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Bodies in Disguise

Graphic and Verbal Embodiments in Djuna Barnes

Introduction

This study aims to consider the outstanding presence of bodies in Djuna Barnes's artistic and literary production, exploring their function in visual and written representations. Training for ten years as a journalist and illustrator in New York, Djuna Barnes was both a visual artist and a writer, so that her literary works always reveal an intense visual approach. Whatever she wrote, whether poetry or fiction, Barnes had physical images in her mind, which provided her verbal productions with an extremely concrete strength. In fact, such an overwhelming presence of bodies gives life to an hypotyposis of the body-shape: always in the foreground, bodies are unavoidable graphic and narrative devices used to explore the limits of both drawing and writing. A brief mention of how bodies are represented from the early stages of her career proves useful in understanding the incidence in her later works where bodies rule the spaces of representation with uncanny and queer shapes. They are often represented as grotesque and deformed, yet turn out to be versatile and multifaceted, suggesting that their function goes beyond their role as illustrations. For the characters, they are tools for both world- and self-knowledge, whereas for the author, they embody narrative and graphic devices to explore the complex relationships between characters and what surrounds them.

As a result, a two-step investigation looks promising to consider first how bodies are represented, then the relationships they embody. The literary and illustrated works chosen to explore how bodies are used as subjects and narratological devices are *The Book of Repulsive Women* (1915) and *Ryder* (1928). These two works, though different in content, form, genre, and style, do share the depiction of bodies as symbols and constitutive elements.

"I can draw and write." Barnes's early journalistic career and the hypotyposis of the body

As hinted in the introduction, a brief overview of Barnes's early representations of bodies during her career as cartoonist may prove helpful to understand how she later came to use them as narrative features.

As soon as Barnes arrived in New York, she enrolled at the Pratt Institute for a short time – about six months – where she received academic guidance for developing her outstanding graphic and painting talent. During the short, yet intense period of academic formation, she gained awareness of her visual talent, immediately embracing Dadaistic techniques.

Soon after having quitted the courses at Pratt, she wrote a message to *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, in which she declared "You need me;" later in life she described this episode slightly differently, claiming that she said "I can draw and write and you'd be foolish not to hire me." They did, and Djuna Barnes soon became the most famous woman reporter and illustrator in the US journalistic and magazine print. (Craft 2013)

The most distinctive feature of her work was the representation of deformed body shapes, caricatured or twisted to grotesque. Illustrations such as the ones from the cycle "Types Found in Odd Corners Round About Brooklyn" realised for the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* (1913) (Figure 1), or the front cover of *The Trend* magazine (1914) show how from her earliest publications body-display was significant to her in accompanying her journalistic activity. (Figure 2)

During her years as a journalist, Barnes started realising the importance of corporal experiences, both positive and destructive. A first-hand experience she had, in particular, shocked the readers for its excessive unpleasantness, and was told by Barnes herself in the sensationalistic essay "How it Feels to be Forcibly Fed" published in the *New York World Magazine* (1914). In the article – which was accompanied by a picture of Barnes during the operation – she wrote in detail about her experience in hospital being forcibly fed. (Siebers 2000) "How it Feels to be Forcibly Fed" is an example of what has been labelled as "performative journalism." (Green 1993, 1) This piece on the rebellious female body claims on the idea of body ownership, which was in tune with feminist activism in the '10s and '20s. (Fortunati et al. 2003) In addition, it enabled Barnes to prove her point on the need for direct body experience, a concept which she would transfigure into a literary leitmotiv.

As she continued testing the versatility of the ink line and shape she accompanied her writings with, Barnes developed the concept of the body as a non-unitary identity. Her body-shapes became increasingly fragmentary, twisted into grotesque, to the extent of gaining her the epithet of "The American Beardsley."[1] However, her drawings added a more cryptic margin of obscurity to the disturbing vignettes by Beardsley; Barnes did not merely try to emulate him, but rather explored further the areas of deformation and queerness. While Beardsley's drawings – so far ironic and grotesque – were clear in shape and figure, Barnes's cartoons were sometimes obscure and impenetrable. (Thornton 1983, 183ff) What is relevant is that at the early stages of her career, Barnes already attributed a central role to the body in her representations.

