Eagleton's rejection of postmodern multiplicity and indeterminacy for it offers no definite solutions to the human condition. They suggest that:

> Contemporary practices […] would no longer contribute to our understanding of art's essence, but instead demonstrate that there is no essence, or if there is, that it allows for an eternally expansive variety of forms, methods and concepts. Art is free from all restraints. Today, after all, everything can be art: a Brillo box, a can of soup, a toilet bowl, a turd. But it doesn't take a visionary to see that artists today are still very much concerned with *Bildung*, with imagining alternative narratives, communities and systems of rule and exchange. […] It is possible that art will diversify even more the next few years, but it is also imaginable that it will become more specific. Whatever its course, we should not simply assume that it has played its part-in terms of affinity, identity, spirituality or otherwise-in our development; it has simply changed its appearance. (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2014)

Despite the level of clarity of what it is that Vermeulen and van den Akker want to propose as the definition of the poetics of the so-called metamodernism, their intention amounts to an unsubstantiated effort to merely re-name an established trend that indeed shows signs of change. However, these changes cannot be located in either the general, philosophical or ideological, predispositions or the instruments used (irony, parody, intertextuality, pastiche, etc.). If the aspiration of metamodernism is to formulate a poetics that explains the essence of art today, the essence of the critical and creative impulses in contemporary society as a deliberate refusal to see the futility of life itself, to disregard the popular formulation and understanding of nihilism, and to

reach a general consensus by which it is acceptable to live in a state of collective willing self-deception, of there being a "futureless" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010) future that need not be ironically or otherwise evaluated, but rather further imagined, then, it must be noted, the modernist liberal-humanist idea seems like a rational, straightforward philosophical option, and postmodernism need not even be further discussed. Vermeulen and van den Akker apparently see postmodern art as too unconstrained in its interrogative project, and the desire for a more philosophically and ideologically structured approach, and the entire discussion on the possibility of 'metamodernism' emanates this desire for a pacifier-ideology – one which cannot be entirely believed, but one that tells 'better' stories. Metamodernism pretends a plurality, but requires a collective agreement on mandatory optimism – a positivist idea that predefines the experience of the discursive reality, and prevents the critical dimension outside of the optimistic framework of an imagined future of the highly abstracted economic, social and political progress. The insistence is on historical continuity, the tacit acknowledgment of its discursive but applicable and important nature, which further implies the willing rejection of the postmodern interrogation that leads to melancholy and apathy, according to Vermeulen and van den Akker.

REPRESENTATION METHODS: THE POSTMODERN BLEND

If the discussion on the definitional disagreement about postmodernism has not highlighted the underlying issue behind the criticism against postmodernism, which is generally the presumed lack of an ethical and moral vision of the socio-political future, the exploration into the postmodern philosophical attitude and methods commonly employed requires, at least a very brief[19], mention of the problem of this absence, or what constitutes (the supposed absence of) postmodern ethics, all with the hope of elucidating the motive, purpose and objective, behind the extensive use of metafiction, post-modern experimentation, and the use of irony and parody as postmodern representational methods. The issue of the supposed postmodern propensity for relativization, as well as the absence of an ethical groundwork, has been sketched, explored and, hopefully, countered in the discussion about the theory of postmodernism, its poetics and general problematics. For this reason, the discussion on postmodern representation methods in this section deals with the metafictional quality of (postmodern) fiction on a more general level, and irony and parody as methods that supplement this general quality, and add to its interrogative character.

In *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, Taylor and Winquist notice a crisis in representation that is profoundly connected with "the postmodern spirit of late capitalism" (2001: 339), or rather, an escalation of the intentional modernist 'deconstruction' of the traditional form. According to these

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[19] A discussion on the problematics of postmodern philosophy or ethics is not encompassed by the scope of this study. However, it is important to note that the issue of postmodern trends in both philosophy and ethics substantiates the general problematics of the proliferation of discourses diverging significantly from the deconstructivist premise of postmodernism. It is for this reason that an entire section of this study is dedicated to the poetics of postmodernism in the form of an attempt at defining both its basic assumptions, and therefore the range of premises that would further be employed interpretatively in the study. This is done with acute awareness of there being absolutely no consensus on the restrictions in the academic circles on how the diverging discourses across disciplines should be interpreted in context. It is also for this reason that Linda Hutcheon's studies are selected since her approach focuses on literature and arts in a methodical and restrained manner, whereas the majority of critics unsystematically approach the topic from varied, frequently incompatible and loosely defined (postmodern) perspectives. In support of this, on the matter of ethics, in "Ethical Criticism," in *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory* (2011), Robert Eaglestone argues that "[the] recent turn to ethics in literary studies stems from two very distinct approaches and, as such, can be divided into two very different (and sometimes opposing) camps. Both of these camps developed in relation to the growth of theory in the 1970s and '80s, and both offer different histories of that development and different ways of understanding the relationship between ethics and literature" (582). Furthermore, Eaglestone relates the view that within the critical circles there is a tendency to place the blame for the absence of clearly defined ethics, or even the problematics of ethics in postmodernism, on the proliferation of discourses and sub-currents within postmodern trends and theories (2018: 582). He notes that, "[other] critics went further and suggested that political aims behind feminism, political criticism, and postcolonialism had overtaken ethics and ethical judgments, and that much theory – especially deconstruction, and postmodernism more widely – was nihilistic and opposed to any sense of the ethical" (Eaglestone 2011: 582).

authors, postmodern representation "has both intensified its estrangement from (and mockery of) representational truth" (Taylor & Winquist 2001: 339), and the attempts at its recovery reveal "a now hysterical, now paranoid, now hypocritical, now sincere" (Taylor & Winquist 2001: 339) range of attitudes, or rather manifestations and outcomes of the use of the typical postmodern methods, irony and parody in particular. Since postmodernism essentially questions the reliability of realist representation, similarly to modernism, though it takes modernist representation as its object as well, and investigates 'traditional values' – their discursive presence in contemporaneity, in terms of their effectiveness in reaching the place of truth – the postmodern representational objective does not pretend a stable quality, which may be the reason why Taylor and Winquist characterize postmodern deconstruction of form and content as "hysterical" (a highly problematic label), "paranoid", "hypocritical" (presumably in avoiding to discard unequivocally that which is under investigation) and "sincere" (2001: 339). The range of these postmodern experimental attempts' outcomes indicates the already discussed emphasis on the process in postmodernism, and the implicit attitude that the concept of 'traditional value' needs to be reduced to present-value only since it remains in the domain of the economic, social and political context of the moment. Postmodern literature and theory start from the position that implies a fragmentation of the experience of the discursive reality so that pieces of truth(s) and meaning, fragmented by the economic, political, social, cultural and ideological contradictions, can merely be irreconcilably grouped and investigated for the potential of their being co-extensive with the discursive past, or for the necessity and responsibility for their revision. With the awareness of and emphasis on the artifice of its own participation in discourse production, the postmodern critical thought, then, strives to examine and expose the ideology of the inherited Truth in the form of myths, grand narratives, the mainstream discourse against the counteracting, specific and diverse, discourses in the present moment. Therefore, its representational arsenal utilizes methods such as irony and parody to directly bring into contact that which persists as stable and introduce new criteria, the contemporary context, in order to test the stability. The postmodern understanding of the nature of truth, myth and ideological discourse as human constructs, as already discussed in the section on postmodern theory and problematics (instead of poetics), counteracts the idea that there may be any ultimate authority of their validity, but does not automatically reject the idea that any of the persisting aspects of these constructs might be viable and sustainable in contemporaneity. It is precisely because of this attitude that postmodern representation intentionally allows for the space

for criticism outside of its own critical or artistic act by means of interpellation. The self-reflexiveness of postmodernism assumes "that error and distortion are constitutive, that truth cannot be adequately represented in any language or by any 'finite intuition' (Kant)" which "irremediably undermines the ideologies of representation" (Taylor & Winquist 2001: 340), and therefore, it consciously examines representation in the process of narrative discourse production, as it expects, and even requires, the same treatment in the narrative discourse reception. Theoretically, this should hold, however, Taylor and Winquist notice "a disturbing" tendency in postmodernism to take its exploration of fictionality, discursiveness and narrativity to the level of dangerous, yet "deliberate 'fictioning' of reality and its representation, a new myth-making to fabricate legends and histories, and to justify political revindications" (2001: 340). This attitude strongly resonates with Terry Eagleton's fear, but less with his apprehensive attitude that the penchant for *difference* of the postmodern critical thought opens the possibility of falling into the state of "*in*difference" (2011: 343), and especially without there being a (supposedly) stable ethical, ideological or political center to guide the direction of the postmodern probe. Whereas Taylor and Winquist notice a propensity for rampant and unethical, revisionist, narrative production, Eagleton might argue that all postmodern little-narrativizing is unethical. Yet, in terms of the philosophical task and ideological goal behind positing the centrality of such notions as traditional values, Taylor and Winquist compare the two presented positions, the postmodern one as interrogative (though occasionally unrestrained in this endeavor), and the modern one as determinedly blind to its own falseness and responsibility:

> The hypocrisy of the 'traditional values' reaction is manifest: in the name of truth (as representational adequacy) it denounces postmodern 'relativism' and simulation (erasure or perversion of the distinction between true and false, real and fake, original and derivative); yet it refuses to own up to the falsifications and mythmaking of its own history (the history of European domination, racism, and imperialism) or to acknowledge that its canons too are relatively arbitrary, with significance being accorded only to those who represent its aesthetic and moral values. (2001: 340)

In his article "Deepening the Self" (1998), Simon Haines asserts that "taking language seriously […] means refusing to think about it as if it were a suspension of grains of sense in an opaque fluid of nonsense, to be separated by the centrifuge of reason" (25). This attitude towards language, and

by extension the discourse and narratives it produces, involves, simultaneously, a deconstructionist position that language-meaning flows and moves contextually, but also that the impulse behind language production must be understood as sufficiently meaning-producing for communication – a statement that seems redundant, yet apparently necessary in any discussion on postmodernism as informed by the legacy of the late twentieth-century deconstructivism[20], but also the modernist critical rationale. This call for "taking language seriously" precisely sustains the postmodern position on the discursive nature of reality, and subsequently, the responsibility for the discourses it produces. It also recognizes the propensity of the postmodern experimentation to obliterate the communicative principles behind language in order to illustrate the infiniteness of the field of language play, by which all experience becomes purely subjective – often in the enunciative act of artistic creation.

In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon suggests that there are, however, such "postmodern contradictions that are less generalizable" (2004: 44) referring to the context-bound experiences that need not necessarily be solely critical revisions of the past, for postmodern literature, though metafictional in sensibility, need not always be historiographic. This critic characterizes postmodernism as "almost always double-voiced in its attempts to historicize and contextualize the enunciative situation of its art" (Hutcheon 2004: 44), which resonates with Haines' conclusion that literature has been denied the moral dimension it deserves, and with the understanding that postmodern art is additionally always aware of its own socio-political dimension and its intentionality.

In *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction* (1984), Patricia Waugh observes "a greater awareness within contemporary culture of the function of language in constructing and maintaining our sense of everyday 'reality'" (2001: 3). This author argues that contemporaneity can no longer tacitly assume that language is "an independent, self-contained system which generates its own 'meanings'" (Waugh 2001: 3), but rather that the philosophical crisis of the episteme and history, as formulated by Derrida, brings into play "its relationship to

[20] I use the term 'deconstructivism' here loosely or generally enough to encompass the linguistic and critical shifts after the 1960s, but also the subsequent (postmodern) critical and literary theories strongly premised on the ideas proposed by Derrida, Barthes, Lyotard and Baudrillard, among others. The term is to stand for the critical suspicion behind the stability of the sign and meaning, and not to be understood as a reference to the movement or school of deconstruction.

the phenomenal world" (Waugh 2001: 3), thereby interrogating it as a convention. In the already mentioned article, Haines maintains that "language is an unseparated medium of life, and to live with it is precisely not to centrifuge it, but to use it: to breathe it" (1998: 25), an attitude towards the language of literature that holds this discursive form as indispensable for the elaboration of the "moral philosophy" (1998: 28) of our moment. The critic argues that:

> [if] moral philosophy has not taken the language of ordinary life seriously enough, literary theory certainly has not taken the language of literature seriously enough: has not trusted it enough. (Haines 1998: 28)

What Haines notices as the sidelining of "the language of literature" as the emancipatory and moral charge behind the human apparatus of cultural production and political action echoes Derrida's call for taking responsibility for the philosophical, political and social legacies of the past as the discursive forces present in contemporaneity. Derrida and the 'problematic' deconstruction aside, postmodern literature, as well as critical theory, resonate with this general impulse that the understanding of the past, of our historicity, as discursive invites also an interrogation into the discursive nature of the present moment, of contemporaneity – an experience constructed by language. Moreover, it is the metafictional quality of postmodern fiction that integrates these positions, and morally interpellates the implied recipient of the discourse, the addressee or the implied reader of a literary narrative, in the process of moral judgement. The perceived absence of an ethical 'center' of postmodern fiction by a multitude of contemporary critics is, in fact, a willing disregard for, or the resistance to, the 'center' shift – from the source of ethical and moral judgment as previously emanated in the traditional authorities, towards the 'reader' – the creator, the experiencer and the de-constructor of the narrative discourse[21]. Furthermore, it is perhaps convenient to mention irony and parody here as rhetorical instrument that testify to the critical and 'center' shift. The proliferate use of irony, for example, in postmodern literature, cannot simply be regarded as a show of ethical or other uncertainty, but a deliberate intent to involve the recipient in the dialogue that the 'irony's edge' – the criticism – opens. This inference is inspired by

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[21] This claim, highly evocative of Roland Barthes' article *The Death of the Author* (1967), focuses rather on the postmodern methods – metafiction, irony and parody – in terms of the postmodern reliance on the readerly willingness to supplement, to use Derrida's term loosely, the context of the open-text and round its moral and ethical core with a counteracting, even subjective, discourse. The text is the point of intersection between the author's own awareness of the discourses pertaining in their discourse production and the reader's critical and self-reflexive interpretation of the received discourse.

Hutcheon's, among other, interpretation of the role of the ironist in *Irony's Edge*, as the entity behind the intended ironic meaning, but also, and inevitably so, the interpreter of the irony – the discourse participant who ultimately reaches an understanding of the evaluative attitude in the ironic intent.

For Haines, it is "hard to separate an emotion from a moral judgment" (1998: 32), and postmodern fiction interpellates the reader in, at least, two ways. In this postmodern metafictional setup, on the one hand, the reader is invited to spontaneously experience the deconstruction at the level of the discursive story-world (or universe, to be tediously precise) against the discursive referent-world; and it invites the reader to assess the didactic, implicating or critical quality, among other, of the pragmatic or rhetorical methods, such as irony and parody. The problem of the perceived absence of postmodern ethics is the manifestation of the postmodern capacity to subject truth value to plural, often subjective, criteria thereby exploring its universal quality. Moreover, there is no prescriptive background to this interrogation – no philosophical or ideological principle guiding collective judgment towards a necessarily singular inference or conclusion. As Haines notes, "if reason has any purchase on behavior or character it may only be through putting the 'facts' of a case in a new light, which is not a matter of overcoming emotion but of schooling, teaching or reforming it" (1998: 31), and this is precisely what metafiction purports to do in both challenging the conventional understanding of fictionality (and factuality, for that matter), and implicating the reader in the process of narrative-discourse construction and comprehension, reception, deconstruction – ultimately, the *construction* of a discursive cognitive unit as involving the received discourse, but also the subjective referent-world-discourse-informed understanding of it. It is a process in which both the narrative *bricoleur* (Lévi Strauss' term as understood by Derrida) and the implied reader are highly aware of the artifice of narrative discourse production, but also of the valid emancipatory potential of its exploration. This process, although it involves experimentation in which a certain degree of defamiliarization is reached, also involves the "'meta' terms" that Waugh defines as "required in order to explore the relationship between this arbitrary linguistic system and the world to which it apparently refers" (2001: 3) – a point of comparison between the world constructed and the referent world, and a necessary continuity of critical, philosophical, ideological, literary and other traditions that postmodernism does not break free from, but investigates by applying a contemporary filter to them. The 'meta' terms Waugh mentions go beyond the linguistic, symbolic relationships in language, and the practice is neither

new to modernism, nor postmodern literature, but, as Waugh notices, "this form of fiction is worth studying not only because of its contemporary emergence but also because of the insights it offers into […] the representational nature of all fiction" (2001: 5).

Metafiction, according to Waugh, "explicitly lays bare the conventions of realism; it does not ignore or abandon them" (2001: 18), and the conventions of realism serve to provide the referential background "against which the experimental strategies can foreground themselves" (2001: 18). In other words, metafiction relies on the representational techniques of realism "for a stable level of readerly familiarity" (Waugh 2001: 18) and the establishing of the authenticity of the fictional world, but it might also be added, the necessary continuity between the preceding and contemporary forms. Even more explicitly, it "does not abandon 'the real world' for the narcissistic pleasures of the imagination" (Waugh 2001: 18) for that would amount to an avant-garde escapism postmodernism negatively reacts to. Metafiction "[re-examines] the conventions of realism in order to discover – through its own self-reflection – a fictional form that is culturally relevant and comprehensible to contemporary readers" (Waugh 2001: 18). It can further be argued that the metafictional character of postmodern literature and criticism, encompasses a vast body of fiction where "a theory of fiction" is explored "through the practice of writing fiction" (Waugh 2001: 2) – a self-reflexive process of "drawing on the traditional metaphor of the world as book, but often recasting it in the terms of contemporary philosophical, linguistic or literary theory" (Waugh 2001: 3).

The attitude resounds Linda Hutcheon in noticing the necessity in the co-extensiveness between art and its theory, the practice and its critical reception, and following that line of thought, it is no wonder that the contemporary literary discourse rarely reaches consensus considering the habitual prescriptive aspirations of the academic circles to construct the critical discourse to encompassing the norm for the practice, rather than supplement it. The metafictional, according to Waugh, "[tends] to be constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion" (2001: 6), the opposition in which the traditional literary convention is subverted by the implied criticism that it incorporates; and the created link between these conventionally separated, traditionally often exclusive, processes is the "formal tension which breaks down the distinctions between 'creation' and 'criticism' and merges them into the concepts of 'interpretation' and

'deconstruction'" (Waugh 2001: 6). The modernist self-reflexive critical practice, innovative because of its critical scope, practiced in literary art, as discussed by Stevenson previously, based on the works of authors such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and Joseph Conrad, among others, becomes the basis for the established postmodern (and contemporary) practice since:

> Contemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to an even more thoroughgoing sense that reality or history are provisional: no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures. The materialist, positivist and empiricist world-view on which realistic fiction is premised no longer exists. (Waugh 2001: 7)

In addition to that, Waugh sees the postmodern literary and critical practice as exhibiting "the same sense of crisis and loss of belief in an external authoritative system of order as that which prompted modernism" (2001: 21), but emphasizes that modernism "does not 'systematically flaunt its own condition of artifice' (Alter) in the manner of contemporary metafiction" (Waugh 2001: 21). Even though the quality of metafiction cannot possibly be ascribed to all postmodern writing, "nearly all contemporary experimental writing displays some explicitly metafictional strategies" (Waugh 2001: 22) as reflected in their tendency to emphasize the artifice of narrative creation as a process of meaning construction. More precisely:

> Any text that draws the reader's attention to its process of construction by frustrating his or her conventional expectations of meaning and closure problematizes more or less explicitly the ways in which narrative codes – whether 'literary' or 'social' – artificially construct apparently 'real' and imaginary worlds in the terms of particular ideologies while presenting these as transparently 'natural' and 'eternal'. (Waugh 2001: 22)

With modernist poetics, there is still a tendency to lean towards the idea of an ordered experience of reality, the idea that implies a wholesome vision of the possibility of unity in the idea of universality and so-construed values as theorized by liberal humanism. In modern literary practice, the turn is towards the mind, and the imaginative potential of the subject as the artist – self-creation. With postmodernism, the attempts at ordering the experience of reality are performed from the inside, as opposed to towards it – at the level of the (narrative) discourse itself as the building block of the discursive reality. Similarly, Waugh argues, "for metafictional writers the most fundamental

assumption is that composing a novel is basically no different from composing or constructing one's 'reality'" (2001: 24), which necessarily explains the postmodern tendency to use metafictional strategies, and extensively so, in various forms. Waugh sees the postmodern (and contemporary) trend of removing the conventional distinctions between writing and criticism, and the recognition of their significance for the understanding of narrative structure and possibilities, as beneficial "for understanding the contemporary experience of the world as a construction, an artifice, a web of interdependent semiotic systems" (2001: 9) since such explorations reveal the modalities in which knowledge is both produced, structured and circulated in contemporaneity, which offers the emancipatory potential often disregarded in criticism against the postmodern philosophical task. The very idea that postmodern literature often foregrounds epistemological uncertainty does not necessarily posit that any certainty is impossible, but that its present conception is such that its balance is lost when counteracting discourses come into play – the level of language and discourse revealing the foundational flaws most visibly.

For this reason, the following chapter in this section deals with humor as a social phenomenon, and in a very general manner, since it is frequently understood as the implied objective of representational methods such as irony and parody. However, this discussion does not attempt to define humor phenomenologically, nor deal specifically with such manifestations of humor that could be classified as comic. The aim of the brief revision of a selection of relevant contemporary literature on humor serves to highlight its significance in the context of both the socio-political dimension of human interaction and communication, and to highlight the emotive (affective) function as related by the vehicle of humor, broadly understood, in pseudo-communicative situations, such is the case with literature. The two chapters following the discussion on humor deal, then, with irony and parody individually as representational methods supplementing the metafictional quality of postmodern fiction, and their cognitive-psychological and rhetorical (or pragmatic) value as postmodern instruments of criticism.

Arguing about Humor

Humor, a phenomenon that occurs in social context, that relates communication at levels other than the literal, that facilitates and strengthens human relationships, enables social cohesion and provides members of groups and communities with indispensable relief from the threatening and disturbing realities of everyday life or grand-scale events, among other things, should be treated as more than a vivisection, and yet here I risk to destroy any possible pleasure we, as humans, derive from humor by reviewing the relevant, mostly contemporary literature that deals with the phenomenon with the view of the aspects this dissertation strives to discuss, and subsequently discussing irony and parody in terms of the so-constructed framework.

Considering the aim of this dissertation, both the exploration into the linguistic and the socio-psychological approaches to the phenomenon of humor respond to the desire to construct a general framework that could be applicable in the analyses of the selection of contemporary Canadian short stories since the study deals with irony and parody – methods that need to be observed as multidimensional. However, the study of the linguistic aspects of humor corresponds with the general aim to a lesser degree as it could, perhaps, yield results that contribute to the general study of the formal characteristics of these devices in narrative discourse, but does not necessarily involve the socio-political aspects of their use. The premise here is that 'the humorous effect', or the less-comic or humorous critical effect, achieved by the use of the discussed representational methods need not be reduced to their linguistic dimension, but that the targeted and achieved (social function of) humor can reveal, on the one hand, the rhetorical and/or pragmatic mechanisms present in storytelling and its product (the narrative discourse), and the mirrored mechanisms, as expressed in the reception and interpretation of humor, enabling its critical component, on the other. The subversive character of humor is treated against the ideological, political or social implications of the stereotypical, problematic or universally accepted values, and value judgments, as revealed in the process of interpretation, and the tension between the discourse of the story-world and the referential, real-world, discourses. Additionally, this approach will shed light on some of the modalities of interaction between different discourses, and the rhetorical, critical and subversive nature of intertextuality achieved by the vehicle of irony and parody.

In his study *Linguistic Theories of Humor* (1994), Salvatore Attardo defines humor as one type of "competences" and demarcates the differences between several possible and existing approaches

to the topic of humor – all distinct in terms of whether they deal with the essence of humor, phenomenologically, or the modalities of humor and its manifestations, but also the reception (1994: 2), which is relevant for the study of literary works. However, Attardo suggests that "linguistic theories of humor are either essentialist or teleological (sociolinguistic approaches)," and deal with "the essence of the humorous phenomena" (1994: 2), whereas other theories and approaches endeavor to understand "the modalities" and "reception" (1994: 2) of humor, or more precisely the humorous effect, which renders them more specific in the focus on the particular phenomena in the process of production and reception. More explicitly, what Attardo posits as relevant for the essentialist linguistic approach is the effort to explore "the necessary and sufficient conditions for a phenomenon to occur" (1994: 1), whereas the theological "describe what the goals of a phenomenon are, and how its mechanisms are shaped and determined by its goals" (1994: 1). With regard to irony and parody as frequent vehicles for the humorous effect, neither of the approaches seem to offer particularly applicable tools for describing the multifaceted nature of the produced effect – comic, humorous or humorous but not comic.

This problem relates to, as Attardo argues, the issue of the impossibility "to define 'a priori' the category of humor" (1994: 3), since the criterion of laughter does not satisfactorily define it (1994: 3), and in those terms, he argues against the general qualification of "all the historical literary genres and modes [as] manifestations of the 'general category' of 'the comic,' or humor" (1994: 3), even in the case of comedy. Attardo's review of the relevant historical and contemporary positions on the mere possibility of explaining humor, or establishing an operative and satisfactorily descriptive theory includes, among other, Benedetto Croce's claim that "humor could only be understood in a historical perspective" (in Attardo 1994: 7), and Umberto Eco's that "the category of comic does not seem to have a possibility of theoretical differentiation from that of humor" (in Attardo 1994: 5), and what complicates things further in considering these, is that there seems to be a necessity for a different approach – such that would tackle the general dimension of humor production and reception – competence, as the basis for a general category and one that would not necessarily involve a defining of the phenomenon in an essentialist or substantialist manner, but that would involve an interdisciplinary approach necessary for the description of the complex groundwork for the process of its production and reception, as well as its plasticity. In other words, this approach would take for its starting point the premise that "humor (or the comic, etc.) is whatever a social group defines as such" (Attardo 1994: 9), but also that social groups

define "the modalities of the social construction of the 'humorous object,' or those of its changes and/or fluctuations among individuals" (Attardo 1994: 9). This is particularly relevant for the study of irony and parody, and for Linda Hutcheon's understanding of the ironic intent and her drawing on discursive community as necessary for ironic and parodic communication.

For a more thorough understanding of what occurs when irony is employed, it would be useful to turn to *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (2007), where Rod Martin discusses Arthur Koestler's term 'bisociation' as standing for the "mental process involved in perceiving humorous incongruity" (7), occurring when two (or more) situations, concepts, ideas, etc. are "simultaneously perceived from the perspective of […] self-consistent but normally unrelated and even incompatible frames of reference" (2007: 7). Martin claims that this process "underlies all types of humor" (2007: 7), and the most obvious manifestation of this process may be puns. In addition to that, in the foreword to *The Psychology of Humor*, prof. Peter Derks suggests that "although it is essentially a type of mental play involving a lighthearted, nonserious attitude toward ideas and events, humor serves a number of 'serious' social, emotional, and cognitive functions" (Martn 2007: 1), which is to say, Koestler's bisociation, and Martin's subsequent interpretation of it, extends to a broader field of mental play, and according to this 'blend', humor is produced both as a result of social interaction and with the view of achieving a specific function that is, essentially, social or socially motivated. It is on this view that irony and parody here are observed as performing very specific and intentional social, and critical, functions in the context of the selected contemporary narratives. This social dimension of humor, however, is not unproblematic due to potential disagreements on what 'social' might imply, and whether literature may serve as a pseudo-communicative, and therefore, social situation.

In their article "Literature, power, and the recovery of philosophical ethics" (1998), Coady and Miller discuss the nature and dimensions of social activity, and differentiate between actions that are social, but also those which are either not, or "not constitutively social" (203). This interrogative perspective resonates with Rod Martin's categorization of humor as "fundamentally a social phenomenon" (2007: 5), but Coady and Miller distinguish between actions that are social in terms of being "permeated by the social" and the action that may "not (wholly) [be] constituted by its social dimension" (1998: 204). There authors' discussion on the social aspects of an action essentially takes into consideration the "induction into the social world of conventions and

institutions that enables the possibility of any higher level thought or activity" and, what is particularly important for the aim of this study, "literary activity" (Coady & Miller 1998: 204). The "induction" these authors mention refers to "the social regulation, adjustment, and structuring of prior non-social individual, natural, and interpersonal actions" (Coady & Miller 1998: 204), by means of which social interaction is made possible, successful and effective since individuals may "have a prior capacity to think and act in rudimentary ways in accordance with natural inclinations" (Coady & Miller 1998: 204), but are only able to experience, explore and express "higher level thought or activity" (Coady & Miller 1998: 204) in interaction with other individuals. Language, therefore, serves as "a conventional system" (Coady & Miller 1998: 204) that makes this possible. By extension, they suggest, literary genres are also "conventional enabling mechanisms" (Coady & Miller 1998: 204). Without the enabling function of these conventional systems, they suggest, communication would be devoid of its social component, and would be an aimless activity.

However, in contemporary literary theory, Coady and Miller notice a trend which they term as the "socio-politicisation of the ethical," whereby "literary texts, traditionally viewed as repositories of moral and aesthetic insight or challenge, tend now to be seen as predominantly ideological constructions, or sites of power struggles between social forces of various kinds (1998: 201), which is a surprising conclusion against the background of the discussion on postmodernism here. Additionally, it is highly evocative of the modernist critical trends in contemporaneity that have been attempting to vindicate these sort of ideological traces in present discourses. What is problematic when commenting on this article, is that the starting premise pertaining to the importance of language in the induction of individuals into the 'social order' and the inevitable immersion into the 'enabling systems' as formulated or operated by language, holds its logic and overlaps with the essentially postmodern views on discourse, and interpellation by extension. However, the two authors take the position that "ethical problems only exist for autonomous agents" (Coady & Miller 1998: 210), which, as they propose, means that:

> Individuals and individual actions are treated as wholly explicable in terms of impersonal social forces locked in political conflict. We are urged to see ourselves as 'docile bodies', and to view 'creative' literary output as simply evidential of impersonal social power struggles. (Coady & Miller 1998: 201)

Coady and Miller's generalization as an attempt to re-introduce the modernist illusion of liberal humanist autonomy, however reactionary it may be, presents a convenient impetus for proposing that it is precisely in the subversive function of humor within language as the conventional system, and therefore literary genres and literature in general, that the ethical promise is located in postmodernism. This is, of course, not to say that contemporaneity offers no other mode of ethical criticism or political action, but those are not the object of this study. Coady and Miller notice a direct link between postmodernism and the "rejection of individual autonomy" (1998: 210) that renders human beings "simply the constructions and playthings of socio-political forces" (1998: 210), and the issue may not be, per se, their consideration of the 'death of the author', the postmodern view of the discursive and artificial nature of reality as constructed, but rather their interpretation of postmodern autonomy as entirely abandoned. More specifically, these authors find that the recognition of the Derridean insight of the ideological in the discourse, and the recognition of the Foucauldian understanding of the forces operating internally and externally in interacting discourses, somehow render us powerless or autonomy-less, which is a Baudrillardian dilemma, so to say, or at least as represented in the American feature, *The Matrix*[22] (1999), where the protagonist is revealed the truth behind the reality as an illusion – a simulation, and subsequently offered a choice of the blue or the red pill, one of which would simply erase his memory and allow him to continue life in the simulation. Needless to mention, prior to learning the truth, the protagonist of the movie believes that he is autonomous, and similarly, Coady and Miller decidedly refuse to observe the postmodern critical thought for its evaluative edge for it might reveal a philosophical and ideological rupture in the continuity of the simulation of liberal humanism, and quite understandably so, of course.

In *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (1988), a study that explores humorous expression, and specifically in American female authors, Nancy Walker uncovers the profound link between the economic and socio-political reality and the expressions of humor as subversively undermining the cultural reality. Exploring "feminist humor" (Walker 1988: xii), Walker uses Umberto Eco's distinction between "humor and the 'comic'" (1988: xii) as a suitable groundwork for an interdisciplinary analysis of the manifestations of the feminist subversive

[22] *The Matrix.* Directed by Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski, performances by Keanu Reeves, Laurence Fishburne, Carrie-Anne Moss, Warner Brothers, 1999.

criticism and political action – feminist humor. This insight from the field of linguistics remains useful for this study as it sheds light on the effect-potential of the representational methods discussed here. To be more precise, neither irony nor parody manifest as explicitly 'comic' or humorous, and not all that can be qualified as humorous necessarily produces a 'comic' effect. It is precisely for this reason that a discussion about humor at a more general level seems indispensable, and especially in the light of much of contemporary criticism against irony in postmodern and contemporary literature, and art in general, as purely pragmatic, unproductive and symptomatic of the lack of a visionary impulse.

Researching the phenomenon of humor across various sub-disciplines, including cognitive psychology, in *The Psychology of Humor*, Rod Martin outlines humor as "originating in social play," but evolving "as a universal mode of communication and social influence with a variety of functions" (2007: 5). According to Martin, these functions of humor can be observed as accruing additional dimensions over the course of evolution, both in terms of human biological and cultural development (2007: 5), suggesting its paramount importance in establishing "social cohesion" (2007: 5), but exclusion as well. More specifically:

> It can be a means of reducing but also reinforcing status differences among people, expressing agreement and sociability but also disagreement and aggression, facilitating cooperation as well as resistance, and strengthening solidarity and connectedness or undermining power and status. (Martin 2007: 5)

Fundamentally social, or social-function oriented, humor or the humorous effect as produced by means of irony and parody needs to be considered as a reflection of the economic, social, cultural and political circumstance of the moment, but also as a reflection upon the principles, values and discourses of contemporaneity, which is precisely why the attitude behind observing irony and parody here as critical instruments, against the background of the postmodern interrogative paradigm, presents an attempt at exploring the specifically cultural and socio-political trends in the contemporary Canadian short story as a reflection of the referent-world discourses, or the discursive community, as Linda Hutcheon notices in *Irony's Edge*.

Martin claims that the "psychological functions of humor include the cognitive and social benefits of the positive emotion of mirth, and its uses as a mode of social communication and influence,

and as a way of relieving tension, regulating emotions, and coping with stress" (2007: 29), and in those terms, this author notes that humor is neither inherently "friendly nor aggressive" (2007: 18), but rather having "adaptive functions" (2007: 15) with regard to regulating emotions. The "paradox of humor," Martin suggests, is in its dual nature:

> If one's goal is to strengthen relationships, smooth over conflicts, and build cohesiveness, humor can be useful for those purposes. On the other hand, if one's goal is to ostracize, humiliate, or manipulate someone, or to build up one's own status at the expense of others, humor can be useful for those purposes as well. (2007: 18-19)

Even when it is observed from the angle of 'play', "humor is not necessarily prosocial and benevolent" (Martin 2007: 17), but serves the purpose of emphasizing on and exaggerating social or other differences by means of laughter, or merely association and participation, in the form of humor that is perceived as an extenuating circumstance of criticism. In this process, certain members the social group enhance bonds, and tacitly endorse the normative, whereas other members are purposefully invited to modify their attitude or behavior, or experience exclusion. Self-deprecating humor appears to anticipate this exclusionary or coercive function of humor in that the individual humorously recognizes the incongruity of their behavior, attitude, the social, political, cultural, gender or other norm, any dimension of social interaction, thereby appealing for sympathy and social clemency. It is important, however, at this point to notice that social situations produce similar manifestation of humor, or the comic, in their 'pseudo' instances (Martin 2007: 5): "such as reading a book, watching a television program, or recalling an amusing experience with other people" (Martin 2007: 113). This is to say that social interaction does not necessarily happen only face-to-face, but that it is co-extensive with such situations in which social interaction is simulated even if the individual finds themselves physically isolated from other people: "while watching a comedy show on television, reading a humorous book, or remembering a funny personal experience" (Martin 2007: 5). In the 'pseudo-social' situation, the person still responds to the content that is supposed to be humorous or comic, even if the experience is not immediate, direct or involving them personally in the social situation. Moreover, the person is equally capable of understanding and participating in the experience, even in physical isolation, and Martin notes that "being able to enjoy humor and express it through laughter seems to be an essential part of what it means to be human" (2007: 3).

The perspective drawing on insight provided by cognitive psychology argues that the production of humor requires the "[mental processing of] information coming from the environment or from memory, playing with ideas, words, or actions in a creative way, and thereby generating a witty verbal utterance or a comical nonverbal action that is perceived by others to be funny" (Martin 2007: 6), but this does not suggest that humor has purely cognitive character (Martin 2007: 9), but rather that the mediation and regulation of emotional processes in social interaction is highly involved in its range. The cognitive approach to humor perceives "some type of incongruity as […] a defining characteristic of humor" (Martin 2007: 85), and the "cognitive synergy" (Martin 2007: 85) that is at its core stands for the blending of the incongruous, "incompatible […] or even contradictory interpretations of the same object or event [..] active in the mind at the same time" (Martin 2007: 85). This view of humor is particularly important for the short story genre, as will be discussed in The Postmodern Fender-Bender section which offers a definition of the short story not only as double-voiced (Laurie Kruk), but specifically, importing significant amount of topicality and emotional charge in a subversive manner – through irony, parody, contrast, etc. – due to its doubled narrative progression (Dan Shen). It is particularly irony and parody that serve to safely, yet subversively, introduce the potentially unpleasant, distressing, problematic, delicate or inflammatory material and foreground it effectively, in the manner of the genre. Humor, indeed, plays a significant role in this process as it mediates between the socially acceptable content and the socially appropriate reactions to it, even if its character is not necessarily comic.

The cognitive approach to humor presupposes that "information is organized in knowledge structures called schemas[23]" (Martin 2007: 85), and this viewpoint seems highly compatible with the overall attitude in this study that observes narrative discourse as a structure generated according

[23] Rod Martin draws upon the extensive work by linguists in the field of cognitive studies and, as of more recently, cognitive poetics as an interdisciplinary approach to literary interpretation, in defining this knowledge construct as "a dynamic mental representation that enables us to build mental models of the world" (2007: 85). This concept, in tandem with the concept of the script – a conventional, experiential setup of sequence-of-events presupposing a particular range of actions and outcomes – exemplify the basis for the discussed potential for incongruity and incompatibility in object or situation perception. Martin suggests that "while we are hearing the setup of a joke, a schema (or script) is activated to enable us to make sense of the incoming information" (2007: 86), and we are, then, cognitively, emotionally, and overall experientially able to decode and evaluate the inconsistency between the expected outcome and the implied, different and unexpected, result. Martin notes that the script is responsible for the recognition of "what details of the narrative are appropriate and relevant, and how to evaluate people's action" (2007: 86). In the case of irony and parody in literary works, very complex networks of schemas and scripts interact to contradictorily represent the incongruities between the discursive perception and the desired, often interrogatory and critical, construct.

to, or intentionally against, conventional parameters, such as genre conventions on a more general level, but also narrative conventions within a genre, for example. In other words, the explanation offered by cognitive psychology proposes that the setup of a 'joke', or an incongruous scenario that need not necessarily have a comic effect for its outcome, is based on two counteracting schemas or scripts, the second of which "typically gives an altogether different (and even contradictory) interpretation of the situation, rather than just a slightly modified perspective" (Martin 2007: 87). The humorous or comic effects, then, do not reside in the "replacement" or erasure of the primary script, but rather in the "simultaneous activation of two incompatible scripts" (Martin 2007: 87) as the essence. What follows is that not only is this cognitive or mental play at the heart of the competence Attardo potentially refers to in discussing the inadequacy of very specific approaches to humor, but that the evocation of the alternative script has a strong social or socially-permeated function which is experienced as "enjoyable and amusing" (Martin 2007: 87). Martin explains this as the evolution of the rudimentary play in which "the simultaneous activation of multiple schemas to try to make sense of a joke enables both the joke teller and the listener to engage in playful cognitive synergies" (2007: 109). On an everyday level, humor may occur both spontaneously and unintentionally, as well as intentionally, verbally and as reflected in non-verbal behaviors (Martin 2007: 97), and all of these essentially represent efforts "to be logically consistent and coherent, […] to avoid ambiguity and contradiction, and […] assume that there is a unitary external reality that is shared by everyone" (Martin 2007: 115), whereby perceived incongruity is voiced, consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or otherwise, in the form of humor and for the purpose of appealing to a specific social function the humor corresponds to, or regulating one's emotional response to the perceived incompatibility in reality. The complex interaction of the diverse cognitive and emotional functions as related by humor, however, frequently render this "mode of communication […] inadequate, since different individuals and groups often have quite different perceptions of reality and disagree about their interpretations of events" (Martin 2007: 115), and Martin suggests that humor, as a mode of communication, extenuates the circumstance of mediation of these realities (2007: 115). More specifically, this is to say that "by simultaneously expressing opposite meanings, the humorous mode provides a shared conceptual framework that embraces contradictions, rather than avoiding them" (Martin 2007: 115), and provides grounds for negotiation rather than collision and conflict, and especially so when the content of such negotiations pertains to "oppositions […] manifested in terms of such

pairs as good versus bad, life versus death, obscene versus nonobscene, money versus no money, high stature versus low stature, clean versus dirty, intelligent versus unintelligent, and so on" (Martin 2007: 90).

Irony: *Not Everyone's Cup of Tea, Apparently*

In *The Psychology of Humor*, the already discussed study integrating various approaches to humor and dealing comprehensively with its social and emotional dimensions, Rod Martin defines irony as a "type of conversational humor", "a figure of speech that communicates the opposite of what is said," and relates it closely to sarcasm in terms of the humorous potential (2007: 98) – potential since irony need not always create a humorous or comic effect. In the study, Martin explores humor in general, in its intellectual aspects, but also linking it closely with the evident social functions it performs or facilitates (bonding, exclusion, etc.). Following this line of thought, it is unsurprising that irony, as a type of humor, mediating oppositions and conflicts, yet retaining a critical and value biased course, should be treated as a rhetorical (representational) method.

In *Splitting Images – Contemporary Canadian Ironies* (1991), Linda Hutcheon explores the cultural basis for what she calls the "particularly fertile ground for a certain kind of politicized irony" (vii), and especially so with the rise of the postmodern critical thought and mode of exploration of the profoundly institutionalized and internalized discourses and narratives. Hutcheon explores how this, seemingly typical and perhaps convenient, Canadian, "ironic sense shows up in some of the 'splitting images' of contemporary Canadian literature and art" with the purpose of "negotiating the many dualities and multiplicities that have come to define this nation" (1991: vii). Of course, Hutcheon distances herself from claiming that *Canadianness* somehow monopolizes irony, or that there is such a thing as typically Canadian irony. However, the recognition of the prevalence of this representation method, figure of speech, or mode of critical, social and other interrogation, does not discount the indication that, indeed, there might be a typically Canadian *use* of this trope (Foucault) in representation, rhetorical mode (Booth) and critical instrument (Hutcheon). Hutcheon's view of irony as a rhetorical instrument – a view similar to Wayne Booth's, and a negotiating instrument between the diverse voices, ideologies and philosophies, "the oppositional voices both of and within Canada" (1991: vii), reveals a general

postmodern critical trend in dealing with the coexisting discourses in Canada at the end of the twentieth century.

More specifically, Hutcheon's conclusions reveal a trend in the postmodern literary practice for a very specific employment of irony as an instrument of political and social criticism, and reevaluation configured to comprehend and include, rather than dismiss and exclude. In contrast, the critical reception of this proliferate trend in Canada, varies significantly as has been discussed in the section dealing with the problematics of postmodernism, since the issue with the postmodern critical thought and attitude is largely built on the frequent postmodern reluctance to situate criticism, philosophically, ideologically, politically, ethically, etc., in one ethical, philosophical or ideological center. Contrary to Booth, and especially Hutcheon who sees irony as profoundly political, the contemporary academic circles observe irony as pragmatic in its postmodern form, denying it the edge it has been known to exhibit, in parody and satire specifically, throughout centuries.

In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon suggests that "the foes of postmodernism see irony as fundamentally antiserious, but this is to mistake and misconstrue the critical power of double voicing" (2004: 39). As discussed earlier, this is one of the major points of reproach of our contemporaries, the so-called metamodern critics, against the use of irony since its operative mode entails this 'antiserious', anti-totalizing and investigative attitude. This position could only hold if both the intellectual and emotional dimensions of humor could be disregarded as socially, politically and culturally irrelevant. However, that is clearly not the case, and Hutcheon argues that "irony may be the only way we can be serious today," suggesting that:

> We cannot ignore the discourses that precede and contextualize everything we say and do, and it is through ironic parody that we signal our awareness of this inescapable fact. (2004: 39)

This view resounds Derrida's acute awareness of the inherited traditions and legacies as emanated by the present, contemporary, discourses, and therefore the necessity to retain the interrogative mode toward the newly produced discourses. In Hutcheon's view, this is what irony, and parody, achieve by allowing for the conflicting positions to interact within a single context, thereby exposing the sustainability of the referential, normative, values against the introduced discourse,

and allowing for “the past and the present [to be] judged in each other’s light” (2004: 39). Additionally, the critical and political dimensions of irony and parody are both implied by postmodern art, and required for their “didactic” function, for postmodern art “teaches us about those countercurrents, if we are willing to listen” (Hutcheon 2004: 41).

Discussing the relation between postmodernism and mass culture, the problem of whether it is the postmodern ‘in-difference’ and anti-totalizing attitude that causes the proliferation of contemporary mass culture and its movement away from the traditional aesthetic and moral standard, Hutcheon notices that “postmodernism’s relationship with contemporary mass culture is not, then, just one of implication; it is also one of critique” (2004: 41) in as much as it resists to turn its own practice blind to those forces that shape its own production and counteract it. In other words, postmodern literature undoubtedly works from within the framework of its contemporaneity, encompassing the space of mass culture, but also the counteracting subcultures. Interpreting this intense conflict from a position of unavoidable complicity and immersion, postmodern literature resorts to irony and parody – “a questioning of commonly accepted values of our culture (closure, teleology, and subjectivity)” and “a questioning that is totally dependent upon that which it interrogates” (Hutcheon 2004: 42), which requires a self-reflexive, and even a self-conscious, attitude towards the discourse the interrogation produces. As Hutcheon puts it, such an interrogation is “not a rejection of the former values in favor of the latter; it is a rethinking of each in the light of the others” (2004: 42), which is paradoxical and stands to explicate the nature of postmodern contradictions in general – oscillating between criticism and confirmation.

However, the much criticized extensive use of irony and parody, then, is not merely an anti-serious attitude for the purpose of relativization[24], but perhaps an attempt at a ‘de-elitization’ of the inherited traditions of aesthetics, morality and politics, in the broadest sense – a re-evaluation of what it is that defines low and high art, how these relate to the contemporary moment, mass culture and its countercurrents, and, overall, how these oppositions coexist and interact. Irony is

[24] I use the work ‘relativization’ because it is so frequently and loosely used to dismiss the interrogative nature of postmodern critical attitude. However, in the case of irony and ironic expression, it would be naïve to suppose that the objective and intention of the producer or receiver of irony could be to relativize. It would, nevertheless, be safer to assume the intention as problematization, to use, yet again, Hutcheon’s term. The underlying commitment of irony, then, resonates with the postmodern critical attitude embracing the entirety of diversity, conflict, paradox, multiplicity and variance present and coexisting along with the institutionalized discourses and normative, as well as our internalizations of them.

fundamentally based on oppositions (at the level of the language itself, the social, political, cultural levels, etc.), and the postmodern critical thought's context on:

> [the] *process* of making the *product*; it is *absence* within *presence*, it is *dispersal* that needs *centering* in order to *be* dispersal; it is the *ideolect* that wants to be, but knows it cannot be, the *master code*; it is *immanence* denying yet yearning for *transcendence*. In other words, the postmodern partakes of a logic of 'both/and,' not one of 'either/or'. (Hutcheon 2004: 49)

With regard to postmodernism, in *Splitting Images – Contemporary Canadian Ironies*, Hutcheon claims that irony "inherently undercuts" the idea of itself as a master narrative, an ideological or philosophical "explanatory system" (1991: 2) that can be used in interpreting any culture, and therefore "all Canadian mythologies" (1991: 2). On the contrary, such pretensions are consciously rejected by (contemporary) postmodern irony where the ironic rhetoric establishes an interrogative multivocity, intentional ambiguity and double-sense, rather than merely a discursive style. This intentional ambiguity and double-sense, again, does not suggest a tendency to relativize, but to expose the instability of the sign, and consequently bring forth the forces counteracting the univocal (narrative) discourse. Furthermore, pertaining to the relationship between postmodern contemporary Canadian literature and irony, Hutcheon argues that not "*all* Canadian art is bathed in what someone once called the cold douches of irony; that would manifestly be wrong" (1991: 2), but that the use of irony, in the contemporary Canadian and other literature, is "*one* mode of self-defining discourse" (1991: 2). This, again, is not to say that the 'self-defining mode' Hutcheon mentions has to do with defining *against* the normative. What it does imply is a process of 'definition' *within* or *amidst* the present, coexisting discourses, which is a postmodern tendency, of course.

Linda Hutcheon's discussion on the definition of what irony is, or what is generally and specifically recognized as irony, "in all its many motivations and modes" (1991: 10), ultimately echoes the postmodern recognition of "language" as "ambiguous, doubled, even duplicitous" (1991: 10). Hutcheon specifically addresses Michel Foucault's proposition[25] that the concepts of

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[25] In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault treats irony as "*the* paradigmatic postmodern discursive practice" (in Hutcheon 1991: 10) whose purpose is ultimately to establish "the primacy of a contradiction that has its model in the simultaneous affirmation and negation of a single proposition" (in Hutcheon 1991: 10). Irony, in Hutcheon's

knowledge and power are "structured on a hidden trope of irony," that "things said say more than themselves" (in Hutcheon 1991: 10), and expounds its ideological dimension in terms of how irony operates to potentially represent "subversive and authorizing" and "undercutting and excluding" relations (1991: 11). Irony, and especially as observed in its postmodern manifestations can be "tricky business," as Hutcheon notes, since "the pleasure of being 'in on the secret' is what is often called irony's elitism" (1991: 11) – intentional interpellation of the reader, "an implicit compliment to the intelligence of the reader" whereby a willing seduction into association "with the author and the knowing minority who are not taken in by the ostensible meaning" (Hutcheon 1991: 11) is achieved. The success of this interpellation resides in the ability of the interpreter, or the reader, to decode the meaning underlying an ironic statement.

Hutcheon's take on the 'trickiness' of irony, however, underscores the difficulty, or at least the complexity, in interpreting it, and especially so from a temporal distance. This argument could be extended to cultural, social and political communities, and Hutcheon extensively deals with the *discursive communities* in her study *Irony's Edge* which will be discussed later in more detail. These "discursive communities […] might cast some doubt on the ability of any historical research to 'reconstruct' [ironic] references – except in the most general and basic of terms" (Hutcheon 2005: 111), which is also to suggest that investigating instances of irony in contemporary literature and culture could present a less daunting task.

In *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, first published in 1994, Hutcheon provides the basic definition of irony, from the semantic point of view, as "involving saying one thing and meaning another" (2005: 35), which resonates with the view of irony as a figure of speech, but perhaps less obviously with Foucault's understanding of irony as a trope, as previously mentioned. However, Hutcheon is careful to distinguish irony from other figures of speech and rhetorical devices by emphasizing on its ability to "put people on edge" (2005: 35). This is to say, irony, according to this author, "is a 'weighted' mode of discourse in the sense that it is asymmetrical, unbalanced in favor of the silent and the unsaid" (Hutcheon 2005: 35), and its interpretation resides in the ability of the ironist to relate, or the interpreter to evaluate, the imbalance and examine the incongruous, opposed or conflicted sides.

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interpretation of Foucault's 'archeological project' is "a prime example of a discourse whose signs do not merely designate (single) things, but do much more: they create specifically doubled meanings" (1991: 10).

In addition to this, Hutcheon's definition of irony emphasizes the evaluative, judgmental and emotive or affective attitude in the recognition or decoding of irony (2005: 35). In other words, the *edge* that Hutcheon sees as the distinguishing feature of irony involves an invitation for a critical attitude, for the examination of value-judgments, and it, inevitably, involves an affective dimension – on the side of the ironist and the interpreter. It "oscillates in semantic terms between the simultaneous perception of the said and the unsaid" (Hutcheon 2005: 37), and it is this critical potential of the implied, in context, that makes for the "emotional ethics" of irony (Hutcheon 2005: 14) for the reception of irony is unavoidably divided, even when successful. Hutcheon uses Milan Kundera's characterization of irony as something that "denies us our certainties by unmasking the world as an ambiguity" (in Hutcheon 2005: 14) to clarify the particularly irritated attitude towards this rhetorical mode in contemporaneity, in its postmodern manifestations. Irony, then "can also mock, attack, and ridicule; it can exclude, embarrass and humiliate" (Hutcheon 2005: 14) and its scope encompasses the intellectual and emotional dimensions of our existence, which suggests that the very employment of irony overreaches a pragmatic or discursive, relativizing practice. It is the intentionality behind the ironic expression that is inherently critical, and as such it is a reaction or reflection on the totality of the discursive practices that cannot be reduced to intellectual or emotional detachment. Irony is a mode of problematization.

In Wayne Booth's seminal work, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, first published in 1974, irony is defined in terms of its rhetorical power and the mechanism of contrast or reversal as "something that undermines clarities, opens up vistas of chaos, and either liberates by destroying all dogma or destroys by revealing the inescapable canker of negation at the heart of every affirmation" (1975: ix). Booth's interpretation of irony as "a distinguishing mark of all literature, or at least all good literature" (1975: xi) contributes little to the complex definitional or interpretational issues that have persisted to this day, but it does highlight the frequency of its use – as a rhetorical device throughout literature, or potentially a pragmatic construct. The brief mention of Wayne Booth's invaluable exploration of irony serves to reinforce the perspective of irony as a device that rhetorically contributes to postmodern evaluation and criticism. However, it is also to explore the pragmatic function of irony as exposing the discursivity in the social, political and other constructs. The attitude here is that irony should be interpreted as working against the exclusion of either of the functions. More precisely, as the two are negotiation strategies pertaining to context-based meaning, and strategies that relate the intentionality of the narrator to the expectations of the

reader, they will be understood here as complementary, co-extensive, functions rather than exclusive, and in those terms, in the analyses of the selection of contemporary Canadian short stories, they will serve as the decoder for the particular critical potential in the narratives. Irony, whether it is regarded as a figure of speech, a form of conversational humor or a postmodern trope, undoubtedly serves as a vehicle for encoding rhetorical and pragmatic intentions.

In *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Booth argues that irony invites the reader to construct the underlying meaning using the provided clues emphasizing on the problem of not only varied and disparate interpretations supported by textual cues, but also their frequent neglect by readers. In other words, Booth notices, irony easily goes unnoticed, and something that a number of readers may interpret as irony may be understood as literal meaning by others, which calls for the "sensitive detecting and reconstructing" (1975: 1) of that which is termed ironic or possessing the quality of irony. According to this critic, "irony has come to stand for so many things that we are in danger of losing it as a useful term altogether" (Booth 1975: 2), and what adds to the ambiguity, as Booth suggests, is that irony must be intended, and therefore:

> [deliberately] created by human beings to be heard or read and understood with some precision by other human beings; they are not mere openings, provided unconsciously, or accidental statements allowing the confirmed pursuer of ironies to read them as reflections against the author. (1975: 5)

Booth's attempt at describing irony leads him to investigate the most common or defining features of irony in literary texts – its stability in the context of the text or the wider referential context, the level at which irony's rhetorical power is visible and evident, as well the local or restricted quality of irony that may only hold in certain contexts. More specifically, then, Booth treats irony and the ironic in terms of the context in which "a weighing or qualification on every word in it" requires "the reader to infer meanings which are in a sense not in the words themselves" (1975: 7), and even though Booth does not specifically deal with the pragmatic potential of irony, this is the reason why irony may as easily as it does rhetorical, perform the function of a pragmatic instrument.

Much in line with the contemporary cognitive poetics theorists, Booth notices that the "ironic exchange" (1975: 14) must be based on some sort of background knowledge relevant for the

context in question, but the nature of this *knowledge* that allows for the understanding of irony and the ironic, necessarily eludes systematic scientific empiricism and objective definition. Booth explores the so-called "merely subjective" (1975: 16) interpretation of the ironic in his chapter on the stability of irony, and problematizes knowledge in terms the criteria of commonality or locality in understanding intended irony. This particular aspect of the problem of detecting and interpreting irony will be additionally discussed, in cases where it is relevant, in the analyses of the selection of contemporary Canadian short stories. According to Booth, "discovering an ironic intention in a work depends" on the process of "ironic reconstruction: the decision that the author cannot have intended such and such a meaning" (1975: 19), on the decoding of the textual cues that would delineate the meaning that would be signaled by the sentence itself on the literal level, and the meaning of its contextual surrounding (1975: 19), and underscore possible ambiguity, incongruity or discrepancy in the two. The process of reconstruction or decoding, as Booth suggests, assumes a conventionality of sorts – a consensus on the literal and referential, as opposed to the possible ironic, and does not heavily rely on the "*critic's private sensibility*" (1975: 21) for there would be no stability in the interpretation on the figurative level.

What Booth implies in *A Rhetoric of Irony* is that, as a rhetorical device, irony is conditioned by the textual environment, the networks of interrelated meanings, and not by the reader themselves – even if the private circumstance and sensibility of the reader may affect the interpretation of something as ironic, irony in literary works must be ascribed to the narrating entity as intentional, and as part of the rhetorical, and we may add, the pragmatic objective of the narrative discourse.

In *Irony's Edge*, Hutcheon sees irony both as a rhetorical trope, and a pragmatic instrument (2005: 1), and deals with "its perceived politics," and its social and formal dimensions (2005: 1) as working transideologically (2005: 10). Much like Booth, Hutcheon studies the implications of recognizing something as irony or ironic, but also of "its misfiring" (2005: 3), that is, of either failing to notice the intended irony, or ascribing literal meaning a subjective ironic interpretation. As Hutcheon notes, the focus is on "[trying] to understand how and why irony is used and understood as a discursive practice or strategy" (2005: 3) in the first place, but also how it is that "irony has an evaluative edge and manages to provoke emotional responses in those who 'get' it and those who don't, as well as in its targets and in what some people call its 'victims'" (2005: 2). More precisely, Hutcheon deals extensively with this social function of irony (and parody), and

her insight into the mechanism resounds Rod Martin's discussion on the social (and pseudo-social) function of humor.

In the mentioned study, Hutcheon considers the "affective dimension of irony's edge" (2005: 2), which is one of the main reasons why this study is taken as a referent in exploring irony as a rhetorical and pragmatic instrument, an instrument for social inclusion and exclusion, and "intervention and evasion" (2005: 2) – as discussed in the previous chapter in terms of humor in general. Hutcheon suggests that "the 'scene' of irony involves relations of power based in relations of communication" (2005: 2), which unsurprisingly renders it a convenient instrument for the endorsement of a range of diverging positions, legitimation of attitudes, promotion of interests, but also the "undercutting" and subversive criticism of that which is taken as a universal rather than a discursive value. However, the 'problematics' of irony, much like the problematics of postmodernism, depends on what Hutcheon calls "dynamic and plural relations among the text or utterance (and its context), the so-called ironist, the interpreter, and the circumstances surrounding the discursive situation" (2005: 11). In other words, the reconstruction of the supposed or assumed ironic meaning, just as Wayne Booth suggests, stands at the very core of the problematics of irony since it is contingent not only upon the ironic intention, the rhetorical and pragmatic context, the context of the work, but also the context of the interpreter, the discursive reality of their (narrative) discourses, and a number of subjective factors. Irony, Hutcheon comments, "isn't irony until it is interpreted as such – at least by the intending ironist, if not the intended receiver" (2005: 6).

In *Irony's Edge*, Hutcheon does not deal with "irony as a keystone of poetics, a paradigm of criticism, a mode of consciousness or existence that raises questions about the self and the nature of knowledge" (2005: 3), but she focuses on how it is that "irony's edge gives parody its 'critical' dimension in its marking of difference at the heart of similarity" (2005: 3). In other words, the power of irony lies in irony's potential to defamiliarize, and particularly so in parody, that which has become an image of reality, and not only by means of contrast or inversion, but alternative interpretation. In terms of understanding irony as semantic inversion "antiphrasis – or saying one thing and meaning its opposite", Hutcheon proposes a view of irony as "a communicative process" in which irony possesses "three major semantic characteristics: it is relational, inclusive and differential" (2005: 56). It is for this reason that any exploration of irony necessarily involves its social and political functions, even though the linguistic peculiarities (syntactic, semantic,

pragmatic, etc.) may shed light on the manner in which meaning is related – where and how textual cues signal ironic meaning. The attitude here is that irony's defamiliarizing power lies in the propensity to evaluate these textual cues, the context of the text, the script or schema[26], or to intentionally disrupt the figure-background relation in context. More explicitly, irony's scope reaches beyond the semantic level and destabilizes the 'certainties' of our commonly attuned perception of social, political, cultural or other positions, and in the postmodern short story form, it is through the ironic, or parodic, input that topicality is examined (Kruk, Shen).

Hutcheon's approach to irony in *Irony's Edge* appears to be as practical as Booth's since both critics focus on the general application and applicability of their discussions. However, Hutcheon's method, although 'artificial' as she suggests (2005: 4), observes irony in practice from the perspective of "its critical edge" (2005: 4), which is its critical capacity overall, "its semantic complexity" (2005: 4), and the problematics of irony's reliance on the "discursive community" (2005: 4), which has been mentioned earlier as one of the potential issues in exploring irony trans-culturally, although as Hutcheon suggests, it is one of the crucial prerequisites for irony[27]; and,

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[26] Scripts and schemas provide a very broad number of situational or conceptual outlines, and necessarily vary due to the interpreter's subjective experience, general knowledge, cultural and other background, etc. However, since irony is considered here in the framework of 'discursive communities' (Hutcheon), it may be safe to assume that members of a discursive community share a common, though general, idea about a multitude of everyday, as well as specific, scripts and schemas the ironist calls into their (narrative) discourse. Moreover, irony as a process of communication serves the purpose of both reinforcing certain concepts, schemas and scripts, as much as it brings their validity into question. In the process, it serves its socio-political function of strengthening community or group bonds, but also excluding those members who do not, to use Hutcheon's words, 'get it'.

[27] In *Irony's Edge*, Hutcheon notes that "in a study of the discursive politics of irony written in the 1990s, you might well expect to find a concentration of examples of irony focused on issues of gender, race, class, or sexuality" (2005: 5), which, incidentally, encourages the interrogative attitude and enthusiasm of this dissertation. Considering the impossibility of the membership in the discursive community that has produced the selection of contemporary Canadian short stories, one can only hope to indirectly share the concerns or attune themselves to the topicality present in them and, trans-culturally and transideologically attempt to decode the ironic practice and its implication in the Canadian culture. This is also inspired by Hutcheon's claim that "[there] is a long history of argument that the key to the Canadian identity is irony, that a people used to dealing with national, regional, ethnic and linguistic multiplicities, tensions, and divisions have no alternative" (2005: 7). With regard to her similar conclusion in *The Canadian Postmodern* on how it is that the postmodern critical thought and method almost effortlessly permeate contemporary Canadian literature, one inevitably feels encouraged to explore the nature of the possible correlation between the philosophical trend and the 'transideological' instrument of criticism. My enthusiasm in exploring irony does not subside in its recognition that "[our century] joins just about every other century in wanting to call itself the 'age of irony,' and the recurrence of that historical claim in itself might well support the contention of contemporary theorists from Jacques Derrida to Kenneth Burke that irony is inherent in signification, in its deferrals and in its negations" (Hutcheon 2005: 9), nor does the enthusiasm to explore the nature of postmodern irony subside since this particular perspective of interrogation and context could contribute to a better understanding and appreciation of contemporary Canadian short story. It does not purport to do much more.

finally, “the role of intention and attribution of irony” and “its contextual framing and markers” (2005: 4), which can all be discussed jointly, even if the discussion here could not purport to be as extensive, structured and thorough as that of Hutcheon in the mentioned study.

Here, irony is perceived as something that “comes into being in the relations between meanings, but also between people and utterances and, sometimes, between intentions and interpretations” (Hutcheon 2005: 13), which is to suggest that it cannot be observed as a static (pragmatic or rhetorical) instrument, but a dynamic part of the communicative process. In this view, irony must occur in “the space between (and including) the said and the unsaid” (Hutcheon 2005: 12), and the dichotomy is both “inclusive and relational” (Hutcheon 2005: 12) implying that the ironic meaning is created in the interaction. Additionally, the interaction must be such that the meaning of the said and the unsaid, in varying degrees of complexity and idiosyncrasy, must co-extend in relation to each other. As Hutcheon notes, irony is found in the interaction that “undermines […] semantic security of ‘one signifier: one signified’ and by revealing the complex inclusive, relational and differential nature of ironic meaning-making” (2005: 12). The dynamics of what irony involves renders simplistic and convenient definitions problematic. Irony does not “disambiguate” (Hutcheon 2005: 13), but “can only ‘complexify’” (Hutcheon 2005: 13) since it achieves its effect only in specific circumstances, in the context of its appearance, and since its use and reception inevitably involve oppositional or confrontational intention.

Hutcheon claims that irony’s “foregrounding of the politics of human agency” renders it “a strategy of oppositional rhetoric” (2005: 11), but it is both problematic and thought-provoking to observe it as rhetorically charged if irony’s effect, or ‘edge’, resides not only in the ironist, but the interpreter that becomes the ironist. To be precise, it is “the intended addressee of the ironist’s utterance” (Hutcheon 2005: 11) that ascribes ironic meaning to that which they perceive as involving ironic intention. This is where Hutcheon’s view of the discursive community provides the vital key to understanding and explicating the mechanics of irony. The quintessential feature of irony, Hutcheon explains, is the “interpretive and intentional move: it is the making or inferring of meaning in addition to and different from what is stated, together with an attitude toward both the said and the unsaid” (2005: 11), whereby, it can be concluded, the attitudinal component of the premeditated irony resides in textual cues provided in (narrative) discourse, but the ultimate evaluative attitude in the interpreter. The interpreter of irony is not merely at the receiving end of

the ironist's intention, but "they make irony happen by […] this intentional act, different from but not unrelated to the ironist's intention to be ironic" (Hutcheon 2005: 113). The intention is, therefore, encoded in the context (or text) by the entity that, as if literally, elaborates the 'said' with the attitude of the 'unsaid. It is this "irony's appraising edge" (Hutcheon 2005: 12) that Hutcheon singles out as the characteristic that distinguishes irony from other figurative forms, and additionally, it might be added, the reason why the postmodern critical thought, in its theoretically uncomplicated form, resonates with this mode of representation and device.

At this point, a brief digression to the ethical issue raised in the introductory part of this section seems convenient. Much of the criticism directed against postmodernism with regard to the noticeable absence of an ethically defined philosophy also extends to the use of irony. More specifically, it is the question of intentionality that draws attention on the issue of irony's ethics.

On the one hand, in line with Relevance Theory[28], the responsibility for the ironic meaning resides with "the encoding ironist who must coordinate assumptions about codes and contextual information that decoders will have accessible to them and be likely to use" (in Hutcheon 2005: 115). In other words, ironic interpretation cannot be a matter of subjective interpretation and ascription of meaning, and ethically, the ironist is responsible for the conveyed meaning. Both Wayne, as previously discussed, and Hutcheon agree on this view. However, this attitude does not neglect the importance of the discursive community as a space in which this intentionality can be received. On the other hand, as Hutcheon suggests, the disapproval of irony as a representation mode can be rationalized with the view of the possibility that "irony might well mean never having to say you really mean it" and "evasion through tacit affirmation" (2005: 115). Therefore, shifting

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[28] In *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* (2007), Richard Walsh discusses Relevance Theory (as developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson) in the context of the literary category of fictionality, and sees its value in its communicative approach, "from the perspective of pragmatics and cognitive linguistics," and providing for "an invaluable conceptual basis for a pragmatic theory of fiction founded upon the principle of relevance rather than truth" (16). Drawing on the broad field of narratology, the theory of worlds, but particularly the linguistic insight of Grice, Walsh observes Relevance Theory as paramount for the understanding of the pragmatic and rhetorical communication between the text (and the implied author) and the reader since the narrative discourse is always incomplete, or rather cannot fully emulate perfect contextual clarity, and therefore "inference is not a supplementary component of communication, but its core" (2007: 23), and this view of context echoes the Derridean idea that meaning is only found in context, but one that is instable, temporary and supplemented by the doer of deconstruction. Furthermore, as Sperber and Wilson note, "ostensive-inferential communication [is] a process whereby 'the communicator produces a stimulus which makes it mutually manifest to communicator and audience that the communicator intends, by means of this stimulus, to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions'" (in Walsh 2007: 24). This is particularly interesting for irony since it corroborates the view that the ironic intent must be encoded within the text.

the accountability for the ironic meaning onto the recipient undoubtedly complicates the ethics of irony further as "sometimes, people even give contradictory interpretations of their own intentions" (Hutcheon 2005: 115), and, additionally, as the recognition of ironic intention need not only be encoded in the text (context), but also in "extratextual evidence such as statements by the ironist" (Hutcheon 2005: 115) or other information that the interpreter may assess as relevant to interpreting intent. Hutcheon maintains that the interpreter infers "specific semantic meaning itself and the evaluative edge of irony" (2005: 116). More specifically, the interpreter assesses the contextual appropriateness of the semantic content, as well as the attitude encoded in the context, but the very act of such assessment suggests another kind of intention – that pertaining to the interpreter to *decode* the presented information as irony, which implies a willingness to *deconstruct* textual information in such a way that presumes the "evaluative edge" (Hutcheon 2005: 116) as encoded deliberately for the interpreter to decode. With this intention, on the part of the interpreter, there is also responsibility and accountability for attributing ironic meaning, and as Hutcheon suggests, it is here that the "affective" and intensely social dimension of irony is best seen, since "those who might not attribute irony where it was intended (or where others did) risk exclusion and embarrassment" (2005: 15).

With regard to the criticism aimed at postmodernism, and specifically, the criticism that takes the extensive use of irony in postmodern literature as a symptom of disaffectedness, detachment and indifference, a lack of ethical sense and an inclination towards relativization, it is significant to note that "ironists and interpreters of irony can meet on any number of different terrains: rhetorical, linguistic, aesthetic, social, ethical, cultural, ideological, professional, and so on" (Hutcheon 2005: 94), but irony also has a strong affective (emotive) dimension. The "affective 'charge' to irony" (Hutcheon 2005: 15) reflects this critical and political edge that Hutcheon links to the discourse as produced by the discursive communities. Irony's emotive function:

> [cannot] be separated from its politics of use if it is to account for the range of emotional response (from anger to delight) and the various degrees of motivation and proximity (from distanced detachment to passionate engagement). (Hutcheon 2005: 15)

There certainly exists a relational link between the "terrains" Hutcheon mentions and the range of emotional responses, and these are additionally conditioned by the cultural normative and

institutionalized, and internalized, discourses regulating the appropriateness of irony (2005: 95). In contrast, irony, as an oppositional strategy (Hutcheon), along with parody, often appears in such domains where overt criticism, or open discussion, is not possible. It is convenient to notice the semantic peculiarity and correspondence in Hutcheon's definition of postmodernism and irony – both defined in terms of being processes.

With regard to the postmodern critical approach to discursive constructs, the discursive reality as referential, Hutcheon suggests that "all irony happens intentionally, whether the attribution be made by the encoder or the decoder" (2005: 113) since the presupposition of intentionality on the part of the ironist may be irrelevant if the decoder themselves do not express a determination to notice the evaluative dimension of the presented information. Irony, it may be suggested, is an attempt at a dialogue in a discursive community – an invitation to reassert "human agency" (Hutcheon 2005: 113), a strategy against univocity.

Discussing the political dimension of irony, its propensity for oppositional strategy, Hutcheon essentially asks whether irony can be seen as destructive or constructive:

> [irony] can be provocative when its politics are conservative or authoritarian as easily as when its politics are oppositional and subversive: it depends on who is using/attributing it and at whose expense it is seen to be. Such is the transideological nature of irony. […] My operating premise here is that nothing is ever guaranteed at the politicized scene of irony. Even if an ironist intends an irony to be interpreted in an oppositional framework, there is no guarantee that this subversive intent will be realized. (2005: 15)

On this view, the transideological politics of irony can be observed through its two possible functions (or approaches): that which negativizes, from a position that is "exterior to the system" (Hutcheon 2005: 16), and the other that offers a "more constructive or 'appropriative' function" (Hutcheon 2005: 16) that relates its critical attitude from the position within the system. Or rather, in the former, the ironist expresses a detachment from the system against which irony is used as oppositional, whereas in the latter, the ironist recognizes their position within the system. The intentionality of the ironist, depending on their position, *inside* or *outside* the system, creates a context with visible hierarchical structure, and this holds in as much as literary discourse can be considered a pseudo-communicative situation. Namely, "discourses are forms of social practice,

of interaction between participants in particular situations, whether this be in face-to-face conversation or in interpreting artistic texts" (Hutcheon 2005: 86). More specifically, this is the reason why irony is often deemed elitist. Irony's elitism displays the hierarchy of those who perceive and understand the ironic, therefore critical, intent – those who are attuned to its 'edge', and those who do not. Now, Hutcheon does not explain this in terms of irony's elitism creating social divide, or cliques, "communities or in-groups" (2005: 17), although irony's affective and social dimensions certainly have this influence. According to Hutcheon, "irony happens because what could be called "discursive communities" already exist and provide the context for both the deployment and attribution of irony" (2005: 17). Consequently:

> [irony] is one discursive strategy that both cannot be understood apart from its embodiment in context and also has trouble escaping the power relations evoked by its evaluative edge. The (paradoxically) enabling constraints that are operative in all discourses obviously function here as well, but it is not only a question of who may use irony (and where, when, how) but who may (or can) interpret it. […] irony involves the particularities of time and place, of immediate social situation and of general culture. (Hutcheon 2005: 86)

This observation is based on the already briefly discussed Foucault's view of discourse and discourse production. The 'paradoxical' constraints that simultaneously enable and restrict irony in discourse, according to Hutcheon, inevitably expose its political dimension (2005: 86), but these forces are always recognized by the discursive community, which makes irony possible (2005: 88). Additionally, this recognition "foregrounds the particularities not only of space and time but of class, race, gender, ethnicity, sexual choice – not to mention nationality, religion, age, profession, and all the other micropolitical groupings" (Hutcheon 2005: 88), and exposes the overlap of each individual's affiliation with different shared communities and collectives. Consequently, irony must be considered transideological because it essentially works against the notion that any "hard belief" as expressed in favor of single affiliation, ideology or other, might hold in the totality of the discursive community (Hutcheon 2005: 18).

