

Title: ‘Bad Retail’: A romantic fiction

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Biography

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Abstract

‘Bad Retail’ is a work of fiction that I wrote to accompany a series of my own narrative paintings. The text was originally disseminated through a series of exhibitions in the form of printed handouts that were included alongside the visual works. The story evolved from a simultaneous investigation of two related devices in literature and painting: anachronism and collage. These

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terms are linked by an act of displacement: of objects from history and of images from their source. This compositional tendency is characteristic of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century romantic fiction, which often refuses to conform to (and remain within) accustomed genre categories. The aforementioned narrative will be accompanied here by a series of illustrations based on the paintings and drawings that I produced in tandem with the text. The aim will be to treat the journal submission as a form of ‘illuminated manuscript’, in which anachronism might be understood as both a verbal and a visual strategy.

Keywords

anachronism

collage

fiction

painting

fairy tale

dystopian

Preamble

[...] these quilted snatches are viewed as past moments – of clarity, beauty, civilization, and spiritual elation – that must somehow be retained and restitched in a sense, spliced onto the present, [...] as if they were alive, as if they were types of intelligent, deathless energy, and this so as to allow the past, with a nourishing insistence, to feed the present.

(Oppenheimer 1998: 84, ‘Goethe and modernism’)

The ‘romantic novel’ (a product of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries) often tends towards a fractured compositional form. As defined by Robert Miles, the salient feature of romantic fiction ‘appears to be its failure to conform to and remain within accustomed boundaries. The generic boundaries – the seam lines – remain, just badly stitched together’ (Miles 2001: 180).

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As Robert Kiely observed, in his 1972 study of the genre: ‘Whereas the best romantic poetry achieves, indeed embodies, moments of synthesis, the romantic novel [...] is an almost continuous display of divisive tension, paradox, and uncertain focus’ (Kiely 1972: 17). Miles attributes this tendency to the romantic interest in the subjective and the irrational (graveyard imagery, the supernatural and so forth). He concludes that while ‘such material was workable in the medium of poetry, it pulled against the qualities that had become intrinsic to the novel form: duration, a concern with community, and the objective representation of events’ (Miles 2001: 180).^[1]

For today’s reader, familiar with twentieth- and twenty-first-century techniques of collage, the discordant, ‘stitched-together’ quality of romantic fiction embodies a certain formal and intellectual appeal. The surrealist Max Ernst made his collage novels (most famously *Une Semaine de Bonté*, 1934) from cut-up engravings to nineteenth-century gothic fictions and melodramas (the sensationalist offspring of earlier romantic literature). As Hal Foster states, Ernst’s collage ‘only articulates what is implicit in the found illustrations’. Gothic fiction is a genre ‘already given over to the unconscious, a genre in which repressed desires are hysterically expressed’ (Foster 1997 177).

My own story, ‘Bad Retail’, is a work of fiction linked to a series of narrative paintings. The text was originally disseminated through a series of exhibitions in the form of printed handouts that were included alongside the visual works.^[2] At the most basic level, the paintings ‘illustrate’ the events described in the story; the story expands upon the scenes and characters portrayed in the paintings.

The term ‘collage’ is appropriate when thinking about the story’s fragmented approach to history and (cultural) memory. In the illustrations to the story, references to The Cold War and mid-century modernism coexist with images and forms inspired by symbolist, futurist and cubist painting, Rococo-style interiors and late-twentieth-century street fashion. I wanted to dramatize

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the equivalence of collage (as a physical – and now increasingly virtual – medium) to anachronism (a temporal displacement of images). I was inspired by works of romantic historical fiction, in which the simulation of the past often fails, either because the provenance of certain objects has become confused or because the author's contemporary sensibility moulds their description of 'period' costume or speech.

The relationship with the practice of collage lies with this idea of *displacement* – an object removed from its proper time period. Similarly, the practice of collage allows a given material to be transposed (or *appear* to be transposed) from its specific cultural context.

But if my story is a contemporary romantic fiction, failing 'to conform to and remain within accustomed boundaries' (and full of tell-tale fault lines and stitches), then what generic boundaries are being delineated and convulsed?

The story alludes to three narrative genres, all in some ways linked to the idea of anachronism: romantic historical fiction, literary fairy tale and dystopian fiction.

