

“Those Ill Things”: On Hidden Spectacles and the Ethics of Display

Monika Pietrzak-Franger
(University of Siegen, Germany)

Abstract:

Angela Carter’s short story ‘Black Venus’ (1985) and John Wood’s collection of poems *Endurance and Suffering: Narratives of Disease in the 19th Century* (2007) are revisionist projects which also rewrite life stories of people suffering from syphilis. This paper inspects to what extent these undertakings succeed in re-imagining marginalised minorities. The validity of these endeavours is measured against the visibility of individuals and their bodies, and their positioning *vis-à-vis* the gendered and oppressive cultural scripts surrounding syphilis. On the basis of this discussion, the paper enquires into the modes of display of the nineteenth-century syphilis sufferers as an example of Victorian minorities and asks to what extent such ‘exhumations’ are ethically justifiable.

Keywords: ‘Black Venus’, Angela Carter, *Endurance and Suffering*, ethics, neo-Victorian, spectacle, revisionist project, syphilis, John Wood.

Stereoscopy has often been suggested as an optical technology that stands for the neo-Victorian preoccupation with the nineteenth century (Krueger 2002: xi; Munford and Young 2009: 5). While such a comparison certainly highlights the stance of the contemporary observer, it fails to evoke the variety of ways in which Victorian vistas of invisibility, i.e. those aspects of Victorian life that had been willingly silenced and veiled in and through official discourses, have been invoked in contemporary projects. Like the Victorians, we are aware of the fascinating “dialogue between visibility and invisibility” (Flint 2000: 166), which they consciously articulated. At the same time, we attempt to reveal the secret spaces of tenebrosity that the official culture created at the time. Often, however, such archaeological undertakings fall into the trap of essentialising the past that we excavate. Even more frequently, the clear vision of the remains is occluded by contemporary ideologies which fall like a screen of dust onto the dug-up vestiges and prevent their close examination. These archaeological projects are also bound up with the question of responsibility *vis-à-vis* the object of such studies and with ethical decisions that determine the way in which this

newly ‘exhumed’ past is presented. This paper looks at two instances in which subjects marginalised in the nineteenth century have been ‘excavated’ by neo-Victorian projects and asks to what extent the modes of excavation and re-appropriation determine the effect of these revisionary attempts. The subjects under consideration are people suffering from syphilis.

Anja Schonlau begins her book *Syphilis in der Literatur: Über Ästhetik, Moral, Genie und Medizin, 1880-2000* (2005) by stating that the socio-political impact of syphilis has lost its significance after the discovery of penicillin in the early 1940s and claims that AIDS has greatly taken up the position of syphilis in socio-cultural discourses (Schonlau 2005: 12). Nonetheless, the Oslo and Tuskegee experiments, the increase of syphilis cases in Europe since 2006, and the recent revelations of the American government concerning the experiments in Guatemala (1946-1948) show that the disease continues to take its toll despite the developments in medical diagnosis, prevention and treatment possibilities, and irrespective of our allegedly more sensitive and ethically-oriented culture. Interestingly, such shocking, though sporadic, news is accompanied by an inexplicable but pervasive silence on the part of the mass media.¹ The ambiguous (in)visibility of this venereal disease today mirrors the developments in the cultural perception and conceptualisation of syphilis in the nineteenth century. Meegan Kennedy argues that the broad cultural significance of syphilis at the *fin-de-siècle* was due not necessarily to its high contagiousness but rather to its “paradoxical status as an open secret”, which turned the disease into an “appropriate icon for cultural criticism” and a feasible political tool (Kennedy 2004: 262). The visibility of the disease cannot, however, be limited to the evocation of its metaphorical function. The materiality of the body afflicted by the ravages of *spirochaeta pallidum* has to be taken into consideration as well. In the nineteenth century, syphilis existed in a strange tension between the visibility provided by its metaphorical use and the materiality of, often hidden, decaying bodies.

Physical degeneration, followed by a slow loss of mental powers resulting from parasyphilitic afflictions such as *tabes dorsalis* (Mott 1911), ruined the health of the sufferers but also forced them to redefine their own social status and provoked an identity change. Life stories of patients suffering from the disease, with the exception of famous personalities, have often been lost to posterity. Neo-Victorian fiction, frequently preoccupied with revisiting the spaces of Victorian invisibility, offers a possibility of re-

imagining these lives. Yet, in view of the contemporary conceptualisation of syphilis and due to our uneasiness concerning illness in general, the project of rewriting the lives of nineteenth-century syphilis patients appears rather difficult. While the trope of syphilis has been used as a way of rethinking gender, class and racial debates (Schonlau 2005, Walkowitz 1982, Levine 2003), little has been done to review the stories of actual syphilis sufferers and to rethink their position at the time.

In this respect, Angela Carter's short story 'Black Venus' (1985) and John Wood's collection of poems *Endurance and Suffering: Narratives of Disease in the 19th Century* (2007) are unique in that they re-appropriate life stories of actual nineteenth-century individuals afflicted by the disease. Such an undertaking highlights not only the discrepancy between individual lives and the cultural perception of the disease, it also reveals the tension between the materiality of suffering and the culturally accepted dematerialisation and sublimation of the disease. Last but not least, such appropriations render visible ethical problems that lie at the core of neo-Victorian projects, revealing some of their potential blind spots. Drawing on a Levinasian understanding of ethics, this paper inquires into the effects of Carter's and Wood's appropriations and into the value of 'making visible' the spectacle of syphilis-infected bodies. Most particularly, it asks to what extent the attention to the materiality of suffering and to bodily decay is helpful in rethinking the identities of Victorian syphilis patients. I argue that such a spotlighting is another way of "sexsation" and sensationalisation of the Victorian past (Kohlke 2008a: 6), as it puts on display Victorian ill bodies.² Repeatedly, this practice pre-empts or short-circuits a more ethical engagement with individual suffering and with our past.