Within a discursive community, then, irony uses such strategies, oppositional or 'appropriative' that instantaneously include and exclude, revealing the diversity within the community. It is this quality of irony that echoes the postmodern call to the consideration of all and everything that had

been left in the category of the 'unsaid' and 'unvoiced' for the mere appearance of uniformity and unity. In Hutcheon's words, "irony's doubleness can act as a way of counteracting any tendency to assume a categorical or rigid position of "Truth" through precisely some acknowledgement of provisionality and contingency" (Hutcheon 2005: 49). Irony is not a typically postmodern method, however, it strongly reverberates the postmodern critical endeavor in that as "a relational strategy […] it operates not only between meanings (said, unsaid) but between people (ironists, interpreters, targets)" (Hutcheon 2005: 56), and produces (ironic) meaning as a form of discourse that requires not only "a sort of general cultural competence to cover the presuppositions, background information, assumptions, beliefs, knowledge and values that are shared by ironist and interpreter" (Hutcheon 2005: 91). Additionally, it endeavors "to change how people interpret" (Hutcheon 2005: 30) the products of their culture and politics (literary or other discourses), and to understand the nature of the relations of power within their own discursive community.

Exhausting Parody

If the modest scope of discussion inspired by the review of the selected literature on irony – its structure, complexity and functioning – did not unintentionally kill the subject under vivisection, then perhaps the chapter on parody will.

In *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction*, Patricia Waugh explains the relation between defamiliarization and metafiction, and provides an explanation for how parody utilizes these modes to subversively "'defamiliarize' fictional conventions that have become both automatized and inauthentic, and to release new and more authentic forms" (2001: 65). In this view, parody is defined as a strategy that "deliberately sets itself up to break norms that have become conventionalized" (Waugh 2001: 65), and what Waugh suggests is that not only does parody destabilize the ideological, philosophical, socio-political and cultural norms as emanated in the discourse, but it challenges the conventions within the literary, or artistic, practice, and both to evaluate the discursive practice. By extension, Linda Hutcheon's view of parody's paradoxes in *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, first published in 1985, places emphasis on "the ambivalence set up between conservative repetition and revolutionary difference" (2000: 77) as particularly problematic in terms of the disclosure of intent behind the

enunciation act. In examining its pragmatic dimension, this author relates parody to irony's doubleness and the necessity for "a certain institutionalized set of values - both aesthetic (generic) and social (ideological) - in order to be understood, or even to exist" (Hutcheon 2000: 95), which echoes the entire discussion on irony in the previous chapter.

In both of these critics' view, then, parody – in using the rhetorical and pragmatic power of irony, as a strategy – represents an act of evaluation that presupposes an attitudinal direction. Moreover, Hutcheon suggests, it is the pragmatic function of irony in parody that reveals an evaluation "most frequently of a pejorative nature" (2000: 53), regardless of whether the background is parodied, or if the foregrounding of parody against a contextual background is the objective. Essentially, it is a form that "has the advantage of being both a re-creation and a creation, making criticism into a kind of active exploration of form" (Hutcheon 2000: 51) that in its act of 're-creation' trans-contextualizes preceding discourses. In the same manner in which irony requires its recipient's specific background knowledge relevant for the discourse community in which irony is used, parody is often accused of elitism (Hutcheon 2000: 95) as "it is realized or actualized only by those readers who meet certain requisite conditions, such as ability or training" (Hutcheon 2000: 95). This 'qualification' for understanding irony, and therefore parody as an even more complex form, might be explored against the concept of intertextuality which, among other factors, enables the recipient not only to decode the distinctive move of the narrative discourse towards a meaning that exceeds the literal level, but also to infer the suggested meaning of the 'unsaid'.

In *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, Taylor and Winquist explain univocity as "the idea that subjectivity is singular, autonomous, and has a unique voice, and that meaning is singular and natural" (2001: 415). In other words, it is a concept that presupposes the existence of "a singular unambiguous meaning" (Taylor & Winquist 2001: 415), and stands in direct relation to the liberal humanist notion of a possibility of such a thing as 'natural' and 'universal' – consistent – meaning, value and truth. This conception also extends to the philosophical categories of knowledge, ethics, etc., and influences much of liberal humanist, therefore, modernist ideas, generally speaking. In contrast, the view that "the individual is the site of the convergence of multiplicities (various discourses, voices, and meanings) that not only construct the subjectivity of the individual but also are part and parcel of any act of language and textuality" (Taylor & Winquist 2001: 415) describes

Mikhail Bakhtin's heteroglossia[29], a concept that is in direct opposition to univocity. Taylor and Winquist note that:

> The most crucial difference between univocity and heteroglossia concerns how knowledge and meaning are conceived either as outside of culture and history or as the immediate product of history and culture. Whereas a univocal reading suggests that language or a text possesses a singular voice with an equally particularized meaning, heteroglossia suggests that a text as well as individual subjectivity is constructed out of a range of significant and distinctive differences that are cultural and historical. (2001: 415)

On this view, heteroglossia is a concept that observes the inevitable and inescapable ideological basis in (narrative) discourse, expressed through language and relations based on power. Subsequently, the perspective of text as univocal is abandoned in postmodernism since it recognizes "the range of voices and discourses that are woven into the text" (Taylor & Winquist 2001: 415). Additionally, since heteroglossia implies ideological interpellation, willing or unwilling, intentional or unintentional, both in terms of (narrative) discourse production and reception, it necessarily extends to the relationship between texts themselves since the mediation of meaning is never direct and immediate, and produces intertextuality, as Julia Kristeva[30] terms it – the interrelatedness of (literary) texts, the referencing of one in another, pastiche, parody, etc., by which (literary) texts are referential with regard to a vast body of related discourses, literary and non-literary. Consequently, the decoding of a (literary) text, its interpretation, draws on the awareness of intertextuality, and in some cases, depends or heavily relies on it. With regard to pastiche as an example of intertextuality, or an imitation of a style, in postmodernism, Taylor and

[29] Even though Julia Kristeva's take on intertextuality presents invaluable contribution to the postmodern critical thought and marks a significant move in the direction of poststructuralism in the 1960s, for fear that it might needlessly broaden the discussion, I intentionally restrain myself from including a discussion on her essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel" (1966) in the first section of this study or at this point, and reluctantly so.

[30] Julia Kristeva's introduction and definition of the term 'intertextuality' in "Word, Dialogue and Novel" (1966), published in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980), is inspired by Bakhtin's placing the text in the context "within history and society" (65). "The poetic word, polyvalent and multi-determined," Kristeva notes, "adheres to a logic exceeding that of codified discourse and fully comes into being only in the margins of recognized culture" (1980: 65), and this logic, Kristeva acknowledges as Bakhtin's pioneering object of study, and therefore, she draws heavily on the insights of Russian Formalists and Bakhtin in particular. However, what Bakhtin terms "*translinguistic* science" (in Kristeva 1980: 69), she sees as "intertextual *relationships*" (1980: 69) for "[history] and morality are written and read within the infrastructure of texts" (1980: 65), which echoes the Derridean notion of the inherited in the discourse, but also a range of other philosophers, critics and thinkers inspiring the proliferation of the postmodern critical thought.

Winquist draw on Linda Hutcheon's conclusion that pastiche works to "both affirm and subvert the conditions of history: history is exposed as a contingent narrative, while the will to historicize is confirmed" (2001: 275), and so does parody.

However, as Hutcheon notes in *A Theory of Parody*, parody "historicizes by placing art within the history of art" (2000: 109) allowing for "certain ideological consideration" (2000: 109) to surface in a contemporary light, because the convention itself not only necessitates the act of 'reenactment', but such 'reenactment' that is regulated by the mentioned "authorized transgression of norms" (2000: 109). In terms of Waugh's comment on parody's intentional, even playful, undermining of conventions, and genre being only one of them, the Bakhtinian 'authorized transgression' holds in terms of allowing for this subversive event in the realm of art, and literature in this case. More specifically, literary works, or even non-literary discourse, are observed as interacting with the discursive reality of contemporaneity, but interacting still in the realm of artifice – of artistic creation. In fact, Hutcheon sees parody as "one of the techniques of self-referentiality by which art reveals its awareness of the context-dependent nature of meaning, of the importance to signification of the circumstances surrounding any utterance" (2000: 85), and following this line of thought, this discussion focuses on the metafictional nature of parody, but also on the nature of intent. In fact, the attitude here is that the very nature of defamiliarization of the evoked context stands as reflexive of the rhetorical intent by the parodist. And yet, as Waugh suggests, the rhetorical intent may be subtle enough to point the reader in the direction of "the indeterminacy of the text" (2001: 67), placing them in the position of the secondary critic, "to revise his or her rigid preconceptions based on literary and social conventions, by playing off contemporary and earlier paradigms against each other" (2001: 67). The success of such an endeavor on the part of the parodist underscores the significance of what Hutcheon calls the discursive community in *Irony's Edge*, but also the, perhaps, rightly imputed criticism of parody's elitism in certain cases. Waugh argues that parody's "creation" is "[fused] with critique" (2001: 68) in such a manner that the act of creation itself reintroduces into the discourse the 'thing' that is internalized and institutionalized in the discourse by means of which it:

> [renews] and maintains the relationship between form and what it can express, by upsetting a previous balance which has become so rigidified that the conventions of the form can express only a limited or even irrelevant content (2001: 68)

In other words, in a deconstructive manner, parody sets up such a discourse that relates to both the past and contemporaneity, but also a discourse in which the artifice is laid bare, the "very essence of narrative – its inescapable linearity, its necessary selectiveness as it translates the non-verbal into the verbal – and finally creates its own comedy out of its critique" (Waugh 2001: 69). Parody, however, does so not by means of covert criticism (only), but by exposing the discursive nature of such social, political, ideological and other dimensions encompassed by the re-created discourse challenging the univocity of the parodic source.

Hutcheon argues that the postmodern parody, that is metafictional, and defamiliarizing (Waugh), is an example of Bakhtin's "'double-voiced' word" (in Hutcheon 2000: 72) as "discourse within and about discourse" (2000: 72). Hutcheon explicates the formal nature of the connection between irony and parody, or parody's use of irony as a strategy, as a sort of hierarchy in which irony "[operates] on a microcosmic (semantic) level in the same way that parody does on a macrocosmic (textual) level" (2000: 54). Moreover, "irony's patent refusal of semantic univocality matches parody's refusal of structural unitextuality" (Hutcheon 2000: 54), which is the reason why irony is so organically found in parody as a rhetorical strategy.

Modern parody, Hutcheon suggests, explores "the nature of self-reference and legitimacy" (2000: 2), but in its self-reflexivity, it is a form of "inter-art discourse" (2000: 2). This "authorized transgression" (Bakhtin), subversive or conservative (2000: 101), in modern parody stands to provide space for auto-reflexivity and "a new model for artistic process" (2000: 5). Furthermore, Hutcheon sees parody as involving "another kind of 'worldly' connection" (2000: 110) by which ideological layers are exposed as they are appropriated by the contemporary discourse, exposed as being 'referenced' "to a different set of codes" (2000: 110). By the act of subjecting the parodic original to contemporary *codes*, "continuity" (Hutcheon 2000: 110) is established, with the past – its traditions, values and the totality of the inheritance that Derrida, among other, notices. The continuity Hutcheon speaks about also implies a preservation of certain legacies that hold sway in the moment of the enunciative act. More specifically, parody enables continuity of literary works by the act of its own enunciation, the recreation of the already familiar discourse (or even non-literary discourse) with parodic intention, and their re-appropriation in contemporaneity (Hutcheon 2000: xi). In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon characterizes postmodern parody as "the ironic mode of intertextuality that enables such revisitations of the past" that self-reflexively

problematize the “modernist aesthetic autonomy and unproblematic realist reference” (2004: 225). Moreover, postmodern parody as the self-reflexive ironic mode examines the ideological, political and cultural dimensions of the discourses it draws on, both literary and non-literary, and evaluates them in the light of contemporaneity while heavily relying on the cultural conventions and codes it works within.

Digressing for a moment on the tension between modernism and postmodernism, or rather the style, I draw here on Fredric Jameson’s insight into the representational modes of postmodernism. Disregarding the implicit understanding here of both modernism and postmodernism as solely heuristic labels, Jameson’s insight that “[modernist] styles […] become postmodernist codes” (1991: 16) deserves reflection in the discussion on parody since Hutcheon herself bases some of her arguments and counterarguments on his view of postmodern parody. Jameson sees “the stupendous proliferation of social codes today into professional and disciplinary jargons (but also into the badges of affirmation of ethnic, gender, race, religious, and class-factional adhesion)” (1991: 16) as the outcome of the postmodern propensity for fragmentation of everything, including politics. Jameson recognizes the toppling of the once “dominant (or hegemonic) ideology of bourgeois society” (1991: 16) and their transformation into “a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm” (1991: 16). What is problematic about Jameson’s otherwise insightful interpretation of neoliberalism is potentially the implication that somehow the bourgeois hegemony is nostalgically recalled in his text. Namely:

> Faceless masters continue to inflect the economic strategies which constrain our existences, but they no longer need to impose their speech (or are henceforth unable to); and the postliteracy of the late capitalist world reflects not only the absence of any great collective project but also the unavailability of the older national language itself. (1991: 16)

In this context, Jameson does not see the space for parody, and only recognizes pastiche as the representational method of postmodernism, devoid of a critical dimension, “the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language” (1991: 16). Pastiche, as opposed to parody, is “neutral practice of mimicry” or “blank parody” (1991: 16). However, in *A Theory of Parody*, Hutcheon clarifies that parody cannot be understood as a synonym for intertextuality (Hutcheon 2000: 23), since a range of forms, genres and styles

involve intertextuality, in varying degrees, but parody "through ironic recoding" trans-contextualizes (2000: 101) and creates space for "textual dialogism" in Bakhtin's words (in Hutcheon 2000: 22). More precisely, it is a form that "paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies" and "forces a reconsideration of the idea of origin or originality that is compatible with other postmodern interrogations of liberal humanist assumptions" (Hutcheon 2004: 11). The broad definition of parody "as a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity" (Hutcheon 2000: xii) adds to the previous claim that parody is a self-reflexive form of ironic criticism that works within the culturally or otherwise implied constrains that establish a clear relationship with the past, and yet provide a contemporary context – ideological, philosophical, or other. Essentially, parody as a communicative act, "intensely context and discourse-dependent" (Hutcheon 2000: xiv) becomes possible only in the circumstances of shared cultural and other assumptions about the discursive reality. Therefore, the reception end of the communicative act of parody needs to be recognized and decoded as such by the implied reader, or addressee in general. Hutcheon notes that "in recognizing something as a 'parody,' we are, in fact, inferring not just an intent to parody but also an intent to parody a certain text" (2000: xiv), which suggests that, much like the ironic intention, parody must move within the social, cultural, political or other framework in order to be received in the intended manner.

In postmodernism, Hutcheon notices, parody becomes "a privileged mode of […] formal self-reflexivity because its paradoxical incorporation of the past into its very structures often points to these ideological contexts somewhat more obviously, more didactically, than other forms" (2004: 35). What Hutcheon understands as the didactic quality of postmodern parody is its "ex-centric" mode (2004: 35) that suggests the presence of the marginalized and liminal voices within the dominant discourse, the traces of ideology (Bakhtin, Derrida, Kristeva, Foucault, Barthes). The dominant context, as Hutcheon suggests, is explored both from the positions of immersion and exclusion in postmodern parody so that the historical, ideological, philosophical, literary, political and cultural continuity are brought into "a dialogical relation between identification and distance" (2004: 35). The "enunciative act," Hutcheon finds, involves the spatio-temporal, socio-political moment, and overall, "an entire context" (2000: 23) of the discourses that precede and follow the parodic act. This is, of course, to emphasize the self-reflexive and metafictional nature of parody on the whole – its intentionality to evoke the preceding discourses by implicating them in the

marginalized, liminal, 'unspoken' discourses of the moment of its act, and the unique postmodern touch to it suggests the critical distance that allows for the multiplicity of interpretations with the view of the artifice of our discursive realities.

Postmodern parody situates meaning "only 'in relation to a significant context': that is, the context of the once suppressed enunciative act as a whole, and that of 'situated' discourse which does not ignore the social, historical or ideological dimensions of understanding" (Hutcheon 2004: 82). In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon places emphasis on the critical outlook on the past, "and not nostalgically – in relation with the present" (2004: 45), whereby "questions of sexuality, of social inequality and responsibility, of science and religion, and of the relation of art to the world are all raised and directed both at the modern reader and the social and literary conventions of the last century" (2004: 45). This author suggests that parody:

> [requires] that historical context in order to interrogate the present (as well as the past) through its critical irony. Parodic self-reflexiveness paradoxically leads here to the possibility of a literature which, while asserting its modernist autonomy as art, also manages simultaneously to investigate its intricate and intimate relations with the social world in which it is written and read. (Hutcheon 2004: 45)

The historical context, and the enunciative act of parodic reworking, implies a level of imitation that is referential. However, parodic referential propensity does not render it neutral, for that would amount to pastiche. It is rather that parody should be observed as "repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (Hutcheon 2004: 26). In other words, the similarity obtained in the enunciative act of parodic reenactment serves to summon the historical context that is to be examined critically and, necessarily, ironically, from the contemporary distance. With regard to this, Hutcheon argues that parodic forms, its "targets, and its intentions" (2000: xi) change with time, which, logically, depends on the various interacting contexts and discourses interacting with those preceding them. Nevertheless, with regard to art's, and in this case, literature's, penchant for the appropriation of the historical context, Hutcheon finds negative attitude towards parody unsurprising (2000: xii).

Furthermore, the "ideological ambivalence" of parody, or "parody's pragmatics" (2000: xiv) as Hutcheon sees it, stands to emphasize the significance of this vehicle:

> Like irony, parody is a form of indirect as well as double-voiced discourse, but it is not parasitic in any way. In transmuting or remodelling previous texts, it points to the differential but mutual dependence of parody and parodied texts. Its two voices neither merge nor cancel each other out; they work together, while remaining distinct in their defining difference. In this sense parody might be said to be, at heart, less an aggressive than a conciliatory rhetorical strategy, building upon more than attacking its other, while still retaining its critical distance. (Hutcheon 2000: xiv)

If irony's edge is found in parody's evaluative and critical attitude that is contained within the context and related to the reader, then parody also works solely in the context of a "limited and controlled version of this activation of the past by giving it a new and often ironic context" (Hutcheon 2000: 5), but assuming or expecting, at the same time, a readiness in the reader to recognize the intentionally provided (provocation of) appraisal. Without the assumption that the reader, or any addressee of parodic enunciation, would express a willingness to participate in the 'dialogue', parody remains in the realm of imitation.

Hutcheon mentions "recognizability" (2000: 75) as a 'criterion' for even temporary suspensions of conventional limitations and restrictions, within a genre or artistic practice (2000: 75), for parody would not work without a willingness of the recipient to endeavor to decode the trans-contextualized content and the evaluative, oppositional, ironic layer of the parodic act. This 'recognizability' would suggest that the imitative impulse behind parody, in fact, allows for the continuity of literary (or artistic) forms as much as it allows for the continuity of the evaluative attitude towards them, and their appropriation in the contemporary moment. Parody, Hutcheon argues, is not only a "formal textual imitation," but an "acknowledged [borrowing]" (2000: 38) defamiliarized by particular intent. However, the intent itself is facilitated by the 'borrowing' since in the 'creation of the re-creation', parody takes on the form of the text it addresses in order to "ease the decoder's interpretative task" (Hutcheon 2000: 38).

The parodic imitation can be observed as "characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text" (Hutcheon 2000: 6), suggesting that the double voicing in parody, much like in irony, strives to extrapolate from the conflicted interaction of contexts that which remains relevant in the moment of critical reflection, either by means of "parodic foreground and

parodied background” (Hutcheon 2000: 31). Additionally, for Hutcheon, parody serves to express both opposition and contrast (2000: 32), but unlike satire, parody need not even have the social and distinctly moral objective, “ameliorative in its intention” (2000: 16). In fact, satire may use parodic meaning in order to rhetorically relate its concretely directed criticism “with an eye to […] correction” (Hutcheon 2000: 54) – something that parody, in itself does not attempt so overtly. By extension, the capacity of parody to contrast, Hutcheon attributes to its function – the difference that is achieved in the ‘repetition’ that encompasses both the act and the form (2000: 34).

On account of parody’s possible decadence, Waugh argues that postmodern metafictional parody introduces novelty in terms of the very *difference* Hutcheon mentions, and it does so by “undermining an earlier set of fictional conventions which have become automatized” (2001: 65), and creating a new space for further dialogue between discourses, ‘within and about’. However, the disparaging and destructive potential of parody can be related to the character of the driving-intention. Hutcheon sees this as a deliberate move to “disorient the reader” (2000: 92) rather than pointing them in the desired direction. This issue proves to be complex, yet persistently relevant with postmodern metafictional parody as it guides this discussion into the direction of the ethics of parody. Hutcheon suggests that in contemporary (meta)fiction:

> [parody] is frequently joined to manipulative narrative voices, overtly addressing an inscribed receiver, or covertly maneuvering the reader into a desired position from which intended meaning (recognition and then interpretation of parody, for example) can be allowed to appear, as if in anamorphic form. […] this almost didactic self-consciousness about the entire act of enunciation (the production and reception of a text) has only led in much current criticism to the valorizing of the reader. (2000: 86)

On the other hand, Waugh suggests that in metafiction, “where the literary norm(s) become the object of parody, the reader is educated in the relationship of historical and cultural to literary systems” (2001: 66). The reader is, therefore, made aware of “the relations of that norm to its original historical context, through its defamiliarizing contextualization within a historical present whose literary and social norms have shifted” (Waugh 2001: 66), but the criticism that parody elicits is provided by the work, or rather “in the work itself by the process which produces the joke or parody” (Waugh 2001: 78).

ANOTHER INTRODUCTION: CONTEMPORARY AND CANADIAN AND SHORT

In *Likely Stories – A Postmodern Sampler* (1992), Bowering and Hutcheon make a witty remark about postmodernism as a range of experiences and interpretations, one may assume, from the point of view of a reader, critic, author, etc. They say:

> Only you can decide which way you choose to read the postmodernism you live. (That in itself is a postmodern statement, I suppose.) (Bowering & Hutcheon 1992: 11)

And the postmodern outlook here, or the outlook on postmodernism, will not leave many eyebrows unraised, but that is the price that needs to be paid in deconstructing my own inherited legacies, traditions, aesthetic notions and value-systems, and especially so in higher education. If there is any perceived eccentricity in my interpretation of postmodernism, then it is likely a symptom of the inevitable immersion in postmodern and mass culture, and less likely the desire for any particular originality or unconventionality. In the Foreword to *Likely Stories*, Bowering and Hutcheon make a note to something that might be related to this entire personal interjection, a meta-commentary, so to say:

> […] we live in an age of electronic reproduction and information technology, an age that has been called 'postmodern'. That's one of the more polite things it has been called, of course, and the label has itself come to the subject of much debate. […] The postmodern seems to worry people… even people who rather enjoy it." (1992: 9)

It is difficult not to resonate with Bowering's and Hutcheon's straightforward, truthful, yet paradoxical claim that postmodernism disturbs, as much as it provides pleasure[31]. The nature of this 'pleasure' being ironic in many senses of that word, perhaps it is no wonder that it always leaves a bitter-sweet taste. Postmodern literature continually modifies our sensibility by deconstructing our notions of what discursive reality is made of in actuality. It brings to surface the 'universal' concerns only to abandon them in the face of contemporary contradictions. It may be unsurprising that the first half of the twentieth century has been marked by the metaphor of personal quest and the subjective – the exploration of the modern artistic-self; and the second half by the subjective perception of reality as the ultimate artifice produced and controlled by discourse,

[31] Terry Eagleton, after all, sees postmodernism as a sadomasochistic spell of Theory's in *After Theory* (2003).

in perpetuation. Both modernists and postmodernists would probably agree, at least, on that. Figuratively speaking, for the contemporary condition of living immersed in mass culture that is constantly challenged by traditional, sometimes elitist and sometimes simply counteracting forces of subcultures, telling these narratives, deconstructing them subjectively, is a mode of sanity. Sometimes, this sanity also has a political ‘edge’.

This subjective understanding and internalization of how the postmodern critical thought reflects on the contemporary Canadian short story, of course, might be problematic or *inelegant* for innumerable reasons – the most obvious one, my not being Canadian, or *Canadian* enough to grasp the most minute depths and complexities of the cultural and socio-political cobweb as woven in its contemporary short fiction. For this reason, in this section and the sections that follow the analyses, I turn to the literature that seems to have stood the test of time and remained relevant in terms of underscoring the idiosyncrasies of *Canadianness* in short fiction, but also contemporary literature that could suggest even divergent lines of thinking on the matter, or that could complement or corroborate my insight. This endeavor, however, does not intend to provide a comprehensive review as much as it strives to provide an inspiring framework for, hopefully, authentic conclusions about the contemporary Canadian short fiction selected for this study.

As Bowering and Hutcheon note:

> Some associate [postmodernism] with oppositional politics, with resistance and challenge; for others, however, it connotes only a contamination by (and complicity with) the benighted culture of ‘late capitalism.’ Still, others see it as both: that is to say, as demystifying and contesting, because it is always part of the culture it nevertheless seeks to criticize. (1992: 11)

Objectively observing this selection of postmodern literature reveals a satiation of sorts. If indeed “resistance and challenge” are only expressible in terms of oppositional rhetoric, then it is a symptom of disillusionment that goes beyond modernist avant-garde escapism or nihilism, because postmodern literature recognizes not the limitedness of its own imaginative potential, but the futility of escapism in the face of neoliberal capitalist economy-driven politics. As Bower and Hutcheon suggest, postmodern experiments create these “‘likely stories’” (1992: 15) that the irony and parody make obvious by defamiliarizing the discourses governing our lives. These may, of

course, be the source of great displeasure because the only pleasure derived from such ‘likely stories’ may be that of recognition, identification and the devastating powerlessness. Neither as a vindication or apology for the postmodern refusal to artificially induce optimism where it does not reside, nor for the fact that a significant part of this dissertation is written in isolation due to global pandemics that has been exposing the remnants of liberal humanist hypocrisy in the treatment of the average person worldwide, the biased yet self-reflexive postmodern attitude here serves as a call for groundedness, both in theory, or Theory, and in terms of avoiding any overly dramatic political interpretations of the stories about the world we share.

In the Preface to *The Canadian Postmodern,* a study by Linda Hutcheon, first published in 1988, Aritha van Herk describes the postmodern trend as one in which the plurality of truths replaced “Truth” (in Hutcheon 2012: ix), or the modernist and liberal humanist notion of universality, as emanated in the *episteme* and history, that continually fuels social and cultural progress. This critic brings this shift in direct connection with the evolution of feminist ideas, and in the recognition of “how cultural notions of the feminine are inevitably inscribed by and in language” (in Hutcheon 2012: ix). The substantiality of this insight has been discussed extensively in the first section, but what van Herk specifically points to is that, potentially, it was feminism that has made a significant, if partial, impact on the postmodern practice (in Hucheon 2012: viii), and unarguably so at the political, social, economic levels, as well as at the level of cultural practice. What would be interesting, however, is to investigate whether this impact has remained at the level of discourse or if it has permeated the practice as well, i.e. the referential reality, and the topicality in the selection of contemporary Canadian short stories might suggest that, indeed, the practice has not experienced the radical change the feminist discourse tenaciously focuses on. Even though feminist theory and criticism only tentatively figure in this study, van Herk’s insight stands to expand the scope of the individual short story analyses with the view of isolating such thematic issues that might signal the persistence of feminist concerns, and their specific Canadian nature in contemporaneity.

Additionally, Aritha van Herk sees the “postmodern ‘different’” replacing the “humanist ‘universal’ as a prime cultural value” (in Hutcheon 2012: ix), which is “good news for Canadians who are not of Anglo or French origin – that is, for a good proportion of the country’s population today” (in Hutcheon 2012: ix). This critic sees the postmodern insistence on the ‘engagement’ of

difference – engagement as opposed to integration or assimilation – as a largely positive legacy of the sixties, “those paradoxical years of political engagement and self-indulgence” (in Hutcheon 2012: x). Granted, van Herk somewhat retains the attitude partial to contemporary modernist view of postmodernism as a relativization. This, in the light of the entire discussion on postmodern theory, is unsurprising. What is more, it might be understandable, since postmodernism, as Hutcheon brilliantly notices in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, stands for a process, and the process of postmodernism frequently amounts to disarray, confusion and disorder – of thoughts, perspectives and directions. However, once again, van Herk inspires another angle of observation in the analyses of the selected stories – one from the point of view of the supposed multicultural character of the Canadian society. With regard to this, liminality, as almost inherently present in postmodern literature, will be explored in such instances where, as Taylor and Winquist in *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism* suggest, there is ‘indeterminacy’ “between two or more spatial or temporal realms, states, or the condition of passing through them” (2001: 219). Additionally, they describe liminality as “the state of being betwixt or between… […] to describe the nebulous social and spiritual location of persons in ritual rites of passage,” but also, “states of initiation in which an individual's status of kinship or influence in the community is undecidable” (2001: 218), which all seem to be largely postmodern concerns, and they do not escape the focus and scope of contemporary Canadian short story authors either. As the postmodern critical thought focuses on the process, postmodern liminality “rejects the privileging of any clearly definable center over a broader sense of middle ground with indistinct boundaries” (Taylor & Winquist 2001: 219).

In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon argues that our “fin-de-millennium consciousness” moves on the pendulum of, on the one hand, “ultramodernism (of technology)” and “hyperprimitivism (of public moods)” (2004: 223), explaining the subsequent “disintegration and decay” (2004: 223) in the interaction of what, one may suppose, are the unsustainable, perhaps even elitist, aesthetic traditions, and popular and mass culture on the other. If this is to suggest that the range or scope of the interacting currents of mainstream discourses and cultures, and their counteracting forces, multiplying and diverging in their subjective interpretation of discursive reality, somehow escape the pressure and influence of historical legacies, then it would imply that there is no literary or other continuity in our production. Hutcheon deals with this “bold assertion” that postmodernism is a de-historicizing force as having “little relation to the actual works of postmodern art” (2004: 223). Of course, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon mainly deals

with the postmodern metafictional historiographic novel, but the contemporary Canadian short story can still be criticized in the same vein because its focus on contemporaneity never seems to be quite free from the grasp of the historically prevalent or disputed discourses, even if their overt mentioning seems redundant. The presence of these discourses – on femininity and masculinity, motherhood and fatherhood, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, personal and national identity, among other socio-political constructs – resides in the layers of the implied and the 'unsaid' in the selection of the contemporary Canadian short stories selected for this study, and they all reveal an intertextuality of sorts – an 'inter-topicality' even – as "a modality of perception" (Hutcheon 2005: 138) that, contrary to the imputed criticism against postmodernism as relativizing and chaotic, strives to expose the falsity of the notion of universality of experience, at least on this 'local' level.

The analyses of the selected stories in this section, in the sixteen chapters that follow, are inspired by the insights drawn from the framework assembled on postmodernism in the previous chapters, with irony and parody being the main instruments in the postmodern interrogation of the topical in the contemporary Canadian short stories selected. A digression at this point seems to be necessary with regard to the specific postmodern concerns addressed in the individual stories. In the first section of this study, postmodernism is discussed from the angle of Jacques Derrida's concept of deconstruction – a self-reflexive endeavor that implies an active process of interpretation of that which is received, with the awareness of what participates in its construction, and with the awareness of what it is that the traces, the liminal, the marginal and the *difference* might signify and relate as meaning in the process of reading. Additionally, the discourse that such a deconstruction entails, which is this study in itself, is the object of the same sort of interrogative process, which is discussed extensively in the context of Linda Hutcheon's studies on postmodern poetics (problematics), irony and parody. It is particularly unappealing to discuss individual stories using the terminology and *discourse* of Theory. Moreover, it seems almost absurd to implant or reproduce the discourse of Theory into criticism and interpretation, for that would suggest a level of *framing* of the selected literary works. For this reason, in the concluding chapters, the stories will be discussed further from the perspectives of relevant postmodern theories, those invited by the topicality shared by the selection of short stories, and in terms of certain phenomenological concerns foregrounded by the postmodern critical thought.

The analyses largely focus on the postmodern use of irony and parody as rhetorical (and pragmatic) devices and methods of representation – as employed to relate specific socio-political and cultural commentaries, and their import necessarily draws on the referential topicality and invites, if not subsequent eclecticism in terms of theoretical discussions, then specifically a range of theories that could provide additional interpretative dimensions. Any insinuation or indication at a particular bias towards a postmodern sub-current in terms of feminist, queer or gender theory, as well as theories on culture, multiculturalism, etc., should be widely dismissed as my own being affected by the postmodern drive for anti-totalization, multiplicity and range, and as a general reluctance to become the prey in the postmodern cobweb of conflicting, diverging and oppositional theoretical practices as pertaining to the mentioned theories, which could tempt me into the direction of unintentional abstraction and inscription. At the same time, this should definitely be the source of valid criticism against the conclusions drawn in this study, for it does not, at least in the interpretative section, fall back on a theoretical framework that could comfortably soften the plunge into the exploration of a culture the author has not immediately experienced, if that is, indeed, a prerequisite for interpreting literature transculturally[32].

On the other hand, the very title of this dissertation, *Postmodern Interpretations of the Contemporary Canadian Short Story*, points to the premise behind this endeavor, which is that the instances of the 'double-edge' or 'doubleness' of irony, and particularly so in parody, as rhetorically charged and combined with the postmodern interrogative attitude, necessarily produce varied interpretative experiences, or degrees, at least of interpretative certainty – a phenomenon in literature that might be overrated, but one that undoubtedly brings pleasure to anyone who has the habit of immersing themselves in other people's experience of the realities we share.

[32] In the Preface to *Canadian Cultural Poesis: Essays on Canadian Culture* (2006), Garry Sherbert, Annie Gérin and Sheila Petty, the editors of the volume, note that their collection "springs from the recognition that until now there has been no textbook by Canadians, for Canadians, on Canadian culture" (xi), and yet there seems to be a rise in the non-Canadian contemporary literature dealing with what they call the "paradoxical fascination with an indeterminate Canadian identity" (xi). Whether this dissertation might contribute to the vast body of contemporary literature on the elusive *Canadianness*, in answering some of the questions the editors and authors in *Canadian Cultural Poesis* pose, "[trying] to understand the open-ended, negotiated nature of the process of identification" (Sherbert et al. 2006: xi), remains to be evaluated. However, the outcome of the peer assessment being irrelevant for the moment, in the process of writing, the project itself testifies to the perplexingly fascinating nature of the Canadian quest for identity – individual and national – in these postmodern circumstances.

Contemporary Canadian short fiction, as discussed both in the introduction to this study, and in this very chapter, exhibits a highly postmodern attitude towards the cultural mosaic it discusses and its own act of creation, and the stories selected for this study are merely decidedly illustrative of the use of irony and parody as postmodern problematizing instruments. This is to say that, in terms of how the postmodern interrogative attitude is understood here – as a deconstructive endeavor self-reflexively questioning the conditions of the subjective and the supposedly universal and the dominant – all of these stories are displays of the intentional postmodern language play, the impulse to examine the historical, cultural, political and other inheritance as interpenetrating the discourses of contemporaneity, the foregrounding of the subjective and the *different* against the background of what is presented as universal, the satiation with the discourses that no longer represent sustainable and viable constructs in contemporaneity, the counteracting currents to the mainstream discourses, the viciousness of social, cultural and political constructs of contemporaneity that reflect the neoliberal capitalist ideology, etc. Subsequently, it is in the chapters that follow that the topical import of irony and parody is discussed in individual stories, and it is in the concluding chapters that the persisting postmodern concerns are discussed against the selected theoretical frameworks.

TESTS, TRIALS AND A VIGNETTE

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Linda Hutcheon sees "the postmodern valuing of the different and the diverse in opposition to the uniform and the unified" (2012: 19) as reflexive of "the Canadian self-image" (2012: 19). From the perspective of the longstanding tendency or oppositional mode of defining their national identity against the American model, Hutcheon sees Canadianness as resisting the urge for "unification, be it geographic, demographic, or ideological" (2012: 19), which is not to say, in the light of the insight the analyses of the selection of contemporary short fiction offers, that this propensity for resisting the cultural, social and political dynamics as an amalgamating force does not also operate from within – keeping the Canadian exploratory mode alert towards its own oppositional and counteracting forces, within culture and as acted upon diverse subcultures. As Holman and Thacker note in "Literary and Popular Culture," "*Canadianness* is a process," and one emanated in "[the] act of performing culture [which is an act] of regular declaration: Canadians telling themselves and others who they think they are"

(2013: 187). Understood in this manner, as a matter of perpetual "indeterminacy" (Holman & Thacker 2013: 187), Canadian culture is "[a] fragmented culture – a culture of limited identities" (Holman & Thacker 2013: 196), and its contemporary short fiction seems to offer an insight into a range of such experiences – of Canadianness as a *process*. With regard to this, Martha Dvořák's and W. H. New's interpretation of the short story as emanating a certain tension in "Introduction, Troping and Territory" in *Tropes and Territories* (2007), "the friction that develops between writer and subject and social context" (13), complements the initial idea of this study that it is in the short fiction form that these instances of social, cultural and political tensions are specifically visible and effective – not due to the length of the genre-form, but due to its poetic demand from the author.

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Hutcheon sees the Canadian exploratory mode as the result of the postmodern critical thought entering the sphere of the local[33], or more specifically, "[translating] the existing Canadian emphasis on regionalism in literature" (2012: 19), not only decentering the perspective, but rather focusing on "the different, the local, the particular – in opposition to the uniform" (2012: 19), which in the case of contemporary literature selected for this study incidentally shows a convergence of topical concerns and interests which, on the one hand, explore the historical and traditional legacies as imparted to contemporaneity by the liberal humanist philosophy and its accrued value systems still persistent as remnants of traditional patriarchy in neoliberal capitalism, and on the other, a range of topics resurrected in the discourse by feminist and gender studies, involving marginalized and liminal voices, but also cultural and social constructs that have yet to be carefully defined.

In the Introduction to her study, *Canadian Literature* (2007), Faye Hammill emphasizes the absence of a "critical overview of Anglophone Canadian literature in print" (3) as a surprising phenomenon considering the popularity of Canadian Studies, at least in Europe. Hammill stresses

[33] In *Double Voicing the Canadian Short Story*, Laurie Kruk marks Neil Besner's overview of "Fiction" for *University of Toronto Quarterly*, in which he was "struck by the number of short story collections he had to review— almost half the books submitted—and concluded that 'short fiction has always been more open to variation and experiment in mode, voice and style than has the novel'" (2016: 8), but it might be added, that also as a form it might be more conducive to the exploration of the everyday experience – the mentioned tensions that the majority of critics seem to emphasize as the key feature of contemporary Canadian fiction. It is at the level of the 'mundane' that the world of short fiction explores conflicts between the collective and individual, the discourse defined and the subjective experience, and its brevity and metaphor-carried narrative progression creates the dynamic space for questioning those philosophical and ideological bases of our lives.

the urgency for “a book which synthesises and updates existing accounts of Canadian literary history while also offering new close readings of key texts, reflecting on the contours of the subject, and explaining the relevance of different theoretical approaches” (2007: 3). However, what Hammill also points to is that “the teaching canon of Canadian literature is very much determined by publishers” and by the availability of literature (2007: 14). Both issues direct attention to the challenges encountered in studying and teaching Canadian literature and culture, and much like Hammill who acknowledges that she has “naturally given emphasis to authors [she] enjoys” in her study (2007: 13), so was the selection of the fifteen short stories for this dissertation guided by the subjective principle of enjoyment with certain authors. Considering that the majority of them are emerging authors whose names have not yet been marked in the comprehensive canon of Canadian literature, this dissertation hopes to contribute in terms of giving them critical acclaim and celebrating this “vibrant, heterogeneous and expanding discipline which forges productive connections across academic and reading communities” (2007: 175), as Hammill puts it.

The Journey Prize Stories, or *The Writers' Trust of Canada McClelland & Stewart Journey Prize*, is one of the most prestigious Canadian literary awards and short fiction anthologies, dating back to 1989, producing thirty-one volumes so far (1989-2019), and each including the shortlisted short fiction works of emerging authors published in Canadian literary magazines, annually. This particular series of anthologies has been chosen as the main source for the selection of contemporary short fiction not only because of its now well-established tradition, but also because of its focus on the contemporary moment and contemporary authors[34]. However, the selection of stories from *The Journey Prize Stories* anthologies is complemented by three stories from two collections by Zsuzsi Gartner – my initial inspiration for exploring ironic and parodic representation in contemporary short fiction.

Zsuzsi Gartner’s collection of short stories *All the Anxious Girls on Earth*, first published in 1999, includes nine stories, two of which are selected for analysis here, “How to Survive in the Bush” and “Pest Control for Dummies™.”

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[34] Additionally, it should be noted, *The Journey Prize Stories* volumes are among the very few available when it comes to Canadian-published literature, at least in the context of Serbia.

In "Pest Control for Dummies™," a young couple goes through a crisis sparked by the male protagonist's realization that the lack of physical attraction towards his girlfriend might be a 'deal-breaker' in the long run since he finds at least two other, older, women, a neighbor and his girlfriend's mother, more appealing due to their bony, skinny and emaciated bodies. Jack's personal aesthetics and preferences bring into question the ideal of the feminine, and the image of the attractiveness of his own body features in the narrative as strain, rigidity and tension – figuratively reflecting his anxiety, the need for external confirmation, but also unconsciously, domination. The female protagonist, at the same time, experiences something that might be considered a pseudo-loss. On finding out that her mother had a stillborn son within a year before she was born, Daisy is plunged into a virtual narrative of her own within the story in which she explores the relationship with the brother she never had in reality – a fetus; but also the relationship with their mother, within the bounds of that narrative, as well as her own conception of motherhood. Gartner's story bends the narrative structure by impregnating it with a virtual, spatially and temporally displaced, narrative focalized from the perspective of the female protagonist thus creating a contrast between the rational and irrational, internal and external – all metaphorically represented in the tension, or rather spasm, that Jack experiences in the absence of the ability to 'defend' himself against the 'pests' taking over his life: his girlfriend – Daisy, an annoying friend who overstays his welcome regularly, a pesky exterminator-poet, and the inappropriate and lustful, recurring, thoughts about Daisy's mother and the next-door neighbor. With the same level of unease, the narrative of Daisy explores the nature of the virtual sibling relationship and her subsequent irrationality in desperately involving herself in the life of a man who she unreasonably suspects could be her brother reincarnated. Indirectly, in "Pest Control for Dummies™," Gartner explores the potential link between childhood and motherhood through the implanted narrative of Daisy's. However, through the narrative of Jack, the concept of femininity is examined to reveal the artificiality of the construct by observing it through the eyes of a subservient, retentive male whose internal conflicts ironically illustrate his inability to 'bend the norm', react, resist, refuse, or act authentically. Furthermore, Gartner tentatively explores Jack's internalized idea of masculinity, although this is not as elaborated as in "Summer of the Flesh Eater," the third story by this author.

Zsuzsi Gartner's "How to Survive in the Bush," explores narrative conventions and destabilizes the discourse, at the level of syntax, semantics and style, by directly parodically importing the

form of the Canadian pioneer women's literary works and situating the events of the narrative in the contemporary moment, thereby adding to the irony of the trope typically associated with early Canadian writing, and yet extending it to the current women's questions. The metaphor of survival, however, in this story, ironically contrasts the urban and rural landscapes as the stereotype-providing background for a turbulent romantic relationship between the protagonist and a former pilot determined on isolating himself and obsessed with building a replica of an airplane that metaphorically stands for his objective – altitude. In her authentic manner, Gartner exposes the instability of syntax in the formal narrative structure which simultaneously takes the reader on a spatio-temporal journey invited by the evident and unavoidable, Canadian, intertextuality, but also allows the reader to become immersed in contemporary topicality, on a more universal level – asking them to be 'in' on the urban versus the rural 'joke' – and syntactically allowing for the narrative to be read as a present-moment process. The experimental nature of the narrative in terms of its formal structure, style, syntax and the overall reliance on intertextuality as the main source of its ultimate irony, exposes its metafictional nature in that the narrative enjoys being read as ambiguous as it is – spatio-temporally dislocated, or somewhere in-between – yet remaining a stable unit.

In the 2003 collection, the selection jury of *The Journey Prize Stories*, volume 15 – Michelle Berry, Timothy Talyor and Michael Winter – conclude that "the short story has never before been as flexible as it is today" (xvii), and incidentally, the story chosen from this volume, Jessica Grant's "My Husband's Jump" testifies to this *flexibility* with respect to its narrative structure and the systematic semantic instability – the postmodern language play. Jessica Grant's character in "My Husband's Jump" bends the literal norm in the narrative real-world – the Olympic ski jumper never lands after breaking all the possible marks, going beyond humanly possible and physics-explained lengths and reaching the altitude from which there seems to be no turning point. This very short narrative explores the postmodern, deconstructivist, idea of the instability of the sign and of the 'word' itself, allowing for semantic inversions, ironic twists and reversals to drive the narrative progression to the point of a philosophical deconstruction of faith at the level of the protagonist's, the Olympic ski jumper's wife's, experience of loss and grief. The selection jury of the volume shortlisting "My Husbands Jump" comment on the "enormous and at times daunting scope of possibility within this famously difficult prose form" (Berry et al. 2003: xvii), and granted, it is the postmodern propensity for self-reflexiveness that drives the experiment in which the story

eludes the limits of the traditional understanding of convention and genre. In this particular case, the narrative resists closure following the premise that the plot itself – the disappearance of the character of the protagonist's husband – resists explanation. Much in the spirit of postmodern problematization, the protagonist ironically unmasks the fragility of faith or faithlessness in formulating her own version of spirituality as the immediate experience of the process of unexplainable loss. The selection jury also notice, and this pertains to the selected story as much as it does to other eleven, that:

> Conventionally, the challenge of the short story seemed to be an issue of selective compression. The writer collapsed the world down to a fragment of its natural action and lined up views of character through the narrowest possible windows. By doing so with precision, a paradoxically complete vision of the world and its people was offered. (Berry et al. 2003: xvii)

In Jessica Grant's story, this "compression" is visible both in the semantic structure and its metaphoric extension to the plot, linking the fragmentary memories and images of the protagonist's quest in resisting the social and cultural pressures while coping with loss. Ultimately, it is only a fragment of comprehension that is offered at the end of the story, but one that somehow enables a profound understanding of the protagonist's process. The paradox that the selection jury notice, then, is one that beautifully reflects on the ability of short fiction, as a genre – a formula of experience – to encompass, compress and capture a moment in its completeness, even if it is only a moment.

The Journey Prize Stories – volume 18 (2006), selected by Steven Galloway, Zsuzsi Gartner and Annabel Lyon, includes Lee Henderson's "Conjugation," Craig Boyko's "The Baby" and Clea Young's "Split" and in the Introduction, the selection jury have reason to ask:

> Why so many stories have babies, or fear of babies? About death and near-death? And why are the guys in these stories so *weird*, the small fry so preternaturally intelligent, the women so bloody-minded? Is it just us? The state of CanLit? Something in the non-medicated, organic beef jerky? (ix)

And, indeed, in these stories, most “guys” are “*weird*” and Boyko’s protagonist in “The Baby” is no exception. In “The Baby,” the male protagonist-narrator finds himself in the role of the father as if overnight, dumbfounded at the impracticality and the illusoriness of his newly-acquired position, under the weight of the tacitly acknowledged authority of his partner – Delia, who desires to become a mother, a concept the protagonist initially has trouble understanding both in abstract and practical terms. However, irony in “The Baby” operates to parody this state, as well as demystify and evaluate the established traditional conceptions of parenthood, but also to parody, and therefore interrogate, the contemporary views on personal freedom, independence and fatherhood. It is the parodic representation here that strongly resonates with the postmodern desire to bring oppositions and conflicts to surface. From narrative structure, through semantic play in the narrative discourse, “The Baby” illustrates the self-reflexiveness that is unequivocally the feature of metafictional postmodern literature. It parodies, however, the traditional conceptions as much as it parodies the contemporary rationalizations of them, and the prevalent irony, driven to the very limit near the closure of the story, optimistically discovers the space for accepting the possibility of the co-existence of these conflicting or oppositional states. Not only does Boyko’s story bend the perspective on the typically idealized and romanticized discourse of parenthood and child-rearing, but it bends the traditional semantic certainty in his crafty semantic play, the profoundly ironic twist of style and the overall parodic use of the register that is ultimately equally unmasked for its shortcomings. This particular feature of Boyko’s story – the parodic treatment of the traditional scientific language, precision and rationality – may be understood as an illustration of the frequent failure of the postmodern impulse for discourse legitimation. The self-reflexive nature of such an endeavor, ironically, achieves its goal in destabilizing its own attempt at investigating that which it tenaciously goes against.

In Clea Young’s “Split,” womanhood and motherhood are probed from the subjective perspective of Tova, a married young woman whose life appears to be taking a course she both consciously and unconsciously resists. In this narrative, Young uses the split-nipple metaphor to ironically portray the process of the protagonist’s rationalization of her anxiety and fear at the thought of becoming a mother, her interrogation of the relationship with her own mother suggesting the link between childhood and motherhood – echoing the message behind Zsuzsi Gartner’s “Pest Control for Dummies™”; as well as Tova’s persisting negative discourse as a reaction to her initiation into this, supposedly, sacred order of motherhood for which she simply does not show any desire.

Young's story somewhat echoes Boyko's effort to delegitimize and destabilize the traditional conception of parenthood in "The Baby," although in "Split," the irony is tirelessly discreet and reached only near the closure of the story. On the other hand, Tova's conflict strongly resonates with Daisy's unconscious fears in Gartner's "Pest Control for Dummies™" where the baby is initially portrayed as an alien – a miniature Hollywood-inspired monster living inside a womb. In both stories, motherhood is brought into connection with the quality of these female characters' relationships with their mothers, and while Daisy transfers her belated desire for a sibling into the maternal instinct, Tova remains impervious to the enthusiasm. The connection between Clea Young's story in this volume, and Zsuzsi Gartner's "Pest Control for Dummies™," published in 1999 in *All the Anxious Girls on Earth*, reflects the persistent topicality of the dimensions of the womanhood and motherhood experiences since these two stories are by no means alone in their exploration, even if this selection does not include other.

Commenting on the general quality of the longlisted short fiction, Galloway, Gartner and Lyon, also make a note of the stories as being "of broad competence but little excellence" (2006: xii). Somewhat unforgiving in assessing what may rightfully be characterized as a Canadian product – a skillfully constructed short story – the selection jury claim that "[they] didn't find many stories that would change our day, let alone our lives; few had any lasting music" (2006: xii). It is in the light of this particular comment, and the enough reiterated criticism against postmodern literature and postmodern experimentation mentioned in the previous sections, that Lee Henderson's "Conjugation" imposes itself as the exception.

A contemporary take on Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis," though subtle enough to stand on its own, and 'elitist' enough to appeal, irony and parody-wise, only to those who 'get the joke', Lee Henderson's "Conjugation" draws on Kafka's famous plot and places his protagonist in an impossible situation: a twenty-eight-year-old finds himself in grade four – in a refresher course, his career in academic publishing on hold, mortified at having to deal with the power dynamics of elementary school children, but ultimately, potentially, transforming into a boy he has never truly been. Lee Henderson's protagonist, incidentally also Lee, brilliantly unaware of his ineptness, learns the elementary postulates of interpersonal relationships and even teamwork, while also, regrettably, losing his position with the academic publisher, and his girlfriend. The narrative resists the tragic ending of its parodied original, and imitates it tentatively, postmodernly, only to the

extent of inviting this text into the fictional contemporary scenario, impossible in itself – or at least quite unimaginable – and metaphorically relating it to the process of the protagonist's transformation. By extension, Henderson impregnates the narrative with sarcastic and ironic allusions both to the academia, the academic publishing specifically, and himself – as the author – in deliberately creating a visible link between the author and the protagonist. This metafictional experiment abides by the imputed rule of the postmodern literary inquiry – it retains structural unity, narrative flow and semantic stability, establishing the sense of imaginable fictionality, by premeditatedly disturbing it by creating allusions to the factual links between the narrative-world and real-world referent. Reduced to an outline, "Conjugation" is about an adult whose asocial tendencies force him out of a job and relationship, and one in which the protagonist experiences an unexpected, essentially ironic, transformation that can be interpreted even as a regression – perhaps not the most fascinating of outlines. However, as the selection jury of this volume note, "it's not what you write about, but *how* you write it. As the man said, there are, after all, a million stories in the naked city" (Galloway et al. 2006: xi).

Zsuzsi Gartner's collection of short stories, *Better Living Through Plastic Explosives* (2011), includes ten stories, "Summer of the Flesh Eater[35]" being chosen for its extensive, and brilliant, use of irony and parody as representational techniques, as well as its thought-provoking topicality in contemporaneity pertaining to gender and gender roles, among other things *postmodern*. If the tone of the story often invites satirical interpretation, then it is because Gartner spares no character in this narrative.

> Excellence comes at a cost. No blood on the reader's floor, maybe, but certainly blood on the writer's… (Galloway et al. 2006: xii)

In the 2006 volume of *The Journey Prize Stories*, along with Steven Galloway and Annabel Lyon, in the Introduction to the anthology, Gartner comments on that which makes short stories exceptional, "blood on the writer's" floor. Gartner's "Summer of the Flesh Eater," incidentally,

[35] It is this particular story, along with the first Canadian short story I read a number of years ago, "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You" by Alice Munro (from the collection *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*), that has inspired me, back in 2016, not only to choose postmodernism as the theoretical background for my dissertation, but the contemporary short story as the corpus of this study. In fact, Zsuzsi Gartner's two collections of short stories, devoured as soon as delivered to my doorstep, confirmed both my partiality to the genre, and the sentiment that there is something unexplainably appealing in its Canadian variety. Reading Gartner's stories, for the most part, brought back the literary-high of reading Munro's "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You."

features blood on plates, bloody meat on barbecue, blood on the cul-de-sac lawn, and finally, the undescribed blood on chef knives utilized by the six men of the community to, apparently, dismember a man they deem responsible for the ruin of their marriages, their children's emotional IQ and property values. A parodic blend of Darwin's insights and contemplations in the *Origins of Species* and his less known contemporary, Alfred Russel Wallace with his take on survival, and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, the narrative of "Summer of the Flesh Eater" involves a 'tribe' of six men, and it is told by one of the characters – though which in particular, does not seem to be of importance. In fact, the narrator's self-reflexive account of the summer events is told with a retrospect wisdom, both intimately relating the irrationality of the escalation, and justifying its consequences, all against the scientific and literary backdrop of the theory of evolution, and the *Lord of the Flies*, though tentative, *borrowings*. During the course of the summer, the indigenous tribe of a suburban community, the six men on a mission to remind each other that they indeed are men, finds itself under the siege of a 'barbarian' – a man whose uncouth behavior and unkempt looks, combined with raw masculinity – soon start to wreak havoc on their relationships with their wives and children. The barbecue man, Lucy – the missing link – starts feeding their wives and children meat, and in the course of the progression of this escalation, apparently seduces the females. The changes that the six unfortunate men witness in their environment propel a plunge of their confidence and composure, driving them into discovering their instinctive side, and into killing Lucy. The narrative discourse deals with the stereotypical basis of the cultural conceptions of masculinity and femininity, but it also provocatively explores the contemporary cultural tendencies as pertaining to class and socio-cultural elitism.

The Journey Prize Stories (2014), volume 26, selected by Steven Beattie, W. Craig Davidson and Saleema Nawaz, undoubtedly celebrates a productive year for emerging authors, skilled at ironic observations and improbable scenarios, and for the editors, the 'joy' in "the feeling of discovery: the jury process [that] allows for exposure to a new generation of writers who are extending the tradition of Canadian short fiction well into the twenty-first century" (xi). This "new generation" also introduces different perspectives on such topics as gender and transgender experience, it deals with the age-insensitive world of social media culture, and provides this study with an unusual vignette – a story which resists the traditional genre-formula, but one that absolutely needed to be included in the selection for its impeccable narrative process and brilliant ironic, if not self-parodic tenor. If all other stories selected for analysis in this section could possibly be classified as

postmodern tests or postmodern trials, Julie Roorda's "How to Tell if Your Frog Is Dead" is the 'vignette' in the title even if it is essentially a story about tests and trials with one's exotic pet.

The obvious criteria of quality and skill aside, the selection jury of the 2014 volume emphasize that what they particularly "valued [was] insight, surprise, and humor where [they] found it" (Beattie et al. 2014: xi). Three of these stories from the 2014 volume, Lori McNulty's "Monsoon Season," Nancy Jo Cullen's "Hashtag Maggie Vandermeer" and Julie Roorda's "How to Tell if Your Frog Is Dead," provide precisely those additional dimensions to a work of short fiction that go beyond skill and technique.

Lori McNulty's "Monsoon Season" tells the story of a transgender woman, Jess, whose transition into a female body becomes also a process of discovering what womanhood truly involves. Her process of acquiring a Neo-Vagina is a fragmented account of almost comical scenes in which Jess finds herself flipping catalogue pages and choosing a particular model, exchanging opinions with other future-transgender women awaiting sex-change operation in a hostel in Thailand, going through a process of contemplating the changes that her male body would endure, and therefore her psyche, but also an excruciating recovery during which her relationship with her mother is explored. The clash of these two women, the transgender perception of femininity and womanhood and the *biological* one as related through the character of the mother, are carefully filtered through the socio-cultural perspective exposing the profoundly complicated issue of gender normative, the female body and how these perspectives are formulated according to an aesthetic, male-formulated construct. The narrative of Jess, creating an illusion of progression towards a conventional closure, ironically produces a sense of relapse. In her finally acquiring a female body, the transgender woman goes back to the only life she knows – one she initially finds to be superficial, exploitative and unfulfilling – since in reality, there is no space for transgender people, even when their transformation achieves the prescribed gender aesthetics.

In Nancy Jo Cullen's "Hashtag Maggie Vandermeer," the forty-eight-year old protagonist, Maggie – a former alcoholic and a recreational marijuana smoker – tries to reestablish herself as a PR, but unsuccessfully so in the world of social media and 'trending'. This narrative, occasionally satirical in the portrayal of Maggie Vandermeer's trending gaffes, reveals the exclusivity of the social media domain, populated by hipsters and members of trending subcultures – all young or

significantly younger than Maggie – the domain in which Maggie's professional competence becomes undesired due to ageism. Essentially, the narrative deals with the protagonist's romanticized self-image and the underlying insecurities, but contrasted to the contemporary culture of social media image representation, her blunders merely stand to expose a double-standard of social desirability, the incongruity between reality and the social media, and this is achieved through the irony behind Maggie's unrealistic ambition.

Julie Roorda's "How to Tell if Your Frog Is Dead," as already mentioned, resists the conventional short story definition as it is, essentially, too short and short of the traditional elements that would render it a 'proper' story. Moreover, featuring such entities that could function as characters, such as the exotic African Sub-Saharan frog, an unidentified cat, a child and the narrator who seems to be implicated personally in the related events, it does achieve momentous structural stability. At the semantic level of the discourse, the narrative employs brilliant allusions in unpredictable scenarios that produce comic effects, and yet it is the very closure of the vignette that creates the final 'effect' – one of reversal and ironic recognition. In the manual on keeping an exotic pet alive long enough to teach one's child various invaluable lessons of life, the narrator reveals their own failures and provides humorous anecdotal, yet didactic, advice on unpredictability and uncertainty – a truly postmodern attitude.

Andrew MacDonald's "The Perfect Man for My Husband" and K'ari Fisher's "Mercy Beatrice Wrestles the Noose," are two of the ninety-six stories submitted for volume 27, *The Journey Prize Stories* collection from 2015, selected by Anthony De Sa, Tanis Rideout and Carrie Snyder. The former features a young married couple simultaneously dealing with a case of terminal illness, and the husband's unexpected confession about his sexual orientation. The latter invites a different kind of sympathy as it is a narrative told by a girl, chaperoned by her mother's ghost, in search of a more stable life with her estranged father. In the Introduction to the volume, the selection jury make a note about the issue of narrowing down the selection to only twelve stories, trying answer the question of "what should a Canadian short story look like; what are the criteria for good, for better, for best" (De Sa et al. 2015: ix). It is not impossible or in any way criminal to ascribe the unseen empathy of "The Perfect Man for My Husband" to *Canadianness*, but it is questionable whether ghosts and wrestling have anything to do with it. In their process, De Sa, Rideout and Snyder locate common grounds for what seems to be expected and eligible to receive the label of

a good Canadian story, and this is “the element of surprise in discovery. Good fiction should surprise, should be something you cannot turn away from” (2015: xi).

Indeed, in MacDonald’s “The Perfect Man for My Husband,” the protagonist, the wife of a man dying of cancer, in her desperate refusal to accept the terminal condition, takes upon herself the unplanned confession of her husband’s being gay as a mission to fulfill what she understands as his dying wish. In her disorganized and unselective search for anyone who would step in the role of a one-night-stand, the couple discover the depth of their love and friendship, which ultimately brings into question not only the traditional concept of marriage, but more substantially, love as it is defined by cultural and social discourses.

In contrast, the protagonist of K’ari Fisher’s “Mercy Beatrice Wrestles the Noose,” an intelligent girl who runs away from an orphanage only to end up at a junkyard, tells the story of her coming to an understanding of the ‘sinkhole moments’ in one’s life – the disappointments at plans not turning out the way they were meant to. Followed by the spectral presence of her wrestler mother, faithful to the living image – a cigarette between her lips at all times – the girl goes against her better judgment and locates the father she has never met, looking for love, as it turns out, in the wrong place. Instead of finding security and stability in his home, Mercy Beatrice’s story ends in an attempt of exploitation – a bizarre dream of the former heavyweight wrestling champion, her father, and his old manager – when she is led to wrestle someone who, to the girl, looks like a dark-haired giant. On the floor of the wrestling ring, Mercy Beatrice realizes the irony of retrospective thinking as she is protected only by the ghost of her mother, whereas her father is nowhere to be found.

Mahak Jain’s “The Origin of Jaanvi,” Souvankham Thammavongsa’s “Mani Pedi” and J. R. McConvey’s “How the Grizzly Came to Hang in the Royal Oak Hotel” belong to volume 28 of *The Journey Prize Stories* (2016), selected by Kate Cayley, Brian Francis and Madeleine Thien. In their individual introductions to the volume, the jury ask the same questions as those selecting the stories for the previous annual anthologies. Brian Francis asks the famous question of what it is that “makes a short story good,” or “exceptional” or “makes you miss your subway stop” (Cayley et al. 2016: xi). Kate Cayley recognizes the emergence of “some patterns” in which “the experiences of clever people in cities or hoping to be in cities seems to be replacing stories of life

in small towns as the cliché of choice" (Cayley et al. 2016: xii), and for Madeleine Thein, the selected stories "[together] reveal a network of defended privacies and unusual hauntings: ghosts, refugees, forgotten wars, hunted animals, deleted Facebook posts, embryos, genes, history, and even the memory of salvation" (Cayley et al. 2016: xiii). What Madeleine Thein specifically emphasizes is not only the "visceral and moving and sometimes disturbing" (Cayley et al. 2016: xiii) tension between the eleven selected stories, but also that they authentically describe the experience of contemporaneity. In her own words, "they confront us with our own alienness, all the things we never noticed or thought worthy of noticing" (Cayley et al. 2016: xiii).

Mahak Jain's "The Origin of Jaanvi" particularly deals with what Madeleine Thein sees as "alienness" as the protagonist experiences the realization of the profound inability to relate to his wife, to people in general as insinuated, and ultimately, his newborn daughter, as he suspects. Dr. Santosh Mistry, affectionate in a very practical and calculated manner, does not seem to be able to connect with those surrounding him on a more intimate level, and the plot of the story – his wife's pregnancy and the possibility of the child being born as a carrier of the genetic defect he suffers from – reveals his unspoken hope that the child's being a carrier would, in fact, give them a biological basis for establishing a relationship. This excessively rational scientist, forcing himself to believe that paternity is a matter of economics and not biology or love, ironically finds himself disappointed at the idea that his daughter is born disease-free, and that he might be assigned only a figurative role in her life, much like the one in the life of his wife.

In Souvankham Thammavongsa's "Mani Pedi," a knocked-out boxer becomes a nail salon beautician. In the incongruity of his gender and boxer looks, he becomes a star in his sister's business – sought by women and men due to the almost exotic nature of such a setup, on the one hand, and on the other, due to men being less embarrassed to show their calloused feet to another man. Revolving around the relationship of two Laos siblings, the narrative deals with stereotypical perceptions pertaining to gender and gender performatives, but also the issue of multiculturality from the perspective of second-generation immigrants. The sister, a well-off business owner, deeply concerned about her brother's dreamy predisposition, imposes on herself what she considers to be a motherly role, reminding her younger brother that dreams must be contained within one's social and cultural position, herself being entrapped by certain restrictions and limitations, gender-wise, which are only inferred from her disgruntled protests at her beautician-

brother receiving tips that amount to more that she charges for the mani-pedis. The boxer-beautician, however, allows himself to day-dream romantically about a young woman he does manicure for, apparently well aware of the impossibility of any substantial connection. What is merely a means of fulfilling existential needs for the sister – running the salon business – provides the boxer with an opportunity to revitalize those who come into the space worn down by everyday life, which is, ironically, the very thing that deprives him of any pleasure since he is suffocated by nail-dust and fungi-like smell in his throat, as well as the constant reminder that he would never truly enjoy being on the receiving end of such care – a commentary on class.

J. R. McConvey's "How the Grizzly Came to Hang in the Royal Oak Hotel" begins with an unusual account of a grizzly finding itself in a luxury hotel and going berserk on being treated as a captive animal by the crew belonging to a movie set that wanted authenticity for their feature. The protagonist and narrator, a veteran soldier, equally held captive by his sense of gratitude and duty towards his sister and the hotel manager, finds himself involved in a mission against the unsuspecting bear led by the publicly trigger-happy southern congressman, incidentally there at the time of the bear's destructive reaction to unfamiliar environment due to a pipeline agenda. The soldier's personal history is used both as an excuse to compel him to play a role in the charade orchestrated by the congressman and the manager, but also in the creation of a political message promoted by the situation. The allegorical tone of the narrative is intensified by the satirical depiction of the stereotypical image of men of power, and their interpellating patriotic discourse that somehow seduces ordinary men to do their bidding. By extension, the narrative implicitly comments on the economic driving force behind political agendas, and the value of human, or other kind of life, against that framework.

In the following chapters, each of the stories is individually analyzed with the view of exploring how ironic and parodic, occasionally satirical, representation guides narrative progression, and how these modes of representation operate in postmodern contemporary short fiction in terms of expanding their interpretative potential.

The Remarkably Uncooperative Narrative of Zsuzsi Gartner's "Pest Control for Dummies™"

Zsuzsi Gartner's "Pest Control for Dummies™" (1999), published in her collection of short stories *All the Anxious Girls on Earth*, relates the narratives of Jack and Daisy, a young couple whose relationship culminates in a crisis, though not causally, when Daisy finds out about the stillborn brother her mother had ten months before she was born. The grieving process she experiences, mainly communicated from the perspective of Jack, encourages him to come to terms with certain unvoiced truths about their relationship and about his own insecurities, frustrations and thoughts when it comes to Daisy. At the same time, Jack's observations of the characters featured in the story are interrupted by Daisy's thought process as manifested in dreamy or hallucination-like states in which she finds herself in her mother's womb, talking to the fetus-brother she has never actually met, and exploring that relationship, as well as the relationship with her mother in the unconscious attempt to heal from what Jack reveals are insecurities inflicted on her by her mother's utter indifference.

The narrative of the story, then, contrasts two worlds existing within the story-world – the internal world of Jack, and that of Daisy, and yet connects them, with an ironic relation of opposition (Hutcheon 2005). The narrative of Jack, being situated in the real-story world, as opposed to Daisy's, operates to relate the 'reality' of the events transpiring in the story and establishes the necessary focal angle in the representation of characters that reveals the irony of Jack's unconscious input. Jack's perceiving eye shapes the narrative and the other characters' intrusions, including Daisy's. Moreover, even though Daisy's narrative bits are focalized from her own 'mind's eye' – literally since she is hallucinating or dreaming about her brother as a talking fetus – Jack's perceptions about Daisy complement its authenticity so that their respective narratives do not simply intersect or overlap, but they interact, in a manner. Jack's 'conscious' narrative works to squeeze out Daisy from his story-world reality, and ironically, Jack is not actually present in Daisy's dreamy sequences, which makes for the ironic sensibility of the story on the whole as the relationship only figures in terms of the convention, much like the narrative flow that Gartner keeps steady only at the level of Jack's observations in the interaction with all the people 'pestering' him. Formally observing this story, Gartner discreetly achieves a very typical postmodern twist in 'relating differences', as Jameson would term it, and allowing them a

coexistence and a relation of paradoxical co-extension fortified at the ironic level – the level of all the import that pertains to ideology, culture, mainstream practice, etc., interacting with the narrative discourse progression at the level of the unsaid.

The story begins with the scene in which Jack is already sitting in a restaurant, having "a flush of guilty pleasure" (Gartner 2011: 64) at the idea of spending time with Daisy's mother, devouring a breaded veal sandwich, but also observing Irene as she elegantly and gracefully eats her agnolotti, and "[pauses] between bites to make another point. For fun, or effect, Jack wasn't sure" (Gartner 2011: 64). That particular ritual with Irene, or rather the realization of his apparently persistent fantasy about "Daisy's mother's deftly rolling up a slice of prosciutto with her long, bony, prostate-probing physician's fingers" (Gartner 2011: 72) exposes, from the very beginning, not only the ongoing crisis in the loveless relationship of the protagonist, but also his struggle to reconcile or deter the incompatible, inappropriate and self-deprecating thoughts towards all the people who walk into his life, or rather – the surrounding in which he, as if suddenly and unintentionally, finds himself, without much prior thought, deliberation or choice. This particular trait of Jack's – or character flaw, perhaps, the "little anal Jack" (Gartner 2011: 65), "Jacques" (Gartner 2011: 64) or "Shock" (Gartner 2011: 65), as Irene pronounces his name, the "puppet" (Gartner 2011: 66), ironically brings to surface the contrast between him and Daisy. The irony, of course, runs in different directions and resembles an ocean current in which several forces come together in culmination to reveal the passivity and inaptitude of this particular character.

Jack's perceiving himself as "[alive] and dangerous – shiv clamped between his teeth, ready for combat" (Gartner 2011: 65) in Daisy's mother's presence, reveals a comical incongruity at the level of story-reality and his thought process. This man, exhilarated at the sight of the woman whose mastectomy scar he fantasizes about sexually, feels trapped (for why would he otherwise necessitate a shiv), undersized in the presence of other men – "a couple of competitive cyclists, their Easter ham-sized quads in electric-blue Lycra splayed out from under a too small table" (Gartner 2011: 67) at the unconscious level – examining his own thigh-thickness and the scent of their and his own sweat, and yet, "the funny thing was, it didn't smell any different than his own plain tap-water sweat" (Gartner 2011: 67). Jack's insecurities prompt him to inescapably compare himself, and merely register that in comparison to those men, he had plenty of leg space. In the presence of Irene, whose particular emaciated appeal causes him to flex his muscles – thighs, toes,

abdomen, butt, but “keep his face relaxed” (Gartner 2011: 67), his “wayward thoughts” (Gartner 2011: 65) reach their peak, although Jack also fantasizes about his anorexic neighbor whose “spine strained against her skin through her thin tank tops” resembles “an aggressive row of hard little knobs like helmeted soldiers marching off to war” (Gartner 2011: 72). Jack wonders whether holding this woman would “feel like holding a bat” (Gartner 2011: 73) – a potentially shocking thought, and an aggressive one at the core, he feels ashamed of in retrospect after witnessing her being taken off to hospital on a stretcher – a woman “deliberately wasting away” (Gartner 2011: 73). In Jack’s mind, as far as he can illuminate the state of his circumstance, his sense of morality is intact by the nature of his physical attraction towards Irene, as she is the one who “seems to lack a moral core” (Gartner 2011: 72) refusing to take any responsibility for his girlfriend’s pain and deep emotional wounds. He, in fact, does not “like” Irene, but merely constantly daydreams about her, her fingers and the aggressively pretentious yet indifferent attitude, and contrives reasons plausible enough to spend time in her presence.

