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'The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe': Towards a Feminist Remodelling of (Meta)History¹

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"“I like,” she said, “anything that flickers.””²

Angela Carter's 1982 short story 'The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe'³ is a fictional biographical account of the development and 'coming to writing' of the author named in the title, while also paying tribute to Poe's poetics of the short story. The influence in Carter's writing of Poe's reform of the gothic genre is well-documented⁴ and

¹ This article is derived from my doctoral thesis submitted at the University of Sussex in April 2003. I am indebted to the State Scholarships Foundation of Greece for their generous funding of my doctoral research, and my supervisors, Professor Deborah Cherry and Dr. Elena Gualtieri, for their guidance and support.

² Angela Carter quoted by Susannah Clapp, 'Introduction', in Angela Carter, *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), ix.

³ Carter, 'The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe' (1982), in *Black Venus* (London: Chatto & Windus/ Hogarth Press, 1985), 51-62, abbreviated as CEAP from now on.

⁴ On Poe's influence, see Linda Peach, *Angela Carter* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1998), 27-8; on Carter's particular version of the gothic, see Gina Wisker, 'On Angela Carter', in Clive Bloom, ed., *Gothic Horror* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1998), 233-248 and Beate Neumeier, 'Postmodern Gothic: Desire and Reality in Angela Carter's Writing', in Victor Sage and Allan

will be not be examined in the present article. Instead, 'The Cabinet' is here deployed as an exemplary textual illustration of an emergent model for the writing of (literary) histories from a specifically second-wave feminist perspective. In Carter's fictional reconstruction of Poe's life and work, the maternal element features in more ways than one, in the flesh (as Elizabeth Poe, Edgar's actress mother) but also, notably, as a spectre (as Elizabeth's ghost, but also partially and imperfectly embodied in the face of Edgar's child-bride Virginia). The significance of the maternal revenant will be considered in terms of the precarious, 'flickering' status of femininity and specifically the mother in Freudian psychoanalysis. Moreover, it will be argued that the notion of 'reconstruction' is pivotal not only in the short story itself but also in the rest of the collection *Black Venus*, in which it was included; a brief reflection on the link between Carter's take on reconstruction and the Freudian notion of *Nachträglichkeit* (belatedness) will elucidate the role of fictionality in the making of 'other', elided and repressed histories as well as, arguably, in the proposition of an alternative performative poetics of literary and life history writing alike, in and of the feminine.

Haunted Reconstruction and/as Feminist Metahistory

'The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe' is the story of Poe's birth and death, but, most importantly, of the women in his life and their respective 'testaments' to him. The following synopsis serves to both give a sketch of the plot and introduce the starting points of the ensuing discussion. In 'the evening of the eighteenth century' (CEAP, 51), Edgar's future mother Elizabeth launches her acting career and receives rigorous training in physical transformation, often bending the laws of gender and casually crossing the boundaries between the dead and the living. David Poe, mediocre as an actor as well as a parent, abandons the family, having only bestowed on his second son Edgar the gift of intemperance. After the birth of her third child, Elizabeth's staged deaths become increasingly realistic off stage too, until she finally succumbs to 'the spectral horseman' (54). The three-year old orphaned Edgar is taken under the wings of Mr. Allan of Virginia and 'ushered [...] into Southern affluence' (55), not before, however, receiving his mother's testament of 'a few tattered memories': nourishment, transformation, the knowledge that 'women possess within them a cry, a thing that needs to be extracted', the awareness of mortality, a tragic actor's face (55-6). Edgar's disbelief at his mother's real and permanent death (after all, he'd seen her rise from the grave on stage so many times) is wiped out when the theatre at Richmond burns to the ground, along with her dressing-table mirror, where he 'knew the somebody else she so frequently became lived' (56). Edgar

enters adulthood unwillingly, under the 'stern, democratic light' of the Republic (51), after having been disowned by his wealthy adoptive father. Now a man, he finds himself another woman to adore in his thirteen-year old cousin Virginia Clemm. But she too has a peculiar affinity to performing (and) death: one evening, Virginia sings an Old World Ballad, her swan song, and falls asleep never to waken again. Her testament consists of the sharp teeth that Edgar calmly extracts from between her legs, having always known they were there. Despite his vain attempts to flee the female ghosts that harass him, Edgar only pre-empts the inevitable. Immobilised in front of the mirror, he melts into thin air.