1. Revisionary Projects and their Validity

There is a revisionary impulse at the core of Carter's and Wood's projects. Carter debunks the myth of dark-skinned woman as an exotic object of male desire and draws attention to her silences and her erasure under the phallic letter. The object of her rewriting is the life of Charles Baudelaire's long-term Creole mistress Jeanne Duval, whose existence, little and badly documented (see Pollock 1999: 276), survives encrypted in Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857-1868) and in his scribbled notes *Mon Coeur mis à Nu: Journal Intime* (1887); she is also put on view in one of

Eduard Manet’s paintings and in his watercolour sketches. Linda Hutcheon draws attention to the nature of Carter’s undertaking:

Here two discourses meet – and clash: the poetic language of male sublimated desire for woman (as both muse and object of erotic fantasy) and the language of the political and contextualizing discourses of female experience. This is a text that almost demands to be read as the site for the discursive construction of the meaning of gender, but in a most problematic sense: there are two conflicting discourses which work to foreground and contest the history of desire – male desire, that is. (Hutcheon 2002: 141)

Carter’s project aims at recovering (but also at re-inscribing) the (imaginary) traces of Duval’s life from between the lines of her mythologised existence. According to Susanne Schmid, these demythologising strategies encompass a re-inscription of the ordinariness of Duval’s life into the myth that has substituted her in Western history, by drawing attention to her health problems, financial worries and consumption impulses. Schmid believes that Carter goes even further to undermine the literary, male-defined Western canon by pointing out the inadequacy of Baudelaire’s metaphors and by highlighting an ironic heritage that he has left both in his literary work and in his syphilis (Schmid 1997: n.p.).

John Wood’s undertaking, while deconstructive in its intentions, has an altogether different object of revision. *Endurance and Suffering* aims not at laying bare the constructedness of gender mythologies but rather sets out to recover lives that have been credited little attention: the lives of Victorian patients whose personal histories have been abridged, reduced to lists of symptoms and jotted down in professional parlance in medical manuals. Wood uses these medical notes and the accompanying hand-painted photographs from George Henry Fox’s medical atlases (e.g. *Photographic Illustrations of Cutaneous Syphilis* [1881]; *Photographic Illustrations of Skin Disease* [1880]) as a springboard for his poetic response, which aims at salvaging the life stories of Fox’s patients from his reductionist medical discourse:

I wanted to take these clinical photographs and case studies and infuse them with the humanity the lives of these people deserved. [...] None of them could have had easy lives – especially the poor lady who had lost her nose to syphilis. What could such a fate have been like? I wanted to know how she lived it, how she endured it. She was a wife, a mother. Like many women, she contracted it from her husband, who then deserted her. [...] We look at her face and at first might want to turn away, but after looking at her and thinking about her for a long time, I could begin to imagine her days and their terrible routine, how she was condemned to live, like Tennyson's Tithonus, as “a shadow roaming like a dream”. (qtd. in Sibbald 2009: 80)

There are two aspirations that motivate Wood's originally icono-textual project: on the one hand, the desire to make the patients and their lives visible, on the other hand, the wish to imbue contemporary readers with an interest in the stories that have been, intentionally or not, sheltered from view, and to trigger their concern. In this respect, the project is illustrative of contemporary neo-Victorian tendencies of “liberating lost voices and repressed histories of minorities left out of the public records and, hence, [of] imagining more viable ways of living with one another in future” (Kohlke 2008: 9). It is the only project that uniquely combines an interest in individual lives of ordinary nineteenth-century syphilis patients with a multi-media aesthetics. If indeed, as Eckart Voigts-Virchow argues, the “post-deconstructivist faith in the value of hermeneutics as dialogic cultural translation [...] appears almost neo-Victorian” (Voigts-Virchow 2009: 109), and the conversation with the Victorian Other helps us reconsider our future, then Wood's undertaking is unquestionably part of this project, as it attempts, through the recovery of easily, and often gladly, forgotten topics, to make us aware, among other things, of our often still pejorative stance towards illness and the ill.³

Wood's purpose refers to a rethinking of the medical subject in general, and the nineteenth-century (syphilitic) patient in particular. Although certainly politically admirable, such an agenda is nonetheless highly difficult to achieve. Attempts to “locate and re-establish a voice or collective locus of agency” of marginal groups encounter problems which