Historical romance novels, like Hollywood 'costume films', often fail to represent the past authentically. As the fashion historian Edward Maeder has demonstrated, these glitches are not really *mistakes* as such; they arise out of Hollywood's desire to seduce its audience with 'an elaborate and excessive vision of the past', in other words, to show history 'through rose-coloured glasses' (Maeder 1987: 10). Anachronism is, in this sense, the wound by which a factual (or partially factual) narrative bleeds into pure fantasy.

Writers like Sir Walter Scott and Alexandre Dumas, père often drew on folklore and legend when bringing real historical events or figures to life. And the visual tropes of historical romance have in turn coloured the depiction of fantasy literature itself. In the 1960s, the British illustrator Eric Winter created a series of images for the 'Well-Loved Tales', an enormously popular brand of books for children published by the Ladybird group. Winter portrayed fairy-tale characters as contemporary film-star-types or fashion models, dressed in medieval or eighteenth-

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century costume, in settings realized with a charmingly ersatz Hollywood flavour (see Southgate 1965).

Of course this myopic tendency – the making of history into myth – should be regarded as politically dubious. The act of nostalgia is tainted by conservatism. As Jeremy Tambling puts it: ‘the ruling class *uses* anachrony’ (emphasis added) to preserve the status-quo (Tambling 2010: 1). He cites Charles Dickens, writing in *Bleak House* (1853–54); those alarmed at the prospect of social reform ‘would make the Vulgar very picturesque and faithful, by putting back the hands upon the Clock of Time, and cancelling a few hundred years of history’ (quoted in Tambling 2010: 1).

In an essay of 1949, Bertolt Brecht deplored the ‘use of fancy colours and folklore’, in the bourgeois theatre of his day, ‘to emphasize the similarities in human behaviour at different times’ (Brecht 2001: 190). He preferred a model of representation that would confirm the *otherness* of history. Indeed, the glamour of these sorts of images has tended to obscure the gritty realism of fairy tales themselves. As Marina Warner has demonstrated, fairy tales are culturally specific and more densely materialist than we would like to acknowledge; they bear the ‘marks’ of ordinary people who told the stories (by word-of-mouth prior to their literary inception), ‘of their lives and their struggles’ (Warner 2014: 77). The language of the stories is often terse, matter-of-fact, even when describing the most outlandish events.

There are magical elements in my own story – sudden disappearances, prophetic beings and so forth. But fairy tale is not the only imaginative genre being deployed. The characters of ‘Bad Retail’ speak a sort of patois inspired by office terminology (words such as ‘file’, ‘corporation’). The language of bureaucracy points towards a different kind of (speculative) fantasy: that of George Orwell’s ‘Newspeak’ and the authoritarian language of classic dystopian narratives.

Stories about the future evoke an imaginary world. The author has to invent her nightmare – quite often, as was the case with Orwell, Anthony Burgess or Ursula Le Guin, she

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has to invent (or at least appropriate and adapt) a language to describe it. Dystopian fiction is only partially a ‘realist’ genre.

Slavoj Žižek goes as far as to state that Margaret Atwood’s feminist dystopian novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1984), was written primarily to conjure an intensely subjective fantasy world. The key episodes for Žižek are those in which the protagonist, Offred, isolated in the Commander’s house, undertakes a meticulous examination of her own body and her immediate physical surroundings. For Žižek, the dystopian plot (of a right-wing patriarchal *coup d’état*) simply serves as the narrative frame in which the heroine can undergo this intense ‘microscopic’ experience (Žižek 2001: 121–22). He likens the conceit to ‘space operas’, where ‘planetary battles ultimately serve as a pretext for rendering the experience of floating freely in empty space without gravitation’ (Žižek 2001: 122).

Certainly we might concede that the novel’s major (if subliminal) purpose is to stage a remarkably aestheticized encounter of the pre-modern past and the technological future; the handmaid’s medieval/Victorian-style red habit and ‘winged’ headdress always look ravishing in film and opera versions of the novel – a ‘sister dipped in blood’, as Atwood describes her (Atwood 1996: 19). But this sort of visual spectacle, where it arises in dystopian fiction, should not be seen as contrary to an authentic political narrative. Real-life totalitarian states have thrived on just this sort of seductive pageantry. As Tambling writes: ‘Who defines what is anachronistic is crucial: Nazi Germany’s use of advanced technology produced that strange hybrid: “reactionary modernism”’ (Tambling 2010: 1).