Irene is a tyrannical mother, counting Daisy’s calories, inspiring an unhealthy body-image, disapproving of her person and constantly underestimating and dismissing her daughter as unreasonable, irrational and an altogether burdensome event in her life:

> The only time they ever went to cloth-napkin restaurants was when Daisy felt brave enough to sit at the same table as her mother, who would eye every forkful that went into Daisy’s mouth as if it contained strontium 90. He was disappointed that it wasn’t Irene but an author Daisy was promoting who was taking them to dinner. (Gartner 2011: 79)

And yet, Jack, whose peculiar sense of *morality* unwaveringly and indiscriminately exposes other characters’ flaws, remains obsessed with his own secret life and undisclosed desires unaware how they surface, even though his *clenching* persistently reveals the incompatibility between his internal life and his outward behavior. His reactions in interaction with Irene do not really reveal a stronger moral disposition or opinion, but are expressions of excitement and fear – Jack is a walking ticking-bomb exercising so much self-control that, ironically, he never explodes, but rather implodes at every challenge.

The entire relationship, as experienced by Jack, is one piece of the ironic puzzle Gartner puts before the reader – it is Jack’s lack of conviction, his lack of any core, that is the source of irony,

and the intentionality of such pragmatic events in the text is encouraged by Jack's own discourse, by the moments of self-discovery in which he perceives the incompatibility between his performance on the surface level (again, ironically, in his interaction with other characters), and his thought process. In the restaurant scene with Irene, while Jack voraciously devours his breaded veal sandwich – an allusion possibly to his 'naughty' attraction to Irene, the very act of standing up for Daisy, the women "he thought he loved" (Gartner 2011: 67) inspires another one of his escapist episodes that would relieve the tension he feels building up in his body, his muscles. By repeating Daisy's words to her mother, being a witness to her pain at the, granted, irrational yet somehow *retroactively-real* loss of her brother, he feels the words "like alien food in his mouth, lightly braised monkey brains" (Gartner 2011: 65). In this 'endeavor', ironically, Jack "felt brave – an anthropologist in the field who's determined to adhere to some throwback tribe's incomprehensible rites" (Gartner 2011: 66). The use of the word 'naughty' above, in describing Jack's affinity towards Irene, was obviously intentional as it alludes to his immaturity, or even, in a manner, stunted emotional development, which Gartner clearly implies by allowing him to understand that the nature of his desire, as well as his ability to act upon it, controlled by his overwhelming yet usurped superego, summarize him best in the label that he himself produces:

> […] the little anal Jack in Jack's head said, as if everyone didn't have wayward thoughts. As if everyone didn't think one thing and then do altogether another. As if the whole civilization wasn't precariously balanced on a funeral pyre of lies. (Gartner 2011: 65)

The protagonist works as a copy-editor, which enables him to become "an instant expert in things he'd previously cared nothing about" (Gartner 2011: 68), and working on a new Dummies™ book on pest control, he comes into contact with a certain organic exterminator who not only plays smart at this 'opinionated' Jack-of-all-trades-in-theory, but also believes himself to be a poet, and calls this delicate copy-editor the "Grammar Boy" (Gartner 2011: 69). The allusions abound, and as with all Jack's interactions, the process of communicating his opinions – even if they are charged with passive-aggressive sarcasm, which is Jack's ultimate expression of dissatisfaction and frustration – ends in his 'clenching reflex':

> The exterminator hung up.
> Jack clenched his thighs. (Gartner 2011: 69)

All this suppressed anger culminates into action only twice – when Jack brings down his fist to kill the "stupidly heroic" (Gartner 2011: 69) ant on his desk, propelled by frustration having to deal with the "exterminator/poet" (Gartner 2011: 69), and when, finally, he is faced with a question so serious, and a matter so unwanted, that his body reacts sincerely – his heart "pacing back and forth […] that drooling hyena, in the cage of his chest" (Gartner 2011: 89). The first instance, more obviously than the second, can be read in the light of his contemplation on whether holding his 'wasting-away' neighbor's body would feel like "a bat" in his hands (Gartner 2011: 73), and whether he could actually feel her heart beating through the thin skin. In the second, the weight of Daisy's breasts suffocates him.

In another instance, Jack's 'salty' feelings would be disregarded by Daisy and her client, and the event would trigger his passive-aggressive emptying of salt on the table, which would also go unnoticed rendering Jack, ironically, invisible man in the story, in addition to 'puppet'. This aggression always flows beneath the surface of the discourse, and emerges either in the form of sarcasm, or belated and detached scrutiny of those people whose presence pesters him:

> People, on the other hand, people could be pests. (Gartner 2011: 74)

Whether it is his friend, Glenn, "who'd drop by all the time" (Gartner 2011: 74) to impose on Jack for hours, recounting personal matters, or "drinking whatever beer was in the fridge and pulling books off the shelves at random" (Gartner 2011: 74), his previously mentioned exterminator/poet client, or his own girlfriend, Jack's inability to impose limits is ironically represented in contrast to the women who seem to either have control of themselves or others, or both, to the degree that is appealing and repulsive to him, which is the effect of the ironic topical import pertaining to the tension between masculinity and femininity, distributed in this story unconventionally to destabilize the notions themselves. Irene's sadistic and unmoved attitude, her overall emotional unavailability, both excite and repel him, and his anorexic neighbor's pathological self-deprecating and destructive 'self-control' has the same effect.

In one of his ponderings spurred by Glenn's somewhat sickening story about a couple eating placenta since "[it's] the only meat you can eat that you don't have to kill" (Gartner 2011: 74), Jack realizes that:

> It was one of those things you didn't think about until it was too late. Like waking up one day and finding your underwear was all jumbled up in a hamper with someone else's. Like realizing her mother's fingers were never far from your mind. Her pale, no-nonsense mouth. *Oh, Shock.* (Gartner 2011: 75)

In the ironic twist of him foreshadowing the question that would potentially break the couple apart, although no certainty is provided in the closure of the story, the protagonist unknowingly reveals the nature of his own impulsiveness and the irrationality of his choices. More precisely, the absence of his willful and conscious, thoughtful and conclusive role in them. Starting a relationship and a life together being one of such choices, Jack remembers simply "[going] home with Daisy" (Gartner 2011: 76) as his girlfriend at the time found a new romantic prospect in the "Daddies room, setting toilet paper on fire" (Gartner 2011: 76). The implication is, of course, that it was Daisy who decided for Jack that they were in a relationship:

> Jack has thought of leaving Daisy. Not because of this brother thing, but because he doesn't find her attractive. He finds his lack of desire baffling, because, the thing is this: he loves Daisy. Or did. Or still does. And yet.
> And yet.
> Jack has this thing about skinny women. (Gartner 2011: 72)

In a comic episode in the life of Jack when he examines a photo of a West Coast banana slug, a "thing almost the size of his own prick" (Gartner 2011: 71), and the organic solutions to its eradication, which he, naturally, finds "difficult to read […] without involuntarily cringing" (Gartner 2011: 71), he learns that organic extermination of such pests involves "[applying] salt" (Gartner 2011: 71) which turns the slug into pus in a matter of minutes, "turning it into an open wound" (Gartner 2011: 71). This knowledge of Jack's provides a suitable parallel for the irony unconsciously invited by the protagonist during dinner with Daisy and her charlatan client – Teddy or Paul of Tarsus – a man who inspires Jack to contemplate "[blowing] [his] own brains out" (Gartner 2011: 80) like Hemingway – pretending to be the reincarnation of Jesus Christ's friend, writing a book about their adventures. The idea, though, that Jack is triggered by this man's supposed connection to Jesus becomes important, since Jack too strives to constantly meet the standard – to do what one is supposed to do rather than what one desires, and this Paul of Tarsus

character, somehow, manages to do both, being a very good businessman and selling the idea of reincarnation, morality and love through empty quotes from the Bible as if the words had been first spoken by him. It is his own ‘open wound’. The sight of Daisy’s infatuated approval triggers Jack’s anger and such pressure builds up that not even the clenching (Gartner 2011: 81) can hold off the explosion. Consequently, Jack “found himself emptying the contents of the salt mill onto the table” (Gartner 2011: 82), as if to turn the Paul of Tarsus character into pus, “[so] *salty*. Neither Daisy nor the guy were paying attention to him” (Gartner 2011: 82). The show that Jack puts on only for himself, the unconscious show of aggression, is neither inspired by jealousy nor rivalry, but by the recognition of that which, in a way, connects him to Daisy’s client, Teddy. The charlatan author, much like Jack, goes through life using the same premise of the word being “precariously balanced on a funeral pyre of lies” (Gartner 2011: 65), only Jack’s ‘moral core’ and guilt hold a wavering double-standard.

Daisy, as focalized through the eyes of Jack, is a woman who does not really *listen*. That is what her mother says of her (Gartner 2011: 64), and that is how he feels when his words meet her “[tilting] her head as if she was emptying water out of one ear” (Gartner 2011: 88). The irony achieved in the focalization of Daisy through the eyes of Jack, her mother and her own dream-hallucinations stands to be an appropriative one (Hutcheon 2005), constructively relating these views to formulate a more rounded image of the character. In relating these perceptions, and especially Jack’s, Gartner achieves a subtle pun as Daisy daily emerges from her hallucination-dislocation from the amniotic fluid of her mother’s womb, and emptying water out of her ear both comically and ironically connects the worlds the narrative-real and the narrative-fictional narrative.

Another layer of irony is related in Daisy’s finally emerging from her hallucination with the decision to have a child – even though her maternal instinct is activated by the pseudo-loss of her brother, therefore the loss of the promise of unconditional sibling love – since she releases herself from the role of the daughter that has been stifling and unfulfilling. Her maternal instinct, based on the desire for unconditional love that she would receive, liberates her from the bond with Irene that is damaging and stunting. Ironically, of course, considering that Daisy’s relationship with her mother is one of avoidance and evasion, constant anticipation of the domineering influence that would be unleashed on her – the critical and disparaging, unsupportive, treatment that is outside

the ‘convention’ – the image behind the *universal* conception of motherhood. During the informatively rich lunch conversation between ‘Shock’ and Irene, Daisy’s mother unaffectedly discusses the loss of the child she had before Daisy:

> Irene snorted: “He would have been chunky and insecure like Daisy. And, unlike Daisy, to give her credit, he’d still be living at home with me because mamas’ boys are like that and I would certainly have had the bad luck to raise a mama’s boy. Shock, puppet, don’t act so nonplussed, I’m just being *realistic*.” (Gartner 2011: 66)

The expression of Irene’s “*realistic*” disappointment in her motherly luck to have a “chunky and insecure” child, and Jack’s subsequent confusion in terms of the internal conflict with regard to the appropriate reaction, complement the previously mentioned irony of Jack’s painful self-discovery, especially in the moments of interaction with Irene. The ‘puppet’, aside from not being chunky, fits the image of “a mama’s boy” Irene so luckily avoided to raise. On the other hand, the ironic import of the concept of motherhood at the level of discourse, that which causes Jack to somewhat freeze, exposes Irene’s complete lack of responsibility in emotionally damaging Daisy, and presents Daisy’s escapist episodes as the only solution to healing the otherwise disturbing relationship with her mother, and perhaps consequently, with other people in her life, since eventually, she might be rejected by Jack due to her not being able to reach the standard that he desires in a woman.

According to Jack, Daisy is “wallowing in an anguish he found baffling, bathing in it as if in a lukewarm tub with unpleasant little islands of oil and hair floating on top” (Gartner 2011: 71) – an allusion that supports the interaction between the two seemingly separate narrative courses, one happening in the actual story-world, observed by the protagonist; and the other at the level of Daisy’s internal world that projects onto Jack’s.

> For almost a month she had been moaning around, crying, screaming, taking time off work. Wearing black. Which she always wore, it’s true, but this seems more deliberate. More… black. (Gartner 2011: 71)

Symbolically, Daisy’s life is the epitome of grief and mourning that only culminates in the moment of recognition of her brother’s existence. Of course, the retroactive loss in this case stands to both

emphasize the reason why she lives in the first place – for “there would have never been a Daisy” (Gartner 2011: 72) had her brother lived, and the equally ironic apparent predetermination at a loveless life[36]. Daisy seems to be on the losing side of every relationship, but not the one she recreates in her own mind – the one with the fetus brother who, though at one point appears “remarkably uncooperative” (Gartner 2011: 83), ultimately resumes his fictional life as a fetus-teenager:

> Daisy is filled with pity towards this sea creature who would steal what is hers. His desire to live has made him weak, he’s laid his cards on the table, forgotten how to bluff. (Gartner 2011: 87)

Daisy’s hallucinations initially have a disturbing note to them. Behind her inward journey, there is a tacit recognition of that which her mother is asking Jack to explain to her – that one child, and one child only was enough for Irene, and that she “wasn’t ever crazy about babies” (Gartner 2011: 65). In fact, even though neither Jack nor her mother explicitly voice the obvious truth about Irene’s aspirations motherhood-wise, Daisy is unconsciously aware of her mother’s perception of motherhood through the treatment and handling she has experienced. In her first escapist therapy-session with the unnamed brother, Daisy instinctively reveals this transferred fear – that babies, and children, might be something alien, menacing and frightening; something that abducts a woman from her normal life:

> The fetus looks so much like some Hollywood version of an alien that Daisy wonders if she isn’t hallucinating an abduction. Maybe they’ve already stuck a tube down her throat and up her ass and shone bright lights in her eyes and scraped away enough tissue samples to create a whole new race of Uber Daisys. A Daisy chain. (Gartner 2011: 68)

However, this first encounter with the alien fetus, or alienated brother, soon alleviates her initial fear and the two engage in “a game of in utero badminton” (Gartner 2011: 68) which reminds Daisy that “she’s always wanted a brother” (Gartner 2011: 68) even if the “first encounter had been strange and utterly magical, much the same as she’d always imagined love at first sight”

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[36] In this story, irony relies not only on the heterodiegetic import, but also on the import of the previously insinuated and hinted at creating several currents of irony both constructively appropriating the incongruities presented in the plot, in Daisy’s narrative, and oppositional irony in terms of Jack’s.

(Gartner 2011: 70), but a "different kind of love" (Gartner 2011: 70). Daisy's plunge into the 'oceanic oneness' that is supposed to be understood in relation to one's mother, becomes a space for her and her stillborn sibling, and a space where the fetus, the older brother, "[teaches] her to relax, to bob lightly in the fluid without tensing her muscles" (Gartner 2011: 70) – revealing a link between Jack and Daisy, both restrained and retentive, in their own ways, and both internalizing that which has been imposed on them in terms of self-image.

For Daisy, her mother's womb is a "coral reef" (Gartner 2011: 70) layered with "skin polyps [undulating] like sea anemone" (Gartner 2011: 71), and the sight of the triggerfish swimming by, much like her desire to "gobble […] up" her brother, a "reef urchin. Heart urchin. Sea biscuit" (Gartner 2011: 71) somewhat suggests the aggressiveness of the environment that creates a sense of incongruity with the concept of oneness, with the idea of the womb. This incompatibility, or the implied hostility of the environment, can be understood as the metaphoric and ironic translation of her relationship with Irene, and supplements the context of her hallucinations or dreams as therapy sessions.

In the third dream-like episode, Daisy tells her fetus-brother the story of Jack, or rather, what she thinks is the defining sketch that could explain "Jack in a nutshell. The Compleat Jack, the ultimate psychological profile" (Gartner 2011: 77). In her account, Jack is portrayed as a careless, or even petulant thirty-two-year-old man who does not seem to understand the concept of expiry date when it comes to mayonnaise. Daisy, a slightly younger woman, appears to play the role of the mother of the ill-tempered child in her sketch:

> "[…] So, I'll grab the jar to check the date and he'll grab it back and I'll grab it again, and then he'll…" Daisy notices that the fetus doesn't appear to be listening. He's wrapping the umbilical cord around his left wrist and then tugging on it as if to test for tensile strength. (Gartner 2011: 77)

The morbidly comic scene alluding to her stillborn brother having the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck three times (Gartner 2011: 71), and him not even *listening* to her unusual take on the ultimate psychological profile of her boyfriend of two years, stands for the moment of her illumination at the fact that she has not been listening to herself about what it is that she wants out of a relationship. Daisy becomes 'enlightened' and her "heart splays" (Gartner 2011: 77).

Incidentally, of course, in Daisy's dream-hallucination-therapy-session, this is the moment when her mother "must have stepped outside onto a porch flooded with sunlight" (Gartner 2011: 77) – a subtle allusion to her being enlightened about motherhood, a brilliant narrative move that brings plausibility to her implausible narrative, and an ironic recognition that she has been mothering her partner instead of actually becoming a mother. Another allusion to Daisy's 'mothering' side, which is at the same time, of course ironically, her 'smothering' side when it comes to Jack, emerges in the final scene when she straddles Jack in an attempt at a sexual advance:

> Jack thought it would help if he closed his eyes. If her breasts hadn't been pressing against him, too heavy, too familiar… (Gartner 2011: 89)

In her fourth dreamy episode, it becomes clear that Daisy is, unconsciously, exploring her own delusion with the idea of reincarnation. This happens immediately after Jack, Teddy – Paul of Tarsus client and she have dinner during which she allows herself the infatuation with the idea of there being a possibility that this charlatan could be her brother. In fact, she allows herself the idea that there might exist a man who she could see in this light – someone into whom, as Delia in Craig Boyko's "The Baby" would say, she "[could] pour all [her] unused love" (Boyko 2006: 74). However, the "fetus is proving remarkably uncooperative, claiming no prior knowledge of ancient Hebrew and insisting that as far as he knows 'Jesus Christ' is just a curse their mother frequently uses" (Gartner 2011: 83). On the unconscious level, Daisy is fully aware of the charade that she perpetuates in her reality, and this exults in her tugging the umbilical cord and drawing the fetus closer:

> She could chew him up, stick her finger down her throat, and puke up the pieces. Daisy is certain her mother would like that. (Gartner 2011: 83)

Daisy's insistence on the absurdity of Teddy – Paul of Tarsus being her brother serves as a defense mechanism against the 'reality' of her situation, as suggested by the scene she imagines in the final appearance of the now-teenage fetus, wearing "a T-shirt with a freaked-out cat dangling from a ledge that reads, 'Hang in there, baby'" (Gartner 2011: 87). She finds herself unable to simply "puke up" the pieces of the hoarded emotional pain, or to abandon the idea that unconditional love is in her reach – in whatever form. In contrast to her mother, Irene, who goes through mastectomy that manifests no particular change on her boyish body – a metaphor since Jack, who notices it, so

unconsciously perceives these women's bodies as 'psychological' types – Daisy "would look lopsided" (Gartner 2011: 65), if one of her breasts were to disappear.

If irony is created in the witnessed tension between what is said and what is left unsaid, what is left for the reader to assume as a matter of encoding provided in the context, then irony in Gartner's "Pest Control for Dummies™" operates behind the formal level of the narrative only to unmask the rationality behind the 'feeling' that remains unexpressed – caught up in the tension between convention, expectation and the norm. In Jack's narrative, the ultimate irony builds up much like the tension he experiences on all the occasions where he plays the role of the 'Grammar boy' or 'puppet', and culminates in his passivity at being presented with a choice to liberate himself. A choice he does not seem able to verbalize expecting, yet again, Daisy to make a decision for him – playing the role of a child while desiring to be treated as something other – an adult, perhaps, but not yet a father. Daisy's irony, however, only appears to be less unnerving when it is contained in her realization that escaping the role of a sub-standard daughter involves creating a life, a child, that would be dependent on her, rather than the other way round. However, her being unaware of the falsity she fosters as partnership, echoes the lack of genuine connection with her mother, and potentially foreshadows another failure.

This particular type of irony, postmodern and Canadian, somewhat paradoxical in its aimless inspection and introspection, will be discussed across different stories, and in the spirit of postmodern problematization, it will prove to be wide-ranging in its potential to reveal how it is that our collective understanding of the constructed notions pertaining to culture, gender, femininity, womanhood, motherhood, fatherhood, etc., fails when faced with 'irony's edge' and its power to reveal a multiplicity of experiences and interpretations.

The postmodern impulse of Gartner's "Pest Control for Dummies™," however, does not emanate only from its visible ironic core, but in the very idea of the absence of center in the narratives of the individual voices participating in the narrative discourse – the constructedness that is inherited, accrued and inevitable in the interaction with others' narratives. The very attempt at becoming the 'engineer' of their own discourses – an intermittent impulse on the part of the two protagonists – reveals the mechanism of Derrida's already discussed deconstruction, as a process, not a finality. The progression of both Jack's and Daisy's respective narratives is underscored by this process of

deconstruction, in the act of narrating their stories, and particularly against other discourses coming into 'play' – the narrative of the female character's mother, unborn brother – a piece of the female characters' history that seems to be weightily present yet untold, episodic characters, the past that resurfaces in the form of trace when the present moment is examined. Gartner's "Pest Control for Dummies™" explores the idea of the constructedness of personal history in personal narratives. Indirectly tackling the largely postmodern and feminist issue of womanhood and female identity in terms of care-ethics, Gartner's characters not only revise the notion of the universality of the female experience, but also the validity of the category through which it is explored – motherhood. Similarly, Gartner addresses the concept of masculinity as culturally constructed, and exposes its individualized manifestation in the male protagonist's questioning his own identity, and gender and cultural performative, all of which defy the traditional conceptions by problematizing them in this very specific story-plot.

Unravelling Irony in Zsuzsi Gartner's "How to Survive in the Bush"

Zsuzsi Gartner's "How to Survive in the Bush" from the collection *All the Anxious Girls on Earth* (1999), explores the internal conflict of the female protagonist, the focalizing narrator, whose expectations (or rather the willing and temporary self-deception) clash with the experienced and recounted, potentially hypothesized, reality. In fact, the narrative, much like the protagonist, unravels ironically, in the spatio-temporal parodic dislocation, while maintaining structural stability. What makes for the particularly elastic and strong connecting tissue of the story is Gartner's postmodern play with the Canadian 'metalanguage' of pioneer writing, and her equally postmodern reliance on the literary themes that participate in the overall parody. Gartner invites literary history and its persistent influence on contemporaneity to infuse her first-person narrative and tells the narrative from "both critical and complicitous" (Hutcheon 2004: 222) vantage point, emphasizing, and perhaps as intensely as possible, the artifice of creation and storytelling, which further foregrounds the constructedness of the narratives of the present. Additionally, however, Gartner's endeavor not only problematizes the present by inviting the discourses of the past to come into the 'field of play' and reveal what it is that remains viscerally relevant – for personal identity, the women's issues, etc. – but also exposes the inescapability of continuity. It is this particular quality of Gartner's parodic experimentation that foregrounds the Derridean postmodern

deconstructive impulse, and it is this continuity that highlights the essence of the postmodern self-reflexive interrogation.

For those unfamiliar with women's pioneer writing, this contemporary story reveals the tension between life and death, the 'said' and the 'unsaid', which is at the core of irony – the presence of explicit and implicit contradictions – and which, along with comic contrasts, not only build the humorous and seemingly lighthearted tone of the story against the somewhat down-played tragic background of the male character, but also accrue the ironic layer on the macro level – the level of the entire narrative. This particular irony that Gartner employs, functions both as pragmatic in exposing the incompatible discourse interaction, and particularly in the opposition between the urban and rural – a negativizing function, as Hutcheon would term it, extending to the parodic reworking of the Canadian women's pioneer writing.

To digress back to the character of the pilot, the tension contained in his disturbing past shrouded in the death of his fellow helicopter school peers (Gartner 2011: 11) – his life in self-isolation and the desire to reach that 'altitude' that seems elusive (Gartner 2011: 21) – might also be interpreted, symbolically, as the desire to *join* his peers. In combination with the protagonist's desire to flee the entrapment of his rurally-set, past-bound world (Gartner 2011: 14, 22) – a world spatially and temporally, but also culturally, located outside of her own (Gartner 2011: 14) – the ironic sensibility of the narrative is produced. At the surface level, the female protagonist struggles with her realization that love, as defined in her relationship, imprisons her personality, and therefore, this dislocation and "contrasts" as "a matter of belief" (Gartner 2011: 12) amount to irreconcilable differences between the couple, and yet, they are only humorously or ironically, occasionally sarcastically, dealt with by the protagonist.

However, familiarity with early Canadian women's writing is visibly emanated in Gartner's urban female protagonist's demystification of the rural setting, and it echoes the theme of entrapment prevalent in earlier Canadian fiction. This adds to the overall ironic tone, but reveals a strong parodic connection on further investigation. The metafictional character of the narration becomes evident with the comment of the protagonist-narrator that "contrasts will be more a matter of belief" (Gartner 2011: 12), and at the formal level, the historiographic parodic source becomes particularly obvious due to the particularity of the style. However, what is specifically complex is

Gartner's use of ambiguous syntax. Syntactically, using the Future Simple tense as if the entire story were a thought experiment, the narrator underlines the discursive nature of the personal narrative, the story itself, but also an awareness of the constructedness of the source narratives. It resounds the essential postmodern assumption that the center is both within and without the structure, and that the discourse, on its own, has no stability. The context, Derrida's substitution of the center, is found in what Hutcheon would call the 'short circuit' between history and the present moment – the level at which the narrative is imaginable in the contemporary moment even if it resounds the past so powerfully. The line, of course, between the literary source and the contemporary setting can be drawn, and yet Gartner's syntax and formal organization render the narrative spatially and temporally mutable, even if this narrative, at first glance, does not 'sound' particularly postmodern.

The ironic edge of the described conflict and the inherent tension that bridges the very opening of the story to its closure does not directly address the social, cultural or political dimensions implied or inferred as present in the characters' lives. Indirectly, however, such issues as femininity and masculinity are subtly explored from a very subjective perspective of the relationship around which the narrative revolves, and interestingly, again as if in the form of a thought experiment, the narrator exposes how much of her own, and by extension potentially the reader's, estimations rely on stereotypical, romanticized, fetishized and idealized images of reality. Additionally, it is the parodic undercurrent that directly addresses the women's issues by importing the ideological context of the parodic sources so that the unsuspecting reader may need to investigate the layers of the literary background on which Gartner's relies.

"How to Survive in the Bush" opens with the narrator's introduction of the character of the pilot who, at the age of thirty-seven, facing the death of all his helicopter school peers' death, quits flying and "reconstructs vintage aircraft in a hand-built hangar the size of a three-car garage" (Gartner 2011: 11). The man whose everyday life resembles "Halloween" (Gartner 2011: 11) because of all the ghosts residing beside him as he tries to rebuild a "1941 Tiger Moth" (Gartner 2011: 11), appears to the protagonist as both haunted by the irretrievable loss of peers and a certain self-imposed dislocation (spatial and temporal) that, figuratively, echoes her own self-deception in trying to forcibly change her lifestyle and aspirations to match his circumstance. The story, in effect, begins at its very end – at the moment of the breakup, and ends with the breakup elaboration,

featuring in between the "day-to-day survival" (Gartner 2011: 12) in the form of a journal. Or it never happened, or the breakup never happened – at the level of syntax, this certainty is refused.

However, in the light of the previously mentioned demystification of the rural, Gartner evokes, stylistically, the prose (stories and sketches, the epistolary form) of the two famous pioneering women writers of Canada – Catherine Parr Traill and Susanna Moodie[37]. In *The Routledge Concise History of Canadian Literature* (2011), Richard Lane provides insight into the work and biography of Catherine Parr Traill that might have served, in some of its aspects as a material source in Zsuzsi Gartner's "How to Survive in the Bush." This author mentions as the "prime example of the conjectural impulse […] Catherine Pan Traill's (1802-99) *The Young Emigrants; or, Pictures of Life in Canada* (1826), […] constructed from letters received from family and friends, rather than from direct experience" (2011: 52), which is precisely the *act* the protagonist of the story reenacts in hypothesizing about the manner in which she would narrate her success-story of the bush to her friends. Moreover, some of the journal entries also resemble epistolary form, which suggests that Gartner's mixing of styles is not only intentional, but purposeful. Unlike Traill, whose "[writing] was to be a source of income that would help the family survive, with her sisters acquiring fame, if not fortune, for their outstanding work, such as Agnes Strickland's *Lives of the Queens of England* […] and Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush*" (Lane 2011: 52), the protagonist dreams about writing a Canadian novel worthy of belonging to the canon, but unsuccessfully so – a humorous, intentional and amusingly ironic authorial intrusion on the part of Gartner.

Furthermore, "Traill's earliest publications reveal her interest in conduct manuals (books that essentially taught young women how to behave in polite society) and personal, moral growth" (Lane 2011: 52), which Gartner subverts in the story, placing it in the ideological framework of unsustainable patriarchal gender role that her urban protagonist ultimately escapes, all by means of subtle and humorous irony. Much like Traill's works dealing with "different aspects of the natural world, including drawn sketches, observational data, stories, anecdotes, poetry and

[37] In *The Routledge Concise History of Canadian Literature* (2011), Richard Lane mentions Moodie's sketches as "[approaching] the domestic chora through the cultural interpenetration that first shocks her, and then provides her with valuable literary material" (2011: 56), which is precisely what Gartner achieves with her form and contextual relation to Moodie's writing. He adds that the themes of "the large binary oppositions that structure her work – cultured vs. uncultured; Old World vs. New World; civilized vs. the primitive […] – are eventually problematized as she acculturates to her new surroundings, even if settling is ultimately a personal failure" (Lane 2011: 56), which is not the case with the protagonist of Gartner's story.

descriptive prose" (Lane 2011: 52), the protagonist self-satirizes her forced efforts to adjust her sensibility to the space of the bush by being awkwardly productive and creative. The brilliantly ironic tone of the protagonist-narrator in dealing with her failing efforts suggests the presence of the second source of inspiration – Susanna Moodie. Whereas Traill "creates a dialectic of hardship/endurance and progress/joy, with a sliding scale from one to the other pole as her narrative progresses" (Lane 2011: 54), Gartner's narrative unravels and deteriorates, and the sentiment gradually becomes closer to that of "Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush, or Life in Canada* (1852) – which, while written sometime after the event, narrates her personal experiences as an emigrant and settler" (Lane 2011: 55). According to Lane, "[less] temperamentally suited to the life of the bush settler, Moodie narrates a very different story from that of her sister" (2011: 55), which is potentially why Gartner's narrative so insistently foreshadows the failure to adapt. Observed as a parodic reworking of Traill's and Moodie's works, "How to Survive in the Bush" takes into consideration first the story of Traill's endurance and work ethics that ultimately lead to progress and enjoyment, but closes with Moodie's ultimate failure to fully adjust to the conditions. The similarities between the character of the story and Moodie's marriage, at least at the superficial level, might also provide another dimension to the work, bridging a historical gap between women in revealing a shared-dimension of the female Canadian experience. The protagonist of the Canadian wilderness in Gartner's "How to Survive in the Bush," however, escapes the oppressing space of the unenclosed prison of rural Canada.

In the "Literary and Popular Culture," Holman and Thacker notice that contemporary popular culture and literature still "[echo] a dominant theme in some of the earliest CanLit works, such as Catherine Parr Traill's *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836) and Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852)," (2013: 200) and that this *historical* and re-appropriating impulse reveals "that Canadian writers and readers are attracted to the concept of Canada as a nation of immigrants, perpetually in a state of being 'away.' The Canadian 'self' is itself a series of fragments" (2013: 200), which supports the general premise of this entire undertaking – that the contemporary Canadian short story reveals a literary impulse of investigation rather than inscription in its postmodern character.

In itself, this story is a postmodern meta-commentary related by the title, and furthered by the structure of the narrative as featuring sections such as "Make Noise" (Gartner 2011: 12), "Play the

Country Wife" (Gartner 2011: 14), "Celebrate" (Gartner 2011: 15), "Be Creative" (Gartner 2011: 18), "Listen Up" (Gartner 2011: 20) and "Learn to Fly" (Gartner 2011: 22) – all ironic in their attempt to describe the futility of the protagonist's attempts at a transformation into a different 'kind' of person, and more specifically, different kind of woman. They are particularly ironic if observed in the context of contemporary positive-psychology trends and self-help fads, and yet they echo a similar struggle that does not seem to be historically remote. Furthermore, the exaggeration of the wilderness-like aspects of the landscape and the immediate environment add to this connection, and the episodic mention of "Susannah, his ex-wife" in the "Celebrate" section clearly serves to contrast the sensibility of the protagonist against the image or idea of the already mentioned Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill – the epitome of stoic endurance, fortitude and survival.

The narrative, construed as literal or hypothetical, leads the reader towards two diverging scenarios – one in which there is indeed a relationship and a breakup, and in this one, the protagonist recollects her "day-to-day survival" (Gartner 2011: 12) 'in the bush'. This in-between narrative in the form of a journal holds a strong evaluative and attitudinal streak, and the irony is created by the contrasting experiences recounted. In this scenario, overwhelmed by "the impossibilities" (Gartner 2011: 11) of the relationship, the protagonist 'would' leave for her coastal town, and in the pilot's eyes, see "only cumulonimbus clouds reflected from a turbulent sky" (Gartner 2011: 11), which the reader might interpret as his reaction to the breakup, or potentially a general description of the pilot's internal state – always on the verge of 'precipitation' especially in the context of the stated and implied losses he has experienced.

The syntactic dimension of the narration style complicates interpretation, or rather, renders it both thought-provoking and stimulating. The second scenario that might be inferred is that the narrative never actually happens, which is why syntactically, counterintuitively, the narrator uses Future Simple, as one perhaps would in hypothesizing a situation, which is evocative of postmodern metafictional writing, and in that context, this narrative is brilliantly experimental in its parodic use of style and theme. At the same time, the structure of the narrative interpellates the reader assuring its own veracity through the immediacy of such-and-such experience, serving almost as an instruction manual. The reader is placed in the position of the experiencer and asked to side with the narrator. The detail and the ingenuity of the circumstances described in the narrative, of

course, convince the reader in the plausibility of the story and provide a space for the exploration of contemporary topicality, of limited and subjective scope, perhaps, but one that intensely influences our everyday life, and the subjective experience of reality.

In the first journal entry, the "Make Noise" section, the protagonist starts exploring her 'fear' of the life in the bush by contrasting her 'civilized' urban 'distinctions' to the still implicit images of the 'wilderness' that she would encounter. The contrast between the urban and rural is at the same time a point of intersection between the two, figuratively, opposed lifestyles – she is not in the habit of wearing heels, she does not keep a typical apartment pet, nor is she particularly fond of the penthouse view:

> But you haven't worn high heels since high school. You loathe miniature poodles. Penthouse suites make you dizzy. The contrasts will be more a matter of belief. You believe the bush is a place to go visit, not a place to live. It's unbearably quiet at night. But love, you will think – great big, gasping, groaning, slurping, sucking, moaning, jubilantly insane love; that waltz you dirty, hold you to the ceiling, push you up against the brick wall love… […] will fill in that silence, make a wailing mess of the coniferous deciduous night that shrinks you down, makes you small. But his kisses will fall like moths. He will wrap you in a lazy, silky cocoon. The silence will grow more intense. (Gartner 2011: 12)

The specific mention of the "contrast", much like irony later on, may be interpreted as a mere narrative element, but it could also be understood as an authorial intrusion – a meta-commentary – since it points to a shift in the stream of consciousness. From the potentially compatible 'beliefs', the narrator-protagonist moves to the those 'beliefs' standing for differences: the bush is a destination, not a home, and the absence of noise becomes particularly important. In fact, from the "unbearable quiet" to the 'intense silence', the narrator-protagonist makes sure to convince herself that the 'sounds' of love, or as insinuated – love-making, would compensate the absence of the sounds of the urban life she existentially relies on. The reader is invited to sympathize. However, contrast and incongruity, both at the level of syntax and the level of meaning, appear to complicate, or deepen, interpretation. In expressing her conviction about the "unbearable quiet," the narrator uses the same tense as in examining her own dislikes about urban life, but the syntax changes the moment these certainties are enumerated. The moment she starts talking about love, the reader,

invited already to walk in this character's shoes, understands that the events to follow 'will have happened', just as "love, you will think" phrase suggests the opposite of whatever would follow. The 'intense silence' at the end of the quoted excerpt introduces the tone and sensibility of the irony that Gartner extends throughout the story – the implicit irony of failed expectations and intentions, incongruities and incompatibilities, but not necessarily with a comic or humorous effect in all instances.

Self-reflexively, in the narrative, the protagonist examines her own set of beliefs, as she would do throughout the journal, as if rummaging through memories of her life in the bush. She recalls her lesbian friend who would not find the bush "ominous" (Gartner 2011: 13) – the friend who would reach towards "a canvas of Emily Carr's thickly barked trees […] wanting to touch wood" (Gartner 2011: 12). The underlying stereotype of a fearless lesbian ready to embark on a hike through the wilderness of Canada is evoked, but also conveniently used to introduce the famous Canadian painter – the female side of the history-story[38] – into the picture. The stereotype is further extended both for the humorous effect, but also as a means of contrast between the protagonist's individual urban sensibility and her lesbian-friend's, and in terms of femininity, which is incidentally where the ironic edge lands:

> But this friend likes women and although she'd appreciate the aviator's way with wood, she would have little use for the things his hands can do once the lights go out. (Gartner 2011: 13)

This commentary also supports the argument for the hypothetical nature of the narrative since it not only reveals, but emphasizes the thought process, the evaluation of pros and cons that might occur before one would make the final decision on such a drastic lifestyle change. The protagonist of Gartner's story, after all, has the luxury of choice.

The extended irony in the story is permanently based on the underlying idea of unfortunate dislocation and even disarticulation – when the protagonist is being creative, or, when she attempts to seduce and excite her lover by wearing her biker boots. These, figuratively correspond in the two lovers' worlds as a symbol of power and independence, but the urban protagonist rides her

[38] Gartner writes a contemporary 'herstory' by allowing these historical figures, all women, to bring their symbolic potential into the story.

motorcycle through the traffic-congested streets and apparently has no sensibility for the literal interpretation of how her seductive attempts would work if she were a real cowgirl:

> Then he'll also tell you that if you were a real cowgirl, you would have had to take your boots off because the smell of manure has never aroused him. (Gartner 2011: 13)

The additional layer of irony with regard to the protagonist's femininity is subtly weaved into the narrative. It is persistently in the form of comments on her inadequacy to satisfy the standard that she understands is desired 'in those parts', in the bush. However, it is not necessarily a commentary provided by the lover, but rather her own feeling of the reaction she encounters – the sort of raw or uncouth sincerity, at the literal level.

This literal level, and the tension between the verbal and actions, or rather between the unsaid and the performed, creates the basis for irony. In certain instances, of course, Gartner unravels the ironic meaning visibly and intentionally, which serves as a cue in the remainder of the text to interpret at the reader's own willingness to participate in the 'ironic play'.

> He will say this as if it's a good thing: *miles from anywhere*. Your mouth will form the words: "It sounds so idyllic." And, one hand cupping his warm balls, you'll cast your eyes around your room, wondering what to take with you, wondering what you can do without. (Gartner 2011: 14)

The motif of 'flight' or escape, the fleeing from an unenclosed and self-imposed prison (of love) flickers in the narrative only to add to the tension initially indicated by the "silence [that] will grow more intense" (Gartner 2011: 12). Gartner uses subtle semantic cues to extend her motif of flight and weave this implicit irony to both the protagonist and her lover. This is their point of comparison, not contrast. Sitting inside the cockpit of her lover's unfinished airplane, in the middle of the night while the pilot is reliving a traumatic experience in his dream, as per usual we learn, the protagonist "will peer through the wind-shield considering the possibilities for flight" (Gartner 2011: 22) from this place that is "*miles from anywhere*" and miles from sounding even remotely "so idyllic" (Gartner 2011: 14) to someone who either fantasizes about "already hugging the highway [as] he is hugging the sky" (Gartner 2011: 22). A macabre thread connects the points in

the narrative where 'altitude' figures as the final goal. The protagonist's 'altitude' is the city – with its buzzing life, sounds and motions:

> There, with the rumble of traffic in your very bones, the nerves buried below your skin will rise to the surface again, gaining altitude, shyly at first, then like a thousand legged centipede will begin excitedly waving to all the people rushing by. (Gartner 2011: 22)

For the protagonist, this altitude may be the highway, or it may be the social contact, but as she notes, "in the city you are hardly earthbound" (Gartner 2011: 17) – a figure of speech that directly contrast the pilot's desire to reach his own altitude. Gartner's protagonist's comment on the 'ghosts' the pilot seems to be haunted by in the opening of the story, the disturbing scene she recollects when she is lying on the floor, "pressing [her] body to the ground" (Gartner 2011: 22), listening to the pilot talking to "all those dear boys from helicopter school whose bodies were left scattered" (Gartner 2011: 22) in his sleep, suggest the possibility of a different interpretation of the pilot's altitude in the protagonist understanding. His tenacious efforts to remain in close connection to the past, consciously by isolating himself in the hangar, and driven by the unconscious trauma manifested and replayed through his vivid dreams, all lead the reader to understand that the protagonist might well be running from death. Figuratively, this death extends to the death of her own being, her femininity as she understands it, her aspirations that seem "stunted" (Gartner 2011: 17) in the shadows of such deeply rooted trees that already exist in the life of the pilot. Ironically, of course, and perhaps, particularly Canadian-ironically, the landscape plays the crucial role in reflecting the internal state of the characters:

> You will let your friends know it's not just desire keeping you there, but that you're reaching inside of yourself, finding inner resources you never thought you had. […] What you won't tell them is that there are so many trees the plants don't receive enough light. They are stunted. Dwarves. (Gartner 2011: 17)

The wannabe pioneer's, protagonist's, attempts at gardening mirror her failed urban aspirations and complement the overall irony or failure and displacement. Namely, in the "Play the Country Wife" section, the joke about the specific instant soup brand adds to the irony of the protagonist's willing participation, or perhaps a self-imposed one, in a charade-like spectacle for the CBC

reporter who comes to interview the pilot, among other "chock-full of interesting characters" (Gartner 2011: 14) residing in East Kootenays:

> […] you will play the country wife. You'll make soup and serve it wearing an apron. Sighing heavily, she will tell you, "I wish I had time to make home-made soup," knowing full well she wishes no such thing.
> She will say: "What do you call this?"
> You will say: "Campbell's." (Gartner 2011: 15)

On its own, the "Campbell's" joke would only add to the brilliant humor Gartner always manages to slip in between the recurrently profound observations of her characters' thought processes. However, here, it additionally serves to intensify the underlying irony in the protagonist's failed aspirations – a failed writer who practically dresses up for the role of a cowgirl, or a country wife, or even an artist. The irony is not aimless, even if it is character-bound and personal, but extends to the entire category of women playing these roles:

> You used to dream of writing the great urban Canadian novel. Now you try to think up visual metaphors to convey sparkling clean taste. (Gartner 2011: 15)

The protagonist's dream of "the great urban Canadian novel" is almost ridiculed by the self-aware, metafictional, epistolary prose or the diary that she writes in journaling her experience in the bush (Gartner 2011: 21). In addition to journaling, there are the letters written to friends that would have to be "funny, ironic letters that describe you doing battle with the wilderness, as if the wilderness were a surly bank teller or a waiter who's brought your Corona without the requisite lime" (Gartner 2011: 17), which is another hint at the self-reflexive nature of the entire narrative. The parodic overtones of the protagonist's attempts to meet the expectations of her friends in conveying her life in the bush through the metaphor of struggle strengthen the reliance on the stereotypical images and conceptions with which Gartner so efficiently textures the narrative. And the tone is parodic since the entire narrative is populated by the ghosts of pioneering women, the powerful symbolism echoing in the subtle mention of their names, the metafictional, the author's palpable presence, even if the plot itself is situated in contemporaneity.

The same metafictional self-reflexive tone infuses the irony in the protagonist's description of the attempt to be as 'creative' and crafty as her pilot lover who fells a tree and produces actual objects. However, in the "Be Creative" section of the journal, the protagonist's effort amounts to punching holes in cutlery – an image that combined with the described sound insinuates at the non-verbalized internal turmoil:

> You'll punch holes in all the cutlery and string it up on fishing lines stretched across a row of cedars behind the house. When the wind comes up, the clatter will be deafening. (Gartner 2011: 18)

Due to the obvious and intentional authorial *play*, the entire endeavor of telling this story as a reworking of the pioneering women's writing serves as a metafictional comment. Moreover, it even invites Jameson's view of postmodernism as a trend which commodifies art, in this context, as the uninspired artist, the authorial entity, regurgitates history in order to sell it as something new, much like the uninspired housewife-playing protagonist punches holes in cutlery in an effort to infuse herself with creativity.

Another instance of such parodied ironic circumstance worth mentioning, if not for its relevance for postmodern interpretations, but for the extraordinary humor Gartner provides, is the encounter between the protagonist and the pilot's ex-wife in the "Celebrate" section where failed expectations result in a humorous reversal:

> […] and the three of you will dance arm in arm under the belly of the unfinished plane. He will be pleased you get on so well and you'll feel sad that their marriage failed. […] That night you'll hunch over the sink and cry, "How could you have left that wonderful little Lady Pinecone?" He will splash cold water on your face and tuck you in. (Gartner 2011: 16)

The protagonist's insecurities about the pilot's ex-wife, Susannah, the figurative "woodpecker, the one you will hear but never see" (Gartner 2011: 16), fumble in a comic reversal when the imagined "qualified ranger and speed rock climber" who speaks "Nepali like a Sherpa" and knits (Gartner 2011: 16) shows up to reveal her "tiny and delicate" (Gartner 2011: 16) self. The image of the annoying 'woodpecker' transforms into one of "Lady Pinecone" after the protagonist has had

enough of Canadian Club to become fully receptive to the charms of the former wife of her current lover. Perhaps the Canadian reader would not find humor, or hints of irony, at the specific mention of 'Canadian Club', but for the non-Canadian reader the implicature plays with the stereotype of the peaceable, overly kind and undisturbed Canadian who cannot even bring herself to be confrontational, passive-aggressive or disrespectful to the ex-wife of her lover who attends this "party" (Gartner 2011: 15) possibly for no other reason than there being very few people that could be invited and attend 'in the bush,' which, though unstated in the story, might open another can of worms. And, of course, when all of these characters come together and form a club, it is the place where history and contemporaneity meet.

The use of irony in "How to Survive in the Bush" demonstrates its pragmatic potential. Irony, with the contrasts and incongruities it encompasses – at the level of the specific and the general – operates in this story at the pragmatic rather than the rhetorical level, and serves the purpose of exposing the inconsistencies between internal and external perception. This ironic sensibility abounds in implicatures that not only reflect the protagonist's internal conflict, but allude to the historical, traditional socio-cultural sources of the irreconcilable and diverging paths of the two characters when the narrative is interpreted as a very specific rendition of a section of Canadian women's writing. The visible link between the (historical and literary) past, the intertextuality that is invited into 'play' that figures with ironic undertones, the integration into the contemporary moment, the syntactical insistence on the metafictional character of the narrative, render this contemporary short story a piece of postmodern 'trickery' that amuses with its crafty narration. The parody at the level of Traill's and Moodie's works, and their significance in the Canadian literary history, at the formal, structural and stylistic levels of narrative work to accentuate the irony in which the almost visceral relationship between the past and contemporaneity is contained.

Isn't It Ironic in Jessica Grant's "My Husband's Jump"

In Jessica Grant's story, "My Husband's Jump," first published in *The Malahat Review* and subsequently selected for *The Journey Prize Stories* (2003), irony, along with humor, operate at the level of the unexpected, usually semantic twists, but also at the level of the final message that the story relates. The nature of the message can be discussed in terms of the personal philosophical

and spiritual turnaround that the protagonist of the story experiences in grieving the shocking and unexplainable disappearance of her husband, an Olympic ski jumper who, simply, “never landed” (Grant 2003: 84). This message, far from being any form of denouement, makes for the, perhaps, anticlimactic and sentimental closure of the narrative, which is in itself an ironic reversal since the narrative discourse operates, and with force, to discard and reject such a ‘closure’ – the recognition and acceptance of death:

> But my husband’s *jump* was a verb, not a noun. Forever unfinished. What must it be like, I wondered, to hang your life on a single word? To *jump*. A verb ridden into the sunset. One verb to end all others.
> To *jump*. Not to doubt, to pity, to worry, to prove or disprove. Not to remember, to howl, to ask, to answer. Not to love. Not even to *be*.
> And not to *land*. Never, ever to land. (Grant 2003: 90)

However, the overall ambiguity at the level of the discourse, and particularly so at the point of the anticlimactic closure, expose the intentional postmodern concern with the discourse as unstable, decentered and ultimately limitless in the subjective field of play, as Derrida defines it. The entire narrative discourse is a deconstruction of an impossible event discussed in the context of interacting social and cultural discourses in which the personal discourse of the protagonist-narrator, in the act of refusal to implicate and integrate itself in the dominant, becomes a temporary center of its own. In the very possibility of deconstructing and reconstructing the narrative of her husband’s strange disappearance, and translating it to a higher level philosophical discourse – not only on semantics, though this particular aspect echoes the postmodern interpretation of Derrida presented in this study strongly – the protagonist-narrator exposes the constructedness of all other discourses surrounding her, as well as the idea that narratives are essential to our sanity.

The protagonist’s semantic considerations, the understanding of her husband’s jump as a process, rather than a finite act as suggested by the noun, invites only a tacit acknowledgment of the finality, but really signifies a process of her own healing as she is forced to mourn without ever having proof of the actual loss. The irony at this level is the protagonist’s own ‘jump into faith’ – into the process of acceptance of the event transcending any rational or adequate explanation. It is the irony of “[hanging] your life on a single word” (Grant 2003: 90) regardless of whether it is ‘science’, or

‘jump’, or ‘God’ or ‘faith’, for that is what the protagonist ultimately must do, even though in itself it brings no resolution. The protagonist does not make a ‘leap of faith’, but precisely a jump, and one that implies both accepting, and recognizing the impossibility of acceptance – of not knowing, or having, at least, the necessary answers, which is something that the Olympic ski jumper, her husband, would never have to deal with. The protagonist allows herself, therefore, another context – that necessary supplement in the deconstruction of her own condition.

The detached discourse narrated to focalize the protagonist’s experience, the source of both irony and humor, often lighthearted sarcasm, is both complemented and contrasted to faith to such an extent that it renders the action of the word ‘leap’ inadequate in terms of the conclusion the protagonist reaches at the end of the story. Moreover, the lengths that the protagonist has to go to in order to find her own peace of mind as to the loss of her husband, if she ever does so, as the end suggests, requires her to *jump* in the same inexplicable manner to a conclusion from which she would not *land*, but from the postmodern point of view, this move through language only mirrors the discursive nature of reality.

The story opens with the description of the protagonist’s husband final jump, or rather, as his wife would come to understand, his ‘ascension’ of sorts. It is impossible not to relate this allusion to Zsuzsi Gartner’s “How to Survive in the Bush,” and the motif of altitude, even though the two stories remain unrelated. The altitude that figures in Grant’s “My Husband’s Jump” – the action of the verb *jump*, rather than the finality of the act itself, figures in the mentioned story by Gartner in a similar manner, as a process and goal – something to do with finality, but without the focus on the finality itself. The protagonist’s lover in Gartner’s story is a former pilot whose unconscious desire to rejoin his peers in reaching this ‘altitude’ echoes Grant’s protagonist’s husband who, in fact, achieves the altitude that turns out to be a point of no return – a “life mid-jump” (Grant 2003: 84) that, as the protagonist says, she was warned about, but understood only “metaphorically” (Grant 2003: 84). The naiveté of her tone in attempting to verbalize what she cannot emotionally process, along with the detachment that follows, introduces the ever-so-slightly ironic tone in the narrative discourse – one, however, directed at the protagonist herself as she contemplates her isolation not only in terms of the loneliness at literally losing her husband, but also at being denied the right to mourn in privacy.

> It began like any other jump. His speed was exactly what it should be. His height was impressive, as always. Up, up he went into a perfect sky that held its breath for him. He soared. […] Up. Over the crowd, slicing the sky. Every cheer in every language stopped; every flag in every colour dropped. (Grant 2003: 84)

For the protagonist, the first experience of the, then unfathomable, but ultimately imminent death of her husband "was a wondrous sight" (Grant 2003: 84), signaling a detachment as she witnesses the occasion on television, much like everyone else – all of those people who would "[come] after her" (Grant 2003: 84) demanding to know the answer to the mystery:

> Honestly, and I swear this is true, at first I felt only wonder. (Grant 2003: 84)

From the "pure" (Grant 2003: 84) and untainted position of a mere witness, the protagonist becomes involved in the investigation that, in fact, goes well beyond the search for the possibly injured man or the body, as it would be improbable that he could survive – perhaps as improbable as the jump itself carrying the man off into his death without any prospect of retrieval.

> It was pure, even as I watched him disappear. I wasn't worried about him, not then. I didn't begrudge him, nor then. I didn't feel jealous, suspicious, forsaken. (Grant 2003: 84)

The investigation that forces her involvement turns into preposterous, scandalous and tabloid concerns about the life of the disappeared ski jumper, and the protagonist, whose life becomes, as she claims, a stage for "Iago and Cassius" (Grant 2003: 84) types of all kinds to 'slither in' and tear up her privacy, the image of her husband, but also her own by planting the seeds of doubt not only in what occurred at the Olympic Games, but also prior to that. Moreover, it opens the stage for "the faithless" (Grant 2003: 85) to unnecessarily re-traumatize her: "Family, friends, teammates, the bloody IOC – they had "thoughts" they wanted to share with me" (Grant 2003: 85) – thoughts that would insinuate that the man was still alive, allegations of a possible doping-scandal (Grant 2003: 85) that would explain the 'altitude' of the jump, suspicions of an affair (Grant 2003: 87), but also thoughts that would place the blame of the jumper's disappearance on her – the Olympic jumper running away from an overbearing wife – a victim of marriage (Grant 2003: 87), according to his family[39]. If on the semantic level, the protagonist relates a dose of

[39] Although the allegations remain unexplored in the story, their mere mention opens the door for the transideological

graceful, but light-hearted and whimsical attitude, it is profound grief that is at its foundation, which renders the irony permeating the entire narrative all the more powerful:

> I did, however, tell one reporter that while adultery may break the law of *marriage*, it has never been known to break the law of *gravity*. I was quite pleased with my quip, but they never published it. (Grant 2003: 87)

Such 'quips' are, in fact, all that she is capable of producing in the face of preposterous allegations in midst of the blame-game that she somehow cannot avoid to become the center of. The protagonist relates the bits of her dinners with her husband's Swiss rival, a man "exhausted and slippery-looking" (Grant 2003: 85) who insists on providing scientific explanations for the fact that her husband never landed – "a […] rare and determined air current" (Grant 2003: 85) that might have taken him "against his will, into the stratosphere" (Grant 2003: 85). The aim, however, behind this man's insistence on there being a rational explanation behind the disappearance reveals not a concern for the probable tragic death, but a disturbing jealousy at the height and length of the jump itself – the wondrous singularity of the incident:

> You believe, then, that my husband is dead?
> He nodded again, but with less gusto. He was not heartless – just nervous and desperate to persuade me of something he didn't quite believe himself. (Grant 2003: 85)

At the semantic level, it is the protagonist's observations that cue ironic interpretation – the "gusto" of convincing himself in the possibility of such a feat requires resorting to science. If there exists a scientific explanation for the "impossible reference points, marks nobody ever expected to hit" (Grant 2003: 84), then such a rationale could allow this rival skier to move on. What he desperately needs for this to happen, however, is for the wife of the 'flier' to believe as well[40]. He demands a certainty that would center his discourse, and the protagonist provides only more language play, literally.

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speculation on what sort of discourses present in society produce these outcomes.

[40] The postmodern treatment of faith and belief here unequivocally determines them as intimate and subjective. Whereas the character of the Swiss-competitor and Sister Perpetua desire external confirmation, however irrelevant to the faith or belief itself, the protagonist ultimately demonstrates that such validation is both unnecessary and inadequate.

> Have you slept recently? I asked. You seem jumpy – excuse the pun. (Grant 2003: 86)

The tension that the protagonist's narrative mediates culminates in these sort of puns, exposing the irony of her own position, as well as that of her husband – he dies and yet his death is a spectacle; he dies and she becomes the person responsible for providing answers, and yet, "[the] world was not interested in *my* theory" (Grant 2003: 88). The protagonist's theory causes reactions in the form of "the subject [being] politely changed" (Grant 2003: 88) because her theory is founded on the idea that God had something to do with her husband's never landing:

> I tried to explain that my husband's jump had made a believer out of me. Out of *me*. That in itself was a miracle. (Grant 2003: 88)

The implicatures provided in the protagonist's observations pertaining to faith, and the faithless, evoke the interpretations of certain well-known Biblical images and potentially refer to the New Testament, the death and final ascension of Jesus Christ. More precisely, they might refer to the scene in which Mary Magdalene sees Christ rising from his grave and approaches him in an attempt of physical contact[41]. This intertextual interjection and Biblical allusion links directly to the protagonist's immediate experience of God – "how tangible, how furry" (Grant 2003: 89), and suggests the irony of the protagonist's willing mistake of seeing her dog as God. Jesus Christ's final message to Mary Magdalene is a message of transcendence of the physical, and yet the protagonist, much like the sisters, remains unconsciously caught in the material plane, for a moment. The naively ironic, if not sarcastic, undertone to the unfortunate, supposedly unconscious mix-up in the protagonist's mind (the dog/god delusion) complements the postmodern premise of the instability of meaning in the narrative discourse, and by extension, the impossibility of stability in its immediate or secondary experience.

A convert, metaphorically speaking, the protagonist is desperate to find a like-minded ear that could confirm her only plausible theory and explanation for the seemingly unusual experience and processing of the loss, but even her old high school principle, Sister Perpetua, leaves the woman

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[41] *The Bible*, John 20:17: Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Source: *Bible Hub*: https://biblehub.com/niv/john/20.htm, accessed April 18th 2020, incidentally, the so-called "Holy Saturday".

"howling *God* at the moon, night after night, half expecting to see my husband's silhouette pass before it like Santa Claus" (Grant 2003: 88).

Sister Perpetua, a woman whose "coughs were bigger than she was. Vast, hungry coughs" (Grant 2003: 88) confesses to losing her faith in the event of the infamous jump. The ironic reversal or twist is impossible to overlook:

> She and the other sisters had been gathered around the television in the common room. When he failed to land, she said, they felt something yanked from them, something sucked from the room, from the world entire – something irrevocably lost. (Grant 2003: 88)

For the formerly-faithful nun, "his failure to land" (Grant 2003: 89) discredits the conception of God, "[what] we had *thought* was God" (Grant 2003: 89), but the 'reversed-miracle' in which the sisters lose faith remains as unexplained as the one because of which the protagonist finds it. After spending her "life feeling outnumbered by them – how dare they all defect?" (Grant 2003: 88), the protagonist asks before visiting the coughing sister, but the sanctuary, the supposed repository of faith turns out to be as paralyzed and confounded as the rest – the irony of the reversal of their roles intensifies the implicature of the protagonist being left only with the "silent partner" (Grant 2003: 89), a sad-eyed dog:

> I told her I was sure of God's existence now, as sure as if he were tied up in my backyard. I could smell him on my hands. That's how close he was. How real, how tangible, how furry.
> She lifter her hands to her face, inhaled deeply, and coughed. For a good three minutes she coughed, and I crouched beneath the swirling air in the room, afraid. (Grant 2003: 89)

The innocence in the protagonist's, possibly unintentional, pun furthers the irony in the narrative. The wordplay in which her 'dog' becomes 'god' draws on the idea permeating the discourse that words' meanings are subjective constructs, and it exemplifies, though particularly subtly, the postmodern metafictional experiment in which meaning is decentered, or multiplied – residing in the associative power of its surroundings, ever-changing with context, perhaps constructed by it, but with the emphasis on the constructedness. The reversals, the antonyms and the contrasts that flutter around the idea of faith, all serve to suggest the instability of the semantic units in its conceptual state. In the final scene of the story, the protagonist is kneeling beside the floppy-

headed dog, "watching him, watching the sky" (Grant 2003: 89), "[thinking] about the word *jump*. My husband's word" (Grant 2003: 89).

Jessica Grant's protagonist ultimately contemplates faith – not the significance of the 'leap' that is merely the beginning, but the significance of the 'jump' that is a verb that stands for the progression that reaches no finality. The sleepless slippery rival and the coughing nun, among others, paralyzed by the finality of the 'jump' for their own reasons, looking for that elusive centered sign-signified-signifier trinity – the former infused with disbelief and jealousy, the latter perhaps jealousy and disbelief; the former doubting his own ability and potential, and the latter apparently 'perpetually hungry', or simply empty, doubting the nature of her own 'ascension', 'altitude' and the 'jump'. In her ironic martyrdom, being villainized or scape-goated for the unproven, purported and claimed *sin* of her husband – for the mere fact that he never landed after defying gravity and what science and the International Olympic Committee would consider possible, the protagonist's semantic *journey* to faith works to expose the faithless.

Interestingly, Jameson[42] sees postmodern experimentation as "not much more than theorizing its own condition of possibility" (1991: viii), which is not significantly different from how Derrida understands the process of deconstruction – a process of discovery of that which is contained in our reception and production of discourses as belonging to a tradition that is not necessarily continuous with the present moment. Jameson, of course, sees this theorizing as a negative trend, one that Eagleton claims leads to abstraction and indifference. However, in the light of Derrida's understanding of deconstruction, the protagonist's theorizing of the semantics of her narrative – the philosophical conditions of survival, stands as a personal reevaluation of the grand narratives under the sway of which we live – religious and scientific in this particular case. The constructedness of the notion of the immutability and universality of these inherited narratives becomes, at once, disambiguated and exposed for the plasticity inherently contained within each such construct, which is essentially a postmodern concern, and Jessica Grant's effortless semantic deconstruction of *god* and *dog* unravels the notion of the universal and deconstructs the entire discourse on faith, in the story.

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[42] In *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991).

The Bundle of Irony in Craig Boyko's "The Baby"

First published in *Descant*, Craig Boyko's parodic account of coming to terms with fatherhood illustrates the pragmatic potential of irony in the context of the general discourse on parenthood. Here, the parody treats the presented scientific, and on occasions, overtly traditional and ostensibly detached discourse on parenthood and child-rearing, but it is blended with what can only be labeled as brilliant humor – at the semantic level, and the level of irony. What is essentially parodied, or rather, subjected to the ironic edge, are the popular conceptions of parenthood, and the narrator's own immaturity and egotism in facing fatherhood. The narrative flow is fueled by comic reversals, intended naiveté and the misalignment of roles, at least in the case of the protagonist – daddums, the father-to-be who tells the story from the perspective of an over-educated, science-reinforced man-child. This short story reaches its climax with the final utterance, and comment, of the narrator when the blatant sarcasm of the entire narrative progression is, yet again reversed in the confession that his "heart melted" (Boyko 2006: 81).

The story opens with the protagonist being unduly shocked by his, possibly wife's or girlfriend's, Delia's, request that they conceive a child:

> Delia was again making noises with her mouth. The noises she was making, with her tongue and her teeth and the selective vibration of the vocal folds of her larynx, were intended to convey me a message. The substance of that message was that she wanted a baby. (Boyko 2006: 73)

The comic detachment of the terrified man is related by the naïve, although all too precise and specific, use of scientific and technical language – creating from the very start a polarity that would be developed further in the narrative progression: between the couple themselves, the (seemingly) unemotional and unattached protagonist, and the unexplainable loving mother (authority to both him and the child) who desires, nay *needs*, "a thing – I mean a little person – into which – into *whom* – we can pour all our unused love" (Boyko 2006: 74); the polarity between the rational and irrational that persists until the end of the narrative when the narrator finally discovers that he possesses a heart that can be 'melted'; the contrast between the realist and the absurd in terms of expectations and perceptions; and, ultimately, the polarity as expressed in the contrast between a man and a child, the man-child that is unexpectedly, ritually, introduced into fatherhood after

telling a bed-time story. These polarities, or contrasts, and their unexpectedness create for the parodic effect, and they are driven by the ironic, and often sarcastic, pieces of dialogues, sourced in excerpts from what is presented as popular or relevant literature on 'the matter', and finally, a three-part bed-time story of the narrator – a fable with an ironic moral connotation that borders satire. In the postmodern spirit, Boyko manages to use irony both to produce humorous effect and parody, and satirize the stereotypical conception of parenthood, but at the same time validate it through a subjective experience.

The discussion between the couple treats the stereotypical conception of a preordained order of events as pertaining to relationships and family, and parenthood in particular, which is strategically why the narrator reduces it to a biological impulse, and even equals it with the impulse to shop and hoard 'things' that do not necessarily have a purpose:

> "We already have many nice things. That gyroscope, for example," I said, using my finger to point at the gyroscope, which had been bloody expensive, let me tell you. "Or that astrolabe. You should make more use of the things we already have. We don't need more things." (Boyko 2006: 73)

The gyroscope and the astrolabe are innocently introduced to add to the rationale of the narrator, and defend this man's desire for personal freedom and the established material stability as reflected by the number of useless possessions. This, however, might also be interpreted as a postmodern commentary on consumerism, and even an anti-capitalist and anti-postmodern one, depending on which definition and understanding of postmodernism one relies on. In this particular *scene*, Boyko makes sure to paint the picture of this ironic situation by focusing on the finger-pointing of the character-narrator who, much in the vein of a child – a child disappointed at the impending 'arrival' of a sibling – desperately tries to make sense of things. The character-narrator, daddums, is propelled into fatherhood without much emotional preparation:

> "Correct me if I'm mistaken," I said, stroking my chin, "but don't babies *poop*?" (Boyko 2006: 73)

At the level of (narrative) discourse, the narrator debates his case with the mother-to-be from a seemingly naïve perspective by raising questions that defamiliarize the entire experience. The

basic metabolic processes of infants are explored from the narrator's man-child point of view, but then rationalized, and his fearful attitude supported by citations from the relevant scientific literature, which is probably an (online) encyclopedia or any other widely available resource. The ironic gist of the entire process is evident:

> "I do not think I want a baby," I said. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but don't babies grow into *children*?" (Boyko 2006: 74)

The narrator is "uncomfortable" with children as they "have a tendency to speak with a certain bluntness. They have a distinct lack of tact. They are, in a word, *indiscreet*" (Boyko 2006: 74). The incompatibility between the narrator's discourse on the baby – its semantic complexity that amounts to absurdity – the attitude of Delia, and the reader's experience and general knowledge on what taking care of a baby involves, along with the audacious and flaunting exaggeration, all add to the overall ironic, and parodic, essence of the story. It does not, "*exult in monotony* (italics added)" (Boyko 2006: 74) – something young children do, as the narrator finds after reading a text by the famous Gilbert Keith Chesterton, a late British writer whose productive years reached into the fourth decade of the twentieth century. Of course, the mention of this particular (literary) critic and author, the intentional temporal and linguistic displacement at the level of the language Boyko uses – the language that carries with it an evaluative edge that is, at least temporally, incompatible with contemporaneity – all give parody its credibility, even though this might complement the elitist epithet ascribed to both irony and parody. The reader is required to either be of certain age or do research before successfully collecting all the parodic breadcrumbs Boyko leaves in the narrative discourse. At this point, the image of the narrator-protagonist attains, along with the detached, slightly mechanical, pragmatist, a stiff-lipped appalled and taken-aback sensibility of a late nineteenth or early twentieth-century British man, and everything that it might entail, including going hunting if one is willing to allow the mind to extend the stereotype of an old-fashioned British man to the narrator's persona. Furthermore, Boyko's postmodern experiment supplements this already complex image with a contemporary sensibility, and the baby, observed by the narrator as an object, appears to be "obviously defective" (Boyko 2006: 75) and he becomes the hawk for the cause that involves its being 'returned' without any restraints of the awareness of politically correct speech that a twenty-first century Canadian might have adopted:

> Though it seemed, I conceded, to be operating correctly for the time being (in truth I had no idea what functions it was supposed to perform), the harsh noises and sundry smells that issued from it gave me reason to worry that it would soon malfunction. I asked Delia if she'd filled out the warranty card. (Boyko 2006: 75)

The metaphor of the object-baby, an unnecessary acquisition that requires maintenance, operating in terms of some sort of mechanical device, is stretched to include the considerations of its "upgrading to a superior make or model before we got too attached to it" (Boyko 2006: 75). The baby's feelings at being called "obviously defective" are also obviously not taken into consideration, which is in itself a circular parodic comment on the twenty-first century discourse on the matter. At this point in the narrative, the reader willingly accepts the ironic exaggerations that this parody involves, and the "suspicion that it was perhaps not the finest specimen of its sort" (Boyko 2006: 75) does not revolt or distance the reader, precisely because of the implicit irony that is only strengthened by the narrator's interjections.

These interjections, throughout the narrative discourse, remind the reader of the metafictional nature of the story, and they create a direct link between the intended meaning and the literal level of the narrative discourse. In one of them, the narrator makes sure to note that he "consulted the *New Family Encyclopedia* (we were a new family now, after all) to see what the average lifespan of a baby was" (Boyko 2006: 75). Irony, as based on incongruity, the contradictions that provide divergent interpretations, here becomes interlaced with a network of references, all indicating its provisional, pragmatic and rhetorical nature – sometimes even simultaneously.

> I offered to take the baby hunting (in truth I wanted to "accidentally" lose it in the wilderness […]) but Delia put the kibosh on that idea in no uncertain terms. (Boyko 2006: 75)

A preposterous proposition to take the "zero years old" baby (Boyko 2006: 7) hunting, and the interjection on the true intentions, are already visibly parodic at this point in the narrative, and the exaggeration progresses into an absurd, scientific, argument against his wife's "kibosh" on the matter that "as the scientists informed us, […] ontogeny recapitulated phylogeny (and what cause would they have to lead us astray?)" (Boyko 2006: 76). The specific word the narrator uses to describe Delia's veto on taking the baby hunting stands for an amusing interjection. The word has

mysterious origins, and although its meaning in contemporary use is somewhat clear, the use in the text and in relation to his partner, extends the polarity mentioned at the very beginning – between him and her, between the man-child and the adult, the mother and the authority on the matter. Not that Boyko here deals with the issue of feminism, gender issues or masculinity in particular. He explores, though, the established hierarchical positions, from the very beginning, and the implied conclusions provide the source of ironic pleasure. The man is weakened in the newly formed dynamics, being woken by the insubordinate child, and physically *abused* by Delia insisting on him telling the child a bed-time story as she "nudged me in the small of my back with her bony kneecap" (Boyko 2006: 79), when he:

> [pretended] to be asleep, seasoning the deception with a life-like snore. Alas the success of my dissimulation was a pyrrhic one; it earned me a vicious slap upon the head and the demand that I awake that very instant. (Boyko 2006: 79)

The exaggeration that Boyko uses in this narrative discourse draws its strength in the parodied style that defamiliarizes the entire process of the narrator's acceptance of the role of the father.

Additionally, of course, it defamiliarizes and exposes certain traditional, or even biological, drives behind the conception of a child either as an absolute genius for their "remarkably prehensile fists" (Boyko 2006: 78), as illustrated in the story, or the failure if it does not fulfil the parents' expectations, or the intensity of exaggeration in the reactions of 'spectators' to the most basic phases in an infant's development as something majestic or extraordinary. The narrator's observation of the baby as possibly "obviously defective" (Boyko 2006: 75) parodies precisely those expectations developed in a competitive spirit, as if child-rearing and parenting were a competition. At the same time, it parodies the unwritten rule of the observer to react to an infant as if they were witnessing an acrobatic act that actually requires work and training.

The choice of words is never accidental in Boyko's "The Baby," and the "remarkably prehensile fists" evoke the image of chimpanzees or other primates dangling from branches, which is why there is special quality to the ironic exaggeration when he relates the comments of the guests who visit and witness the baby's newly acquired physical skill:

> "Astounding!"

> "Unutterable!"
> "Discombobulating!"
> "Beggars description!"
> "Inexpressibly *outré*!"
> "Gurgle! Goo!" (Thus spake the baby itself.) (Boyko 2006: 78)

Boyko's narrator in the story is aware of the falsity of the amusement that he is providing to the guests, but accepts to participate in the play much like the reader participates in his parody. The contrast made by the last description of the 'recorded' reactions, the basic sounds produced by the baby itself during the event and the intertextual link with Friedrich Nietzsche's capital work, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and the Übermensch – the super human, provide a commentary on the absurdity of expectations as prescribed and established in the popular discourse, and therefore the ritualistic observations of babies in general, even by those outside the familial circle. However, it also mocks, though sympathetically, the exhilaration induced in parents and their immediate surroundings by the phases human infants go through – the phases that could hardly be said to reflect superior intellectual or other capacity, let alone a Übermensch. There is a dose of self-reflexive, objective, yet warm-hearted and tender demystification of the wonder of observing human development, from age "zero".