As she approached the publication of her first literary work, Barnes's interest became increasingly focused on the image of the suffering body, especially the feminine body. Most of the drawings realised during these years depict women's faces deformed by grimaces of pain, and bodies in agony. (Figure 3)

According to Phillip Herring (Herring 1995), such an attitude to depict pain and agony reflects Barnes childhood trauma of getting raped. Although the violence to which she had been subjected undeniably impacted her work, Barnes's choice of literary and artistic topics cannot be limited to such episode(s). As claimed by Bonnie K. Scott (Scott 1995) – and by other feminist critics,[2] too – themes as physical violence and rape in Barnes's work are influenced by, but not limited to, the reiteration of personal trauma. Though largely present, these traumas are textualised and discussed before being developed into rhetorical devices and transfigured into narrative techniques.

To the aims of this study, it sounds useful to explore how the bodies' fragments which animate Barnes's vignettes are transfigured into the subjects of poems, and how they work as narrative strategies. Visual rhetorical devices based on the use of physical shapes are in fact constitutive elements of both *The Book of Repulsive Women* and *Ryder*.

Barnes proved ahead of her time in anticipating the theories of Jakobson (Jakobson 1956) and Lakoff (Lakoff 1980) who later in the century would demonstrate that the metaphor – including metonymy and synecdoche – plays a funda-

1 On *Bruno's Weekly*, III, July 22, 1916. The signature under the vignette called "The Spring, the Poet, the Flower," quoted "by Djuna Barnes (the American Beardsley)."
2 See the critical essays edited by M. L. Broe (1991) in *Silence and Power*.

mental role in structuring and communicating meanings. In the representation of the human body, the synecdoche worked for Barnes as both the tool and the content of the figurative or verbal expression. In realising how some rhetorical tropes can serve visual as well as verbal purposes, Barnes also anticipated what much later would have been defined as "visual rhetoric." (Willerton 2005)

In journalistic vignettes as well as in the illustrations meant for her short stories, and definitely in texts, the hypotyposis of body shapes is mainly embodied in the rhetorical figure of synecdoche. Bodily fragments dominate both the picture-frame and the text: if in the early cartoons bodies are reduced to sketch-style fragments, in the texts new characters come to the reader's attention through flashing descriptions of some body parts. As a general assumption, characters are never presented in Barnes's works as whole figures, which suggests that they lack a coherent identity. As a consequence of their unfixable fragmentation, characters are perpetually trapped in a condition of sufferance. (Armstrong 1989) They suffer from everything that surrounds them, violence inflicted by the outside world, and also from the meanness of relatives and friends who should supposedly be devoted. Instead of finding some sort of solace in a common painful condition, characters behave selfishly and ferociously with one another; their relationships can only be defined as a Hobbesian attitude, which eventually explains why monstrosity is a predominant theme in vignettes and writings.

Fragmentation and violence seem, therefore, a tight *binôme*; they form a vicious circle where the human body suffered from an original violence, which broke it into fragments and which forces it to generate violence towards other bodies. In fact, Barnes's focus on suffering and fragmented human bodies is mostly oriented towards the condition of female bodies. Even though men and women are equally doomed to unhappiness and spiritual dismemberment, women seem to be more afflicted by such a condition. Victims of a social male logic, they are either meant to be submissive in acknowledging their inferiority, or, in rejection of this perspective, to accept prostitution. Barnes brutally emphasises the symmetry between actual prostitution and domestic submission: in both cases, women are forced to endure punches and rape by men. This same kind of violence, as an act with devastating consequences on the women's bodies – and souls, is differently textured in both of the works considered.

The first literary work that Barnes published in New York is *The Book of Repulsive Women*, an illustrated work made up of eight poems and five drawings. The collection of poems was published in *Bruno's Weekly* in November 1915 as

it was not accepted for publication by any other magazine. Guido Bruno's garret served as a gathering point for Bohemian artists of Greenwich Village; tourists had to pay a fee to observe them at work. Critics consider *The Book of Repulsive Women* to be a hybrid between crime news in verse and poetry of the macabre because of the rough themes it discusses. (Doughty 1991, 137ff) The eight poems build up a crime scene which shows women as victims; it is not clear whether the same woman undergoes different kinds of violence – rape, murder, and autopsy –, or several women are caught in different scenes. The core of all eight poems, however, is the suffering female body. The grotesque contrast generated by the description of physical pleasure within violent sexual intercourse creates a sense of repulsion and critical detachment in the reader. In this way, he or she can analyse structures and rhetorical choices through which the woman's body is introduced and handled. From the opening lines of the first poem, body-parts lie down lifeless and broken, impossible to be mended together.