But quoting from history (in and through modernity) is not just an attribute of fascism; it occurs in the aesthetic language of the twentieth-century avant-garde. In Pablo Picasso’s suite of paintings based on *Las Meninas* (1957) and Robert Rauschenberg’s transfer drawings illustrating Dante’s *Inferno* (1958–59), the act of historical appropriation (or anachronism) takes centre stage. Both recognized an ethical purpose in appropriating from history to satirize (or comment-upon) the present. Picasso saw the old regime of the seventeenth-century Spanish court (depicted by

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Velázquez) as comparable to 1950s' Spain (where Franco's dictatorship and the privilege of the monarchy endured) (see Morris 2010: 180–81). Rauschenberg visualized Dante's Hell through images collaged from news-media and photographs of modern American life in the age of The Cold War and McCarthyism (see Krčma 2016: 167–68).

For both artists, the painting and poetry of the old regime do indeed constitute a source of 'intelligent, deathless energy'. I draw attention to their work now precisely because my own fiction began with *painting* (not with literature) in mind. In 'Bad Retail', the notion of (some kind of) royal court merges with the idea of a transcendental/mythological space, equivalent to Dante's Hell (as imagined by Rauschenberg). Such a world may be perceived as equivalent to the *idea* of a painting – as it might be mythologized or satirized in contemporary culture. An object of austere hierarchy and magical separateness, of old-world charm and glamorous obsolescence.

Though 'Bad Retail' is not strictly speaking a work of ekphrasis, though it does not 'describe' my paintings, it did evolve as a result of thinking about the particular challenges involved in their making.

These challenges are not dissimilar to those facing literary fiction itself. In his essay of 2000, Umberto Eco acknowledged the rising trend of the hypertext-narrative and interactive storytelling online. Not only could writers now create infinitely open-ended narratives, they could also tamper with the denouements of classic plots and inter-merge the stories of, say, *Madam Bovary* and *Pinocchio*. Eco compared the process to making a collage; for example, putting together 'fragments of *The Marriage of the Virgin*, of *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon* and the latest Pokémon story' (Eco 2006: 13).

But, whilst acknowledging the fun creativity it might allow, he warned against the dissolution of our stable narratives (Eco 2006: 13). 'Unchangeable stories', he wrote, 'make tangible' the 'impossibility of changing our destiny'. 'Stories that are already made also teach us how to die' (Eco 2006: 15).

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Of course these hypertext authors did not *invent* the process of using canonical literature as raw material for anachronistic collage – it had been a hallmark of magic-realist, punk and postmodern fiction, such as that of Angela Carter, Italo Calvino, Kathy Acker and Jorge Luis Borges. We should acknowledge, however, the crucial point that distinguishes such avant-garde writing from the culture of open-endedness encouraged in hypertext narratives and other digital phenomena (Internet memes, You-Tube mash-up videos and so forth). Authors such as Carter and Borges, though they convulsed generic categories in their writing, nonetheless arrived at specific and indelible outcomes that established clear parameters for their artistic visions (and their respective artistic – and political – *identities*).⁹

Reading from the work of T. J. Clark, we might conclude that the art-historical equivalent of Eco's 'unchangeable story' is a painting with a resolved and satisfying composition. In his study of Picasso's *Guernica*, he writes that 'being, for human beings [...] seems to have as its very precondition being "in": reaching out, really or imaginatively, and feeling the limits of a place' (Clark 2013: 281).

This model of aesthetic practice, characterized by a sense of an object's limits and its carefully worked-out internal structure, is hard to sustain in contemporary life. 'Limits' would seem to have no authority now in a world where objects (telling stories) are apt to be dissolved into vast networks of signs and images, subject to endless modification in 'magnitudes that cannot be planned or anticipated' (Joselit 2013: 19).

It may be a caricature to speak of those networks as a form of 'spatial rubble' (to borrow a further phrase from Clark) (Clark 2013: 281). But the sublime authority of those networks, their mythical plenitude, their opportunity for unregulated transformation do indeed place strains on the *other* human desire: to reach out (really or in the imagination) and *feel* the edges of a story, the limits of a space.

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‘Bad retail’

Hugs and fun-fun, Corpus-Eye! Allow me to speak in the Torian ‘language’. You will know that, when I speak of ‘*monagés*’, I speak of those born to rule. That ‘Corpus’ is a word for ‘all’ or ‘everyone’, sacred unity of living, breathing files under Com. That all things are good and beautiful that are ‘corp’rate’. That ‘Rwands’ are the places in Tori that were once standing but have long since been destroyed.