post-structurally informed scholars both in postcolonial and feminist/queer studies broadly situate in “1) a logocentric assumption of cultural solidarity among a heterogeneous people, and 2) a dependence upon Western intellectuals to ‘speak for’ the marginal condition rather than allowing them to speak for themselves” (Kharbe 2009: 441-442). At first glance, Wood’s *Endurance and Suffering* elides both problems. Precluding any homogeneity among the sufferers, Wood brings forward particular lives and individual attitudes towards the disease. What he also does is to offer them the imaginary space of articulation in his poems. Yet, unlike Carter’s demystifying project – famously Carter speaks about being in the “demythologising business” (Carter 1997: 38) – Wood’s rewriting inadvertently once again takes up the same myths that have surrounded syphilis since time immemorial and which were variously exploited in the Victorian era. Rather than deconstructing these myths, Wood’s poetic project supports and maintains them, thereby appropriating the ‘otherness’ of syphilitic subjects and preventing any possibility of an ethical involvement on our side. For Levinas, it is the recognition of alterity that is at the core of an ethical engagement. According to him, “there are no pre-existing ethical grammars” (Nealon 1997: 132), rather, it is through a dialogical response to the other in a face-to-face situation that ethics is born. In this sense, ethics can be understood as a “critical *mise en question* of the liberty, spontaneity, and cognitive enterprise of the ego that seeks to reduce all otherness to itself” (Critchley 1999: 5). By re-inscribing syphilis sufferers within the myths that surround the disease, and hence reducing them to the ““*other in me*”” (Critchley 1999: 5, original emphasis), Wood pre-empts the possibility of such an ethical engagement.

2. Gendered Myths and Individual Lives

Syphilis imagery has from its outset been gender connoted. Sander Gilman argues for a co-existence of two major icons of the disease: that of a female (prostitute) as a source of syphilis and of a male sufferer as its ultimate victim. Tracing the development of syphilis iconography, he claims that “during the Enlightenment [...] the image of the syphilitic shift[ed] from male to female, [...] from victim to source of infection” (Gilman 1987: 95). R. S. Morton (1990) sees this association of femininity with the source of contagion in such works as Luca Giordano’s *Allegory of Syphilis* (1664) or Johan Sadeler’s *Warning against Syphilis* (1590). Like Morton, Margaret

Healy reads Agnolo Bronzino's *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid* (ca. 1545) as a conceptualisation of the infectious powers of Venus, who, while playing with Cupid, turns her arrow at a sufferer coiling in pain on the further plane of the canvas. The masks that lie at her feet refer not only to the notions of vice and treachery but also, in a more literal reading, to the masks worn by syphilitics to disguise the deformation of their faces (Healy 1997: 9).

This link between femininity and the disease continued over the centuries not only in visual arts but also in literature and medical writings, only to reach its peak in the mid-nineteenth century. It was a time when females began to function as exempla of syphilis in medical writing (Gilman 1978: 96). Inspecting Jean Louis Alibert's *Description des maladies de la peau observées à l'Hôpital Saint-Louis* (1814), Gilman discovers that the author incorporates images of both female and male genitalia but only female faces as illustrations of the ravages that the disease brings to the human body (Gilman 1989: 238). This has two consequences. Firstly, "[t]he movement within Alibert's atlas signifies the reduction of the anonymous male to his infected parts, whereby he becomes the incidental victim of the female's infection" (Gilman 1989: 238). Secondly, "[t]he corrupt face of the female serves as a warning to the male of the potential pollution to be found in [her] genitalia" (Gilman 1989: 240). These specific visualisation techniques highlight female guilt and responsibility in spreading the disease.

Public and medical attitudes at the time clearly show a relationship between venereal disease and the body of the prostitute. Mary Spongberg summarises these beliefs as follows:

the body of the prostitute came to be synonymous with venereal disease. Prostitutes were not merely agents of transmission but somehow inherently diseased, if not the disease itself. [...] During the 1850s, the language and ideology underpinning the discussion of syphilis and gonorrhoea treated prostitutes and disease synonymously. The terms "social disease" and "social evil" were used interchangeably. (Spongberg 1997: 45)

Although Spongberg makes a number of sweeping overgeneralisations, for example regarding nineteenth-century British medicine as a homogenous

woman-blaming narrative, which inscribed on the body of the prostitute the ability to generate VDs, the link between venereal disease and women as transmitting agents cannot easily be dismissed (Nead 1990: 122-125). Likewise, the depiction of men as the ultimate victims of the disease needs to be kept in mind.

Still, although these arguments hold true for the early and mid-nineteenth century, they certainly find less evidence in the late Victorian era. While the moral stigma of the venereal disease was still present in many a medical book, the forerunners of syphilology, such as Jonathan Hutchinson in Britain or George Henry Fox in America, began to dissociate themselves from this narrative of guilt. Medical atlases, which were often simply extracts from earlier publications, were often devoid of the subtext that was characteristic for longer medical publications. And while, indeed, the tendency was to concentrate on disease symptomatology, whereby the ailing subject was lost in the translation onto the page, there was also a tendency to suspend narratives of blame and guilt, which were present in early Victorian medical writing. In this context, what Wood does is to reintroduce a gendered narrative into medical writing.

Purposefully or not, Wood re-inscribes the lives of nineteenth-century syphilitics within the binary gender structures that have accompanied the traditional depiction of syphilis. Although the only three patients that are awarded poetic space to recount their experience directly are women, their identity is conflated with the iconic depiction of femininity as corruptive. The first in the order of reading is a woman whose portrait serves as an illustration of “syphiloderma tuberculosum” and who has been poetically named “The Passionate Shepherdess”. Positioned on a neutral background, the Passionate Shepherdess displays her disease but makes an attempt to avoid the camera. Longingly and with shyness, she utters her invitation to love: “Come live with me and be my love” (Wood 2007: 27, l. 1), thus appropriating Christopher Marlowe’s famous pastoral poem ‘The Passionate Shepherd to His Love’ (1599). The invitation, more directly than Marlowe’s “request for intellectual companionship that is open to erotic reconstruction” (Brown 2004: 114), carries a promise of sexual (dis)pleasure in the pastoral setting, which now refers to the topography of the shepherdess’s body – the symptomatological landscape of her cutaneous disease: “And we will all love’s pleasures prove / That valleys, hills, and stubby fields, / Or any warm and moist spot yields” (Wood 2007: 27, l. 2-4).