> For though one took you, hurled you
> Out of space,
> With your legs half strangled
> In your lace
> You'd lip the world to madness
> On your face.
> We'd see your body in the grass
> With cool pale eyes.
> [...]
> Plunging grandly out to fall
> Upon your face.
> Naked—female—baby
> In grimace,
> With your belly bulging stately
> Into space.

The woman character, or rather her body parts, stand out in an empty space. (Duncan 1996) The reader, who comes to know this woman through the presence of her body pieces, automatically tries to reconstruct a whole; however, the woman's naked legs, face, eye and belly seem to lie in an unsolvable black-and-white contrast with the 'space.' The reader, therefore, begins to realise that some

pieces of the puzzle are missing and gradually accepts that a re-union of the limbs is unlikely.

The instinctive reaction that drives the reader to unify the body parts is derived from the intrinsic quality of the rhetorical device through which the fragments are presented; as a figure of speech where the part refers for the whole, synecdoche urges the reader to look for the body out of the limbs. However, the violence to which bodies are subdued breaks the sense of re-union, mutilating the rhetoric device – as well as the body. The parts do not stand for anything more complete, and are, instead, self-referential.

The reason why Barnes undermines the fundamental understanding of synecdoche is indicative of a profound reflection on the human condition, which, according to her, is corrupted and doomed to sufferance. As such, even figures of speech lose their role; there is no point in trying to represent a deeper sense, here encapsulated in the metaphor of the body, when that meaning is missing. The union between the parts and the whole is denied because that whole no longer exists. In such a perspective, body scraps are not meant to be mended together, but rather witness an eternal condition of disharmony. If any form of knowledge of the whole, any life-meaning, or general understanding had ever existed, it has been forgotten or it is unreachable by human reason. The uncanny fragments of violated bodies disguise something which peers out from the surface of their wounds but which remains undiscoverable by the reader – and the writer. As a result of the impossibility to come in touch with any kind of knowledge, other elements are introduced in the poems such as indifference and listlessness.

> SO she stands—nude—stretching dully
> Two amber combs loll through her hair
> A vague molested carpet pitches
> Down the dusty length of stair.
> She does not see, she does not care
> It's always there.
>
> The frail mosaic on her window
> Facing starkly toward the street
> Is scribbled there by tipsy sparrows—
> Etched there with their rocking feet.

The atmosphere generated by the semantic fields in this poem seems to contrast with the violence and anger of previous verses. Words such as "dully," "loll," "vague," "dusty," and "frail" all evoke a sense of indifference, which culminates in the verse "She does not see, she does not care." The sense of apathy and submission which replaces violence is in fact the natural evolution of the conflict affecting human beings. Trying to balance on the unstable dichotomy of violence and submission, of repulsion and listlessness, the "cabaret dancer" in poem VI can only find rest in death.

> We saw the crimson leave her cheeks
> Flame in her eyes;
> For when a woman lives in awful haste
> A woman dies.

Suicide is the only possible outcome for a life corrupted from its origin; in an uncanny and disturbing way, the initial metaphor of bodily fragmentation seems to find its fulfilment here. Now that the woman is dead, the author feels free to use the word "body" as a paradigm of the whole. As a corpse, the body is finally reunited:

> VIII. SUICIDE
>
> Corpse A
>
> THEY brought her in, a shattered small
> Cocoon,
> With a little bruised body like
> A startled moon;
> And all the subtle symphonies of her
> A twilight rune.
>
> Corpse B
>
> THEY gave her hurried shoves this way
> And that.
> Her body shock-abbreviated

As a city cat.
She lay out listlessly like some small mug
Of beer gone flat.

Death does not guarantee, however, a positive re-union, a peaceful result after a life of pain and sorrow, especially since the body is described as "bruised" and "shock-abbreviated." Not even a corpse is exonerated from being violated. (Bronfen 1992) On the contrary, it is further degraded into a beast's corpse, a stray cat, or into a – listless – object. Death does not come as a merciful oblivion, as nothing suggests that the individual has stopped suffering. Far from being a long-awaited relief, it just adds a margin of paralysis to the ineptitude of the character. "From cradle to grave" – as the refrain of *Ryder* echoes – the female body is condemned to carry on the tragedy of a corrupted and therefore fragmentary and nonsensical existence.