Tori is a pious country. The *Fkuks*, their gods, are ‘manifest’. They are human-shaped. The Monothés decline to worship these deities, calling them pretenders to the grace of Com. And so the fractured Corpus fights. Wars, so many wars that much of the great city of La has been destroyed. And the Rwands encroach upon the Upright-World, as if in hunger for its stable forms. Liquid are the Rwands. You could *drown* in them, you could drown in them, on such a day as this.

The day the Lohng-Queen mar’ged with Dadah. They said it was a mar’ge for *peace*.

But there’s an old saying in Tori (un-blessed by peace for a thousand years) – that *of all the organs in the Corpus-Politic, diplomacy is the first to rot.*

And, in the streets of La, you can see the un-subtle signs of decay. Wounds festering in the body of an ancient city, smashed so many times by Athener, the Goddess of Right-Force.

Oh my *have!* It was less than two hours until the mar’ge, and the Solvent-Boys were still not ready; the room in which they had assembled for the purpose, one of Ballancy’s rooms, high up in the Monagé-Fortress, looked like the Rwands. The floor was scattered with thrown garments and towels, the air fogged up, nearly at the expense of air to breathe, with clouds of rather strong smelling perfume.

But describe, Corpus, the clothes they were putting on.

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It was the age of the un-short pantalon, the age of the attenuated hem. The bright young athers wore their breeches long (up to twice the outside-leg). The surplus material wafted along behind their feet like the flaccid tails of some peculiar animal.

Lord love you Corpus-Eye! Dressing for an occasion was *hard work* – and the Solvent-Boys certainly took a long time worshipping the Goddess of Retail.

‘Lohl!’ said Ballancy, at last. ‘I’d rather worship the Fkuks – I’d rather worship *them* and keep my colours, than wear such bad retail’.

‘What you call bad retail’, Afterbird advised, ‘the *Bams* call a most corp’rate virtue’.

‘Corp’rate virtue!’ said Ballancy, a disgusted tone in his voice. ‘And as for the *oothers* [...] How ugly they look in their [...]’ He held his hand in front of his mouth.

‘*Bouchettes?*’

‘Aye, their bouchettes! How nasty they look! How *dog-sided!*’

He turned to speak to a quiet young ather, who had finished dressing some time ago. He was staring out of the window, his figure thrown into shadow by the light of the Corps-Eye.

‘What d’ya say, Bill-Deed? Don’t you think their oothers are dog-sided?’

The sad young ather did not at first respond. He was staring through the window with as much intensity as if he hoped to crack the class merely by staring through it.

‘I think *you’re* dog-sided, love!’

‘Eeeeeeeeeeeeh!’ Hamlick cried out. Ballancy had already jumped to his feet.

‘What’s wrong with Bill-Deed today?’ he asked, coming up behind him. ‘Are you *mad* of us, love?’

‘No’, said Bill-Deed, turning again to face the window. ‘I’m not mad of *you*... only a little mad of my mad self!’

‘Well, you’d better not be mad!’

‘Oh leave him!’ Afterbird declared, grabbing Ballancy by the arm and pulling him towards the door. ‘Come on! Make haste! Or we’ll miss the mar’ge’.

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Ballancy sneered, one last time, at the sad young ather. Then, shaking free of Afterbird's impatient clutches, he bent swiftly over the powdery remnants of a long white line of *solvent* that shimmered on the nearby table. He disposed of it in two-or-three sharp intakes of breath.

The rest of the Boys were already crying out 'hugs!' as they piled along the network of gilded corridors that flowed outward from the rexecutive quarters, meandering through knots and sharp turns.

They emerged at last into the glowing crystalline light of Abeatha's famous vestibule.

The gateway to Dadah's home was already full of kents dressed for the mar'ge, making a great noise as they descended. No one strutted more proudly than the Solvent-Boys. They were rightly proud of their heritage. Ballancy himself was a Child of Com (a blood descendent of the Great-Monage). The elite fraternity over which he presided was the proudest of all proud fraternities in La.

By the time the Solvent-Boys arrived, the Delta Hej was full. Here and there, among the brightly dressed figures, the light was swallowed by the Pulcheviks' dark uniforms and the Bams' more sombre clothing. The Monothes' hats were shaped like heads of screws (with rectangular indents in their hemispherical crowns).

The bride at least wore *some* bright colours for the occasion. Her dress was rather dour, but her veil and petticoat sparkled with coquettish hues, where emblems of the two religions entwined, as if in love.