With 'The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe', Carter enters a tradition of literary criticism and history, which is rich and enthralling as much as it is fraught with sensationalist mythologising, an almost morbid fascination with *eros* and *thanatos*, and mutual accusations of such unprofessional indulgence among researchers and critics. The most fascinating aspect of critical and biographical writing on Poe does not, however, consist of its lurid qualities or the sacrificing of historical accuracy for shock value, but rather of the transformation of the writer's life into a literary *oeuvre* in its own right. 'Poe has himself become literature – myth romance, poetry'.⁵ As Shoshana Felman notes, although the value of his writing, and particularly his poetry, has been the object of much contestation, Poe's *influence* can hardly be denied. His work and life (hi)stories exert a power over readers and critics that has been compared to magic, on account of its inexplicable and overwhelming force.⁶ One may even suggest that much of the 'critical' writing on Poe shares many of the gothic, death-bound and sensationalist qualities for which his tales are known. It would therefore appear that his 'magic' operates by way of a compulsion to emulate and hence repeat, to which even his most vehement critics are not immune. According to Felman, the history of Poe's reception presents a striking example of the Bloomian anxiety of influence in the field of history. Poe has been at once one of the most admired as well as most misunderstood and deprecated of American writers. In either case, his poetry has been of great influence over its readers, specifically in the sense of exerting power over them. Hence, as a – literary – case history, Poe's case prompts a shift in the field of the analytical object, from biography and the text to literary history itself.⁷ This shift,

⁵ N. Bryllion Fagin, *The Histrionic Mr. Poe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1949), viii.

⁶ Shoshana Felman, 'On Reading Poetry: Reflections of the Limits and Possibilities of Psychoanalytic Approaches', in Harold Bloom, ed., *Edgar Allan Poe: Modern Critical Views* (New York: Chelsea House, 1985), 119–139 (120–1).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 121 and 138–9.

which was yet to be attempted at the time of Felman's essay, is boldly enacted in fiction by Carter.

In 'The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe', the case of Poe is approached from the point of view of family history and is developed around a maternal testament, while Carter endeavours to also trace common threads between family trees and artistic genealogies. Significantly, the work and life of Poe are also shifting landmarks in the history of the evolving relationship between literature and psychoanalysis, from Marie Bonaparte's biography to Lacan's 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"'.⁸ Carter's nonchalant invasion into the fields of literary criticism, history and psychoanalytic theory by means of a short fictionalised biography is manifested through the replaying (and hence revision) of the primal scene and a series of strategic anachronisms and overhauled genealogies, in which E. A. Poe is retroactively cast as his mother's pupil and where Carter (the implied author) pays tribute to Poe while simultaneously 'mothering' him in the new imaginary biography that she contrives.

Whether an addendum to or a dissident break with the Poe mythology, Carter's speculative (and, to a great extent, spectral) reconstruction of Poe's childhood acquires additional (and metalinguistic) meanings when considered in the context of *Black Venus*, the 1985 collection of short stories in which it was included. If the later short story collection *The Bloody Chamber*⁹ engineers a revision of the fairy-tale, as a genre as much as a revealing instance of popular imagination and a culturally-defined repertory of *mythologemes*, *Black Venus* addresses the question of the reader's access to the past; especially parts of history that, in retrospect, appear to have culminated in either some noteworthy event or the production of a culturally significant corpus of signs.¹⁰ The former is

⁸ Trans. by Jeffrey Mehlman, *Yale French Studies: French Freud*, n. 48 (1972), 38-72.

⁹ (London: Victor Gollanz, 1989).

¹⁰ Past events that are accessible *only* through texts almost come to belong to the same order as their sources. It is in this sense that the past is in greater risk of losing its unassimilable remainder of the Real. Textualisation thus perceived has to do with a certain affective distance in per-/reception, which may be the result of a heavy – textual – mediation due to chronological, geographical and/or cultural distance. But what threatens the remainder also makes up a platform for the interrogation of history from the point of view of ideology: the ways in which 'distance' is conceptualised and operates in historical texts opens them up to the precarity of signs. Hayden White argues a similar case in regard to the effect of the inevitable textuality (and hence literariness) of history ['The Historical Text as Literary Artifact', in Canary and Kozicki, eds., *The Writing of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 41-62] but differs from Carter's and other feminist ('improperly' historical) emergent models, in so far as the latter proceed from and remain within the field of literature, which they regard as *immanently* historical, rather than the other way around.

exemplified in the reconstruction of the days leading to the notorious murder of the Borden family by its daughter Lizzie in 'The Fall River Axe Murders', and the latter in the titular short story, an account of Charles Baudelaire's domestic life from the perspective of his mixed-race partner and 'muse' Jeanne Duval. These short stories present attempts to reconstruct, that is to say *speculate*, on the conditions that enabled, permitted, or chronologically preceded the *appearance* of a *phenomenon*. The results are (literally) dramatic: in the case of the murder story in particular, the customary theatricality of crime reconstruction is not so much mimed as it is parodied, not mirrored but rather deflected into a model of archaeology,¹¹ where the past, whether it refers to history or literary history, is best re-presented (and essentially revised) on stage. This may or may not be an actual theatre stage; it may simply involve a specific register of vision and performance.