The drawings that Barnes juxtaposed at the end of the poems expand on the themes of violence, nightmare, darkness, and monstrosity even more than the verses. In what can once again be identified as a hypotyposis of the female body, Barnes depicts deformed shapes caught in intense agony. One of them, in particular, encapsulates the physical tension between violence and apathy.

The second illustration of the sequence (Figure 4) immediately stages a violent contrast between the white figure of a woman and the total-black background, thus introducing a strong contrast between the subject and the space around her. If in the first poem the limbs of the woman were spread in an empty "space," here the woman's body seems about to be ripped into fragments. Symbolically, this vignette embodies the cause of human sufferance, something beyond human understanding, which condemns the body of the poems to an unhappy earthly life. The woman is hanging on to a 'sky creature' by a hook in her mouth, which suggests the precariousness of human life; moreover, she is weighed down by a heavy object in her hand, which will eventually determine her physical break. This woman embodies the condition shared by all women – and by humans in general – of being torn apart by opposing tensions.

The dynamic violence frozen in such a tension is strongly opposed to the indifferent, creepily jolly facial expression of the indefinite sky creature; despite being in charge of the precarious balance of the woman, the sky creature does not seem to be concerned with her pain. Violence is therefore intentionally committed and perpetuated until the break comes.

The third image (Figure 5) shows the results of the fall, and adds strong, grotesque tones to the development of the sequence. The dark background here is about to swallow the woman's body – once again in the foreground but closer, naked, unavoidable. This time, her body is caught in a process of metamorphosis, which endorses the issue of monstrosity. If in the last poem the female body was compared to a beastly corpse, here the overlap between human body and animal is clearer. Having suffered an original violence, the inner nature of human beings is degraded to resemble a beast. Human bodies reveal their animal qualities behind their daily masks in the relationships they form with other subjects who are unfriendly and hideous – if not ferocious. Even in this simple and essential image composed of bichromatic masses, the female body is not presented as a whole figure. Part of the right leg – or paw – has already been swallowed by the darkness which only spares a couple of fragments. This progressing darkness suggests that the dismemberment is *in fieri* and inevitable.

Although the transformation of the female body into a beast indicates that the embodiment of violence is complete, such a metamorphosis is cathartic; as death in the poems does not represent a final resolution to the inner tension that the female body undergoes on a daily basis, neither does the transformation into beast. Being turned into a beast does not bring any kind of solace, not even the absence of awareness; it does not lead anywhere but to more violence and bodily sufferance.

In addition to characterizing *The Book of Repulsive Women*, synecdoche and fragmentation pervade the second work chosen for this investigation on Barnes's bodies, *Ryder* (1928). In this work, everything has changed compared to the first collection of poems in terms of form and content, except for the presence and central role of bodies. *Ryder*, a chronicle of the Ryder family, is a complicated experimental novel in structure and language; unsurprisingly, this work has been long misunderstood. Only recently has the novel been re-evaluated as a highly experimental work, which covers a wide range of literary genres. According to Miller, this text is based on the use of "a mocking pseudo-Chaucerian and Rabelaisian technique." (Miller 1999, 132–133) According to Ponsot, it imitates and mocks an outstanding range of literary forms, including "sermon, anecdote, tall tale, riddling, fable, elegy, dream, epigram, vision, parable, tirade, bedtime story, lullaby, satiric couplet, parallel structuring, ghost story, debate, sententia or aphorism, and emblem or epitome activated as epiphany." (Ponsot 1991, 94)

Within such an experimental virtuosity, it is clear that traditional elements like coherence or cohesion lie elsewhere. Bodies' fragments serve the purpose of creating a *fil-rouge*, which keeps chapters together and runs through the characters' delirious rambling speeches. Once again, synecdoche seems to suit the writer's needs. (Figure 6)

What can be said about the experimentation in *Ryder*'s literary genres is also valid for its images; from the very frontispiece, Barnes declares her explicit attempt at exploring, challenging, and reinventing traditional forms. (Figure 7)

The image intentionally recalls the style of European woodcuts of the 15th and 16th centuries, pushing the observer to wonder about the grounds of this artistic quotation. Barnes's time in Paris gave her the opportunity to learn different traditions of writing and drawing such as the *imagerie populaire* technique. (Durcharte and Salunier 1926) Barnes refers to these traditions in both *Ryder* and *Ladies Almanack* which were both published in 1928, revealing how in those years she was particularly interested in studying European traditional forms.