Through the introduction of disquieting images, the plea is made dangerous and deviant at the same time, as the consummation of physical love is here directly related to a nightmarish vision of syphilitic infection:

I seep, I run, I ooze desire.
 My open legs are smeared with fire.
 Oh come and kiss my pepper-skin.
 My taste sets testicles a-spin. (Wood 2007: 27, l. 17-20)

The association with pastoral idyll is not the only intertextual reference Wood plays with. The publication of Marlowe's poem in 1599 succeeded the publication of Girolamo Fracastoro's three volume epic poem *Syphilis, sive morbus gallicus* (*Syphilis or the French Disease*) in 1530. In the third volume, Fracastoro recounts the origins of the disease and links them to the sacrilege of the shepherd Syphilus, who brought the scourge onto his people by turning against the Gods:

At once upon this criminal earth there arises an unknown plague. Syphilus is the first attacked by it, on account of having been the first to profane the sacred altars. A hideous leprosy covers his body; fearful pains torture his limbs and banish sleep from his eyes. Then, this terrible disease [...] does not take long to spread in our entire nation. (Fracastoro 1911: 54)

By analogy, the passionate shepherdess is identified in the poem as the source of carnal scourge.

Through an inscription into the pastoral setting, she is further associated with the images of disease popular in the sixteenth century. In the genre painting based on the engraving by Johan Sadeler, the "sinister shepherd", who is about to taste the water from the spring, is warned by a learned man, identified by Panofsky as Fracastoro himself, against the venereal disease, which is here identified with the image of "Venus lactans" (Morton 1990: 121). The inviting gesture of Venus and the spring that issues from her breasts find their equivalents in Wood's poem, in which the shepherdess promises: "I'll be your milk. / I'll bring you warm and bubbling jugs, / And you will purr and lick my dugs" (Wood 2007: 27, l. 14-16).

Through the links to early syphilitic iconography and Marlowe’s poem on the one hand, and through the reference to the origins of syphilis in the shepherd Syphilus’s sacrilege, on the other, the woman with *syphiloderma tuberculosum* is doubly inscribed as a dangerous source rather than deserving victim of syphilis.

Here, as well as in two other instances when syphilitic subjects are allowed to speak, references are made to excessive female sexuality and corruption. In ‘Syphiloderma Tuberculosum: Lady in a Hat’, the speaking “I” can be identified as an object of male attraction, who, while wallowing in excess and highly conscious of her position, appears entirely ignorant as to her responsibility in spreading the disease. Finally, the third poem, ‘Little Lady Lena’, has connotations of the sexual exploitation of children (Wood 2007: 94). In fact, here, the lyrical ‘I’ speaks for herself only in the first two lines of the first stanza, and is otherwise limited to recollect and repeat the words of the ‘love talk’ addressed to her. Unlike in the previous poems, here the responsibility for spreading the disease is not addressed directly, yet the assumption as to the age of the speaking ‘I’ suggests the male molesters as the source of the disease. The language Wood introduces changes these connotations, whereby the criticism of patriarchy is partly lost. As Wood remarks in his ‘Notes’, “[t]he suggestive language is in part taken from a well-known scene in Thomas Otway’s play *Venice Preserved* [1682], a scene in which Aquilina, a dominatrix prostitute, is being begged by her client to kick and humiliate him” (Wood 2007: 117). This direct linguistic link between Lady Lena and Aquilina, who is here reductively read as “a dominatrix prostitute”, again foregrounds the feminisation of the venereal disease.

This imagery of a diseased female as the source of syphilis is paralleled by a depiction of the male syphilitic as victim, which is compatible with the traditional iconography of the disease. Gilman acknowledges that already in the fifteenth century, the male was regarded as the “exemplary sufferer”, commonly being “portrayed as the primary victim of the disease, not as its harbinger” (Gilman 1987: 95). Importantly, Wood begins his book with the image of the ‘Unknown Man: Syphiloderma Papulosum Circinatum’. Accompanied by the only lengthy quotation from Fox’s medical atlas, this first poem diverts attention from the man as a possible culprit to the female lodger, who, according to Fox, spread the disease to the family:

what this family suffered, through no fault of their own, but merely from the unfortunate circumstance of having kept a syphilitic boarder [a woman], the reader can easily imagine. Scores of such instances [of non-sexual origin] doubtless are occurring of which no record is made, no history written. (Wood 2007: 19)

Here, the man, as the synecdochic image of the whole family of innocents infected by a lodger, functions as the prime sufferer. Although in Wood's poem, which takes a contemporary microscopic view of the spirochete, the causative organism shifts the responsibility away from the lodger and to the vehicle of the disease itself, it nonetheless does not discredit the narrative of male victimhood. Flanked by Fox's narrative, the image of the man, who, his eyes cast down, shamefully reveals the marks of the disease on his forehead, supports rather than negates this myth.

In fact, the choice of plates depicting syphilis and their sequence in Wood's book can be organised into a smooth narrative on syphilis, not unlike the traditional image of the disease that we have never managed to dismiss. Other poems that refer to syphilis patients also typify them. The poem 'Syphiloderma Ulcerativum Performs' evokes the suffering of an 'innocent', deceived and abandoned wife, described and openly critiqued in the late nineteenth-century New Woman writing, for instance in Sarah Grand's *Heavenly Twins* (1893). All in all, rather than resurrecting patients' voices from supposedly ideologically dubious medical books, Wood re-inscribes into the pages of his greatly schematised narrative, a biased but historically justifiable depiction of the disease. While this insertion of a gendered narrative could be understood as a deconstructive or counter-discursive gesture, which spells out what was only latently present in the medical text – namely the gendered economy of medical narrative of blame and responsibility – this gesture remains ambiguous and problematic precisely because it takes up and perpetuates the stereotypical and stigmatising narratives around syphilis.