Linda Hutcheon regards Angela Carter's fiction as being characteristic of a contemporary literary tendency, which she describes as 'historiographic metafiction'. This emergent genre challenges the distinction between the literary and the historical by highlighting the similarities of the two modes; such as verisimilitude (rather than 'objective' truth), the employment of conventionalised, non-transparent linguistic constructs and intertextuality.¹² Hutcheon names Carter's novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* as an exemplary sample of the metafictional genre. Doctor Hoffman (named after E. T. A. Hoffmann, the nineteenth century writer of horror and mystery tales) is a mad scientific genius turned terrorist, devoted to the project of a radical rewriting of history with the help of his androgynous and irresistibly seductive daughter Albertina. Doctor Hoffman's methods of intervention to reality are principally performative and consist of the introduction of three-dimensional (initially spectral and, as the project progresses, enfolded) imaginary beings in the midst of 'real' situations. Based on the *dramatic* nature of his interventions, I would argue that when Albertina describes her father's activities as the rewriting of the [sic] history books, she is speaking metaphorically, referring to a creative endeavour much more akin to a *mise en scène*, rather than the production of written texts.¹³ Interestingly, it is precisely these resulting performances of a mutated past

¹¹ Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock, 1970 [1966]), xxi-xxii. See also *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972 [1969]), esp. 'Archaeology and the history of ideas', 135-140.

¹² *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 105.

¹³ Angela Carter, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (London: Penguin, 1972), 198, quoted in Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 101.

that effect the desired mutation: Hoffman's history-altering stagings are 'performative' not only in the dramatic sense, but also in the manner that 'speech acts' intervene in the real – political – world.¹⁴ Hoffman's enacted phantasies only seem unnerving and ominous not so much because they materialise in real, three-dimensional space (i.e. outside his own personal realm of fantasy),¹⁵ but due to their innate reality-altering powers: once they take place, everything *will have been different*. They do not 'take place' without, simultaneously, taking over time. In other words, they retroactively colonise history.

This schema could possibly be read as a covert and playfully self-reflexive comment on the author's career and feminist agenda as a writer, although in an intriguingly sarcastic inversion. After all, *The Infernal Desire Machines* is a dystopian vision of a twisted revolution of/in knowledge, mercifully prevented from completion by the hero Desiderio, whereas second-wave feminism, certainly from Carter's perspective, would constitute a radical process of change which is not only positive and ethically sound, but also, significantly, on-going. While self-avowedly engaged 'in the demythologising business',¹⁶ Carter's goals go well beyond the deconstruction of existing – 'patriarchal' – myths and norms. When she comments on the importance of writing for feminism as forming 'part of the slow process of decolonialising our language and our basic habits of thought' and providing the means 'to say things for which no language has previously existed',¹⁷ her attitude towards reality is not any less radical and guilty of hubris than that of Dr. Hoffman. To articulate the previously ineffable amounts to a (meta-)speech act of the most pervasive consequences. Nevertheless, whereas Dr. Hoffman changes the world simply because he can, in the discourse of the second wave, the revision and rewriting of histories has been cast in terms of *survival*. In other words, history for feminism has often been a matter of life and death in *quasi* literal terms, at least as regards the Women's Liberation Movement.¹⁸

The retroactive character of feminist interventions opens up the question of *Nachträglichkeit* (belatedness), a concept that Freud develops in his case history of the 'Wolf Man'. Freud proposes a model for a type

¹⁴ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

¹⁵ I use the spelling 'fantasy' to refer to the faculty of imagining (*Einbildungskraft*, according to Freud) and reserve 'phantasy' for the resulting imaginary productions (*Phantasien*).

