

DEVOURING THE DIVINE SUBJECT: THE FEMALE MOUTH IN TWO DINESEN TALES

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The unbridged division of mind and body is to be found at the basis of the Protestant and male – centered culture Isak Dinesen's fiction has its roots in. Foregrounding an intricate association among masculinity, selfhood and Spirit, as opposed to a debased and, by general consensus, feminine materiality, the metaphysical division fosters an essentializing definition of the feminine which pins it down within carefully circumscribed bodily and discursive spaces. The female mouth, which uncannily hovers between intellect and body, acts as the segregating bar of the opposition that patriarchal discourses have endeavoured to regulate in an attempt to stabilize women's gender positions. In problematizing the fixity of this material borderline, Dinesen's stories proceed to question the essential truth of woman and to rearticulate the feminine in terms of re–visioned (bodily) spaces.

I. Gendering the mouth

Mouths loom uncannily in the background of every feminist study that addresses issues of women's embodied existence, particularly those concerned with the material basis of their sexual positioning in discourse and in socio–cultural practices. They are a familiar absence, an unacknowledged presence, which, nonetheless, constitutes the inevitable condition of possibility of embodiment and hence of every probe into the workings of women's conflicting relationships to material processes, to eating, giving birth, or simply being a body.

As a category of critical inquiry, the mouth, or for that matter the body itself, has never, however, even remotely stimulated the trained inquisitiveness of the Dinesen scholars. Invisible in its natural inevitability, it has lain abjected in the marginal obscurity of a critical discourse which has invested its energy inscribing Isak Dinesen's fiction into the canonical literary space of masculine intellectuality. More often than not, commentaries have exalted the deep symbolic meaning of her (otherwise) cardboard, unearthly characters, the virility and artificiality of her style, the ordered design of her meticulous, narrative structures. Sustained by this consistent privileging of the masculine principle operative within her writings, Isak Dinesen's appropriately male pseudonym received the pat–on–the–cheek of recognition from Ernest Hemingway's very mouth, at the cost, however, of shutting its own up.¹

The mouth of the woman Dinesen, as well as that of the Dinesen woman, found itself silenced and incarcerated, or more precisely, it was silenced by

being immobilized within the structurally dominant side of a Cartesian dichotomy wherein a valorized intellect violently subsumed the material and its attendant associations of corporeal baseness. Somehow, on the way up the canonical ladder, Dinesen's storytelling fiction came to lose its breathing space, its very life and flesh in becoming trapped within a classificatory system that upholds the hegemony of the fixed, qua masculine, subjective order.

My readings of "The Cardinal's Third Tale" and "Echoes" (*Last Tales*) will embark on a quest for the missing flesh, the relegated physical and corporeal aspect of the Dinesen text, by way of re-visualizing, in the sense of rendering visible as well as re-presenting, a mouth blotted out of critical response in an erasing gesture aimed to assuage hermeneutic anxiety. Centering my discussion on the mouth-activity of the Dinesen women I hope to follow the textual moves by means of which the female mouth reconfigures itself as an object of both fear and desire, a bodily margin invested with danger and power in being the site that holds out the possibility of disruption of bodily and hence subjective spaces.

In its very function as controller of incorporate processes, the mouth can regulate, or potentially deregulate, the spatial frame of the body and by the same token manipulate the formation of the subject which is firmly rooted in its material manifestation. It is in this light that the unorthodox, incorporate acts performed by Lady Flora and Pellegrina Leoni proceed to rearrange the lines demarcating the humanist subject as this is sketched against the background of an early twentieth century Protestant ethic, distinctly Northern European in its conception and application. A rearticulation of gender, a redrafting of the concept of femininity is, thus, effected from within the Protestant and humanist discourse of subjective stability the moment that the spatial schema of what I will call the "divine subject" is reordered. The solidity of the inner self as opposed to the outer menace of non-being falls prey to an unrelenting mouth activity, Lady Flora's kissing of a diseased spittle and Pellegrina Leoni's vampiric sucking of blood being both incorporate acts that refuse to respect the oppositional basis of the inside/outside, soul/matter structures.

In the metaphysical model of territorial, subjective demarcation, "here" and "there" are invested with powers of ontological and, it seems, theological determination. What lies on the "inner" side is valorized on the grounds that it bears the mark of an essential coherence which the "exterior" other lacks and threatens. Protestant teachings have sustained and reiterated the humanist configuration of space in order to construe an extreme form of Christian anthropocentrism in what has been called "positive individualism." Protestantism, the religion of the personal, of personal freedom, commitment and prayer, validates the exclusionary isolation of a "divine," individual core, the locus of "the interior Master, the Spirit," which needs be contrasted to, and hence protected from, the intermediary obstacle of the flesh (Bouyer 123-143). In more recent, scientifically alert times, Freud would authoritatively locate the origin of the spatial divide in the primary oral phase, foregrounding the mouth as

a bodily orifice inscribed with the potential of spatial and thus ontological delimitation. He writes characteristically in "Negation":

Expressed in the language of the oldest, that is, of the oral, instinctual impulses, the alternative runs thus: "I should like to eat that, or I should like to spit it out;" ... That is to say: it is to be either *inside* me or *outside* me The original pleasure ego tries to introject into self everything that is good and to reject everything that is bad. (237).

What the incorporate activity of the two Dinesen heroines puts into question is precisely the fixity of the very borderline which guarantees the autonomy of the self by admitting no point of contact between the dichotomy's two terms. It questions, as it were, a separation all the more ideologically and politically significant for ultimately spreading its logic of hierarchical subordination on to sexual difference.