Wood does not manage to poetically bring to mind the pain and misery of the people who suffered from syphilis in the late nineteenth century. What he does, rather, is to (r)evolve their identities within the limited framework of gendered and sexualised stereotypes, in which they had already existed. According to Homi Bhabha, such processes of

stereotyping can also be regarded as a complex and ambiguous technology of othering, which “is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always already in place, what is already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated” (Bhabha 2010: 95). This repetition highlights the necessity of delimiting the borders of the self, while at the same time testifying to the attraction of otherness which is continually addressed in this repetition. In other words, while marking his fascination with syphilitic patients, Wood’s stereotypical evocation of the disease keeps them at bay, thereby simultaneously precluding the possibility of compassionate solidarity on the side of the reader.

It is by ‘spelling out’ their lives that Wood fails to acknowledge their alterity. Reacting to the feminist critique of Levinas concerning his masculinist misrecognition of female subjects, Diane Perpich proposes to read his notion of alterity in terms of singularity rather than otherness, and points to the problematic character of recognition and representation for his philosophy. While identity politics often limits the otherness of the other to a series of differences in categorisation (the otherness of gays, women, animals), Levinas recognises singularity as more than a list of attributes that turn an other into an imaginary, essentialised and antithetic Other. Recognition of these attributes appropriates otherness into the world of sameness. Singularity, on the other hand, must be seen as an excess that cannot be communicated through any innate characteristics but only becomes visible in interaction (Perpich 2008: 188). Perpich also points out ambiguity as the founding principle of ethics in Levinas: “Singularity *must* be said – it demands its due – and yet it cannot be said. The singularity ‘represented’ by the face cannot appear in language as such, or it appears only at the price of losing its singularity” (Perpich 2008: 194, original emphasis). Every representation, then, marks a failure in the evocation of this singularity. By filling-in the gaps in the presentation of the syphilis patients, Wood concentrates on the patients’ collective attributes of disease, thus leaving little space for their singularity.

In view of these tendencies, Wood’s project must be seen as belonging to the neo-conservative trajectory of neo-Victorian writing, in which, as Marco de Waard claims

the social aesthetic of a 19th century, bourgeois and empiricist liberalism is reinstalled in the name of a neo-

conservative supremacism which encourages only the most reified and hackneyed models of reciprocity and has very limited tolerance for otherness. (de Waard 2009: 157-158)

Wood's decoupages fail to act as the "documents of the spirit, of endurance, and of suffering" that they claim to be (Wood 2007: 3). What they bring forth are the gendered scripts in terms of which we still perceive the disease.

Unlike Wood's project, Carter's 'Black Venus' draws attention to the discrepancy between the cultural imagery of the disease and individual suffering, which, willingly or not, takes place in the shadow of this stigmatisation. Carter attends to the discourse around the exotic origins of the disease and weighs it against an individual's fate:

For herself, she came clean, arrived in Paris with nothing worse than scabies, malnutrition and ringworm about her person. It was a bad joke, therefore, that, some centuries before Jeanne's birth, the Aztec goddess, Nanahuatzin, had poured a cornucopia of wheelchairs, dark glasses, crutches and mercury pills on the ships of the conquistadors as they took their spoiled booty from the New World to the Old; the raped continent's revenge, perpetrating itself in the beds of Europe. Jeanne innocently followed Nanahuatzin's trail across the Atlantic but she brought no erotic vengeance – she'd picked up the germ from the very first protector. (Carter 1996: 5)

This passage, while contrasting cultural imagery around the disease and an individual's story, also suggests that Baudelaire is the transmitter of the disease. Yet, there is a certain ambiguity concerning the role he and his mistress play in the spread of the disease. While Baudelaire might have transmitted it to Duval, after his death and back in the Caribbean, she "dispenses" it "to the most privileged of the colonial administration" (Carter 1996: 12-13). "[T]he whore", as Kohlke rightly points out,

exploited for both sexual gratification and artistic inspiration, finally resurrects herself as exploiter. [...] For once established as a 'respectable' madam, Jeanne presumably

takes a generous cut of the earnings of her girls, while continuing to cash in on the dead poet’s fame by a further necrophilic means. (Kohlke 2003: 346)

In this context, syphilis becomes a democratising disease, which turns Duval and Baudelaire both into victims and victimisers. Kohlke also reads it as “a metaphor for the insidious ineffectiveness of capitalism, the all-pervasive ideology of which corrupts both perpetrators and victims and eventually breaks down the boundaries between them” (Kohlke 2003: 347).

And yet, the susceptibility to the disease, its democratising character and the conjoined suffering of Duval and Baudelaire do not make them equal. In *fin-de-siècle* France, with the myth of the ‘syphilitic genius’ very much in vogue, syphilis was often a subject of, if only feigned, pride rather than scorn. Guy de Maupassant allegedly welcomed it with joy: “I’ve got the pox! at last! the real thing! Not the contemptible clap, not the ecclesiastical crystalline, not the bourgeois coxcombs or the leguminous cauliflowers [...]. The majestic pox, pure and simple” (qtd. in Quétel 1990: 128-130). This perception of syphilis helped to mythologise male genius, while at the same time still functioning as a tool of repression for women, who, as in Britain, were regarded as evil receptacles and transmitters of the disease.