¹⁶ Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', in Michelene Wandor, ed., *On Gender and Writing* (London: Pandora, 1983), 69–77 (71).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁸ See, for example, Dale Spender, *Mothers of the Novel* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986).

of (repressed) memory that is mediated, deferred and belatedly constructed:

[...] scenes, like this one in my present patient's case [of his parents' love-making], which date from such an early period [one and a half years of age] and exhibit similar content, [...] are as a rule not reproduced as recollections, but have to be *divined – constructed* – gradually and laboriously from an aggregate of indications. [...] I am not of the opinion, however, that such scenes must necessarily be phantasies because they do not reappear in the shape of recollections. It seems to me absolutely equivalent to a recollection, if the memories are replaced (as in the present case) by dreams the analysis of which invariably leads back to the same scene [...]. Indeed, *dreaming is another kind of remembering* [...].¹⁹

Although, admittedly, the above observations are made in reference to the analytical situation, their implications by far exceed its specificity, as is the case with most of Freud's work. Indeed, feminism's engagement with psychoanalysis relies on this very assumption, namely that psychoanalytic breakthroughs and failures may be transposed onto the social and the cultural, even if they are initially drawn out in reference to individual analysands. *Nachträglichkeit* does not only upset chronology but also casts the question of personal and, arguably, collective histories not in terms of retrieval but of construction and reconstruction. Consequently, the absence of adequate archival material or whichever type of documentation is taken to be the support of historiography, does not preclude the 'divination' of repressed histories. A variety of 'aggregate[s] of indications' is called up to compensate for these all too common absences, even though not all of such indications are conscious, not to mention verifiable. The second wave strives to draw links between repression and socio-cultural suppression, with the theoretical support of (but also against) Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. In this effort, the feminist uncanny (namely, the return of the feminine as repressed) furnishes them with a remarkably versatile method, as does *Nachträglichkeit*.

According to Bruce Maslish, Freud's immeasurable impact on modern culture and thought could be described as the dissolution of a 'discontinuity'.²⁰ Perhaps the most groundbreaking feature of the Freudian affirmation of a continuity, where the opposite was previously thought to be the case, is the fact that its poles are not ontologically de-

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis: The "Wolf Man"' (1918 [1914]), in *Case Histories II, The Penguin Freud Library*, vol. 9 (London: Penguin, 1991), 227-366 (284-5), emphasis added.

²⁰ Bruce Maslish, *The Fourth Discontinuity: The Co-Evolution of Humans and Machines* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 3-4, drawing on Jerome Bruner, 'Freud and the Image of Man', *Partisan Review*, vol. 23, n. 3 (Summer, 1956), 340-347.

lined, but may be occupied by different concepts. In other words, they stand for structural positions rather than 'objects' material or not, as is proven by the case history of the Wolf Man. To start with, the model for remembering proposed in the analysis of the Wolf Man involves the work of reconstruction rather than retrieval: any sort of implied one-to-one correspondence between experience and recollection is thus exploded and the psychical quality of the material remembered ['scene(s)'] is wholly redefined. Consequently, an equivalence is unequivocally drawn between recollection and dreaming, which has a tremendous impact on the rethinking of the relation and limits between fiction and history in postmodernity.

It is hardly by accident that the problematic relationship between fantasy and reality is raised repeatedly, almost compulsively, throughout Poe's *oeuvre*. As Richard Wilbur maintains, both of the fundamental conflicts around which Poe's poetics is structured, between the 'poetic soul' versus the 'external world' and the 'earthly self', are consistently played out in the realm of the dream.²¹ Translating this feature into post-Freudian/-structuralist terms, Felman renames it as the 'Poe-etic' effect. Trapped in a limbo, between masterly 'conscious art' and an array of fixed ideas, Poe's work prodigiously exemplifies 'the effect of a deadly struggle between consciousness and the unconscious', which, albeit present in all poetry, is thrown into relief in Poe's (literary) case history *par excellence*.²² It is in this respect only that the textual manifestations of the Poe phenomenon (that is, his life and work as well as all ensuing biographical accounts and literary criticism) may be seen to participate in the poetics of the dream, the visual-textual product of the battle (or, negotiation) between consciousness and the unconscious. As a result, if the question of life history persists in this context, it is not so much due to simplistic Freudian applications, but a deeply ingrained affinity between the psychical friction that gives rise to dreaming and that which prompts a particular kind of writing.²³ This kind of writing (which is almost the analogue of dreaming) may not always sit comfortably under the heading of the gothic but does share some of its most fundamental elements, particularly those pertaining to the genre's affinity to vision and theatrical-

²¹ Richard Wilbur, 'The House of Poe', in Robert Regan, ed., *Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 98-120 (102).

²² Felman, 'On Reading Poetry', 139.