To separate, if we were to trust Lacan's knowledge of Latin, etymologically reaches back to the ancestral *se parere* which means "to engender," or in its juridical sense "to put into the world." Alternatively phrased, it raises the question "How ... has the subject to procure himself?" (Lacan 214). In so far as separating entails engendering, the mouth, in its function as the fleshy rim that divides the corporeal space of being from the domain of dead matter, procures and positions the subject into the world. It en-genders it, sustaining it to life and carefully delimiting the material space it is to inhabit against the excluded threat of (bodily and self) dissolution. By the same token, however, it also genders it; it assigns the subject, as it were, to a gender category by means of inserting it into the appropriate discursive space within which the bodily shape comes to be culturally intelligible. To give an example, feminine is, by cultural consensus, small, so that any deviation from the normative formulation risks being classed at best unfeminine and at worst an aberration. On a different reading level, which will be my own, it may, of course, function as a calculated challenge, a detour from the normativity of feminine size that concretizes dissident bodies such as the case is with the excessive, gigantesque figures of Lady Flora ("CTT"), Athena Hopballehus ("The Monkey," *Seven Gothic Tales*) or Mali ("Tempests," *Anecdotes*).

In a context of invisible, though concretely felt, patriarchal, power relations, bodily space comes to materialize gender, or more accurately, the reading of the body's materiality sets up the self-grounding presumptions of the gendered subject. For to the extent that the subject is embodied, its embodiment needs to be regarded as constituted within signifying and interpretative practices. Bodies exist as knowable categories solely by way of submitting to the signifier, inscribed and fashioned in terms of the master discourse that decides their meaning as it curves out their representational space. No space of representation, according to Victor Burgin, can be without a subject, and no subject without a space it is not. No subject, therefore, without a boundary (Burgin 115). Being such a regulating boundary, the mouth emerges, in this train

of thinking, as a bodily organ invested with the uncanny power to assign, or potentially unsettle, subjective places within sexual and social structures in the course of signposting the spatial limits of flesh.

Where women's flesh comes into question, the signposting has been careful and determining, regulated by means of a mouth turned target of prohibition and stage of semantic contestation. If (bodily) space has a history, women's mouths could speak, if allowed, their own untold history of oppression in which they figure as the sites where western patriarchal discourses have battled to assert their authority and impose their will. The enforcement of restrictive injunctions on the female mouth facilitates control over women's bodies, their sexuality and ultimately their very speech. The rigid encoding of the incorporate and other sexually charged activities that involve the female mouth – eating, kissing, chatting – means en-gendering Woman, putting her into the world, consolidating her position in “only one, a single, completely essential place.” The idea of the locus and the place, Jacques Derrida points out, is central to the history of the West and its metaphysics (Derrida/McDonald, 68, 69). It could be further argued that it is central to the history of patriarchy's endeavours to firmly delimit the representational place of Woman which, though subject to cultural, geographical and temporal variability, has consistently ascribed her to one legitimate (hetero)sexual (dis)position and a single highly-cherished locale: the home. What underwrites these sexual and socio-geographical positionalities of the feminine is an induced schizophrenia scarring women's attitude to matter, their own bodies and flesh. To be consumed but not to consume, to remember Rosalind Coward's succulent thesis in *Female Desire* (87–91), feeder of the hungry but destined herself to suffer the pangs of hunger, woman is traditionally regarded as being one with matter, food to be indulged in and feared. In a paradoxical twist of signification, however, she remains at once alienated from the material, posing as the target of eating disorders and the stage where guilts and anxieties concerning her being as the “disembodied” body of masculine imagination are played out and conveniently gendered.

The turn of the century Northern European cultures, where I hold Dinesen's texts to be placed, witnessed an almost apocalyptic materialization of the male fantasy of the bodiless woman, an unprecedented fascination with the emaciated female figure termed by Bram Dijkstra “the cult of the consumptive sublime” (Dijkstra 29). It was a moment in history which associated femininity with a state of permanent invalidism, with the fading woman as “signifier for the desired otherness of the sublime” and the structural opposite of the robust female body unconsciously taken to stand in for the threatening otherness of matter (Bronfen 223). In the cultural register of the age, a woman's death by starvation was posited as the logical apotheosis of feminine virtue, the very guarantee, in turn, of man's immortal soul. For as it has been suggested, the “cult of female invalidism” carried the moral imprint of a Protestant ethic, whereby a woman's unblemished virtue was directly proportional to a self-obiterated body and the only ethical means of safeguarding man's soul

from the moral pitfalls of an aggressive, money-making, public existence (Dijkstra 7–8). In the Puritanical household that fashioned young Karen Dinesen's pleasures and discontents, a woman needed to feed a man's soul with her flesh, affirm the coherence of his masculinity with her death, her bodily space fading away, abjected, into the dark recesses of man's essentialist mythology of identity.² Discursively violated and normatively coded, the female mouth spoke thus the truth of woman's sex and sexuality. A "bleeding orifice" to the imagination of some, it articulated the truth of that other female wound at the antipodes of which it found itself situated, the truth, as it were, of woman, only tailored to the symbolic prohibitions it reproduced and readily implemented.³

Dinesen's two texts reproduce and re-present in their turn the same regulative, patriarchal guidelines aimed at circumscribing societal attitudes to food, women's bodies, sexuality and death. In the course of the reduplicating process, however, they fail to produce a perfect identity with the "original" signifiers they reiterate. They transform themselves, instead, into disturbing doubles which threaten the onto-theological basis (and bias) of the early twentieth century, Protestant formulation of selfhood by means of performing a displacing move which results in difference rather than identity and agreement.