Now a hush was falling on the temple. The choir's last refrain of 'Corp'rate day!' had faded out, leaving only a trace of an echo in the vaulted space. The Lohng-Queen, having reached the altar, was slowly sinking to her knees, her massive skirts rising to engulf her. She settled at last into a crouching position resting on a tiny gilded hassock, her face pressed against the velvet cover as though kissing it through the layers of her bouchette.

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There were no vows for the Great-Monage. He shunned the Corpus-Eye eternally, even on the occasion of his mar'ge, and few had ever seen him in the flesh. Besides, there were no vows for *Him*, only for the bride. And she delivered them from her hunched position of servility, as custom required, only lifting her head slightly, every now and again, whenever the old Cleric, Sollox, prompted her to speak. He intoned the vows first and she repeated them, her voice following his like an echo.

'Permanent-Rose', said Sollox when the vows were done, 'you have spoken before Com. We will now proceed to the glorification of the Heavenly Ather...'

And he went on with the prayer, oblivious at first to the sound of anxious whispering. With a great cacophony of rustling and clumping, the Corpus-major struggled to fall to fall to its knees.

The late-arriving entity was tall, magnificently dressed in the most solvent and corp'rate garments that flashed and shimmered as she advanced on the crouching Queen. By the time she reached the altar, at least two thirds of the Corpus was on their knees. All those who remained standing were dressed in dark retail.

'The Goddess of Land Services!' a kent was heard to say, and a great murmuring rose up, as the Sorics present launched into the first words of the credo.

The Fkuk had raised her hands for silence. 'You may all rise! You're making your guests feel rather awkward I think. That includes you, Sollox. The Bams are lonely in their upright state. And *you* don't look at all comfortable'.

Indeed, the Cleric, being too far from the ground to kneel without first hopping down from his pedestal, had been forced to make an approximation of a bow in his seat – and this was rather awkward. At the Goddess's prompting he righted himself, though somewhat gingerly.

'This is a *corp'rate* celebration! What does it honour?'

'Love, your grace'.

'Love?' said Korer. 'Some would say *heresy*'.

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‘We intended no slight upon the divine honour of the Fkuks...’.

‘Indeed!’ said the Goddess. ‘I shall tell that to my sisters. I’m sure they’ll be greatly encouraged. But however disingenuous *you* choose to be, *lord-monagé*, you will not find me so. I should like very much to speak to the Bride, and would do so were she not at this moment *incommoded*. I’ll not spoil the ancient proprieties by asking her to stand and have *parlé* with me now. I’ll speak to *this* young ather instead’.

Her eyes came to rest on the Pulchevik Courage, who, like all the Bams present, had remained standing. He returned the Fkuk’s gaze, trembling, but with a certain surety.

‘You did *not* say the credo when I first appeared’.

‘My faith forbids it madam!’

‘Your *faith*?’

‘I am a True Defender of Com, lady-monagée!’

‘Lohl!’ said the Goddess haughtily. ‘They are growing more numerous by the hour these *true defenders*. Even the Pulcheviks, founded, as I recall, to protect *our* honour, are calling themselves the *True Defenders* of Com’.

‘Step forward, Pulchevik Courage!’

The young soldier, having glanced nervously at those around him for some sign as to how to proceed, and having received none, approached the Fkuk a few steps from the altar.

She was terrifying to look at. Her mouth frightened him the most. And not because he was a devout Monothe. He had lived in La since he was a child and was used to seeing oothers’ mouths in public. But when he looked there, he was conscious of being able to see *more* than he should of the moist hollow between her lips, of light reflecting and light penetrating there in quite an unnatural way, of saliva clinging to the *inside* of her teeth. Lord love you, Corpus-Eye – her teeth were made of *glass*.

‘Hugs’, she said. ‘I have not come to make war’ (and she spoke loud enough for the Corpus to hear). ‘I have come to make peace. I have come to give my blessing. A long time has passed since

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I drew any comfort from the bloody persecution of those who choose – as they have the right to choose – *not* to worship me. This mar’ge is for peace. And peace is dear to my file. And, if *I* can bless this mar’ge, I who have the most to *lose* in blessing it, then surely those who worship me can do the same’.

She looked at the Corpus and smiled. Her voice trembled. ‘Let us worship peace. Let our prayers be for the many different ways of praying. Let us be one voice made of *many* voices. Let us be *one* Corpus!’

So saying, she took the Pulchevik in her arms, and kissed him, much to every-kent’s surprise – they cried out, regardless of their faith. Some of the Bams, doubting Koror’s words, feared an act of mischief, that the Goddess might avenge her sisters at the Pulchevik’s expense. But Courage was left unharmed. And, seconds later, the Goddess had faded like an image reflected in glass, much to the confusion of the Pulchevik. He found himself suddenly embraced by nothingness, clutching at the empty air.