The image that the narrator creates of himself – one of a composed, controlled, logical and science-reliant man who already possesses enough things to add a baby to the list – is strongly contrasted in an ironic turn when he realizes his wife is pacifying him in the same manner she does their child (Boyko 2006: 78). This image is further transformed by the narrator's gradual "[warming] to the baby" since "it was not without its uses" (Boyko 2006: 78). However, even the development of the sentiment, as the narrative progresses to its culmination, maintains the parodied tone.

> I hesitated. "The moral? Why, the moral is look before you leap. Or perhaps it's don't bite off more than you can chew. Or maybe it's don't shit where you eat. Or perchance it's think before you speak. Or mayhap it's don't do something just because everyone else is doing it. Or peradventure it's pay no attention to honey-tongued demagogues for they act only and always in their own interest. All right? Okay? Now good night."
> The baby yawned. "Nigh-nigh daddums."

… My heart melted. (Boyko 2006: 81)

After being 'viciously slapped' into playing the story-teller for the child, providing three short fable-like stories, the final one ending in a horror, slasher-like scenario – the narrator is asked to explain the moral. An actual moral, didactic, message would render this short story a fine example of satire, but naturally, a postmodern experiment goes a step beyond moralizing or attempting to assert any ultimate understanding of the reality narrated. Boyko's narrator-protagonist connects the opening of the story with the final messages – the "don't bite off more than you can chew" segment and the "don't do something just because everyone else is doing it" bit could be interpreted as personal reflections on the decision to expand the family. These are all general pieces of popular wisdom that do not offer any specific relation to the stories he tells the child, even if they relate significantly to his personal situation. Nevertheless, the manner in which they too are contrasted by the realization that he does, indeed, belong to the same 'lot of people' who melt at the idea that their child manages to pronounce syllables starting with specific consonants – from the basic ones to the ones connected into a meaningful whole to denote a relationship of belonging and affection – exposes the pragmatic motivation behind the entire ironic endeavor in the text.

Craig Boyko's "The Baby" is a clear illustration of the postmodern interrogation of the discourse, "both about it and adjacent to it" (Hutcheon 2004: ix), as extensively discussed. In its deconstructive process, it emphasizes the power of the inherited discourses, as well as such related discourses that constantly work as counteracting forces, and yet, perhaps more successfully than other postmodern experiments here, Boyko's deconstruction rummages through all the *difference* that Derrida emphasizes on pertaining to the endeavor, and reaches that which remains relevant in the present moment – a dimension that is irrevocably human and perhaps unconstructed. Additionally, Boyko's narrative discourse in "The Baby," and equally powerfully as all other stories analyzed in this section, explores that quality of the dominant culture or discourse defined experience, and foregrounds the issue of what is "the common-sensical and the 'natural'" (Hutcheon 2004: xi) by placing it in the subjective and critical context. Ultimately, the commonsensical and the natural seem to unproblematically exist only outside of the particularity of context.

Going Mental in Clea Young's "Split"

If there existed a risk of over-quoting anyone, then perhaps Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, published in 1974, runs that risk, and yet, her discussion on the concept of femininity, and by extension womanhood, seems to be as relevant as ever considering the topicality of contemporary fiction. In *Modern Literary Theory*, an excerpt from *The Second Sex* figures among the seminal texts on feminism, Simone de Beauvoir elucidates an overtly pertinent issue, and that is one of the "myth of woman" – the myth behind the popular and discourse-driven perception of the biological translated into cultural, and therefore the social and political role[43]. It is with Beauvoir's exposing of the concept of the male-constructed woman, universalized and shaped according to the patriarchal conception of the female experience, that the story of "Split" is interpreted in this chapter.

Clea Young's short story, first published in *The Malahat Review* and selected for the 2006 volume of *The Journey Prize Stories*, deals with the very question of whether and how this idea of "the Eternal Feminine," as de Beauvoir calls it, is manifested in the very particular yet ordinary young woman who does not seem to find purpose or the necessary *drive* to play the role that is, apparently *naturally*, imposed on her by the social norm, the institution of marriage, her personal choices and the collective, communal, tradition. Her femininity, as will be discussed, is explored through the image of her split left nipple – through a supposed deformity that, she fears or hopes, makes her inverted in some way. Metaphorically speaking, her initiation into the world of wives and mothers is a personal *split*, and one that becomes more obvious as the protagonist, Tova, contrasts the *before* and *after* images of her already *former*, though this is left unelaborated at the level of narrative discourse, best friend Alannah – the mother of one-year-old Luke, the *Tiger*, adored by everyone, including Tova's husband – Jed, but not Tova. For Tova, the absence of that which in her immediate surroundings seems to be biologically in-built, culturally adequate, socially

[43] "This one, the myth of woman, sublimating an immutable aspect of the human condition – namely, the 'division' of humanity into two classes of individuals – is a static myth. It projects into the realm of Platonic ideas a reality that is directly experienced or is conceptualized on a basis of experience; in place of fact, value, significance, knowledge, empirical law, it substitutes a transcendental Idea, timeless, unchangeable, necessary. This idea is indisputable because it is beyond the given: it is endowed with absolute truth. Thus, as against the dispersed, contingent, and multiple existences of actual women, mythical thought opposes the Eternal Feminine, unique and changeless. If the definition provided for this concept is contradicted by the behavior of flesh-and-blood women, it is the latter who are wrong: we are told not that Femininity is a false entity, but that the women concerned are not feminine." (Beauvoir 2011: 41)

appealing and overall desired and *normal*, creates a split. Becoming a mother is a daunting prospect that forces her to reflect on other dimensions of the life she has created. Moreover, the idea of motherhood and the immediate presence of baby Luke, reveal certain ambiguous details about Tova's past, her sensibility, maturity, certain aspects of her relationship with her mother, the relationship she has with her own body, but also, potentially her sexual orientation, and the subsequent undeclared split with Alannah. It is this allusion to homoeroticism, as linked to Tova's ideas about femininity, that ironically transpires at the end of the story. Although it remains at the level of mere allusions and ambiguity that may be interpreted one way or another, homoeroticism and her relationship with Alannah, elucidate the theme of femininity, a woman's relationship with her own body, the social and personal construct of motherhood, and they culminate in the metaphor of the split – or rather, the interpretation in which the protagonist does not consciously fear that she might be inadequate due to the deformity that looks like "a mouth with no teeth" (Young 2006: 201) – a baby's mouth; but rather unconsciously fears loss of personal freedom and imprisonment in marriage and motherhood. Moreover, at the unconscious level, the protagonist hopes that her 'deformity' would also biologically prevent her from conceiving, since as a biological woman she is decidedly unable to match the elation at the baby's "[going] mental with excitement" (Young 2006: 205) in her husband's steady grasp.

Curiously enough, Tova recalls her conversation with Alannah pertaining to Jed, her husband, at the very beginning of the relationship:

> "[…] looks like he'll be a demon in the sack." Tova had never been one for searching out those kind of men. For over a year she'd pined after her aerobics instructor despite his being openly gay. (Young 2006: 204)

Wasting "over a year" *pining* over an unavailable man, or rather aesthetically eroticizing him without any hope of a relationship, confirms the interpretation that the protagonist, both unconsciously and consciously, works against her initiation into motherhood, even if she marries the man she claims would be "her first and last husband" (Young 2006: 201) – the always predictable lover, and a "culinary whiz," as opposed to Tova who is "spastic around vegetables and knives and pots of boiling water" (Young 2006: 202). If the characters of Tova and Alannah stand in a relation of comparison up to the point of Alannah's pregnancy, in certain but not all

respects, then the protagonist stands in the relation of opposition and contrast, 'inversion' in terms of Jed. He is the choice, "a crucial decision" (Young 2006: 201), "the right decision," and Tova "feels empowered having come to it on her own" (Young 2006: 201). The irony of this empowerment, when observed from the perspective of her anxiety at the idea of visiting Alannah because of the baby, and because of the scenes featuring Jed and the baby playing, becomes apparent and extends to the entire narrative giving it a disturbing feel in the context of her passive, potentially gradual, acceptance of what she perceives as an impending personal disaster.

The protagonist's mother "never dropped her on her head" (Young 2006: 209), Tova is careful to note, and she was neither abused nor deprived of affection. Physically, there never occurred an event that could leave her incapable of understanding or feeling the supposedly biologically pre-defined affection, and yet the absence of the mothering sentiment escapes the protagonist. Even if her mother inconsiderately notices her anxiety as manifested in her habitual picking at pimples and spots on her face as "self-mutilation" (Young 2006: 204), Tova somehow manages not to fully involve her mother into her own conflicted thoughts on motherhood. The blame is only discrete and indirect as Tova notices that "only a mother could say such a thing" (Young 2006: 204) – calling anxious face spot-tampering "self-mutilation". Tova sarcastically and ironically remarks on that specific label, and she never forgets that her mother felt the same way about babies and children before she was born – a comforting thought in case she *finds* herself pregnant. The lingering incongruity between biology and psychology permeates the narrative in Tova's exploration of the possible underlying causes of her own female *mutation*.

In this story, irony is significantly less prominent that in the majority of other selected stories, and it is only implicit if one discounts the sarcastic instances. It works as a negativizing and oppositional force throughout the story, constantly exposing the incompatibility of the internal and external life of the protagonist. This split in Tova creates a tension that, at the end of the story, unravels like "some fiery planet going down" (Young 2006: 211) in the metaphorical image of a flung lit-cigarette on the porch, in complete darkness, as she is left alone when her friend rushes inside to take care of her son. The image is an exaggeration, of course, but such exaggerations operate ever so subtly in Young's story, as opposed to those in Craig Boyko's "The Baby" where the purpose of the defamiliarization of the discourse is a parodic show, among other things. The humorous or 'entertainment' factor is lost here since the narrative progresses largely on the literal

level, whereas sarcasm and irony only occasionally appear to emphasize the exclusivity of the experience. While Boyko's story might be enjoyed by a wider readership, Young specifically addresses the discursive community of those who have not been *let in* on the secrets of womanhood and motherhood, as the widely-accepted and popular discourse understands and disseminates it.

The split in the protagonist becomes apparent when she finds herself observing her best friend, someone who is a familiar face, body and confidant "as though from a great distance" (Young 2006: 210), and when her "perspective shifts and she sees Alannah as a strange creature at a rare closeness" (Young 2006: 210). The humorless and dry irony indicates an internal division in the character's perception of her once idolized friend – or possibly even an undisclosed love interest, as she is transformed by pregnancy and the presence of the baby. Tova's desire for things to revert to the way they were before this mysterious induction into the motherhood order becomes more of a reaction to her inability to integrate the changes she faces:

> She thinks of the last time they went out, just the two of them, and sat tucked in the horseshoe booth. Alannah may have been pregnant that night. (Young 2006: 210)

The extent of the change in Alannah's behavior, interests, body and perceptions lead Tova to evaluate the nature of their relationship, and the role that her friend has played in her life:

> A girl who told another girl, hesitant to take off her clothes, worried about flashlights and angry residents, to stop being so scared and enjoy it for what it is: water on every inch of her skin. (Young 2006: 211)

From a person who once persuaded the protagonist to skinny-dip, against better judgment, she is now 'an injured ballerina' (Young 2006: 208) whose routine includes the ridiculously sentimental desire for "shepherd's-pie" and "soul-food" (Young 2006: 205-206), one incompatible with the woman who would so freely express her sexuality and desires in front of "a line of waiting customers huddled inside the restaurant entrance" (Young 2006: 210). Tova, almost childishly remembers Alannah finger-combing her hair in that horseshoe booth, and there is a whiff of jealousy, alongside with the perhaps imputed homoeroticism – that her finger-combing-friend would now be someone apparently excited by the "genius – the baby's and Sadie's" performing the most basic of operations, and "sending Sadie outside so she will ring the doorbell and wipe her

paws upon reentering" (Young 2006: 200). The protagonist's sarcastic (Young 2006: 200), yet unspoken reactions seem petulant and suggest a recognition of guilt for failing to feel undisturbed by the changes in their relationship, and not only between the two friends, but the two couples whose time together revolves around leaving the baby to Tova's husband, and suffering through trivial discussions. Any deeper or meaningful conversation between the two, however, seems impossible, in Tova's view, since she realizes that Alannah somehow believes the two of them share the same tacit acceptance of the façade of solid marriage – another intimate observation, though toward Tova this time, that angers her:

> "A baby doesn't make it better, though." The words whip from Alannah's mouth and are gone. (Young 2006: 210)

Allanah's intrusion does not only come uninvited, but it encircles the irony of the character of Tova – a woman who tenaciously looks for defects in her biology in order to resist socially and culturally imposed rituals, practices, and obligations, in a manner. The irony of Tova is in her persistent passive resistance to the social norm, the sulky anger towards Alannah for conceding defeat in the face of the self-same threat to her person, and personality, and, ultimately, in Tova's continuing to 'play' her role in the relationship with Alannah, even if the friendship is, in fact, over:

> "You should call me when you feel like that," Tova says. She thinks Allanah must hear the flat-line in her voice. Alannah shouldn't call her. Ever. (Young 2006: 211)

In observing Alannah's choice of earrings, Tova allows herself to notice what she figures is hypocrisy in the plausibility of her friend's performance as a mother. Noting the specific kind of earrings (Young 2006: 205), an intimate piece of information, she deduces that Alannah would feel safe to drink in the absence of her husband and the presence of Jed – a natural father with "perfect cradle musculature" (Young 2006: 205). The idea that her independent friend strategically plans the absence of her husband in order to revert to her 'former-self' annoys Tova. And although Tova's observation has no judgmental edge to it, the protagonist's immediate reaction is a passive-aggressive rummaging through all the previous situations in which she would not feel particularly uninhibited to do as she pleases, in the presence of her husband:

> Every time she has a drink Jed assumes, or Tova assumes Jed assumes, that's the end of her. Blotto for the night. Practically passed out and puking. That's how it makes her feel when he pulls out his "I'll drive" line so early in the evening. (Young 2006: 206)

This is yet another instance in which irony only tacitly works to expose the incongruities in what is being said on the literal level, and what is implied. Tova's reactions to seemingly marginal issues with her husband reveal a profound contrast against what the character truly desires, and how she is expected to perform. Tova consciously refuses to become bound in the gender-role performative that she recognizes in her best friend. The resistance, however, is a passive one, and that is the ultimate irony. Tova's irritation with Alannah's new personality is the reflection of what she fears might become of her, and the anger towards Alannah stems from the idea that somehow her friend should have resisted to conform. Becoming Alannah was once a thrilling idea, but now it is a disturbing reminder that resistance is futile. In a manner, the protagonist is role-bound in the discourses she is interpellated in, and her physical defect remains the only thread of hope not to be induced into the discourse of motherhood, for it appears that she is somewhat unable to express her existential needs to others, nor exert her autonomy. Finding fault in a minor aesthetic glitch of her left breast, it is as if Tova desires to be expelled from the norm that implies femininity, therefore womanhood and ultimately motherhood. This is also where her mother's untactful description of her anxiety as self-mutilation, comes to mind – the desire to destroy the body, figuratively speaking, or at least its feminine characteristics.

> Alannah and Case are always saying things like, "You should get yourself one." Meaning a baby. (Young 2006: 200)

Marriage, and then children are a matter of natural course, according to Tova and Jed's friends, but Tova is the only one of the four who "hasn't yet fallen under that maternal spell she's heard women speak of so rapturously" (Young 2006: 203). In fact, this event of pregnancy, something that she dreads and hopes she is biologically incapable of achieving, is depicted as an impending "embryonic darkness" (Young 2006: 203), something she would either fall or be "pushed head-first into" (Young 2006: 203). Womanhood, and motherhood, do not come naturally to Tova as lying in a bathtub, with "a wet face cloth covering her breasts" does, since that is "something she remembers her mother doing and so it has become one of those inexplicable habits carried on"

(Young 2006: 200). It is, in fact, Tova's realization that there exist no specific psychological reasons or traumatic experiences that expelled her from that "maternal spell" that she turns to her body:

> Tova peels the waterlogged cloth from her chest and regards her anomaly. She's unsure if *split* is the correct word. Perhaps *inverted*. Maybe *mutant*. Her nipple has since become a joke she and Jed share; when it's soft, it looks like a mouth with no teeth. Yes, they laugh about it now. Privately though, Tova wonders if it will cause problems if, or when, she has a child and wants to breastfeed. What if the nipple doesn't work? (Young 2006: 201)

Her left breast is anomalous, "split", "inverted" and even "mutant" – different from the breasts of those normal women capable of experiencing rapture at the sight or idea of babies, of motherhood, even if the concept itself entails deprivation, sacrifice and transformation at the psychological level that might not always be welcomed. The inadequate nipple, the source of nourishment for the infant and, figuratively, the ability to provide love and affection, is reduced to "a mouth with no teeth" – a baby's mouth. Perhaps this is the reason why Tova's choice of husband is a man who nurtures – a culturally less expected, *inverted*, model of masculinity that does not reject the 'mothering' impulse in a man.

The irony in Clea Young's "Split," in the general sense as that in Craig Boyko's "The Baby," works to expose the artificiality of the discursive nature of reality as defined by the social and cultural discourse. It uncovers the complexity of the concepts contained in this discourse and unconsciously internalized by one's subjective narrative, and these pertain to femininity and motherhood, but also masculinity and fatherhood. The inversion symbolically related by the split in the protagonist's left nipple suggests a possibility – the mere probability that gender models and performativity as based on biological distinctions do not align with the range of *mutations* in the subjective and deeply personal experiences of the self and of the political, social and cultural constructs that the self, throughout its development, internalizes and obeys when they are prescriptive. A digression to Simon de Beauvoir's insight from the very beginning of this chapter seems appropriate in that it recognizes that when the discourse is such that "the behavior of flesh-and-blood women" (Beauvoir 2011: 41) contradicts it, then it must be the discourse itself, our imaginings of the concepts we live by, that need to be re-evaluated.

Even though this chapter does not deal with the complexity behind the concepts of womanhood or motherhood theoretically, it is safe to assume that this absence will be filled by the fact that literature has the power to capture the moments of disagreement and contradiction between the written and unwritten rules we live by, between our theorized concepts and institutionalized practice, and digest them in a subjective embodied experience that reveals the artificiality of social, cultural and political reality, and that the insight drawn from it provides illumination for the multiplicity of experiences that could not possibly be encompassed by the normative. In essence, this is what the postmodern approach, in this story as well as in all other stories analyzed in this section, achieves – it reveals the constructedness of what is considered to represent the universal dimension of experience, and this is achieved not by the direct claim to the right to difference, but rather by exposing the incompatibility with what the society and culture promote as universal, with the subjective and *different*.

Thematically, Young's "Split" deals with the issue of female identity and female experience, and the gender roles and performative that are deduced from the belief that there might exist a universality of woman's experience based on the biological gender. However, what the narrative discourse of this particular story does, and in an obviously postmodern manner, is explore the nature of the subjective and *different* experience by deconstructing the personal narrative for traces of that which is inherited in the form of tradition – the protagonist investigates her relationship with her mother for the causes of what might have gone wrong in her upbringing to render her different than other women, someone who does not want to be a mother. However, what she also does by looking back, self-reflexively, at this relationship, is explore the presence of the socio-cultural discourses exerting their power on her mother as well. The two women share the same unenthusiastic outlook on motherhood, and yet, her mother accepted the role, which incites the passive-aggression in Tova disguising the recognition that apparently women do what they are expected to against their own desires and ambitions, and delaying the moment of her own sharing of that passive fate. Moreover, this is particularly signaled by the anticlimactic closure of "Split," the moment in which its postmodern interrogation simply falls short of the modernist denouement. If anything, the discourse of Tova resists that moment of certainty for it recognizes the complex and intricate position of the subject whose autonomy is bound by the socio-cultural discourses, and represents a moment in the process of the recognition of the Foucauldian forces exerting power

over the individual in a subtle and seducing manner, yet threatening non-compliance with exclusion.

Metamorphosis of Lee in Lee Henderson's "Conjugation"

Lee Henderson's "Conjugation," initially published in *Border Crossing*, selected for *The Journey Prize Stories* in 2006, can be interpreted as a postmodern parodic take on Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis" featuring a twenty-first century man, an employee at the marketing department of an academic publisher, who "[awakes] one morning from uneasy dreams" and "[finds] himself back in grade four" (Henderson 2006: 1). This twenty-eight-year-old man does not, in fact, turn into 'vermin' or insect, nor does he come to enjoy rotten food. However, in this parodic postmodern reenactment or somewhat obscure and selective intertextuality, Lee, the protagonist, does suffer losses as he is left by his girlfriend and fired by his employer, and as he endures the comic 'tyranny' of his director and the shame at being "gawked at" (Henderson 2006: 2) by ten-year-olds. He also manages to become "disgusted with [himself]" (Henderson 2006: 7) for failing to make, as an adult, a lunch that is more than a ham sandwich. After a series of embarrassments and inconveniences, a temper-tantrum or two, a calculated and slightly malicious take-over of the grade four male clique and bizarre mischief, Lee experiences a metamorphosis in the curios course of his unreal circumstance.

As previously mentioned, the parodic reworking of Kafka's novella opens the door for intertextuality at the beginning of the story, rendering the entire narrative process inviting for ironic, frequently sarcastic, but ultimately ambiguous interpretations, even if the story does end on an unusually optimistic note with the protagonist finally grasping the concept of *community* and solidarity only when all the existing relationships in his life – the one with his long-standing girlfriend and the one with his seemingly sympathetic employer, suddenly come crashing down in two irony-charged phone calls. Lee's life as encompassed by the narrative flow, suffers ironic twists and turns intensified by the idea that this grown man is somehow forced to regress to grade four only to find himself abandoned there, and liberated from the life he has never truly enjoyed – one in academic publishing.

What particularly adds to the parodic tone and the ambiguity of the story, as well as its associative richness, is the inescapable link between the author and the protagonist, as they are not only namesakes, but potentially share knowledge and experiences of the life in the academic circles, or at least academic publishing. Against this manifest metafictional dimension at the background of the narrative – the intentionality behind the authorial intrusion, however fictional the link might be – the narrative acquires its ironic and self-reflexive.

> All summer I'd dreaded this day and now it was here, the new school year. My clock alarm went off and I patted the snooze button and just lay there with my eyes closed – 6:45 a.m. and I had to get up and go to grade four. (Henderson 2006: 1)

From the start, the narration establishes Lee as an anguished adult, tormented by the "fresh little electronic scream" (Henderson 2006: 1) as a signal that he must leave the safety of his bed and bring himself to the "somehow, uniquely depressing, grade four" that he finds to be "sort of inescapably elementary" (Henderson 2006: 1). Figuratively speaking, this 'elementary' aspect of his going back to school both refers to the character's emotional and intellectual failings in his adult life. The irony of Lee's dread in anticipating the new school year, and his perceptions upon facing what one could certainly imagine as a deeply humbling experience for an adult, if not worse, expose his profound insecurities as social awkwardness around children, but also a certain emotional incompetence, as suggested by his soon-to-be-ex girlfriend, as well as his employer who urges him not to "underestimate the skills [he's] learning" (Henderson 2006: 12).

However, these conclusions cannot be drawn from the opening of the story since it deliberately confounds at the level of the conventional script that is activated in the reader. Namely, one would suspect Lee to be a teacher, or some sort of school employee considering the textual cues, but as the protagonist reveals his status as a student, the plot thickens. The initial parodic references, or simply the 'metamorphosis' concept, turns into a different sort of incongruity when it is revealed that the twenty-eight-year-old is forced, for one reason or another, to pass grade four and acquire a specific set of skills. The vagueness behind this seemingly absurd circumstance – the insistence of his director at the academic publishing that Lee must be "aware of the skills" (Henderson 2006: 12) – creates another ironic thread, which is comic as well, in the story. Whether Lee is actually forced back into grade four because he has never passed it, which is an unlikely scenario

considering that he already has an established even if shaky career at the publisher's; or whether he is required to go back to the rudimentary and elementary due to some sort of lack of basic skills – in communication, empathy and camaraderie – seems more likely. In fact, these seem to be at the root of his issues with his girlfriend and colleagues at work, and Henderson brilliantly creates a parallel between these academic circles, and the 'community', with this grade four class with its power dynamics.

> I tried to appear nonchalant while the children of grade four gawked at me with no sign of shame – in what grade did a kid learn about shame? I looked at their soft faces and smiled in an open and hopefully well-adjusted way. (Henderson 2006: 2)

Lee's anxiety at the sight of children who he would be sharing a class with manifests itself through sweating and the "suppressed […] urge to sob" (Henderson 2006: 2), and it is at this point in the narrative, with the stark contrast between the situation – the incongruous background and an almost impossible scenario; and his supposedly adult perspective, that the ironic core of "Conjugation" starts to emanate its comic-rays of "fuzzles" and "wozzles" onto the even more unusual sequence of events in which this peculiar adult is observing a "mafioso of girls" (Henderson 2006: 5) only to single out one who would be his friend, a Mormon Melinda, "the girl whose desk was behind [him] – standing by herself at her own set of bike bars and [he] thought how interesting and desirable she'd be someday, eventually making a zealot very happy" (Henderson 2006: 5). His perception of the unsuspecting children makes for the sarcastic weave of the narrative, however, it is in the subtle, inevitably ironic, paralleling that the narrative reveals more about Lee.

The protagonist's initial nervousness on the first day of school is intensified by his own contemplation on how he has "always hated children, even when [he] was one" (Henderson 2006: 2). A parallel is established with Melinda, whose face will, regrettably, suffer by his hand during a dodgeball game, as she is a Sunday-school Bible-enthusiast and a Mormon, which Lee was "irked to learn" (Henderson 2006: 12). In his own words, Lee describes the nine-year-old self as "[preferring] the Bible to Sunday cartoons, cheese to chocolate, privacy to community" (Henderson 2006: 2). In creating this parallel, the protagonist – ever so unaware of the inappropriateness and social awkwardness of his behavior in a manner that is bizarre, but provides the satirical undertone – begins to explain, unintentionally, the reason for his being 'sent down' to

grade four. It is his need for 'privacy', aloofness even, escapism potentially, that the director sympathetically referred to in emphasizing that:

> I'm serious, Lee. Please don't think if you come back from this and nothing has changed that you can expect to keep your job. We're a team, right? A *community*, Lee. (Henderson 2006: 12)

The background of the intuited conflict that must exist behind the reason for this sort of embarrassing demotion – or therapy – is not addressed elsewhere in the narrative any more directly than here. Lee's making "basically zero friends" (Henderson 2006: 2) back in his first take on grade four becomes the quintessence of the issue in his metamorphosis. Lightheartedly aware of his social ineptitude, Lee perceives "the civilized look" on his now teacher's, Ms. Durant's face, as she presents him to the class of threatening ten-year-olds as something she could have "practiced maybe all summer long" (Henderson 2006: 2), and his insight that he "might be able to learn something from a woman like this" (Henderson 2006: 3), "her voice so affected and brave" (Henderson 2006: 2), suggests that it is this public face or persona that Lee does not manage to reconcile with his internal states. More precisely, the ironic punchline that may be inferred at the very onset of the narrative suggests that this "refresher course" (Henderson 2006: 3) is supposed to teach Lee certain elementary social skills and rules that even children unconsciously pick up in grade four. Again, the incongruity of the protagonist being a coupled adult with a career in academic circles, potentially satirically comments on the power dynamics present in that particular community and the necessity for social flexibility, but also, as the story will reveal, a certain scheming in order to establish social positions. The entire ironic weave paired with the parodic source constructively functions to compare the children Lee particularly dislikes with his own younger self. Additionally, the same constructive, or appropriative irony as Hutcheon calls it, allows Lee to befriend the more assertive children, even if that objective necessitates that he manipulates and even bullies some of them. Lee, in other words, is back in grade four in order to learn how to play the game, so that he could come back all 'refreshed' to the academic publishing 'community'.

This process, for Lee, includes a series of what he believes are 'tests', the first of which is being handed an origami by Melinda asking for "the answer to number 6" (Henderson 2006: 3) for the

entire class, which Lee miserably fails as he remembers “what kind of infraction” (Henderson 2006: 4) he has made in receiving and reading the note, and therefore refuses to participate because “of their cheating [he] would have no part” (Henderson 2006: 4). The almost sulky refusal to be initiated by his classmates, and his ridiculous zealousness for rules, attracts an elastic to Lee’s ear and “a round of vindictive giggles” (Henderson 2006: 4), which Lee interprets as the official act of ostracism in which he becomes “the other pariah in the class” (Henderson 2006: 7) along with Derek “who looked like a snowman made of skin” (Henderson 2007: 7):

> Even the academic press staff at their most irritating didn’t make me feel that strange. (Henderson 2006: 7)

The encounter with Derek in the cloakroom in which Lee feels some sort of hatred rise in him (Henderson 2006: 7) observing the “deeply-stupid” looking “mouth-breather” (Henderson 2006: 7) tie up his shoe laces painfully slowly creates another interesting parallel to Lee’s internal projections. The situation causes the protagonist to compare the unexplainable hatred he feels towards Derek to the ‘strangeness’ he has encountered in interacting with the academic press staff. However, this unexplainable and immediate loathing Lee experiences in a short exchange of words with Derek might suggest a certain disgust and embarrassment at the image he has projected himself, especially at that age. Unsuspecting Derek is a reminder of Lee’s unflattering phase, and obviously one that he has not successfully completed, being back in grade four, or more evidently, being triggered to such an extent by this boy’s mere presence.

Back home, that very night, Lee experiences a temper tantrum, “a conniption” (Henderson 2006: 8) at not turning the oven heat on, backgrounding the anticipation of phone calls from those who, he suspects, want to know about his first day back in grade four. Moreover, such interest, Lee surmises, must be “cruel” (Henderson 2006: 9) even if it comes from his girlfriend – a woman Lee has much to reproach, it appears, as imagining her “flipping through a fashion magazine with just enough energy to envy the women she saw there” (Henderson 2006: 9) or remembering how “[her] place was always a ghastly mess, the lair of an otter obsessed with prized clamshells […] always exempt from the private reality behind her unctuous lifestyle” (Henderson 2006: 9). The hallo of irony becomes brighter the more Lee shares his perceptions about the people in his life – that is, the ‘otter’ person.

On the other hand, Lee's initial fascination with Ms. Durant – a woman "maybe a bit older than [him]" (Henderson 2006: 3), but young nonetheless and a foot shorter than him, whose laughter "started as a squeak and finished in a silent giggle" (Henderson 2006: 9), and someone who inspires "[some] kind of juvenile reflex" (Henderson 2006: 6) in Lee – grows into an equally stereotypical juvenile infatuation with his teacher as he attempts to catch her attention in interacting with the children:

> I could feel Ms. Durant nearby, and hoped she was listening to the conversation. (Henderson 2006: 15)

These attempts radiate a regression that the protagonist is even somewhat proud of, but as a self-reflexive commentary it might even be self-deprecating. Lee is, in fact, an unadjusted four-grader, with experiences that adulthood allows, though not the maturity. Punished in a manner all his classmates would be, after severely bruising one side of Melinda's face during a dodgeball game in which the protagonist supposedly underestimates his strength, Lee finds himself writing "*I will not throw so hard in gym class ever again*" (Henderson 2006: 17) with Ms. Durant reproaching him for inconsistent behavior. The pin incident in which he encourages the boys to pierce through the thin layer of the skin that made the girls scream (Henderson 2006: 11) reverberates in this comic scene as well. Instead, however, of contemplating the reasons behind his frequent neglect of the fact that he is an adult with certain responsibilities, Lee considers whether he should compliment Ms. Durant (Henderson 2006: 17), and even asks her a personal question prompted by the attraction he feels towards her, "desire" (Henderson 2006: 17) even. As if to suggest that *boys will be boys*, Lee's mischief suggests a conscious and premeditated regression, or rather, exposes a peculiar, supposedly typically male, mindset that focuses on personal desire and, in this case, self-aggrandizement.

> The way she tilted her head, crinkled her cute little eyes, I could tell this poor girl, that nice little Mormon girl, was beginning to have her first crush, the first of, I estimated, three, before she would utterly stamp away all her nigglings of religious doubt and sexual curiosity to marry a drab Mormon four and a half years older than her. She'd always remember me, though… (Henderson 2006: 13)

Namely, as Lee develops what he calls friendship with the Mormon girl, Melinda, he pretentiously assumes about being her first crush in a satirical self-glorification in which a twenty-eight-year-old believes that he is “the first boy to show her some charm and attention like no boy in the fourth grade could ever express, Mormon or normal” (Henderson 2006: 13). This immaturity, the religious comment and implications aside, intensifies the ironic and satirical layers of the story. Whenever Lee’s ‘juvenile reflex’ surfaces it is contrasted by his seemingly adult rationale that exposes the incongruity between his behavior or thinking process and the actual circumstantial reality.

Lee’s adulthood implies a certain recognition of the naiveté of the young, and so Chris, “[the] little monkey kind with his fuzzle worship” (Henderson 2006: 13) inspires Lee to take over the rule over the clique by establishing the second alpha, Alex, on the group throne, “[his] brains and my adulthood: we were unstoppable” (Henderson 2006: 13). Of course, this brainwave of Lee’s only comes after the conversation with Mormon Melinda and after he becomes “[buoyed] by the strength of a young girl’s infatuation” (Henderson 2006: 13). Lee’s “original grade” (Henderson 2006: 22) four experience, in fact, satirically stages this adult’s fantasy of power and subversion of hierarchy as manifested in his plotting against the alpha ten-year-old:

> My plan to overthrow Chris happened quickly, such is the way kids do everything. At an academic press it might’ve taken half a career, but in elementary school it took all of an hour. (Henderson 2006: 13)

Lee and Alex, the second in line, do establish rule over the group, and the “worship” of fuzzles is substituted for the worship of wozzles – imaginary creatures, in imaginary settings, living imaginary dramas in which, apparently all these boys, invest their creative and emotional energy. As these imaginary worlds stand to represent the imaginary projections of the alphas in the group, Lee’s strategy expels Chris from the position of the leader so that “[it] was like checkmate whatever move Chris made” (Henderson 2006: 13). However, through successfully executing his ‘sinister’ plan, Lee not only changes the power dynamics, but becomes a member of a group for the first time in elementary-school life. His contentment and gloating at achieving this feat owes to the fact that he no longer sees himself as an imposter in the group, which then, in terms of his career in academic press sends across a pessimistic message.

Focusing on integrating the class, on becoming friends with the ten-year-olds, Lee neglects his academic concerns, and long division "[leaves him] confused," he misspells the name of Louis Riel, but "[the] worst was Ms. Durant's comments" (Henderson 2006: 14) that read an assessment of the entirety of his behavior, and her suspected opinion on him, which to Lee seems as important as the fact that "[he] had a career to think about," and, in fact, "[he] was sleeping poorly, [he] was constipated, and [he] related it all to [his] marks" (Henderson 2006: 15). No longer prone to tantrums manifested in his screaming at the oven and the form he is supposed to fill out for the camping trip, Lee considers Ms. Durant's comments judiciously:

> *Must learn to play fairly. Causes mischief. Does not play well with others*. (Henderson 2006: 15)

The protagonist's idea of mending the situation at this point revolves around him granting some of the power over the imaginary world of the invented beings to Chris, as well as others – including them in the entire process of world-building. However, things do not go well for Lee as the success of his secret project also renders him 'buoyed' again, and this buoyance manifests itself in the form of overenthusiastic dodgeball game where he mildly injures Mormon Melinda. That particular day reaches its culmination in the sleepover party organized for the project of creating a setting for the wozzles' war against fuzzles.

The irony, on the whole, that would be revealed during this day of escalation is that Mormon Melinda does not have a crush on Lee, and the dynamics of the group, the discord between Chris and Alex, is not changed by Lee's original idea, but by the advice Lee receives from the principal in creating a code – something that works, but ultimately does not change Lee's situation as he does not seem to control his own behavior as well as others'. Moreover, his perception of self-worth in the interaction with the classmates is strongly contrasted to that in situations with adults – Lee is more than hesitant and 'juvenilely' subservient in his relationship with Ms. Durant, as is the case in his avoidant tactics with his girlfriend, and his employer. Nevertheless, in a bizarre situation of the sleepover, and the first one for Lee (Henderson 2006: 18), this man awkwardly exerts dominance over Alex's parents, "[a] very dormant couple, from what [he] could tell" (Henderson 2006: 18), by overriding their disagreement with an adult attending their son's

sleepover, and taking upon himself the responsibility to teach the boys “something more about life than just wozzles and fuzzles” (Henderson 2006: 18).

> Don’t be absurd, I said. The conversation already seemed infinitely familiar from my days at the university press as I learned to dodge the scholarly cudgel of my halfwit boss. (Henderson 2006: 18)

This unusual intrusion on the part of Lee, his complete and utter disregard for Alex’s father’s authority, at least over his son’s life, “a man suffering from near-death ennui” (Henderson 2006: 18), on the one hand stands as an unexpected and absurd episode in the narrative – a progression from the ‘juvenile reflex’ when Lee asks for permission to go to the bathroom fifteen minutes before recess (Henderson 2006: 6), seeing through his classmates’ testing his character when he decidedly refuses to provide the answer to question “number 6” (Henderson 2006: 4), to putting pin-needles in the skin of his palm, plotting, scheming and turning children against each other, hitting Melinda with a ball so hard that “her whole body swung through the air and she landed in a sobbing heap on the floor,” “sporting a gruesome bruise on the entire left side of her head” (Henderson 2006: 16), and finally, bringing a magazine that would turn the sleepover into an inexplicable chaos of vulgar behavior with the boys, and his utter boredom. More precisely, the night and weekend when things escalate for Lee.

The lesson that Lee awkwardly imparts on his young classmates involves a *Playboy* magazine issue that causes the boys to act in “lewd and adorable” ways “simultaneously” (Henderson 2006: 19) while Lee “sat uncomfortably in a far corner” (Henderson 2006: 19). The culmination of the evening happens “[at] about 8:30 p.m.” (Henderson 2006: 19) when Lee calls his girlfriend from the sleepover, something he wants her to understand as “more like a retreat, or working late” (Henderson 2006: 19):

> I’ve started seeing someone else, she said.
> This comes as a complete shock, I said. (Henderson 2006: 19)

In a phone call to Melinda, immediately after being told the news of the breakup, which in itself is a satirical comment of the immature behavior, even though Lee was “concerned for her health”

(Henderson 2006: 19), Melinda reveals her crush on Chris, which Lee takes as well as the breakup and being fired by the director of the academic press later that weekend, on Sunday:

> We've filled your position, the director of the academic press said.
> I am completely shocked, I said.
> We got busy. We needed someone.
> I'm sure you were very busy. An academic press is a busy place.
> I'll give you a good recommendation.
> For what? Grade five? (Henderson 2006: 21)

In both of the 'breakup' conversations, there is an ambiguous mixture of satirical exposure and sarcasm. It is almost impossible to interpret Lee's sarcastic irony solely in the context of his detailed, though narcissistic at points, observations about other characters. On the other hand, considering the absurdity of his behavior – the regression that he experiences effortlessly after being coached to become part of grade four – the chances are that his expression of shock might be satirical as well since the authorial hovers over the narrative.

After the series of inopportune events, mostly caused by his behavior, Lee contemplates the newly found liberty in the fact that he was at that point without a job, or "girlfriend, away in the forest and only a song to keep [him] from falling straight to sleep under a night filled with gold stars" (Henderson 2006: 22) – a reference to the only gold star he got in his report card, "in music" (Henderson 2006: 14). This complete inversion, regression or simply an improbable scenario, pushes the protagonist in the direction of understanding that "there was nothing in [him] that yearned to rejoin the world [he'd] left behind last September" (Henderson 2006: 22). Moreover, this world of adults – his girlfriend whose affection was measured by the amount of ignoring he received, "moving [him] aside like a whining door" (Henderson 2006: 14), or the director of the academic press who chose a pragmatic and practical solution to Lee's absence and failed to abide by the "we're a team […] A community" (Henderson 2006: 12) promise that was supposed to motivate him into coming back "all refreshed and such" (Henderson 2006: 12). The story closes with Lee's watching his classmates in the company of Ms. Durant, playing "a game of capture-the-flag" (Henderson 2006: 22), divided into teams, but himself refraining from participating and providing only "moral support" (Henderson 2006: 23). As Lee manages to innocently and, for the

first time, effortlessly, exploit her company to make conversation, he is confronted by his furious classmate, Alex – the captain of his team, urging him to “run!” (Henderson 2006: 24).

> I looked at Ms. Durant for a hint. She was so beautiful, but she was my teacher. My grade four teacher. I thought, If only – if only – and we stood there, on the other side of a fence from the kids in my class, and I really didn’t know what to do. Could I kiss her? Should I run? (Henderson 2006: 24)

The manner in which the story closes, with Lee finally getting permission from Ms. Durant to play the game as a reward for showing self-control and awareness of his status only creates more ambiguity as he oscillates between his two personalities. Remaining puzzled on the adult-side of things, intensifies the irony of Lee’s position that is translatable into more probable and plausible scenarios than those in the story itself. This incongruity between the boyish and adult Lee that the satirical note in his reflections and behaviors exposes, provides the link with the ‘metamorphosis’ implied by the very beginning of the narrative. And this metamorphosis of the adult Lee, wrapped in his career with the academic press publisher – profoundly unhappy and unbalanced – culminates in the moment when he is metaphorically ‘on the fence’. Choosing to “[take] off” (Henderson 2006: 24), to run rather than kiss his fourth grade teacher and involve himself in another grown-up plot, he perhaps, metaphorically, chooses to remain with the only team that truly need him. He does not, after all, die of starvation as the parodic inspiration in Kafka’s “Metamorphosis,” even against all the abandonment.

And yet, the title and its potential meaning imposes itself on the analysis with a question mark. It remains somewhat ambiguous if the ‘conjugation’ stands to describe the progression of Lee’s ‘voice’, ‘mood’, ‘tense’ or ‘person’ – if it is a figurative link to the classroom in which he observes the bilingual posters with animals on them (Henderson 2006: 2); or if it pertains to the success of his effort to finally unite two worlds – the worlds of wozzles and fuzzles into a war – an oxymoron, perhaps, but a postmodern bringing together of differences, and in this case, an imaginary biological process which is inserted into the narrative of two imaginary worlds, and in which their tiny inhabitants could temporarily unite to exchange their genetic material, much like Lee temporarily becomes a part of the world of grade four and its minuscule humans. Perhaps the size

of a human does not matter, but the implicature is yet another bridge leading to the inspiration for the parodic opening, with a postmodern inversion.

The Desperate House-Husbands in Zsuzsi Gartner's "Summer of the Flesh Eater"

"Summer of the Flesh Eater" belongs to *Better Living Through Plastic Explosives*, the collection of short stories Zsuzsi Gartner published in 2011, and it features a number of peculiar characters – a group of men: Stefan Brandeis, Trevor Masahara, Marcus van der Houte, Karlheinz Jacobsen, Kim Fischer, Patel Seth and the voice of the nameless narrator who seems to relate their condensed narrative of tribal survival; their respective wives and male-children, and Lucy, "the so-called missing link," "The Truck Guy," "The Meat Guy" (Gartner 2011: 5) – "a barbarian […] at the gates" (Gartner 2011: 1) of their cozy, dapper and suburban cul-de-sac – the negativizing counteracting discourse on masculinity, but also one challenging the socio-cultural convictions as implied by the narrative.

Against the suggestive subtitle backdrop, "Field Notes on the Tendency of Varieties to Depart Indefinitely from the Original Type – after Alfred Russel Wallace" (Gartner 2011: 1), a nineteenth-century British naturalist and biologist, among other things, who contributed to Charles Darwin's publishing of the *Origin of Species*, the group of the above listed men – *indigenous* to the neighborhood and all joined in the tribal spirit of male emancipation, political correctness, personal grooming, fine cuisine, literature, high-culture and art, but also science, and biology and theory of evolution in particular – are forced to face an unfamiliar threat: a wife-beater-wearing (Gartner 2011: 3), mullet-sporting, sweaty and hairy man driving muscle cars, a motorbike, with a complete disregard for decorum and manners, and "a big, shit-eating grin" (Gartner 2011: 3) according to Trevor's, one of the protagonist's, first impression of the exotic man. A man whose most prized possession includes "the Q" (Gartner 2011: 3) – a large barbecue grill, "a Mayan shrine in the cloud forest of Coban" (Gartner 2011: 10), whose flames would transform "slabs of porterhouse steaks, rib-eyes, short ribs, spareribs, pork loin chops, lamb shoulder chops, and leg steaks" (Gartner 2011: 10) into an aphrodisiac for the men's wives over time, or a contagious disease that would change them, almost as if at the genetic level. This tribe of twenty-first century men encounters "a silver Camaro Z28" (Gartner 2011: 1) trouble – a man who sets them off on a quest

of neighborly discovery and self-discovery, much like one of Charles Darwin because, Lucy, who Karlheinz Jacobsen nicknamed that due to his "scientific bent" (Gartner 2011: 5), was not only destroying the "property values" (Gartner 2011: 5), but because this encounter, and all the events transpiring in the course of the summer, allow them to understand that "even then [they] had more in common with other animals than [they] could have imagined" (Gartner 2011: 5). In keeping field notes (Gartner 2011: 15) on the "specimen" (Gartner 2011: 9), and ultimately, killing him – with the allusion to "Chas's," Charles Darwin's propensity for animal torture "under the guise of research" (Gartner 2011: 21).

In "Summer of the Flesh Eater," a story in which Gartner unleashes a musky carnivore onto a group of emasculated men, profound irony is located at the semantic level in the characters' discourses revealing their perceptions of themselves and their circumstances, but also in the ultimate construction of the narrative – in Gartner's metafictional intrusion in exposing these characters – the protagonists – for their satirical potential. At its most superficial, the ironic positioning of this uncouth barbarian in suburbia where he is welcomed by a pack of men whose sophistication endearingly manifests itself in the form of "a pitcher of iced Matcha tea spiked with Kentucky Gentleman" (Gartner 2011: 3), and a judgmental attitude more typically, or rather stereotypically, with the female sex, creates the basis for the gender reversal. As mentioned, the irony is foregrounded in the conflict between the varied discourses so that, at the level of the social and the economic, the tribesmen's deprecating attitude reveal the constructedness of their own discourse of superiority. However, when it comes to masculinity, their narratives crumble as the discourse fails to mask its own artifice and instability, and the characters gradually descend into a bout of madness.

In terms of Gartner's metafictional setting, the reversal of roles and the exploration of the issue of masculinity, would not translate the intense irony without the irony of the scientific background. Namely, anchored in the subtle parodic rendition of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* as pertaining to the characters' supposedly scientific interpretation of the observed behavior of their new neighbor, this purportedly naively guided narration results in something is almost satirical when this Darwinian anchor turns out not to sink in the light of the subtitle referring to Darwin's contemporary, Alfred Russel Wallace, whose theory of evolution, in fact, takes a different position than that of Darwin. For Wallace, survival is a matter of local adaptation, due to environmental

conditions and pressures, and such adaptations cause differences in the same species. On the other hand, Darwin's take on the matter of survival involves competition. This particular reversal of interpretation – the underlying irony – exposes what is at the core of the narratives of the protagonists, and that is their unreserved inability and ineptitude to 'compete' with what they perceive as a 'cave' man, even if their discourse insistently maintains that it is precisely what they are doing. These men, after all, exfoliate their armpits, groom their body hair, savor fine cuisine and are part of a book-club that critically deals with such matters as "Clarissa's guilty rejection of the hydrangea in *The Hours*" (Gartner 2011: 4).

Gartner's postmodern attitude in the very construction of the narrative, on the one hand, requires background knowledge on the two biologists, complicating the matter of fully interpreting the ironic message at the closure of the narrative, but not entirely, and especially considering the abundance of it at every narrative twist and turn. On the other hand, it brilliantly allows for the ironic edge to be even doubled since it works at the level of the conflict between the 'tribe of men' against Lucy who becomes their immediate environment – their 'pressure' and his very presence a threat to the survival of their perfect lawns, and their 'property values'. However, ultimately, it is a conflict between the 'tribe of men' and their wives – Kim Fischer's wife excluded since she chooses to leave him "[on] Labour Day" (Gartner 2011: 22). The latter conflict works all the more ironically since it tackles gender roles and satirically presents the negative impact of environmental factors on both the women and children, even if its source is removed and its traces erased – the devastating effect of the flesh-eater Lucy, on this pack of women, "straddling their motorcycles, careful of their gently swelling bellies, revving their engines" (Gartner 2011: 23), in the rain that "could render a man blind" (Gartner 2011: 23).

The ironic and satirical representation of the protagonists involves another parodic source – William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. These apparently grown men, fathers, involve themselves in a paranoid pursuit of what they believe is a threatening monster. Even though the story does not fully resonate with Golding's novel, apart from the direct reference, "[we] feared they'd soon be running wild in Lynn Canyon, engaging in some kind of *Lord of the Flies* one-upmanship with rival cul-de-sac kids" (Gartner 2011: 13), it adds to the irony of the protagonists' ironically exaggerated, radiantly ridiculous and dramatic situation. Granted, the war in the novel might be translated here as the invasion, not only by the barbarian Lucy, but also the stench coming from a

local rendering plant, so that “the congealed odour of pyrolyzed animal parts would enter the cul-de-sac and then just hang there” (Gartner 2011: 4), which can even be interpreted as a paranoid retrospective input by the narrator since it directly relates to the coming of the new neighbor and his penchant for meat. Furthermore, Lucy himself is presented as the ‘Lord of the Flies’ when he stands in between “[mosquito] torches on bamboo poles [flanking] the barbecue” (Gartner 2011: 10). The protagonists, of course, never see the irony of their own cul-de-sac ‘rivalry’ with Lucy. The parallel between this flesh-eater and the dead parachute-man in the novel somehow relates the idea that this sort of man could never survive the cul-de-sac suburbia. To further the parallel and intensify the parodic undertone, Gartner separates the men-boys occasionally, providing them with the opportunity to comically exhibit their cowardly nature, irrational fear and paranoid ideas among the group: “Stefan swore he had seen Lucy’s arms swinging along, his knuckles skimming the ground, pelvis tipped backwards as he made his way through the dense overgrowth” (Gartner 2011: 19). At the same time, the men’s individual experiences are reinforced by the group discourse of humorous denigration and deprecation of Lucy, and they represent a mode of communication that not only excludes the undesired, but strengthens their own sense of self, as members of the group of men, even if eventually the discourse collapses. Ultimately, much like the boys in the novel, these men-boys, the tribe, shed tears over the murder they commit, but these men are “not ashamed to admit that more than one of [them] wept. Karlheinz the longest and loudest” (Gartner 2011: 23).

The opening of the story offers the first invitation for ironic interpretation. Namely, according to the narrator, the unnamed protagonist speaking before the tribe, the “[forgetting] was what got [them] into trouble in the first place,” referring to the fact that “[they] are men” (Gartner 2011: 1), with the emphasis on the necessity that they “remind each other as often as [they] can” (Gartner 2011: 1). In this mock-empowering discourse, Gartner sets grounds for reverse interpretation, the ‘unvoiced’ opposition to the voice of the excruciatingly, but also somewhat embarrassingly, straightforward narrator – the focalizing subject – and his accounts of the process of the other protagonists’ coming to terms with the change in their respectable environment. In the narrator’s account of life before Canada Day, the day Lucy moves in at “2781 Chatham Close” (Gartner 2011: 2), the life for these men seems normal, even if their neighbors, the Wong-Campeau’s, with their “Ritalin-infused twins at Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck, an International Baccalaureate school we knew doubled as a rehab centre” (Gartner 2011: 1), faced what he explains as “[that] kind of

corked-up familial stress [that] inevitably manifests as fault lines" (Gartner 2011: 2). The tea that the narrator so nonchalantly spills on the Wong-Campeaus, however, foreshadows the trouble that is to ensue in the 'property value' paradise. The said couple's property is described as "looking like crap" (Gartner 2011: 2) by Trevor, and the tribe retrospectively ponder what they could have done to make the property better looking and potentially preventing Lucy from coming into its possession, as well as the possession of their respective wives, although that particular sense of property value is revealed later on in the narrative.

The story encompasses a three-stage period during the faithful summer, and those being the stage at which Lucy moves into his new home, installing a sense of unrest with the indigenous men who resist his barbecue-show and, supported by their wives' apparent disgust towards this brute, initiate a tacit rivalry that empowers the bonds within their circle. This stage coincides with the appearance of the unbearable smell coming from a local plant, spreading some sort of "almost gelatinous stink" (Gartner 2011: 4) over the community so that "even the leaves of the silver birches that edged the ravine behind [their] properties appeared to curl back from it. The cedars and the Sitka spruce, more stoic trees, stood their ground" (Gartner 2011: 4). It is also in the description of this first stage that the metaphor of the Manichean struggle is introduced – the "sideshow" (Gartner 2011: 4) man, "[drinking] beer straight from the can, wiping his lips with the back of his hand, exaggeratedly rotating his shoulders as if attempting to recalibrate himself" (Gartner 2011: 4), looking and smelling ripe, according to their equally observant wives (Gartner 2011: 3), becomes the crucial agent in the metaphor of war – at the social, economic, cultural and, finally, physical level – and his invasion of their space, their natural habitat, is paralleled with the unavoidable putrid smell, as if of hell. The first stage establishes a beautiful incongruity between the rational, cultured and scientifically-bent tribe, and this man who "[pats] the hood of the barbecue as if it were a loyal hound, the half moons of his prominent cuticles edged in grease" (Gartner 2011: 3).

The second stage encompasses the events immediately prior the faithful dinner hosted by Lucy, the event itself, and the subsequent change in the wives' behavior – initially welcomed by the men since it involved intensified desires for intimacy and "more than one child walked in on a mid-afternoon scene in a rec room or kitchen that elicited hysterical giggles or cries of 'Gross!'" (Gartner 2011: 12). At this point, the change in the wives' attitude towards Lucy remains unobserved or willfully overlooked, although retrospectively, the narrator accounts for the fact that

“[their] wives no longer arched close while [they] watched HBO late in the evenings, angling for a deep-tissue massage or core realignment” (Gartner 2011: 15), as well as that the infamous neighbor had by the time started “dispensing goodies as if he were a hot dog vendor at the corner of Hornby and Robson” (Gartner 2011: 16) and that, naturally, “[they] certainly couldn’t forbid [their] wives, who drifted over to sample his wares” (Gartner 2011). The property value of Lucy’s home rapidly deteriorates as he is more concerned with feeding the children, and their wives, barbecue meat almost daily, and the tribesmen’s focus is on determining the level of danger the property poses for the children’s play. As the communication between the men and their wives and children becomes almost inexistent, reduced to “a kind of sign language” (Gartner 2011: 19) – the children obviously experiencing reverse-evolution due to the influence of Lucy – and as the “[sightings] of [their] neighbor became rare” (Gartner 2011: 19), the account of the summer enters its third stage.

> It was towards the third week of August that our wives started avoiding us altogether, disappearing into themselves as the sky fell. We tried following them, walking barefoot, careful on the tinder-dry pine needles underfoot, breathing through our mouths slowly and evenly. We knew this wasn’t the way it was supposed to be, fire ants pouring from the peonies, keeping watch while our wives grunted among the vines. But they were always home by morning. (Gartner 2011: 20)

The apex of the culmination is reached when the wives’ adultery and allegiance to the flesh-eater become obvious, and the tribesmen fall into paranoid patterns building up the pressure within the group to take action. This third stage, therefore, is marked by the unexplained event of Kim Fischer’s wife leaving him on Labour Day. Even though Kim and the tribesmen are fully aware that his wife did not leave him for Lucy, it invites uncontrollable anger and desire to unleash it onto the individual who, apparently, produced the unimaginable changes in the dynamics of their marriages, in the relationship with their children (except for the childless Kim) and overall their livelihood. That very evening as the ‘desperate husbands on paternity leave’, the tribesmen, gather to emotionally support Kim, in the act of sharpening chef knives, “fully forged and polycarbon-tipped […] those Sabatiers and Wusthofs” (Gartner 2011: 22), they premeditate and carry out the murder of their ‘Lord of the Flies’, and bury the remains, as well as the instruments, except for the “Mousterian scraper as a souvenir” (Gartner 2011: 22) that Stefan admits to keeping.

Stefan Brandeis's introduction as a man whose name already invites the question of appropriate pronunciation and a number of stereotypes pertaining to snobbism or homosexuality (and potentially both), and the fact that on seeing their new neighbor's Camaro Z28, Stefan immediately sees "trouble" (Gartner 2011: 1) allows the narrator to subtly allude to the implication of one's choice of vehicle being a qualitative criterion for the label of barbarism of sorts:

> He was kidding, of course. Who could have believed that a barbarian was at the gates? (Gartner 2011: 1)

With or without the allusion of a posh background or homosexuality, stereotype-wise, Stefan is the first to notice the new neighbor's unfortunate choice of attire, the "muscle shirt" or "wife beater" (Gartner 2011: 3) and "cut-offs" – a sight "he hadn't seen […] since Expo '86" (Gartner 2011: 3). Initially curious about Lucy, Stefan "would yell mock *sotto voce*, 'you got some 'splaining to do[44]!'" (Gartner 2011: 5), referring to the primitiveness and crudeness of the man's overall behavior, as observed from a distance – a quip that makes the rest of the tribesmen "literally [yowl]" (Gartner 2011: 5), and a moment of post factum realization about the men's own animalistic nature, negated and repressed so forcefully, only to emerge in the climactic moment of, almost ritualistic, sacrifice – murder. On the lighter side of things, Stefan is the designated extender of the metaphor of the 'missing link' as he continually wittily remarks on their neighbor's activities in the lines of Lucy "maybe […] trying to reinvent the wheel" or this man's "arms swinging along" (Gartner 2011: 19), comparing him to an ape like creature, granted, at the time when the men have already begun losing their minds for reasons pertaining to Lucy decreasing their property values and stealing their wives. Also, Stefan's "twins talked to each other in clicks and clacks of the tongue, like the bushmen of the Kalahari" (Gartner 2011: 19) – an unforgivable consequence of playing in Lucy's backyard. In a brilliant foreshadowing, however, the narrator unintentionally explains the possible background of the twins' unusual verbal regression in disclosing that:

[44] Stefan's character is additionally rounded by the allusion to the 1950s TV show *I Love Lucy*, in which it is the male character, Ricky, who says these words to his female co-star Lucy. However, the phrase as used by Gartner is not as related to the TV show as much as the popular culture since it is never uttered in this modality in the show. Due to the Mandela Effect, it has become an iconic, and of late, meme reference. The intertextual interjection draws into the plot of the story the traditional and old-fashioned, though culture specific, discourses and explores them implicitly in this contemporary setting, but also provides the cue for subsequent ironic interpretation since the show evoked is essentially comic. (*I Love Lucy*. Produced by Jess Oppenheimer, performances by Lucille Ball, Desi Arnaz, Vivian Vance. Desilu Productions, 1951-1957. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0043208/. Accessed 30 May 2020.)

> They drew on the garage walls with the charred ends of sticks and charcoal briquettes as if drawing on the insides of caves – of the things they imagined, or the things that had yet to happen […] A small figure emerging from the bushes on what looked like an enormous turtle. Men with sharp implements converging on a cowering beast. Tangles of foliage and fire. Rain. (Gartner 2011: 19)

Finally, on killing Lucy, Stefan is the one who pockets a "souvenir" or "*memento mori*" (Gartner 2011: 22), as Patel suggests due to the importance of the correct terminology when dealing with such matters, as the characters invest themselves in stabilizing their discourse even in distressing moments. With this slightly sarcastic remark in mind, Patel Seth plays a very special role of legitimating the tribesmen's discourse in the story. Namely, the Latin scholar's (Gartner 2011: 2), Patel's comments on the circumstance are both comic in contrast to the established discourse of the other man, and they seem to resolutely perpetuate the ideas of the parodic sources – the men's ideas and interpretation of Darwin's theory of evolution, as contrasted to the actual mechanism operating behind their thought-process and actions – Wallace Russel's. However, considering that the other men do not even fully understand Patel's Latin expressions, his comments reveal a degree of unawareness, self-deception and delusion with regard to the reality of the situation, and their obviously misguided interpretation of it, and not to mention subsequent actions, referring further to the parodied paranoia of the boys in the second parodic source, *Lord of the Flies*. Additionally, Gartner does not fail to represent the heterogeneity of the group itself in placing Patel and, for example, Trevor in contrast. The former a Latin scholar, his every phrase oozing with what we assume is erudite academic gravity, and the latter a foul-mouthed average Joe, expressing his impressions as fast as the neural networks forms in his brain.

The tribesmen, fully trusting of Patel's linguistic expertise, merely accept the decisive and, occasionally tragic, bits of Latin expressions. Parenthetically speaking, Patel's depression does not seem to interfere with his judgment, and his "black mojito" (Gartner 2011: 6) combined with citalopram, an anti-depressant, is not taken to diminish the weight of his scholarly, almost poetic, judgment. Moreover, these bits of wisdom provide their discursive reality with a legitimacy of eternal or natural truth, as if the Latin scholar were an authority translating and imparting on them justification according to universal laws. Even if it is unclear if the men actually understand the Latin expressions, their sounding Latin is enough. Stefan's perception of the knife he keeps as a

souvenir of victory becomes *memento mori* through Patel's eyes, a reminder of the inevitability of death, perhaps even a hint of fear. Stefan's keeping the instrument of murder therefore does not suggest a sinister streak in Stefan's psyche, but a reminder that death in itself is inescapable and part of life. A grain of solace for the weeping men. After all, it relieves the guilt in some, and foregrounds Patel's *caveat emptor* (Gartner 2011: 2) comment on Karlheinz's persistent sense of guilt with regard to the events of the summer suggests. It is an exonerating factor because the responsibility lies with the buyer, and therefore the new neighbor Lucy, had it coming.

Similarly, Patel's role in the group, regardless of whether it includes the company of their wives or not, appears to perform the function of a philosophical-punchline contributor. During the "soiree [...] at the Brandeis-Lohr place" (Gartner 2011: 7), and a painfully uninspiring attempt at an anecdotal intellectual amusement, "an apocryphal story about the worth of a certain crowd-pleasing Egyptian Bastet cat statute" (Gartner 2011: 7) on the part of Trevor's wife, further elaborated by Kim Fischer and finally by Karlheinz who shared a different version of the same story, Patel comments: "It's all the same in the end, isn't it? [...] People place great stock in authenticity" (Gartner 2011: 7). Patel's curious comment on the relativization of authenticity, but perhaps also genuineness with regard to the new neighbor, invites the ironic interpretation of the tribesmen's ridiculous interest in contemporary fads, but also sarcastically summarizes their delusions about themselves. Finally, Patel drives a Mini Cooper and his wife finds Lucy's statement that "[kangaroo] is a beautiful protein" (Gartner 2011: 11) to be "poetic," which Patel in his generosity fails to protest. In retrospect, of course, that particular evening would resonate with Patel's belated "christening" of "Operation Aphrodisiac" (Gartner 2011: 16), the men's last attempt at civilized battle against Lucy's toxic sexuality, as "[their] Failed Feast of the Satyricon" (Gartner 2011: 16). Equally satirically, the narrator will remember Stefan's wife's "[leaning] forward and [dragging] a finger" through the blood on Lucy's plate during the dinner he hosted, "and then exaggeratedly [sucking]" (Gartner 2011: 12) on it. The assumed expression of mockery by the loyal wife of Stefan's will eventually be understood for the beginning of an end. The men, after all, find their wives' initial impression of the new neighbor as being "a trifle judgmental, but one thing [they'd] always appreciated about [their] wives was that they spoke their minds" (Gartner 2011: 3).

Perhaps it was "Kim Fischer's wife even enthusiastically [snuffling] Kim's exfoliated pits like a truffle pig" (Gartner 2011: 3) upon meeting the ripe-smelling neighbor that allowed the tribesmen the impression that their wives too found him to be misplaced in their community – an uninvited trouble and threat to property values. The irony of Kim Fischer, whose "unisex name and dubious tenor no doubt had more to contend with than the rest" (Gartner 2011: 2), finds its release in the incongruity of images of a gentle-looking, "spa treatment" booking, "crack-[waxing]" (Gartner 2011: 16) man, "yelling […], brandishing his fists like an Old Testament patriarch or modern-day mullah" at the "carnivorous soul" of Lucy, while seeking his damnation and expulsion to hell (Gartner 2011: 2). This childless man whose wife's "overbite had glinted in the bedside light like the teeth of something feral" (Gartner 2011: 12) after tasting the barbecue specialties of Lucy, becomes the epitome of bravery. Granted, for his "rumoured 'crack-wax'" (Gartner 2011: 16), but also the fact that it is this 'unisex-modern-day-mullah', "a committed locavore" (Gartner 2011: 8), who distributes the instruments of murder in his kitchen on the night his wife's abominable act of leaving transpires among the men as the final straw, and in such a manner – leaving a message that deeply disappoints the tribesmen due to "her schoolgirlish handwriting and her choice of stationery" (Gartner 2011: 22). Kim's justifiable departure from the cul-de-sac in the aftermath of the summer events, inspires Patel, "not generally a man to talk in clichés" to frequently repeat the phrase "*Thank God there were no children*" (Gartner 2011: 22).

However, it is the character of Karlheinz Jacobsen who provides the crucial ironic, and specifically parodic, foundation of the tribesmen's narratives. Namely, it is Karlheinz's "scientific bent" that provides the nickname for the neighbor (Gartner 2011: 5), and he is the only tribesman disappointed at the new neighbor's "chrome Jesus fish" (Gartner 2011: 5) attached to "the Dodge Ram, circa early '80s" (Gartner 2011: 5) falsely inspiring hope of, at least "covert religiosity" (Gartner 2011: 5) in Lucy. Karlheinz is the only one in the group who "held to a notion of the divine" (Gartner 2011: 5), and a belief that the amuse bouche consisting of "a test-tube tray of plastic ampoules filled with wild-morel cream that [they] were meant to squirt into [their] mouths" (Gartner 2011: 8) would have an aphrodisiacal effect on their wives during the soiree at the Brandeis-Lahrs. The "preordained train wreck" (Gartner 2011: 8) of the evening, however, puts Karlheinz's imaginative mix of science and culinary art into the shadow of Lucy's "raised veins traversing the waxy underside of his left arm, flexing in a manner that accentuated his already over-delineated bicep" (Gartner 2011: 8). It is also Karlheinz's scientific endeavors that would be

destroyed by the newcomer's barbarism when, as the tribesmen suspect, Gido – the "seriously misbred […] murky concoction that no doubt involved at least one AWOL chromosome" (Gartner 2011: 6) – destroys his agoutis, leaving a trail of blood behind. Interestingly, Gido's appearance somewhat echoes Karlheinz's "failed attempts at crossbreeding golden agoutis with voles in order to create sleeker guinea pigs" (Gartner 2011: 8). This god-fearing scientist whose knowledgeable disposition enables him to precisely identify the weed in his unwanted neighbor's garden as "[giant] hogweed […] with sap so toxic the skin reddens and blisters after contact before erupting in severe inflammation prone to infection" (Gartner 2011: 14), provides a convenient and "non-negotiable reason to forbid the kids to play in [Lucy's] yard" (Gartner 2011: 14). The suspected Eurasian species, apparently stuck in the '80s, figuratively in the form of an over-muscular and hairy primate wearing tight cut-offs and a wife beater, frequently sighted in "decaying Adidas" (Gartner 2011: 5), cannot be missed by the perceptive eye of Karlheinz. Moreover, it is this man who provides the scientific foundation for the tribe's "endless speculation" as he begins "to compile *field notes* – 'evidence'" (Gartner 2011: 15). It is his dedication to meticulous evidence gathering – incessant spying, to be more exact – that gradually allows for the discovery of something quite demonic in the behavior of the 'missing link'. Apparently, with the lack of any scientific evidence that would explain or suggest why their wives would even be tempted to taste the uncouth barbecue meat of Lucy, Karlheinz "actually witnessing him laying a piece of deeply charred something or other directly onto Kim's wife's extended tongue" (Gartner 2011: 16), undoubtedly from the nearby bushes, concludes that the act was a "proffering of a communion host" (Gartner 2011: 16).

In the subsequent, desperate, yet elegant and sophisticated attempt at rekindling the relationships with their wives, these men would shower them with "Lapsang souchong-smoked duck breast with pomegranate sauce," the courtesy of Patel; Kim's "dolmades"; Karlheinz's "oyster foam-agnolotti"; Trevor's "quail stuffed with raisins and quinoa; Stefan's "saffron risotto with truffle oil and mascarpone"; and finally, for dessert, Marcus's "silky black cod with Pernod mole sauce (70 percent pure, fair trade cocoa)" – all "executed flawlessly" (Gartner 2011: 16), but to no avail as the attempt triggers what Trevor would call "[their] slut phase" (Gartner 2011: 17), one in which their wives not only started dressing and acting differently, but one that both "[reminded them] how mutable this thing we call the 'personality' really is," and one that would make Karlheinz "[start] attending Mass again" (Gartner 2011: 17).

> "I just don't see why meat has to be the main event!" Kim Fischer detonated one day, seemingly apropos nothing. We nodded fervently, as if at a Free Methodist revival meeting. Someone, most likely Stefan, added, "Amen, brother!"
> No one way yet speaking in tongues. (Gartner 2011: 17)

Indeed, Marcus van der Houte would certainly not speak in tongues – his real-estate policy, as read on his business card, "*Art Direction for Real Estate*" (Gartner 2011: 2) translates his forward personality, and it is no wonder that among the tribe, he is "the one who elected to go over and talk to [Lucy]" (Gartner 2011: 5) about "property values" (Gartner 2011: 5). More precisely, about the Dodge Ram – according to some "off-white" and according to Marcus, "*tapioca*" (Gartner 2011: 6), the gnomes, the barbecue machinery, the kids' "instant ADHD" (Gartner 2011: 5) in discovering the world of trucks, etc. However, as the narrator insists, "we didn't then, nor subsequently, ever use the term" (Gartner 2011: 5), referring to property values, since that would suggest some sort of classist dynamics as these men "are not the kind of men who fixate of [their] lawns" and have no problem using Lee Valley mowers at all (Gartner 2011: 5). The encounter between Marcus and the bare-kneed Lucy, however, pushes Patel into upping his dose of antidepressants since their tribesman manages to "[fall] on his seersucker-clad ass, cartoon-style, white bucks up over his head" (Gartner 2011: 6) startled by the "slathering muzzle of what looked like an Alsatian/Cayman" (Gartner 2011: 6) – the unfortunate Gido. The comic scene that initially causes the rest of the tribesmen to chuckle, ultimately leads them to confessing fear, which "we all know, is a useful adaptation" (Gartner 2011: 6). It does not particularly help the image of the tribesmen, although it reinforces profound ironic representation, that on finding Lucy under the truck, and trying to get the bare-kneed-man's attention, Marcus "[taps out] the end-credit sequence to *Moulin Rouge* on the hood" (Gartner 2011: 6), which, one could say, might have caught the attention of Gido in all likelihood – figuratively, an organic reaction of masculinity, of muscle, to such unexpected sophistication in the circumstance.

> We can now admit an isolationist stance would have been best for all concerned. But we did what any civilized tribe would have done under the circumstances and invited our new neighbor to a dinner party. (Gartner 2011: 7)

It is at this very dinner at the Brandeis-Lahrs, that Marcus' "lamb popsicles in fenugreek sauce" (Gartner 2011: 8) that the neighbor exhibits an unpopular opinion towards the delicacy. Namely, "[their] neighbor actually giggled" (Gartner 2011: 8) at his specialty, which does not sound as distressing as Lucy "[demurring], muttering something about erectile dysfunction" (Gartner 2011: 8) when he is passed "a plate of Trevor's dulse salad" (Gartner 2011: 8).

> Sure, we knew men like him existed. But we'd never had a chance to observe one in such close proximity. (Gartner 2011: 9)

Trevor Masahara's reaction to Lucy, however, seems to reveal an 'odd' man in this tribe. It is unclear whether Trevor's reactions reflect a change in his personality, or whether, perhaps, his sensibility, apart from being "ever self-flagellating" (Gartner 2011: 15), simply found its appropriate outlet. In comparison to other men, Trevor seems to understand the language of Lucy, and his own observations always take the form of less euphemistic expressions. Trevor's masculinity, brutally attacked by Lucy's pointing to his chest and requiring to know "how much mileage [he gets] with that rice grinder there" (Gartner 2011: 7), 'bravely' transfers the limelight to unisex Kim and his locavore lifestyle – a perfect spin that would, finally, intellectually pacify the barbarian, and yet provide the group of men an opportunity "to laugh along good-naturedly" (Gartner 2011: 8) at the newcomer's ignorance, if a little at Kim's practices as well. It would be Trevor's observations of Lucy's backyard, "on the pretext of retrieving an errant Frisbee-golf disc" (Gartner 2011: 14), that would confirm the tribe's suspicions, or paranoia, about the absolute horror they assumed the place to be: "almost swampy, as if the groundwater was rising […] And behind the smokehouse, what could only be described as a midden of bones" (Gartner 2011: 15) – a confirmation that, indeed, there was something about the smell, as Trevor had noticed:

> "I know it's only a smell," Trevor Masahara said one particularly rank Tuesday evening […] "but sometimes it seems like, you know, an actual *thing*." (Gartner 2011: 5)

It is the nature of the smell, initially identified as coming from the rendering plant, that drives Trevor to detonate. The "confluence of bad luck" (Gartner 2011: 4), the arrival of the barbarian and the smell from the plant, needed to be explained as a "bizarre coincidence" (Gartner 2011: 4) rather than ominous superstition. And yet, Trevor's petitioning "for cutting down the Sitka spruce grove" (Gartner 2011: 18) so fervently, and perhaps expectedly so after being triggered by the

tragic agouti-carnage (Gartner 2011: 17), even though the grove is not on their property, creates a direct link to the murder.