Pollock argues that Carter introduces “feminist irony” to the ending of the story (Pollock 1999: 271), by inscribing Madam Duval into this binary scheme but at the same time making her infect colonial administrators with “the veritable, the authentic, the true Baudelairean syphilis” (Carter 1996: 13-14). Indeed, such an ending can be read as a contemporary empowering of Duval to take revenge on white colonisers, who had deprived her of her own motherland and history – a dusky mistress takes up the mythologised role of the goddess Nanahuatzin. In fact, Schmid argues that:

Carter deconstructs two aspects of nineteenth-century images of women: firstly, she questions the male opinion that exotic and erotic women do not possess any individuality. Secondly, she moves on to a metapoetic level. “Black Venus” is also a rewriting of male-defined literary history. (Schmid 1997: n.p.)

Although Carter's short story highlights the inadequacy of Baudelaire's language and uncovers the blind spots of Western, male-defined literary history, 'Black Venus' does not really rewrite this history but rather re-appropriates it. In fact, Carter's aggrandisement of Duval's revenge does not differ much from Guy de Maupassant's scenario in his novella *Le Lit 29* (1884), in which Irma, the most beautiful of the kept women in town, proves more heroic than her once-lover captain Épivent in killing the Prussians by infecting them with the syphilis she contracted when raped by enemy soldiers. Unlike Wood's essentialist rewriting of syphilis patients through an uncritical adoption of gender myths around syphilis, however, Carter never simply takes up these traditional narratives but rather shows, by drawing attention to their multiplicity, the complexity of individual existence lived in the shadow of such culturally sanctioned accounts.

3. (Mis)Reading Material Culture

Both Carter's attention to the multiple ways of imagining and reading Duval and Wood's juxtaposition of the clinical photographs and his interpretative poems foreground yet another issue significant to neo-Victorian studies: the question of hermeneutics and the problem of its ethics. The misreading of Baudelaire's "negress" has famously been pointed out by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak:

there are at least three ways of ignoring the inscription of the "negress." First, by asserting [...] that perhaps Baudelaire meant to focus on her predicament as being exiled without history or geography. Without attention to developing the native informant perspective, such an assertion can unfortunately collapse into what Lisa Jardine has called "recovering some concealed radical message from ostensibly reactionary writing." The second way of ignoring the negress is to bring in precisely the details about Jeanne Duval or the elusive *malabaraise*, without attending to the way the negress is displayed in the poem. Third [...] is by suggesting, as Edward Ahearn has done, that the negress is somehow Baudelaire's dark double. [...] These readings, as they

deconstruct an error, themselves perform a lie. (Spivak 1999: 155-156)

While Spivak indicates some errors in contemporary readings of Baudelaire’s poetry, Kohlke draws attention to Carter’s critique “not only [of the] patriarchal construction of the female body, but also feminist versions of the same” (Kohlke 2003: 352), thus foregrounding some of the blind spots of contemporary scholarship.

The problem of interpretation is also significant with reference to Wood’s collection, in which it is thematically emphasised. Although Wood’s agenda and his comment on Fox’s sparing documentation in ‘While Sales Have Declined’ – “FOX’S MINUSCULE comment reads [...]” – emphasises the problems various reading strategies entail, there is a certain naiveté concerning the reading of bodies expressed in the poem accompanying the photograph of “[a] newsboy with a severe type of the disease” (Wood 2007: 59):

The headlines are filled with bad news:
 Love again has done its mess.
 But who couldn’t read a face
 for free with so much yet to lose. (Wood 2007: 59, l. 1-4)

The phrase “who couldn’t read” refers both to the display and the spectacle of the newsboy’s corporeal predicament and to the easy accessibility of this ‘text’, at the same time suggesting the straightforwardness with which his ailing body can be interpreted.

This perilous ‘effortlessness’ of reading material signs was known to Victorian medical men, who often admitted that their judgement of a patient’s appearance and the presuppositions concerning his/her history, proved detrimental to their diagnosis (see Hutchinson 1909: vii). Wood appears to be free of such apprehensions. And yet, his cultural assumptions obviously influence his reading of material markers in the photographs. In ‘Lady in a Hat’, Wood identifies the woman on the picture as a high-class courtesan. The poem draws attention to the sartorial codes which constitute the basis of his interpretation:

I assume you're familiar with quality:
 note the eardrops, real jet, worth tidy sums.
 Like my bonnet, they come from Patee.
 And this is pure Belgium lace on my bosoms.
 (Wood 2007: 91, l. 5-8)

Is it the full-size earrings, the straw hat or what can be seen of the dress that betrays her provenance and profession?⁴ Why does Wood interpret her as a prostitute if this type of dress was commonly advertised in many fashion periodicals at the end of the nineteenth century? Worn by the ladies, the style was also imitated by the middle and the working classes. It seems that the underlying reason for this classification is Wood's assumption that no respectable lady would be photographed by a clinical photographer, making her a de facto prostitute. Although such a reading cannot be precluded, it nonetheless shows that socially accepted scripts and iconographic traditions weigh much on Wood's interpretation. He could have made the woman in the picture anything in the world, but he has decided that she is a 'vulgar and disrespectful whore'. Wood's choice is symptomatic of a number of tendencies characteristic of the more sensationalist re-imagining of the Victorian era (see Kohlke 2008a: 350).