A woman's mouth forwards itself, in both texts, as the site of this disruptive difference. It figures as the borderline which, though desired to separate the stable interiority of a "spiritual" self from the alien exteriority of a "material" alterity, refuses to remain closed but acts rather as a slippery fissure to the seamless continuity of the fleshy boundary. There is little else more voracious and violent than a gaping mouth, as George Bataille and Mikhail Bakhtin have, incidentally, both argued (Bataille 59, Bakhtin 325). It is in this positioning as a potentially "position-wrecking," mobile limit that the female mouth locates its power to simultaneously constitute and collapse the "divine" oppositions erected between soul and matter, inside and outside, G(o)od and Evil, or ultimately man and woman. In materializing the very slash of the dichotomy, it helps erect binary structures and at the same time undo them by allowing the intrusion of the other into the selfsame, infecting the universal and atemporal sphere of the spirit with the deadly change inherent in matter. By thus melting the frigid distancing of opposed terms, which in the last analysis amounts to an erasure of difference, the mouth introduces the subject into the slippery world of difference as movement.⁴ It acts as the medium by means of which the human intellect manifests itself in speech, providing the condition of possibility of the constitution of the (speaking) subject while in the same move paving its way to its disappearance in language.⁵

To the extent that division and difference make thus their entry into one's narcissistic universe, the mouth constitutes the entrance of death into the subject's life, the space in which Eve's apple, the symbol of mortality and loss, dissolves the unity of God and man and inflicts the narcissistic wound central to the construction of subjectivity. Evil and food, as it were, converge and meet

each other's course under woman's sensual palate, a site of *jouissance* where the feminine disturbs the crystallized assumptions of masculinity.⁶ In digging their teeth into tender flesh, in sucking the blood and savouring the sweet juices of an evil excess, the two Dinesen heroines move from "mentally licking their lips" – an activity that both the Prioress of Closter Seven ("The Monkey" 78) and Countess Faustina ("Anna," *Carnival* 202) abundantly indulge in – to gulping down, devouring, and in the process overrunning, the legitimate borders of their gendered position.⁷ As will be now demonstrated in the case of "The Cardinal's Third Tale," a woman's mouth asserts itself as the moist ground where enforced notions of femininity lose their foothold and glide down the slippery passageway of material and semantic recycling, caught up in the infinite repetition of negation and reincorporation which constitutes the process of life and death, the very movement of writing; of re-writing, effectively, the female body.

II. "The Cardinal's Third Tale": The Diseased Mouth

In "The Cardinal's Third Tale" a woman's mouth foregrounds itself as the terrain of the rewriting activity, as the figurative sexual organ which proceeds to problematize issues of gender by opening itself up to the contaminating effect of a diseased, seminal, spittle. Difference, absence and death come thus to penetrate and infect, in the guise of a venereal disease, the Christian and humanist systems of meanings that determine, among others, readings and formulations of femininity, in the process of contaminating Lady Flora's body with syphilis.

The tale seems peculiarly caught up in Isak Dinesen's own personal plight with the disease and ultimately her death, given that her irrevocable absence is what arrested the completion of her ambitious, a thousand and one tale, *Albodocani* novel that was intended to include the story. Bearing, in this manner, the symbolic seal of death's absence "The Cardinal's Third Tale" succeeds in emerging ahead of its first readers and in doing perhaps something more than merely voice a friendly warning against "a renewed belief in an ethical Christian salvation" with which it was initially accredited (Thurman 364). It deploys rather, unobtrusively but persistently, a Luciferian discourse of evil which Dinesen opposed to "the studied calm, satisfaction and uncritical atmosphere of the Paradise" and which she indirectly associated to her disease and eventual loss (Blixen 249). To her Romantic imagination, syphilis became the proof of the Devil's continuing solidarity with her and at once the guarantee of her writing. As she told her protégé Thorkild Bjornvig "I promised the Devil my soul, and in return he promised me that everything I was going to experience hereafter would be turned into tales" (Thurman 258). Validated by this bizarre Faustian pact, the disease-induced writing, the very text of "The Cardinal's Third Tale," enacts the distabilisation of constricting articulations of the feminine in crossing the limits of the Cartesian subject by way of Lady Flora's virgin, untouched, and suspiciously big mouth.

Lady Flora Gordon's uncontainable bulk of flesh projects itself from the start as the scene of her drama. "A giantess, mightier than any of those whom ...[are]... shown in fairs," "vast of hips and chest," "she stood head and shoulders above the men with whom she conversed" ("CTT" 74). The physical double of her mother, Lady Flora travels through life marked by an ardent desire to avoid replicating her mother's fate, a life of tormenting jealousy suffered at the hands of the irresistible and "harmoniously proportioned" nobleman she had for a husband. Repeating Cardinal Salviati's – the narrator's – obstructing move she covers her eyes when "invited to gaze into [this] abyss of suffering and injury," thereby making a gesture which induces a state of non-vision or at best of distorted vision on the Scots Lady's part ("CTT" 78). Lady Flora refuses to confront her corpulent body or more precisely she regards it in the distorted light of a monstrosity, a polluted substance because excessive in that it falls short of the expected feminine code. Having been deprived of the etherialization semantically encoded as feminine – the representational discourse of all the normative underpinnings of femininity from the late nineteenth century cult of female invalidism to the present obsession with slimness anorectic or other – she reproduces her mother's now interiorized "incessant, burning wish to grow smaller." She longs to "annihilate that same sacred body, which was just now budding into its season of rich flowering," ("CTT" 79) to do away, as it were, with the otherness of an excessive bodiliness and the dangers of passion, suffering and desire harboured therein. Her gaze that reads her flesh and decides her gender position puts itself forth underwritten by the fear of sexual liminality, the wish to avert the danger of exclusion threatened by excess, which in being an additional surplus, effectively, surpasses and disfigures the legitimized territory of normality. To Lady Flora the obliteration of the flesh guarantees self-preservation within a space of narcissistic all-inclusiveness and signals a return to the childhood of a "still ... pretty, nimble *little* girl" who knew safety and pleasure at the side of a gay father ("CTT" 79, my emphasis).