²³ Felman uses the term 'implication' (rather than 'application' of psychoanalysis to literature) to describe the methodological shift from a relationship of exteriority between literature and psychoanalysis to one of interiority and interimplication, and gives Lacan's seminar on the 'Purloined Letter' as an example of this shift. Although not in exactly the same terms, the relationship between Carter's pseudo-biographical writing, psychoanalytic theory and the genre of the gothic may be described as one of implication rather than application.

ity,²⁴ both of which are as a rule implicated in the acts of witnessing and reconstruction. Moreover, one should not forget about the deeply ingrained theatricality of the analytical situation nor, significantly, the role of drama as a fundamental metaphorical and analytical network in psychoanalytic theory since Freud.²⁵

By challenging the linearity and, consequently, the clarity of narrative and, primordially, of one's self-constructed life history, belatedness (*Nachträglichkeit*) recasts the question of origins, if only in the negative, through a deliberate and efficient obfuscation. In many of the short stories of *Black Venus* and, in particular, 'The Fall River Axe Murders', the narrative unfolds backwards, from the outcome back to the conditions that nurtured and/or triggered it. This narratological schema, however, is no mere flashback. Its movement is not simply toward the past but the *cause* and yet, as Brooks observes, one of the effects of the *nachträglich* schema is the disentanglement and severance of the chronological and the causal sequence.²⁶ Should one transfer the conceptual pattern of *Nachträglichkeit* with all its implications onto the life-cycle of the human species, 'of woman born' and with death as its final and irrevocable destination, a split would appear in the presumed unity of both beginning and conclusion. As has already been noted, Freud casts the feminine and specifically the maternal in the double role of home and the uncanny, a source of terror and gratification. Her body designates life-giving and yet simultaneously prefigures the grave.²⁷ Should we suspend, for a moment the implications of these observations for the feminine and consider them in purely narrative terms, the site of the maternal body is also where beginnings and endings become unnervingly conflated. In Poe's case this *quasi* truism of psychoanalysis acquires particular significance. D. H. Lawrence describes Poe's entire literary career as a post-mortem development. Poe the writer is undead, vampyric: 'Man must be stripped of himself. And the process is slow and bitter and beautiful, too. But the beauty has its spark and anguish; it is the strange, expiring cry, the phosphorescence of decay. Poe is a man writhing in the mystery of his own

²⁴ Susan Wolstenholme, *Gothic (Re)Visions* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993), 7-8.

²⁵ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'Theatrum Analyticum', *Glyph*, vol. 2 (1977/8), 122-43 (123 and 140n.).

²⁶ Brooks, 'Fictions of the Wolf Man', 280.

²⁷ See, for example, 'The "Uncanny"' (1919), in *Art and Literature, PFL*, vol. 14 (London: Penguin, 1990), 335-376 (368); 'The Theme of the Three Caskets' (1913), *ibid.*, 233-247; and Marion Sprengnether, *The Spectral Mother: Freud, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 232 and *passim*.

undoing'.²⁸ If Poe's writing is dated after its author's death, it could be considered as the kind of writing that follows and unfolds in the shadow of a return to the psychoanalytic womb. Poe's *oeuvre* thus partakes in a painfully protracted reconstruction in which endings and beginnings merge in a permanent, essentially gothic twilight.²⁹

The term 'reconstruction' is deliberately chosen for its connotations of criminality: the bodies in question in the stories of *Black Venus* (Jeanne Duval and Charles Baudelaire, Lizzie Borden, the Poes) all bear some affinity to subversion and perversion. If, as Cixous points out, the ghost were the fiction of our species' relationship to death,³⁰ the maternal ghost would arguably be a redoubling of such a fiction, which may fail to cancel out mortality but perhaps succeeds in uncovering the foundations of the Symbolic order upon a separation not merely from the maternal body but, most significantly, from a prelinguistic blissful immediacy that lies literally 'beyond words'. As an example of feminist interventions in historicity and history-writing from within fiction, Carter's story unfolds clear of the pleasure principle, in a *fort-da* game that, in its motivation, does not differ too significantly from the one devised by Freud's little grandson, nor does it explicitly deviate from the Freudian model of circuitous entropy.³¹ And yet the twist in 'The Cabinet' consists of the solution of a murder mystery even though, at first glance, no murder seems to have been perpetrated. Carter's short story hence becomes an indictment of a psychical economy, the clues for which lie in a maternal haunting compulsively performed on and off stage.

(Re)constructing Edgar

So you say [Poe] overacts? Very well; he overacts. There is a past history of histrionics in his family. His mother was, as they say, born in a trunk, grease-paint in her bloodstream [...]. (CEAP, 51)³²

²⁸ D. H. Lawrence, 'Edgar Allan Poe', in *The Symbolic Meaning* (New York: Viking, 1961), 105-120 (107).

²⁹ Twilight is often cited as one of the most persistent clichés of gothic writing: see, e.g. Eugenia C. Delamotte, *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 19.

³⁰ Hélène Cixous, 'Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche*', *New Literary History*, vol. 7, n. 3 (1976), 525-48 (542).

³¹ Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), in *On Metapsychology, PFL*, vol. 11 (London: Penguin, 1991), 269-338.