> "But it's our stink, right" Trevor maintained.
> What we feared: Trevor, with his refined sense of smell, would go off his nut in the night and take a chainsaw to the trees. (Gartner 2011: 18)

Luckily for Trevor and his tribe, however, the black-bear warning delays the detonation impact of his inadvertent recognition that it is about "our stink" (Gartner 2011: 18), their smell, as men, as opposed to the supposed stench of the *barbarian*. From snuffling Kim's exfoliated armpits, to deciding that "[when] animals kill each other we don't call it murder" (Gartner 2011: 18), the wives of the tribesmen destroy the legacy of their masculine evolution. As opposed to them, their "sons seemed oblivious to the smell and the frequent volcanic eruptions that pockmarked our driveways with small craters" (Gartner 2011: 21), adding to the sense of betrayal, as well as guilt:

> Were we neglectful fathers? Were we secretly relieved to find more time on our hands after work and on weekends than we'd ever thought possible post-fatherhood? There was something in the still-childless Kim's eyes that made the rest of us feel guilty, but he never laid any accusations. (Gartner 2011: 13)

This beautifully ironic rendition of guilt, unexperienced by their wives, and supported by the understanding that they could never "revert further into an idealized past" (Gartner 2011: 13), places the men in a serious cul-de-sac with their wives':

> [squatting] on their haunches in front of backyard fires they'd built in pits lined with basaltic rock, looking at [them] with those eyes, waiting for us to do something. Hunt? Gather? Or something else, something beyond our capabilities altogether? (Gartner 2011: 21)

In the moment of the tribesmen's observation of their wives' complete conversion, or devolution, into bush-women, a rival tribe almost – entirely different beings from those who they believed they shared lives with – tacitly, or less so, pledging alliance to ancestral Lucy, the men discover, finally, that it is their masculinity that has been under attack the entire time.

> It was only after he stopped the clowning completely that we realized how much we had enjoyed viewing him as a harmless throwback. (Gartner 2011: 19)

Their barbarian-neighbor's outward displays of unsophistication, lack of manners and class – the possible sentimentality of tacky taste, as discussed seriously by these men (Gartner 2011: 10) serve to reinforce their own socio-economic position, and establish bonds within their tribe. However, in their collective, tragic mistake – in the immense enjoyment at the man's unworldliness – the tribe underestimate their foe. Even though Patel never communicates this message, one could imagine him uttering the word 'hubris' at this point. Lucy's mansplaining them about what meat is (Gartner 2011: 11), and what is, evidently a way to 'contract' erectile dysfunction (Gartner 2011: 8), but also seducing their wives and their children into becoming his followers, dislocates the men from the convictions they so anxiously hold on to. In retrospect, all the offensive observations hurled behind Lucy's back, in the privacy of their gentlemen's club, remain, "as [they've] learned, in the end […] just words" (Gartner 2011: 20).

This postmodern short story, a structural masterpiece, successfully unites literary and scientific sources as the pseudo-narrative of masculine identity, and guided by intense and unwavering irony, it examines the cultural perpetuation of such models, but also comically inverts them in the light of the overwhelmingly contradictory demands on masculinity, similarly to femininity, of course, though this is not the question Gartner directly or extensively tackles in the story. Moreover, in exploring the two postulates of the theory of evolution – one guided by the premise that survival is motivated by competitiveness, and the other that it is merely a matter of environmental pressure – through satirizing the protagonists' awareness of their own nature and motivations, by contrasting so powerfully the toxically masculine, ripe, Lucy to the degree of effeminizing the protagonists, and by placing them in a classist social context, painfully politically correct environment publicly, a multicultural context, yet one driven by 'property values', Gartner places these men in a cul-de-sac, figuratively speaking. They are "[six] blind men describing an elephant" (Gartner 2011: 20), unaware of their role in the circumstance, "the role of observer or participant" (Gartner 2011: 9), as Darwin would designate it.

In the narrative closure, Gartner allows for ambiguous interpretation to thrive. These men, "engaged in what Patel has described as a Manichean struggle" (Gartner 2011: 23), ultimately

recognize their responsibility for the sinister and unprovoked murder of Lucy. As if to suggest that "boys will be boys" (Gartner 2011: 23), the men decide to *stoically* suffer the consequences of their participation in the Darwinian/Russellean experiment they themselves initiated.

According to their field notes, it was sometime in early July that the unexpected sexual urges of their wives made "things […] good. Almost too good" (Gartner 2011: 12), suggesting that the "swelling bellies" (Gartner 2011: 23) their wives would be sporting by the end of the summer might be the product of their own doing – during that brief period. Such an interpretation would obviously amplify the guilt. However, the blindness of these men – to their own qualities, to their wives' personalities, to the situation they allowed to spin out of control due to some sort of shared paranoia – could also be interpreted with regard to their wives' potential adultery. Remaining blind to their wives' betrayal and infidelity becomes possible in the light of their own, now murderous, past – and an atonement, as the final sentence of the story suggests:

> The smell is something we've learned to live with, even Trevor. A kind of sufferance we must bear. (Gartner 2011: 23)

There and Back Again[45] in Lori McNulty's "Monsoon Season"

Lori McNulty's "Monsoon Season," first published in *Descant*, deals with some of the most controversial and unpopular topics, not only in contemporary Canadian society, but globally – the transgender experience, or rather the experience of the transition, through the focalizing eye of former Teddy, now Jess, no longer "a boy" (McNulty 2014: 15), but a "Neo-Vagina" (McNulty 2014: 13) *owner* doing her best to *embody* and adjust to this "glamourous new entrance after a lifetime of exits" (McNulty 2014: 13). This narrative does not utilize nor deal with the popular representation of transgender and transsexual people, largely avoiding the overly stereotyped and commercialized images of drag[46]-divas, the peculiar drag-banter, the entertaining tea-and-shade

[45] An ironic reference to J. R. R. Tolkien's subtitle to "Hobbit," with regard to Bilbo Baggins going through various ordeals and acquiring the One Ring, only to realize that he really wants to go back home, to the Shire. This reference, however, has no intertextual relevance to "Monsoon Season."

[46] In "Figures of Otherness in Canadian Video," Joanne Lalonde defines drag as "a slang term referring to transvestite prostitutes that have been broadened to include transvestites generally as well as those working in the entertainment world, in a *drag show*, for example. Some of these transvestites have had hormone therapy and are now called *hormone queens*. The term 'drag' is not necessarily linked to a specific gender, even if it was used traditionally for male to

bits as representing drag culture and as such appropriated by heterosexual women, nor, by extension, the certain aspects of trans-culture as represented by the most famous global drag-queen show – *RuPaul's Drag Race*[47], which has educated the straight, along with the uninformed LGBIQ, in the art and struggles of drag, but also invited criticism in terms of the aesthetics of female impersonation, body positive image and identity. This entertaining dimension of the subculture may have revealed the quality of the drag and trans legacy as appropriated by the hetero culture, and the entertainment industry by large, but it has not aspired to deal substantially with the internal issues of the community, which this story indirectly tackles. This cabaret, burlesque and nightclub dimension serves as the backdrop for the representation of the protagonist's evolution in the story, however, it offers no more or less information than the character's family background, and in particular, her relationship with her mother, which is an intentional narrative move towards the subjective experience, rather than the collective one, revealing the diverse range of identities within the obscure community defined on the basis of the stereotypical understanding of sexual orientation. Additionally, it is interesting that McNulty, as if intentionally, neglects to address the drag nightclub scene, but focuses on the mother in the story of the transgender experience since the *maternal* link is particularly important in the drag or transsexual community. Namely, the queens belong to specific groups taking on the last name of the group Mother, or integrate the name of their House in their own. In this story, even though Jess mentions the person who introduced her to drag, that particular character is abandoned for the elaboration of the relationship with Jess' biological mother – the one who somewhat rejects her new identity. Ultimately, it is Jess who leaves the biological *model* and supposedly goes back to the community she knows, though the latter is only insinuated.

Moreover, even though the protagonist experiences illumination in the form of comfortableness in her newly formed body, the emphasis in the entire narrative is on the process itself, and the

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female transvestism. The word 'drag' effectively connotes homosexuality and at times the expression is even considered a synonym for female impersonators. Despite the homosexual connotation, many homosexuals are anxious to distinguish themselves from drag queens because they prefer men displaying their virility" (Lalonde 2006: 200).

[47] *RuPaul's Drag Race*, reality television-show in which "[playing] a dual role, RuPaul reigns supreme in all judging and eliminations, while RuPaul, the man, helps guide the contestants as they prepare for each challenge. Contestants include the nation's most outrageous, cutting-edge, talented and stunningly gorgeous drag queens all fighting for the title (and tiara) as top drag queen of the land. Working with our contestants are top models, designers and American idols all rolled up into one. Each week, through the trials and tribulations of glam, glitter and show-stopping performances, one drag queen is eliminated until reaching the next superstar drag queen of America." Source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1353056/ Accessed 15 May 2020.

culmination or climax does not really occur. In a manner, the protagonist's process is infused with negativizing irony that she manages to transform into constructive so that her own being might embody difference rather than exclude it, and yet the closure of the narrative suggests a reversal in this line of progression.

In terms of the protagonist's history, the narrative brings together two settings – the Queen Street background, much like the bits of family history, offer an insight into Teddy's movement towards the transition operation, whereas the relationship with Margaret, the mother, after the surgery, in convalescence, offer insight into the specifics of Jess' personal experience. The two personas, constantly contrasted in terms of a 'split', yet somehow residing in the same body, eventually merge into one. The irony in this story, however, although it may occasionally be found in the perspectival inconsistencies, especially with Jess' mother, emerges in the process of Jess' discovery of what this procedure entails at the psychological level – the change that is so drastic that it feels like her body is "[hostage] to an abnormal cell, her body cut and cut again, splitting her in two" (McNulty 2014: 12) – and particularly in terms of the fact that when all is done and her transition is finally successful, Jess goes back to Queen Street, to involve herself, as one may assume, in the same round-and-round, with the same "pretty crowds [snaking] around the hot clubs on Queen, shouting out names she no longer knows" (McNulty 2014: 20).

Furthermore, another current of irony overwhelms the narrative as it exposes, both with Margaret and Jess, and the other episodic characters in the story, that the issue of womanhood – what it means to be a woman, what is considered feminine or femininity to be – remains devastatingly on the criteria of aesthetics, and worse, aesthetics as prescribed by men featuring in the female characters' narratives. In those terms, the ironic edge of story cuts deep when Jess, after a heartbreakingly dangerous and painful operation, transitions into a body that is anatomically considered female, and one that still necessitates 'accessorizing' in order to fulfil its supposed purpose – the purpose being unknown aside from providing an authenticity to the desired aesthetics. The anatomical woman, Jess, returns to Queen Street, "turns up her collar, braces for the southwest rains to come" (McNulty 2014: 21).

The revolving symbolism of water and fluidity – precipitation, rain, moisture, monsoons and an episodic hurricane – may be understood as an optimistic message of a change, and one that

conveniently in the narrative comes after the storm. However, Jess' encounter with "Viking-faced," "Hurricane Katrina bangs" (McNulty 2014: 16) Ursuline on the day when the protagonist is finally able to go shopping, a much dreaded event sending her down the memory lane of traumatizing homophobic and unpleasant experiences, offers no optimism that her new identity, or better, aesthetics might find acceptance with the people she knows. This optimism, as Jess is reminded, remains ungrounded even after all the anatomic changes, and in the case of the encounter with the transsexual Ursuline, it is precisely because of the anatomic changes that she faces negativity, ironically.

In stumbling upon Ursuline, "the masque of death" (McNulty 2014: 16) who "[tosses] Jess back onto the pile of polyester" (McNulty 2014: 18), Jess' background and 'beginnings' start to take form and further elucidate her uncomfortableness in the Thai hospital resort when one of the trans-women the protagonist meets, in a crude comment, justifies prostitution as a means to obtaining the finance to complete the transition:

> Jess felt as if her soul were being trimmed by a long knife. She was all concealer and three-layer cover-up, penciling her lips to erase the rough outer edges of her life. Still, she bled. While they chatted, she mentally extracted her organs and laid them out on the long teak table. […] Okay. There. She was all there. (McNulty 2014: 4)

This idea of "losing the prick […] at any price" (McNulty 2014: 4) illuminates a profound crisis in Jess' psyche – the idea that she is whole and yet that there is an extra part to her somehow resurfaces with ironic ambiguity, when Ursuline's presence at the boutique undermines her confidence and belief in the transition that actually did happen. The masculinity of Jess' body, the inauthenticity, the "all concealer and three-layer cover up" that she works to get out of, somehow remain there even after her transition is successful:

> "Well, I hope *this* works out," Ursuline says, tossing Jess back onto the pile of polyester. "And I really hope you find a stylist," Jess strokes Ursula's dirty blond hair. "Because this shag is animal cruelty." (McNulty 2014: 18)

Apparently, Teddy, at the time, met Ursuline in the same place where Jess acquired her name for the first time – Robbie's Play Palace, "an underground drag bar off Church Street… [where she]

pushed signature cocktails and, tucked inside her blue napkins, pushed a little E" (McNulty 2014: 16). The process of her 'amateur' transition, something one may assume Ursuline never got past, includes "ordering estrogen and anti-androgen pills through Robbie's US connections" (McNulty 2014: 17), and it becomes obvious that the transition, for Jess, does not only signify a gender-change, but a change that involves forgetting a history that no longer fits into this image of "a real" (McNulty 2014: 16) Jess, "[now,] in her best dress, a sunflower-coloured trim cotton polo with stand-up collar" (McNulty 2014: 16) – feminine, classy and 'natural' since, after all, "Cinderella lost her balls, now she needs a gown" (McNulty 2014: 16). Ursuline, a remnant of Jess' undesired and potentially embarrassing past, establishes a painful reminder, and not only of Teddy's struggle to survive on his own since there seems to be a history of crack-dealing (McNulty 2014: 9) even before Robbie's, but a reminder that escaping this subculture that 'made' her, building a congruous identity with the mainstream image – that which is perceived as feminine – may not simply be a matter of getting rid of a penis and acquiring a vagina. Ursuline's reference to '*this*' in the above quote from the story prompts Jess to inspect herself in the mirror, once again, and "[try] to gather her refracted self: face, chest, legs, eyes" (McNulty 2014: 18) – all that which made Teddy less of a 'woman" and, yet, all that which does not seem to make Jess any more authentic in the eyes of the member of the community who shares the same circumstance. Ursuline's comment may well have been a jealous outburst, but the cause of the reaction – the foundation of her observing Jess in that manner – may be located in the political and aesthetic standard of the trans and drag community. These women do not identify as hetero-women regardless of the sexual pull towards other men.

If certain feminist approaches refuse to raise the issue of the perspective from which this abstracted experience is described and politically observed, it is because of the complex and problematic nature of defining the trans-rights and activism discourse against gay and lesbian, and the more phenomenological one. Ironically, these women identify as men, but also as women, regardless of the pronouns that they would choose. Their experience of womanhood[48] is perceived from a position that is biologically different from that of a *woman*, and this is merely one of the aspects

[48] The issue of transgender activism has become topical in recent years due to the conflicts between the lesbian and trans activist communities, with the former reproaching the latter that the exclusivity of the woman's club cannot be extended to men, with or without makeup on, since oppression against women stems from that very sense of male entitlement to modify or shape the female experience.

that they embody. Also, regardless of the biological genitalia, they embody the state of *different* experience that is incompatible with the culture perceiving only binary opposites – heteronormative in relation of contrast to homosexual orientation, men in contrast to women, etc. – and this difference is actually a multiplicity embodied within this trans identity. The heteronormative rejects this multiplicity, and ironically, Ursuline approaches Jess in a similar manner. One might entirely disagree with the premise of the multi-dimensional nature of gender experience, and yet, Ursuline's referring to '*this*', to the anatomical changes observable on Jess' body, resonate with Margaret's – "her son has breasts" (McNulty 2014: 10):

> "Harold leaves, you come back as Cher. Think this makes you a woman?" Margaret gestures vaguely below Jess' waist. (McNulty 2014: 11)

Both Ursuline and Margaret appropriate, as their own subjective experiences of their gender, the modes in which their respective cultures define it, and according to their perceptions and internalized values, Jess 'transgresses' these boundaries. For Ursuline, the anatomical changes – the 'going all the way' – assumes a desire of assimilating with the normative, with the mainstream culture, and it goes against the subculture which, apparently, allowed the safe space for their identities to develop in the first place. Teddy, after all, became Jess only in the environment that allowed him to express his or her sensibility, as opposed to the environment at home – a father who told Teddy to "[go] find [himself] another fairy castle" (McNulty 2014: 9), which he obviously did, a mother who "had no more energy to stop them" (McNulty 2014: 9). On the other hand, Jess' attempt at this supposed 'female' authenticity appalls Margaret since her hetero-normative experience does not allow for such "shape-shifting":

> Despite years of vitamins, hormones, lipo-, hippo-, and laser therapy, Jess had never held a lover. A crude, midnight circle of one-night stands, sure. Men who'd fuck anything in a short skirt, yes. She was their shape-shifting Queen Street tranny. Fuckable. Transgressive. Freak. Subject, object, verb. No agreement. (McNulty 2014: 3)

It is not simply homophobia that shapes Margaret's perception, it is the prescriptive cultural discourse that does not find place for this different modality – the trans modality. The irony, of course, of the fact that Ursuline's reasons for passive-aggressive resentment match the sensibility of Jess' mother's resentment and disgust, and they resound those of the men Jess finds herself with

– the “circle of one-night stands” who see her as something exotic and “transgressive” – a projected image of a fetishized woman-man or man-woman, something that exists in-between, but has no space in society other than in underground bars, the gay-circles, the trans-scene, etc. This change ousts Jess from both worlds, in a manner, and propels her into the uncharted territory of, often politically extremely problematic, transgender existence. It is not without a reason that the full acronym, shortened so as not to confuse the uninformed, includes LGBTTIQ: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, intersex and queer individuals. The difference between transgender people and transsexual ones being more complicated than merely labeling the former as cross-dressers. Cross-dressers, may even identify with their biological gender and remain within the heteronormative, sexuality-wise. More explicitly, again, it is the subjective experience of gender that is problematized since it exposes how it is, in this particular story, that women – biological, transgender and transsexual – understand womanhood and femininity. The story does tentatively and ironically comment on motherhood as well, but that is a discussion for a different chapter.

Jess’ transition journey starts in early June and ends sometime in the fall, as implied by her sensing the beginning of the monsoon season. In Phuket International Hospital (McNulty 2014: 1) in Thailand, Jess finds herself experiencing pain that she describes in terms of “someone just [shoving] a pickaxe up [her] pelvis” (McNulty 2014: 1). The “bloodied” stitches, and the “wetness spreading beneath her bottom […] copper-coloured stains seeping through to the crisp cotton sheets below” (McNulty 2014: 1), all symbolically represent her as a woman already – in possession of a “swollen vagina” (McNulty 2014: 2) excruciatingly felt as the famous surgeon checks the stent. The menstruating allusion is somewhat ironic as the narrative is focalized through the eyes of Jess, the new woman, and her formidable desire to acquire acknowledgment with the change.

> Jess turned to see a Thai woman in a tight-fitting turquoise dress do a twirl so a river of cinnamon hair plunged to the small of her back. Her long legs draped to the floor. Between then, not a bump or bulge. (McNulty 2014: 3)

Jess’ apprehension at the process she has long waited for, the anxiety and vomiting in the guesthouse before the actual surgical procedure, are relieved by the presence of Lydia, the long-

legged Thai hostess, whose "heart-shaped mouth" and "beatific beauty" (McNulty 2014: 4) discomfort Jess to the point of feeling like "a gorilla in the mist" (McNulty 2014: 4). The artificiality of Jess' body, albeit its appealing qualities, falls short of the ideal aesthetics of the transgender Lydia who also happens to be the walking-advertisement for dr. Jemjai's plastic surgery. Namely, not only is she the perfect success story in terms of the aesthetic ideal of femininity, at least in Thailand, but her "coochie" also exhibits the functionality attributed to the biological prototype – she can experience an orgasm, and apparently, this woman must have also had the opportunity to go through a catalogue of available vagina-models, much like Jess. Which one she chose, remains undisclosed in the story, but Jess' awe at the final result – the whole package – estimates a brilliant choice and a promise of a solid investment, especially in the light of Lydia's account of her personal history "[coming] to Bangkok when the family rice crops in her home province of Thai Binh were ruined by swarms of planthoppers" (McNulty 2014: 4). Even though Jess could not relate to the devastation caused by something that McNulty brilliantly brings into connection with the Biblical punishment for sin, there is a feeling that the trans-women who find themselves in the Thai guesthouse, waiting for their time to go under the knife, all share similar stories of *becoming* – rejection by family, prostitution (McNulty 2014: 4), drug-dealing (McNulty 2014: 9, 16) and other, forcing them into a certain lifestyle, the state of exclusion, and an idiosyncratic, perhaps eccentric (or ex-centric), understanding of their own identity.

It is this particular dimension of "Monsoon Season" that testifies to its postmodern quality. The deconstruction of the experience of transgender transition is performed from within the liminal and marginalized experience, and the voices of the protagonist's mother and her former friend serve to deepen the sense of marginalization as this new woman becomes additionally marginalized by the latter. Even though the narrative discourse of Jess maintains structural stability, even on this internal and formal level, there is an additional ex-centric move within the narrative flow with the focalizing wavering between Teddy and Jess – the same person, yet two different identities.

Trying to understand her new personality after the surgery, Jess ponders the effect of the "[one] organ, spreading to the rest of her parts" (McNulty 2014: 12), taking the place of her former "penis personality" (McNulty 2014: 12), and exposes the instability of the biological in the face of the psychological – or perhaps, the cultural. The question that her new-body-personality raises

addresses the issue of the nature and quality of this gendered experience – as a woman or man, as a transsexual person she once was, and a transgender one.

> Vaginoplasty, clitoroplasty, and labiaplasty had come a long way, he explained. Moist, elastic, hairless – these were the benchmarks of his profession now. He spoke about flaps and grafts and good vascularity. (McNulty 2014: 12)

However, her transition – the pre-surgical ordeal, the surgery itself and the post-operative process – all reveal the ironic, and comic at times, focus on the genitalia that supposedly guarantee the authenticity of gender. The *catalogue* dr. Jemjai offers his patients grants them a variety of vagina faces – vagina personalities, "he could make her Neo-Vagina look any way she wanted" and even "emphasize the lips, so her Neo-Vagina would resemble a pouting face" (McNulty 2014: 12), which all suggests that there is a certain pattern to the aesthetics of it, and the pattern resembles the exoticism and fetishism of the men Jess mentions as her one-night lovers. The supposed perfection of this scrotal-sack grafted organ is "glamourous" (McNulty 2014: 13) in Jess' mind – it is "a bold accessory" (McNulty 2014: 21), but what it has to do with womanhood, as a concept, other than visual similitude and aesthetic appeal of an idealistic or exotic sort, remains somewhat unclear to Jess, still going through the process of acquainting herself with her suffering body.

> "Am I not enough woman?" She rises, moving unsteadily toward Jess, who steps out of reach. Margaret grabs her own breasts then lets her arms drop to her side. (McNulty 2014: 19)

After a night of drinking, Margaret, Jess' mother, finds herself in a similar mist of uncertainty about her own womanhood. Being left by her husband, "puckered elbows, the soft wattle beneath her chin" (McNulty 2014: 19), Margaret is observed as "an old woman" (McNulty 2014: 19), replaced by "a young lady underwriter" (McNulty 2014: 19) – a new model, figuratively speaking – according to her own, unexpected, confession in a moment of weakness and self-doubt.

> "My son is prettier than me," she whispers but her voice breaks. Jess draws her closer, feels her mother's life tightening around her, her own future opening out. (McNulty 2014: 19)

Ironically, the recognition of Jess' beauty, even if her mother's formulation may not have been sensitive or intentionally uplifting, induces transgender Jess into the *order* of women – into this

vaguely, aesthetically-defined, male-regulated, but also self-imposed context in which desirability is the pre-requisite for membership. Similarly, Jess' newly acquired female attribute brings into question her membership in the in-between club of the transsexual and drag subculture.

Femininity, then, is a double-edged construct based on the desired performativity. Even more ironically, the rite of this induction – the acknowledgment or the perception of the feminine attributes, along with youth – reveal a deep-seated internalized misogyny based on the aesthetic idealization of the image of women as constructed by the heteronormative. Women's beauty is desirable because it is appreciated by the opposite sex, and the lack of desirability, against the heteronormative – either due to age, physical attributes, or cultural standards – holds more weight than the actual biological gender. A woman with a vagina, but without desirability is forced to find her performative in another conceptual frame. Womanhood, as prescribed by the heteronormative, requires the standard of femininity as it enforces gender roles, which further complicates any implication of such individuals whose irresolute identification with the normative bend the prescribed cultural, social and political norms, which is precisely the issue of transgender women. A transgender woman whose outward appearance aesthetically pleases men might actually, in fact, conforms with the heteronormative. However, her performativity is problematic since her political existence remains undefined, and since the socio-cultural attitude toward her might not allow her the designated space for women. Compliance to the normative, then, is both desired and irrelevant, for as long as it allows for the exploitation.

In the act of comparing herself with her transgender daughter, Margaret establishes an ironic and disturbing parallel, as both women, in their own transitions, seek to find their place, and role, in the culturally conditioned and socially perpetuated ideal of femininity that is unsustainable and untenable, even if one would subject themselves to "[stretching] the vocal cords forward, then clipping off the excess" (McNulty 2014: 20) in order to change the pitch of their voice, or agree to a "[penile] inversion with a flap technique" (McNulty 2014: 13) so that their sexual orientation would not make them feel like "the terrible mistake her parents had made" (McNulty 2014: 17), all on top of the devastating hormonal and other treatments that would bring them closer to the image that would be less culturally diverse, or more acceptable, in all its unacceptability.

The figurative, inebriation-induced, mother's blessing marks the beginning of Jess' new life, but ironically, one that she begins in the same place – a sublet on Queen Street, where she would try to be her *different* self, as part of the transition. Ironically, however, one might wonder whether going back there, Jess would find the same 'crowd' of men exoticized and fetishized her as a now-transgender woman, and whether, indeed, her Neo-Vagina would somehow allow her political autonomy and economic stability.

#itsallgood in Nancy Jo Cullen's "Hashtag Maggie Vandermeer"

"In summer everything was young" (Cullen 2014: 40), except for Maggie Vandermeer, the woman against whom, it seems, the universe, with its *trending* youth, conspires to oust her from their privileged social network zone, but professional life as well. In other words, the experienced PR cannot seem to find a job, and while managing her ten-year loosely-defined sobriety, she finds herself battling against what seem to be menopausal hot flashes, loneliness and rejection. This forty-eight-year old, 10K-running, "forty push-ups, forty chair dips, and one hundred crunches" (Cullen 2014: 34) wellness enthusiast who manages to "[stave] off scrotarms" (Cullen 2014: 35) – a feat she works too hard for according to Lacey, her daughter, is stuck in the space in which her efforts to maintain the outward appearance of managed-youth and natural-freshness disastrously collide with the external world in which youth based on the date of birth is preciously observed as the qualification for visual branding and marketing success. Maggie's, skin still resists gravity, there is "no double chin" (Cullen 2014: 35) and "her hair colour looked totally natural" (Cullen 2014: 35), *totally*, even if other parts of her body show signs of her 'natural' progression into maturity, to avoid the word *croning*.

The pun is intentional, much like the puns Nancy Jo Cullen so effortlessly tosses around in the entire narrative of "Hashtag Maggie Vandermeer,"[49] inviting the reader to sympathize with the ironic discrepancies that pilot the narrative progression. At the level of the protagonist, this vulnerable and disoriented woman desperately trying to reinvent herself in the world where appearances on social media build reputation, the irony works to, on the one hand, expose the restrictions of this age-biased privileged group; and, on the other, to expose the ironic note to her

[49] First published in *The Magazine*.

own inauthenticity as she hopelessly uses social media to emulate what she imagines to be the content that trends, unsuccessfully. Ultimately, if the tone of the story might come across as somewhat satirical, it remains contained in the kindhearted thread of irony that merely presents a moment in this woman's struggle to locate her place in the world she understands very little about. Additionally, it is also in the fact that Maggie's hashtagging has the opposite effect, trending-wise.

The protagonist's temporal dislocation, or rather her psychological mindset based on romanticized notions pertaining to the past, allows for the conjunction and exploration of the discourses belonging to a different time and those of contemporaneity, in the context of social networking. Although this narrative uses irony with a pragmatic objective in mind, its function is largely to negativize the misplaced and obsolete discourses as related by the protagonist. At the same time, it extends to the discourses of the present – the hypocritical and superficial world of online, virtual, communication, where appearances are promoted as a simulation of reality. At the same time, the superficiality of the narrative of social networks and the artifice of its discourse mark the point of convergence with the underlying irony of the protagonist's own inauthenticity.

Maggie Vandermeer's loneliness is particularly tackled through her relationship with her daughter, through the hints of delusional, naïve and romantic slips in her musings, incongruent with the protagonist's reality, and at the end of the story, through the storm of passive-aggressive text messages triggered by the intolerable feeling. It is in these bits shedding light on her internal life, that the irony at the level of the character is achieved, and particularly in its satirical escalation. In contrast, the accounts of Maggie Vandermeer's devastating and degrading job interview experiences work to illustrate the ironically charged generation-gap, as suggested, between the baby-boomers and a range of millennials who might, for example, associate Maggie's officially undisclosed fantasy about Pemberley (Cullen 2014: 40) with those "[unnecessary] things. That touchy, feely stuff with sunsets and oceans" (Cullen 2014: 35) – words uttered by "a toxic little snot named Jasmine" (Cullen 2014: 35), the interviewer, whose authentic look during their brief encounter features a "Bettie Page hair cut and gold stud in the left bottom corner of her mouth" (Cullen 2014: 35) – an incongruent image of a vintage-look and, potentially, liberality projected by a young woman who may not even understand the implications behind the pin-up, playmate culture. However, Maggie Vandermeer's baby-boomer discernment neither carries weight in the

world of contemporary PR based on social media images, nor does it move the "little twot who interviewed her" (Cullen 2014: 38).

This particular interview with Jasmine, the sardonically insensitive limp-handed handshake-person (Cullen 2014: 35), according to Maggie's, brings to light both the slim prospects of the protagonist ever getting back into the world of PR because of her age, but also a stubborn refusal to acknowledge the ineptitude of her lifestyle, circumstance, age-group, etc. in relation to the job-type she tenaciously seeks.

Maggie Vandermeer, a twenty-three-year veteran in PR, hastily mentions her daughter twice during the interview. The first mention inspires the limp-handed Jasmine to understand that Maggie's presence on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn could be interpreted in terms of her own mother's inappropriate content posting – inappropriate in terms of her mother not "[getting] Facebook at all" (Culler 2014: 35). Maggie's clumsy social-media name-throwing invites the stereotypical evaluation on the part of the interviewer, yet it also confirms its validity, which is later on explained in the satirical listing of Maggie's choice of Instagram and Twitter content and the unfortunate hashtags.

> You know, we want to trend because people like us, not because we look like sentimental throwbacks. Not because people are laughing at us."
> Maggie nodded again. (Culler 2014: 36)

This particular exchange will satirically echo in one of Maggie's walks through the park that she likes to imagine as her own estate, as "her own Pemberley, or some such place" (Culler 2014: 40) – satirically, because Maggie's insistence on her being able to trend as much as the next person exposes the core of the ironic incongruity of her person in the environment where she is unwelcome – due to her competence or incompetence – depending on the angle, age and appearance, and sensibility, and due to the idea that imagining herself as the heroine of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, in the twenty-first century, cannot possibly help her fit in with the trending crowd. Of course, there is also the matter of Maggie's misfortune of failing to understand the concept behind what she believes constitutes trending on social networks:

> She held her iced latte in front of her turquoise painted toes and snapped a photo. She typed #lactosefree #summernights #turquoisetoes #maggieVandermeer, then she posted it to her Instagram account. She knew how to bloody trend. (Cullen 2014: 40)

Taking a picture of an iced latte and capturing her painted toes neither constitutes trending content, nor does it particularly manifest comprehension of the concept of the hashtag. Maggie's metadata involving her own name not only represents a pretentious, but also an inadequate misstep in her attempt at being an influencer, even if the idea behind branding her own name shows deliberation.

The cheeky irony here can only be understood outside the boomer circle, in the discursive community, as Hutcheon would define it, of millennials who not only set the rules, but apparently intentionally keep them secret and unwritten as to confuse the aspiring-boomer-influencers from achieving fame. This is potentially why Maggie, in fact, could not "take a hint" (Cullen 2014: 41), contrary to her own belief.

Maggie's hashtagged content posted on social media includes food, "a cupcake piled with maple icing and topped with a slice of bacon, #reward, #runninglife, #maggieVandermeer" (Cullen 2014: 41), "herself in new white-framed sunglasses, #summer, #instacute, #maggieVandermeer" (Cullen 2014: 41), a photo of her cat with equally non-trending hashtags, a photo with a Mexican actor she knows very little about, and among other things, "whimsical observations such as, *As much as it is reality we will not live trouble-free lives, so we will worry when they come*, all followed by the hashtag Maggie Vandermeer. Still, she failed to trend" (Cullen 2014: 41). Maggie, in other words, does not understand the influencer hierarchy or the trend setting mechanisms, and the interpretation of the confusing cliché she posts seems redundant, and it is particularly this dimension of Maggie that, in the context of this millennial-run social media PR, renders her narrative discourse satirical.

> "I don't eat pasta." Maggie patted her stomach.
> "Jesus, Mom," Lacey said, "You have to stop obsessing about your weight."
> "Caring about how you look is different from obsessing." Maggie licked the tapenade off her fingers to prove her point then changed the subject. (Cullen 2014: 37)

Yet, in this generational clash, the protagonist's narrative exposes the double standard operative both in the millennial and boomer crowds, and it pertains to appearances since there is no significant difference in the protagonist's obsession with her looks, and the social media's obsession with presenting the *perfect* image of what that should be. She, in fact, is one of many unsuspecting victims of the online social trends set by a generation that internalizes the established rules differently – fluently and intuitively – as a rule of inclusion, but also intentional exclusion. Maggie's trending aspirations are simply out of her reach because she does not belong to the crowd, to the group, who sets the standard. In those terms, she is a social media outsider, and the scene in the park when she is being, though politely, ignored by the girls she sees reading a magazine together – laughing and enjoying their summer day, "near perfect" (Cullen 2014: 41) – also suggests the protagonist's misdirected and unwanted social interaction:

> Maggie could take a hint. "Have a nice night," she said. "Don't talk to strangers." She walked up the path toward the north end of the park, peals of the girls' laughter chiming. "Being alone is not the same as being lonely," Maggie reminded herself. (Cullen 2014: 41)

The implication, then, is that Maggie's social awkwardness operates in the same manner on her social media accounts, or rather, translates onto them. Seeking to be a part of the group she could not possibly relate to, whether in terms of interests, age-group or other, Maggie sets herself for failure, which ultimately results in her daughter being 'targeted' as the only source of companionship.

Maggie has "a dining room mirror (hung just so to make her apartment look larger than it was)" (Cullen 2014: 34), she licks the tapenade off her fingers just to show how laid-back about her looks she really is (Cullen 2014: 37), "her kitchen was shining" (Cullen 2014: 45), and all of her social media content is supposed to portray her as athletic, stylish, whimsical, but also deep. The emphasis is on the attempt, of course, since Maggie ultimately craves any attention she could get, and the *trending* she imagines would propel her personally or professionally does not even work that way. In contrast, the young people that she meets – the standard-setters, influencers, those actually trending on social media – stand as a range of pastiche-like pieces from the past, arranged in a stylish way to limp-handshake a boomer for looking and thinking their age, while they themselves derive from that very boomer-culture the fashionable pieces they endorse as trending-

worthy content. The irony, I find, is sympathetic because Maggie, in her own bubble of unawareness, faces a number of hipsters – the walking images of their own social media personas, and not the other way round.

The first interviewer, Jasmine, rudely hipster-splaining Maggie that they would not want to be the laughing stock of the social media community by choosing someone from a different generation as their PR, and doing so while rocking a Betty-Page. The lip stud potentially gives Jasmine the qualification for placing Maggie in the same basket as her own mother due to the apparent difference in her and Maggie's projected images, age-aside. Maggie could have been younger, though, but still not meet the appearance and style standard, or the sensibility for the job – the hipster, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and even Facebook circles simply require specific types of personality and message-creators – the postmodern blends: those carrying the marks of the past (vintage) on their backs (clothing style), but operating within the philosophical frame of contemporaneity. Maggie's irony is that she is the opposite of that.

In the second interview, the protagonist encounters "a bearded boy with a waxed moustache and a sallow-faced girl with large framed glasses" (Cullen 2014: 43), and it is as if *she* is being beamed into a different era in which men wax their moustache and girls' intelligence is somehow enhanced by the stylishness of over-sized glasses – both of which give them credibility and authority to judge her competencies even though her work experience ranges back to the time when they were babies. On confirming that these young people, too, care little about "the importance of having a firm handshake" (Cullen 2014: 43), Maggie Vandermeer is "deflated" (Cullen 2014: 43), or perhaps 'defeated' – feeling older, if one is to interpret her queue number, fifty-eight (Cullen 2014: 42) as an allusion, an implicature. Maggie's dining room mirror that makes the room look larger – the focus on such aesthetics, the "shining" kitchen (Cullen 2014: 45), her thoughts about perhaps "[starting] an etiquette school" or "be a fitness instructor" since "the baby boomers would relate to her" (Cullen 2014: 44), or the idea that she could "teach all those fat chefs how to eat properly" (Cullen 2014: 45), represent her as belonging to a generation that seemingly has no place in the world of influencers.

As mentioned, during the first interview, with Jasmine, Maggie drops her daughter's Twitter handle, Pushyboots, in a desperate attempt to endear her dismissive interviewer. The rash mention

of the handle changes the course of the conversation, as Jasmine recognizes Maggie for "the Former Drinker" – a detail her daughter, Lacey, Pushyboots – sex advice blogger, appears to have shared with her followers – and expresses excitement at actually having the opportunity to meet "the FD" (Cullen 2014: 36):

> "I guess you'll have something to talk about over lunch."
> Jasmine opened her office door. "Well, thank you very much, Maggie Vandermeer. Say hi to Pushy. We totally love her." (Cullen 2014: 36)

Maggie is the hashtag, a character in this blog, but still not trending. In fact, as her daughter implicitly maintains, any association with the character of the FD and the real person that is her mother, would not be met with appreciation – she is not someone that Pushyboots would want to be associated with in real-life, or rather, Maggie's persona in the world of social media, online or otherwise, does not meet the standard of association of such elevated, influencer, kind. And Maggie is all too aware of that, which makes it even more disturbing that she so tenaciously works against the actual state of affairs.

> Maggie never should have said [she] mentioned it. "I was losing the interview."
> Lacey shrugged. "You shouldn't do it."
> "I can't say you're my daughter?"
> "Not in that context." (Cullen 2014: 38)

It is a matter of a generational gap, but also the fact that Maggie, now ten-years sober, is the one who "trained [Lacey] in the art of the perfect vodka martini" (Cullen 2014: 37), implying that Lacey's regular job as a bartender owes to her mother's expertize in alcohol consumption, but also that Lacey and her mother might have issues that go well beyond the expected generational differences. The narrative of Maggie only tentatively deals with the insinuation that this mother might be all too dependent on her daughter's care, affection, and ultimately, in this jobless circumstance, a push to get employment. Tentatively, that is, until Maggie Vandermeer unleashes a long thread on her daughter one late night.

In a parodic moment echoing the already mentioned *Pride and Prejudice*, Cullen reveals the state of the protagonist's sobriety, or rather its "maintenance":

> It is a commonly held belief among those abstaining from alcohol that sobriety maintenance cannot be managed by enjoying any sort of relationship with other stimulants, aside from coffee and cigarettes, neither of which Maggie could tolerate. However, a little weed could go a long way toward mitigating the effects of life. […] For sure, the meetings helped too, but some days Maggie just needed a little more. It was hardly a crime. (Cullen 2014: 39)

Maggie's subjective take on sobriety, the potential mishaps in her relativizing the use of marihuana, since "it certainly wasn't as if she was getting her kid to roll her a spliff" (Cullen 2014: 39), and the unconscious parallel to what her alcohol-abuse has done in terms of her relationship with Lacey – her daughter being an experienced bartender, but also a famous blogger apparently at least partly due to sharing information about the dysfunctional relationship with her mother; and maybe even her jobless circumstance, all ironically point to a very dependent and immature forty-eight year old, still searching for that 'something' that would make her believe her own mantra that "[being] alone is not the same as being lonely" (Cullen 2014: 41), trying to 'trend' with her daughter's 'crowd', and making a brand for her own name, #maggieVandermeer, out of the trivial and mundane – desperately emulating the behavior of those whose, granted, similar behavior is forgiven due to their age. After no less than thirty-three messages revealing her thought-process, a stream-of-consciousness outburst condensed into SMS format, and all the passive-aggressive resentment at the silent treatment by her daughter, Maggie stops her unsolicited 4 a.m. rant about Lacey not providing feedback on the "etiquette school" idea:

> And just in case Lacey would worry she was crazy, Maggie typed her final, final message on her phone's small screen: It's all good.
> She hit send. (Cullen 2014: 47)

Her "final, final message" would have made for an excellent hashtag, although an ironic one. The protagonist's emotional rant does stand as the climactic moment, but only with regard to the climax of irony – the fact that the protagonist remains unaware of her self-undoing to the very end of the narrative.

Walking on Eggshells in Julie Roorda's "How to Tell if Your Frog Is Dead"

First published in *The New Quarterly*, Julie Roorda's vignette "How to Tell if Your Frog Is Dead," selected for *The Journey Prize Stories* in 2014, described by the selection jury of the volume as "[plotless] and characterless," and "a perfect example" of "insight, surprise and humor" (Beattie et al. 2014: xi). Indeed, at the formal level, this anti-story undermines any narrow definition of the genre form since it rejects the consideration of the conventional expectation of plot and character, and their dynamic interaction, as the key elements to a narrative. Moreover, contemporary narratology in its insistence on such categories as eventfulness and fictionality – the key elements of a narrative discourse – would find this vignette an exciting yet brilliant experiment since, in this story, nothing really happens. Or, everything does, only at the level of the hypothetical.

Curiously set in a spatio-temporally undefined location, relying on the reader's imagination to position the "vivarium" in whatever place they would find suitable in their own home, the circumstance of the narrative involves a child and their care-provider – it is safe to assume that it is a parent, and one of a very specific background that encompasses knowledge of the "African clawed frog" (Roorda 2014: 86), and everything that this creature might necessitate in order to survive, which is, according to the information provided by the narrator, a great deal of care and detail without any guarantees of success.

Essentially, "How to Tell if Your Frog Is Dead" is both a narrative about the fragility of life, uncertainty of death, and child-rearing. That is, throughout the narrative discourse, the narrator makes sure to unexpectedly and quite wittily, frequently ironically, create a link between the process of taking adequate care for this "pet frog" (Roorda 2014: 86), the possible challenges, and the consequences, as well as collateral benefits, it could have in parenting: "your child may enjoy the benefits of interacting with an exotic species while learning valuable lessons about commitment and responsibility" (Roorda 2014: 86). Ironically, of course, upon reading the story and learning how fragile this exotic pet is, however amusing the potential mishaps might be if the death of a pet frog is not taken tragically, the reader might still opt for a dog or cat. With regard to that, aside from the said African clawed frog, the "native to sub-Saharan Africa" and its "stagnant pools and backwaters" (Roorda 2014: 86), the narrative tentatively features pseudo-characters such as a playful, mischievous cat, "cruel and haughty by nature" (Roorda 2014: 88), impervious to punishment and prone to "disdain" (Roorda 2014: 88); a hypothetical hurricane or other extreme

weather (Roorda 2014: 86) as the potential threat to the stability of the humanly created environment for the sub-Saharan native – a potential agent of disaster; “guppies and crickets” (Roorda 2014: 87) mentioned in relation to the valuable lesson in “the basic dynamics of the food chain” (Roorda 2014: 87); a hypothetical friend who “should be paid a reasonable, but not exorbitant, fee” (Roorda 2014: 88) for taking care of the frog in case of need; also, hypothetical mating partners or companions for the frog (Roorda 2014: 88); a hypothetical plumber whose use of clog-dislodging snake could confuse or frighten the child (Roorda 2014: 89) due to frogs being the favorite prey of snakes; and, ultimately, the narrator – the parent whose function in the narrative is not only to impart wisdom on the unusual creature that is the African clawed frog, the conditions of its upkeep, or the lessons that could be drawn from the failures, but rather, as the reader is to understand, to share their own atypical experience. It is in this oddness and incompatibility – the exoticism of the pet and, therefore, the oddity of the choice for the described setting of the story, its fragility in a home frequented by a self-important cat and a child whose experiences certainly do not comply with the requirements of the task, the improbability of certain scenarios, or perhaps an exaggeration for the comic effect that echoes the spirit of ‘life-imitates-art’, that irony’s edge is discovered. In its pragmatic and humorous functions in this story, irony subtly tackles certain socio-political issues that the narrator skillfully explores through the seemingly unrelated matters pertaining to a frog pet. This irony is, as Hutcheon defines it, constructive, or rather appropriative for it both involved the introduction of the counteracting and oppositional, yet somehow allows them coexistence, which creates the frequently humorous effects. Of course, it is due to the hypothetical sensibility of the narrative discourse that this constructive dimension of irony is possible, as will be discussed.

In order to “maintain the delicate balance of conditions required for life inside the vivarium” (Roorda 2014: 86), lest the frog dies, a certain temperature needs to be maintained, and this homeostasis, as the narrator cleverly anticipates, might be threatened by a hurricane, drastic weather conditions or similar circumstance in which the power supply of the device maintaining the temperature might be cut off. The randomness itself of the introduction of such an agent testifies, though amusingly, both to the instability of the vivarium conditions, and the nature of the responsibility in taking care of an animal so fragile. And yet, this is all with regard to the “valuable lessons about commitment and responsibility” (Roorda 2014: 86), as well as the “important lesson about the effects of climate change” (Roorda 2014: 87). To complicate things further, the narrator

observes the likelihood of the frog unintentionally killing itself by hopping out of its artificial dwelling "if it is not properly sealed" (Roorda 2014: 87), implying that commitment to detail pertains not only to temperature, but also careful handling of the vivarium at all times since the frog "could starve, or become dried out before you are located and return it to safety" (Roorda 2014: 87). Of course, the irony on the semantic level resides not only in the comprehensive, meticulous and formal style, but also in the implication that the vivarium presents a safe environment for the frog pet. This ironic remark is furthered by the narrator's afterthought about the bottom of this man-created dwelling:

> The bottom of the vivarium is to be lined with medium-sized pebbles and stones to create nooks and crannies where your frog can hide. If the stones are too small, your frog may accidentally ingest them; if they are too big, your frog could be crushed or pinned, and may die. (Roorda 2014: 87)

In addition to the child's learning lessons in commitment and responsibility, the possible consequences of the inept choice of vivarium bottom-lining offer a lesson in "attention to detail and the value of moderation" (Roorda 2014: 87). The irony is then furthered by raising the stakes since the exotic sub-Saharan African frog, out of its natural habitat, seems to be threatened by practically everything and anything around it. At this point, the narrative, in its instructive and didactic, highly informed, knowledgeable spirit, reveals a certain experiential (even empirical) dimension to the narrator's line of thinking – the rationale behind the narrative on the whole. There is an undeniable feeling that the narrator has gone through a similar process of learning such lessons, and perhaps with the child.

The nourishment of the frog is tackled from the perspective of "optimal health" and "balanced diet" (Roorda 2014: 87) that includes insects, but instructing the child in the "basic dynamics of the food chain," as the narrator suspects, might cause them distress and invite questions about life and death, or rather how "the chicken, fish, or hamburgers you had for dinner all similarly died to become food" (Roorda 2014: 87). In the case of this event triggering pangs of guilt and idealism in the child, the narrator simply suggests that "nuts and legumes are good alternative source of protein" (Roorda 2014: 87) when the child turns vegetarian.

The noticeable change of style as the narrator reports the words apparently addressed to the child at one point, also apparently prior to the narrative discourse in question since they otherwise could not purport to claim empirical certitude, cues ironic interpretation yet again and reinforces the metafictional sensibility as well. As an almost off-topic comment on the context of taking care of a pet frog, the narrator notices that the shedding of the skin which occurs "[approximately] every two weeks" need not be assessed as "a sign of emotional instability" (Roorda 2014: 87), and that the leftover skin, whatever the frog does not ingest as a part of its natural diet, will "[provide] your child with a fascinating natural artifact to present at Show and Tell" (Roorda 2014: 87). These seemingly trivial incongruities are what cues the ironic interpretation throughout the narrative discourse, and they are only intensified by the comic scenes, perhaps hypothetical yet vividly imaginable in the context, in which the child forgets to turn off the special lights designed for the vivarium causing the "frog's circadian rhythm [to] be disrupted" (Roorda 2014: 87), and very possibly die:

> Either way, your child will learn to distinguish imaginary monsters from the real terrors of living and dying. (Roorda 2014: 87)

However, even if the child successfully completes this lesson, in the unfortunate case of the frog dying, there are still instructions for dealing with the aftermath, and they are such that one might think, if they have not already, that the educational value of the narrative must be based of real-life experience. The resourcefulness that complements the text in terms of plausibility is illustrated by the very specific advice on choosing the best, "biodegradable" (Roorda 2014: 89), container for the disposal of the deceased pet, such as a "Q-tip box […] as it allows an open-casket option for mourners to pay their respects" in the form of "a modest ceremony" tastefully accompanied by such a choice of popular songs as "'Let's Go to the Hop' and 'It's Not Easy Being Green'" (Roorda 2014: 89). Lest a comic disaster occurs, the narrator warns the reader about the dangers of improper selection of the frog's tombstone as pebbles used for such purposes "might shoot out the back of the lawnmower, at bullet speed, and your child could lose an eye" (Roorda 2014: 89). The reader can only hope that this sort of experience is merely at the level of the narrator's exaggeration and penchant for drama. Moreover, it is the interplay between the narrative's fictionality and the convincing and credible, though comic, scenarios, that reveal the ironic intent, as much as they reveal the metafictional sensibility of the story.

In the blatant defamation of cats, Roorda plays with the stereotypical only to enhance the strong comic potential of the text. The vivarium, according to the narrator, should be protected by not allowing “cats to approach [it] within a metre’s circumference” (Roorda 2014: 88), as these traditional pets “may wish to engage in the type of play your frog will not enjoy” (Roorda 2014: 88). One could easily substitute the pet for a newborn in this particular context, and certain scenes and instructions as the ‘survival’ manual for inexperienced parents, but in the context of the entire narrative, that would be disturbing. However, it is precisely these kinds of allusions and associative circumstances described in the narrative that build the ironic core, though it may be slightly morbid. The frog is, after all, in constant danger of dying.

Ironically, the frog is likely to die even in cases when it is provided with a companion, for the purpose of procreation or companionship – male or female, since they only normally mate four times a year, and over-breeding can somehow cause their untimely demise. The silver lining, however, of keeping a pet whose sexual orientation can be described as fluid, is that it offers a possibility for “a valuable lesson about tolerance and diversity”:

> *Amplexus* is the Latin word used to describe the mating position of frogs. It means embrace. Sometimes a female frog will *amplex* another female, or a male another male. This is nothing to be alarmed about. It’s perfectly natural… (Roorda 2014: 88)

As straightforwardly as homosexuality is dealt with, the narrator tackles the issue of religiousness or spirituality, as dealing with such a fragile pet almost inevitably invites the topic. In the ironic and comic conclusion that “[although] some deities have been known to employ a plague of frogs as an agent of wrath, religion is generally silent on the subject of their afterlife” (Roorda 2014: 89), the narrator advises against dealing with “tragedy in spiritual terms” (Roorda 2014: 89), but also against denying death as a finality since the child would eventually realize that no such thing as a pet-farm exists. The rationale behind the narrator’s advice is based on the premise that it would be wise to avoid “expensive therapy” (Roorda 2014: 89) for the child in the future.

If there is any evidence of parody in this story, then it is found in the discernable style, or rather style-imitation. Much like the parody in Zsuzsi Gartner’s “How to Survive in the Bush” or that in Craig Boyko’s “The Baby,” the origins of this particular postmodern experiment might be traced

back to a vast body of child-rearing and parenting literature and textbooks with their precision and scientific scope that is ultimately ironically treated here.

After providing a detailed guide through the experience of keeping an exotic pet frog – from the infrastructural and logistical specifics, the security detail and the issues that might arise from the frog's immoderate consumption of pebbles, the deathly-amplexus regardless of its sexual orientation, as well as the educational, psychological, cultural and spiritual benefits or dimensions acquired in the process, the narrator reveals another context-specific factor in the learning curve of the experience pertaining to the possible problem in determining the condition of this amphibian's death – that is, the state of life. Namely, in urging the reader to "remember that frogs hibernate for several months of each year" (Roorda 2014: 89) the narrator potentially reveals their own initial ineptitude or clumsiness in the matter.

In the familiar reversal to something strongly resembling personal experience, the narrator advises the reader – a fellow-sufferer parent, perhaps – that "this condition of deathlike stillness can be beneficial, particularly if your child is prone to hyperactivity" (Roorda 2014: 90).

> If you suspect you have erroneously buried your frog alive, you will have learned a valuable lesson. (Roorda 2014: 90)

In a typically postmodern manner, Roorda's narrator's certitude is both destroyed by the admission of possible failure, but also strengthened by the experience itself – revealing the intentional ambiguous nature of the narrative progression – its playfulness and ultimate ambiguity at failing to provide a conclusive closure to this excerpt of everyday life. Moreover, it is ironic that this almost anti-story, in fact, provides an epiphanic culmination as opposed to the majority of the other selected stories for the analysis. However, this occurs due to the reliance on the metafictional style and the strong ironic reversal that occurs at the very end.

The Death of Ego in Andrew MacDonald's "The Perfect Man for My Husband"

One of the first thoughts that went through my mind as I read Andrew MacDonald's short story "The Perfect Man for My Husband," published in *The New Quarterly* prior to being selected for *The Journey Prize Stories* (volume 27) in 2015, was to ask why Canadian authors were killing off

gay teachers. In the 2014 volume of *The Journey Prize Stories*, Rosaria Campbell's "Probabilities" – a story about a university lecturer contracting AIDS, probably in one single random rendezvous at a local park, a gay hideout, searching relentlessly for a specific young student he might have infected unknowingly, someone reminding him of his small-town past, all with the help of an understanding sister. The stories, other than involving a gay man, a straight woman, each, and a conservative environment, have little in common. In fact, Campbell's "Probabilities" initially selected for the corpus of this study due to its topicality and broader relevance as a fragment of the contemporary Canadian mosaic, ultimately had to be abandoned due to the tragic appeal of the irony running through its postmodernism-infected veins. In other words, the heartbreaking conflict at the heart of the plot, the recognition of the futility of the protagonist's resistance, and the decency of his fortitude in "Probabilities" made me question the entire section since I found no place in my postmodern deconstruction for unnecessary sentimentality. Therefore, in all probability, "The Perfect Man for My Husband" imposed itself as a suitable substitute as it deals with a similar topic, but is far more humorous. The irony of the change of mind, in this case, had to do with the pragmatic nature of irony that Andrew MacDonald so viciously employs to soften the blow of the narrative he relates. This irony, in Hutcheon's categorization, can be observed as negativizing, when the female protagonist's, the narrator's, discourse addresses the external discourses, as will be discussed. However, with regard to the internal incompatibilities with her own desires, and the circumstances that deprive her of satisfactory denouement, this irony becomes, surprisingly, constructive and appropriative – an instrument for understanding the complexity of the situation.

The story of the young married couple following the final days of the husband's life, "a private high school" (MacDonald 2015: 62) teacher who announces to his wife that he has been diagnosed with cancer, "the worst kind, and that it had spread to so many corners of his body that there wasn't any hope" (MacDonald 2015: 61) during what the protagonist-narrator will be calling their "Cancer Dinner," "The Moment Everything Changed" (MacDonald 2015: 62), tenaciously resists the melodrama and the 'mushiness' due to the pragmatic, and occasionally 'sharp' use of irony – in its observant, sarcastic and exploratory modes.

At the level of the narrative discourse – in the couple's exchanges, dialogues and the narrator's own observations of the situation that leaves her somewhat lagging behind the notion that her husband would soon be dead, irony features in the form of exaggeration, allusions and the overall

semantic networks built throughout the discourse. The backdrop for the irony, however, resides in the title itself – the emphasis on the incongruity as related by the idea that a wife would be launching a dating-search for her husband, and the persistent emphasis on the sanctity of marriage as reflected in the two main characters not even being named in the story. Both the protagonist – the wife, a non-profit organization fund-raiser organizer, who is also the focalizing subject – and her husband, remain nameless even though other characters, such as the episodic Alex – the first gay man the wife manages *to bring to the table*, literally; or Hattie – the wife's friend, and the wife's superior – Vargo who tells an awful joke at an awful time, get their mark. The remainder of characters, the merely mentioned neighbor, or the oncologists, another gay man who seems appropriate because he is *gay*, and the wife's mother do not require naming in this story since they relate a function that enables ironic flow (counteracting discourse) or background.

It is through the wife's consideration of the images of homosexual men, and her reflections on her relationship with her mother – subsequently, her personal circumstance pertaining to a *defective* uterus – that the irony exposes the artificiality of conventional and traditional notions of love and marriage, and at its very core. On the other hand, the manner in which irony builds up and culminates in the protagonist's realization that the entire perfect-man-hunt may have been a means of deterring the fact that her husband's death was imminent, puts a question mark on the entire process as narrated by the protagonist, especially to the cynical observing eye, considering the idea that the expression of the ultimate selfless and ego-free love may have merely been a self-deceptive attempt at coping with a personal loss on different levels – the loss of a husband on the literal as he is dying, and the loss of the conception of her married life and relationship, up until the point she finds out that he has desired to sleep with men the entire time (MacDonald 2015: 63).

> I told myself if I didn't move I could keep the shape of him forever, that when this version of him was gone, I could fill the shape up over and over, making a new him when the old one had to go and leave me. (MacDonald 2015: 76)

The final scene in the story, where the protagonist crawls into her husband's bed, sensing the closeness of his dying hour, potentially invites this cynical interpretation since the allusion to the 'shape' of her husband extends to the initial irony in the story. Namely, "The Moment Everything Changed" – the dinner when the protagonist learns about the terminality of her husband's illness,

and the hopelessness of his recovery – parallels the evening of his unintentional or 'irredeemable' (MacDonald 2015: 64) confession about his sexuality as the couple were smoking marijuana on their porch, recreating the beginning of their relationship, since sick as he was, he could actually "find room in his life for drugs" (MacDonald 2015: 62) again. The two moments, the dinner and the porch-confession, are never merged at the level of the protagonist's discourse, since, obviously, the bad news of cancer changed the dynamics of the relationship initially. However, the husband's confession opens the door for the protagonist's interrogation into the very nature of their relationship, if at certain points unconsciously. This 'shape' of her husband changes in the course of narrative progression, as the protagonist observes him – at the level of the physical, as he becomes weaker and "skeletal" (MacDonald 2015: 70), but also in terms of the essence of their relationship and his unique take on it. The confession actually triggers the second change in their relationship, but not in the way it would be expected.

> He saw my expression and let the joint fall out of his mouth. It landed on the shawl and sparked until we both frantically patted it out. Our hands met a few times, violent with slapping sounds. Once we'd beaten the joint into a stubbly mess, I took out a spare I'd rolled in case the first one suffered a premature death.
> […] "Repeat what you just said."
> "What did I just say?"
> "That you want to sleep with a man. Is that what you said? Did I hear you right?" (MacDonald 2015: 64)

Instead of a "violent" reaction to something that would shake the foundations of a heterosexual union legitimized in marriage, there is a surprising symbolic fire, "patted out" by hands who only produce "slapping sounds" until the conflict is reduced to a "stubbly mess". The protagonist, who notices that her husband's unanticipated statement, "I wouldn't mind getting laid" (MacDonald 2015: 63), "ended up being a natural transition to [him] telling [her] that he meant he wanted to sleep with a man" (MacDonald 2015: 63), realizes at that point that a completely different dimension of a person she loves has just opened itself up before her – "a kabuki shadow puppet play" (MacDonald 2015: 63) in which the convictions about the people playing behind those masks come to be revealed for what they are, "nothing like the images you had imagined" (MacDonald 2015: 63). In a show of what can only be described as unimaginable self-control and self-

abnegation, the wife decides that in the face of the realization that everything she had known has proven to be false – or at least not as it seemed entirely – she would "pick up the Lego blocks of reality and rebuild them in a manner [she] can live with" (MacDonald 2015: 63). This implicit understanding of her husband's unacknowledged and unvoiced aspect of personality prevents her from potentially causing the "premature death" of their relationship. The *joint* is brilliantly utilized at the semantic level of the story, and as the protagonist lights up the spare one, so does she present her husband with another dimension of her – a dimension, however, that becomes more complex as the narrative progresses towards his death.

> "So that's it, then," I said to him. "You want me to seek out a male partner who can be with you in ways I can't." (MacDonald 2015: 64)

The protagonist's husband, however, asks for no such thing, and disbelievingly finds himself in an actual situation where Alex, a perfectly random hair-model gay man Hattie knows, is invited for dinner, and his wife nudging him to flirt with the equally unsuspecting man who "didn't pick up a lot of the cues a person on a date would normally pick up on" (MacDonald 2015: 68) – in an unbelievable situation of inappropriate questions, allusions and observations, all backgrounded by her meticulous 'preemptive' preparation of the bedroom and decoration using candles and condoms "placed at convenient locations throughout the room" (MacDonald 2015: 67).

> "I was just thinking," I said, engaging in damage control by leading them to the kitchen, "that you two could talk. It's my understanding that you've been out of the closet for a long time. My husband here could probably use a few pointers." (MacDonald 2015: 67)

It is this unique orchestration of a date-night for her husband, since "[pardon] me for thinking that the rest of the world would find you as pretty as I find you" (MacDonald 2015: 69), the protagonist finds herself not only preparing dinner, shaving her husband, but also asking the date-guest, Alex, about his preference in pornography, encouraging her husband to compliment his date – twice, without success, but also concerned about leaving the man alone in the kitchen suspecting "he might steal the nice forks and knives [her] grandmother left [her] when she died" (MacDonald 2015: 68). This stranger in their home, in the kitchen, waiting for the visibly awkward couple's consultation in the washroom to be over, oscillates between being a threat to the protagonist and the potential perfect man for a one-night stand for her husband. The irony of the gay-man-hunt

endeavor, the almost mindless preparations and the gracelessly assertive behavior in the conversation, all lead the protagonist to an unconscious realization of the bizarreness in her behavior when she understands that she has a stranger in her kitchen – a stranger who she thought she would have sleep with her husband since he has cancer, and "[if] that's not grounds for getting something you want, I don't know what is" (MacDonald 2015: 69). There is also, already, the fluttering of the idea that the entire process of her caring for her husband, albeit her *defective* uterus, she behaves like an overly assertive liberal mother. The protagonist, however, refrains from allowing for the absurdity of the idea to reach her consciousness. In contrast, her husband is the one who is fully aware of the turmoil hiding behind the superficial image of the woman on a mission.

> Since the awkward dinner with Alex, I tried to set up one more date, this time with a nice, clearly homosexual man I met at the grocery store. But the man had a boyfriend, and besides, my husband said he wasn't thinking about screwing men. Jokingly, he said that he wanted to keep his soul pure so that he could gain access to the kingdom of heaven. (MacDonald 2015: 71)

Almost desperately, the protagonist's husband is trying to both allow his wife to cope with his impending death by participating in her project, and the harmless banter that would create the atmosphere of normalcy between the two of them. However, despite his illness being 'the moment of change' for the both of them individually, and as a couple, his process of coming to terms with the finality of his life seems to make him more aware of what is taking place inside the protagonist's mind.

There being no secrets between the two of them, and his homosexuality being the only apparent one that needed to be revealed, the couple's relationship transforms in such a manner that the protagonist both consciously and unconsciously, and gradually, changes the form of her love towards her husband. It becomes something more attuned to caring and unconditional affection, rather than romantic expectation. In contrast, understanding the extent of her sacrifice towards him – the weight of his confession and her subsequent, seemingly detached acceptance of the new circumstance on top of the 'terminal' circumstance he has guiltlessly brought upon their marriage – the husband makes attempts at redeeming himself by continuing to play the role of his 'old' self,

his heterosexual version who refuses to seek anyone outside their marriage. The sanctity of their union, in fact, remains intact despite his confession, and the protagonist's efforts to validate it, and all out of love.

> "It's too bad he wasn't looking for another woman." She swallowed the spinach leaf and pursed her eyebrows. "Sorry. I'm a shit."
> "No arguments here." (MacDonald 2015: 71)

In her conversation with the only ally in her pursuit of the perfect man for her husband, the protagonist finds herself in yet another situation in which her marriage and relationship with her husband are being observed from a traditional or conventional point of view. Whether Hattie's supportive comment is to suggest that the bucket-list wish would have been easier to grant had the protagonist's husband's wish been more conventional, or if she is hypothetically offering her own assistance in the matter, meets crystal clear opposition from the protagonist. Her rationale, however skewed by the traumatic realization of his terminal state, and the subsequent understanding that her entire marriage might be founded on something that had nothing to do with romantic heterosexual love, involves a subjective rationalization that Hattie's internalized heteronormative, however generous in terms of friendship, cannot grasp:

> What kind of man should my husband sleep with? I thought of me, but as a man, and realized maybe that was the point, that he wanted a "not me." Which in some lights, might seem horrible. In the light I chose, it meant that his attraction to men could only be an inversion of his attraction, or lack thereof, to me, such that in loving men, according to some curious physics, he was also loving me. (MacDonald 2015: 66)

This rationale behind the protagonist's 'decision' that she is loved by her husband does not come without previous effort. In making herself more manly, halting her grooming routine and acquiring a wig that would make her look like "one of the Beatles" (MacDonald 2015: 66), she goes through her own process of understanding that she cannot be 'crushed' by her husband's desire for men precisely because she still is the woman he loves, even if his homosexual preferences limit the scope of their romantic life. In fact, it is this realization that enables her to understand the background of Hattie's implication, and reject the mere need for that sort of conventionality. Ironically, of course, her husband desiring another woman, a woman that is not *her*, as implied by

Hattie, would be more painful as it would suggest that there is something wrong with the protagonist – as a woman, as a person or other. In their context, desiring men is proportional to apples and oranges, and she finds it less hurtful that she would if the situation were more ‘traditional’. Apples and oranges explicate the “curious physics” behind her acceptance of the transformation of the relationship that follows her husband’s ‘irredeemable’ confession.

> Most people said very bad things to me about the status of our marriage. These were the kinds of people who exchanged crystal swans and called it love, while simultaneously thinking up elaborate ways to inflict harm on one another. My mother believed in traditional marriage norms, even when one-half of the marriage was dying of cancer, as my husband was. (MacDonald 2015: 66)

The protagonist’s retrospective discernment of their sexual life as “subpar” (MacDonald 2015) due to their inability to have children because of her uterus, “the warped shape of one of Dali’s clocks[50]” (MacDonald 2015: 65) echoes her mother’s arrogant statement that “a man could smell when a woman couldn’t give birth” (MacDonald 2015: 69). The protagonist is ironically liberated from the nagging earworm of her mother’s beliefs and opinions on motherhood and relationships by the very insight into her husband’s disinterest in women, and therefore in her. What she has internalized as guilt for the unfulfilling sexual life, and therefore something faulty with her womanhood and the potential of motherhood, becomes exonerated by her husband’s confession of his own *defectiveness* in their relationship. Figuratively speaking, a “defective woman” (MacDonald 2015: 70) is matched with a gay man, creating a relationship that ironically stands the test of loyalty and friendship, as well as love of an unconventional kind.

[50] The particular mention of Salvador Dali evokes the biographical elements of his own unconventional love life – the turbulent marriage with the controversial Gala Dali. Prior to the marriage with the famous surrealist, Gala’s marriage with Paul Éluard supposedly involved an *open-concept* of exclusivity. In numerous contradicting and inconclusive accounts on her personality and character, Gala Dali’s descriptions range from a monster and a manipulator, to a muse and artist. Even though the personal and artistic history of this particular couple potentially has very little to do with the story, it is the unconventional nature of their relationship that resounds in the protagonist’s understanding of there being something different about her perception of love, against the traditional narratives. Additionally, this subtle intertextual interjection achieves that postmodern import of topicality that raises more questions than it answers. The protagonist’s uterus may bear the shape of a surreal clock, but her sensibility resonates more with Éluard who, supposedly, even introduced his wife, Gala, to sexual partners during their marriage, including Salvador Dali, who she would marry. (Pound, Cath. “Gala Dalí: Monster, muse – or misrepresented?” *BBC Culture*. https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20180822-gala-dal-monster-muse-or-misrepresented. Accessed 30 May 2020.)

> As usual, the signs were there. Before digging her own grave, our spaniel seemed unusually calm. Everything she did felt premeditated. On my way out, my husband slapped my ass and told me he loved me. (MacDonald 2015: 74)

In the same manner as the protagonist retrospectively and cynically surmises that she "might have known" as "[there] were signs" (MacDonald 2015: 64), she reflects on the faithful morning when she left her husband home to go to work. The manner in which MacDonald uses irony directly relates the protagonist's unknowing in both cases, and the respective shock that remains concealed in the irony of the contrast – in the tension of the lighthearted, though slightly sarcastic and snappy remark that, indeed, she did not know that she was marrying a gay man since that would have prevented her from doing so; and, on the other hand, that she did not make the connection between her dog dying and her husband falling on the front porch, being taken to hospital only to curl up in that bed and die. The parallels only acquire ironic meaning because there was guiltless ignorance in these situations;

> When I was eight, our spaniel dug a hole for herself under the house and burrowed there. We found her later that week, serene in her little grave. Apparently elephants do that too. Apparently, so do husbands. (MacDonald 2015: 73)

The semantic level of the observation, and the insistence on "apparently" intensifies the irony in the "as usual," as quoted above. The protagonist's relentless search for the perfect man for her husband, 'apparently', renders her blind to the signs that were all around her, infusing her with a dose of guilt at failing to notice or feel that something massively wrong was happening as she was being "assaulted" with the "tasteless punchline" of her boss, Vargo, as the neighbor was calling the ambulance. This guilt is not directly voiced, merely subtly related in the conclusion that "somewhere on the coast of Brazil, a butterfly flapping its wings had caused this" (MacDonald 2015: 75). Ironically, the protagonist's desperate need for an explanation of the causality that evolved into that particular chain of events – initially inwardly and then outwardly – is disguised, unconsciously, yet so spontaneously and physiologically, by her obsession with the perfect man for her husband:

> In times of crisis, your nervous system dilates your pupils, raises your blood pressure, increases your heart rate, parts of your brain shut off, and you can only comprehend survival. (MacDonald 2015: 76)

The physiological changes along with this, almost organic, obsession intensify in the repetition of the word coming from the narrator herself – 'her husband', and the emphasis on the 'wife' – and the matter of the husband's survival is equaled to the survival of the marriage, and herself – the other-half.

> It was a simple equation: if I could do this thing, find this man, I could negate so many other things. The word *cancer* didn't even occur to me as I tried to find the perfect man for my husband. (MacDonald 2015: 76)

On the one hand, the "simple equation" that formulates in the protagonist's mind is a completely irrational idea – one that remains unapproved by the husband even if it directly pertains to his desire, that one wish he blurted out, intoxicated and already weak, but one that he never sought to fulfil himself, at least during the course of their marriage. Much like, ironically, the husband 'shuts off' a part of himself that pertains to the unconventional and non-traditional, conceding to a heterosexual lifestyle and creating a union with the protagonist as a mode of *survival*, so does the protagonist 'shut off' the entirety of the perceivable loss of her husband in order to cope. Additionally, MacDonald ironically arranges the husband's frustrated attempts at reviving their sexual intimacy (MacDonald 2015: 73) with the protagonist's preparing food for him. On the morning that he is taken to hospital by the ambulance while she is at work, the protagonist "brought his breakfast into the living room on a tray" (MacDonald 2015: 73), however, during the entire course of his illness:

> Without him knowing, I'd been keeping a diary of his food and fluid intake and found that in the last three days he'd consumed the equivalent of a two-inch cube of cheese, three thumbs of orange juice, and a soggy bowl of cereal. (MacDonald 2015: 71)

The protagonist's display of love that so visibly takes over the narrative in the mindboggling selflessness of looking for a lover for her husband, overshadows the actual love that she provides for the dying man. Along with refusing to go to work even if it means being fired (MacDonald

2015: 70), and buying the “highest quality marijuana [she] could find” (MacDonald 2015: 62) from a college student dealer, trying to clumsily make herself more manly for her gay husband and obviously going against the entire traditional community, the protagonist, in fact, transfers that ironically described motherly, ‘warped-shape-of-Dali’s-clock-uterus’, instinct onto him.