To recapture the lost pleasure, Lady Flora lives out a recuperated state of total inwardness in shrinking "from any touch, physical or mental" ("CTT" 80). "No Gordon will ever be bitten by the teeth of your holy skulls," she warns the Catholic Father Jacopo during one of his frequent visits to her Rome residence. "I warrant you that they would crack in the attempt! For no outside touch will ever leave a mark on us" ("CTT" 91). Lady Flora's desire to "shrink" into the "absolute loneliness" of a fleshless interior fully separate and distinct from all exterior influences, to eliminate, somehow, all marks of teeth or, put differently, the trace of any incorporate process, be it that of eating or of sexual intercourse, is, in the last analysis, the desire shared by the Berlevaag community in "Babette's Feast" (Dinesen, *Anecdotes*) to return to an undisturbed state of plenitude whose autonomy and unity have yet to be infiltrated by the difference inscribing death. "The immortality and perfection of a human being," writes Jacques Derrida in *Dissemination*, "would consist in its having no relation at all with any outside" (Derrida 101). In renouncing all relation with the outer world

and in thus consolidating the borderline of the oppositional rift, Lady Flora's pitied loneliness and feared arrogance lend themselves to and in turn reinforce the separatist logic built into the liberal paradigm of the self. When in her "boundless arrogance" she rejects Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the basis that "what I have neither ordered or paid for I will not receive," ("CTT" 87) she moves onto the discursive terrain of the Enlightenment proprietary individualism "which defines self as an entity of accumulation and appropriation" (Brown 192). It is in this vein of a primarily capitalist thinking that she constructs her subject position in a negotiation with space, constricting the inflated space of her corpulent body within the solidly bound interiority that she hopes to possess by inhabiting. An ideology of self-possession and self-sovereignty evidently underlies the spatial arrangement.

Oneness and wholeness is what she herself admits to having pursued. "My own oneness is my integrity," she retorts to Father Jacobo's Christian teachings on the oneness of creation. "I have not married, I have taken no lover; the idea of children repels me – all because I want to be one, and alone in my skin" ("CTT" 84). Tainted with the hues of a provocative atheism, this and the rest of Lady Flora's expressed opinions earn her in Father Jacopo's imagination the status of a *Lucifera* imbued with the evil he opposes but in whose vicinity his own doctrinal position finds itself unexpectedly situated. For his belief that all of us are the "limbs of the same Body" of Christ ("CTT" 86) rearticulates, in its Catholic version, the divine subject's reaching for completeness, this time, within the body of Christ. It performs a bodily union which ultimately sublimates a sinful corporeality by consecrating it in the name of a spiritual union with God. In the Eucharistic ritual the division introduced into Christian consciousness following the sin of the flesh is healed by virtue of the introjected, purifying body of Christ. The spiritualization of the flesh succeeds thus in procuring, effectively by subsuming the corporeal to the spiritual, an identification, oneness, with the ultimate signified which is God (Kristeva, *Powers* 118–120). On a subtextual, level then, the Scots lady's rationalist isolation and the Roman priest's faith in the unity of the universe come to touch each other, bringing God and Devil dangerously close within the scope of a kiss.

It is the act of Lady Flora's kissing the feet of Saint Peter's statue that constitutes the moment of change, when the excluded other touches the limits of the self in coming into contact with the physical borderline surface of her skin. In just a moment her mouth transforms itself into the vulnerable fissure on the continuous border which subverts the pattern of her illusory identity in allowing sexuality and death into the enclosed system of her clean and proper self. The terms of the encounter between her ladyship and the enormous statue of St Peter, the only Roman beau who undertook to prevent her from leaving the "Eternal City the same as she came" ("CTT" 76), foreground themselves as heavily sexualized. Escaping any kind of religious encoding, the meeting soon fashions itself into a sexual encounter whose outcome will be a venereal disease. "The evening before I left Rome," Lady Flora later recounts

I drove to St Peter's. The church was empty and ... lights were burning in front of St Peter's figure ... I gazed at it for a long time ... When I had stood so for a while one of the candles flickered a little; it looked as if the face of the Apostle changed, and as if his lips moved faintly, and parted. A young man in a brown cloak came into the church, went by me and kissed the foot of the statue ... in the end he walked on ... I know not ... what in this moment drove me to follow his example. I took a step forward and, like him, kissed St Peter's foot. I had thought that the bronze would be ice-cold, but it was warm from the young man's mouth, slightly moist ... Like him I held my lips against it for a long time ... Four weeks later ... I discovered the sore on my lip ... I was not ignorant, I knew the name ("CTT" 97-98).

To understand the paradoxical and ambivalent role of disease within the tale's framework one needs to regard it as a defiling category whose, often ritual, exclusion from the social or the subjective system guarantees the system's orderly functioning. Defilement, as "sacred" filth, may be conceived only as related to a boundary, according to Julia Kristeva. It represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary and into the margin, that, in other words, which escapes the "symbolic system," the order of classifications and differences (Kristeva, *Powers* 65, 69). Lady Flora internalizes such a system of consolidated boundaries out of which she fashions the illusion of a unified and stable identity that admits of no oscillation. Her drama locates itself in the fact that the internalized system, whose gender classifications have been mapped out along the lines of masculine thinking, labels her body freakish and unfeminine and rejects her corporeal identity as an abomination. In this scheme of things her flesh is accredited with the power to defile and pollute and so having been classed as a source of disorder it needs to be excluded and repressed so that she can enjoy the security of a clean, blessed self.

And yet her position is paradoxical in that she is willfully blind to the prohibitions and the limits of the (symbolic) Law in terms of which her subjectivity is constructed. She only wishes for the safety of an imaginary plenitude devoid of the pain attendant on difference. The diseased spittle she inadvertently introjects acts precisely to make the limits of the Law visible to her in the very act of crossing them inside the liminal orifice of her mouth. It forces an acknowledgement of difference and desire upon her by means of awakening her to the reality of the Law's prohibitory borders and so paves the way to their own subversion. "Desire," after all, "desires limits in order to break them in *jouissance*," to quote Geoff Bennington's elegant phrasing. One needs to move within the domain of the Law to retain the possibility of transgressing it (Bennington 42, 49). It is so with Lady Flora who acquires the power to challenge the blinding prohibitions of patriarchy in the act of acknowledging them. When she bends to kiss the feet of St Peter's statue, the first perhaps religious symbol or even external object she consents to touch, she enacts on the surface a symbolic submission to the divine law. Only that by the same masterly stroke she defies its edicts on chastity as she contracts syphilis and affixes

herself to the fellowship of the libertines of Monte Scalzo, bearing along with a new love of humanity the mark of the love of flesh ("CTT" 96).

