

## After Death, Death: The Mechanics of Longing in Henry Carrington's *The Siren*

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**Abstract.** This essay deals with the mechanics of longing in a late Victorian siren poem by Henry Carrington, *The Siren* (1898). Although Victorian literature teemed with short stories, poems and novels on sirens, this genre, that builds upon and reverses Homeric siren tradition, remains neglected in literary discussions. With the translation of *The Little Mermaid* into English in 1872, the image of a “longing siren” was born. No longer were these the stories of Odysseus who had survived the siren song: now they were about the sirens’ own sorrows, griefs and desires. Sirens became profoundly human – they became desiring subjects themselves.

**Key words:** siren literature; desire; *jouissance*; death; object of desire; love; myth; modernity.

### [fr] Après la mort, la mort: la mécanique du désir dans *The Siren* de Henry Carrington

**Résumé.** Cet article traite de la mécanique du désir dans un poème de sirène de la fin de l'époque victorienne, écrit par Henry Carrington et intitulé *The Siren* (1898). Bien que la littérature victorienne grouillait de nouvelles, poèmes et romans sur les sirènes, ce genre, qui construit et renverse la tradition des sirènes homériques, reste négligé dans les discussions littéraires. Avec la traduction anglaise de *La Petite Sirène* en 1872, l'image d'une «sirène désirante» était née. Celles-ci n'étaient plus les histoires d'Ulysse qui avait survécu au chant des sirènes: c'étaient maintenant les histoires des douleurs, chagrins et désirs des sirènes. Les sirènes sont devenues profondément humaines: elles sont devenues elles-mêmes des sujets désirants.

**Mots clés:** littérature de sirène; désir; *jouissance*; mort; objet de désir; amour; mythe; modernité.

**Sumario.** 1. Introduction. 2. The Subject, Longing, *Jouissance* as the “Pleasure-in-Pain”. 3. The Siren. 4. Candor of a Monster. 5. Heart equals Death. 6. Warning of Death as *Jouissance* Expected. 7. After Death, Death. 8. The Moral of the Story is not a Pleasant One. 9. Works Cited

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### 1. Introduction

Somewhere along the fallacious line that stretches between history and myth, in the vast expanse of the Mediterranean Sea, there was a shore veiled in ecstasy and doom. According to Homer, there dwelled creatures virtually unseen, because all those who

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looked upon their faces and heard their beguiling song never lived long enough to tell it – they all perished within the depths of the sea (XII, 6). These hybrid creatures were called Sirens and wise voices of old often quarreled about their nature. Some said their names were Thelxiope, Molpe and Aglaophonos, while others called them Pisinoe, Aglaope, and Thelxiepia (Hesiod #47; Ps. Apollodorus E.7.18); according to some they were daughters of Sterope and the Aetolian river god Achelous, according to others they were born of the old Phorcys, the father of the Gorgons and everything vile (Apollodorus 1.7.10; Sophocles #861); some were sure there were only two of the kind, others that they lived in a trio.<sup>2</sup>

But some things everyone agreed upon: whoever laid eyes upon their monstrous bodies and heard their song of ecstasy and bliss, left everything they possessed behind so as to drown or rot on their shore.

Then Ulysses arrived. Although warned by Circe that the siren voices bring destruction, Ulysses could not suppress his feeble humanity and he opened his senses to their song. However, he had tied himself to the mast first, proving that his cunning mind was stronger than the sirens' song. By hearing them but not jumping overboard, unable to quench his libidinal thirst, he showed that there was only one way of longing: the eternal, barred, never-ending one. Thus, the story of "Ulysses and the Sirens" was born, and the spiral of wanting was bequeathed to the world: to yearn and not to have, just so as to yearn again.

Since these elusive times, sirens kept their lethal voices. Centuries moved on and they kept fishing for human prey, for there was always a new soul to catch and a new desire to entice. Sirens remained undefeated by ordinary men: only heroes of old and their divine companions were able to subdue the power of their words, and these heroes were all long gone.