It is in this massive and messy display of love that irony rhetorically undermines the traditional or conventional idea of what love, romantic love or marriage can be. This story contrasts a subjective experience to the plethora of traditional narratives about marriage, and the Dali-allusion of the protagonist’s uterus shape reveals an additional dimension – a story of singular and eccentric, but pure and tragic love, not because of the husband’s abstinence from intercourse with men, but for the vulnerability and openness that invite a transformation beyond the conventionality of the concept – of love, romance, marriage, friendship. It is for this reason that the plausibility of the story might be cynically brought into question since it claims that ego can be defeated to the extent of unconditional love. Perhaps the nature of the metafictional in MacDonald’s story addresses this problem early on, in the “Cancer Dinner” scene when the protagonist throws a fistful of bread at her husband in a powerless outburst of disbelief, devastation and sadness at the hopeless situation:

> The bread ball bounced into his glass of water. We both looked at it sadly as the water molecules slowly pulled it apart, the bread falling open like a strange underwater flower you needed grief to discover. (MacDonald 2015: 62)

It is perhaps the grief in the face of hopelessness that, ironically, allows for the sort of selfless transformation that brings liberation from the convention and normative, and at the same time, the extent of unconditional, ambiguous, fluid and unrestricted love, even if only for a time.

Dangling Jesus in K’ari Fisher’s “Mercy Beatrice Wrestles the Noose”

K’ari Fisher’s “Mercy Beatrice Wrestles the Noose” was first published in *Malahat* in 2014, and made its way into the selection of short stories in *The Journey Prize Stories* in 2015. This award-winning story features Mercy Beatrice, a girl doing her best to persevere through the ‘sinkhole’ moments – noose figuratively around her neck, her chain-smoking ghost-mother, her newly-found father and the boy he has brought up, Pauley – all four of them in the hold of the world of wrestling

in their own ways. For Mercy, who lost her mother and suffered the “arthritic charity” (Fisher 2015: 16) in the orphanage she escapes, finding her father seems like an opportunity for a new life. Things, however, take a potentially dangerous turn for the girl when Blumenkranz, her father’s former manager, sets her up to duel against Paula Pocahontas, a “barn-gladiator” (Fisher 2015: 26), and when in the course of losing the wrestling match, she realizes that it “will be nothing but a series of drop kicks and heart punches, and try as I might I will walk into a fist, probably over and over” (Fisher 2015: 28).

This narrative involves a ghost of the protagonist’s dead mother – a somewhat terrifying character not because of her spectral form, but because of the almost satirical description of her living-person. The narrative-*here*, located in “Bodie, British Columbia” (Fisher 2015: 14), now a junkyard decorated by something that might be loosely interpreted as a dangling Jesus installation, or one looking “more like Abdullah the Turk” (Fisher 2015: 20) – the curious expression of Mercy’s father’s artistic taste – merges with the narrative-*there*, in the episodic descriptions of Mercy’s life with her mother, though spatially identified as somewhere in Chicago and the orphanage, otherwise undefined, but still providing contrast between the urban setting and Bodin, a place she grows to like. And finally, the narrative provides the link between these two spatial and temporal dimensions through the protagonist’s experience of her mother’s ghost as a bridge between these seemingly different worlds, but ironically, worlds in which the noose around Mercy Beatrice’s neck does not seem to loosen. More precisely, as the mother’s ghost and the protagonist merge in a dramatic culmination of the wrestling match, the irony behind the ghost’s misinterpreted presence becomes evident in a heartwarming reversal. In addition, in this narrative, ironic representation also works at the level of character description – in the cases of Mercy’s mother and her ghost, and the father. But to digress to the father’s surreal installation of the *dangling Jesus*, in the eyes of the boy he raises, it comes as the ultimate irony of Mercy’s misfortune, that what the orphan boy sees as the *savior*, she sees as “Abdullah the Turk” (Fisher 2015: 20). Aside from any racist, racial or ethnic stereotyping, the mere idea that the boy sees a positive figure where the girl sees something quite *foreign* and potentially threatening, reveals her unconscious knowing, throughout the narrative, that coming to the junkyard was a mistake. This particular reflection on her father’s *art* proves to be true when he leaves her *hanging* in the ring.

Mercy Beatrice's story opens with a description of the ghost of her mother, "hanging around [her] all evening" (Fisher 2015: 14), a cigarette "[hanging] endlessly from her lips" (Fisher 2015: 14) – a detail that would prove persistent in the frequent sightings of her mother, but also for the very end of the story. In fact, the smoking habit, a substantial part of her mother's personality when she was alive, continues well into the afterlife as, Mercy notices, "[she] sucks on it pathologically" (Fisher 2015: 14) – on the cigarette that never seems to burn to its end. When the mother's ghost first appears, the protagonist has already, as inferred, broken a promise or transgressed her mother's request not to look for her father, and "stay away from this place" (Fisher 2015: 14) – the place being Bodie, a former "self-sufficient whistle-stop along the Canadian Pacific Railway during the lure of Gold Mountain" (Fisher 2015: 14), but now, a junkyard – the owner of the place that "operates off scrap brought in on the train" (Fisher 2015: 14) being her father. The place that her mother's ghost warns her about, is marked by a "cross-like gold mining derrick" (Fisher 2015: 19) onto which Mercy's father projected his artistic inspiration in the form of scrap junk lifted and suspended to dangle on the crane. Incidentally, "the yard is the only place for miles with electricity" (Fisher 2015: 19), and behind it, there is "a forest with sunny patches of billowing trees and bushes of ripe berries" (Fisher 2015: 20) – a sight that is perhaps incongruous with the sensibility of the junkyard, but one that nevertheless allows Mercy a sight different than that in Chicago, "a graveyard of dead trees, with stuff bubbling at the top" (Fisher 2015: 20) – the view from "our old airtight apartment behind the meat-packing plant" (Fisher 2015: 21). As Mercy contrasts the stifling city air, and the "pine perfume" (Fisher 2015: 21), she implicitly also contrasts the experiences with her parents, respectively. It might, however, be noted at this point that it could be that Mercy reaches a certain level of maturity only at the very closure of the narrative, which would, in retrospect cast doubt on certain dimensions of her narration.

> Her voice comes from a bottomless pit, and there's a warning in it, like she's asking for some sort of repentance, but I don't know what for. What does she expect me to do? Air-grip her legs and squirt tears of supplication out of my eyes? She's on repeat: Why are you *here*? I told you to stay away from *this place*… over and over. (Fisher 2015: 15)

"Ghost-mom," an "amazingly accurate" (Fisher 2015: 15) specter, or projection if one is less prone to *suspend their disbelief* in the gothic aspects of the story, in spite of her "fog-body" (Fisher 2015: 15) – the misty and obscure texture of her appearance – retains the details of her living form: "the

wiry dark hairs on her forearms, the muscular face, and the thin lipless dash of her mouth" (Fisher 2015: 15). A woman of "savage temperament" (Fisher 2015: 19), according to Mercy's father, had a "small compact body" (Fisher 2015: 19), but still, one that sported a "professional wrestling costume" (Fisher 2015: 15) in the afterlife, "blue tights and a flowing shirt with a wide red belt cinched around her diaphragm where her breasts should be" (Fisher 2015: 15). Had it not been for the constant presence of the cigarette, and the aggressive Bible-assaults, Mercy's rendition of her mother's living image onto the ghost would reveal a superhero figure, "The Polish Poo-Bah" (Fisher 2015: 15). And yet, with a "carefully embroidered gold crucifix" on her cape and a "stiff collar [rising] behind her head like an old carapace" (Fisher 2015: 15), for Mercy, she seems to well be that 'bully', "trailing [her] the entire time, puffing through the trees and picking up speed like a steam engine" (Fisher 2015: 23) – a religious fanatic whose interpretation of the Bible, as well as its literal use as a physical object, seem to have left Mercy with bitter memories.

> My mother's ghost is a bit like the ones in those Biblical bully-fests she used to read me at bedtime. (Fisher 2015: 15)

Her Polish mother's wrestling career, as well as her contradictory unhealthy lifestyle, curiously integrate God, angels and Biblical characters, as Mercy remembers her mother telling her stories about "Jacob staying up all night to wrestle the angel" (Fisher 2015: 25) with the only desire of his being a confirmation that everything would be alright. In retrospect, for Mercy, there is only some nostalgia to the memory, and she remembers this story as she comes into an uninvited conflict with her father's adopted son, or whatever other title Pauley seems to have acquired over time, or himself desired. The particular moment in which Mercy is alone in a room that smells much like "Blumenkranz's halitosis" (Fisher 2015: 24), pinned to the wall, teeth dusty, after attempting to show affection to Pauley, it is her mother's story that she turns to for relief or comfort, however troubling, or creative one might find her mother's take on the Biblical stories. Wrestling was her life, but she also "did everything with a purpose that reeked of faith" (Fisher 2015: 24). There is a bizarreness to this observation that, indeed, seems accurate. On the one hand, her mother's bedtime stories, the "bully-fest", provide both comfort and discomfort, and conflicting emotion that Mercy attempts to rationalize in her objectivity. On the other hand, her mother's preferred mode of punishment, forcing Mercy to hold out a Bible in front of her – as if to literally feel the weight of faith by feeling the tension in the arm and shoulder muscles – then

"[slapping] at it with her calloused palm so I'd almost drop it" (Fisher 2015: 24), is a lesson in faith, love and sacrifice. Mercy remembers her mother's ability to constantly remind her of all the "sacrifices" (Fisher 2015: 24) made for her benefit, in her name. Her superhero, wrestler, proud owner of a four-thousand-extra-Polish verse (Fisher 2015: 24) Bible mother, always with a cigarette in her mouth, dies of TB (Fisher 2015: 16), ironically. This particular irony would be extended through the account of her father's surviving a jump with a noose around his neck, and his supposed daily intake of brandy and strychnine – a poison once used to enhance endurance, but lethal and detrimental to health nevertheless. On the one hand, the entire satirical account of this cape-wearing guilt-inducing hero-mother struggling against poverty, holding on to her faith and bullying her daughter into the same desperate clenching for the imaginary, becomes figuratively projected onto Mercy, as Mercy not only sees her late mother everywhere – her own version and understanding of God and faith, being, after all, a child who is left all alone and sent off to an orphanage where she feels confined in "its endless laundry chain" with nuns dispensing "arthritic charity" (Fisher 2015: 16):

> Even Mom in her last days of fighting TB was more chipper than Sister Patricia. (Fisher 2015: 16)

It is only when Mercy is in the wrestling ring, Paula Pocahontas already mid-attack, the woman who appears like a giant in comparison to her own size, that she notices, aside from her "heart's hammering" (Fisher 2015: 27):

> Ghost-Mom throws her *fer shit sake stick* on the floor, flows right through Pocahontas and like water down the drain, twirls down my throat, legs kicking. I feel the back of my neck rise, an old carapace lifting plates of fossilized armour. (Fisher 2015: 27)

The gothic scene culminates in her mother's ghost merging, but not in an act of possession, but reinforcement – like "fossilized armour" of faith and love – with Mercy, who can now hear the crowd again, and not only her own heart beating. It is also at that moment that she receives the first punch, "the sound of fist on bone so much louder inside my own body than hearing one land long ago" (Fisher 2015: 28), nothing like the one she could hear while waiting for her mother to finish the match, in the dressing room. In this open-ended closure of the story, she fails to find her father:

> I search the crowd for my father but he's gone, I can't see the living for the dead. (Fisher 2015: 28)

Mercy Beatrice's father, is a man she only thought looked like "an Adonis" (Fisher 2015: 16) according to his old trading card, salvaged from the garbage. The subtle irony linking Mercy's junkyard-father and the garbage is established quickly, but his curious description of the *before*, the trading card information Mercy bases her image of him on; and the *after*, of actually meeting him and observing him for the traits she would have expected, together satirize "one of the world's most feared heavy-weights" (Fisher 2015: 16). The trading card describes a man of above average height, "140 consecutive wins; 350 pounds" and includes "an anecdote describing how he once jumped off a balcony with a noose tied around his neck while he whistled 'Yankee Doodle' – and lived due to the impressive strength of his 22-inch neck" (Fisher 2015: 16). The noose that first appears in the title of the story begins to accrue more sense as the anecdote of her father's mindless exhibition becomes known. Her mother, a former-wrestler chain-smoker dying of TB, and her father's jumping from a balcony with a noose around his neck to perform for "men in lapels" (Fisher 2015: 18) who placed bets on his and other wrestler's and entertainers' lives as if a human circus is somehow acceptable if it is under the guise of sports, although sufficiently satirical and comical, reveal a disturbing pattern of poverty and degradation. At the same, these two people, Mercy's parents, diverge not only in terms of their life choices, but also their reasoning pertaining to the lifestyle they became involved in.

Whereas it is inferred that it is Mercy's mother's fear that gets her through surviving the matches – her version of wrestling with the angel only to be told that everything would be fine – and that the woman dreaded the idea that Mercy could follow in her footsteps, and therefore "never taught [her] the trade" (Fisher 2015: 18), Mercy's father sees wrestling as "more than carnival entertainment, or even good versus evil" (Fisher 2015). In other words, for him, it is "a high degree of physical development" that "can lead to a real pleasure in the mere act of living" (Fisher 2015: 19) – an ironic statement considering his testing the limits not of physical strength, but his chances of dying. There is a profoundly ironic disregard for life with this man who never even questions his old manager's advice to take brandy and strychnine as "prescription for broken collarbones and bent knuckles" (Fisher 2015: 17). But then, as Mercy realizes, "[he] appears to be completely

blind to the spectacle of his own strength; the tricks and shows of grandeur he submits Pauley and me to on a regular basis" (Fisher 2015: 19).

When Mercy first sees her father, her expectations of the Adonis on the trading card are dispelled as she finds herself greeting a "pink-jowled and hog-necked" man, "[looking] at [her] through milky eyes, perplexed, his forehead wrinkles lapping the shore of his balding head" (Fisher 2015: 17). In other words, her god-like father image turns out to remind her more of "old Mr. Armchair Antoni from the front lobby of our last apartment" (Fisher 2015: 17) with the distinct smell that one may assume was not of a particularly fragrant note. Moreover, their first encounter after so many years, entices this old man to "reach down and grab a 200-pound yard sow snuffling around his feet like a puppy, and then, in some sort of potential display of mentorship, jack it over his head" (Fisher 2015: 18). The implied 'mentorship' must have been Mercy's afterthought, since that is exactly what her father establishes as their relationship. In fact, his nurturing nature seems to be expressed only with the stock he keeps, "checking his precious pigs for drooling ear, snot balls, and hoof sunburn" (Fisher 2015: 18), as a matter of routine, much like practicing wrestling becomes the routine of his, now, two children, Mercy and Pauley

Of course, the Wrestler raises Pauley, a newborn abandoned "on the hood of a gutted Model A" (Fisher 2015: 19), in the midst of the display of "rusted carcasses in the junkyard" (Fisher 2015: 15), and his take on why Pauley was left there, somehow humanizes him – in an attempt to probably provide comfort for the boy's abandonment, he figures that it was the "cross-like gold-mining derrick" (Fisher 2015: 19) that gave his parents the impression that the junkyard was a church[51]. With the same propensity for believing what is convenient, or less painful, the child he raises, would interpret the dangling "dazzling masterpiece" of "a hubcap with a face-like rust" (Fisher 2015: 20) as "[looking] a bit like a bearded Jesus" (Fisher 2015: 20). Ironically, the boy's jealousy at Mercy's being picked to go into the ring when he is the one who truly desires to be like their father, and his subsequent sulking, turn out to save him from the punches Mercy would, at least once, endure in the ring. After all, "wrestling might be in [her] blood" (Fisher 2015: 19), and she sparks her father's special interest for that very reason.

[51] Mercy's mother's obsession with the Bible, and the Crucifix, and her father's projecting the image of it onto the derrick, and Pauley's subsequent interpretation of it as the *dangling Jesus*, all separate her from the wrestling-enthusiastic lot. Somehow, Mercy Beatrice does not fit in with the narratives the other characters are willing to live by, although she does try hard.

> "Your dad says your mom thought her shit smelled like roses," he said, sitting up. His voice is tough, but it's hard not to notice there is envy in it too. […] I just haven't gotten to explaining to him that I already know all about my mom, that it's impossible to be with someone your entire life and not be cognizant of every tiny thing… (Fisher 2015: 23)

Mercy's perception and understanding of her parents, especially from the focalizing point of probably an older-self narrator, reveal also a profound need for security –with her mother gone, at least one at the junkyard where the wind "starts my father's Jesus rocking against its chains like it's trying to get bucked off" (Fisher 2015: 21) – a scene evocative of her father jumping from a building with the noose around his neck. Figuratively speaking, the rocking Jesus and her mother's embroidered crucifix provide the perfect explanation for why she would be seeing ghosts in the first place. Her mother's anxiety and over-controlling nature, as opposed to her father's erratic behavior (Fisher 2015: 18) seem to be observations of someone who has already created a distance from the events, at least temporal. And from that distance, Mercy can see when it was that she experienced her two 'sinkhole' moments:

> I get the feeling that there aren't many moments in life where what you think is going to happen works out exactly like how you'd plan it. That by the time you comprehend the sinkhole reality of it, it's generally too late. (Fisher 2015: 17)

The situational irony of the moment when Mercy sees her father, a pink-jowled old man whose bursting physique and knots on suspenders suggest not only a contrast to the image of Adonis, but something oddly forewarning, results in her "eye twitching wildly under the weight of his stare" (Fisher 2015: 17). The girl might have even experienced fear, and not only "the sheer disappointment" (Fisher 2015: 17) written all over her face. As he displays his strength in lifting the 200-pound sow over his head and mentions that the pig was raised by him – a display, then, of fatherly prowess – and confuses her to the point of staying, it is only in retrospect that Mercy can say that "there's that devastating moment when you see that you may have based a choice on shaky foundations" (Fisher 2015: 18). Witnessing her father almost wrestle the sow that he nurtured since it was merely a piglet, and joining the routine of his and Pauley's life – or rather, becoming a crucial cog in the wheel of his now mentored wrestling duo, Mercy, the narrating protagonist, almost carelessly remembers how her mother "rarely let [her] watch her wrestle" (Fisher 2015:

18), and how she would comment on her “rich fantasy life” (Fisher 2015: 18) as the girl would play in her dressing room – in her own “made-put ring in spangled outfit with knee-high slipper boots” (Fisher 2015: 18). Of course, the noose is around Mercy’s neck the moment she runs away from the orphanage, and her struggle to survive and find a truly safe place for herself with her father, however ‘fantastic’ the notion of it might be under her circumstance – provides little comic relief in the story.

The second sinkhole moment, however, triggered by the appearance of a man “outrageously glamourous… [dressed] like an opera singer” (Fisher 2015: 25), the strychnine-prescribing former manager of Mercy’s father, Blumenkranz, tightens Mercy’s noose and leads her into an actual wrestling ring. As this satirical rendition of a swindler appears to create a “sparkle” (Fisher 2015: 26) in her father’s eyes – a mutual understanding that there is future in wrestling, “[about] halfway through the night they start hatching a tag-team father-daughter duo” (Fisher 2015: 26), and Mercy is targeted by Blumenkranz as the next money-making body, probably enthused by the memory of her father’s daredevil and fearless muscle shows. From her mother’s stories, Mercy is also familiar with Blumenkranz’s coming to the US from Europe – a story of survival – but also some sort of charlatan success, advertising a Russian wrestler as an ogre, “THE UGLIEST WRESTLER IN THE WORLD” (Fisher 2015: 24), suggesting a sensationalist style and a drive for making profit, which Mercy will also find, applies to her.

This faithful night, ominous as the gloves of Blumenkranz remind Mercy of songbirds she watched “drop dead after running into the fresh scrubbed windowpanes at Old Ursine” (Fisher 2015: 26), proves to be the second mistake, or second forced decision since, the protagonist realizes, “even though I can see the noose, the possibility of a noose and the shaky foundation, it doesn’t help” (Fisher 2015: 27). When Mercy catches the sight of Pauley, sitting on tracks at the Smeltersite Pub, jealously watching her enter the ring, “with this look that [she recognized] from [her] final days at the orphanage” (Fisher 2015: 27), disappointed at not being chosen by her father, and “[having] nowhere to run to” (Fisher 2015: 27), Mercy reveals her awareness of the entire situation. She acknowledges that her accepting to wrestle Paula Pocahontas was nothing more than her way of indulging the whim of a reckless old man, seduced by Blumenkranz’s enthusiasm to the point of complete selfishness and irresponsibility: “I look at my father, he’s wildly reminiscing, torturing his chair” (Fisher 2015: 26).

In her defeat in the ring, Mercy Beatrice could win her freedom from the world of punches by disappointing, ironically, the only person she wanted to impress or become closer to. In the 'fossilized armor' provided by her mother's unexpected appearance in the ring, and her flicking the cigarette for the first time in her life, even if in the form of a ghost, Mercy is supported only by the person who is no longer living. The moment in the ring, when the punches start to fly, provide insight into the origin of her mother's version of the Jacob story, and in those moments, comforted only by this imaginary presence, she potentially receives the message "that it was okay, that everything was going to be all right" (Fisher 2015: 25) – from an unlikely angel.

In *Postmodern Approaches to the Short Story* (2003), Farhat Iftekharrudin, Joseph Boyden, Joseph Longo and Mary Rohrberger, the editors of the volume, argue that minimalism in the short story is sometimes referred to as "dirty realism" in which:

> [subject] matter is usually limited to people of the lower- or lower-middle socioeconomic class where standards of living contribute to an overabundance of trailer parks, unkempt neighborhoods, polyester clothes, as well as leisure activities that stereotypically denote the under or unemployed: frequent drinking, gaming, fighting, boredom, and so forth. (xi)

Contemporary Canadian short fiction does, in fact, explore the dimensions of this, interestingly labeled, sub-genre or form even though this selection of short stories does not include any other that could particularly be classified as such. In "Mercy Beatrice Wrestles the Noose," the motif of poverty and impoverishment figures throughout the characters' descriptions – from the father's absurd performance of jumping with a noose around his neck, the setting that is the junkyard – a space imbued with symbolic power, the noose in the very title of the story guiding the interpretation, the satirical descriptions of the absurd extravagance of the former manager – a man dressed like an opera singer in a junkyard dwelling, etc.

However, Fisher's "Mercy Beatrice Wrestles the Noose" reveals even more genre fluidity with its featuring a spectral character – the ghost of the mother, and interestingly, in *Women's Gothic Fiction: Carnival, Hauntings and Vampire Kisses* (2016), Gina Wisker, exploring contemporary fiction, poses the question of why "contemporary women write the Gothic" (1). Additionally, she relates this question of genre-specifics to the "feminist perspectives and critiques" (Wisker 2016: 1), and sees the genre modality as a form of "relentless questioning, [and exposing] dis-ease and

discomfort, sometimes only to reinforce the complacencies it disrupts, but more thrillingly, very often leaving writers and readers more aware and less comfortable" (Wisker 2016: 1). Indeed, in Fisher's story, the protagonist's retrospection of the 'sinkhole moments' or the moments in which her personal choices, guided by fear, uncertainty, desire for protection and affection, cause unease due to the realization of the initially unperceived tension in the focalizing voices – that of the protagonist's perspective as a child, and that of the protagonist's perspective after her childhood is apparently over, being defeated in the ring by a black-haired giant of a woman with her father nowhere to be seen, and her mother's ghost the only source of fortitude. Wisker suggests that "[the] Gothic undercuts and destabilizes single readings, as it does its own conventions" (2016: 2), and additionally, it not only brings into question the relationship between the real and the imaginary – the fictional yet narrative-real ghost, in this case, but also the dynamics of the veracity or fixedness of the entire narrative world. The setting of "Mercy Beatrice Wrestles the Noose" works to de-layer or dually focalize the perceptions about the narrative world at the level of narration, as discussed already. The junkyard, Mercy's father's beloved pigs, and the dark chambers, frequented both by her and Pauley, potentially related to the orphanage, provide a stark contrast to the space of the forest Mercy finds idyllic. However, the forest, of course, is merely a place of temporary value for it only figures in the story.

Fisher's "Mercy Beatrice Wrestles the Noose" shows the manner in which the genre-fluid short story interrogates its own formal conventions by blurring the focalizing perspective, but also thematically relates the mentioned "dirty realism" (Iftekharrudin et al. 2003: xi) with the conventions of the Gothic. With regard to that, as Wisker notes, this form, "shakes up and problematises tired ways of perceiving and expressing normality by disrupting the everyday world of residual compliance" (2016: 2), and in this story, the disruption and problematization of the narrative reality occurs at the level of focalization mainly, whereas the visibly gothic characters and characterization only complement it. Wisker notices that the Gothic essentially "disturbs, upsets, ironises and parodies our deeply held beliefs and our safe but constraining narratives of, among others, progress, identity, power, family, safety and love" (2016: 2). A potential critical perspective that the story also offers, being temporally located in the first half of the twentieth-century, may pertain precisely to what Wisker refers to. The focalizing subject, Mercy Beatrice, a child whose age remains undetermined, faces perturbations ranging from her mother's death to her father's shameful attempt at exploiting her compliant interest in his lifestyle. The title of this

chapter, hopefully humorously reflects on the story. However, it also emphasizes the somber dimensions gracefully, but inadequately, disguised by the protagonist-narrator who courageously endures her own "constrictive [narrative] of security, safety and collusion which society peddles" (Wisker 2016: 2), for the story of Mercy Beatrice is not only an exploration of loss, family values, parental affection, but also poverty and exploitation.

Darwin or Lose in Mahak Jain's "The Origin of Jaanvi"

"The Origin of Jaanvi," first published in *Joyland Magazine*, and subsequently selected for *The Journey Prize Stories* in 2016, tells the story of Dr. Santosh Mistry and his wife, Sapna, expecting the birth of their firstborn – an unplanned child, according to Santosh, but also a specifically powerful trigger for both his profound identity crisis, and his wife's religiosity. In contrast to many other stories selected for analysis, Mahak Jain's ironic representation works subtly and reveals itself gradually as the narrative progresses, until it reaches closure and its punchline, for the lack of a better term. Granted, the closure of "The Origin of Jaanvi" only raises suspicion, or rather, the manifold interpretations sparked by the final comment of the narrator and the protagonist, Santosh, place this narrative in a typically postmodern interrogative mode by which the story ends in the process of his contemplation, unresolved – or unsatisfactorily resolved, perhaps, but much like the narrator, Santosh, the thought behind Jain's narrative progression, just as it is the case with evolution, "didn't hinge on or care for romance" (Jain 2016: 98) or idealism.

Even though Jain does not place any particular emphasis on irony on the semantic level, there are two crucial points at which irony is exposed as a representational method – accumulated in the visible contrast between the two main characters, and especially in terms of their beliefs. Namely, the *origin* of Santosh's daughter is associated with Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, and the 'anomalous' character of her health, of the absence of the genetic mutation, ultimately associated with the father's foreshadowed absence from her life. More precisely, Jaanvi's origin comes into close association with her mother, who incidentally names her upon birth, and Santosh's unvoiced expectation that there would be something in his daughter that would make it possible for him to relate to her is failed as the newborn is genetically unaffected by his genetic participation. The irony ultimately reveals the oppositional forces between the protagonist and his wife – "an example

of successful advertising" (Jain 2016: 101), but a misrepresentation in reality; between science and religion, and by extension, rational belief, pragmatism and practicality against superstition and appearances; and tradition and individuality as conflicts playing out in the couple's marriage, but more specifically, within Santosh himself who finds it difficult to reconcile with the idea that he has married a woman who stands against everything that he has been trying to get away from – literally and figuratively – and the woman who ultimately has greater claim to the child, their daughter, since she names her, and since the baby, ironically, does not carry the same genetic condition, Thalassemia, "a sea of blood, or blood infected by the salt of the sea" (Jain 2016: 94). The protagonist's internal conflict, the inability to accept his origins and the mistakes in making certain choices, irrationally translate into a thought that "if Jaanvi had inherited [his] disease, the connection between [them] would have been stronger" (Jain 2016: 111), a somewhat disturbing idea exposing the contradictory nature of his own beliefs.

Originally from Delhi, Santosh moves to Canada to pursue his university education and settles in Ontario where he becomes a supervisor of a team of graduate and postgraduate students in a research center lab facility conducting experiments pertaining to "filial cannibalism" on "different varieties of teleost fish […] known to eat some of the eggs they fertilized, a form of population control" (Jain 2016: 97). Sapna, also a native of Delhi and a graduate of Queen's University in Canada, "which had a reputation as the biggest party school in Canada" (Jain 2016: 100), apparently presented herself as a very good match for the Mistry family, considering their criteria in choosing him a wife. Outwardly a couple matching each other's familial and educational backgrounds, Santosh and Sapna discover an unsupportable antipathy for the personality of the other. For Santosh, "it was hard to imagine her praying in her dorm room at Queen's" (Jain 2016: 100), and yet his wife insisted on installing "a small shrine in the kitchen" as "[she] said she was used to waking up to the smell of sandalwood and the music of religious song" (Jain 2016: 100), which Santosh tolerates, pragmatically. In fact, his relationship with Sapna, after a number of unsuccessful attempts to introduce her to his interests, or rather distract her from "the Bollywood 'masala' films she usually watched" (Jain 2016: 98), and get her acquainted with the topics that sparked his scientific interest or curiosity fail after a documentary on dolphin poaching and she "[becomes] resistant to attempts to get her to watch anything educational" (Jain 2016: 98). Santosh observes this as "an impasse" (Jain 2016: 98) – a barrier between the two of them that goes beyond sensibility or interest, almost a matter of *culture*.

Santosh's narrative opens as he is shopping in anticipation of the newborn, months ahead, but his anticipatory propensity suggesting an affection of the practical sort. Hands full of samples of "a quarter-slice of white bread spread with hazelnut chocolate, some coconut water, and a couple of cheeses" (Jain 2016: 92), the protagonist spots "a woman roasting coffee for sampling" (Jain 2016: 92), and noticing that the product was not ready for sampling, he is distracted by a pair of pajamas he would buy for Sapna. As he returns to the sampling desk, he observes "a crowd had formed" (Jain 2016: 93). Nevertheless, the protagonist "tried to reach for a sample, but it was impossible" (Jain 2016: 93). Even though he cannot see the face of the woman who has blocked his way to the counter, he notices that she is "passing the half-filled Styrofoam cups back to another Indian woman" (Jain 2016: 93), or rather, he recognizes their "heavy accent" and their "speaking Hindi to each other" (Jain 2016: 93), which in Santosh's mind creates the sense of an impending association, considering all of their skin color and ethnicity. And, of course, there is also the fact that "[the] quantity of cups passed back outnumbered the people the two women had with them" (Jain 2016: 93) – an observation that causes him to feel "embarrassed and angry and [feel] the need to apologize" (Jain 2016: 93), which is precisely what happens in the aftermath of attending a temple service with Sapna. The shame that overwhelms Santosh does not draw from the fact that the Indian woman was taking more than was appropriate, but from the realization that the server could associate *him* with the group apparently led by these women. With at least three samples in his hands, still he feels that the scene he witnesses is something that he is culturally detached from – "[the] impression it must have left on that woman – greedy Indians, selfish Indians, uncouth Indians" (Jain 2016: 93), is not something that he is able calmly process. On the other hand:

> At a store like Sabzi Mandi, in Bramton – Browntown, it was called – packed with goods imported from India and even more Indians, I could laugh at something like that, but the incident made me want to erase the color from my skin. (Jain 2016: 93)

A pattern that emerges in Dr. Santosh Mistry's narrative, and especially when it comes to his perception of his own culture in contrast to his Canadianness, suggests that even after he establishes his life, and achieves some sort of material and financial security, he still feels like a cultural impostor[52]. The extended irony will reveal that on holding his child, at the very closure of

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[52] The postmodern *rootless migrants* or *impostors*, characters like Santosh, Lee in "Conjugation," the boxer-beautician and his sister in "Mani Pedi," but also the veteran in "How the Grizzly Came to Hang in the Royal Oak Hotel" and,

the narrative, the same pattern would emerge – as profound doubt in his own qualities on the emotional level, or the inadequacy and the unsatisfactory nature of his rationalizations and scientific explanations as justifications for his being of a certain predisposition (scientific rather than religious), his skin color (bringing into question his Canadianness if the rudeness of his nationals activates insecurities), and ultimately his ability to bond with his child since he cannot even bond with his coworkers – the members of his team who never seem to invite him for lunch.

In *Narrating Citizenship and Belonging in Anglophone Canadian Literature* (2018), Katja Sarkowsky explores "[the] concept of diaspora […] [addressing] crucial questions of belonging and agency as well as identification, obligation, and community and the local and transnational spaces to which they relate within the multicultural city" (143), and she further raises the issue of how it is that "citizenship is to be understood – as status, institution, or practice" (143). Even though Sarkowsky emphasizes on the nature of citizenship – a relation of belonging – she also works through the modalities in which individuals group "in relation to citizenship" (143). Those modalities, as she notes, can reflect relations "as strangers, outsiders, or aliens" (143), and dr. Santosh Mistry's process reflects on all of these raised issues from a subjective viewpoint. On the one hand, the protagonist strongly rejects what seems to be a burdening cultural baggage of his Indian ethnicity, distancing himself from the diaspora by refusing to participate in the communal and religious practices. However, at the same time, this man's inability to formulate a different social identity only leaves him in the identity of the detached scientist. Intentionally indeterminate, the focalizing objectivity or reliability of the narrator – the protagonist himself – prevents the narrative to objectively read the Canadian response to his social inaptness. He is not ignored, but he remains un-included (rather than excluded) by his coworkers. In contrast, his wife, Sapna, sees no particular necessity to extend her identity in order to participate in the life outside of the diaspora, her identification and obligation remaining within the borders of the community she identifies with. Both characters, with regard to the question of belonging, the local and transnational spaces, remain isolated – dislocated. The couple's citizenship unquestionable, their practice of Canadianness remains a very personal matter – with Santosh, it is the extension of his

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to a lesser and varying extent, Jack in "Pest Control for Dummies™," Tova in "Split" and Maggie Vandermeer in Cullen's story, all exhibit a variation of the anxious sense of being dislocated and failure to discover within themselves a point of reference, a center, that would enable them to authentically connect with the culture that permeates their lives.

pragmatic, rational, professional identity, and with Sapne, it is merely a matter of the external circumstance she takes no part in. Symbolically, Santosh's disease stands as a remnant of his ethnic identity, something that he does not desire to erase or deny, but treat in a manner that is more 'Canadian' in his opinion – scientific.

After agreeing to visit Sapna's temple, but not before "[trying] to formulate the kind of calm, reasoned argument that could rid Sapna of the notions of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness that she had inherited from her mother" (Jain 2016: 100) while attempting also to come across as "sympathetic" (Jain 2016: 100) – a quality in him that his wife is dubious about, Santosh realizes that not only is the group at the temple regularly informed about the potential genetic disorder Sapna dreads her husband has transferred to the baby, but worse – upon his inspection of the temple, the protagonist recognizes the face of a man whose name he cannot remember, but a man who works at the same university (Jain 2016: 102). The realization that there is a witness to his 'blunder', to his betrayal of the scientific skepticism and the repudiation of religion – of his Canadianness – plunges him into a mood that would cause him to be cruel to his wife, verbally, but also elaborately prepare a defense for the potential attacks on his "scientific integrity" (Jain 2016: 107) – Canadianness, as opposed to being a typical temple-going Indian. It does not come to the protagonist's mind that the academic would potentially understand his reasons for visiting the temple, or respect his privacy. The imposter syndrome screams from the inside of Santosh's mind, already shaken by his wife's perceived disrespect of his and their privacy, his illness, and he further detaches himself from the reality he lives, and moves into his ruminating "isolation" (Jain 2016: 107) that would be broken by the birth of his daughter. However, Santosh's preferred isolation, working alone at the lab and hearing "only the sound [of] the gurgling tanks" (Jain 2016: 106) does not seem to bother him as much as the realization that for his research team, much like for his wife, his "presence was strictly ornamental" (Jain 2016: 106) – a matter of professional exchange pertaining to the research, and detached practicality and feigned civility with his wife.

> I didn't know how many had knowledge of what had transpired at the temple, of my medical condition, or that I had relied on prayer to defeat genetics. That was how it would seem to them, no matter the truth. I knew what I would be thinking, were it someone else: typical Indian. (Jain 2016: 106)

The rumination caused by his insecurities – the idea that his medical condition would, indeed, have anything to do with the manner in which he is perceived, or the shame at the notion that his attending a temple service would discredit his life's work – turns into a paranoid stream of thoughts urging Santosh to question whether his "team's reticence with [him] had always been present, or if it was something [he] was just becoming aware of" (Jain 2016: 106). Entangled in a web of his own projections, Santosh fortifies his defense case:

> […] I would not be caught by surprise. It would be my opportunity to educate, demonstrate my knowledge, and remove any suspicions about the soundness of my science. It was possible, I would inform them, to prevent the spread of Thalassemia… (Jain 2016: 107)

The protagonist's ramblings about the nature of his disease, the problem of India being a country "that manages marriages with an eye toward economic and social shrewdness, not medical common sense" (Jain 2016: 107), reveal an unconscious line of thinking that surfaces sporadically suggesting how obsessively Santosh turns to science whenever he is unable to emotionally process stressful situations, such was the aftermath of the temple visit and his disappointment. Indirectly, Santosh accuses Indian marriage politics for his wife's "[knowing] more about the affairs of imaginary gods than she did about blood" (Jain 2016: 107), whereas he does not belong to that culture, or rather rejects it after moving to Canada:

> I did an inventory of all religious iconography I possessed and threw it away. My disease was not a matter of chance, God's will, or karma, whatever Sapna might think. It was the result of poorly made decisions, specifically my grandfather refusing to have my mother tested as a carrier, despite obvious indicators, because he was afraid the knowledge would make her undesirable as a marital partner. The unfortunate situation was that this was true. (Jain 2016: 108)

However, Santosh's allusion to the "poorly made decisions" and the undesirability "as a marital partner" appear as an echo of his own situation, and a projection. In dissecting, scientifically, the situation in which he finds himself married to a wife who blames him for the potential disease their child might carry – a wife who, unaware of her husband's presence, claims to her mother that she is "doing her duty" even though "they have kept this secret from us" (Jain 2016: 94), and a woman who would rather invest her faith in a pundit at a temple than her husband. On the other hand,

Santosh, seemingly accepting of his condition, rationalizing it as rendering him "more prepared" for the end than most since he "already [knows] the ways [he] will suffer" (Jain 2016: 95), cannot recover from the fact that his wife does not want their child to suffer in the same ways – he understands it as a rejection of him as a person, and whereas he somewhat accepts that there is a divergence in their sensibilities, the desire to eliminate his disease from the context of the baby, signifies a removal of him altogether.

> "It worries me that you believe this. That you think like this. It worries me that you will be passing on this kind of nonsense to our baby."
> She answered just as calmly: "It worries me that my daughter's father is the kind of man who has no culture, no belief, no principles to live by. You might be a big scientist type, but as a man, you are empty." (Jain 2016: 105)

On the one hand, the justifiable fear that turns Sapna cold when it comes to her husband – her not being able to look at him since the visit to the doctor's that would determine if she too was a carrier, and therefore, determine the chances for the child having a minor or major variety of the disease (Jain 2016: 95), grows into a general aversion towards his personality. His inability to relate to her on her level, albeit all the practical affection she experiences in their marital life, reflects his inability to fully accept her as a mother of his child. Not only does he feel like an impostor in the culture he desperately tries to emulate, but he feels the same way in their marriage – a foreigner of sorts.

The extended irony of Santosh's desire to transfer the disease to his child so that there would be a definitive proof of familial bond between them, unravels as the hypothesis of his filial cannibalism experiment fails:

> We were looking to see how the parent fish would react when we mixed in eggs fertilized by foreign fish. One would expect a poorer parent to cannibalize these before approaching its own offspring, but how would a richer parent behave? My team hypothesized that it would behave the same as an equally rich fish that had no foreign offspring in its blood. To my younger students I explained it as a question of economics versus romantic notions of paternity. (Jain 2016: 98)

In other words, Santosh's premise is based on the idea that the economic status of the fish-parent would influence their choice of eggs targeted for cannibalization, meaning that the poorer ones would target their own offspring as a form of population control and economics, regardless of their genes. According to his theory, the poorer fish-parent would not discriminately select the genetic material for nutrition, but rather be guided by the economic feasibility, so to say. In his view, there would be no emotional attachment to the eggs genetically related to the parent, or more precisely, there would be no significant difference in the absence of genetic relation either. The premise that tacitly reveals his own contemplation of fatherhood – of the possibility of bonding with the child in the case it does not inherit his condition, the "defects" owed "to a history of near-incestuous breeding in India" (Jain 2016: 95) – ironically becomes confirmed and overturned, depending on this man's conflicted angle.

> The results disproved the hypothesis: the fish, regardless of their social standing, targeted the foreign offspring first. It seemed the fish gave preferential treatment to their own genes. (Jain 2016: 108)

The "preferential treatment to their own genes," disproves Santosh's scientific rationale that there exist no "romantic notions of paternity" (Jain 2016: 98), but at the same time, justifies, perhaps at the biological level, the very idea that this scientist would indulge in such "an illogical thought" (Jain 2016: 111) and senseless desire that his child would suffer the same genetic condition. The callousness of Santosh's underlying desire testifies to a selfishness that his pragmatic sensibility cannot recognize, but on the other hand, such a desire exposes a profound fear that without the blood-bond, this unusual and unwanted common grounds, in the child's life he would merely play the role of an 'ornament'. For the protagonist, the news of the daughter's not inheriting the genetic defect causes a sense of disappointment (Jain 2016: 111):

> The code my blood could have passed on to my child was lost in the gap between generations. A perfectly normal, even desirable event, and yet… […] I could think only of what Darwin had said, of evolution, that 'non-inheritance was the anomaly.' (Jain 2016: 111)

Santosh's "unconvincing" (Jain 2016: 110) recognition of his daughter suggests another ironic thread weaved into the ambiguous closure of the story. For one, her not inheriting that which is

biologically particular only for her father is a loss – for Santosh – who himself was not an anomaly, but feels anomalous. His child, healthy, Canadian, in the arms of her mother, with prospects that involve being initiated into her mother's religion and preferences, with him as a silent bystander, or a cruel oppositional force that would perpetuate the unofficial war between the couple, provides a pessimistic view of his fatherhood prospects. There is nothing substantial in Jaanvi that Santosh can anticipate relating to, and yet, it seems that his experiment's premise of the absence of any romantic notions – the ultimate scientific explanation of survival, evolution and paternity – that is disproved in fish, remains somewhat persistent in his own mind. The meaning of the child's name, "[as] precious as life" (Jain 2016: 110) and the newborn's *anomaly* of being healthy, contrasted with Santosh's pure disappointment at a loss, provide the anti-climactic epiphany of the almost open-ended closure of the story. One is left to wonder whether Santosh would manage to relate to the child in ways that seem inaccessible to him with other adults, in a manner that is based in care-giving – of which he seems capable in the practical sense.

Exhausted Dreams in Souvankham Thammavongsa's "Mani Pedi"

First published in *The Puritan* in 2015, Souvankham Thammavongsa's "Mani Pedi" finds its place in *The Journey Prize Stories* in 2016 (volume 28). Short enough to read in *one-sitting*, "Mani Pedi" relates the story about Raymond, a former boxer, and his older sister, the owner of "Bird Spa and Salon" (Thammavongsa 2016: 129) who "talked tough and was for real tough, but […] had a good heart" (Thammavongsa 2016: 133) – children of immigrants in Canada who "didn't leave Laos, a bombed-out country, in a war no one ever heard of, on a raft made of bamboo to have [Raymond] scooping ice cream or frying cabbages with old grease oil" (Thammavongsa 2016: 129), as his sister dramatically reminds baby-brother. In fact, Raymond's sister's idea of honoring their sacrifice – all the implied imaginable and unimaginable struggle their parents had to endure – was for him to be saved from depression and the humiliation of working in a mall, by moving him into her home, shared by her unemployed husband and four children, by employing him herself in her nail salon, so that he could be one of the women-workers there – inhaling nail dust and scraped off layers of feet skin, developing potentially contagious warts on his hands almost regularly and a cough that never goes away, all the while depriving himself of any hopeful naiveté of a different life.

Thammavongsa's irony in this story runs deep in the mixture of heartbreaking and unfortunate circumstances, the dislocation in which the siblings find themselves operating in-sync, almost perfectly, in their truly loving sibling relationship that manifests itself tastelessly in the sister's unbearable and denigrating rants toward Raymond, their complementariness, and profound mirroring in terms of the underlying feeling and sensibility as pertaining to their life-circumstance. It is in these incongruences and contrasts between the two at the level of discourse – in the dysfunctional relationship that works perfectly as Raymond is *saved* by his older sister and knows his place in their dynamics, that the painfully pessimistic and discouraging sensibility shared by the siblings emerges, and blends with their individual doubtful or cynical outlooks. At the narrative closure, Thammavongsa interjects with irony showing the characters in the state of being "close to [it] and out of sight" (Thammavongsa 2016: 137) of hope – of becoming a part of the world they so painstakingly serve, from the margins, but never being on the *enjoying* side.

It is from Raymond's perspective that the world of the salon is observed, however, this view constantly clashes with his sister's in terms of her demands, her frustration at the naiveté Raymond so carelessly allows himself, and certain generalized injustice that alludes to there being more to her own narrative, which is only hinted at in the story. Moreover, her frustration emphasizes the crucial contrast between the siblings who are, at the closure of the story, figuratively placed in a virtual narrative, paralleled with that which they only imagine upon hearing, from their car, on their way home from the salon:

> […] a family in their backyard, somewhere nearby, the sizzle of the barbecue, the sweet smell of steak on the grill, and the giggling. It was the kind of giggling they themselves did as kids. Now, that kind of giggle seemed foolish for them to do. It was like a far distant thing, a thing that happened only to other people. (Thammavongsa 2016: 137)

This moment is merely virtual as it brings them both to a different time and different frame of mind in which naïve and hopeful joy appears possible, as contrasted to the present moment. However, it also ironically echoes their marginalized position in the salon – the spectators of happiness they only witness, but never experience. The narrative, basically, takes a dark turn at its closure highlighting this condition of existing at the very *center* of life – working in a place where people come to relieve themselves of the daily stress and *transform* themselves, as Raymond would

notice, into someone different. For the two siblings, however, even this is a constant reminder of their not being granted the same opportunity, even if for Raymond, "[warts] weren't so bad as mumbling nonsense and bad headaches and black lights or being dead" (Thammavongsa 2016: 134). The salon, in a manner, saves the protagonist from a more pessimistic future – one that has a definitive expiration date, and "[warts] went away eventually" (Thammavongsa 2016: 134). The idyllic image that the closure of the story tentatively relates as the siblings' shared, imagined projection suggests not merely a loss of childish or innocent optimism, but a levelheadedness that the sister expresses differently than Raymond. His understanding that this "giggle" would probably remain an impossible prospect, or a distant memory from the past, still does not prevent his attitude to life to be one of modest gratefulness – even against "the smell of feet" that "got into the pores of his nostrils and grew there, like a follicle of hair" (Thammavongsa 2016: 134), and stayed "at the back of his throat" (Thammavongsa 2016: 134) so that he could not even eat properly.

> But it was not the women. He blamed the smell on the men. Most women took care of themselves. […] It was the men who came in, who had never had a pedicure their whole lives and wore heavy socks and leather boots year-round. Ones who had been too embarrassed to show their untreated toes to a female pedicurist. (Thammavongsa 2016: 134)

This difference in attitude is the source of irony that exposes their coping mechanisms. Starving Raymond whose nose and throat seem to be infected with the smell of feet and chemicals, loses appetite and, therefore weight, but most importantly, the enjoyment that food brings (Thammavongsa 2016: 134), and for his sister the weight loss is "a good idea since it made him look good and that meant more clients coming to see him" (Thammavongsa 2016: 134), emphasizing on the profit, even if Raymond's sense of smell becomes permanently attuned to the "sour, a little like bleach" (Thammavongsa 2016: 134) smell.

> "Fuck! Shit! I don't get those kinds of tips. It's because you're a fucking man, isn't it? Men. Even in a business I own myself and built up myself, we are still paying them more. And these women who are doing this. They should know!" (Thammavongsa 2016: 133)

At the same time, ironically, his sister becomes the temporary hawk for the feminist cause and equal pay as Raymond's muscly hands, unusual boxer background, "good flirting"

(Thammavongsa 2016: 133) and overall appeal to the female clientele due to his simplicity, discretion and dedication to detail, start earning him more money on tips than she charges for the mani-pedis themselves (Thammavongsa 2016: 133). And the male clientele who feel more confident exposing their devastated feet to another male also brings unexpected profit. Raymond is both the surprising money-maker, and the usurper of her business. This sort of irony would be constructive, integrating these two positions' contrasting values, but the negative aspect of their shared ironic circumstances, their perceived social and cultural marginalization, dispel the possibility for irony's appropriative function since there is no movement from the ex-centeric position towards the supposed *center*, which is why the narrative of carefree contentment remains *virtual*.

The comic appeal of the figurative sibling rivalry meshed in with the feminist issue reveals another important detail about the sister. The inconsistencies in her line of thinking do not necessarily address only her own internal divide – the business woman who brings home the bacon, financially supports her unemployed husband and her children, in a large house (Thammavongsa 2016: 129), and the woman who has taken on herself all the burdens of supporting a family without much energy or time for a personal life – a traumatized woman who finds using the gel she uses on her customers "fucking expensive" (Thammavongsa 2016: 131), and basically too expensive to waste considering how she daily handles polish remover and files. The irony, however, does not escape Raymond who sees her, sympathetically, as "a dentist with tartar-stained teeth preaching about flossing and brushing often" (Thammavongsa 2016: 131). Investing in her own 'transformation' is not a practical decision for this woman, and yet the lack of investment in her own well-being renders her antagonistic and somewhat uncompromising.

> If there's something I know in this life, it's rich women. (Thammavongsa 2016: 135)

The clientele of her salon are not simply women who want their mani-pedis, but women who come to rant "about their kids or husbands or boyfriends" or share "what the fuck they're doing this weekend" (Thammavongsa 2016: 131), and Raymond's sister does not have the patience to suffer through the exhausting oversharing that takes place. She oscillates between her desire to make profit and simply "shut them right the fuck up" (Thammavongsa 2016: 132). The latter being the advice she gives Raymond on speaking Lao whenever he feels "tired or not interested"

(Thammavongsa 2016: 132) in communicating with them, so as to make them feel uncomfortable – uncomfortable not at hearing a foreign language, but at the idea that they might be gossiping about them, which is another inescapable stereotype immigrants speaking their native language have to endure. This woman alternates between the indifference to the clients and indifference to her own economic struggle, as a woman and as a second-generation immigrant. Her 'knowing' these rich women also implies the tacit recognition of the boundaries of the space within which she is culturally and socially allowed to operate. In *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*, Gilbert notes that "[regardless] of their image, […] marginalized people serve an essential societal function; without margins, the center cannot exist in daily discourse" (2004: 4), and this is precisely what the protagonist's sister insinuates by placing herself, as well as her brother, in the position of the counterweight to the center of the 'rich'. In this multicultural setting of Canada, the protagonist's sister is not speaking from the point of view of a minority. As Gilbert suggest, "'marginality' and 'minority' are not synonymous'" and it is the former that "encompasses issues of power and control that are ideologically based" (2004: 5). This character's perspective comes from the marginal position not only of a second-generation immigrant, but also the marginalized position of a woman. Incidentally, Gilbert provides a very thought-provoking comment pertaining to the differing viewpoint even within the same marginalized category, such as that of women:

> I may be marginalized as a woman, subject to oppressive economic and social constraints, but a poor, Third World woman might perceive me – a white, mainstream, academic, liberal feminist – as a part of the power center of a culture that oppresses her. (2004: 7)

This insight is precisely the source of the protagonist's sister's subdued outrage and passive-aggression at the women coming to her nail salon, serving the purpose of sustaining her and her family's existential needs. As Gilbert sustains, "marginality is rooted in the experience of the marginalized" (Gilbert 2004: 7), and this character experiences marginalization at the level of gender on the account of the culturally inherited values (being the sole provider for the family under the pretense that she is earning enough, while her husband remains unemployed), but also culturally from the experience of her immigrant parents whose experienced restrictions both siblings seem to have internalized. This internalization places the protagonist's sister in the role of

the experiencer of her parents' struggles, and the marginalization or oppression that she experiences coming from the gender inequity only complements it, in however incongruous a way.

Ironically, Raymond works within a similar restricted space, but being somewhat relieved from the experience on the basis of gender, even if he is placed in the space designated for female performativity, his experience of marginalization becomes outwardly exotic, and internally almost tragically romantic:

> "What, you think you got a chance with that Miss Emily there? She's rich and educated. None of the things we are or are ever gonna be. Don't you be dreaming, little brother." (Thammavongsa 2016: 135)

Raymond's exotic moment at the salon propels him into a day-dream or fantasy that socio-cultural boundaries do not exist. The nature of the boundaries Raymond's sister perceives, and Raymond willingly expels from his personal, escapist day-dreaming, suggests an internalization of the stereotypical view of immigrants, of people of 'another culture' and the subsequent recognition of the social inequality that implicitly leads Raymond's sister into becoming the stereotypical service provider for those better off in financial terms – a Laos woman who does nails fits perfectly into the Asian stereotype. On the one hand, Raymond's sister is pragmatic in her understanding of their social, ethnic and educational background. On the other, it is her own internalization of the stereotype that deprives her of the under-defined or unspecified hope. Not revealing the particular source of her obvious anxiety and uneasiness, aside from being the sole provider for her family – and a good one; and the inferred fact that she must share Raymond's distaste for the smell of feet, chemicals and the nail dust that fills the air she breathes every day – there remains a mystery to this woman's insistence on the pessimistic advice that Raymond receives:

> Keep your dreams small so life don't ever hurt you and spit you out with your innards all hanging out for all to see. It just ain't ever gonna happen. Keep your dreams small. The size of a grain of rice. And cook that shit up and swallow it every night, then shit that fucking thing out in the morning. It ain't ever gonna happen. (Thammavongsa 2016: 135)

Her words sound like something she might have heard herself, and something that might have turned her away from pursuing an authentic path – one that has nothing to do with the perceived

and internalized socio-cultural restrictions as per her ethnicity. Raymond, however, in his tacit acceptance and sharing of her sister's attitude to life, still finds himself in a different position than her. Being, ironically, the only man working in the salon – and a man whose physique stands out as unexpected in such a place – he manages to attract the attention, and tips, that alleviate the burden of his hopelessness. For the two of them, the salon is the source of sustenance, but for Raymond it is almost spiritual sustenance – it provides hope, however fragile it may be.

Raymond, "a trial horse" (Thammavongsa 2016: 128) – a former boxer who sees himself in the ring as "just there for someone to punch through, a body to pass on the way to some victory belt" (Thammavongsa 2016: 128), decides to retire when he is finally knocked out by a series of punches "in the middle of his face" (Thammavongsa 2016: 128) that not only leave him on the floor injured, but somewhat awakened to the fact that staying in the ring would soon enough kill him. He shortly finds himself working in his sister's nail salon after she sisterly-rescues him from mall-drudgery of ice-cream scooping and cabbage frying. Additionally, his sister also *rescues* him from a life in "a mouldy, cold basement with just one window" (Thammavongsa 2016: 129) through which Raymond can only see "shoes and boots and heels. Feet. No glimpse of sun or sky at tall" (Thammavongsa 2016: 129). Ironically, her "dramatic" (Thammavongsa 2016: 129) kicking open the door of this shabby basement spurs Raymond to pull himself out of "feeling sorry for himself" (Thammavongsa 2016: 129) and so he decides to become her employee "just to get her to calm down about it" (Thammavongsa 2016: 130). In the process of learning the trade, as it requires no "school or nothing" (Thammavongsa 2016: 129), Raymond finds that:

> It reminded him of sparring at the gym, having to think quick, act, respond, handle the situation, anticipate what was coming. No one client was the same, but there were some basic things everyone needed. […] He wore a mask at first to cover his nose and mouth and he wore gloves too, but he couldn't get a proper grip and couldn't converse with his clients so after a few days he removed them and exposed himself to those tiny shards of nail dust that entered and scratched at his lungs. (Thammavongsa 2016: 132)

The parallels that ironically invade the narrative – the salon being Raymond's new ring, the knock-outs being less threatening, the non-fatal warts, and the feet that seem to follow him everywhere, even when he changes his residence – build the impact of his one controlled outburst at the closure

of the story when he indirectly acknowledges them. Additionally, the salon as the ring and him being a punching bag encompasses also his sister and her overall aggressive pessimism at the prospects of both of their futures. It is this particular understanding of Raymond's that appears at the very beginning of the narrative, in his description of the final knockout when his face meets direct punches, and it deeply resonates with the punches his sister seems to be enduring at a more figurative level.

> It was the sadness. The heaviness of it. All over his body. […] And when it was all over he could see nothing but black light. (Thammavongsa 2016: 128)

Sadness and heaviness that Raymond notices in himself in the ring, during his last fight, figures as a silent symbol with his sister as well – nails "too long and yellowed at the tips" and skin on her hands "dry and flaking" (Thammavongsa 2016: 131), and in her words – through her own eyes, "[although] her face was treated to facials and creams and anti-wrinkle serums and was smooth and glowing, she felt like Raymond's face, beaten and busted, and she just didn't want to look at that face hoping" (Thammavongsa 2016: 137). While "hope is a terrible thing for her" (Thammavongsa 2016: 137), for Raymond hope emerges in the realization that "people transform so instantaneously" (Thammavongsa 2016: 130) after their treatment at the salon, "[they] came in looking sad and tired and exhausted but left giggling and happy and refreshed" (Thammavongsa 2016: 130). The idea that someone's life could change in such a miraculous way brings him closer to his sense of guilt, and atonement, for injuring so many people in his early years of boxing, and to an understanding that for him, boxing was "just sad and tired and exhausted, the way he knew it" (Thammavongsa 2016: 130) – a parallel that metaphorically relates Raymond's optimism to the closure of the story when the sound of children giggling sends his sister deeper into her own fears that Raymond might end up heartbroken, by the world and not just Miss Emily. The same optimism, sends Raymond into his day-dream hideout, a space he protects even from his sister, his protector.

Miss Emily, is not only Raymond's favorite client who removes her own nail polish even though she does not have to, someone whose "cuticles were already peeled back and her nail bed was long and thin and smoothed" (Thammavongsa 2016: 134), a woman with perfect hand and feet skin –

nor only a love interest, but something "bright" (Thammavongsa 2016: 136) as opposed to the 'black light' he is used to, a dream:

> When he didn't see Miss Emily, he painted and shaped all his clients' feet like Miss Emily's. If he could get the nails looking like hers, anyone could be like Miss Emily. (Thammavongsa 2016: 135)

If any woman could transform into a version of Miss Emily, so could his day-dream become reality. Aware of cultural and social distance between him and this wealthy woman, his attraction remains in the domain of a fantasy, but one that goes beyond ordinary infatuation or romantic desire, even though he quite obviously desires love (Thammavongsa 2016: 136). For Raymond, this woman becomes a *clutch* – something vaguely defined by her brightness "when she was alone" (Thammavongsa 2016: 136), without the company of her three-piece-suit-expensive-cologne "distinguished man" (Thammavongsa 2016: 15), that gives the promise of the transformation he so frequently sees in others and desires for himself – a "naïve and not real worldly like his sister was, but this little dream was his, and it was decent" (Thammavongsa 2016: 136), even if he shares his sister's understanding that "maybe Miss Emily ain't ever gonna be with a man like me" (Thammavongsa 2016: 136).

In the ultimate irony of Thommavongsa's "Mani Pedi," it is Raymond's face, "[a] crooked nose, a busted eyebrow with the hair not meeting in the same place" (Thammavongsa 2016: 137), the "big, burly former boxer […] handling their female hands" (Thammavongsa 2016: 132), the fact that he is able to provide them a touch by "that kind of muscle in so gentle a manner" (Thammavongsa 2016: 132) – the profound incongruity of this man's presence in such a place, albeit all the attempts of his sister to mold him into one of his ordinary women-workers there, and in spite of his own submissiveness in the face of his sister's disparaging attitude, that singles him out from all the rest. He does become the "southpaw" (Thammavongsa 2016: 130) his sister sardonically and slightly maliciously accuses him of:

> What the fuck, Raymond. You going southpaw on me now. You a right-hand. All your supplies go on the right. Fuck. Maybe you shoulda thought of that when you were boxing. You know how fucking southpaws are hard to fight – they do everything backwards. It's too late, isn't it. To go southpaw now. (Thammavongsa 2016: 130)

Like the plastic hand detached at the wrist he initially practices manicure on, Raymond bends the way his sister asks him, but not only because he "didn't like arguing or talking back to his sister" (Thammavongsa 2016: 133), nor only because of the sense of duty and love he feels for her, nor the gratitude for always taking care of him, but because:

> She talked tough and was for real tough, but she had a good heart. It was possible to be both. (Thammavongsa 2016: 133)

And because working for her, for once, at the salon, despite the men's feet smell inside his nose and throat, he could see himself transforming people into something other than injured blobs on the ring floor – he could dream of himself becoming transformed and "get by. It's to get to the next hour, the next day" (Thammavongsa 2016: 137). In this place that his sister sees profit, Raymond finds opportunity, if only in his own mind to go around the idea that men like him ought to have economic, social, cultural or other restrictions on the dreams they have – as former boxers, second-generation immigrants, uneducated, poor, or other: "That I can dream at all means something to me" (Thammavongsa 2016: 137).

The narrative of "Mani-Pedi," focalized from the point of view of both of the protagonists, but mostly Raymond, stands as an illustration of the postmodern exploration of socio-cultural discourses from the ex-centric position – from within, and from the marginalized position of the two characters. Moreover, at the formal level, although the narrative discourse does not particularly destabilize the narrative progression, it slightly disturbs perspective as the shift between the focalizing subjects – the two present narrators – imperceptibly changes, even if Raymond has primacy. This focal-shift also allows for the irony to flow into the progression, but also for the diverse import to be introduced, especially with regard to the female protagonist, Raymond's sister.

Not on My Watch in J. R. McConvey's "How the Grizzly Came to Hang in the Royal Oak Hotel"

First published in *EVENT*, J. R. McConvey's short story found its way into the 2016 volume of *The Journey Prize Stories*. The account of the bizarre event resulting in a grizzly-trophy-head hanging in the Royal Oak Hotel lobby allegorically comments on the dynamics of power in politics, war and peacetime – controlling the lives of *soldiers*, or ordinary people implicated, without the possibility of choice, in the power struggles and political agendas of those who have "the potency of […] belief" (McConvey 2016: 185). Ironic representation in this very short story, works at the level of narration – through character representation, from the focalizing view of the protagonist, who both allegorically, and ironically, tells the story about "that other past, the one [he] spent so long trying to lose" (McConvey 2016: 186) by relating the account of the incident in which an unfortunate grizzly bear, transported from "the Yukon to preserve the authenticity of the scene" (McConvey 2016: 177), destined to serve as a prop for a movie due to the arrogance of the director who could not settle for the digital effect filling for the role of the actual animal, somehow manages to free itself on the premises and "[go] berserk" (McConvey 2016: 178).

> So I guess you could call what transpired poetic justice, if you believe justice ever reads like a poem, or that any true poet would take carnage for a muse. (McConvey 2016: 177)

The poetic justice the ex-military, now Royal Oak Hotel bellhop, insinuates pertains to the bear's "storming around the lobby, mauling two guards and a production intern with running swats that looked tossed-off, just for the-hell-of-it" (McConvey 2016: 178), destroying the craft services table, and practically anything on its way to the Banquet Room C, where someone manages to close the door behind it, and provide some respite for the unnerved, bewildered and panicked crew, cast and guests – a dose of justice for basically "plucking [it] from its surroundings" (McConvey 2016: 177) only three days prior, and expecting it to express compliance to their obviously unintelligible and unreasonable requests.

It is from the very opening of the story – from the mentioning of the narrator's discharge, "when it hardly felt real to be out in the world" (McConvey 2016: 177) – that a link is created between his account of the bear's brief captivity and the subsequent bout of what is perceived as aggression by its captors, and his own, still unspecified yet visibly present, understanding of both the situation

and the behavior, as if from a personal experience. It is in this relationship with the bear, that the narrator – first as an observer, and later on as the participant – relates the allegory of how men of power, satirical characters that somehow exert influence over creatures like the bear – by extension, creatures like the protagonist – to execute their own goals, create and uphold an image, promote a belief and gain advantage, in the broadest scope of that word, over those who they involve in their schemes.

The protagonist of the story feels like he owes his sister for the job that he could have only hoped to find since she was the one who "had pulled a lot of strings" (McConvey 2016: 185), and therefore, his gratitude towards his sister extends to the manager of the hotel, and by extension, the protagonist is given no choice but to submit his will to the plot of the congressman since the manager makes it clear to him that "the hotel's reputation was at stake" (McConvey 2016: 179).

Working, then, as a bellhop only due to his sister's efforts to "land [him] the job" (McConvey 2016: 179), one he feels indebted for and particularly lucky to have since, according to him, "[that] was as good as it got for men like [him]" (McConvey 2016: 185), also relates the irony of obedience and acquiescence the former soldier is full aware of. It is the sense of duty and gratitude that renders him silent to the injustice that transpires in the incident at the hotel, but also his understanding of this particular mechanism that seems to be perpetuated in all aspects of life, society, politics – in war and peacetime. He, in other words, a 'bear in captivity' shoots the animal and relates the irony of his situation that goes well beyond what superficially might be an interesting anecdote. More specifically, it is an allegorical commentary on the Foucauldian conception of the interpellation into the discourses that restrain individuals from exerting any autonomy without the threat of punishment or exclusion. The indebtedness of the former soldier that leads him into the absurd political-show of the congressman stands to illustrate the particular manner in which the economic pressure extends to the social discourse and practice, and renders the individual powerless to regulate their independent functioning or reasoning.

To digress, the incident at the hotel, according to the narrator's observations, escalates due to the presence of the southern congressman who takes the opportunity for much desired publicity and political agitation since it would be much easier to lobby his pipeline agenda after successfully "[averting] the crisis, [saving] the dignity of an historic landmark, and [proving] what you could

accomplish when all the waffling stopped and you just let people do what they did best, be it a question of varmints or pipelines" (McConvey 2016: 185) – the ironic punch of the charade the cowboy-congressman creates for better ratings, and one that exposes the simulation of the image of life and its reality as enveloped in a web of lies, political deceit and hidden agendas. These, however, do not go unnoticed by the narrator's sarcastic eye as the characterization of the congressman, from the image that is projected by the very man onto others, "a man known for loud suits and louder opinions" (McConvey 2016: 178) progresses into one in which he, "hands clutching the lip of the upturned table, looking at [the protagonist] with something like hatred" (McConvey 2016: 184). Ultimately, it reveals a man whose "knees [buckle]" and whose fear presents itself on his face like "jaundice" (McConvey 2016: 183) when the already lethargic bear "[disgorges] a stupefied roar" (McConvey 2016: 182) in its obvious defeat, raising its paw only as if to welcome the bullet. It is the incongruity of the stammering congressman's shaky threats and machoism, on the one hand, and shameful spinelessness, on the other, that make for the satirical note underscoring his character, and especially so considering that the congressman is neither asked, nor volunteers to shoot the bear, but rather imposes his person as the only solution to the situation:

> […] it was as though Palm Sunday had come early and here was Christ preaching his way into Jerusalem, vowing to throw the thieves from the temple, a camera crew trailing like the faithful behind him. (McConvey 2016: 178)

However, the congressman's generosity in offering to 'sacrifice' his own safety by entering Banquet Room C and inflicting lethal damage on the bear using his prized Colt single-action .357 Magnum revolver, dangling on his belt in a perfect show for the incidentally-present camera crew (McConvey 2016: 178), is immediately countered by the hotel manager who steps in, "ostensibly to express outrage yelling righteously and pointing out that it wasn't even legal for the congressman to carry his gun [there]" (McConvey 2016: 179). The brief verbal battle between the hotel manager and the congressman – the former seemingly articulating the word of law and order, and the latter proclaiming himself the sheriff – amounts to the matter of who would "upstage" (McConvey 2016: 179) whom. The manager "[insists] on taking full personal responsibility for such a gross inconvenience to his guests" (McConvey 2016: 179), and the congressman absurdly refuses to allow the bear to continue to "present a significant danger to the public […] on his

watch" (McConvey 2016: 178). It is precisely with the manager taking full responsibility for the incident and the congressman insisting on shooting the bear himself that the protagonist becomes unwillingly involved, ultimately, as the enforcer of the decisions made for him by two people who, in one way or another, control the terms and conditions of his employment, and therefore his freedom of choice. The protagonist guesses that he "was an obvious choice" (McConvey 2016: 179) as a soldier for congressman's newly-waged war against the barricaded bear, considering that the manager has knowledge of his military background, which is the reason why he:

> […] stayed quiet while [the manager] explained how he couldn't risk physical harm to himself at such a crucial moment […] and how of course, they couldn't expect an esteemed guest like the congressman to carry the whole burden of this errand on his own. (McConvey 2016: 179)

Consequently, the protagonist finds himself a part of the two-men mission on the grounds of not being able to risk his position as a bellhop, therefore putting his life on the line for the whim of a congressman whose dangling revolver remains a symbolic accessory in promoting a lifestyle and politics without any substantiation. Or, at least, in terms of the reality of the situation. The protagonist, first informed about his role in the congressman's mission, is immediately utilized in the manager's public announcement to the camera crew where he "casually dropped a reference to Afghanistan, as though it were a dash of exotic spice, something to sprinkle on his speech for flavor" (McConvey 2016: 180). Mentioning the protagonist as a war veteran and a hero in his public announcement, and complementing the congressman's public spectacle – using the narrative of patriotism to "[distance] themselves from the threat while heightening the drama, making a better story" (McConvey 2016: 180), leads the protagonist to the realization that he would be used as a soldier in another war, only this time, unexpectedly – one against an unsuspecting enemy in the form of a bear, but one that reenacts the same rhetoric of power, and power-dynamics, the protagonist has experienced.

> I briefly thought about asking for protective clothing but gave up on the idea as soon as the manager stepped in and thanked GamePro for the donation of this fine weapon, saying how the Royal Oak was a place that appreciated quality, speaking of a long and dignified

> tradition of service, and insisting I would be perfectly safe if I kept my bellhop uniform during the mission. (McConvey 2016: 181)

The rhetorical use of irony, as related by the allegory of recent wars unwaveringly alludes to the use of men and women, soldiers, as cannon-fodder – expendable in comparison to their superiors and mere pawns in their strategy for power, and in this case the successful furthering of the congressman's pipeline agenda almost imperceptibly after the much louder-ringing affair of saving the day in the incident at the Royal Oak Hotel. Here, the narrator, powerless to make a choice that would release him from the bond of the manager's spin on the patriotic narrative of service and duty, without betraying his own sense of duty and loyalty toward his sister, finds himself facing a bear, shotgun in hand, flanking an already distressed congressman into the room where, in a corner-nook behind some drapes, the bear "sat, squat and huge amid stacks of red plush chairs, pawing at a lectern it had knocked over" (McConvey 2016: 182).

The almost lifeless animal does not even react to "the eggy stink leaching out under [the congressman's] cologne" (McConvey 2016: 181), nor the smell that the protagonist might have released in the process. But then, "the same bone-shaking terror" (McConvey 2016: 183) that the protagonist sees in the congressman's tremor, knees buckling, face changing color and the grunting suggesting inability to breath properly – the anxiety of impending danger and death at the face of a creature whose "size and strength and capacity for damage" render it "a monster" (McConvey 2016: 182), is also something that the protagonist knows "so intimately that this faceoff with a cornered grizzly played like an exercise, a routine chore" (McConvey 2016: 183).

As the congressman's legs and feet fail him in the attempt to approach the grizzly at a distance necessary to fire his weapon, he reveals a detail about his agreement with the manager, and the real reason why the protagonist is chosen for the role of tactical support in the first place:

> "Look, I'm sure we all understand our roles here tonight," the congressman said and held out the Colt. I shook my head and gestured at the shotgun, but the congressman waggled the Colt at me and said, "No. It can't go down like that." (McConvey 2016: 183)

If the protagonist understands and accepts his role as a soldier, cannon-fodder or necessary collateral in the process of liberating the hotel from the grizzly enemy – a sacrifice somehow

acceptable to him with the view of duty and the potential damage the perpetuation of the incident could inflict on the hotel's reputation – then the entire allegory also acquires an additional dimension when the congressman's pathetic admission of cowardice becomes both an act of blackmail and an offer of bribery – yet another way of interpellating others in the discourse of power. The Colt, "the one the congressman was known to say he wouldn't even let his wife touch" (McConvey 2016: 183) is transferred into the protagonist's hand, and serves as an instrument for the confirmation of the image of the southern cowboy sheriff – the image of patriotism and courage, even if the three shots into the bear's eyes and heart are fired by the hand that would have nothing to do with the endeavor later on – the invisible hand whose reward for his service, ironically, can only be that his name and legacy would not be attached to the hanging grizzly-head in the hotel lobby, and, at the same time, that by being able to tell the account of the incident at the hotel, his similar role with regard to Afghanistan, "Kandahar and the detainees and the tribunal and [his] time at the veterans hospital" (McConvey 2016: 180) would somehow fade – both from the protagonist's memory, but others' as well.