In the illustrations of *Ryder*, she stages a caricaturing and mocking precision which was absent in the first work discussed; if compared to the sketches for *The Book of Repulsive Women*, the drawings in *Ryder* show a complexity that is antipodal to the essentiality of the 1915 vignettes. Likewise, and thus highlighting the symmetry between graphic and verbal techniques, the density – sometimes obscurity – of syntactical structures seems to prevent the risk of fragmentation, which in 1915 was conveyed by elliptical verses. Still, bodies' fragments remain a thematic core and a narrative device. Hate, violence, and rape on the one hand, and apathy, listlessness, and ineptitude on the other remain the main topics handled in the novel: Hobbes's *Homo homini lupus* seems to determine – or condemn – human relationships.

As the reader was only allowed to see fragments of female bodies of *The Book of Repulsive Women* (1915), in *Ryder* (1928) the reader is given the chance to view some restricted fragments of the characters' bodies. They are introduced through almost physiognomic descriptions, which focus on some parts of the body such as fingers and feet. Several examples can be considered as applications of this technique:

> Sophia was born gross, witty, gentle, enduring. [...] This is the body of Sophia, and she is greater than we. (*Ryder,* 16)

> In the cradle he [Wendell] looked much as he would look in the grave, a hawk nose, a long lip that upon the nipple seemed too purposeful, and a body like a girl's. (*Ryder,* 17)

> Her [Julie's] feet are all soled turned up, hands all backs for agony. Every man's heart in her mouth, the bowels of the world kennel in her belly. (*Ryder,* 114)

The first two quotations reveal the tone of mockery addressed to physiognomy as a science. Barnes often uses this tone as a mode of introducing new characters that immediately appear ridiculous and pathetic. From the initial consideration of Sophia's robust body complexion, which can be objectively positive for a child, the writer lingers on Wendell's lip, sarcastically described as "purposeful."

The last quotation is particularly meaningful because it stages a particular case of synecdoche which is reiterated throughout the whole novel. Women's feet prove a powerful metaphor carried out by the characters themselves. Several times, Sophia warns Amelia to keep her feet far from men, meaning that Amelia should stay away from them, since they only cause a woman's ruin. "Love and the Maiden, that was life and beauty mingled! Two wings folded over her feet. [...] Death and the Maiden. So painfully mingled, two wings folded over her feet." (*Ryder,* 221) Feet are the metaphor for male-female union, which is why Sophia claims "large feet and small feet have played a great part on the history of man." As soon as a woman approaches a man, she compromises her health and life:

> Destiny is in a foot. [...] From the very first day you put your foot in that house, did they not begin to pluck the very feathers from your breast to line their nest with? (*Ryder,* 35)

Delivering children is one of the greatest dangers for women since many eventually die from childbirth: "Amelia wept that she was again to be a mother. [...] I shall die this time" (*Ryder,* 96). Men, pitiless and selfish, keep on impregnating women for the sake of their physical satisfaction. It is therefore fundamental that a woman keeps her "feet and legs" far from men if she wants to live a decent – however not happy – life.

> Never let a man touch you, never show anything, keep your legs in your own life, and when you grow to be a woman, keep that a secret for yourself [...] Never, never have children. (*Ryder*, 32)

Compared to the intentionally unsuccessful synecdoches used in *The Book of Repulsive Women*, the ones of feet and legs in *Ryder* seem to fulfil the criteria of this figure of speech. Feet and legs which must be kept away from men, are clearly the parts that represent the body. There is even a moment when Sophia hints at the female body as an original whole: "Think you what this must inevitably do to corrupt a Whole Body?" (*Ryder,* 46) She is suggesting a pre-existing condition when the woman was entitled to the ownership of her body. Unfortunately, the corruption is, as she highlights, inevitable. The body parts represent the whole, but the whole is denied by human nature's wickedness and monstrosity. Reluctant and slave to their own animal instincts, women – including the preaching Sophia – approach men, get pregnant, deliver children, and then, exhausted, die. Though the synecdoche seems to work formally, it just leads to death, the tragic outcome of love – or rape – and by all means the denial of a living body. Barnes emphasises how matrimonial intercourse's only disguise is a legalized and socially approved rape. In fact, the women in *The Book of Repulsive Women* and those in *Ryder* undergo the same ineluctable fate: violence and debasement, fragmentation and, eventually, death. Some of the illustrations that Barnes incorporates within the text are particularly meaningful as they condense fundamental concepts. (see Figure 6. Drawing accompanying Wendell Ryder's story of the Beast Thingumbob, *Ryder)*