The Cleric Sollox was at the same moment undergoing his own confusion – reeling from the scene he had just witnessed and making fumbling attempts to restore the ancient proprieties. ‘We will now proceed to the glorification of the Heavenly Ather...’

But nay-kent was listening. The Delta Hej was full of whispers, of scandalized murmurs. And while the cavernous room dinned and while the Corpus-Eye was thus distracted, the Lohng-Queen *moved*, came subtly to life – just enough that she could turn her head to one side. She glanced at the crowd gathered near the altar.

‘We will now proceed to the glorification of the Heavenly Ather...’

It was no use. The pious mood in the Delta Hej was broken beyond repair. The disturbance, though Sollox could not see it, was made by the Solvent-Boys struggling to carry Bill-Deed through the crowds at the side of the altar, which pattered as they dispersed. He had fainted only seconds before, striking against the shoulders of Ballancy and Afterbird as he went down.

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As for the bride – she went back to staring at her velvet hassock. She was once again as motionless and unimpeachable as the great stone statue of Dadah himself.

After the mar'ge, the entire Corporation went to the Hall of Solid-Profit. There was enough drink and fine sustenance, enough scandal and fun-fun to amuse the Corpus-total. All eyes should have been on the bride. This was *her* day, and she looked solvent and grand. But, truth to tell, many-kents were absorbed in watching a striking young ather who sat at one of the tables in the far corner of the hall. The looks thrown in his direction were not kind, but he made no attempt to enjoy himself discretely.

The partner of his mirth was a creature with a lovely oother's face and hands shaped like massive cat's paws, strong enough to break an ather's skull. The refined and delicate gestures of those vicious-looking hands went some way towards concealing their might. Certainly the handsome file was quite at ease. Every now and again, he would touch his cheek against the Sphinx's shoulder. And she would whisper something in his ear. And he would shake with laughter and whisper something in return. And she would laugh with even greater want of propriety, throwing her head back and bearing her pointed feline teeth.

The longer they amused themselves in this way, the more the Corpus muttered. Even General Trite, the solemn leader of the Pulcheviks, could not stop staring at the jovial dis-enemies. Then something moved in the corner of his vision, accompanied by the noise of a chair being scraped back over the marble floor. The General muttered '*Styrene!*' – without even turning his head.

'My lord-monagé, I'm going to see Bill-Deed, who, as you know, was taken *ill* during the mar'ge'.

'Resume your seat', said the General. 'Your duties are not finished here. It's unseemly how you fawn over that *lumpenboo*'.

'Yes, lord-monagé!'

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The oother spoke softly, but a note of strained compliance in her voice betrayed her real anger.

She sat down and began toying with the crumbs of solid-profit that were strewn about her plate, weaving patterns amid the embroidery with her finger.

Then, glancing over at the Sphinx and the Sphinx's un-miserable friend, she asked whether she might not go and 'say hugs to Blonda'.

'You may not', said the General in the same quiet but vaguely contemptuous tone. 'A lumpenboo and a *whore*: these are fine friends for the Children of Com!'

He went back to staring at the Sphinx's table, where some kind of little ritual was about to unfold.

The Sphinx was tapping on her glass with feigned haughtiness, the bright young ather was making a speech.

'To my good friend Hypocampus [...] who is the dearest friend that any-kent could wish for [...]

He raised his glass in the direction of the Sphinx, who pressed her hands together and shrieked with laughter so loudly the Corpus-major shook its head and scowled.

'To *Blonda!*' she cried, saluting her friend in return.

But the Corpus-Eye had long-since wandered. At the bride's table the Lohng-Queen was about to eat – and every-kent wanted to see her manage that. She ate only a small amount – and without removing the muzzle-like garment that was the source of so much consternation to the Solvent-Boys. *Lohl*, how they strained to catch a glimpse of her well-guarded shame! It was like Ballancy said to his pals, loud enough for the Bams to hear, 'some of the oothers might be pretty if only you could see their mouths'. And they eagerly hoped she might partake of another morsel. But the bride had no great appetite. After that modest bit of income, she laid her fork on the table and did not touch it again. Before long it was time to make their way to the Club-Grande. The *discino* was about to begin.