All that changed in the nineteenth century when sirens and mermaids entered literature, leaving myths and hazy, fabulous hearsay accounts behind. In 1837, Hans Christian Andersen wrote *The Little Mermaid* and turned the iconography of sirens and mermaids on its head. This first real mermaid/siren to enter European literature was no ruthless seductress on the lookout for her prey, but a helpless, sad virgin in pursuit of her happily-ever-after. The plot of the story is well known: the Little Mermaid, lured by the idea of a human world and a human soul, agrees to give up her voice and her tail in exchange for a pair of human legs and the love of a human prince. Just like Ulysses before her, she was warned by the sea witch that her quest would be a painful one, but the Little Mermaid agreed to pay the price all the same.

And she failed, turning into sea foam, the object of her desire never attained.

As a first piece of siren literature, *The Little Mermaid* was a flash of thunder in the blue sky, its uniqueness unrivalled. From its translation into English in 1872, works starring sirens and mermaids flooded literature. Everything about them was new: they were not seductresses anymore, but innocent victims of love and desire; they stopped singing, their voices being taken away from them; now we read about their sorrow, their grief and their incapacity to leave the circle of desire.<sup>3</sup> In short, sirens became profoundly human – *they became desiring subjects themselves*.

<sup>2</sup> According to the *Odyssey*, it seems there are only two, while most of the ancient Greek sources assume there were three of them.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* (1837), F. Anstey's *The Siren* (1884), Bret Harthe's *The Mermaid of Lighthouse Point* (1901); H. G. Wells's *The Sea Lady: A Tissue of Moonshine* (1902) or Frantz Kafka's *The Silence of the Sirens* (1920).

The “longing sirens” have fled the field of the Other, and moved into the very heart of subjecthood.

This change of perspective, the point of view from which we witness the monstrosity of sirens (or better, their humanity), is crucial in a marvelously written poem by Henry Carrington, simply entitled *The Siren*. For no apparent reason, this poem has been omitted from all the accounts of Victorian siren stories, few as they are. Written in 1898, this siren story structurally resembles *The Little Mermaid*, so it fits perfectly into the siren literature. We shall see how a familiar siren narrative, in its very structure, follows the path of the subject’s desire, as the siren repeatedly reaches for her object of desire only to experience *jouissance* of the fall.

I would like to show how Victorians used this new image of a ‘longing siren’ to illustrate the mechanics of longing, showing us the very nature of our psychic, libidinal life.

## 2. The Subject, Longing, *Jouissance* as the “Pleasure-in-Pain”

Many of the terms used in this analysis originated, or became widely known, through Lacanian psychoanalysis. Throughout Lacan’s opus, Jacques Lacan discussed notions of desire, the desiring subject and *jouissance* excessively. It is safe to say that they form the very core of his work.

According to Lacan, a subject appears as a subject only at the moment of her<sup>4</sup> invocation by/into language (“Position of the Unconscious” 708). Once the subject enters the language, once she enters the signifying chain, a world of desire opens in front of her, always luring her forward. The subject longs for a phantom object, for something imaginary that she cannot have, always finding it in its absence, perennially caught within desiring circles. Since the nature of the object of desire (*objet petit a*) is to be nonexistent and unattainable – it is literally *not* – the subject continuously falls in her attempt to reach it, experiencing *jouissance* (an excessive emotional overflow) in return.

Lacan developed his concept of *jouissance* on the wings of Freud’s late introduction of the death drive to his theory. Being only ostensibly a sort of pleasure, the title of the work in which the death drive appears clearly states that it is *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The difference between the pleasure principle and the death drive that surpasses the pleasure, is in the level of excitation a person experiences in relation to the object of her desire. While the pleasure principle functions as an “economic speculator,” as Adrian Johnston calls it (234), calculating the probable and possible level of satisfaction (maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain/displeasure), the death drive goes beyond this moderated/mitigated level, bringing *extreme* pleasure to the subject.