The beast, a dream-creature invented by Wendell in a story set up for his children Julie and Timothy, embodies love, sexual desire, and death. She is a conglomerate of women-like and beastly features, suggesting that the feminine human body is in fact only a disguise for what it should actually look like. The emphasis here lies on fertility and on its deforming effects on the female body. The creature has ten breasts because she has had ten babies. Once again, the relationship between the creature and a male beast encapsulates the dichotomy of love and death. The feminine creature = who in having "no face and no eyes" represents all women = asks her lover how she could be sure of his love for her; she proposes an answer herself since he seems unable to do so: "Promise me that you will bury me, then I shall know that you love me." (*Ryder,* 120) Aware of the inevitable outcome of her love, yet incapable to resist it, she willingly pursues her

end. The degradation to which a woman condemns herself through the choice of loving a man worsens during her complete transfiguration to beast:

> Amelia de Grier and Kate-Careless, went, [...] upon their four feet to do the dirty mess, and damn their infinitesimal-lime-squirting-never-stop-for-consideration-of-a-woman cloacae (and she with the backache and the varicose veins climbing her legs, or whatever-you-call-the-backsides-of-a-pigeon). (*Ryder,* 114)

The relationship between Amelia and Kate changes throughout the novel; they are rivals at the beginning, coexist for most of the narration, and finally put aside their mutual detestation, and try to live side by side. While they do not develop a proper friendship – which is never possible among human beings – nor do they feel any sympathy for one another, they begin to realise that they share the same painful destiny. (Scarry 1985) Degraded and defeated, Amelia and Kate apathetically meet their failure.

Using the body as a mighty symbol and powerful metaphor, Barnes also introduces deeper considerations about some other topics in *Ryder*, which remained unexplored in *The Book of Repulsive Women*.

> Amelia discovered that Sophia, under her increasing flesh, kept memories of what that flesh now covered, sweet breasts hidden by time, shoulders impertinently swamped, legs that walked in their old way beneath inglorious pounds, and a foot that yet played small. (*Ryder,* 34)

Sophia's present and decaying body is compared with her ripe and youthful one, thus establishing a contact between past and present. The fracture between a glorious maidenhood and a decaying adulthood – now senility – lies once again in the act of physical corruption caused by sexual intercourse and consequential pregnancy. Sophia's feet, once small, represent the young age when she had not been touched by a man yet. Her body, now rotten and degraded, disguises the memory of a shapely and ripe one, and represents the corruption which irreversibly spoilt it. The only possible connection between Sophia's past and future is encapsulated in the evil episode of meeting a man; therefore, such a link sounds painful and noxious to the woman who tries not to re-evoke it through memory.

In fact, the origin of her evils continues affecting her as her body is still trapped in its "increasing" degradation.

The progressive deterioration of the body sounds as a *memento mori,* which actually accompanies human beings from birth to death. "From cradle to grave" is a refrain that repeatedly crops up in *Ryder* to remind the reader that no positive turn is to come. In *The Book of Repulsive Women* the woman's body lies naked on the grass, waiting for rotting to start; in *Ryder*, the degradation process starts in life, and it is slower, though more devious. A strong connotation of passivity affects both the cradle and the grave, this time staging a disquieting metonymy: as they name the container for the content, they both refer to the body which is lying inside. Motionless, passive bodies in cradles and graves are there as a result of the same violence. An infant is the outcome of a double violence, one against the mother who is impregnated against her will, and one against the child itself since birth is a sin towards the new-generated life, condemned to sufferance. The corpse in the grave represents then what is left of a life of subjected and inflicted violence, and which is now indifferently occupying another frame, the grave, not very different from the starting point.