What dancing! The Bams took the sport seriously – as they took everything else in life. True, their faces remained rather fixed and solemn (in contrast with their files' fluid and frenetic

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exertions). But they spoiled as many pantalons as their hosts (by stepping on them and tearing them). And the Soric-oothers' loyalties were soon tested when the Bams approached them with stern faces and outstretched hands – for who among them could refuse such wonderful partners? It seemed the warring factions were truly reconciled.

A little before midnight, a violent commotion started outside the windows of the Club-Grande, drawing many of the guests onto the terrace. There the factions had formed in two small groups, the Bams clustered around one of the Lohng-Queen's *piés*, the Solvent-Boys supporting Ballancy whose ruptured nose bled copiously, spattering his retail with crimson stains.

'Who hit him?' Styrene asked, as she rushed up behind the Solvent-Boys. 'Courage?'

Why no, Afterbird replied. It was the pié – lashing out in self-defence. 'He tried to look under her thingmy [...] her *bouchette* [...]'. Styrene could not help but laugh at this.

Just then, Ballancy, clutching at his spurting face, had stamped across the terrace and shouted at Courage.

No single ather could make himself heard above the din – that is, until a stern voice shouted '*hugs!*' And the sound of music playing in the Club-Grande returned to the fighters' ears. There was peace again in the gardens of Abeatha, broken only by the soft strains of that rolling corp'rate melody and the rapid noise of footsteps on the terrace. The crowd parted reverently. Both parties in the quarrel assumed the graceless air of children surprised in acts of mischief. Courage was properly shame-faced. Ballancy was not so easily chastened. He continued to frown and grimace and dab boorishly at his injured face with whatever part of his retail was close enough to hand.

'Well Courage', said the General. 'I do believe my orders were to *stop* any trouble at today's event'.

'I'm sorry father!' the Pulchevik replied.

'As for *you*, my good-file', Trite continued, addressing Ballancy. 'The Great-Monage will decide your fate, *tomorrow*. Until then, He asks, kindly, that you should leave'.

'Lohl!' cried Ballancy.

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‘*That* is His will!’

‘Va!’ said Ballancy, with even greater passion. ‘What do you know of Dadah’s will?’

‘I *am* Dadah’s will!’ returned the General, and he spoke with violent emphasis.

‘And would He take kindly’, said the blood-covered rexec, ‘to your claiming in public to be His monagé?’

‘I make no claims to be his monagé – only his loyal servant’.

‘Then let Dadah pass sentence! I don’t take orders from middle-monagés!’

Then, all at once, he cried out. The General had grabbed the ather’s hair close to the roots. His voice was large enough to bear the full force of his anger without showing any signs of strain. It gave the impression of his speaking quietly and without much effort.

‘Get out!’ he said. ‘And don’t linger in the gardens, if you value your file!’

Ballancy rose to his feet. Muttering with pain and vexation, he stumbled down the steps of the terrace that led to the grounds. When he turned to answer he was a long way from the General and nearly swallowed by the darkness-that-falls-when-the-corporation-shuts-its-eyes. ‘You claim to speak for Dadah’s will’, he shouted, ‘but you are holding it *prisoner*! And those who love Him will rise up to set Him free!’ So saying, he ran off down the steps and was lost to the Corpus-Eye.

After Ballancy had been turned away, there was no more trouble – but Styrene was soon weary of dancing with the Monoths. And, Lord-love-you Corpus-Eye, the night was ‘old’, as the Torians say, when she leaned on the Gallery of Rexecs and peered into the hall below. She turned and looked behind her, the last of many furtive glances to ensure that Trite was not observing her. And, satisfied that he was not (indeed that he was nowhere to be seen in the Club-Grande), she took a final galvanizing breath, snatched up the folds of her capacious gown and fled the discino, as quickly as she could without stumbling on her heels.

Behind her the festive noise of the Corpus flowed and receded. The oother felt a stab of guilt as she descended the staircase in a panic. What if some kent should see her leaving? What excuse

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would she have for prowling about Abeatha while the rest of Com's children were so piously celebrating?

She reached the foot of the stairs and, by weird force of habit, touched the coiled symbol of *right-force* that nestled there among the shapes carved in the balustrade. Then, turning sharply to her left, she rushed along the high-ceilinged hall that joined the southern wing of the fortress to the monagés' private quarters.