Freud developed this concept by identifying a strong tendency among war veterans and neurotic patients to keep reliving their painful experiences over and over again, their psyche constantly repeating the pain in spite of its obvious displeasure (11-35). Lacan identifies his idea of *jouissance* in this register. *Jouissance* always involves a limit to be transgressed. There has to be a line to be crossed, a Law<sup>5</sup> to be broken, after which *jouissance* is promised to the subject. In *The Ethics of Psychoa-*

<sup>4</sup> Since the analyses deals with a female character, I will use the female pronoun when referring to the desiring subject.

<sup>5</sup> The capitalized “Law” serves to point not to the legislative law, but to the law of language, the semiotic law.

*nalysis*, Lacan argues for this concept by criticizing Kant's example from the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Kant says that a man faced with a choice between sexual satisfaction that results in death or non-satisfaction, by default chooses the latter. As an example, he takes a man who is offered a choice to sleep with the woman of his dreams but be hanged afterwards, or not to sleep with her at all. Contrary to Kant, Lacan says that the psychoanalytic experience shows that there are many cases where individuals actually choose the former; it even shows frequent examples when they choose satisfaction *precisely because* it involved the possibility of death (*Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 134).

Seen in this way, it seems that *jouissance* involves a final satisfaction, a pure pleasure by transgressing against the Law and finally attaining the phantasmal, always already absent *objet a* of desire. However, this is not the case. In the *Encore*, Lacan distinguishes between two types of *jouissance*: *jouissance* promised and *jouissance* obtained (11-12). The subject expects the *jouissance* promised by the very existence of the Law (that prescribes the limit of socially acceptable satisfaction) to be transgressed in the attaining of the *objet a*, but in the process of reaching for it she always falls short – *objet a* always stays out of reach by its very absence, which orients the desire towards it. In this “fall” the subject experiences *jouissance* obtained, a sort of extreme pleasure that, nevertheless, falls short of the idealized standard. Thus, this *jouissance* of falling short, of not reaching the goal, in most cases manifests itself as pleasure-in-pain. This *jouissance*, through the fall and exhaustion of the subject, always says: “This is not it!”

*Jouissance* promised is a mythical experience orchestrated in the libidinal economy by and around the missing object; *jouissance* obtained, the only existing type, is an “enjoyment that is enjoyable only insofar as it doesn't get what it's allegedly after” (Žižek 164).

Extreme pleasure does not have to be pleasant.

### 3. The Siren

The poem follows the eponymous Siren in her epic, inner struggle for a gentle and compassionate heart, a gift that has hitherto been allowed to mortals only. Having been previously denied this glorious thing, not even being aware of its existence (or of the lack of it) the Siren was spending her immortal days with her two sisters in reckless mirth. Singing to the passing ships was undeniably in her nature, love and compassion meant nothing, anguish and pain even less. Drowned bodies and rotting corpses had been piling up on her faraway shore, but the sight of them meant little to her, death of men being the very air she breathed.

Then one day, as she was swimming with a triton, the Siren realized that the triton could understand the animals that swam by their side, so she turned to Jove (Jupiter) to grant her this inciting gift. The new knowledge of animal speech opened a whole new world to her, one in which she began longing to know, have, and possess. She learned from the animals she now could understand that she was the vilest and the most despised of them all, because, while they hunted for food, she killed for nothing, not even for joy.

Something irreversibly changed inside of her; a desire for a heart that can feel invaded her immortal peace.

She turned to Jove once again, but Jove was wise and compassionate enough to warn her that the heart of mortals would bring her excruciating pain and eternal sorrow, a kind of suffering that inevitably leads to craving death in the end. Though kind and merciful, she would still have to perform her task of lethal singing, bodies and shipwrecks would still suffocate her rotten shore.

Faced with this promise of torment, the Siren noticed that now she wanted it even more, so Jove promised her a gentle heart, adding to it a one-time way out: when the Siren could bear the anguish no more, she would be offered her previous heart of stone one last time.

After her transformation into a compassionate being was complete, the Siren, being able to feel, fell into a dark abyss of desperation and agony. For now she empathized with the men she was luring to death, but she was a slave to her voice, to her own monstrous nature, both killing and mourning her victims, going round in circles, unable to stop the endless horror of her own monstrosity. Incapable of coping with her fate any longer, and repulsed by the peaceful evil with which her sisters continued performing their deadly task, the Siren fled to an isolated island, where the beginning of the poem finds her, grieving the rotting fruit of her enslavement, desiring only one thing – to die.