As the cradle and the grave seem to play a relevant symbolical role as containers, frames, limits for the body, it might be worth spending some words to discuss what we could define as the "logic of the frame," used throughout the novel. As considered at the beginning of this study, the images accompanying *Ryder* are more complicated than the vignettes in *The Book of Repulsive Women*. Though always described by their sufferance, degradation, bestiality, humiliation, or violence, the bodies in *Ryder* do not show the extreme fragmentation portrayed in the first collection of poems. However, the illustrations in *Ryder* do preserve something of the cartoonist technique. Banal that it may sound, drawings graphically and metaphorically make the most of their picture-frame. In a way, Barnes is shifting the limit of the subject from the physical shape – seen as a frame of the body – to the frame of the illustration. The drawings do not constitute a sequence on their own as they have nothing to do with one another; isolated in their uniqueness, they only make sense within the limits of their frames – or displayed situations. Moreover, the organization of the verbal text into chapters mirrors the logic of the frames in a triggering way, and is evident from the bewildering list of chapters:

36: Amelia Tells a Bed-time Story
37: Sweetly Told
38: Dr. Matthew O'Connor and the Children
39: Wendell Discusses Himself with His Mother
40: Old Wives' Tale, or the Knit Codpieces
41: Wherein Sophia Goes A-Begging
42: Amelia Hears from her Sister on the Misfortunes of Women
43: Timothy Strives Greatly with a Whore
44: Fine Bitches All, and Molly Dance
45: Dr. Matthew O'Connor Talks to Wendell on Holy Inspiration
46: Ryder – His Race
47: Going To, and Coming From
48: Elisha in Love with the Maiden
49: Three Great Moments of History
50: Whom Should he Disappoint Now?

Read in a sequence, the chapters seem to acquire a weird collection of episodes rather than a proper story or plot. The desire for a family biography encouraged by the title – and to some extent by the frontispiece – is denied, mocked, and deconstructed by the list of chapters, as they seem to put together a disconnected series of particular scenes. As a matter of fact, the gained effect of a collage made up of tiny windows which peep into a family's life is completely intentional. These "windows" which are an important thematic device in the novel also form a narrative structure; scenes of a family life are framed in chapters as in their illustrations. In other words, the chapter-division stresses the symmetry between the structure of the narration and the aim of the vignettes: the characters are not allowed to move outside the scene in which they are caught, they do not evolve nor grow wiser. They may be present in more than one episode, but never change, remaining stuck in a fixed mental state of ineptitude where they are incapable of developing healthy relationships. Once again, characters are designed to be nothing more than bodies, imprisoned in their limited spaces of existence, which do not include peaceful and painless human relationships. Characters are, ultimately, *framed* in their selves, or better yet, in their bodies.

To conclude: embodied relationships

As demonstrated, the hypotyposis of bodily shape governs both *The Book of Repulsive Women* and *Ryder*. Not only does the presence of bodies permeate the thematic level, but it also works at different stages of depth in their narratological structure. The originality of Barnes in using bodies as literary devices lies in the fact that physical shapes embody complex relationships. As previously stated, they work on a metaphorical stage as synecdoche and metonymy, which represent, or rather, replace a no longer existing whole body. On a deeper level of analysis, they embody narrative agents. In both works, though not through the same linguistic strategies, physical shapes embody particularly three kinds of relationships, which can be synthesised into three basic *binômes*: characters and the outside world, characters and their maker (writer and/or artist), characters and their inner selves. Actually, a "versus" instead of an "and" would better suit these *binômes* since such relationships are always conflicting. Additionally, in each *binôme*, the "character" coincides with his or her "body" – or what it is left of the body since violence prevents any kind of physical or spiritual integrity.

As to the opposition between the subject (here intended not as active agent) and the world, the body plays the role of an experiential tool without which it would be impossible for the subject to come in touch with what surrounds it. The physical experience is the first and necessary contact with the world, although, since the nature of human existence is corrupted, this connection is as painful as inevitable. The body as a non-integral entity cannot produce a stable connection with the world, so the only "knowledge" to which this body can aspire is broken and fragmentary, incomplete and painful. The relationship, a source of experience but not of knowledge, remains superficial, and causes violence and pain to the already hurt subject, and is eventually translated into bodily fragmentation. The vicious circle of sufferings is unstoppable because the world has been corrupted by human beings which in turn are corrupted because they came into the world. In being born, they fragmented the self into pieces, making bodies into nothing more than broken tools aimed at establishing unstable contacts with a corrupted reality. Sometimes the body expresses anger and rebellion against this condition and fights it – which ends up with fighting against itself as both cause and victim of violence; sometimes it just resigns itself to sufferance, and waits pathetically for death to remove its pains. The woman in *The Book of Repulsive Women* – assuming that she stands for all women – is constantly subdued to