³² Carter's knowledge of the body of critical and biographical writing devoted to Poe is suggested by the beginning of the short story: cf. Fagin, *The Histrionic Mr. Poe*, where it is asserted that the famous author consistently 'insisted on the tragic tone [...]. Gravity and tragedy became him even more than mourning became Electra'. (vii).

Thus begins the reconstruction of Poe's rather dramatic life (hi)story. But since 'Poe' the character is none but 'Poe' the writer, that is the implied author of a body of texts published under this name, the search for the man's origins easily slides into an investigation into the archaeology of his work. This archaeology is in itself a reconstruction (or, in the context of theatricality, re-enactment) of the life (hi)story of his mother Elizabeth and hence aptly starts from her own birth and childhood. 'Origin' is thus deferred into the fascinatingly vertiginous contemplation of the mother as child, the seductive challenge and sublime melancholy of which is thrown into relief by Roland Barthes in his discussion of the Winter Garden photograph of his own (already dead, at the time of writing) mother as child, which is famously and tellingly *not* reproduced in his study only to sombrely haunt the entire *Camera Lucida*, through and thanks to its all important omission.³³ Unlike most of Poe's biographers who reproduce the same miniature portrait of his mother,³⁴ Carter's story is not illustrated. In the absence of images, Elizabeth's life is re-enacted in a series of narrative vignettes, in which incidents from her stage career and personal life intermingle: as a nine-year old waif, making her first appearance on stage; as Ophelia, in heart-breaking performances of the crazed suicide-to-be, some years later; then, a young mother, breastfeeding in the wings while learning her lines. These scenes are either indicative of related activities and impressions (metonymical figurations); or, they are taken to summarise and provide an adequate replacement for aspects of her life that are not represented in the text, in the manner of metaphor. This part of the text (52-55) is arguably an indirect allusion and homage to Virginia Woolf's essay on the actress Ellen Terry. Carter borrows from Woolf her gender-inflected phantomisation of the actress and even imitates the syncopated prose in which Woolf 'sketches' her impression of seeing Ellen Terry on stage.³⁵ As Elena Gualtieri argues, the strategy of sketching (auto)biography is symptomatic of Woolf's conviction that fiction makes an ideal vehicle for the writing/drawing of life histories, precisely due to its 'impure', partial and

³³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1993 [1980]), 67-75. On the significant omission of the photograph, see Diana Knight, 'Roland Barthes, or the Woman Without a Shadow', in Jean-Michel Rabaté, ed., *Writing the Image After Roland Barthes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 132-143.

³⁴ E.g. Kenneth Silverman, *Edgar Allan Poe: Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1992), table 1; Marie Bonaparte, *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, facing 6; Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe*, facing 30.

³⁵ Virginia Woolf, 'Ellen Terry', in *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life*, ed. by Rachel Bowlby, vol. II (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), 173-8 (173-4).

fragmentary character.³⁶ In this respect, the evocation of Woolf's essay arguably sheds some light on Carter's metahistorical poetics, since they both evoke the implications of *Nachträglichkeit* for the documentation of the past.

Whether traces or substitutions, the vignettes become emblematic of the physical and psychical existence of Elizabeth Poe, as well as a pervasively *formative* ambience, in which all three of the Poe children are imbued. The shaping force of this family drama is played out in all its potency in the description of the hampered intra-uterine development of the youngest child: '[...] on stage, her final child *in utero*, stitched its flesh together as best it could under the corset that preserved the theatrical illusion of Mrs. Elizabeth Poe's eighteen inch waist until the eleventh hour, the tenth month', and '[t]he monotonous clamour of their parents' argument sent them [Henry and Edgar] at last to sleep but the unborn one in the womb pressed its transparent hands over its vestigial ears in terror. (To be born at all might be the worst thing.)' (53). The interspersing of on and off stage events, that is to say the fictional and the non-fictional within Carter's fictional text, implicitly relies on an equivalence between the two modes, which is reminiscent of and, possibly, analogous to Freud's views on the 'homogeny' of dream and memory outlined in his explication of *Nachträglichkeit*. Ironically, 'homogeny', namely similarity due to common ancestry, is in fact oppositional to the class of similarity that is at issue in the present context. The equivalence between on and off stage events is contingent on their *effect*, not their origin but their conclusion, which is however only revealed in the reconstruction. After the (f)act, in this fictional memory narrative, spectacles and first-hand experience acquire the same currency, spectres and warm, tangible bodies become interchangeable.