The poem is dramatic and tragic from its first verse almost to its very last and, like *The Little Mermaid*, it is a story of sacrifice and pain. Ulysses plays just a minor, almost insignificant role, appearing at its very end, when Jove decides that Circe is going to release Ulysses, so Ulysses continues his journey home, passing the Siren's two sisters unscathed on the way. Meanwhile, the Siren herself is offered her original heart of stone once again, or the gift of death instead. Of course, she realizes that the lives of innocent men are worthier than her own, so she jumps from a cliff in a final act of sacrificial desperation. However, the winged Hermes catches her in the fall and Jove proclaims her queen of her island, bringing back to life all the men who had fallen prey to the Siren's song.

*The Siren* seems to have a happy ending after all, but it actually only deepens the feeling that the subject alone is incapable of freeing herself from jaws of desire. As we shall see, the Siren actually longs for death as the final stillness of being, beyond language.

Without a *deus ex machina*, without a higher power the subject is doomed to the pain of yearning.

Heart-breaking and dramatic, *The Siren* is, in my opinion, the most beautiful piece of Victorian siren literature. *The Little Mermaid* is overly melancholic and predictable, written as a fairytale, and as such it tries to melt hearts of stone. Its approach is moralizing and Christian, and in the last instance, it builds upon the medieval notion of the mermaid as a soul catcher. *The Siren*, too, is a story of love and sacrifice, but it pushes the narrative of *The Little Mermaid* to the extreme, delving deep into the realm of desire and psychical life of an individual, thus providing us with a strong example of the subject's mechanics of desire. The poem is a most curious combination of the Homeric siren episode and the modern mermaid plot introduced by Hans Christian Andersen. As such, as we discuss the inception of the subject's desire typified by the Siren's image, a slightly comparative approach would be useful.

I will proceed with a closer reading of the poem and show that it beautifully weaves a net of the *objet a* and that it tells a tale of the invocation of the subject into/

by language/culture; it describes the never-ending path of desire, on whose non-existent, illusionary end death (the object of desire) awaits; death that is the very nature and echo of all other desired objects – pure void.

#### 4. Candor of a Monster

*The Siren* is a poem written for audiences familiar with the classical Homeric narrative, but at the same time it speaks to its own age. The setting draws heavily upon the Roman version of the Greek mythology, featuring Neptune and Jupiter, Hermes<sup>6</sup> and Ulysses, and it is constructed so as to explain and expand on the events in the *Odyssey*. We learn that the Siren had earned her poisonous voice as punishment for assuming she could sing better than the Graces (Muses), and we are also given a solution to another issue that troubled ancient authors: the Sirens had previously been three, but due to the events described in the poem, only two of them remained to witness the passing of Ulysses.

For a knowledgeable audience, this is a very shrewd invention, playing both with the ancient lore and its modern counterpart. In a true Victorian spirit that finds everything classical sacred, we are invited to revel in the imagination of Henry Carrington, clearly brought up on classical scholarship.

On the other hand, the differences with the *Odyssey* might be more than just a pleasant guessing-game for specialists and they might give us more than an outline of a creative mind. In Carrington's poetic imagination, the famous companion of the Sirens, namely Ulysses, has been reduced to a single chapter - one out of thirty-two. Thus, the roles have been reversed: instead of following Ulysses on his epic journey around the Mediterranean Sea, we follow the Siren on her spiraling journey around her object of desire - death. Instead of being oriented towards an outside adventure, a physical voyage home, the narrative of *The Siren* revolves around the Siren's inner journey, around her path to the heart of desire.