Interestingly enough, the text defines not her present but her previous condition of blindness as an "ailment" which disease, as it appears, is called upon to cure ("CTT" 88). Imbued with the ambivalence of Plato's *pharmakon*, the virus restores Lady Flora's "vision" in the course of acquainting her with the absence operative within death and representation. It invests its energy restructuring, as it were, the interpretative strategies, which have sustained her dismissive readings of her body and sexuality, around an alternative network of meanings. So far, an urge to fix and stabilize has informed the semantic register of her interpretations, made particularly noticeable in her ready dismissal of metaphors which underlies her embarrassed denunciation of the Biblical "Song of Songs" ("CTT" 86). A rhetorical trope inscribed by movement, metaphor involves the transfer of a signifier from one semantic realm to a novel one which immediately proceeds to contaminate the newcomer with its own meanings, forcing in the process the signifier to remain suspended and divided as regards its semantic allegiance.⁸

Unable to confront the difference produced by the doubling of signification in the process of metaphorical displacement Lady Flora sought to arrest the oscillating movement of the signifier within a set of unequivocal readings which promised the security of an uncontaminated identity. Her venereal disease fulfills its remedial function in enabling her to accept the structure of excess in which her identity is embedded by means of awakening her to an unbounded and destabilizing excess of (metaphorical) signification.

The semantic difference produced during the metaphoric transference, this excess of meaning that escapes classification within a single signifier or category, is the mark of Isak Dinesen's writing. It is the very text of "The Cardinal's Third Tale" which disease generates insofar as it injects absence into Lady Flora's homogenized universe. At once ambivalent and displacing, disease casts itself as the source of the narrative and provides the condition of possibility of the story's writing; disease is the story itself which, according to the old storyteller Mira Jama in "The Diver" is, like all "poets' tales," a pearl, "disease turned into loveliness, at the same time transparent and opaque" (Dinesen, *Anecdotes* 12). In dis-placing Lady Flora's subject position by almost literally changing her perception of space, the contaminating virus introduces the "spacing" which is central to the movement of writing, that " 'general space' that disrupts all presence and absence and therefore all metaphysical notions of limits."⁹ Syphilis is what rewrites her body in the course of (visually) re-spacing it.

While staying at the Bath of Monte Scalzo, in Ascoli, Lady Flora is lovingly nicknamed by her fellow sufferers "dromedaria" after the haughty creature that, as tradition holds, knows, alone of all, the hundredth name of the prophet. "She gazes round with pride ... conscious of her superiority as keeper of the secret of Allah. She says to herself: *I know the name*" ("CTT" 95). The Scots lady knows it too after knowing the name of her disease whose seal and

secret she carries on her lip. And the name is Devil, or rather uncannily, it is both God and Devil, cure and poison, a signifier "caught up in a process that it does not control," the process of nomination and writing (Derrida, "Living On" 81).¹⁰ The network of symbolization Lady Flora enters, upon contracting the disease, proves duplicitous and ambivalent as soon as it is recognized and phantasmatically controlled. God is identified not by One but by a hundred names the last of which coincides with His opposite. The signifier God merges with its other, ceasing to stand for an unequivocal "goodness" unproblematically defined against the barrier warding off evil; it is no longer representative of any single signified but is rather constituted in ambiguity, in the space between two signs, those of God and Devil. The masculine authority of the Other – of which God is a representative – to assign names, to fix subjective structures, and thus determine the course of cultural, social or political processes, succumbs thus to the inherent undecidability of His own naming. As a result, the religious narrative and its underlying gender assumptions which frame the tale emerge disordered and unmasterable now that the dominant representative code enjoys no longer the illusory security of a definite origin.

The implications for the inscription of femininity in the text, as it will be more closely discussed later, are far-reaching. Lady Flora comes forward as the Dinesen woman who, in being displaced, proceeds to transform herself into a displacing force in its own right. Against all prescriptive readings of the feminine, she comes to accept her unnatural dimensions in an act which reshapes the space of femininity by reconfiguring Woman as a form of excess empowered to burst over the borders that are meant to define it. To the extent that this rebellious act of re-writing, by means of contaminating, the truth of femininity falls within the jurisdiction of the Devil, the woman of "The Cardinal's Third Tale" is sketched vested in the evil of disruption, a *Lucifera* whose power unexpectedly locates itself within the hymeneal space of her mouth.¹¹

III. "Echoes": The Vampiric Mouth

In so far as Lady Flora's mouth metaphorically fulfills the function of a vaginal opening, it forwards itself in a hymeneal position as that "protective screen" and "invisible veil" which, in being situated at once inside and outside the woman, unsettles the dynamics of the spatial opposition and, by implication, the problematics of gender.¹² In "Echoes," a pocket of narrative "The Dreamers" (*Seven Gothic Tales*) failed to contain, the mouth reappears at the centre of this persistent problematization of gender that cuts across the entire Dinesen oeuvre. This time it furnishes the stage upon which the feminine rearticulates itself by being positioned between, and hence interrogating the stability of, the philosophical opposites of life and death. It is through the unholy activity of her mouth that Pellegrina Leoni transforms herself into a vampiric figure, situated against a textual background which reduplicates the ambivalence of her status in being schematically caught up between the irredeemable absence of death

invoked by the introductory cannibalistic narrative and the life-giving presence of God presumed by the sacrament of the Holy Communion that almost ritualistically ends the tale. Almost from the start, both the Woman in the text and the text of the Woman occupy in-between positions whose suspended allegiance to either of the polar extremes of life and death threatens the fixity of the antithetical structure. Pellegrina Leoni, the famous opera singer believed to have been dead for the past thirteen years now, is, in effect, nothing less than a dead undead. Officially declared deceased in a theatre fire in Milan where she tragically lost her voice, Pellegrina Leoni has occupied, since then, the interstice between two forms of existence – a celebration of and a triumph over death. This double positioning, in a state of liminality whereby a dead body remains in the guise of a living one, has acted as accomplice to her dissimulatory activity and as the screen which has facilitated, by concealing, her incessant travelling among places, names and identities.