> The smell of sulphur and burnt metal and gamey blood filled my nose, and I thought for a countless time how it was all the same – beasts or warriors or children – all just a pulpy tangle of pink meat and brittle bone under a thinness of pleading skin. (McConvey 2016: 184)

Nevertheless, the protagonist does not relativize the act of killing and places the bear – an animal or a beast, depending on the perspective – in the range of the categories of people whose deaths he has witnessed or caused. In fact, it is in this recognition of his instrumental role as a soldier that the rhetorical edge of irony reveals a profoundly disturbing entrapment system of the economic, political and social discourses. It is these discourses that relativize life and death, and the protagonist's almost habitual obedience that allow for their perpetuation. With the awareness of this – in the aftermath of killing the grizzly – the protagonist turns to the congressman only to find a mixture of fear and hatred in his eyes.

> He couldn't stand it – the ways in which he needed me, and did not. He couldn't tolerate how expendable I was, how useful and anonymous and effective. There was still fear in his

> look too, and I knew that while he hated me, he was also afraid of me, as many others had been, and had been right to be. (McConvey 2016: 185)

With blood spatter on his bellhop Royal Oak Hotel uniform, the protagonist is a serious threat to the "sweat-thinned Egyptian cotton shirt" (McConvey 2016: 185) still floored behind a turned table, waiting for his body to regain its strength after collapsing under the weight of cowardice. The congressman's public image, built on the shaky foundations of the southern patriotism narrative to mask the economic and political motivation, becomes exposed for the mockery it relates in reality. It is equally a moment in which the congressman is faced with his own *instrument*, and a moment in which the broader allegory alluding to foreign politics involving the military provides a hint of the instability of the narrative of service, duty and obedience. It is during the short interval, "a few seconds" (McConvey 2016: 185), that the two men face each other, with the bear carcass in the corner of the room, that the idea of disobedience flutters in the air. A hint, since "[the congressman] implied, in simply being there in that room, the huge apparatus he carried on his back, the political connections and money, the reputation, the potency of his belief" (McConvey 2016: 185).

In the protagonist's observations of the grizzly's behavior, and his hope that the grizzly would react to their approaching, to the congressman's pointing the gun at it, and finally, to his own challenging its territorial and existential integrity – he projects the personal experience of the situation evolving at the hotel, but also the circumstances of his military past. In other words, he sees himself in the entrapped animal:

> The grizzly knew it was alone, and that the creatures who'd brought it here did not wish it well. I would say that's what allowed me to do it, finally: the anger I felt that, after its first burst of terrified rage, this fearsome thing had become so useless, so neutered and disoriented by the environment of the hotel that it stopped knowing how to defend itself. (McConvey 2016: 184)

More explicitly, the protagonist is able to pull the trigger three times precisely because of the anger he feels in his own powerlessness to defend against the unscrupulous and degrading demands of the society that does even seem real to him. He tacitly concedes to the unspoken proposal that the trophy killing would be ascribed to the glorious congressman, and in those terms, the allegory

openly comments on the war practices in which soldiers merely serve as collateral damage in the furthering of economic or other interests of those who seem to carry the power. As the protagonist would ask himself on seeing the arrogant and self-righteous cowboy buckle under pressure:

> Whatever he summoned then to convince himself of the best path forward must be the quality all men of power possess, which allows them to focus without distraction on the absolute present, their certainty distilled so its purity can't be questioned when others are asked to drink from it. (McConvey 2016: 183)

The comment extends to the very beginning of the narrative as well, with regard to how, in the first place, the men of power seduce, persuade or delude others to participate in their version of reality - the reality projected as an image, complemented and supported by other images, with very little to do with the disordered and messy reality of the present. The protagonist finds the solution to his moral conundrum as related by the narrative, ironically, in the act of "[hugging] the shadows, trying to fade invisible against the backdrop" (McConvey 2016: 186) of the politician and the hotel manager – a somewhat disturbing message with regard to the economic and political circumstance worldwide in contemporaneity.

At the formal level, McConvey's narrative discourse employs irony to complement the allegorical nature of the plot, and the irony is contained at the level of representation that, occasionally, escalates into sardonic or satirical, yet humorous, bits. The discourse of the narrative not only brings into question the fictional dimension as related by the protagonist, but indirectly foregrounds the related topicality from the referential world – the real world. In this negativizing opposition, as achieved by the employment of irony, this postmodern narrative encompasses a wide range of real-world related narratives, exposing their discursive nature and rhetorics.

THE POSTMODERN FENDER-BENDER

The scope of this exploration of the contemporary Canadian selection of fiction includes, as readily as it tackles the issue of postmodern interpretations with the emphasis on ironic and parodic representation, a discussion on the essential question of what a short story is, and what conventions supposedly frame its manifestations. The review of relevant literature and the discussion that follow serve to explicate how it is that the short story form relates a specific modality of knowledge, and how, specifically, the contemporary Canadian short story utilizes this medium, with its distinctive narrative approach, to tackle the contemporary topicalities of the Canadian society, in a clearly postmodern spirit.

In Chapter 3 of *Contemporary Fiction: A Very Short Introduction* (2013), Robert Eaglestone wittily tackles the problematics of genre in saying that "genre, which basically just means 'type', looks relatively innocuous," until it is applied to "contemporary fiction, [where] it looks as if it's simply the 'pigeonhole' into which different sorts of novels are placed: science fiction, 'chicklit', historical fiction, thrillers, and so on" (2013). However, in the same chapter, this critic notes that, observed as "as a line of descent," genre "is both crucial to the creation of literature and to reading and understanding books" (2013) since it provides the necessary general frame in the scope of which the reader approaches a literary work. At the level of genre, even the failure of the reader's expectations based on their experience with and knowledge of the genre they are experiencing serves to produce effect. Moreover, Sevinç Türkkan in "Genre Theory," *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory*, suggests that "[genre] is the term used to characterize groups of similar texts that share certain recognizable conventions and that belong in the same literary tradition" (Türkkan 2011: 216). In fact, genre itself is a convention defined modality of experience, which does not reduce it to the convention itself.

As Flannery O'Connor puts it in "Writing Short Stories", in *Mystery and Manners* (1969), "[a] story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is" (96). O'Connor's definition of the short story form, or genre, as a singular form, is echoed in the theoretical considerations of Viorica Patea in "The Short Story: An Overview of the History and Evolution of the Genre," a chapter of *Short Story Theories: A Twenty-First-Century Perspective* (2012). Patea draws on Charles May's understanding of the short story as "a hybrid form combining both the metaphoric mode of the old romance and the

metonymic mode of the new realism" (in Patea 2012: 2), and she acknowledges Allan Edgar Poe's discussion of "form, style, length, design, authorial goals, and reader affect" (2012: 3) as providing the theoretical and practical basis for the contemporary discussion on genre, but also for the very "birth of the short story as a unique genre" (2012: 3). However, in spite of the vast body of literature on the topic of short fiction, its plasticity maintains an open discussion on its defining features – in terms of the formal narrative characteristics, but also in terms of its qualitative dimensions.

In the Introduction to *The Journey Prize Stories* (2016), Brian Francis, one of the three jury members doing the selection for volume 28, and a writer himself, touches upon the broad definition of genre, and relates the question to the qualitative dimension:

> I remember hearing once that a short story should be short enough to read in one sitting. (Or one standing, if you're on the subway, which is where I do most of my reading.) I get the sentiment as far as length, but what are the general rules when it comes to short stories? What makes a short story good? What makes it exceptional? (Cayley 2016: xi)

The issue of "the general rules" of the short story, far from being elusive, nevertheless resists absolute definition, and the qualitative dimension, probably, even more so. However, in this section, several definitions of the short story are highlighted as offering insight into how the convention itself serves as the background for the qualitative dimension, and how it is that against the formal and structural conventional genre background, it is the individual qualities that emerge and, as Brian Francis put it, "[make] you miss your subway stop" (Cayley 2016: xi).

In "The Short Story: An Overview of the History and Evolution of the Genre," Viorica Patea argues that the "[generic] considerations of the short story focus on its split allegiances to the narrative and the lyric" (2012: 9), that is, that as a medium of prose, much like the novel, the short story additionally "makes use of poetry's metaphorical language, its strategies of indirection and suggestion" (2012: 9). More explicitly, Patea observes the difference between the novel and the short story, again, both prose mediums, as differing in their "artistic methods" (2012: 9) since the latter employs the "lyric mode" (2012: 9) in addition to the traditional narrative elements pertaining to "storyness and narrativity" (2012: 9), and with the addition of the restriction of length. This *restriction*, however, may be observed as a specific modality of storytelling "[blending] the brevity and intensity of the lyric with narrative features such as plot, denouement, character, and

events” (Patea 2012: 9), which Patea, among others, sees as crucial for the particular kind of effect this form produces. More specifically, as Patea argues, “since it operates through oblique telling, ellipsis and implication, shunning the more explicit statements and causal effects that characterize longer works of prose” (2012: 9), the short story stresses the lyrical in its form – at the level of language and metaphor, and therefore other devices commonly used in order to achieve this, “maximum economy, [targeted] intensity, suggestiveness” (Patea 2012: 9). In fact, as Patea emphasizes, contrasting the short story to the novel, “lyricism is an inherent feature that derives from the tension and intensity of the short form and is present even in the most realistic short stories” (2012: 10), which is essentially both what distinguishes it from the other medium of prose, and what provides its effect-producing quality.

From a more traditional point of view, the short story can be explained in terms of being “a compressed, unified, and plotted form” (Patea 2012: 3), and the exploration of the particulars of “the formal structure of the short story is mainly a twentieth-century critical enterprise” (Patea 2012: 3). A short story, say Minh Nguyen and Porter Shreve in the introduction to *The Contemporary American Short Story*, is “a narrative prose piece, generally brief, in which a series of events shows characters in conflict” (Nguyen & Shreve 2004: xiii). In the light of the previously offered reflections, this definition could further raise the question of the nature of this expected or conventional ‘eventfulness’ in such a brief narrative prose piece, the traditional conception of characters, conflicts, resolution or denouement, “the overall *point*” (Nguyen & Shreve 2004: xiii), and, it might be added here, what it is that readers expect to experience when reading a short story.

For illustration, the brilliantly witty vignette, Julie Roorda’s “How to Tell if Your Frog Is Dead,” reads as a short story, even though its length renders it somewhat short of the genre-typical works. However, puns aside, the vignette does not present any specific characters, other than the narrative-hypothetical ones – the narrator who is also the implied agent in the account of, again, hypothetical events, and the mention of such entities as a child, a cat and a friend, figure as function-fulfilling, but otherwise undefined. The conviction of narration – its precision, detail and didactic value – satirically turns on itself at the closure, turning the decisive manual into a comment on the unpredictable nature of life’s course, and parenthood, which renders the absence of actual plot irrelevant for the reception of the narrative discourse. However, in the light of the previously

presented short story definitions, Roorda's vignette could be categorizes as an anti-story, resisting to encompass the traditionally expected elements.

What makes the comprehension of this unusual vignette's narrative discourse possible, is the cognitive mechanism earlier explained in the section discussing humor – the cognitive scripts and schemas using which the reader fills in the intentional and unintentional narrative gaps. Or in less clumsy terminology, the suggestiveness Patea talks about. In *Double Voicing the Canadian Short Story*, Laurie Kruk draws on Ian Reid's discussion on the short story as "often an act of partial and provisional framing," which "[emphasizes] the instability of any frames through which they are interpreted" (2016: 17). This insight complements Patea's observation of this form as founded in the suggestive and the elliptical. Furthermore, Fahrad Iftekharrudin et al. in *Postmodern Approaches to the Short Story*, bring this into relation with the insight that "a human child's first complex utterances are in story form" (2003: vii), which leads psycholinguists "[to] propose that we regard the short story, not the word, phrase, or sentence, as the most basic unit of human expression" (2003: vii). Additionally, Patea notes that the short story, being "[more] stylized than the novel, […] tends to distort everyday reality more than long-form narratives do and operates through intuition and lyric effects" (2012: 10).

The definition offered by Minh Nguyen and Porter Shreve evidently does not encompass such instances in which the narrative is presented in the form of an experiment rather than an emulation of the referential reality in terms of the traditionally expected elements, in the strict terms of the category of eventfulness (storyness) and elements such as characters, the plot, etc. In Craig Boyko's "The Baby," both the characterization and eventfulness, or rather *storyness*, are achieved only indirectly. In fact, there is no specified progression of events, and the conflicts between characters are merely hinted at through irony – sarcasm and parody. These two narratives do not illustrate the exceptions to the rule as described in the provided general definition of the short story, but rather explicate the plasticity of the form, and draw attention to poststructuralist and postmodern views of genre. To be more specific, the failed attempts at providing the ultimate definition are unsurprising in the light of the modern, and postmodern experimentation that explores, and not merely playfully, the metafictional nature of narrative and narration itself as a process, as well as the formal conventions. How it is that even against this experimentation the reader recognizes the genre-form testifies to certain modalities of literary production that can be

observed from the perspective of cognitive science – cognitive narratology and poetics. With regard to this, Shreve and Nguyen notice that postmodernism particularly treats the short story genre, much like any narrative regardless of the length or medium, as unstable and subjectively constructed, with the reader as "an active participant in the creation of meaning" (Nguyen & Shreve 2004: xv). This is also the attitude of cognitive poetics with regard to the reception of narrative discourse. These critics note that:

> For many, aspects of *postmodernism* involve pushing modernist ideas to further and more experimental extremes: rejecting traditional distinctions between genres, and emphasizing irony, playfulness, ambiguity, fragmentation, discursiveness, self-consciousness, satire, and an interest in popular culture. (Nguyen & Shreve 2004: xv)

As discussed in relation to a number of contemporary issues pertaining to postmodern poetics, and with regard to metafiction, irony and parody as essential for understanding the multifaceted postmodern trends in contemporary literature, maintain a continuity of literary forms, and even traditional conventions and aesthetic traditions, by re-appropriating them to the present context thereby establishing a viable and visceral connection to them in the very act of re-creation. This act necessarily entails a questioning and exploration of both the form and context in foregrounding the topicality of contemporaneity. However, needless to emphasize, this connection, although overt in historiographic postmodern literature, remains present in other forms in, perhaps, less explicit ways.

In "Pest Control for Dummies™," Zsuzsi Gartner's irony behind the title of the story hovers above the narrative of Jack – a man who writes 'for Dummies' editions on various topics, none of which substantially enrich his personality or the quality of his life. In "How to Survive in the Bush," Gartner re-appropriates the style of pioneer women's writing and creates a manual for female urban-dwellers in what contemporaneity sees as the bush. The parody exposes the entanglement of diverging conceptions of femininity and masculinity, gender and gender-roles, and exposes their artifice as a stifling influence. In Clea Young's "Split," the body is the metaphor for the psychological split caused by a forced dislocation implied by gender performative – the protagonist does not find any enthusiasm when faced with the prospect of becoming a mother, yet senses that she would crumble under the pressure of the progression as required by her being married. In Lee

Henderson's "Conjugation," a parodic take on Kafka's "Metamorphosis," the lack of social skills brings the career of the protagonist, incidentally also Lee, to a grinding halt, and he is forced to take a refresher course in elementary school grade four. The metafictional nature of the narrative directly comments on the academia and its heavy reliance on social networking as grounds for advancement. In "Summer of the Flesh Eater," Gartner takes irony to a new level parodying not only Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, but providing it an internal opposition as well, and blending it seamlessly with the parodic allusions to Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, all to expose the snobbery of contemporary suburbs, among other things. In Nancy Jo Cullen's "Hashtag Maggie Vandermeer," the satirical undertone to the irony of the forty-eight-year old Maggie's unsuccessful career resurrection exposes the ageism of liberal capitalism and the ridiculously simulated world of hipster social media – both in terms of advertising and the images the culture projects as trend-setting.

In *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, Taylor and Winquist note that readers, "as [they] gain experience with a genre, […] come to understand that the genre tacitly encodes rules of form, content, and/ or thematic development, and readers invoke these rules to help them make sense of the text or performance" (2001: 153). In the discussion on parody that draws on the original source in order to create a stable background for an antithetical rhetorical strategy, the importance of imitation has already been emphasized – imitation in the form of linking the act of creation and the creation itself to that which precedes it, whether by means of intertextual referencing, pastiche, parody, etc. The 'experience' Winquist and Taylor mention in relation to genre, therefore, serves as the background for "content and/or thematic development" which postmodern literature frequently strives to subvert. In its process, nevertheless, it does not destroy genre-conventions per se, but signals its artifice – a reflection of the artifice of social, political, cultural, ideological and other constructs in referential reality. The parodic source in Henderson's "Conjugation" only serves to more powerfully enforce the critical dimension of irony – Lee's career in academic publishing, weighed against a simpler life of a fourth-grader, loses its charm, and the death of the protagonist present in the original work parodied, "Metamorphosis," is avoided only due to Lee's change of heart – his conscious decision to refrain from being ruthlessly competitive. The cultured tribe of "Summer of the Flesh Eater," Chaz-loving erudites, ultimately recognize their own primitive nature against the backdrop of an impulsive murder of their neighbor.

Taylor and Winquist define genre as "a type of written or performed text and a psychological construct that leads readers to construct texts in response to recurrent rhetorical situations" (2001: 152). The psychological dimension of the pseudo-communicative act, restricted by the framework of genre, presupposes readerly participation. Additionally, genre is not merely a label, even if it does not present an unchangeable or stable construct, but a "type of text or performance" (Taylor & Winquist 2001: 152) that can be recognized against other types, and it is, indeed, a mental construct, "a coding template that leads to active, often purposeful, reading and writing" (Taylor & Winquist 2001: 153). Nevertheless, even as a mental construct encompassing broad and general features of a particular 'type' that enable the reader to recognize and build certain expectations pertaining to their previous knowledge and experience, this "bundle of formal and substantial features" (Taylor & Winquist 2001: 153) is a dynamic construct:

> ideally shared contractually by writers and readers, that bundles together features of texts – topoi, allusions, themes, syntax, diction, rhyme, and so on – and then 'gives presence' to them in varying degrees. The genre dynamic 'fronts' those features that cause instances of the same genre to resemble one another. (Taylor & Winquist 2001: 153)

The postmodern experimentation has often been said to blur the lines between genres, and in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon suggests that the traditional literary conventions "have become fluid," asking "who can tell anymore what the limits are between the novel and the short story collection (Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*)" (2004: 9). However, as Hutcheon clearly states, "there is no simple, unproblematic merging" (2004: 9), or more explicitly, postmodern merging does not occur without the premeditation of problematizing the discursive import of the source located in the past or tradition (convention). As noted at the very beginning of this chapter, if genre is understood as a modality of experience, structured by conventions, then it is also the constructedness of the conventions and their plasticity as such that account for what Hutcheon terms problematic. To use another one of Hutcheon's expressions in discussing this, the postmodern experimentation with genre itself reflects another form of problematization.

As Viorica Patea notes, the short story represents "this moment plucked out of the flow of time [which] seeks meaning beyond the contingent and the particular" (2012: 11), and therefore its intention is transgressive against the convention, and even when such an act is only suggested.

Iftekharrudin et al. suggest in *Postmodern Approaches to the Short Story*, that the postmodern trend pertaining to short fiction:

> (1) merged 'reality' and 'illusion' to the point that distinctions became a matter of interpretation; (2) further blurred the line between 'reality' and artifice through 'fantasy,' games, mimicry, parody; (3) called attention to themselves in an attempt to make authentic the act of knowing; and (4) used apparent disconnection and incongruity as techniques for creating coherence. Plots were either fully realized, represented as a base chain of events not necessarily causal, truncated, as in the modern story, or abandoned altogether (thus antistory). (2003: x)

Why they reflect on the poetics of postmodernism as something that belongs in the past will remain beyond the scope of this section, but it does complement the argument that the short story, as so far discussed, possesses the form inherently malleable to genre-fluidity, or malleability within its own convention, which can be attributed, as previously suggested by Patea, to its inherent lyricism.

In his study *Genre* (2005), John Frow defines genre as "a universal dimension of textuality" (2) that is necessarily related both to other genres and other texts, and in fact generic structures. The central argument of Frow's study is that genres perform functions or serve as devices for relating specific kinds of effects that need not necessarily be unchanging or inflexible (2005: 2). Moreover, the definition of genre, according to Frow, depends on the understanding of the underlying generic structures – frames – that contain formal, structural, rhetorical, and other features, all of which determine the deviance from the generic frame and the inclination toward the specific (2005: 10).

Postmodernism, undoubtedly, subverts the typical (and stereotypical) frames and scripts with the use of irony and parody, among other instruments. Loosely restrictive then, but avoiding deterministic definitions by which genres should be understood as highly formulaic, Frow's definition presupposes intertextuality or genre-interrelatedness as crucial to the effect that a particular text produces. That is, a text, in order to produce an effect of reality, truth, plausibility, etc., remains reliant on the convergence and confluence of different genre-particular elements within a single text. In that sense, genre is pragmatic, but it is not specifically a feature of a text nor is it imputed on the text by the readers; genre owes its existence to social convention, and therefore, it is also defined by the reader's or interlocutor's expectations – internal cues, the setting,

etc. Basically, genre could be defined as a specific manner in which "symbolic material," rhetorically charged, can be structured, much like Flannery O'Connor suggested, as quoted at the beginning of the chapter.

In *Style and Rhetoric of Short Narrative Fiction: Covert Progressions Behind Overt Plots* (2014), Dan Shen notices that in formulaic structures, as explained by Frow, "our surface reading, or the way the overt plot moves, exists in tension with a very different and powerful dynamic that focuses, at a hidden and deeper level, on aesthetics and ethics, among other kinds of thematic import (1). Shen's insight is particularly important as it complements the premise behind a number of studies (Laurie Kruk's *Double Voicing the Canadian Short Story* being only one of them), and this one included, in that the "hidden dynamic" (2014: 1) of the text, the "covert progression" (2014: 1) works at the level of "a deeper-level textual movement that is aesthetically conveyed, and both form a significant counterpoint that supplements or contradicts the surface meaning, thus complicating the audience's response in various ways" (2014: 1), which is precisely the mode in which irony and parody operate. Shen describes this covert progression in contrast with the underlying lyrical meaning in poetry, although he recognizes the shared qualities. Furthermore, with regard to irony and parody as specifically explored here as representational methods, Shen's conclusion that "covert ethical progression foregrounds the connection between ethics and aesthetics in that it is characteristically created by the implied author with subtle stylistic and structural devices" (2014: 4) accentuates the role of the author, or implied author, in the intentionality of irony, and parody. Ethical issues, and those are certainly tackled extensively using irony and parody as instruments, "can be non-didactically, finely, and uniquely conveyed by the literary writer" (Shen 2014: 4). Additionally, Shen relates plot development in short fiction with covert textual progression, working simultaneously in creating a tension by which the cover layer "[develops] important countervailing or supplementary themes that are crucial to the proper understanding of the implied author's rhetorical design" (2014: 145).

To digress, in *Storytelling and the Sciences of the Mind*, David Herman specifically defines genre as a set of protocols formulaic for the process of storyworld making. This is to say, the creation and transformation of a storyworld does not depend on the genre per se, but rather, it is the "consequences and effects" (2013: 105) that the author strives for that are achieved via genre-specific protocols. Following Frow's line of thought presented earlier, that a narrative can never

be interpreted or even observed isolated from other narratives and discourses in which it comes to exist, David Herman's comment on at least two co-extensive dimensions of a narrative pertaining to genre seems to complement and further explain the dialogism overtly present in the selected short fiction discussed here, as proposed by Shen as well:

> The interplay among the dimensions at issue – the specific pattern of responses created by the way an interpreter frames answers to those sort of questions when engaging with a narrative – accounts for the structure as well as the functions and overall impact of the storyworld issue. Thus, whereas the questions just listed concern what kind of world is being evoked by the act of telling, those questions connect up, in turn, with further questions about how a given narrative is situated in its broader discourse environment – questions concerning why or with what purposes the act of telling is being performed at all. (2013: 106)

This is particularly relevant for those narratives in which the story-world spatially and/or temporally blends such referential entities or dimensions incompatible with the spatio-temporal location of the narrative-real world. For example, in Boyko's "The Baby," the narrative discourse merges the early twentieth-century discourse on child rearing and comes into conflict with the twenty-first century notions on parenthood. Both ironically employed, the discourses create an amalgam of parody due to the reader's ability to identify the points of contrast and critically evaluate them. In Grant's "My Husband's Jump," the semantic instability extends to the spatio-temporal instability of scenes and images, destabilizing further the core-concept being examined – faith and the existence of divinity, as the protagonist visits a nun-run Catholic school and brings distress to her former principal, Sister Perpetua – symbolically and metaphorically rounding up the curious and tragic event of her husband's failure to land his ski jump. In Henderson's "Conjugation," the context of the fourth grade as contrasted to the implied, more easily scripted idea of the protagonist – an adult – in academic publishing, directly creates a parallel between power dynamics, as experienced by the protagonist in the elementary school setting, his imposter syndrome, and the subsequent power struggles he finds much easier to deal with than those in academic publishing albeit the same operating mechanism being at work in both, as suggested. The barbarian at the gates of a suburban community, populated by men whose names invite numerous pop-culture associations and whose interests invite suspicion in the light of the

patriarchal stereotypical notions of masculinity, allows for the parodic interpretation in the context of the nineteenth-century work on the theory of evolution. By extension, it is in this context that the twenty-first-century masculinity is examined against the backdrop of contemporary hypocrisy of sophistication and emancipation – a smoke-screen for property values. In McConvey's "How the Grizzly Came to Hang in the Royal Oak Hotel," the incident in which a bear wreaks havoc on the hotel floor invokes the context of war and militant foreign politics in which soldiers become pawns in the games of those who control the economy, politics, and the public discourse.

Defining narrowly the short story genre as a specific narrative structure with distinctive formal features and formulaic functions would be reductionist at the very least. In accordance with both Frow's view of genre as pragmatic, and Herman's as specific-function-oriented, bearing in mind the powerful dimension of genre being a social convention inviting particular expectations, the short story could be said to produce a singular effect at its climax – the purpose of which may vary significantly: an epiphany or recognition that is the effect of narrative progression.

To digress, yet again, in *Style and Rhetoric of Short Narrative Fiction*, Shen suggests that "'plot' is a very elusive term in narrative theory" (2014: 3), which complements the problematics of the conventional short story effect previously discussed. Drawing on Seymour Chatman's distinction[53] between the "traditional 'plot resolution' and the modern 'plot resolution'" (in Shen 2014: 3), Shen finds that the former involves "causally related" events "[progressing] towards the denouement, marked by a completed process of change of a certain kind" (2014: 3), whereas the modern plot does not necessarily encompass a resolution, "but rather that a state of affairs is revealed[54]" (in Shen 2014: 3). In Shen's interpretation of plot, it is irrelevant whether there is causality driving it towards a resolution, or whether there occurs a "display of state of affairs (often character-oriented)" (2014: 3), but rather that "there may exist a parallel textual movement that runs throughout" (2014: 3), which is, for example, precisely the case with Julie Roorda's "How to Tell if Your Frog Is Dead," where the traditional conception of plot and characterization fail, and yet the vignette achieves the convention-guaranteed effect, in the form of a revelation of a reversal. Shen also suggests that the modern type of plot "conveys a different thematic import and often

[53] Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse* (1978).
[54] Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse* (1978).

contains various textual details that appear peripheral or irrelevant to the themes of the plot" (2014: 3). More explicitly, in the modern plot, the plot development progresses in such a way that the covert progression, with its counteracting imports, "gradually comes into view" (Shen 2014: 3), and ultimately produces the effect of the display of the state of affairs, or a revelation about the character. In contemporary postmodern short fiction, the plot that prevails seems to be precisely the modern one, with dual progression guiding the narrative flow, however, into an open-ended closure, that most often anti-climactically reveals a state of ambiguity, uncertainty or irresoluteness.

Viorica Patea discusses this short-story *event*, or epiphenomenon, as "[the] philosophy of the short story" (2012: 14). Patea quotes Mary Rorhberger's explanation of the effect being the product of "the metaphysical assumption that the idea and the real merge at the moment of revelation, a moment as profound as epiphany" (in Patea 2012: 14), which seems to be a less pragmatic approach. In those terms, Patea suggests, "[critics] and short story writers agree that the short story is concerned with an exceptional, mysterious, strange, unexpected or unusual experience" (2012: 14), and the "aesthetics of brevity imposes limitations that directly affect the short story's epistemology and style" (2012: 12), meaning that its short form, literally its length, "prevents [it] from being cumulative and does not allow for extended explanations" (2012: 12). Finally, Patea says:

> Theorists agree that the epistemology of the short story is one of revelation, vision or insight. The fundamental element of the short form resides not in narrative structure but in 'the moment of truth' or of crisis conducive to a heightened awareness, a momentary realization that marks the passage from ignorance to knowledge. (2012: 15)

However, in its postmodern manifestation, the short story frequently relies on the anti-climactic closure, relating a disturbing postmodern message that the resolution of conflict – the reconciliation of contradictions – is not possible. Patea suggests that "[with] their play with intertextuality, collage, and issues of originality and authorship, postmodern short stories have become, even more than their modernist models, plotless antistories" (2012: 19). In a manner of speaking, the closure of "Mani Pedi" in which Thammavongsa allows her protagonist to only voice, for once, his indignation at being reproached for fantasizing, in full recognition of the

impossibility of his dreams, stands for an anticlimactic moment in the light of the closure that ensues. The story leaves a disturbing sense of impossibility, rather than unpredictability, and in doing so creates an anti-climactic moment not of epiphany, but of acceptance – indifference even. Similarly, the protagonist of McConvey's "How the Grizzly Came to Hang in the Royal Oak Hotel," anticlimactically hands over the gun to the congressman, tacitly accepts the role he is assigned, and contently remains in the shadows changing his soldier uniform for a bellhop's – choosing the lesser evil. In Lori McNulty's "Monsoon Season,' the transgender protagonist, Jess, goes through an excruciating struggle and sex-change operation, only to go back to the place where she will, potentially, be profiled as the 'other' – another 'other' or variation to the subculture she used to feel at home with. Maggie's texting at the closure, the escalation of frustration in Cullen's "Hashtag Maggie Vandermeer," though intense at the very least with over thirty messages being discharged at her daughter in the middle of the night, creates not only a sense of an anticlimactic ending, but resist closure altogether by deepening the existing conflict and perpetuating the narrative-implied pattern, in spite of the increased intensity that builds the expectation of a resolution. It is at that very point that the subtly satirical representation of Maggie Vandermeer becomes simply disturbing. Jack's heart reaches a climactic moment in "Pest Control for Dummies™" when, at the very end of the story, Daisy assertively proposes that they have a child. However, Gartner's protagonist remains paralyzed in this moment, hoping himself that Daisy would do something more 'climactic' such as attack him or at least shout at his implicit rejection, but the closure itself reflects Jack's paralyzed state and remains uncertain. In Young's "Split," Tova's epiphany is hinted at, yet cut short by the power shortage that darkens the porch where she finds herself with her former best friend. In creating points of comparison and contrast between herself and Alannah, Tova tacitly reaches a conclusion that she would probably find herself in the same role-playing game, but this is only a possible interpretation whereas the closure refuses to provide additional clues to the resolution.

The Voice Behind the Experiment

In *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction*, Patricia Waugh explores metafiction and the quality of the metafictional from the perspective of the 'constructedness' of reality, and therefore, on the more obvious level, fiction. Waugh argues that what metafiction

exposes is "the fact that life, as well as novels, is constructed through frames, and that it is finally impossible to know where one frame ends and another begins" (2001: 29). In those terms, the frames we perceive are "the organization of experience" and in narrative discourse, in fiction, therefore, exploring this 'organization' "involves analysis of the formal conventional organization of novels" (Waugh 2001: 29) – the genre conventions. Literary and genre conventions, Waugh claims, are "provisional" (2001: 31) and any attempt or method by which a convention is challenged, in terms of intentional transgression, exposes its artifice. Waugh notes that:

> Parody and inversion are two strategies which operate in this way as frame-breaks. The alternation of frame and frame-break (or the construction of an illusion through the imperceptibility of the frame and the shattering of illusion through the constant exposure of the frame) provides the essential deconstructive method of metafiction. (2001: 31)

This is to suggest that literary genres, necessary for the comprehension of fiction, invite a "willing suspension of disbelief," as Samuel Taylor Coleridge[55] phrased it, since essentially, their framework appears to be fluid, co-extensive and co-dependent on other genres as well. Any self-reflexive interrogative experimentation with genre, then, "operates by exploring fictional rules to discover the role of fictions in life" (Waugh 2001: 35), which, Waugh notes, particularly, "[strengthen] each reader's sense of an everyday real world while problematizing his or her sense of reality from a conceptual or philosophical point of view" (2001: 34). With regard to metafiction and focalization in that framework, in *Double Voicing the Canadian Short Story*, Laurie Kruk emphasizes on the dimension of the voice, which, as Kruk sees it, is "not solely the product of the author (biographical or implied), character, or narrator, but some combination of all three" (2016: 5). Kruk, in fact, somewhat echoes Shen (2014) in his observation that the narrative progression almost necessarily works on two levels, one of which is covert, and counteracting the level of the discourse, and this is to say, that along with the voices allowed in the narrative, there is a number of counteracting voices which are not visibly present as entities, but rather as traces of culture, ideology, politics, or other.

In K'ari Fisher's "Mercy Beatrice Wrestles the Noose," the fictionality of the story operates at the level of the narrative-fictional and the narrative-real world, and the ghost of the mother, as opposed

[55] In *Biographia Literaria* (1817).

to the narrative-real characters, operates without interference, but precisely with the function of initially blurring the sense of reality in the narrative, and then gradually filtering it into a recognition of its true colors, ironically as the girl probably loses consciousness on the floor of the wrestling ring. The narrative being told from visibly two perspectives of the protagonist, the metafictional and self-reflexive nature allow for the interpretation that takes into consideration precisely this tension between fictional rules and rules of fiction, but also the narrative-fictional and real, against the understanding of constructedness of narratives, and the implications of this phenomenon for real life. Daisy's implanted narrative – the dream-like hallucinations of the brother who never lived – in Gartner's "Pest Control for Dummies^{TM}," reveals the internal process the character goes through that is otherwise impossible to observe, and yet this narrative follows the narrative-real story progression providing an additional dimension for its interpretation. Moreover, without this narrative of Daisy's coming to terms with loss, the narrative of Jack, focalized from his own perspective and told from his person, could not be interpreted without bias, and vice-versa.

The Bakhtinian 'authorized transgression' that allows for the use of such devices as irony and parody, among other, within the formulaic construct we call genre, easily translates to the 'macro' level of the convention. In *Metafiction*, Waugh uses the term 'play' for what is here often called 'transgression'. The weight of the latter may, indeed, seem inappropriate in comparison to Waugh's more elegant metaphor, even though the term is prevalent in literature and habitually used. Waugh says that "the most important feature shared by fiction and play is the construction of an alternative reality by manipulating the relation between a set of signs (whether linguistic or non-linguistic) as 'message' and the context or frame of that message" (2001: 35). Waugh substantiates the use of the term 'play' by directly linking it to the concept of play (Waugh 2001: 36), which has also been mentioned briefly in the chapter on humor as essential in communicative and pseudo-communicative situations. One of the best examples of such 'play' analyzed here is Lee Henderson's "Conjugation," intentionally allowing for the authorial transgression through the creation of the link between the author and the narrator – both in terms of the name and their academic association. Similarly, Mahak Jain's "Origin of Jaanvi" and Souvankham Thammavongsa's "Mani Pedi" feature characters who invite interpretation with regard to the author's potential link to the narrative and characters, or even autobiographical interpretation. In the case of K'ari Fisher's "Mercy Beatrice Wrestles the Noose," the author's sharing her interest

in wrestling as a child[56], and spending time with her sisters reenacting the wrestling matches they watched on television, may well be irrelevant for the interpretation of the story, but invites the question of how much of the authorial voice there is in the narrative discourse.

In conclusion, contemporary short fiction, indiscriminately plays with the effect-oriented dimensions of narrative even when it intentionally fails to provide it, which is, in itself, an effect. In his article, "The Semiotics of Literary Postmodernism" (1997), Douwe Fokkema brings into question "whether the interpretation of texts can be and should be related to features or properties of those texts" (1997: 16). In other words, if postmodern experimentation, or simply subjective and unrestrained expression transgresses the experiential and conventional knowledge of the reader pertaining to genre types, one is bound to ask whether readers may feel "completely free to interpret them in whatever way, or are they made up of signs with conventional meanings which readers that are familiar with these conventions will be inclined to decode in certain ways and not in others?" (1997: 16). Fokkema, essentially, raises the question of the extent to which experimentation can obliterate the lines between the conventional, loosely understood here and only in terms of genre typical features, and the purely subjective. As previously discussed, literary conventions cannot be said to entail set-in-stone restrictions. As mental constructs, in contemporary short fiction conventions become dynamic and fluid, as influenced by their understanding of the discursive community. In fact, it might be a risk to extend Hutcheon's view on discursive communities as pertaining to irony, therefore by extension parody, to the discussion about genre. Irony and parody are, after all devices and modes of representation. However, the oppositional and subversive intentionality behind these, as well as their detection, comprehension and reception, point to the plasticity of conventions within which they operate – in the spirit of postmodernism, and this plasticity concerns all human constructs, including literary conventions. More specifically, then, such cases where the restrictions pertaining to genre are transgressed to expose it as a construct, or to relate it to another genre, show that trans-contextualization operates beyond rhetorical and stylistic devices, or representation methods.

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[56] In an interview for *The Malahat Review*, Fisher shares details about her interest in wrestling and her inspiration for the character of Mercy Beatrice: http://malahatreview.ca/interviews/karifisher_interview.html Accessed May 7th 2020

In *The Routledge Concise History of Canadian Literature* (2011), Richard Lane writes that "[feminist] literature in Canada has developed hand-in-hand with feminist social, political and literary-theory movements" (125), striving to, as he puts it, downplay the "hierarchy in favor of collaborative exchange" (125). Additionally, as Lane notices, Canadian postmodern literature, encompassing in his study the period between the 1970s and the beginning of the twenty-first century, "[probes] deeply into myth and traditional narrative structures, revealing new non-patriarchal modes of being" (2011: 180).

A significant number of contemporary Canadian short stories selected for this study raise questions on the issues of womanhood and motherhood – they explore the socio-cultural conceptions of femininity and masculinity and gender issues on the whole, but they also deal with the particular and specific narratives as reflexive of the interactions with the mainstream discourses that guide our collective perceptions on the mentioned matters. Some of the stories expose the stereotypical basis of the conventions within which their narratives are realized, some work to usurp these conventions by parodying their contemporary relevance, and some uncover the illusoriness of an interrogation that seeks to merely contrast by showing us how incompatible concepts, perceptions and experiences do co-exist and rightfully so – all in the spirit of postmodern interrogation, indifferent to the nature of the result, focused on the process, and all with the extensive use of irony as the instrument that allows the exploration into the validity of the truths and values which background the discursive reality. This chapter, therefore, discusses how postmodern contemporary Canadian short story endeavors to show the multiplicity of experience and discount the liberal humanist notion of universality in terms of the socio-political and cultural constructs such as femininity and womanhood, subsequently motherhood and fatherhood, but primarily the presupposed dichotomies of experience partial towards the dominant culture as the emanating center of truth value. In addition to that, this chapter also discusses how certain constructs defy the conventional or normative comprehension of gender and gender-defined roles, and therefore gender performative as well.

At the same time, the theoretical framework in this chapter remains within the limits of the broad postulates of feminist theory and focuses on the two diverging approaches – the Foucauldian and the phenomenological one – to complement the interpretation of the selected short fiction.

Considering the limited sample of the selected short fiction in this study, the reluctance to particularize the theoretical framework with regard to feminist theories emerges with the understanding that any specific focalizing perspective could load the interpretation of the stories with meaning that might not have been intended. Within the broad and diverging field of feminist, gender and queer studies, the complex foundation behind the theoretical postulates by various authors and critics based in political, social, cultural and other perspectives, from the first wave of feminism to the contemporary trends, presents a daunting web of works, potentially incompatible and clashing with the essential interrogative idea behind this endeavor – to locate the *difference* and the liminal, decipher the encoded and self-reflexively interrogate it in my own discourse on the topic without attempting to fit it into a particular modality of *theory*. The broad theoretical framework serves to possibly determine the sense of the direction of socio-political criticism as related by the narratives produced by female and male authors on matters dealing with gender in specific contexts, and although it attempts to avoid any *totalizing* enclosure, it offers a modest range of contemporary reflections on the questions pertaining to women and gender – some narrow in their approach, and some considering the subject broadly.

In *The Blackwell Guide to Feminist Philosophy* (2007), Linda Martin Alcoff and Eva Feder Kittay comment on the canonical body of writing, from Aristotle to Nietzsche in philosophy as containing implicit "[assertions] about women and the proper or natural gender relations" (Alcoff & Kittay 2007: 2), or such explicit ones "[claiming] about the nature or natural condition of women" (Alcoff & Kittay 2007: 2), yet both as means of explicating or justifying the conditions of the economic, social, political and cultural reality in which women are subordinated – either in terms of their rights, or in terms of the "false universalization of men's experiences" (Alcoff & Kittay 2007: 5). The question of this universality of experience in philosophy, which is the focus of Alcoff and Kittay in their article "Defining Feminist Philosophy," has been particularly problematized in literature, and therefore explored in terms of what it is that makes the *gendered* experience unique, or what dimensions these gender-bound perspectives share so that any proposition regarding universality could be made. More precisely, the 'assertions' that these authors mention prescribe the conditions of the universality of experience by defining and describing it from the male perspective, which is why Alcoff and Kittay argue that such philosophy clearly disregards the female experiences (Alcoff & Kittay 2007: 5). Following this line of thought, Tamsin Lorraine, in

"Feminism and Poststructuralism" (2007), discusses the two diverging approaches to this question in feminism – the first:

> [responding] to the liberal feminist notion of the universalizable emancipatory ideals of the rational subject with the Foucauldian notion that subjects are constituted within and through a field of social relations – gendered and otherwise – inevitably inflected with power. (Lorraine 2007: 268)

In this approach, Lorraine suggests, it is the social, and for contemporary conditions of neo-liberal capitalism, we could argue economic, practices that disguise the "vested interests" (Lorraine 2007: 268) that feminists strive to expose by determining those "points of resistance" (Lorraine 2007: 268) that could bring about change. On this view, the nature of interpersonal relationships is interrogated with regard to the power-relations characterizing them, and with regard to the broader socio-political, and economic context. Therefore, the dimension of universality of experience is based in the 'emancipatory ideal' of breaking free from the discourse of power, and the power-relations manifested as prescribed and imposed by the discourse. This approach, then, presupposes the 'universality of men's experience' and neglects its discursive nature. In contrast, the second approach explores:

> [the] notion of authenticating a feminist perspective through the lived experience of women by refusing to take experience at face value and yet investigating it with psycho analytic and phenomenological analyses that insist upon the importance of experience to understanding the embodied nature of sex and gender. (Lorraine 2007: 268)

Taking these psycho-analytic and phenomenological perspectives into account, the second approach seems to investigate the ethical and political questions that the Foucauldian approach somewhat neglects. In the already mentioned study, *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, the author specifically deals with this disregard for the nature of the historically and culturally constructed image of woman as the "Other of man" (Taylor & Winquist 2001: 118). More precisely, the question that de Beauvoir asks in her study resonates with the problematics of the universality of experience in terms of gender as a constructed, discursive notion, which is precisely what the postmodern critical approach takes for its main target – the artifice of the philosophical, social, political, economic and other concepts upon which the image (or simulation) of our reality

has been progressively constructed. In Taylor's and Winquist's words, paraphrasing de Beauvoir, "why [is it that] woman remains, in the dominant cultural discourse, immanent while man realizes transcendence" (2001: 118) and how can then concepts such as femininity and womanhood, femininity and masculinity, motherhood and fatherhood, be defined in terms of that which has been based on the idea of the universality of experience – something that has proven to fail in the face of subjective experience.

In "Feminism and Poststructuralism," Lorraine notices that postmodern feminism is marked by the rejection of "[assuming] that simply because certain kinds of experience were shared by some women that they could automatically ground the theoretical truths of a feminist perspective" (2007: 266), and this project "to expose the internal contradictions of metaphysical discourse privileging the subject of certainty (cogito), that is, a disembodied and universalized male-identified consciousness" (Taylor & Winquist 2001: 118) extends to the impulse to interrogate the historically assumed notions within the range of ideas about the *authentic* female experience as well. These perspectival differences, then, in the diverging currents of feminism could somewhat be observed from the angle of the issue of feminist ethics, or rather – the vicious circle in which the feminine, therefore femininity, subsequently womanhood and motherhood, become inevitably defined according to or against the preset of the historically determined gender performative.

According to Marilyn Friedman and Angela Bolte in "Ethics and Feminism" (2007), the matter of female ethics is profoundly influenced by the traditional space of women. The two critics notice that "[women's] moral concerns were more likely than those of men to focus on caring for particular others, not hurting them, responding empathically to them, and maintaining relationships with them" (Friedman & Bolte 2007: 81), which is noticeably determined by the historically traditional space of women – the space of domesticity implied by the gender norm. In contrast, "[men's] moral concerns were more likely than those of women to focus on abstract matters of justice and rights in relation to other persons considered impartially" (Friedman & Bolte 2007: 81). This is to say that "while care ethics might constitute a feminine ethic, it was not necessarily a feminist ethic" (Friedman & Bolte 2007: 82), and it is this particular distinction between the feminine as "emblematic of women's traditional role as wife, mother, and family nurturer" (Friedman & Bolte 2007: 82), and the feminist as a range of experiences that does not remain contained within the historically determined framework of subordination to "the role of male head

of household, compromised by a normative ideal of extensive self-sacrifice, and made socially vulnerable to domestic violence” (Friedman & Bolte 2007: 82) that a number of contemporary Canadian short stories selected here deal with, mostly from the female perspective.

In Zsuzsi Gartner’s “Pest Control for Dummies™,” femininity is evaluated from the perspective of the focalizing subject, Jack, the narrator-protagonist who contrasts the images of Daisy and her mother in terms of their physical desirability as opposites – the former representing undesirable form and corresponding ‘mothering’ sensibility Jack secretly desires to reject, whereas the latter’s body is physically less threatening in its emaciated and mastectomized form, symbolically reflecting the failure at her role as a mother. At the level of the narrative discourse, the mother’s blatant disregard for these perceived failures in the role of a mother suggests this particular difference of experience that brings into question the biological basis for the socially, economically, politically and culturally constructed concept of motherhood – supposedly guaranteed by the biological quality of gender. Furthermore, Daisy perceived excess of femininity as reflected in the alluded irrationality (complemented by the nature of her subjective narrative within the story that is a dream-hallucination), the size of her breasts, her appetite, and the contrast against the aggressive and callous character of her mother, also stand to connect this character’s femininity to womanhood, and subsequently motherhood. On the other hand, Jack’s profound insecurity in terms of his masculinity and therefore manhood – ironically represented through the lack of any traits that could relate his behavior to the traditionally or stereotypically understood male experience – indirectly comments on the concept of fatherhood. For one, Jack’s affection and care are pragmatic, and the sense of empathy he displays remains within the scope of the social performative imposed on him by his environment. At the same time, it is this imposition that seems to preclude the expression of his subjective experience. At the closure of the story, confronted by the prospect of fatherhood, Jack is paralyzed and unable to express his existential reaction – the existential *no* at the face of the undesired proposition that is, contextually, socially and culturally appropriate and desired because he is unconsciously refusing to step out of the framework of his relationship in which instead of the relation of partnership, Jack and Daisy, perform the roles of child and mother, respectively. In Clea Young’s “Split,” the parallel between the body as the biological basis for the socio-cultural conception of femininity and womanhood, and motherhood, is drawn to expose the symbolic defect preventing the protagonist from experiencing the pangs of the instinct expected of her by the wider community of women who seem to share the experience.

It is on this basis that the postmodern critical thought evaluates the phenomenon of the female experience as varied. However, the biological parallel also extends to the protagonist's husband, perceived by Tova as modelled to cradle babies as opposed to her own body – reflected in the perceived split-nipple defect and the image of her best friend's broken-ballerina body. The concept of feminine ethics renders the protagonist of "Split" 'unethical' or less feminine in the absence of care ethics. In the parody of Craig Boyko's "The Baby," Delia is comically represented as irrationally desiring an object onto which she would project affection and care. This irrationality is emanated in the body as Boyko's focus at the opening of the narrative alludes to the mechanics of body parts producing words, and potentially also certain biological impulses. His male protagonist, however, initially rationally resists the impulse and therefore the role of the father, which does not suggest a particular rejection of the presumably shared men's experience, but rather a witty exploration of the stereotype in which men are not *biologically* wired to desire children or eagerly accept the role of the parent – the dichotomy of the irrational and rational, female and male, operating parodically in the background. In the same vein as Gartner's and Young's female protagonists expose the notion of a totalized biological experience as translated into the social and cultural, Boyko parodically hints at the absurdity of the principle, in terms of the male experience. Similarly, in Mahak Jain's "The Origin of Jaanvi," where motherhood is implicitly represented in terms of the traditional and conventional concepts of unconditional love and unbounded care – the protagonist's wife, however, not being the epitome of the traditional feminine type care-ethics-wise – the concept of fatherhood becomes strongly contrasted in the protagonist's internal conflict dealing with the question of whether, indeed, blood – the biological connection shared between the parent and the child – is the basis for establishing a relationship. What is more, the symbolism of the biological is additionally contrasted to the protagonist's, father's, pragmatic attitude towards affection, guided by the idea that it is not biology that is relevant for the survival of the species, but economy. In Gartner's "Summer of the Flesh Eater," the roles of women and men are reversed to the point of satire, and the satirical effect is only possible due to the socio-cultural qualities behind the conceptions of femininity and masculinity, womanhood and manhood, and motherhood and fatherhood. The men, symbolically located in the cul-de-sac, are represented as the primary guardians of the all-male children, whereas the wives are the ones concerned with careers. Their interests, skills and behavior are contrasted to the culturally established normative with regard to masculinity and manhood as these men are enclosed in the domain of the private – the home and

house – and operating within the traditionally female space of domesticity in which they find themselves neglected, ignored, isolated, ridiculed and ultimately threatened by the rampant and uncontained masculinity of the new neighbor. Apart from being brilliantly witty, Gartner's reliance on the parodic original being sourced in biology provides a thought-provoking alternative to the socio-cultural norms of patriarchy, but more importantly, it explores the culturally established discourses' power over individuals as their space becomes limited in the performative scope of their role. In Thammavongsa's "Mani Pedi," the former boxer's sister, the owner of the nail salon, represents the cultural amalgam of the suggested traditional Asian family model and a liberal (Canadian) one. On the one hand, the woman is the sole provider for the family – a husband and four children, and she is also the safety-net for the unfortunate brother whose health becomes threatened after a long boxing career. On the other hand, she expresses disgruntlement in the context where her brother starts earning more than she, as the owner, and other women working in the salon. Her discontent in this particular context stands for the general working and living conditions of women exposing the unsustainability of the female performative in terms of the economic, social and cultural demands.

In *Rereading Heterosexuality: Feminism, Queer*[57] *Theory and Contemporary Fiction* (2012), Rachel Carrol talks about the "'invisibility' of heterosexuality as a normative category of identity […] its 'unmarked' and 'naturalized' status" (1) which allows its historically inherited discourses to be overlooked, and which allows it, as an "institution" to "[continue] to have immense normative power" (1) not only with regard to the identities external to the cis-normative, but also pertaining to "heterosexual identities which do not conform to familial, marital or reproductive norms" (1). As Carrol suggests, when the invisible power of the heterosexual institution regulates identities within the heteronormative, it controls the perception of the female identity in terms of gender performativity: in the framework of family, marriage and with regard to motherhood. However,

[57] Even though this study does not develop a comprehensive framework within the field of feminist, gender or queer studies, but chooses to consider the selection of short fiction in terms of the general phenomenology pertaining to the explored concepts, queer theory invites for this brief mention due to its phenomenological focus on gender, sexuality and identity. In *Rereading Heterosexuality: Feminism, Queer and Contemporary Fiction*, Carrol defines queer theory as "concerned with questioning the binary structures by which sex, gender and sexuality are conventionally understood, whereby all human persons are required to identify/be identified as either male or female, either masculine or feminine and either heterosexual or homosexual" (2012: 6), but also "with the hierarchical nature of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, [where] this binary is understood as not so much expressive as *constitutive* of heterosexual power" (2012: 6).

Carrol also suggests that the binary opposition between heterosexuality as the dominant mode, and homosexuality, operates as a necessary socio-cultural duality. Heterosexuality "depends on 'homosexuality' in in order to sustain its own identity – or rather the fiction of its own identity" (2012: 6), which is precisely the dynamics Zsuzsi Gartner explores in "Summer of the Flesh Eater" in rendering the six men's masculinity, as the apparent precondition of male heterosexuality, questionable and profoundly indeterminate at the level of representation, while forcefully insisting on it at the level of the narrative discourse. Carrol suggest that this dynamic operates as a playfield in which the heteronormative defines itself against the very existence of its perceived opposition, homosexuality, by striving to "repress or erase the latter's existence" (2012: 6), by which, ironically, the very "recognition of the 'incoherence' of heterosexuality significantly qualifies any assumptions about its power" (2012: 6). In "Monsoon Season," the protagonist's father's reaction to his then-son's homosexuality is the expulsion from his own space – the home, and the mother's reintroduction to her now-daughter involves hiding her from her friends. This usurpation of the heteronormative space is inverted in "Summer of the Flesh Eater" since the indeterminate men are usurped by the unwavering masculinity of the *barbarian*. In "The Perfect Man for My Husband," however, the heteronormative discourse is not only expulsed from the space of the married couple's home, but also from their marriage, and ironically so, in the female protagonist's reaction against her mother's insistent intrusion with the traditional discourse on marriage. In "Split," the homoerotic contemplations of the protagonist invite the further questioning of the construct of the dominant expectations of womanhood and motherhood, and therefore, the heteronormative as institutionalized through the discourses pertaining to gender roles and performativity (motherhood).

In her article "Can Third Wave Feminism Be Inclusive?" (2007), Naomi Zack emphasizes on the problematic perspective behind the essentialist definitions of womanhood as reductionist in the idea that "there was a thing in women that could constitute them as women" (203). The more "realist" (Zack 2007: 203) definitions, as Zack suggests, comprise the varied modalities of experiences as opposed to concentrating on any supposed shared dimensions – regardless of the criteria behind the perceived commonality. These definitions do not reject the possibility of a "universal definition of women" (Zack 2007: 203), nor do they state that "it is futile to posit one thing shared by all women" (Zack 2007: 203). However, in their approach, anti-essentialists "include the difficulty of encompassing the multiplicities of intersections (of race, class, sexuality,

and so forth), lack of a biological foundation of gender, the dangers to agency of social construction accounts, and the shakiness of the postmodern subject" (Zack 2007: 203), which further leads Zack to support the anti-essentialist position that whatever it may be that is a point of commonality in women, cannot be understood in terms of "a substance or essence," nor something inherently biological that could be considered as the determinant of gender (2007: 203).

In terms of the relationship between gender and culture, Zack notices that it is the cultural construct of gender that "[precludes] a universal cultural condition for all women" (Zack 2007: 203), or more specifically, it is the constructed idea of gender that disqualifies the very universality attached to its cultural perception. With regard to the reductionist and one-dimensional basis of such claims, Zack particularly mentions intersex individuals, as well as transgender women, as being assigned or imposed the binary determination on the account of their external biological characteristics at birth, which politically, socially and culturally disqualifies them as women. In Lori McNulty's "Monsoon Season," the narrative of Jess deals with the connection between the culturally and socially prescribed gender identity, and the subjective transformation on the account of the sex-change operation. The changes the protagonist experiences immediately prior to the operation, and in the process of recovery and understanding the very mechanics of the Neo-Vagina she possesses, echo Zack's claim that the presupposed substantial universality of gender is merely a construct. Moreover, what the narrative of Jess in "Monsoon Season" also hints at, is the particular dimension of the culturally and socially determined constructs of femininity and womanhood, and that is its aesthetic dimension. More specifically, what pertains to the body, as perceived by the cis-normative, and from both the female and male perspective as related by the characters of Jess' mother and the doctor performing the surgery, but also other transgender women, seeks authenticity in the aesthetic appeal of the external presentation, exposing a certain hierarchical structure within the very gender-perspective that involves an evaluative aesthetic edge in terms of genitalia, body and facial hair, as well as voice. Jess is almost negatively acknowledged as a woman by another woman, her mother, in terms of femininity and aesthetic appeal, and against the mother's perception of her own declining womanhood – apparently a temporary category according to the aesthetic criterion. The narrative discourse in "Monsoon Season" comments on the notion of being a woman outside of the gender defined roles. Neither the protagonist, nor her mother, appear to qualify for the membership to the group considering their own conceptions of what it requires and entails. More specifically, the mother – already a mature woman, possibly

middle-aged – whose looks seem to be in decline according to the protagonist, is left by her husband, which deprives her of the traditional domestic role she seems attached to. This impacts her identity as a woman in terms of the cultural perception of her womanhood – her desirability, and especially so against the context of her age. Additionally, the social standing of her womanhood is impacted by her son's initial gayness, and her now daughter's full transition into the female body, again, against the background of her being substituted by a younger woman. She, however, reluctantly fulfills the role of mother to Jess observing her as someone alien due to the changes to her physical appearance, including the voice, but mostly because of the genitalia that, as she claims, do not make a woman (McNulty 2014: 11). It is the cognitive dissonance that occurs when the mother is 'reintroduced' to her now-daughter, and the emotional resistance to Jess' new identity, that functions to expose this woman's crisis with regard to her own female identity. The fragility of the socio-cultural construct of womanhood is exposed when the mother herself asks, "Am I not enough woman?" (McNulty 2014: 19), alluding to the fragmentation of the socially and culturally constructed identity in the aftermath of her failed marriage. The mother, almost tragically, recognizes that her "son is prettier than [her]" (McNulty 2014: 19) alluding, again, to the dimension of the aesthetic powerfully present in all the female characters in the story – the transgender women and this woman alike – exposing the misogynist premise behind the gender performative that serves to perpetuate the subordination of women through culturally and socially constructed models of perception, and in this particular case, of the body as means to attaining socio-cultural acceptance, but also as an instrument for sustaining existence. Both the female and transgender bodies serve as instruments to achieving economic stability in the process of their exploitation. The surgeon in "Monsoon Season," after all, offers a range of Neo-Vaginas and procedures that would appeal to the aesthetic ideals of contemporaneity, from the male point of view – that would transform these transsexual women into 'perfect' (transgender) women – women whose outward aesthetics go well beyond the faulty biological models. These Neo-Vaginas are presented as *faces* whose shape, size and model of *lips* can be adjusted to the desire of the paying client, or the patient, and they represent more than an accessory to the female identity – a resource, and an asset, to conveniently use the language of economy and *import* any implicatures that might come to mind with the interjection.

Naomi Zack argues that "[being] a woman is […] a relation external to individuals and any individual woman is external to the category that through assignment and identification, defines

her as a woman" (2007: 204). More specifically, Zack introduces the FMP[58] category as relationally shared by all women (2007: 204), regardless of their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, biological gender, etc., thereby bypassing, or altogether rejecting the essentialist idea that it is at the level of biology that women substantially relate. This universality, it seems, is understood more as a state or status in which "[any] woman shares her relation to category FMP with all other women, although she need be neither designated female from birth, nor a biological mother, nor a primary sexual choice of men" (Zack 2007: 204). In those terms, it is the protagonist of "Monsoon Season" that is yet to discover the mode of self-identification to the FMP category since she is not yet accepted as a daughter, nor desired by men as a woman. Similarly, her mother's identity as a woman undergoes self-scrutiny in the light of her son's sex-change, and particularly in her irresolute stance on being a mother. A similar question is raised in Clea Young's "Split" where the question is not whether Tova, the protagonist can identify with women, but if her inability to relate to the category of motherhood excludes her from the category of women altogether. This particular story explicates the subtle mode by which gender roles are perpetuated according to an exclusive socio-cultural model according to which the triad of femininity, womanhood and motherhood present an unbreakable three-step induction to the group. More explicitly, in "Split," motherhood seems to represent the natural progression from womanhood onto the final socially and culturally desired level of female existence, and it is directly related to the performative defined by the traditional and patriarchal conception of the female gender. Whereas the protagonist in "Split" provides passive resistance to the idea of becoming a mother thereby persisting against social pressure, the female protagonist of "Pest Control for Dummies™" sees motherhood as a means to revitalizing her emotional identity. The points of comparison and contrast between the two stories reveal the presence and absence of the social forces behind this process of induction into motherhood as operating, in the case of "Split" from the angle of the socio-cultural discourse of heterosexual relations, as an external influence; and in the case of "Pest Control for Dummies™,"

[58] In "Can Third Wave Feminism Be Inclusive?" Naomi Zack defined the FMP category as follows: "[What] all women have in common is a relation to the category of human beings who are: designated female from birth, or biological mothers, or primary sexual choices of (heterosexual) men. Call this the FMP (Females, Mothers, Primary sexual choices) category, which is an historical cultural construction that holds universally across cultures and extends back through all recorded history. It is not necessary that any or all women be any or all of the disjuncts of the FMP category. Even if they are any or all of the disjuncts of FMP, it is not that identity that makes them women from a feminist perspective, but the fact that they have a relation to the FMP category as a whole. This relation of being a woman consists of self-identification with the FMP category and/or assignment to it by others in a dual sex-gender system. (Zack 2007: 203)

from the personal angle, the genuine desire of Daisy to explore motherhood, not as a requirement, but a choice, as opposed to her mother who, as insinuated, might have not desired the same.

In conclusion, this brief analysis of the selected contemporary Canadian short stories from the phenomenological feminist perspective raises a number of issues that might be the subject of further studies, and particularly the problematics of the transgender women's identity in relation to the already complex women's question. In its reluctance to encompass differently oriented trends, this chapter hopefully foregrounds the necessity to revise the phenomenological bases of the politically and economically oriented theories, as is potentially achievable in the still developing framework of queer studies.

THE POSTMODERN MIGRANTS

In the first section of the study dealing with the problematics of postmodern theory, criticism and poetics, Terry Eagleton's discussion on the essence of postmodern criticism in *After Theory* figures as the basis against which Linda Hutcheon's insights are weighed. For this reason, it seems redundant to elaborate Eagleton's position on the so-called "postmodern cult of the migrant" (2003: 21), but appropriate to reinstate it once again in the light of the discussion of contemporary Canadian *migrants* featuring the fifteen stories analyzed. The postmodern migrant, in Eagleton's view, is characterized by a general sense of discontinuity with tradition (2003: 21) and allowed the space of co-existence with the more deeply rooted emanations of the Western culture by the nature of capitalist politics and global consumerist culture. This particular criticism addresses the supposed irreverence perceived in postmodern incredulity, ethical uncertainty and doubt in general. As Hutcheon suggests in *The Canadian Postmodern*, "[to] make problematic such issues as gender, authority, facts, and subjectivity can obviously lead to a paralyzing skepticism about basic values and categories of belief in literature and in life" (2012: 18), and these are incidentally the values of liberal humanism on which Eagleton builds his criticism against the postmodern critical thought and qualifies postmodernists, among other things, as migrants – aimless, rootless and ungrounded. In contrast, Hutcheon sees this 'irreverent' questioning of the romantic, often academic, conception about liberal humanism as "[offering] a new impetus to questioning in many areas of art and theory today" (2012: 18) by means of exploring that contact zone of the contexts pertaining to contemporaneity and the past in their interaction, and with a self-conscious and self-reflexive attitude, both in terms of the production and reading of texts (2012: 17). In this contrastive or comparative interrogative process, postmodern literature "[turns] to those forms that can accentuate difference, especially in the face of a mass culture that tends to homogenize or obliterate anything that does not seem to fit" (Hutcheon 2012: 18), which is, ironically, what the main point of condescension of Eagleton's criticism addresses. This postmodern impulse to locate the point of *difference* – as Derrida would initially define it, as the byproduct or *ce qui arrive* on deconstructing a text – finds its expression in Canadian postmodern literature in specific forms. Hutcheon notices these "new forms […] that embody ethnicity and the female" (2012: 18), and in the case of contemporary short fiction selected for this study, encompassing the period between 1999 and 2016, gender and gender identity remain in the focus, exploring cultural conflicts produced by the internal tension of the artifice of the concepts themselves and the social

performatives derived from them. Hutcheon notes that "we can *know* today only through its documents, its traces in the present" (2012: 22), suggesting that, "our knowledge of the past is something constructed (or even re-constructed)" and that therefore, "its meaning cannot be eternal and is certainly not unchangeable" (2012: 22), which postmodernism foregrounds in all its critical instances.

In *The Canadian Postmodern*, Hutcheon identifies as momentous "[the] relationship between the national search for a cultural identity and the feminist seeking for a distinctive gender identity" (Hutcheon 2012: 6), and all against the colonial and dominant culture. This insight extends to contemporary Canadian short fiction, and yet in this particular selection, the focus of feminist criticism takes the form of a phenomenological exploration of gender. In the selected stories of Zsuzsi Gartner's, "Pest Control for Dummies™" and "How to Survive in the Bush," both published in the *All the Anxious Girls on Earth* collection, motherhood and womanhood, respectively, are approached with the view of exploring generational and cultural conceptions of the biological as the basis of gender performative. This is particularly elaborated in Clea Young's split where the perceived physical defect metaphorically defines the resistance to the culturally imposed gender imperative. Similarly, in Lori McNulty's "Monsoon Season," it is the aesthetics of femininity that are examined against the concept of womanhood as the transgender woman's sex operation opens a set of questions, the most problematic of which being that of what it means to be a woman. However, in "Hashtag Maggie Vandermeer," Nancy Jo Cullen indirectly reminds the reader that feminism must deal with the economic conditions of women. More specifically, she considers womanhood in the context of ageism in liberal capitalism, as the protagonist is imprisoned by her own internalization of discourses pertaining to a different time, the past, and is therefore unable to reinforce her personal or professional identity to correspond to the demands of contemporaneity. Paradoxically, however, those same discourses are observed operating in contemporaneity, in the narrative, with a different exclusionary modality. In "The Perfect Man for My Husband," Andrew MacDonald's protagonist's femininity and womanhood are explored in the context of her husband's homosexuality. In attempting to suppress her femininity in order to become more attractive for her husband, the protagonist brings into question the aesthetic basis behind the notions of femininity and masculinity, and implicitly evaluates them against the background of stereotypical representations, both in the heterosexual and homosexual contexts. Moreover, MacDonald takes the female protagonist's insights contrasts them to the traditional

conceptions of marriage and the heterosexual normative. Under this *insider's* magnifying glass, from the perspective of a heterosexual woman, the fragility of the discursive construct in the face of *difference* is revealed, and in this specific case, its decisive rejection in the name of genuine sentiment goes against the socio-cultural performative, placing the female protagonist in an undefined space, in dislocation or removal from tradition. In "Mercy Beatrice Wrestles the Noose," K'ari Fisher's character of the faith-driven ghost-mother fuses the aesthetics of the feminine and masculine in a representation of a petit woman with masculine features, forearm hair, pathologically sucking on a cigarette (Fisher 2015: 14) – her religious background heavily weighing down the protagonist, Mercy Beatrice, and serving as a point of departure from tradition. It must be noted that the world of K'ari Fisher's story seems to be populated by particularly eccentric characters, among which there is the giant dark-haired female-wrestler, Paula Pocahontas, and the protagonist herself – all existing in a liminal space where such oddness does not seem exotic or *different*, until it is contrasted to the uniform discursive image of urban life as progressive, or rural as eccentric in its own manner yet retaining a certain romantic or idealistic appeal, as depicted in the storyworld of Zsuzsi Gartner's "How to Survive in the Bush."

In discussing the "shared themes of powerlessness, victimization, and alienation" in Canadian postmodern writing, "a certain ambivalence or ambiguity that makes both Canadians and women open, tolerant, accepting, yet also at times angry and resentful" (Hutcheon 2012: 6), Hutcheon seconds Lorna Irvine's comment that "the female voice 'politically and culturally personifies Canada'" (in Hutcheon 2012: 6). Undoubtedly, Hutcheon sees Canadian writing at the end of the twentieth century as a dialogical space with acute awareness of its discourse production. It is a space where "liberal-humanist notions of art as original and unique, notions that are tied up with (male) notions of individual subjectivity" (Hutcheon 2012: 7) are openly challenged and revised – deconstructed – in the light of contemporaneity, and with the inclusion of the traditionally, historically, politically or socially marginalized counteracting discourses. It is in this specific oppositional, yet not necessarily confrontational, tension – through irony and parody – that "the (male; British/American) canonical texts of our culture, both 'high' and popular" (Hutcheon 2012: 7) are challenged. Hutcheon notes that this subversion of power and authority is achieved via subversive use of language, "the major issue in the general history of decolonization, whether in terms of gender or of nationality" (2012: 7). With the use of irony and parody, essentially, postmodern critical approach refuses to bind itself to an ethical center that produces conclusions

reminiscent of those it explores, even if it provides grounds for critics to label this absence of ‘ethics’ a migrant-cult. The extensive use of irony and parody does not negate cultural, or the continuity of tradition – its aesthetic standards or value judgments as the basis for the reality experienced. What it does negate is the universal validity of such postulates and the impossibility of their modification.

To digress temporarily to Nancy Walker and her study, *Feminist Alternatives: Irony and Fantasy in The Contemporary Novel by Women* (1990), postmodern interrogation emphasizes revision as a mode of salvaging that which remains of use in the present. In the light of the analyses of the contemporary short stories selected for this study, Walker’s insight that “[another] type of revision of history [that] is the revision of one’s personal history” (32) comes to support the claim here that these contemporary stories investigate the traditional and the historical in their own moment by allowing for *dominant* to be represented as the covert counteracting voice. Walker notes:

> One of the most pervasive devices in the contemporary women’s novel is the dual narrative voice that represents a duality of consciousness – the second, usually first-person voice interprets, adjusts, revises the initial story. The effect is to reinforce the fact that we invent our own stories, trying to find a coherent pattern. (1990: 32)

Even though Walker explores the novel for this trend in women’s writing, it is observable in the short story as well, to the degree provided by the prose medium, understandably. The short story genre’s mechanism preventing it from excessive elaboration, such revisionist moments in these stories are often the anticlimactic substitutes for the epiphany of the modern denouement. Young’s “Split” overtly investigates its own narrative progression with a revisionist streak, and so does Boyko’s protagonist in “The Baby” in the parody of style. Gartner’s “How to Survive in the Bush” creates its own *herstory* by allowing for the voices of the historical figures of women to bring their own socio-cultural baggage of tradition to be examined and, ultimately, rejected by the protagonist of contemporaneity. McNulty’s protagonist in “Monsoon Season” and McDonald’s female protagonist of “The Perfect Man for My Husband” reject their mothers’ legacies, and remain somewhat unrooted in contemporaneity. On the other hand, Thammavongsa’s protagonists, the two siblings in “Mani-Pedi,” internalize the legacy of their parents’ traditional perception of the social verticality and cultural restrictions and remain equally bound to the margins as those who

reject it – a postmodern paradox, apparently. Furthermore, what Walker also notices is that "[the] pervasive use of irony and fantasy as narrative devices in the contemporary novel by women [calls] into question assumptions about identity, gender, relationships, and women's potential and achievements" (1990: 36), which has been discussed, perhaps excessively, in the previous chapters. However, this is reiterated since Walker brilliantly notes that the use of irony is emblematic of the alternative, used to "[point] to a contrast between conventional surface reality and the possibility of another set of truths" (1990: 36), which complements the discussions in the individual analyses of the selected stories.

Moreover, such subversive language play is found in Zsuzsi Gartner's "Summer of the Flesh Eater," where two canonical texts are provocatively used to explore the conceptions behind gender performative, and the tension between tradition and contemporaneity brought to escalation in the process. Similarly, in "How the Grizzly Came to Hang in the Royal Oak Hotel," McConvey exposes the power of public discourse and the power-dynamics on the relation of economy and politics, as individual human and animal lives, both equally expendable, are utilized for the advancement of personal or public interests under the guise of traditional narratives of patriotism, service and duty. In that context, then, perhaps the congressman's mouth chewing on the narrative of patriotism stands to represent an individual rooted in tradition against the character of the protagonist – a disillusioned, exploited and economically threatened man – a migrant, which is particularly problematic as a term in the context of contemporaneity. Additionally, McConvey uses the character of the congressman, exposing his 'savior', Jesus Christ-rhetoric, to generalize the economic and political issues and allegorically relate them to the exploitative neo-liberal capitalist politics in which human lives become expendable in the pursuit of the economic interests of those in power.