She was now quite safe from observation (and the noises from the Club-Grande were scarcely audible). She kept on running, though she was short of breath and her retail was both tight and cumbersome. She climbed the North Stairs so swiftly that, on reaching the last step, she had to pause and grab the newel for support. Her heart was pounding so violently, it threatened to burst through her file. 'Calme-toi!' she whispered. 'Calme-toi!' The plea came out in gasps. Sweat pooled from her armpits into the frothy diaphanous material of her dress. It was as she stood there, fighting for breath and telling herself over and over *not to faint, not to faint, not to faint*, that the monagée became aware of being watched. Turning to her reflection in the mirror, she found it staring back at her in a haughty and disapproving manner.

She recognized, at once, the image that rebuked her through the glass. The image was not her own. It stood exactly where her double *should* have occupied the mirrored reflection of the landing. The face in the reflection was gaunt and shrewd – its eyes could only be described as sharp.

'Hugs Athener!'

'*Hugs Athener?*' said the Goddess. 'Is this how you address me now? Lohl!' – she cried, more sternly, as the girl began to edge away from her across the landing. 'Not so un-slowly if you please. Come back?'

'Not a chance!' said Styrene. 'Deed's ill, and I must go to him at once. I'm quite un-full of dis-concern?'

'Styrene!' said the Goddess. 'I insist upon you coming here and addressing me properly!'

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‘Hugs-and-how-*are*-you!’ said the oother, exasperated. But she returned and sank to her knees.

‘That’s better’, the Fkuk said imperiously. ‘I feared for a moment you had gone the way of Dadah! Now, tell me. How was the mar’ge?’

‘A perfectly dis-un-tedious event. Except for Courage and Ballancy having a fight. Trite’s furious. He sent Ballancy away as punishment’.

‘*Trite!*’ the Goddess sneered. ‘What has *Trite* to do with anything?’

‘A lot to do with everything’, the monagée replied. ‘He is Dadah’s favourite now!’

The Goddess smiled, bearing her gums above her transparent teeth.

‘Well, he’d better guard his file. *There are many cold corpses in the Rwands who once bore that title and many who will bear it yet*’.

The oother said nothing. She glanced in the direction of her room, eager to be gone, reluctant to leave without the Goddess’s permission.

‘Styrene’, said the Fkuk in a more cheerful tone, ‘how would you like to visit me tomorrow?’

‘Tomorrow?’

‘Aye. Let’s have s’unch!’

‘Oh no, Athener, I’ll be very dis-un-tired’.

‘But it’s such a long time since we had a good parlé [...] We’ll have s’unch and parlé. Bring Blonda with you. And Hypocampus too, if you like. We’ll *all* have s’unch. Tomorrow at noon! I’ll expect the *total-you!*’

And, with that, she vanished. And Styrene found herself looking at her own reflection once again.

It was not a pretty sight. Her mad rampage from the Club-Grande had taken its toll on her *macquiage*. Beneath her wild strands of loose-floating hair, flakes of coloured powder were melting in her sweat.

‘What a fright!’ she murmured.

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After making herself look as neat as possible, she turned and crossed the landing, edged open the door to her own chambers and kicked off her shoes. It took her some time, creeping in her stocking-feet through the semi-darkness, to reach the bed itself.

‘*Deed!*’ she whispered.

Her hands glided over the soft folds of the coverlid towards his sleeping file. ‘Oh my poor have!’ she murmured. She crouched over him trembling. With a sigh she climbed onto the bed beside him, hauling herself over the blankets in her great dress, laughing a little, struggling and floundering as though in deep water.

‘Oh my have!’ she said again. ‘Oh my *darling* object!’

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[1] The gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley are, in that respect, the epitome of romantic fiction.

[2] I originally presented the 'Bad Retail' text in the form of printed handouts for the solo exhibitions: *Hugs n Fun-Fun*, The Glasgow Project Room, Glasgow (26 October–2 November 2013) and *Oh My Have*, 1 Royal Terrace, Glasgow (30 March–19 April 2015). Parts of the text were read-aloud at DCA, Dundee, as part of a live public performance commissioned to accompany the exhibition *Maripol, Clare Stephenson, Zoe Williams: Spring/Summer 2015*, Dundee Centre for Contemporary Art (14 May 2015).

[3] Carter's subversion of tropes derived from art, cinema, canonical literature and fairy tales was, above all, profoundly ethically driven. The self-proclaimed 'moral pornographer', Carter

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was ‘completely committed to historically rooted socialist materialism’ and co-opted patriarchal tropes and clichés to this end. Her appropriation of ‘mythology’ (in the sense offered by Roland Barthes) ‘functions as a subversion of those religious [and other cultural] beliefs that would restrict human freedom’ (Dimovitz 2016: 5).

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