Her “vampiric” existence is triggered off when she accidentally hears her voice revived within the throat of a choir boy in a remote mountain town outside Rome. Emanuele, the aspiring priest and, incidentally, the bearer of Jesus Christ’s name, is soon to be her pupil and the target of her appropriative appetite. By means of her mouth, through her singing lessons at first and then through the literal sucking of his blood, Pellegrina seeks to consolidate her grip onto the nascent man’s throat, to complete the possession of a body already invaded by her voice in terms that the text forwards as aggressively sexual. Upon their first meeting Pellegrina took a long glance at him and “a deep and sweet satisfaction filled her ... She felt her own lungs drawing breath in his body and his tongue in her mouth. A little later she made him talk and made his eyes meet hers, and she sensed ... the power of her beauty and her mind over a young male being, her heart cried out in triumph: ‘I have got my talons in him. He will not escape me’ ” (E 172).

The process of appropriation abounds in overtones of devouring which steadily grow stronger “as now the voice day by day pervade[s] Emanuele’s whole being” (E 176), until the vampiric incident comes as a silent explosion to fragment this subjective wholeness between Pellegrina’s lips. In order to defeat her pupil’s fear of physical pain and in a last ditch attempt to reformulate his relationship to a threatening materiality, Pellegrina pricks three of his fingertips with a needle and draws “a drop of blood from each of them ... Emanuele looked up at her with doleful eyes ... She wiped the three drops of blood off on her small handkerchief, one by one, then, as she looked at the three little scarlet spots she lifted the handkerchief to her lips” (E 180). Embedded in an almost semi-incestuous and pederastic subtext, – Emanuele is Pellegrina’s “child, dear Brother and Lover” (E 189), – the sucking of his blood enacts a sexual incorporation conducted in the labial region. Pellegrina pricks her pupil and draws blood; she penetrates and deflowers him by sinking her talons into his virginal body, that space of innocence where lack instituted by knowledge and desire has yet left no trace. Pederasty has been thought to provide a useful paradigm for the classic pedagogical relationship of teacher and pupil to the

extent that the latter serves as the empty receptacle destined to receive the teacher's desire in the form of knowledge (Gallop 42). Pellegrina's penetration is brought to the fore as a process doubly encoded, enacting on one level the introduction into her pupil of a musical and sexual knowledge that induces a loss both of innocence and of ignorance. On another level, however, her penetrating gesture involves the flowing of blood outwards, the sucking of the self, and its consequent loss, into an abyss of disorder where Pellegrina's ambivalent status plays with absence and presence the contagious game of death.

The sense of danger which prompts Emanuele to ultimately distance himself from his teacher in a desperate effort to expel her corrosive present absence from the illusory order underwriting his sense of mastery, emanates precisely from her undecidable standing as a living dead, a presence inscribed into absence. Pellegrina "lives" and "lives on," in the Derridean sense, surviving into a life beyond death by way of tiptoeing on the evasive, "bevelled *edge*" that is not the opposite of living nor identical with living but which "differs and defers, like *différance*, beyond identity and difference."¹³ Pellegrina's domain is that of the unmasterable "on" in "living on," of that excess of life which has overflowed and shaken, in the process, the divisive line separating the living and the dead, presence and absence, in order to map out a territory of uncertain delimitation which endangers the subject upon constructing it. For death is not a simple absence lodged outside life (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 143). It is, rather, what inaugurates life by rendering absence into the basis of the subject's living, and "living on," in language, what provides the condition of possibility of life, and of the subject, through the absence of death.¹⁴ The absence of death is the lack constitutive of the Symbolic order, the domain of language, difference and desire, and it is constituted, in Lacanian terms, at the moment of castration, the moment the subject knows loss in apprehending that the object is cut off and the Imaginary completeness, once enjoyed, has receded out of reach. To the extent that "*death* ...[passes] ... *itself as other*," to the extent, as it were, that the self is an other, Pellegrina is deadly because, in uncannily turning herself into a locus of otherness within Emanuele's invaded throat, she exposes his sense of self-presence to be grounded on a fundamental void within (Derrida, "Living On" 120).

Notably, the labial region asserts itself as the site of death's abode, the borderline entrance (or exit) of life or/and death which Pellegrina uses to inject Emanuele's self-certainty with the enigma endowing "living on." Through the vampiric sucking of his blood, she upsets the orderly flow of the vital fluid, draws blood and acts instead of being acted upon in a move that distabilises sexual difference, not by merely reversing gender roles, but by sucking his gender position into a world of "bevelled edges" where the enigma of her own femininity rests. Somehow it is, again, a mouth equally hymeneal in its present relationship to the antithetical pair of life and death, as it was to the inside/outside dichotomy, that writes Pellegrina's sexuality into the movement of undecidable signification. Notwithstanding the insecurity of non-allegiance Emanuele rejects Pellegrina's indecipherable body, he ejects and abjects from

his system that polluted hybrid that ascribes to no pure classification and threatens him with contamination and dis-ease. “No. No. No. And it is going to be no, I tell you, every time, whatever you try to make me do” (E 184). “I know who you are. You are a witch. You are a vampire. You are wanting to drink my blood ... You have got gold, diamonds, the flute with silver keys. You have sold your soul for them to the Devil ... [Luigi] told me that you could not die, that you were immortal. All people thought that you were dead.”