violence perpetuated by anonymous, non-identifiable agents. But in *Ryder*, the closer the subjects become to one another, the more pain is derived from their relationship. Amelia, Wendell's wife, is consumed with hatred for her husband; the two sisters, Amelia and Louise do not manage to live together; mother-daughter and mother-son relationships are spoiled by a strong sense of sin for having generated human lives. Even though some sort of dialogues occur among the characters, they rather resemble soliloquies for the poor interactive component they broach. As fragmented identities, subjects can only build up fragmentary conversations; one of the most emblematic conversations occurs between Timothy and a prostitute with whom he tries to establish a connection going beyond the physical intercourse; the questions that Timothy asks her become increasingly synthetic, thus suggesting a progressive mutilation of their communication:

> "Have you ever repented a little" he asked, "either by night or by day,
> either walking, standing, reclining, looking up, bending down, [...]
> sleeping or crying?
> "No," quoth she.
> [...]
> "Wherein shall I find you! Was it in praying?"
> "No."
> "In travel?"
> "No."
> "At home?"
> "No."
> "At a window?"
> "No."
> "In your bed?"
> "No."
> [...]
> "Then when, in God's name?"
> "Never at all" (*Ryder,* 184–186)

Rather than truly dialoguing, the characters either chose long silences or random, delirious soliloquies. Doctor Matthew O'Connor's spectacular and hardly comprehensible soliloquy in chapter XXXII where he describes his tastes, sins, and pains, clarifies the reason why it is impossible for the characters to communicate

with one another. They cannot tell anything about themselves because they do not understand anything about themselves.

The exploration of humans communicating with the world and other human beings in it, strangers or relatives, lies at the root of the conflict between the body and its soul. As previously mentioned in the analysis of the first embodied relationship, the body is a broken tool, so the only possible contact it has with soul is through broken communication. The fragments of the body disguise a soul which has, in turn, been ripped into fragments becoming flesh. The spiral of distress and disguise is as scary as it is unstoppable: at birth, the body comes to exist in the violent world that has generated it. The world causes the body violence, forces it to commit further violence, until it finally kills it. The pre-existing, unitary soul is corrupted from the moment it is embodied in the new-born life, and it cannot be re-unified because the body is thence corrupted. No real connection is therefore allowed between the body and the soul; if attempted, the soul drives the subject into madness, overwhelming the subject with its tragic truth. As previously mentioned, the body does not allow any connection between the subject and the outside world, other characters, or itself; it is only useful for disguising a ripped soul horribly twisted into monstrosity. The body imposes its own limitations to itself, so that the tool becomes the frame, preventing the subject from going beyond itself.

The impossibility to know or understand the subject ultimately triggers a reflection on the relationship between the fictional character and its own maker. Disturbed by the ferocity of the subjects, and confused by the dichotomy they embody, the reader ends up pondering the intentions of the writer in enacting such a tragedy – played by mutilated puppets. However, not even their own maker seems to be able to investigate the characters from a psychological point of view – nor does she seem willing to do so. The writer appears to be disinterested in exploring the psyche of her characters as they are into trying to understand one another, or investigating their souls. Barnes just reproduces their tragedy and shows no real attempt at going beyond the figure. The main reason for her inability to reach a deeper knowledge is that even she, as a writer, is first of all a human being, a body; as a consequence, she is doomed to the same condemnation as the figures she gives life to. The writer is in her turn a violated body and a fragmented soul who does not find a peaceful relationship between herself and the world, between herself and her literary figures, or between her exteriority and her own self.

In conclusion, Barnes's subjects, masks, or simply, *bodies*, catalyse the entire narration by being characters and narrative devices at the same time. They monopolise the scenes with their outer and inner deformity; they represent both the origin and the result of violence and bestiality; they build up the prison of their existence and shape the frame of their ineptitude. They embody the failing relationships among human beings and, ultimately, personify the tragic fate shared by all human beings, including that of the writer and artist – as well as the reader and observer.

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