On the theme of endings (which, however, as has already been implied repeatedly, only kick-start the work of reconstruction), Edgar's youngest and, as it turns out, tragically short-lived sister is referred to as the family's 'final' child with good reason. The witnessing of Elizabeth's lengthy, agonising labour frightens the two older boys and, as becomes obvious later in the story, leave an indelible mark on Edgar's view of and dealings with women. Impressions are constructed by that which is witnessed as well as that which is painstakingly kept from view:

Edgar and Henry, on a pallet on the floor, held hands. The midwife had to use a pair of blunt iron tongs to scoop out the reluctant wee thing; the sheet was tented up over Mrs Poe's lower half for modesty so the toddlers saw nothing except the midwife brandishing her dreadful instrument and then they heard the shrill cry of the new-born in the exhausted silence, like the sound of the blade on a skate on

³⁶ Elena Gualtieri, *Virginia Woolf's Essays: Sketching the Past* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 142-3.

ice, and something bloody as a fresh-pulled tooth twitched between the midwife's pincers. It was a girl. (CEAP, 53)

Edgar's newly born sister brings her infectious hesitation and mistrust of existence into the family. Her arrival signals not only the tragic *dénouement* of the family drama, but also foreshadows the demise of each of its members. The father is the first to be contaminated: having just returned from the tavern, he gets sick at the sight of the material traces of his wife's confinement ('the mess', 53) and starts to literally melt into thin air 'before his sons' bewildered eyes' (ibid.).

The scene of virtual evaporation will be replayed in the second part of the story, where it marks the end of Edgar's life and biography. Significantly, both this one and that of the extraction are intimately connected to the scene of the birth and, considering their impact, play the role of 'primal scenes' for Poe the writer. They effect some sort of trauma which is fundamental in the organisation and ordering of the unconscious and which rehearses the loss on which subjectivity is founded. Whether one approaches this imaginary event from a Freudian perspective, as the frustration of the Oedipal desire for the parent of the opposite sex,³⁷ or considers its equivalent in Lacanian terms, as the forced dissolution of the dyad by the introduction of the Name of the Father, one would come to the same conclusion as to the formative role of such a phantasy. Both scenarios hinge on the internalisation of the palpable absence of the mother. Already mourned for and yet persistently sought for, undoubted point of origin yet unrestorable and elusive, abject, feared and adored, the maternal constitutes the spectre 'haunt[ing] the house of Oedipus'.³⁸

'The Cabinet' presents a free variation on such developmental schemata. It is an allegorisation of the formative phantasy, to the extent that it does not concern the making of a subject, but conveys an other realisation, the meaning of which is only revealed after the completion of the story and the repetition of the primal scenes. The connection between the primal scenes 'proper' and their reworking in this text may be paralleled to the relationship of the dream content and its secondary revision after waking. The primal scenes in the 'Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe' constitute an analytical consideration (a reading and retelling) of the Oedipal primal scene, in which its implications for sexual difference, mother-

³⁷ Admittedly, the dissolution (that is to say, satisfactory repression) of the Oedipus complex not only differs for the male and the female child, but it follows paths too intricate and convoluted for them to be summarised in a single phantasy [cf. 'The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex' (1924), in *On Sexuality*, PFL, vol. 7 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 313-322]. Although, however, the phantasy of the primal scene is certainly no *précis* for the complex or its repression, it is suggestive of its dramatic, *formative* significance.

³⁸ Sprengnether, *The Spectral Mother*, 5.

hood, masculinity and family romances is unpicked and scrutinised. So long as both formations of the primal scene/phantasy by Freud and Lacan adhere to and reinscribe an account of the Oedipus complex, they formalise 'a conflict internal to patriarchy, between paternal authority and maternal priority'.³⁹ 'The Cabinet' reshuffles these roles and hence also challenges the impermeability and the assumed self-evidence of the categories in question. This challenge is exemplified through the literal melting away of the father and the prevalence of the mother as a giver of a worldview as well as care. Therefore, in this particular context, Edgar's character is no mere boy, but rather a gothic writer in the making and, correspondingly, his mother is more than a provider of care and nourishment. She, mistress of the spectral universe of the theatre, introduces him into uncannily flickering images in the mirror and initiates him in her disappearing acts. Intriguingly, she fulfils both the roles of carer *and* educator, thus defying the false dilemma between the biological, homely, domestic mother (the body) and the intellectual, cerebral, adoptive one (the mind).⁴⁰ Indeed, in Carter's story, Elizabeth's appearances on and off stage are always (re)presented as somewhat redoubled. While she is shown acting different parts, a variety of performances of womanhood (as spectacle, as mother, as wife, dying) are also staged through/by her. Likewise, her audience is not limited to the paying spectators in the stalls, but also comprises her children. Performance is crucial in the repetition of these scenes in the second part of the short story too, which have their predecessor in Poe's tale 'Berenice' (1835).⁴¹ Carter fictionally recreates Poe's life in light of his writing, in a manner resembling Marie Bonaparte's biography, but also inverting it at the same time: following the admittedly precarious chronology of Carter's story, life imitates art rather than the other way around. Carter's Edgar 'lives' in the style of his writing and hence the scene of writing is acted out as an episode out of his life. Interestingly, the evocation of 'Berenice' foreshadows the demise of its author and, to follow the post-structuralist paradigm, the beginning of writing.