The denunciation is angry and channels Emanuele’s anxiety regarding the delimitation of his status into an agonizing attack against Pellegrina’s integrity, against her unfaithfulness to the rules of the game, an immortality that has moved her signified outside the culturally prescribed domain of woman’s essence. In renouncing her as duplicitous and deceitful, Emanuele acknowledges, along with his desire to recover a concealed truth, Pellegrina Leoni’s untruth, the fact that, in the end, she possesses no determinable identity. Doubly displaced for being a living woman who feigns to be a dead one that has come back to life, Pellegrina wears her enigmaticity as a multi-layered mask whose invaginated structure – one that can only reveal a mask behind the mask, – hampers and disturbs Emanuele’s, as well as the readers’, hermeneutic task of affixing her onto a stable meaning. To solve the mystery of her duplicity, by essentializing her femininity, will be co-terminous with killing her, doubly since already proclaimed dead, a phantasy dramatically realized in the conclusion of “The Dreamers” which allows Pellegrina to fly off a cliff to meet a second death as an answer to her three suitors’ desire to unveil her true self (*Seven Gothic Tales* 276).¹⁵

Blind to the instability of denomination, Emanuele attempts, following Lincoln Forsner’s example, “to place her, and to hold her fast, within a definite, continued existence” (E 153), by naming her a “witch” and a “vampire,” confining her, so to speak, within the protective bounds of a category, that of evil. In thus defeating her continuous shifting among names, which amounts in the last instance to a true “namelessness – Pellegrina is known to the people of the small town as “Signora Oreste” (E 169) – Emanuele hopes to reinstitute the linguistic topography with which social order organizes itself and to exorcise the “evanescent” plurality of places from where Pellegrina does actually speak. Given that “it is forbidden ..[her].. to remain long in the same place,” and that she is “drawn forward by a goal lying before ...[her]... in the way iron is drawn to the magnet” (E 158, 157), her discourse originates from a place of unknown address which is always giving itself as a “somewhere else” that speaks in her.

It is by means of her voice that she slips into Emanuele and speaks from within his throat, carving out a “somewhere else” that speaks in him in the voice of the other. “I think that here,” he confesses, “I have heard my own voice coming to me from somewhere else, I know not from where” (E 183), a place unknown and unlocatable because inscribed into death’s and femininity’s process of deferral, a process that upholds an instability exclusive of textual or subjective (and gender) closure. The other that speaks therein bears the signature

of desire and absence, the subject's loss in language, and the impossibility of self-presence which the final image of a Eucharistic consummation of the Host within "the wrinkled lips and toothless gums" (E 190) of an old woman fails to invoke. The divine (omni) presence is now contaminated by the evil, open, and desiring lips of the Dinesen woman.

Are, then, these lips gendered? Is the mouth a sexed organ? In so far as it is constructed in terms of, and, in turn, constructs sexual difference, the mouth comes forth as a site where gender meanings are played out, contested and transgressed. Being an *effect* of power, women's mouths have been for long used to circumscribe their sexuality. By the same logic they also possess, however, the power to resist in furnishing the ground of sexual reformulation. Lady Flora's and Pellegrina Leoni's lips, accordingly proceed to rearticulate their femininity in the act of foregrounding their unspecified standing. Positioned neither "inside" nor "outside" but right on the ambivalent edge of a bodily and semantic surface, they forward femininity in terms of the in-between-ness of the hymen. Following Derrida's linguistic games, the feminine in the Dinesen text enters into the *antre*, the "deep, dark, black cave," the grotto-like mouth, only to find itself in the *entre*, the inter-space between two palisades (Derrida, *Dissemination* 212); the palisades of life and death, of Go(o)d and evil, between the sexual, unbudging poles of masculinity and femininity. The feminine is thus no longer encoded as masculinity's opposite but as that which exceeds symbolic dichotomizing and stereotyping. The Dinesen woman comes forth simply as an enigma, an unlocatable other, Pellegrina's uncanny, foreign body which infiltrates Emanuele's divine self-identity to disclose its uncanny difference from itself. In Shoshana Felman's words: "Dethroned from the privilege of unequivocal self-present literality, the masculine can no longer signify itself with a sign of plenitude" (Felman 41). Both in "The Cardinal's Third Tale" and in "Echoes," the masculine subject's desire for a fulfilling sense of mastery promised to be realized in the Real offered him by an omnipresent Divinity, loses itself in femininity's unbounded new space. It is the new "signifying space, [the] both corporeal and desiring mental space" that Julia Kristeva discusses in "Women's Time," and where the novel configurations of their bodies provide women with alternative positions within cultural and sexual structures, at home, at the workplace, in language (Kristeva 214). Could it then be the case that if a mouth is gendered, a woman's mouth can speak new visions of her sexuality only on condition that it remains other than itself?

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NOTES

1. When Ernest Hemingway was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1952, he expressed regret at having had the honour instead of "that beautiful writer Isak Dinesen." Robert Langbaum, Dinesen's perhaps best

known critic in the United States, wrote on the subject: “[Dinesen] received her first important public recognition in the English-speaking world from Ernest Hemingway ... I was surprised because I was not used to seeing her rated so high in public...” *Isak Dinesen’s Art: The Gayety of Vision*, 4.

2. The moralistic Christian influence Isak Dinesen was exposed to in her childhood and youth is traced through to the maternal branch of the family, the Westenholzes. Aunt Bess’s – Mary Bess Westenhoz’s – stifling mingling of fin-de-siècle bourgeois morality with a strict Unitarian code of ethics set the moral tone in the widowed household of Ingeborg Dinesen which Isak Dinesen’s tales seem textually to question. See Anders Westenholz’s. *The Power of Aries: Myth and Reality in Karen Blixen’s Life*. Trans. Lise Kure-Jensen (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 46–66.
3. Angela Carter is reported to have remarked with regard to the blood-like colour of women’s mouths: “We are so used to the bright red mouth we no longer see it as the wound it mimics, except in the treacherous lucidity of paranoia. Now the mouth is back as a bloody gash, a visible wound.” Quoted in Rosalind Coward. *Female Desire*, 117.
4. Jacques Derrida attacks the oppositional, subordinating structure of all “violent hierarchies” within Western metaphysics when he focuses on its most controversial manifestation: sexual difference. Specifically he writes: “The determination of sexual difference in opposition is destined, designed, in truth, for truth; it is so in order to erase sexual difference. The dialectical opposition neutralizes or supersedes ... the difference.” “Choreographies,” 72.
5. I refer here to Jacques Lacan’s concept of “aphanisis” which figures centrally in his model of subjectivity. Discussing the constitution of the subject in language, the subject as product of an unconscious chasm knowable solely in the symbolic, Lacan writes: “there is an emergence of the subject at the level of meaning only from its *aphanisis* in the Other locus, which is that of the unconscious. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, 221. Catherine Belsey helps elucidate the Lacanian remark by throwing light on the way language operates and by highlighting its effects on subject formation. She explains: “Language erases even as it creates. The signifier replaces the object it identifies as a separate entity; the linguistic symbol supplants what it names and differentiates, relegates it to a limbo beyond language, where it becomes inaccessible, lost; and in consequence, the being of language is the non-being of objects. In other words, ‘I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object.’ ” “Desire in Theory: Freud, Lacan, Derrida” *Textual Practice*, 7(3) (Winter, 1993), 394–95. The mouth, though subject itself to semantic and social encoding, is invested with the elusive power of language to “erase” what it is forced to “create,” to sweep away, as it were, the self-present subject of Protestant discourse in the act of materializing the shifting movement of “différance” within the ossified domain of patriarchal hierarchical subordinations.