4. Of Spectacles and Things and on the Ethics of Display

What position do these evoked diseased bodies assume today? Carter's re-imagining of Duval is like a conjuring up of a ghost that returns under a changed disguise and remodels our expectations. It spotlights the discrepancy between Baudelaire's poetic spectacle of Duval's body and the realities of her physical existence. The short story repeatedly draws attention to the way in which the poet constantly fictionalises the woman as an exotic, stunning and dangerous beauty, and to the techniques through which his imagination erases the physical reality of her disease: "His lively imagination performs an alchemical alteration on the healthy tang of her sweat, freshly awakened by dancing. He thinks her sweat smells of cinnamon because she has spices in her pores" (Carter 1996: 10). The oriental scent in Baudelaire's nostrils is juxtaposed with the realities of Duval's contaminated physicality: "she was a little worried about a persistent vaginal discharge that smelled of mice, something new, something ominous, something horrid" (Carter 1996: 6). Yet, Carter does

not make a spectacle out of Duval’s decaying body, rather, she reduces it to a set of culturally poignant signs and only suggests, but does not articulate, the havoc that the illness eventually wreaked upon her body. In Carter’s narrative, Nadar reminisces on his last sighting of Duval: “Jeanne hobbling on crutches [...] her teeth were gone, she had a mammy-rag tied around her head but you could still see that her wonderful hair had fallen out” (Carter 1996: 12). Duval has to “repair” her beauty with false appendages: “You can buy teeth, you know; you can buy hair. They make the best wigs from the shorn locks of novices in convents” (Carter 1996: 13). Like the veil that covers Duval’s face on her imagined escape from Europe, Carter’s language leaves out the ribald descriptions of her bodily decay and hence prevents Duval’s objectification, her construction as an object of a neo-Victorian scrutinising, curiously medical-like gaze. It respects her difference that cannot be reduced to sameness and therefore allows for an ethical engagement on the side of a contemporary reader: in this veiling lies the key to Duval’s singularity. If, as Judith Butler contends, “[f]or representation to convey the human, [...] representation must not only fail, but it must *show* its failure” (Butler 2006: 144), Carter’s story highlights Duval’s humanity in the heterogeneous expression of the subject that fails to pin her down.

In Wood’s work, on the contrary, the lives of syphilis patients are put in a spotlight. The emphasis on the recovery of their stories, which underlines the project, pre-empts a reading of the selected patients as simple objects of Wood’s display. Rather, the photographs take up a position similar to that of the dug-up bog bodies displayed in museums: they are the relics of the past, tangible, material testimonies of individual lives whose traces they constitute. While the materiality of these bodies is mediated, it is the only substantial trace that they have left. These photographs also share the ambiguous ontological status that bog bodies inhabit. Karin Sanders argues that the human corpse on display is “forced to occupy an intermediate space in which it is both a person and a thing”; it is “bifurcated into ‘object body’ and ‘embodied person’ (the first is the material body that can be seen in the museum; the other is the imagined person who inhabited the body)” (Sanders 2009: 193). The re-humanisation of the remains, which involves such strategies as facial reconstruction, is part and parcel of contemporary curatorial practices, guided by the responsibility towards the dead and the ethical display of their remnants. Such practices, which often also involve a direct participation of the viewer in the problems of

exhibition strategies and the question of ethics,⁵ conflate the “bifurcated” objects of display, thus counteracting simple voyeuristic responses on the side of the viewers.

Such spectatorial impulses are not taken into account by Wood, who displays his ‘excavations’ to the viewer and flanks them with his own poetic narrative. His imaginary collection of syphilitics can be compared to a collection of anthropological studies. Such compilations, however, are not free of prejudice and dehumanising effects. Thomas Couser, for instance, points to the criticism that has been levelled at Oliver Sacks’s neuro-anthropological work, which has been compared to the unhealthy spectacle of Victorian freak-shows or humiliating balls at the Bedlam hospital (Couser 2001). In order to establish the nature of Sack’s accomplishment, Couser puts forward a number of criteria, which help him determine the extent of patients’ objectification. His model, which includes such categories as the nature of patients’ exposure, its contextualisation and the control of the spectatorial angle, may be helpful here.

While Carter offers only a verbal and implicit evocation of Duval’s ailing body, Wood supplies a direct, visual spectacle of syphilis patients. Since his overarching narrative of humanisation is not sustained, the patients’ singularity is not retrieved but is replaced by their stereotypical categorisation, which hampers the possibility of a dialogical exchange on the part of the reader. Substituted with gruesome stories of concupiscence and dubious myths of origins, illustrated with clinical photographs, the patients become icons of syphilis. Stereotyped, they are turned into teratological spectacles: their photographed bodies become part of the contemporary unhealthy desire for sensation. Plate fourteen, ‘Syphiloderma Ulcerativum Perforans’, which depicts a woman seated in distress in front of a camera, conscious that the gaping hole in her face will be eternalised, shamelessly exposes her to our gaze. Nothing protects her from our scrutinising eyes, searching for sensationalist images in a world where sensation has become common currency. Certainly not Wood’s sentimental narrative that turns her into an abandoned victim, a romantic, naive woman: “she knew nothing of other women [...] She’s kept his picture, a rose he gave her / she pressed into a book of Tennyson’s” (Wood 2007: 63, l. 15, 30-31). She is thus doubly exposed: through narrative exploitation of her naivety and the ostensible spectacle of her rotting body. Wood’s unrestrained display does not differ much from the medical de-humanisation

of bodies that have been turned into iconic images of medical (and social) disorders. The voyeuristic potential of the photographs is not counteracted but rather highlighted by the stereotypical narratives, whereby readers are allowed to treat the patients as a scaffold on which they can hang their prejudices.