One last observation in regard to the term 'scene' should be made at this point: the lower half of Mrs. Poe's body remains hidden for modesty, but at the same time (and precisely because it is deliberately kept out of sight) it becomes the centre of attention for all present. It should not be mistaken for anything but a stage, only with the curtains down. As well as stage curtains, the sheet/screen may be an allusion to screen memories,

³⁹ Ibid., xi.

⁴⁰ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago, 1984), 237.

⁴¹ In *Tales of Mystery and the Imagination*, ed. by Graham Clarke (London: Everyman, 1993), 189-197.

whose significance is often masqueraded through displacement.⁴² Edgar has no precise recollection of his mother's passing away, but retains a very sharp memory of the birth of his little sister, which in its turn, will be uncovered as the rehearsal of his own wife's death.

The aftermath of the girl's birth brings about the melting away of the father and, along with it, the dissolution of the family unit. The actress moves from town to town, as if to escape (or at least delay) the inevitable: 'this latest baby must be weaned before its mother dies' (54). As she starts to melt away under the strains of single parenthood combined with galloping tuberculosis, she surprisingly reaches new levels of excellence in her art. Soon she hardly needs any rouge at all, her cheeks being covered in blotches of a brighter red. Her impersonation of Little Pickle, to which she had always been well-suited thanks to her low stature and slight build, becomes more convincing than ever as her body withers away. '[S]omething desperate, something fatal' gradually lodges in her performance, a trace which equally fascinates and appals 'the witnesses'. The use of this term, instead of 'audience' or 'spectators', is revealing. From this moment on, what takes place on stage is no longer *just* the play – it has become lined with and overwritten by the rehearsal of a woman's death. Her Ophelia is no longer the only one to expire on stage: a little of the actress passes on along with her in each performance. In spite of (or perhaps because of) this intrusion of materiality in the theatrical illusion (the actress's withering flesh, which becomes all the more real because of its wasting), Elizabeth's performance improves by the minute. Her consumption as spectacle is only boosted by the consumption of her life. Like her two young children and the new-born, ever thirsty for her milk and, when the last drop was sucked dry, her sweat (54), Elizabeth's audience appears almost equally vampyric in their determination to extract some other kind of (voyeuristic or otherwise) nourishment of her, from her first appearance on stage until her last: 'even when racked by the nauseas of her pregnancies, still she would smile, would smile and oh, the dazzling candour of her teeth' (52). More often than not, the two sets of pressing requests would press upon her with doubled force:

She ran back to the green-room and undid the top buttons of her waistcoat to let out a sore, milky breast to pacify little Edgar who, wakened by the hoots and catcalls that had greeted her too voluptuous imitation of a boy [in the role of Little Pickle], likewise howled and screamed (52-3).

Affirming once more her artifice-aided nature as 'versatility personified' (52), Elizabeth plays the roles of mother and whore almost simultaneously and with equal persuasion, on and off stage. All the same,

⁴² 'Screen Memory', in Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*.

her commodification as spectacle fails to make any profits to speak of, and thus, after 'the spectral horseman' has taken her away (54), all she has left to Edgar are 'a few tattered memories'.

Although there is no space to examine the testament closely in the present article, the above reading of the first few pages of 'The Cabinet' already prefigures its conclusions. Elizabeth's lessons to Edgar are succinctly ensconced in her testament to him, but had clearly commenced a lot earlier, at the moment of his birth or, perhaps, his conception (cf. the intra-uterine development of his youngest sister). Carter's tribute to Poe casts his mother, in life as well as post-mortem, in the role of his instructor, thus questioning the inbuilt antagonism of Bloomian literary genealogies. Edgar inherits his taste for theatricality and the penumbra from women whom he loves, instead of male *genii* whom he fears and envies. In the same *coup* as overhauling the psychical repertoires of the 'spectral maternal', Carter's text 'adopts' little Edgar in order to restore him to his dead mother. Together, Carter and (her) Poe map out a realm of spectrality in which 'mother' becomes an agent of the revision and subversion of sacrificial patrilineality. ###