6. *Jouissance* is used here – as opposed to a mere sense of pleasure, gastronomical or other – to refer to a shocking, ego-disruptive force which unsettles cultural givens and which appears to underlie the paradoxical position of the mouth as both limit and undoer of limits. Jane Gallop, “Beyond the Phallus,” *Thinking Through the Body*, 121. See also Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), 14.
7. Jane Gallop has defined excess as that which does violence to humanistic notions of individuality. *Intersections: A Reading of Sade with Bataille, Blanchot, and Klossowski* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 30. In the present context, I visualize excess as a spatial replacement of the signifying and material borders imposed on women by philosophical and theological thought systems, humanism and Christianity being a case in point.
8. Metaphor is a form of contamination in being a form of translation which Jacques Derrida describes as that which “immediately comes to contaminate what it translates with meanings that it imports in turn.” Jacques Derrida. “Living On: Border Lines,” 76.
9. Jacques Derrida in *Margins of Philosophy* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), 327 as quoted in Alice A. Jardine’s *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca and London: Cornell U P, 1985), 184.
10. The information on Allah’s hundredth name being that of Devil is provided by Robert Langbaum in *Isak Dinesen’s Art*, 218.
11. Isak Dinesen believed Lucifer to be a great rebel and somehow the source of her own creativity. Characteristically, she writes in a letter to her brother Thomas (this being incidentally one of her many references to the same topic throughout her fictional and non-fictional writings): “I am convinced that Lucifer is the angel whose wings should be hovering over me. And we know that the only solution for Lucifer was rebellion ... In Paradise, – if he had remained there, – he would have cut a poor figure ... The same is true of my pathetic ‘authorship.’ I cannot, I cannot *possibly* write anything of the slightest interest without breaking away from the Paradise and hurtling down to my own kingdom.” *Letters*, 246.
12. On femininity and the Derridean concept of the “hymen” see: Alice Jardine. *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 190–191. Gayatri C Spivak. “Displacement and the Discourse of Woman,” *Displacement: Derrida and After* (Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1983), 174–175. Also, Jacques Derrida and Christie McDonald. “Choreographies,” 70–72.
13. Jacques Derrida’s “Living On” is in itself an extensive elaboration on the inherent undecidability of “living on” which “can mean a reprieve or an afterlife, ‘life after life’ or life after death, more life or more than life, and better; the state of suspension in which it’s over-*and* over again, and you’ll never have done with that suspension itself.” “Living On: Border Lines,” 77, 135, 136.

14. The absence of death is the lack constitutive of the Symbolic order, the domain of language, difference and desire, and it is constituted, in Lacanian terms, at the moment of castration, the moment the subject knows loss in apprehending that the object is cut off and the imaginary completeness once enjoyed has receded out of reach.
15. The idea that reaching the end-truth of a riddle, particularly of femininity, will culminate in death is reiterated throughout the work of feminist theorists. Sarah Kofman writes, for example: "Doesn't the desire to get to the heart of the matter, to bring the riddle to an end, entail the risk of reaching *the end*?" *The Enigma of Woman: Woman in Freud's Writings*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1985), 21. Shoshana Felman also remarks: "the attempt at *grasping* meaning and at *closing* the reading process with a definitive interpretation, in effect discovers only death." "Turning the Screw of Interpretation." *Yale French Studies*, 55/56, 174-75. See further, Elizabeth Bronfen. *Over Her Dead Body*, 294.

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Στα θεμέλια της προτεσταντικής και ανδροκεντρικής κουλτούρας, στην οποία βασίζεται η λογοτεχνία της Dinesen, βρίσκουμε την αγεφύρωτη διαίρεση μεταξύ νου και σώματος. Προτείνοντας τη σύνθετη συνάφεια μεταξύ ανδροπρέπειας, εαυτότητας και Πνεύματος, ως αντίθετης στην ευτελή και κατά γενική παραδοχή γυναικεία υλικότητα, αυτή η μεταφυσική διαίρεση υποβάλλει ένα ουσιοκρατικό ορισμό της θηλικότητας, ο οποίος την περιορίζει μέσα σε προσεκτικά οριοθετημένους σωματικούς και έλλογους χώρους. Το γυναικείο στόμα, το οποίο μεταωρίζεται παράδοξα μεταξύ διάνοιας και σώματος, λειτουργεί ως η διαχωριστική γραμμή αυτής της αντίθεσης που οι πατριαρχικοί λόγοι επιδίωξαν να ελέγξουν, ώστε να σταθεροποιήσουν τις θέσεις του γυναικείου φύλου. Αμφισβητώντας τη σταθερότητα αυτής της διαχωριστικής γραμμής, τα διηγήματα της Dinesen επερωτούν την ουσιαστική αλήθεια της γυναίκας και προχωρούν να αναδιατυπώσουν το γυναικείο με δρους ανα-θεωρημένων (σωματικών) χώρων.