The *migrant* use of irony and parody can be related to how Hutcheon sees this dialogical phenomenon in the space of literature, "in Canada and elsewhere," and that is as a response "to common social provocations" (2012: 18). These social concerns or *provocations*, as Taylor and Winquist suggest in *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, involve experiences emerging at the border between the liminal and the centralized as "themes of dislocation, identity, selfhood and transmission of culture" (2001: 219) where the impulse of the dominant culture to totalize and assimilate finds a counteracting force, or at least recognizes it. This conflict or "the negotiations

of straddling two or more cultural identities" (Taylor & Winquist 2001: 219) becomes particularly visible in Jain's "The Origin of Jaanvi" and Thammavongsa's "Mani Pedi."

In "The Origin of Jaanvi," Santosh Mistry's conflicting identities as an ethnic Indian and a Canadian, a scientist and a man married to a religious woman, play out dramatic internal struggles in which he finds himself *different* at the biological level – with all the external factors, including the color of his skin, the religiosity he unwillingly takes part in on one occasion, the failure to understand the social dynamics of people and fish, only intensifying it. Due to the open-ended nature of the narrative, it is inconclusive whether the protagonist's internal conflicts might be resolved against the conflicting background of the cultural, social and intellectual differences brought on by the arranged marriage with a woman he feels rejected by and rejects, and the newborn daughter who once again threatens to shake the fragile foundations of his cultural and social identity – being healthy and biologically unlike her father. In "Mani Pedi," Thammavongsa leaves the two siblings in the perpetual role of observers of other people's happiness as they share in the sentiment that their social, cultural and educational background separates them from those who they provide service for, and profoundly. The protagonist, exoticized by the female clients frequenting the nail salon, remains in his marginal role and limited space – once a minor inconvenience on other boxer's road to winning, and now a revitalizing agent in other people's lives – with his own aspirations sustained in the realm of daydreaming, and his sister, similarly stuck in the dual-cultural performatives, serving the function of a reminder that the designated social and cultural spaces, albeit the contact zones, remain intransgressible.

Gendered Humor or Naught?

In *Double Voicing the Canadian Short Story*, Laurie Kruk terms "[the] ability to speak in a double voice […] intrinsic to expression within a subordinate culture, whether such subordination is due to gender, race, class, sexuality, nationality, or any other position" (2016: 2). Additionally, as already discussed, similarly to Shen who observes the narrative progression in the short story as intrinsically doubled – guided by the surface narrative (discourse) and the covert narrative import, Kruk finds 'double voicing' to be the defining feature of contemporary Canadian short fiction, encompassing the voices of the *mosaic* in their interrogation of their identities, against the

background of the counteracting discourses, or rather, as the counteracting discourses of the dominant culture.

In the selection of contemporary Canadian short stories in this study, the narratives of the protagonists, focalized from their own character-voice, internal to the narrative world and shaped by the *covert* import of the referential reality, depict such moments when individual experiences become visibly disparate against their own or others' preconception of the shared experience. The mundane socio-cultural dynamics, directly or indirectly, comes to be challenged against the background of the totalizing discourses striving to unify the individual experiences, and it is in these conflicts that the characters, either in terms of revealing the mechanisms enforcing generalizing views, or in terms of illustrating exceptions that undermine the stereotype as internalized or institutionalized in the discourse and practice, explicate and illustrate the invalidity of the philosophical notion of universality.

To digress to the introduction to this section and the issue raised by Terry Eagleton's insistence that the ungrounded postmodern critical thought pursues *difference* to the point of utter *in*difference. More specifically, to the implication of Eagleton's claim, discussed in the first section of this study, that the postmodern impulse for relentless interrogation of the liberal humanist ideals only dangerously relativizes such traditional, philosophical and ideological, and aesthetic, propositions that have served as the foundation for Western cultures, and creates the atmosphere in which any socio-political consensus becomes impossible. However, as already discussed, what Eagleton sees as political consensus borders uniformity in terms of recognizing the validity of the liberal humanist ideological constructs as universal. This position is understandable due to the implicit fear that the loss of the notion of the validity of the liberal humanist discourse would devalue or destroy the foundations of the Western myth of socio-political progress. However, it also reveals the recognition that – institutionalized and internalized – perpetuated in the discourses of modernity and contemporaneity as universal, liberal humanist values ultimately are merely constructs, already fragile under the weight of the proliferate postmodern currents and their sub-currents, positive and negative. It is not that the postmodern critical approach seeks to devalue the liberal humanist or modernist legacy by placing it in the context of *difference* thereby explicating its 'local' value, but it seeks to find the modes in which it could be modified to include the *ex-*

centric – to phenomenologically recognize the validity of the multiplicity of experience. In this sort of problematization, Hutcheon sees:

> [the] potential for change that postmodern fiction can exploit and expose. In trying to unsettle our unexamined convictions about the status of fact and truth, it sets up a new tension between the fictive and the historical. But it does not do this in order to debunk or to exalt either one. (Hutcheon 2012: 22)

It is for that very reason that irony becomes so extensively employed in postmodern literature – its mode of positioning oppositional forces within the same context provides the ethical attitude of postmodern inquiry in not allowing for the centralizing forces of ideology to exclude one or another. Irony is, at its core, de-centered.

In *The Canadian Postmodern*, Linda Hutcheon sees irony and parody as the "major forms of both formal and ideological critique in feminist and Canadian fiction alike" (Hutcheon 2012: 7) because these modes prevent the producer of the text – the author or reader – to be "totally co-opted by that culture" (Hutcheon 2012: 7). What Eagleton finds unethical in the postmodern attitude – the implicit adherence to the socio-cultural and political discourse being criticized, which is at the same time a highly hypocritical accusation – is the very reason Hutcheon sees irony and parody as effective critical instruments:

> The irony and distance implied by parody allow for *separation* at the same time that the doubled structure of both (superimposition of two meanings or texts) demands recognition of *complicity*. (2012: 7)

In *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*, Nancy Walker investigates humor as a typically male privilege in literature, or rather, she observes it in terms of the differences in the cultural models and gender identity that affect individual and idiosyncratic manifestations of humor. Walker argues that humor with female authors remains strongly linked to their position in society and aimed at the political sphere which renders the use of such humor highly rebellious. Their humor, therefore, is an instrument of advocacy, and as such, Walker notices that it is based almost exclusively on subverting stereotypes which are gender-motivated,

or pertain to the gender normative in society (1988: x), exposing the rigidity in the traditionally constructed images of women.

In the selection of contemporary Canadian short fiction, with nine out of thirteen authors being women, humor most visibly features as the side-effect of extensive use of irony, but also sarcasm and parody. However, in Jessica Grant's "My Husband's Jump," Zsuzsi Gartner's "Pest Control for Dummies™," "How to Survive in the Bush" and "Summer of the Flesh Eater," Lee Henderson's "Conjugation," Julie Roorda's "How to Tell if Your Frog Is Dead" and Andrew MacDonald's "The Perfect Man for My Husband" humor is also located at the semantic level. In Grant's story specifically, it is at the level of discourse of the female protagonist who does not necessarily go against the gender-defining norm, but does somewhat extend her feminist arguments against the index of gender. The protagonist of "My Husband's Jump" deals with the instability of the discourse – in the general sense, and the particular – as her pursuit in the narrative goes towards comprehending that which is ultimately outside of the scope of discourse. Nevertheless, it is at this very level, of discourse, in interaction with other characters, that she exposes the semantic instability and the ideology-imbued nature of discourse directed at her – in the form of puns, semantic play and pure sarcasm. Furthermore, it is in those instances when she is disregarded on the basis of her gender, that she responds by subverting the semantics of the discourse. However, Grant's protagonist's sarcastic subversion of language remains intentionally humoristic creating what Walker terms the "delicate balance between power and powerlessness" (1988: 9). Similarly, the female protagonist of MacDonald's "The Perfect Man for My Husband" acquires access to that same dimension of discourse that becomes subverted by her puns. On the one hand, this character's self-deprecating humor does reflect on the notions pertaining to gender and gender-identity, which, in contrast to the protagonist of Grant's story, provides a more specifically defined perspective. On the other hand, her sarcastic take on the traditional notions of marriage and love merely complement the ironic humor extended by her attitude towards the terminal disease of her husband and her life falling apart slowly. In Gartner's "How to Survive in the Bush," humor is the mode of self-reflexive identity probing, and the particular self-deprecating moments pertain to the protagonist's exploration of the traditionally conceptualized performative of the female gender – her feminist perspective is clearly defined against the symbolical background contrast between the urban and rural spaces as related by the parodied sources. On the other hand, in "Pest Control for Dummies™" and "Summer of the Flesh Eater," humor is found

in the discourses of the male protagonists, or rather the male narrators and focalizing subjects whose (potentially unintentional or spontaneous) self-deprecation emerges upon introspection, in the former, and retrospective insight in the latter. In both stories, such humor addresses the male identity – masculinity and manhood – as contrasted to the stereotypical socio-cultural ideal, and in the case of "Summer of the Flesh Eater," also against the almost satirical characterization of the parodied male referred to as Lucy, 'the missing link'.

Discussing certain feminist positions claiming that the female voice is always present in writing in the form of gender identity defined perspective, Walker suggests that female authors' humor might well be perspective-neutral, "simply human" (1988: 173). More specifically, Walker claims, in "parody and word play" (1988: 173), the female voice does not necessarily acquire the dimension that pertains or refers to gender identity or normative. Zsuzsi Gartner's "Summer of the Flesh Eater," a parody relating at least three sources in the story world in which gender roles, at least for the duration of that particular summer, are reversed, does indeed echo a female voice specifically because of the role reversal. On the other hand, Julie Roorda's vignette – somewhat parodic in terms of style – does not necessarily relate a gendered perspective. Unarguably, the sensibility of the narrative, its sensitivity to the political correctness and inclusiveness, could suggest a possibility of the narrator being a woman, and yet without any additional information, Roorda's narrator remains outside any visible gender norm.

In *The Psychology of Humor*, Martin suggests that humor is used for "exploring our social environments in order to determine the values, attitudes, knowledge, emotional states, motives, and intentions of others" (2007: 117), and therefore one's positioning within that system. As an instrument for "[self-disclosure and probing] beliefs and attitudes regarding a wide variety of issues, such as political and religious views and attitudes toward people of different ethnicities, nationalities, occupations, or gender" (Martin 2007: 118) humor can be used without directly exposing a personal attitude or inviting its evaluation on the part of others, and in terms of irony, or parody by extension, even when the humorous effect is withheld, opposing or contrasting attitudes may be employed without necessarily expressing bias towards one or the other. In contrast, the same mechanism of oppositional strategy, "can also be used to push the boundaries of social propriety, attack "sacred cows," and rebel against social norms" (Martin 2007: 119). In "Summer of the Flesh Eater," Gartner's character representation, as well as humor at the level of

the narrative discourse produced by the characters, explores how it is that humor “[enforces] social norms and indirectly [exerts] control over others’ behavior” (Martin 2007: 119). The six men of “Summer of the Flesh Eater” stand for a group within the community that “[communicates] implicit expectations and rules concerning the kinds of behavior that are considered acceptable within the group” (Martin 2007: 119). Gartner works to subvert these expectations not only by means of parody – at the level of the narrative in its entirety – but at the level of the discourse as produced by the characters when they understand that their group’s standing has suffered a drop in the ‘food chain’ pyramid. Moreover, Gartner’s playful stereotype ascription onto the group of men in terms of representing them after contemporary popular-culture inspired homosexual men in cooking, art or other shows, placing them in the domestic and private space, raises the “issues of self-definition and cultural constraints” (Walker 1988: xi) which Walker sees as the “central concerns of women” (1988: xi). Along with, of course, providing the space for the reevaluation of the conventional perception of masculinity, and especially so in contemporaneity when women’s gender role performative seems to be only accruing additional dimensions in the light of the equality and not equity, Gartner’s feminist approach to this ‘endangered’ manhood exposes the mechanisms participating in the construction of the socio-cultural discourse as drawing on the traditional and untenable models in contemporaneity.

Humor, according to Walker, is a “serious thing” (1988: 7) since in female authors it stands as “an index to women’s roles and values” (1988: 6) and in relation to the socio-cultural reality, sourced in “the tension between intellect and femininity, male and female ‘separate spheres,’ women’s status as a minority group, and the transforming power of a feminist vision” (1988: 7). The “humorist,” Walker argues:

> […] is at odds with the publicly espoused values of the culture, overturning its sacred cows, pointing out the nakedness of not only the Emperor, but also the politician, the pious, and the pompous. For women to adopt this role means that they must break out of the passive, subordinate position mandated for them by centuries of patriarchal tradition and take on the power accruing to those who reveal the shams, hypocrisies, and incongruities of the dominant culture. (1988: 9)

However, the contemporary selection of short fiction here, written by female authors, does not seem particularly interested in assaulting any 'sacred cows' using humor only. More precisely, the comic appears on rare occasions, and such are still enveloped in irony or sarcasm. With regard to this, Walker, however, emphasizes that "women tend to be storytellers rather than joke tellers" (1988: xii), and she observes women's humor in terms of a mode of communication, "a sharing of experience" rather than "a demonstration of cleverness" or "self-presentation" (1988: xii). In those terms, the absence of absurdity or humor for its own, entertaining, sake, correlates with the subversive use of language that is targeted at the "absurdities that women have been forced to endure in […] culture" (Walker 1988: xii), and this mode of expression provides "a subtext of anguish and frustration" (Walker 1988: xii).

In Grant's "My Husband's Jump," the protagonist expresses her discontentment at the preposterousness of the allusions at her being the cause of her husband's mysterious and impossible failure to land on the account of her gender role – the wife. Her sarcasm and puns, however, remain an expression of powerlessness as they mostly go unnoticed by those who she addresses, and the socio-cultural dimension unmasked for its covert misogyny, among other things. Similarly, in Gartner's "Pest Control for Dummies™," humor is employed to defer the course of discourse from trauma to insight when Daisy merely ponders her mother's potential contentment at the idea of her flushing out the hallucinated talking-fetus of her brother from her body, symbolically her mother's wombs as well, by means of vomiting (Gartner 2000: 83).The most poignant feminist criticism relies on the use of irony that does not necessarily carry any humor in its interrogative vehicle, with Clea Young's "Split" being the most illustrative of the feminist concern for the body as inscribed with socio-cultural and political burdens of patriarchy. Zsuzsi Gartner, particularly in "How to Survive in the Bush," does sacrifice the cow of the Canadian enduring treatment of the rural landscape in literally allowing her protagonist to run away and return to the urban jungle as the new trope of life, and does so with the use of relieving, ironic and sarcastic humor. Lori McNulty exposes the commodification of the female genitalia as conducive to the perpetuation of the unsustainable aesthetic ideals pertaining to femininity and applied to women – all of those who relate to the category, transsexual, transgender or those actually born with vaginas – and the quality of humor found in this narrative relates indirectly to female humor. The sarcasm, puns and witty remarks in the discourse of Jess, the protagonist, are more related to the subculture of the drag community where banter – the tea and shade – flow as a sociolinguistic

register. However, the very form of the expression is problematic since it profoundly and intentionally relies on the most abhorrent stereotypical propositions about women, as internalized by the drag community, with the emphasis on body shaming[59]. Nevertheless, the very use of this form of deprecating humor, complements McNulty's exploration into womanhood as a construct perceived by a transgender woman. Nancy Walker particularly argues that "a dominant theme in women's humor is how it feels to be a member of a subordinate group in a culture that prides itself on equality, what it is like to try to meet standards for behavior that are based on stereotypes rather than on human beings" (1988: x). In McNulty's "Monsoon Season" this membership to what Zack defines as FMP equals martyrdom from the point of view of the narrating protagonist in terms of womanhood and motherhood (McNulty 2014: 11) since Jess sees her mother as a passive woman, ultimately restrained by the conventional understanding of her own gender identity. And yet, the issue that lurks behind the likeable character of Jess, easily overlooked due to the foregrounded matter of her own transgender identity, becomes more evident in her drag-banter with her mother. On the one hand, Jess' humor does stand as the index to her socio-cultural role – oppressed due to her sexuality and transsexual identity as Teddy; but on the other, the oppression itself does not

[59] I refrain from further discussion on the nature of the register of the subculture since McNulty provides very little material in the story, and relevant academic literature appears to be scarce. However, the topic invites research on the nature of the drag – transsexual – community's appropriation of the narrative of the female empowerment by, in turn, re-appropriating the derogative language of the oppressor with regard to female outward aesthetics in general. This is to say, by identifying as women, transsexual women adopt the discourse of oppressed marginalized women, and in the process of seizing power over the derogative discourse, they use it against each other in what is essentially banter, or the so-called *tea and shade* in popular culture. However, the extensive use of this now-register, popularized by reality television show RuPaul's Drag Race, as well as Netflix series Pose (which provides, however, a much deeper insight into the New York drag scene, culture and activism), unimaginably, becomes re-adopted by other groups of heterosexual women, marginalized and privileged, as a trend. What is ultimately achieved, paradoxically, is a promotion of the discourse of body-positive image for women as encouraged by transsexual women – men who identify as women or women impersonators. Certain feminist trends consider this to be another form of men dispossessing women of their discourse and space, whereas other trends consider the trend necessary in the re-appropriation of language in which, for example, referring to a female friend as a *bitch* liberates the word from its derogative connotation. In reality, it might, in fact, re-enforce the negative meaning or merely disguise the present discriminatory dimension of the discourse. Perhaps some parallels could be drawn to certain terminology supposedly re-appropriated by Black Americans today, pertaining to expressions dating back to the centuries of slavery, which is today used publicly only available to them, but also used to induce a certain type of slapstick humor that is essentially based on stereotypical perception of Black people. Similarly, in the mentioned popular culture shows, the drag community expresses defiance and pride when using the lingo of what appears to be the marginalized group of women, that is, prostitutes. The point of convergence between the two groups, in terms of identification, seems to be that as homosexuals, these transsexuals find themselves in the same position as women whose last resort to existential struggle is prostitution – both groups existing on the very margins of society, being culturally and socially rejected, and having little or no political power. This complex issue will be the topic of further research as it is substantial in the light of the transsexual and transgender activist struggle in Serbia, since transgender are disallowed any political rights after their sex-change operation, which leaves them with little or no means to establish any economic or other stability or independence.

reflect her belonging to whatever is the index of the female identity. In fact, the humor, although revealing of Margaret's failure as a mother, also signifies the position indexing a male perspective, even if the words are uttered by Jess, and not Teddy. This is to say, the biological factor in the internalization of values plays an insignificant role in this situation. Jess' biological gender and sexuality (homosexuality), neither prevents her from internalizing the values of the society that oppressed her, nor does her transgender womanhood change the modality of her perception afterwards.

> "Will you come?"
> "I'm still your mother."
> "Yes, you gave me life and intermittent asthma. What I need now is a pick up at Pearson." (McNulty 2014: 9)

Margaret, the mother of the protagonist, a woman set in her patriarchal role and imbued with, one can assume, the same oppressive energy projected on her by her negligent former husband and Jess' father, rigidly fulfills the role assigned to her on the account of her gender. Jess' perception of her as a "*Martyr Mother* […] A one-woman show," in which she plays "all the parts" (McNulty 2014: 11), reveals Margaret's inability to step outside the identity that is presumably desired by the society emanated in her homophobic and callous husband, which she also ultimately experiences backlashing with him leaving her for a younger woman. It also, however, points to the referent identity Jess, as a transgender woman, both internalizes and conflictingly rejects.

> Jess swings her black bead-and-sequin clutch, satin-lined with a kiss clasp – an unwitting gift from her mother, rescued from a locked box in her walk-in closet. […] Margaret can keep the gorgeous A-line, the gloomy overcast from her thick-bodied Merlot. Every season demands its bold accessories. (McNulty 2014: 20)

Without the comprehension of working within the same modality and framework imposed by the patriarchal society, under the guise of liberality in which sex-change is possible and subcultures thrive, though in their limited spaces, Jess internalizes the perceptions of womanhood transmitted by her mother, and commodifies herself, yet again, with a certain naiveté that a Neo-Vagina would provide her socio-cultural legitimacy – the shape of the flesh being the legitimating element in the discourse, ironically.

In her Preface to *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender and Cultural Critique* (2004), Joanne Gilbert argues that by "'performing' their marginality, social outcasts call attention to their subordinate status" (xi), which implies the commodification of the marginalized experience as a means to "ensure that the dominant culture literally pays a price for this disparity" (xi). Although Gilbert discusses comedians and performers who utilize humor, and frequently the self-deprecating one, the theme of reestablishing one's social and cultural status, and even political, operates in this story as a pseudo-appropriation by the means of sex-change, and the humor serves a double-purpose, on the one hand unmasking the subjugating mechanisms based in the relations of gender, at the level of the discourse of the protagonist in "Monsoon Season," but at the level of the underlying irony – one that is not particularly humorous – it articulates the worldview of the transgender Jess, entangled in the very same network of socio-culturally established symbolic meanings that essentially represent the moment where she, after such a long journey, unaware, finds herself in the same place, playing the very same role.

As already extensively discussed, in Gartner's "Summer of the Flesh Eater," it is the men who are placed in the subordinate group within the community, and it is this comic reversal of roles that enables Gartner to *turn the tables*. With regard to this, Walker notices that humor is essentially "at odds with the conventional definition of ideal womanhood" (1988: 11) because of the traditional understanding of the female as passive, and thereby subordinate. This particular relation of power translates itself into a textual strategy in female humor on "two levels, one that appears to endorse popular stereotypes of women, and another that points to the origins of these stereotypes in a culture that defines women in terms of their relationships with men" (Walker 1988: 11), which is precisely the manner in which this selection of contemporary Canadian short fiction uses irony and parody to problematize the various socio-cultural phenomena in the contact zones of interpersonal relationships and incompatible discourses.

Nancy Walker also notices the relation between women's historically and culturally perceived inferiority in terms of intellect, "reason and analytical thought" (1988: 80) remaining in the domain of men. She suggests that women being historically "ascribed the qualities of intuition, feeling, and morality" (Walker 1988: 80) also serves as the basis for the production of humor that explicitly targets this "increasing separation of male and female 'spheres'" (Walker 1988: 80) in which women's humor works to usurp precisely those positions of authority that have been historically

denied to them. If Zsuzsi Gartner's "Summer of the Flesh Eater" is interpreted with the premise that the female author's parodic, and occasionally satirical, representation of male characters – standing for reputable, respectable and sophisticated intellectual elite – is intentional, then certainly Gartner's humor carries a subversive feminist dimension within its narrative, one beyond the hilarious, engaging and comical rendition of a group of men usurped by excessive masculinity, or their own ignorance. Furthermore, Walker suggests that the female voice needs to be assessed in terms of "two seemingly contradictory factors" (1988: 170) – the first being the "extent to which the female voice and the uniqueness of women's gender experience is revealed in the works" and "the way in which the humor of both women and men, taken together, demonstrates changes in values, attitudes, institutions, and tastes in the culture itself" (1988: 170). From the point of view of the former, the literary standpoint, as defined by Walker, the stories of Gartner, Young, McNulty, Cullen and Fisher do provide authentic insight into the female experience. The individual analyses of the stories purposefully do take into account the specific manners in which these narratives of women by women are focalized and narrated. The analysis on the formal level focuses on the use of irony as the vehicle for producing a very particular effect, but it is nevertheless dependent on the voice and perspective – the entity in the narrative relating the irony. In *Double Voicing the Canadian Short Story*, Laurie Kruk emphasizes that in the short story "[voice] is highlighted, whether that be the voice of the narrator, characters, or implied author, all combining to make up what [she calls] the 'voice of the story'" (2016: 4). Now, in the light of Walker's previously mentioned cultural perspective (the latter) – the intersection or point of divide between the perspectives pertaining to irony between female and male authors – with Boyko, Henderson and McConvey, all focalizing male characters, the irony relates a somewhat self-deprecating attitude in terms of the focalizing perspective, and it is strongly critical of the discourse pertaining to men, women featuring the story only episodically. However, in the narrative of MacDonald, "The Perfect Man for My Husband," the protagonist-narrator is a peculiar female character – a woman whose husband's coming to terms with the terminal state of cancer and impending death coincides with his coming-out to her, moving her to find him a perfect man so that he could have the experience before he dies. Similarly, McNulty's protagonist is a transgender woman – aware of her male psyche – in the process of comprehending how the sex-operation changes her identity, from transsexual to transgender – a complex process revealing the problematics of the hybridization of identity under the influence of socio-cultural pressure of the

mainstream discourse on sexuality, but also the implicit discourse of at least two subcultures encompassed by the narrative.

Walker's conclusion at the outset of the twentieth century that "[contemporary] women's humor continues to provide a critique of the culture in ways that both continue the tradition of the past and reveal a gradually evolving sense of equality and self-worth" (1988: 171) remains relevant at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and in the light of the selected contemporary Canadian short fiction, it becomes clear that women authors' focus remains on the questions pertaining to gender, female identity, sexuality and gender performatives, and that their critical aspiration – with or without the use of irony and parody as the vehicle – takes for its objects particularly those historically perpetuated myths pertaining to the essence of femininity, womanhood and motherhood. Their vehicle of criticism might be subtle, as is the case of Jain's "Origin of Jaanvi" in which the clear separation of male and female spheres and culturally established stereotypical notions figure as the backdrop for the pragmatic male-scientist; or in Thammavongsa's "Mani Pedi" in which the story of the protagonist's sister figures powerfully in remaining untold, implicit and yet inferred clearly from the manner of her representation – oozing the theme of cultural entrapment and internal divide.

In conclusion of this section, I digress for the third time to Terry Eagleton's claim in *After Theory* that postmodern *difference* amounts to nothing other than political catastrophe and possibly chaos, and note that if the postmodern critical thought has showed us anything, it is that perhaps we have not been ready for a modality that was once offered by the narrative of liberal humanism – one implying the categories of the universal – since we have not been awakened to the differences contained in our existence. This might evoke Lyotard's position that postmodernism might be pre-modern in its philosophical attitude, and the previous chapters hopefully argue in favor of that claim. If the postmodern interrogation has explicated anything through its literary manifestation, it is that the condition of being a *postmodern migrant* seems to be a precondition for the defining of authentic personal, national, collective, female or other identity, without rejecting tradition or legacies, but also without accepting their inheritance as an absolute and allowing for the process of their evolution to remain unhindered by that notion.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

After Everything, Theory

Theory has, as John Leitch claims in "Anti-theory," become "a crossover interdiscipline fusing literary criticism, linguistics, philosophy, psychoanalysis, anthropology, sociology, history, and politics" (2018: 350), and one could feel enthusiastic about it expanding its scope and interest. However, the issue at hand is contained in the apparently unsatisfactory answer to the question of what this contemporary theory has to do with Theory.

In Chapter 1 of his study, *Contemporary Fiction: A Very Short Introduction*, Robert Eaglestone notes that "[literature] is where ideas are investigated, lived out, explored in all their messy complexity. […] Literature is how we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves" (2013). Choosing to explore contemporary Canadian short fiction, as a stranger to the lived-Canadianness, and a student of literary and critical theory, doomed hopefully never to reach a position in which the complexities Eaglestone mentions become clear – for that would imply a position that has grounded itself in a philosophical and ideological attitude, the implications of which would only bring failure to any aspirations at teaching literature – I also chose to entangle myself in the vast body of temporally and spatially distant matter of the critical thought of the 1960s, its erratic proliferation over the course of the twentieth century, and culmination with revisionist and regressive theoretical trends in the last thirty years. Undoubtedly, this endeavor, merely the beginning of my own process of understanding what Derrida brilliantly described as *ce qui arrive* in exploring cultural artifacts in the form of narratives, and recognizing ideological traces in our own discourses about it, serves only to describe the context of my *deconstruction* or interpretation of the contemporary texts coming from a culture whose sensibility I have started to learn to understand through its literary production.

The, perhaps, clumsy design of this dissertation – encompassing the philosophical insight of Derrida and his postmodern[60] peers, the discreet academic brawl between Terry Eagleton and Linda Hutcheon[61], the wide-ranging theoretical input feigning academic neutrality, yet mostly

[60] The label is merely provisional, especially considering that the infamy of being postmodern is always retrospectively attributed.
[61] Obviously, this is only a deeply personal impression in the light of their publications at the turn of the century.

corroborating my bias towards the latter, a section vindicating the political dimensions of irony and parody, a number of chapters in which these are explored, and with pleasure, in a selection of contemporary Canadian short fiction with the view of experiencing *their* deconstruction of the culture that both produces this literature and *against* which it comes into existence, and reflections on Canadian culture by Canadians, among others – attempts to elicit insight that could make Canadianness more *intelligible*, but also to produce a discourse that would be continuous with the present body of critical literature on not all, but literary matters Canadian.

In the section of this study dealing with the theoretical complexities behind postmodernism and postmodern poetics, I draw on Linda Hutcheon's insight in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* that postmodern contradictions are only perceived as such – as paradoxical incongruities – when theory and literature are observed as separate from one another (2004: 14). In interpreting literature without the input from its surrounding discourses, one loses the dimension of its origins and interpellation with those discourses participating in its production. On the other hand, observing literature through the lens of authoritative theory and criticism – prescriptive in their own rights, be it ideologically, philosophically, politically, aesthetically or otherwise – is a suppression of the impulse to interpret culture in the first place, among other things. It seems that the latter scenario in which theoretical disagreements viciously and nostalgically revert to seemingly utopian and ideological models has taken place in contemporaneity, and not to mention the call to abandon all theory in favor of different, less elitist, models of criticism – appreciation. As Thomas de Zengotita, and not unproblematically, notes in *Postmodern Theory and Progressive Politics: Toward a New Humanism* (2019):

> It is, *in fact*, up to the educated few to take responsibility for creating the vocabularies that will express anew the values of universal humanism, casting them into idioms adequate to humanity's diversity and to this historical moment. If this looks like a call for reviving Kant's idea of an enlightened vanguard, so be it. (2019: 355)

This author's unpretentious call for a new, evaluated model of "the values of universal humanism," only becomes problematic in the light of Theory's eminent figures, alive or dead in contemporaneity, who do not seem to be able to reach a consensus on what those humanist

universals have been in the first place, or how they have come to evolve into something that needs evaluation, being universal.

To digress to Theory then, in the conclusion to *Contemporary Fiction: A Very Short Introduction*, Eaglestone notes that "[criticism] means […] finding patterns […] in fiction [as] a way in which we become intelligible to ourselves" (2013) – a qualified insight that my short experience teaching literature confirms. With this in mind, this dissertation neither ambitiously claims the authority of truth, any unwavering legitimacy of its value judgments, nor does it purport the quality of any particularly groundbreaking insight. However, it does hold truth to a design intent on the interrogative paradigm – in terms of its object, but also of its own creation.

The structure of the first section of the dissertation, Theory, Criticism and the Schisms, is inspired, though not in a particularly desirable manner, by Terry Eagleton's claim in *After Theory* that "[theory] overshot reality, in a kind of intellectual backwash to a tumultuous political era" (2003: 29), and that "[it] was postmodernism which marked the break here, as both theory and art became conspicuously classless and consumer-friendly" (2003: 69). More explicitly, my initial disagreement with Eagleton's claim that theory has, apparently lost its appeal by becoming a widely open discourse, drove me into the foolishness of this imperfect and incomplete study, at the very least, theory-wise. In my short experience in trying to bring young students closer to the basic notions of what theory stands for, what its application should look like and how, potentially, theory can serve us in elucidating the *meaning* contained within literary works, I have come to the opposite conclusion, the cause of which might be socio-political and cultural – *local* even, or it could be found in my own lack of intellectual capacity to grasp the root of the issue of students fervently refusing to dabble with theory, in whatever form. Theory, at least in Serbian university halls, has not only remained within the reach of a limited group of academicians, an intimidating and discouraging subject to everyone else, but it has been strongly influenced by the mansplaining power of the conservative academic authorities of the late twentieth century, Eagleton included, desperately clutching at the overly-theorized subject matters that not only refuse to be politicized, but simply cannot due to their obsolete and unusable character in contemporaneity[62].

[62] On the other hand, as Eagleton suggests, the issue pertaining to the students' approach to the study of theory denigrates the precious critical practice by opting for deplorable and useless objects of study: "To work on the literature of latex or the political implications of navel-piercing is to take literally the wise old adage that study should be fun. It is rather like writing your Master's thesis on the comparative flavour of malt whiskies, or on the

Furthermore, Eagleton claims that cultural theory at the turn of the century "is somewhat more modest [disliking] the idea of depth […] embarrassed by fundamentals[63]" (2003: 72). Upon the first reading, my encountering this sentence led me to agree with Eagleton, since, indeed, the fundamentals of Theory seem to be substituted by fragmented insights, potentially based in subjective reflections, *petit* theories, discontinuous with Theory. However, what Eagleton actually means by this is that today's cultural theory "shudders at the notion of the universal, and disapproves of ambitious overviews" (2003: 72), by placing its focus on the popular culture production and criticism (appreciation, it might be inferred), by shifting its mind's eye onto contemporaneity.

With this in mind, I turned to the very essentials, realizing that I do not understand what Eagleton means by the word 'theory'. In "Introduction to the Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory" (2011), Michael Ryan explains the concept of theory by no other means that delving into the origin of the term, "[the] word 'theory' derives from the Greek word for vision," and subsequently, "[a] theory proposes ways of seeing or envisioning the world that adds to our knowledge of it" (xiii), and in those terms, Eagleton's attitude is that postmodernists' answer to the question of whether

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phenomenology of lying in bed all day. It creates a seamless continuity between the intellect and everyday life. There are advantages in being able to write your Ph.D. thesis without stirring from in front of the TV set. In the old days, rock music was a distraction from your studies; now it may well be what you are studying. Intellectual matters are no longer an ivory-tower affair, but belong to the world of media and shopping malls, bedrooms and brothels. As such, they re-join everyday life – but only at the risk of losing their ability to subject it to critique" (2003: 3). Granted, Eagleton himself sees little value in criticism and interpretation, even of the literary canon, but does find it appalling that the objects of contemporary production are regarded with enthusiasm at the expense of the objects of the past. With cautious commiseration, it might be suggested that the answer to Eagleton's dilemma, and apparent dread of the anti-theory movement and pesky postmodernists, the question of whether theory indeed could "loosen [up] without […] falling apart" (2003: 37) is found somewhere in between his glorification and derision, in a matter of several pages' distance in *After Theory*, of the self-same philosophers, critics and theorists who have contributed to the development of the postmodern thought. The ambivalence towards these women and men is my point of agreement with professor's attitude in *After Theory* – it is these academics who have planted the seed of doubt in the tenets of the Western thought, and left it at that for posterity to understand, with the monkey of neoliberal capitalism at its back. If Eagleton's disdain for present generations' disinterest in the traditional topics finds counterargument anywhere, it is in the fact that while tending to existential needs, one might find it difficult to deal with high-theory with the same zeal as the Western liberal bourgeoisie. *To be, or not to be Marxist* is not the dilemma, but it seems crucial for the academia to turn away from the hypocrisy of the modernist and Marxist reaction to the economic-political changes of the late twentieth century – the contemporary dilemma of the revisionist theoretical circles in the academia as they set themselves on fire in protest against the unpardonable postmodern interrogation into the liberal humanist philosophy.

[63] In "Anti-theory," John Leitch notes that "[anathema] is theory as multiculturalism, populist cultural studies, ideology critique, speculation, posthumanism, intellectual vanguardism, academic celebrity culture or, worst of all, an interdiscipline engaged in explicit transdisciplinary projects. This is 'big T Theory' swollen with grandiose ambitions, and for the humble editors of *Theory's Empire*, it signals a lamentable degeneration" (2018: 350), and this entire chapter resonates with this perspective.

theory could be "[loosened] without […] falling apart" (2003: 37) is "an unequivocal no" (2003: 37) based on the interpretation of the late twentieth-century theoretical trends that allowed for the penetration of skepticism into his vaguely defined notion of Theory, at least in *After Theory*. More precisely, postmodern theory, in the discussed context, is visionless, therefore irrelevant. Furthermore, Eagleton claims, "[writers] like Barthes, Foucault, Kristeva and Derrida were really late modernist artists who had taken to philosophy rather than to sculpture or the novel" (2003: 65), and it is their "flair and iconoclastic force" and "their [modernist] intimidatory aura" (2003: 65) that separates them from the postmodern, as it seems, mongrels. Moreover, what Eagleton sees as "theory's masochistic delight" (2003: 71), the postmodern plunge into the *difference*, is equated with anti-theory's attempts at disrupting its discourse with the idea that its terminology, its 'floating signifiers', its epistemological center and its emancipatory approach need revision. Granted, anti-theory has done damage to the very concept of Theory, but it has not exceeded its opponents in rendering it abstracted, elusive and impracticable.

In *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Literary and Cultural Theory* (2018), Jeffrey Di Leo notices that "the theory community," already a small one, "is getting smaller" (3), due to a crisis that shows a significant break from the tradition that has guided it (3), in the form of its discourse production, but also application of theory, whatever that means today. Moreover, Di Leo sees its treatment of the objects of interrogation of contemporaneity by these new theorists, starkly contrasted by Eagleton to the generation of the 1960s, as lacking method, or rather as the method "[taking] a backseat to things such as public interest, social and political activism, and ethics […] with an eye toward making the world a better place, rather than avoiding it or trying to deny its existence" (2018: 5), which might be a commentary pertaining to the liberal humanist idea that change takes place in the classroom, in Theory itself. In the light of the decline of liberal humanist dominance, and its failure to enforce its *emancipatory* ambition, perhaps it is precisely the postmodern interrogation of its method that might prove useful in reestablishing those aspects of the "intimidatory aura" (Eagleton 2003: 65) of Theory, once its method has been evaluated and attuned to the conditions of contemporaneity. Di Leo suggests that "the designator 'theory' needs to continue to be used" (2018: 6) since there exists "no other term that adequately captures the 'proliferation' of objects and subjects of critical attention today" (2018: 6).

However, Di Leo's mention of the axiom referring to the proliferation of discourses as signifying "the so-called death of theory" (2018: 6) echoes, among other things, the *intimidation* sensed in Eagleton's reactionary generalizations about the postmodern critical thought and anti-theory. It is pointless to ask why the proliferation of theoretical discourses would stand for the *death* of Theory, since it is obvious that it only pertains to the *death* of what it was by the end of the twentieth-century, in terms of its historical and philosophical, even ideological legacies, but not in terms of discontinuity with Theory, as suggested by Eagleton, and many others. Di Leo recognizes this, and claims that "[not] only is theory not dead – in spite of the recent passing of many of its major progenitors [but] undergoing a 'reinvention' of sorts today" (2018: 6). If it is the postmodern claim that Theory is often found to be elitist confounds critics like Eagleton, Di Leo's commentary on the critical circles of the late twentieth-century should remind us all that the proliferation of discourses – the opening of the doors of Theory to those who had not until that point in time participated in its construction – did not happen by chance. These thinkers, as Di Leo suggests, "attracted, if not also welcomed, dispute" (2018: 5), and "set an impressive high-profile agenda for theory in the late twentieth century" (2018: 5). What happened to this "[encouraged] opposition" (Di Leo 2018: 5) after the 1990s is an excruciating amount of responses to the subjects considered prior. It is absolutely understandable that Theory today sluggishly regurgitates only the capital works of its making since it seems unimaginable that neoliberal existential circumstance, on the one hand, and the academic demand for the hyper-production of texts, on the other, could join to produce any invaluable contribution, or at least, not in terms of quantity that could visibly change Theory's image today, and not in terms of what thinkers like Eagleton consider intimidatingly visionary.

If the postmodern critical thought has brought us any illumination, it is with regard to the realist-rationale instrumental for everyday life today. After all, now that Theory does not pertain to the privileged space of the liberal bourgeoisie, it has to suffer a makeover to fit the contemporary thinker, though they might be *classless*.

> We can never be 'after theory', in the sense that there can be no reflective human life without it. We can simply run out of particular styles of thinking, as our situation changes. With the launch of a new global narrative of capitalism, along with the so-called war on terror, it may well be that the style of thinking known as postmodernism is now

> approaching an end. It was, after all, the theory which assured us that grand narratives were a thing of the past. Perhaps we will be able to see it, in retrospect, as one of the little narratives of which it has been so fond. (Eagleton 2003: 221)

It is unsurprising that Eagleton does not see the potential of the postmodern approach in contemporaneity, or whatever discursive reality we might be considering in this shared context. Postmodernism, after all, offers no utopian hopefulness. Several pages following the one on which Eagleton recognizes that Theory might just survive the insolent surge of postmodern inquiry, and mark it as an anecdotal side-entry in the vast body of 'Theory's Colonial History'[64], he goes on to say that "[nations] or individuals which cannot bring themselves to acknowledge the realities of frailty and failure - that this is what we all start from, and where we all return - are feeble indeed" (2003: 226). In the study in which Eagleton enumerates the failings of practically all theoretical, political, philosophical and ideological positions leading us into the postmodern attitude, he finds it appropriate to talk about the "[intoxication] by [one's] own self-image" (2003: 226), "the enemies of civilization," postmodernists, being apparently lost "in the very act of seeking to preserve it" (2003: 226). Like Eagleton, I too am a great fan of irony, which inevitably renders me liable to unintentionally attracting it into my life[65] and, therefore, I feel compelled to sympathize with the circumstance of his above quoted claims.

As mentioned in the first section of this dissertation, Eagleton observes postmodernism as a "contemporary movement of thought which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence and the possibility of objective knowledge"

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[64] The degree of my impertinence in arguing against Eagleton's position arrives at my own surprise, in deconstructing his text, and hopefully, it will not be understood as disrespectful, but as merely a bias to the interrogative approach. Nevertheless, the impulse to vindicate the *impertinence* invites another moment of illumination, *ce qui arrive* in my own production of this apologetic note, and it pertains to the question of why, in the first place, the mentioned impulse arrives: does it pertain to the socio-cultural position from which I speak? From the disciplined performativity of my gender to judiciously phrase my arguments so as not to relate them as *hysterical*? To the intimidating number of texts the unsuspecting victim of this academic rant has produced to this day? Or to the fact that theorists have stopped arguing their positions, and this comes as a particular shock in the event of dissertation? The coined title, 'Theory's Colonial History' is a postmodernly irreverent spin to the volume Leitch mentions, "Theory's Empire," but it has nothing to do whatsoever with the volume's content, in the context of this study.

[65] Indeed, what happened to civility? "There is something particularly scandalous about radical cultural theory being so willfully obscure. Not because it could reach hordes of the labouring masses if only it used shorter words. It is scandalous because the whole idea of cultural theory is at root a democratic one. In the bad old days, it was assumed that culture was something you needed to have in your blood, like malaria or red corpuscles. Countless generations of breeding went into the way a gentleman could instantly distinguish a sprightly metaphor from a shopsoiled one. Culture was not really something you could acquire, any more than you could acquire a second pair of eyebrows or learn how to have an erection. Civility was what came naturally" (Eagleton 2003: 77).

(2003: 13). His criticism treats postmodern skepticism as an opposition to "truth, unity and progress" (Eagleton 2003: 13), and a celebration of "pluralism, discontinuity and heterogeneity[66]" (Eagleton 2003: 13) against cultural elitism, in favor of cultural relativism. In his treatment of postmodernism, Eagleton specifically notes the significance of Nietzsche's influence on Foucault and Derrida, and particularly sees them as the source of legitimation of the idea that "the world *is* made entirely out of difference" (2003: 15), which is, as he suggests, an excuse for the shift from the "famished" to the "erotic body" (2003: 2), among other trivialities of contemporaneity pertaining to the postmodern "sado-masochism" (2003: 2) in theory – the bane of socialism[67].

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[66] What is particularly unsettling in Eagleton's view of the inclusion of the marginal, the 'democratic' approach of postmodernism in the treatment of culture and Theory itself, is the reactionary attitude as revealed by his sarcasm and detached deprecating interpretation of the feminist movement, and ironically so for many reasons; and the subtle empowering message to the now-marginalized category of the white-European-American male, apparently no longer in control of the rational discourse: "Margins can be unspeakably painful places to be, and there are few more honourable tasks for students of culture than to help create a space in which the dumped and disregarded can find a tongue. It is no longer quite so easy to claim that there is nothing to ethnic art but pounding on oil drums or knocking a couple of bones together. Feminism has not only transformed the cultural landscape but […] has become the very model of morality for our time. Meanwhile, those white males who, unfortunately for themselves, are not quite dead have been metaphorically strung upside down from the lamp-posts, while the ill-gotten coins cascading from their pockets have been used to finance community arts projects." (Eagleton 2003: 13) For reasons unknowable, Zsuzsi Gartner's "Summer of the Flesh Eater" comes to mind.

[67] Known for his partiality to Marxism, Eagleton, however, notes that "[it] is a mistake […] to believe that norms are always restrictive. In fact, it is a crass Romantic delusion. It is normative in our kind of society that people do not throw themselves with a hoarse cry on total strangers and amputate their legs. It is conventional that child murderers are punished, that working men and women may withdraw their labour, and that ambulances speeding to a traffic accident should not be impeded just for the hell of it. Anyone who feels oppressed by all this must be seriously oversensitive. Only an intellectual who has overdosed on abstraction could be dim enough to imagine that whatever bends a norm is politically radical" (Eagleton 2003: 15). In one of his most famous works, "The God Delusion" (2007), Richard Dawkins discusses the question of morality against religion and religiosity. Fully aware that the more rigid framework of the academic discourse would not allow this intrusion of cross-disciplinary sources, I must digress for, just as Eagleton conveniently explains the Norm against the background of hysterical or psychotic people throwing themselves on strangers, amputating their legs, or maliciously preventing ambulances from saving people's lives, and equally conveniently disregards the fact that the norm pertains to the specific models and authorities behind the performatives in our society in terms of social, political, cultural and economic practices (though, granted, the Marxist thought does penetrate the illustration), and not the question of civility that he discusses. I draw on Dawkins here because Eagleton's argument bears the same value in terms of the norm, as presented above, as does saying that morality is entirely contingent upon religion. To be more explicit: "Many religious people find it hard to imagine how, without religion, one can be good, or would even want to be good" (Dawkins 2016: 241). However, morality, as this evolutionary biologist suggests, is as instinctual and ingrained in our brains as is the sexual instinct" (Dawkins 2016: 251), and "the same is true of the urge to kindness, to generosity, to empathy, to pity" (Dawkins 2016: 253). Finally, Dawkins asks, "Do you really mean to tell me the only reason you try to be good is to gain God's approval and reward, or to avoid his disapproval and punishment? […] It seems to me to require quite a low self-regard to think that, should belief in God suddenly vanish from the world, we would all become callous and selfish hedonists, with no kindness, no charity, no generosity, nothing that would deserve the name of goodness" (2016: 259). The same is true for whatever *norm* Eagleton refers to, whatever utopian framework, concept or object, or subject, postmodernism has, in Eagleton's view, destroyed with its persistent interrogation of its value.

On the other hand, in *Postmodern Theory and Progressive Politics: Toward a New Humanism*, Thomas de Zengotita sees the postmodern movement not as a little narrative, but a necessary "moment" in spite of "all of its excesses and shortcomings" (2019: 353). In contrast to Eagleton's attitude that the postmodern critical thought has become the dominant form, this author does not see that postmodernism, as a movement, has ever been "in charge," but rather that in the light of the recognition that "[the] autonomous modern subject never existed" (Zengotita 2019: 353), it merely found a variance of the modern modality in which it could operate, and copiously so, exploring its moment's origins and its own sensibility. Zengotita notes that:

> [modernity's] universal humanism was only ever an ideal that all too often functioned as a lie. That lie had to be exposed, and it had to be exposed by people who were excluded or exploited by institutions that claimed to represent that ideal. (2019: 354)

What Zengotita sees as an ideal and a lie, is precisely the previously discussed concern with the *norm*, as understood by Eagleton. With regard to this, Fredric Jameson comments on this "postmodern revolt" (1991: 3) against, what can also be inferred as Eagleton's civility, aestheticism that counteracts low-culture, low-theory, the popular, as having:

> [its] own offensive features – from obscurity and sexually explicit material to psychological squalor and overt expressions of social and political defiance, which transcend anything that might have been imagined at the most extreme moments of high modernism – no longer scandalize anyone and are not only received with the greatest complacency but have themselves become institutionalized and are at one with the official or public culture of Western society. (1991: 3)

Obviously, the democratization of the public space, as well as the theoretical discourse, to an extent, could not have only selectively opened the door for the desirable, but for the examination and evaluation of all that had previously been present in culture, but had not been allowed space. Eagleton's sarcastic take on the margins invading the 'center' clearly explains this influx of the popular into the institutionalized discourses and cultures of the Western and other societies – a global phenomenon, with few exceptions if any. However, it appears that the wrong question has figured in criticism against postmodernism for decades now – is it that postmodernism is at fault for opening Pandora's box and demystifying the socio-cultural images liberal humanism has so

long sought to build? Is it not, then, that all that has come to surface with postmodernism has been with us all along? Are we truly so bound by the image, that same arrogant self-image Eagleton refers to when commenting on his students' disgusting interest in the popular culture of contemporaneity, that we petulantly avoid catching a glimpse of our own reflection in the postmodern mirror[68]?

In the *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, Taylor and Winquist note that "[ironically] modernism achieved its goal of determining art's essential nature by establishing that it had no intrinsic qualities and that its critical criteria were ideologically rather than historically determined" (2001: 18). In a manner, Eagleton is right, then, to claim that the critics such as Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva are modern, but they are also beyond-modern or postmodern. Even pre-modern. Their 'intimidatory aura' does remain present in contemporaneity, precisely through the work that sought to destroy the "[the] status of traditional modes of expression [as] nothing more than an assemblage of diverse and often conflicting concepts, practices and institutional frames" (Taylor & Winquist 2001: 19), namely, what Eagleton conveniently does *not* mention as the norm.

If Eagleton's *After Theory* prompted me to go back to the very basics of Theory and contemplate its purpose, it was Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* that resuscitated my interest in the field by providing brilliantly illustrated counterarguments to the previously digested discourse of pure abstraction. Hutcheon notes that "[the] postmodern does not deny that all discourses […] work to legitimize power; instead, it questions how and why, and does so by self-consciously, even didactically, investigating the politics of the production and reception of art" (2004: 224). In investigating a number of historiographic metafictional novels, Hutcheon highlights the postmodern contemporary tendencies in literature, and art, and proposes a framework for approaching the poetics of postmodernism that corresponds to the interrogative nature of the trend. In "[challenging] a dominant ideology, [postmodernism] recognizes, is itself another ideology" (Hutcheon 2004: 224), and therefore, Hutcheon sees this paradox of the postmodern interrogation as "the very act of questioning [being] one of inscribing (and then contesting) that which is being queried" (2004: 224), a self-reflexive practice that rather than bending the image of reality to fit

[68] *Ce qui arrive* with these questions *is*, undoubtedly, a modernist or liberal humanist idea that perhaps emancipation does occur in the classroom. However, the modality of what is disseminated in the classroom requires more revision than ever.

its mold, examines the validity of its perception of the discursive reality, "unavoidably implicated as it too is in that which it investigates" (2004: 224). In contrast to Eagleton, Hutcheon does not see postmodern theorizing as "sterile narcissism" (2012: 9). On the contrary, postmodernism welcomes this "direct confrontation with the issue of the relation of art to the world outside it – to the world of those social, cultural, and ultimately ideological systems by which we all live our lives" (Hutcheon 2012: 9), and that is precisely the political dimension of postmodern problematization, "language and self-consciousness about language [as] social concerns, and not narcissistic navel-gazing" (Hutcheon 2012: 9). If indeed "ideology may be defined broadly as any system of ideas we use to make sense of the world we live in," as Sherbert, Gérin and Petty define it in *Canadian Cultural Poesis: Essays on Canadian Culture*, somewhat coextensively with "[a] more well-known definition by Louis Althusser [which] describes ideology as the imaginary relationship individuals have to their real conditions of existence" (2006: 5), then the postmodern approach, as defined here, is the only viable alternative to understand the nature of not only collective participation in the ideologies present in contemporaneity, but also the nature of our complicity in their perpetuation and production. There, indeed, are no totalizing solutions to the present socio-cultural or economic-political conditions, or ready-made fixes to the experienced *differences* and disparities caused by the ideologies disseminated by our education, popular culture, art or global politics, manifested in our everyday lives and interpersonal relationships. It seems redundant at this point to emphasize that there certainly cannot be any totalizing or unifying solutions to the traditionally defined binary conceptions pertaining to individual experience, based on gender, race, class, sexuality or other. And yet, if Theory or theories are supposed to illuminate us on these phenomenological questions and translate them into a framework that could offer a new emancipatory promise, the emphasis is not misplaced.

With regard to this, in the same study, Sherbert, Gérin and Petty reflect on the nature of the relationship between ideology and identity, or rather how by examining their interaction we can attempt "to explain the problems faced by individuals who struggle to resist hegemonic cultural forces" (2006: 5). These critics suggest that "understanding the full range of the ways in which the natural and the cultural interact" (Sherbert et al. 2006: 1) involves also the exploration of the matter of "whether culture is just given […] or whether it provides us with choices by offering alternative ways of looking at the world" (Sherbert et al. 2006: 1). If the former is true, we have very little influence on the manner in which we respond to it and we may consider ourselves political,

agency-devoid zombies. And yet, if it is not, which it certainly is not, literature might be the essential resource in determining what alternatives need to be considered so that culture, as regulating the ways in which we interact in our differences, might encompass them. If we are to trust the earlier-summoned atheist and evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins, the human kind will not be psychotically jumping in front of cars, nor hanging white males on lamp posts if certain norms were to be reconsidered. It simply does not work that way, and it is precisely this imputation, ideologically biased, and in a sinister manner, intentionally or otherwise, that leads to *difference* being treated as threatening aberration, even if the 'aberration' has been present for as long as culture or norm.

By extension, in *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary Canadian Fiction*, Hutcheon sees the postmodern "'recording' and 'inventing'" as "clearly processes, not products" (2012: 19), an exploration into the alternative perspective that is based on the referent discursive reality, and in those terms, she notes:

> Instead of feeling threatened by this un-fixing or certainties, postmodern culture tends to find it liberating and stimulating. Perhaps the loss of the modernist faith in fixed systems, order, and wholeness can make room for new models based on things once rejected: contingency, multiplicity, fragmentation, discontinuity[69]. (2012: 19)

Sherbert, Gérin and Petty notice in the works of the contributors to their volume that contemporary critical thought treats cultural artifacts not "as something natural, or essentially unchanging," but rather as something "shaped by social processes[70]" (2006: 2). Hutcheon sees this as "a new willingness to enter into a dialogue with history on new terms" (2012: 23), and although this is an insight coming from her exploration of contemporary postmodern historiographic metafiction, it

[69] The use of the term 'discontinuity' remains mysteriously popular in the theoretical circles with regard to postmodernism, even if essentially the postmodern approach recognizes its *inability* to *discontinue* or detach itself from its surrounding discourses or predecessor poetics, ideologies, philosophies, etc. The postmodern recognition of complicity with the inherited discourses disallows discontinuity for even intentional ruptures must then be marked by what came before them, as the source. Hutcheon, in fact, both in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* and *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary Canadian Fiction* provides counterarguments to the idea that postmodernism is a discontinuous trend.

[70] Ironically, in the context of this entire chapter, Sherbert, Gérin and Petty draw on "the Marxist critic," Eagleton's reflections for explaining this dynamics, "a dialectic between the artificial and the natural, what we do to the world and what the world does to us" (Sherbert et al. 2006: 2).

is might be extended to postmodern contemporary literature that does not necessarily emphasize or foreground historicity in its subject matter. Moreover, in her own words:

> There has been a general (and perhaps healthy) turning from the expectation of sure and single meaning to a recognition of the value of difference and multiplicity, a turning from passive trust in system to an acceptance of responsibility for the fact that art and theory are both actively 'signifying' practices – in other words, that it is we who both make and make sense of culture. (Hutcheon 2012: 23)

The notion that we are bound in a framework of culture and ideology whose philosophical tenets remain unchangeable – universal and absolute explanations of the human condition – presents a daunting thought, one echoed in Eagleton's insistence on a totalizing answer to the economic-political crisis brought on by the circumstance of late capitalism, among other things, and particularly so since Eagleton's position also implies that without the totalizing liberal humanist thought, our civilization might just be doomed to suffer the discourse of popular culture and postmodern fads, until they or our entire civilization fizzle out. As Sherbert, Gérin and Petty note, "some cultural critics emphasize our ability to resist being entirely shaped by ideological forces" (2006: 5). What Eagleton's view of contemporaneity in *After Theory* suggests is that human agency has been suspended altogether, and that culture, as he sees it, under the weight of mindless and aimless postmodernism, has reached the point of prolapse, to emulate his tone. However, others might propose that "[if] we use what consumer culture gives us, and create something new out of it, we will not only be made by culture, but we will be contributing to making it ourselves" (Sherbert et al. 2006: 5).

Can't We All Be More Canadian, about Literary Theory?

In the already mentioned article, John Leitch argues that "[attacking] theory does not help" (2018: 351), and provides arguments for why contemporary theory, or theories, need not be at odds with Theory, as perhaps more practiced generations of theorist envisioned it. If theory or Theory is to be relevant in contemporaneity, it must necessarily address its own moment with the same force as the historical legacies of the past, and it must remain aware of its own legacy in doing so. Leitch's review of anti-theorists' grievances against what he calls 'the big T' and his discussion

on the validity of a number of them can be summed up in his claim that "[too] many theorists' writing style lacks clarity and economy, not to mention elegance," (2018: 350) and this is the very criticism that the 'progenitors' of Theory, as Eagleton calls them, have been reproached with. Derrida and Lacan have caused many a migraine, so that reading Foucault after the mentioned feels as pleasant as inducing oneself with a dose of Ambien, I can only assume. Furthermore, Leitch goes on to say that "[a] related problem is a relative lack of attention to formal literary craft, stylistics, and aesthetics" (2018: 350), but perhaps more importantly, Leitch does not fail to mention, and this chapter readily seconds this claim, that "some theorists are righteous and pious to the point of stern intolerance, where tone veers off badly" (2018: 350).

Literary and critical theory remain at least as important in contemporaneity as they have ever been, and perhaps even more so, and particularly from the perspective of the postmodern approach as discussed here. The proliferation of discourses has neither erased the conventions under which literary production operates, nor has it in any significant manner changed our perception of literature. It is a romantic illusion that literature has been more or less important at one period of time or another, that it has lost its luster against the background of popular culture, and that as the object or subject of criticism it has failed to emancipate us, in the degree in which it ever could.

Critical theory, however, seems to have been shadowed by its own regrouping under the weight of interdisciplinarity, and understandably so, but as Leitch notes, "[critical] inquiry creates disruption" (2018: 351), and it might be added, it well should – it is the purpose of critical theory to ask questions about how we come to produce that which we produce, and what message it relates to and about us. In order to be able to do so with as much objectivity that may be expected, the formalities Leitch himself mentions should not be discarded as the thing of the past, of the overcomplicated and, as Eagleton notes, satiated theory. Leitch does not fail to mention the issue I address from a subjective angle, of the claims that critical theory has been "corrupting society, especially students" (2018: 351), and although Leitch says this in the light of the discussion on antitheory, this is precisely what I discuss, indirectly, from within the field of theory. Critical and literary theory have indeed become dogmatic, and particularly so due to the cult of authoritative academics, with their intimidating auras. In such a discourse, obviously, there has been little room for truths, only Truth, and that is what the postmodern critical thought has been foregrounding.

In *The Canadian Postmodern*, Hutcheon notes that “many of today’s postmodern novelists seem to delight in exploring not just the authorial process of their texts’ creation, but also that parallel and equally necessary process of the texts’ recreation in the mind of the reader” (Hutcheon 2012: 45). In other words, this postmodern tendency to emphasize on the process of construction and the phenomenon of constructedness, and with the awareness of its copiousness in terms of the interpretative potential against the heterogeneous experience determining reception, it exposes any claim to the authority of Truth, or totality, or the universality of experience, as constructs themselves. Literature, as the most brilliant manifestation of our emplotment capacity – one of the most fundamental mechanisms by which we comprehend the world, the capacity that guides our embodied experience – also stands to represent the collections of not only the particularly heterogeneous, but infinitely subjective and intimate experiences of our interactions with each other and the circumstances we produce, within the bounds of our imagination. It is not merely an epiphenomenon of culture, it has been the most complete description and criticism of culture. Therefore, criticism and Theory cannot possibly stand to exert any ultimate authority over literature – its mode of production or scope – for it will always work against the restrictions it encounters. Furthermore, both criticism and theory, capital T or not, belong to the broader field of literary production themselves, and it has become clear that any purported elitism or aggressive conviction on the part of those capitalizing on the production of theoretical frameworks for the sake of the academic market does only damage to the platform necessary for theory, and the community of theorists to transfer their knowledge onto posterity.

In *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, Patricia Waugh says that “[the] problem facing writers who attempt authentically to represent conditions of rapid social change is that they may themselves produce works of art which are ephemeral and even trivial” (2001: 12), and to a degree, this extends to literary theory and criticism, as discussed in the chapter on metamodernism. Literature and its accompanying discourses, criticism and theory, find themselves in the same boat, not because postmodernism has obliterated the demarcations between them, and certainly not because the postmodern critical thought seeks to undermine Theory by destabilizing its foundation, but because it has explicated the constructedness of all our discourses, but also the discursive nature of our perceived reality, neither of which can be ignored or disregarded. In *Postmodernism and the Politics of ‘Culture’* (2000), Adam Katz skillfully phrases this:

> Experience and interpretations of experience […] no longer [being] seen as either legitimating existing social relations due to their obviousness or naturalness (their conformity to experience) or as providing the kinds of knowledges necessary for emancipatory movements seeking structural transformations. (65)

Since it is the “experience of the oppressed” (Katz 2000: 65) that is produced by culture and ideology, this perceived “obviousness or naturalness” exposes its own constructedness on the basis of “the privileged epistemological and political position of those who control and benefit from the production of the conditions of experience” (Katz 2000: 65). Hutcheon notes that in Canada, postmodernism “has suggested a rethinking of realism” (2012: 21) in terms of revising what it implies, but also in terms of challenging it as a mode of representation. The transgressive move towards merging genres, defying conventions and intentionally recreating the conflict between fiction and fact, as Hutcheon suggests, can be seen in the postmodern experiments where the “history, biography, and autobiography” (2012: 211) are made to overlap so that they both “challenge the boundaries of the novel genre” (2012: 211), but also “work within the conventions of realism and still contest them” (2012: 211). This general postmodern phenomenon finds its way into the short story genre by testing conventions, only in a different modality. Reflecting on the plasticity of the short story genre – “the genre’s experimental nature” (Patea 2012: 7) – Viorica Patea highlights the critics such as Mary Louis Pratt, Clare Hanson and Frank O’Connor who “argue that the short story thrives in societies with no fixed cultural framework, especially in colonial contexts, and is linked to marginal people, women, or outsiders, all of whom are plagued by a sense of exile and existential isolation” (2012: 7), suggesting that it is “the volatility of class structure” (2012: 7) that allows for the proliferation of the form, and its being conducive to experimentation – within and *without*, at the internal level with regard to its structure, and at the external in the form’s fluidity.

Moreover, in *Postmodern Approaches to the Short Story*, in the Preface, the authors emphasize on this general postmodern propensity for exploring its own process in noticing that “[metafiction] […] was of special interest to the early postmodernist short-story writers, since the desire to address the text and even the writer within the text was different from what had become the conventional use of ‘reality’ to ground the story” (Iftekharrudin et al. 2003: x). On the one hand, the genre’s intrinsic modality – its brevity, its economy and the necessity for efficient and effective

narrative progression with regard to plot, and as mentioned, its lyricism and reliance on the metaphoric language – has presented fertile grounds for the exploration of the boundaries between fiction and reality itself as fiction, and "[the] narratives, therefore, made metaphysical sense by calling attention to themselves as artifice in an attempt to view our world through another lens" (Iftekharrudin et al. 2003: x). In addition to that, as Laurie Kruk suggests, the "organic conception of the literary short story" (2016: 5), the immediateness of the experience, and in its postmodern form very often a moment in the process of experiencing, "privileges writerly autonomy and imagination over critical prescription" (2016: 5). In other words, the postmodern short story cannot be restrained.

However, Iftekharrudin, Boyden, Longo and Rohrberger also highlight that "[postmodernism] as a mode of the contemporary short story, has been clearly established and recognized by short-story theorists" (2003: xi), but not the "postmodern 'theory' (deconstruction, structuralism, reader response, semiotics, etc.)" (2003: xi). These authors suggest that the cause of this theoretical neglect on the part of postmodern literary theory lies in the postmodernists' inability to make "distinctions among literary genres, treating short stories, novels, poems, and other storytelling media alike as narrative forms" (2003: xi), which is an on-point claim considering that much of the post-structuralist approaches – the ones that are applicable to literature in a methodical way – rely strongly on the idea that genre is merely formulaic, and in the Postmodern Fender-Bender section, the insights provided by John Frow and David Herman corroborate this imputation.

However, in spite of the risk of potentially jumping to conclusions, the short story, as a genre form, fundamentally treats the narrative and narrative discourse as a fragmented experience. As Viorica Patea suggests, "the short story strives towards something unstated yet hinted at in the text, which accounts for its intensity" (2012: 16), it has a dual-progression, working at the level of the discourse, but necessarily importing from the referential reality the input on which the resolution of the plot depends, covertly (Shen 2014), which I have discussed extensively in the individual analyses of the selected stories and the subsequent concluding chapters. Moreover, it has "a liminal quality, constantly attempting to dissolve the boundary between the known and the unknown, the visible and the invisible, the surface and the inner secret of things" (Patea 2012: 16), all of which, I propose, render it inherently and fundamentally postmodern – in its approach that is unavoidably interrogative, in its irresoluteness, and to use the worn-out postmodern term, in its fragmentary

representation that relies on ambiguity or incompleteness. It might not be surprising that contemporary theorists lack enthusiasm to address the postmodern qualities of the short story in a particularly methodical way as these ‘little’ narratives do stand to represent the very mode of the postmodern interrogative paradigm – its perfectly compact emanation.

Finally, Holman and Thacker state that contemporary “Canadian literature has become fragmented (perhaps like most national literatures) by ideology, or more accurately, *perspective*” (2013: 198). What these authors imply by the infamous and problematic term, at least outside Canada, is that “‘Canada’ has meant so many different things to Canadian writers that, when their works are taken together, they seem hardly to be writing from the same place” (Holman & Thacker 2013: 198). Incidentally, what Holman and Thacker perceive in their national literature, might well serve to explain the already discussed circumstances of literary theory, or theories, or Theory and criticism. However, what they also notice, is that:

> The concern that Canadians have about their culture is, at root, the same concern they have about their country. Canada is a work in progress, and its literary and popular products reflect the energy and creativity of a people still in the throes of determining who they are. (Holman & Thacker 2013: 218)

The selection of contemporary Canadian short fiction here, as discussed, is the space of the marginal voices, but not all of them marginalized on ‘equal’ terms. As Joanne Gilbert notes, “[the] artist, the fool, the social critic – individuals who stand aside from the center in order to critique it” (2004: xi), in this selection reveal the easily imaginable faces of ordinary people, some even more ordinary than others, far from playing the fool or enacting a revolutionary act of rebellion, but merely questioning, within their own socio-cultural enclosures the scope of their liberty and the bounds of their performativity, leaving the reader to deal with the bitter taste that their experiences bring. These outsiders’ marginalization indeterminately flutters around their narratives as the covert current underlying their discourse, and their phenomenological and ethical focus testifies to what Adam Katz describes as “[the] strength of postmodern discourses” (2000: 65) in *Postmodernism and the Politics of ‘Culture’*. Indeed, the vigor with which these narratives relate the range of heterogeneity or multiplicity – in their plots, on the surface level, that of the narrative discourse – intensifies with the disquieting introduction of ironic and parodic criticism

permeating that metaphorical or lyrical dimension of the narrative. To conclude with Katz's observation that the effect of the postmodern discourse is found "in the effectivity with which [they undermine] the basis of liberal humanism: the free and rational individual as the subject of a democratic and pluralist order" (2000: 65), methodically undoing the constructed images of reality which neither correspond to the dominant, inherited, traditional rhetoric of unity, nor to the individual experience.

The interpretations of these short stories uncover the persistence of a 'double-edged' or 'double-voiced' sensibility achieved by the use of postmodern techniques – a sensibility that suggests that an authentic expression is possible for contemporary authors, in contemporary Canada, but one that is nevertheless restrained, much like the short story is in its most conventional sense, and one that is essentially postmodern at its core in provocatively restraining itself from imagining a clear critical center, ethics or vision, and remaining only interrogative. It is precisely the manner in which postmodern techniques are used, as representation methods, that reveals the awareness of the constrained and limited nature of the discourse – in the storytelling process. Shaped by the socio-political affinities and distinctions of the contemporary society, this particular postmodern expression is both a manifestation of a *different* cultural and political perspective of the storyteller, and of the manner in which the authorial or narrative voice chooses to address and interpellate the reader, striving to alter the discourse from the position that is not removed from its own creation, the narrative discourse, or the circumstances producing it.

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Born in 1986, Sanja Ignjatović received her BA (2014, GPA 9.60) and MA (2015, GPA 10) degrees in English language and literature at the English Department at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš, and completed the doctoral studies of Philology at the same university (2020, GPA 9.69).

The course work and research for her master thesis, "Alice Munro's Narratives in the Short Story Collections *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* and *Dear Life* – Beyond Realist Fiction" (2015), sparked the interest in the broad field of poststructuralist and postmodern literary and critical theories, and extended the scope of her interest to Canadian literature, particularly the contemporary Canadian short story. The interest in interdisciplinary approaches resulted in papers such as "Interpreting the Present – The Rhetorical Function of Time in Michel Houellebecq's *Submission*" (co-authored, 2017), "Feminist Voices in Alice Munro's Selected Short Stories" (2017), "Space Representation in Zsuzsi Gartner's *All the Anxious Girl on Earth*" (2018), "Defining Motherhood - Three Canadian Short Stories" (2018), "The Linguistic Groundwork for Cognitive Poetics" (2018) and "The Post- in Contemporary Canadian Short Fiction" (2019), among other.

Currently a teaching assistant at the Department of English, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš, her engagement includes appreciation classes in Canadian Studies, Medieval English Literature, Renaissance English Literature, Shakespeare - Special Course 1 and British Studies. She is a member of the Central European Association for Canadian Studies (CEACS) and the Serbian Association for the Study of English (SASE).

Prior to her teaching position at the Department of English, she was the first American Corner Niš intern and a volunteer-associate (2010-2015), an associate and official translator for the Serbian delegation of Handicap International at the international project around the banning of cluster munitions and the Convention (CMC), and the license holder and organizer of the first TEDxNiš Event in 2011.

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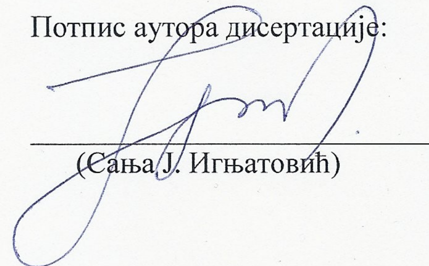


(Сања Ј. Игњатовић)

ИЗЈАВА О ИСТОВЕТНОСТИ ЕЛЕКТРОНСКОГ И ШТАМПАНОГ ОБЛИКА ДОКТОРСКЕ ДИСЕРТАЦИЈЕ

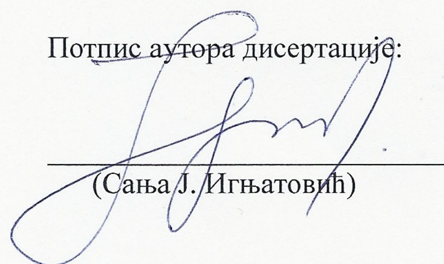
Наслов дисертације:

Postmodern Interpretations of the Contemporary Canadian Short Story

Изјављујем да је електронски облик моје докторске дисертације, коју сам предао/ла за уношење у **Дигитални репозиторијум Универзитета у Нишу,** истоветан штампаном облику.

У Нишу, 2020. године

Потпис аутора дисертације:



(Сања Ј. Игњатовић)

ИЗЈАВА О КОРИШЋЕЊУ

Овлашћујем Универзитетску библиотеку „Никола Тесла“ да у Дигитални репозиторијум Универзитета у Нишу унесе моју докторску дисертацију, под насловом:

Postmodern Interpretations of the Contemporary Canadian Short Story

Дисертацију са свим прилозима предао/ла сам у електронском облику, погодном за трајно архивирање.

Моју докторску дисертацију, унету у Дигитални репозиторијум Универзитета у Нишу, могу користити сви који поштују одредбе садржане у одабраном типу лиценце Креативне заједнице (Creative Commons), за коју сам се одлучио/ла.

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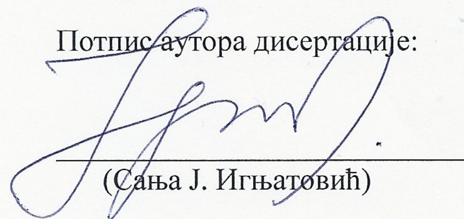

(Сања Ј. Игњатовић)