Unlike the hazy image of Duval, who can be read in a number of ways, Fox’s syphilitic patients are pinned down like exotic species with a limited possibility of generating strong and well-founded interpretations that deviate from the dominant reading that Wood embeds them in. By precluding the plurality of the possible personal stories and by re-contextualising the syphilis patients in the long history of disease iconography, Wood’s project is problematic, as it turns these individual traces of the diseased (some)bodies into types, and thus into objects of our unrestrained scrutiny.

5. From Phantasmagoria to the Museum of Mortality

According to Voigts-Virchow, neo-Victorian preoccupations are like blows “in-yer-Victorian-face”, as they take interest in issues and people that the official Victorian culture gladly marginalised and hid from view (Voigts-Virchow 2009: 108). Yet, as feminist and postcolonial scholars have shown, it is not enough to reveal these marginalised subcultures; the mode of this exposure is crucial for the success of such projects. With what technologies can Carter’s and Wood’s modes of display be compared?

Carter’s indirect verbal evocation and misty portrait of Duval, whose form mutates depending on the point of view of the observer, can be compared to spectacular phantasmagorical images. Projected on the semi-transparent medium of text and changing according to context and reader, the ghostly image of Duval haunts our present, without either her person or her ailing body becoming essentialised. The truth about her, like her figure, is elusive and requires our utmost attention. Whatever her shape, the show makes us aware that we will never see her clearly and that what we know about her is not free from the fancies of our imagination.

If Carter’s mode of narration underlines the inconsistencies of our historical knowledge, while simultaneously inviting us to challenge our perceptual and cognitive assumptions, Wood’s museum of collectibles attempts to impose on our reading his own, one-sided version of the past. Rather than a progressive interactive museum of today, Wood’s collection

resembles a Victorian cabinet of curiosities, in which traces of people's lives have been meticulously displayed and framed by classifying narratives, which typify and objectify their subjects. Wood is not unlike Charles Willson Peale's *Artist in the Museum* (1822), who reveals, by holding up the curtain of the official past, his own collection of ill things: a spectrum of diseased rarities. This is a version of a 'dead' past, a technology of *vanitas mundi*:

a way of exhibiting dissected materials [...]. Articulated skeletons, taxidermy, wax models, and live specimens [that] also offer [...] conceptual links between anatomy and death in what might be considered museums of mortality. (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 36)

Wood's "museum of mortality" offers little inspiration for the reconsideration of our own position in viewing, with panopticon-like liberty, the bodies of the sufferers, which marked them as objects of moral spectacle and social invisibility in the nineteenth century.

Different technologies of display and rewriting carry with them varying degrees of ethical engagement. What is more, they position us differently *vis-à-vis* this re-envisioned past. While in the first case, Duval's phantasmagoric presence, like Hamlet's ghost, reminds us that "time is out of joint" and motivates us to reconsider our future,⁶ Wood's museum of curiosities locates us at a distance from the past. This technology of display precludes the possibility of a more ethical look into the future that the conversation with Duval's ghost allows in the first case. Perhaps, rather than trying to display Victorian vistas of invisibility at any price, we should acknowledge the necessary ambiguity and opaqueness that lies at the core of an ethical (dialogical and performative) engagement with our past.

Notes

1. On the Oslo and Tuskegee studies see James Howard Jones's *Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment* (1981). On the Guatemala experiments, see Maggie Fox's 'U.S. Apologizes for Syphilis Experiment in Guatemala'

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- (2010). On the resurgence of syphilis in the present, see Selena Singh et al.’s ‘The Characterisation of a Recent Syphilis Outbreak in Sheffield’ (2007) and Nigel Hawkes’s ‘Syphilis makes a comeback but doctors may not know it’ (2008).
2. Kohlke argues for the similarity in the techniques of past conceptualisations of the Orient and contemporary sensationalist appropriations of the Victorian era: “Eighteenth and nineteenth century fantasies of the Orient as free zone of libidinal energies are now understood as products of the Western imperialist imagination rather than attempts at literary realism or empirical knowledge. The same applies to the neo-Victorian sexsation, which artificially inflates desire only to reveal the impossibility of its sustainability and satisfaction in reality” (Kohlke 2008a: 6).
 3. In this respect, Wood’s rewriting is also in line with contemporary developments in medicine, which attempt to move away from the long-standing paradigm of “detached concern” to the ideal of “clinical empathy” (Halpern 2001: 68-73) or what Jack Coulehan names “compassionate solidarity” (Coulehan 2009: 585). Coulehan, like other proponents of the new approach, proposes the use of poetry as a way of refining the sensibilities of future practitioners, as it “provides us with deep insight into both the experience and the relief of suffering” (Coulehan 2009: 588).
 4. On sartorial codes and tendencies in the depiction of prostitutes, see Nead 1990: 174.
 5. Contemporary museum projects increasingly begin to involve visitors in the meta-questions concerned with the ethics of display. On this, see Sanders 2009: 169-196.
 6. On the discussion of neo-Victorianism and ethics with reference to spectrality and the trace, see Rosario Arias’s ‘(Spirit) Photography and the Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel’ (2009), and Rosario Arias’s and Patricia Pulham’s *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction* (2010).

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