As much as it struggles to be classical, the poem ends up being devastatingly modern in nature, with the Victorian take on siren lore being the core of the narrative, transforming the classical myth into the Siren's odyssey instead. Though abundant, scenes of voracious shipwrecking are not the focal point of the plot – the main emphasis pushes us towards the Siren's *within*. We are invited to understand, empathize with and pity her existence, her grief-stricken life and her intrinsically split self. The Homeric Siren turns into a profoundly Victorian one, into the very reverse of her monstrous nature – she assumes the role of the human subject.

The poem goes a long way to establish the candor and sincere mildness of the Siren's nature, suppressing her monstrous body as the result. We are told that the Siren's beauty is beyond compare: her face, her hair, her lips, her eyes (13-14). But, the question of whether this beauty hides hideous monstrosity is what interests the narrator as he paints the Siren's portrait:

Not so! That form no fraud we find,  
No veil by Nature's freak designed

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<sup>6</sup> Although all the other names are Roman (Ulysses, Jove), the author anachronistically uses Hermes instead of Mercury.

To hide the foul reality;  
 The monster ill, that lurks behind!  
 Her face did not her heart belie;  
 But 'twas an index of the mind;  
 Where all its secrets you may know;  
 Or 'twas a mirror framed to show  
 The charms, that in her spirit lie (18).

The verse gives us an image of the Siren after her transformation, and if we read the Victorian siren lore closely we shall find that normalized monstrosity is a prerogative of many stories (Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, Wells's *The Sea Lady*, Anstey's *The Siren*, etc.). The monster has to abandon her monstrous nature; she has to abandon her murderous, unacceptable features and impulses. This normalization leads straight to the humanity that lurks beneath her monstrous skin. As we shall see, the issue at hand in the poem is our Siren's trying *not* to be a monster. Her face reflects her genuine kindness and empathy, but she carries on performing her fatal task all the same:

She, but the passive instrument.  
 The slave, that doth his lord's command. [...]  
 The Siren is compelled to sing:  
 A captive longing to be free.  
 And, that her song must ruin be [...] (18, 20).

The Siren is not to blame for her monstrous actions; she is but a slave to her "lord's command": she is a slave to Jove, to culture, to the highest power that provides language. Other aspects of her figure having been sanitized – her body beautiful and pure, her gorgeous face reflecting a candid heart and a caring mind – the only monstrous part left is her "poisonous voice," that

[...] intoxicating balm  
 That all around, above, beneath,  
 Through soul and senses found[s] its way (2).<sup>7</sup>

The monstrosity of the Siren has been cornered into this small part of her existence, but this part, a remnant of her true nature, is exactly the one she cannot resist. She is still compelled to sing, bound to her monstrous nature.

Victorian monstrosity, thus, becomes a vehicle of desire. Bound by the heavenly Law that does not allow her to cease to sing and that makes her crave one thing over all others, death establishes itself as that which is beyond the Law, beyond language and materiality, the place of *jouissance* expected. A desired object (heart that equals death) had been promised to the Siren, but this promise was bound to bring pain. There is no *jouissance* without a Law to be broken, without a limit to be transgressed.

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<sup>7</sup> The phrase "poisonous voice", or the "poisonous nature" of the Siren's singing is a constant throughout the poem (9, 19, 21 etc.).

## 5. Heart equals Death

As the subject in the poem, the Siren sets off on her dim, consuming inner path. The approach the poem takes on desire, as well as the language and expressions used to describe it, are so curiously Lacanian, that if I had not known that the fate of this Siren was originating in the late nineteenth century, I would have placed it in Lacanian times. On the other hand, its similarity with the psychoanalytic notion of desire shows Lacan's profoundly Victorian imagination, the one he inherited from Freud (Auerbach 26-34).

From the very start of the poem, even before we are introduced to the Siren's journey that led to her miserable state, we face a subject ravished by an inner split. The Siren is perched on a rock as she gazes into the distance, fearing that another ship might come and compel her to destroy it by her song, and we feel that the state of her existence is intolerable, that she explicitly has only one wish – to die.

When she at last may sink to rest,  
All pains and wrongs and woes forgot.  
Upon the earth, her mother's breast,  
Or in the ocean's stilly deep.  
Where motion, sound, and sight are not,  
Find that unbroken stilly sleep.  
The happy envied mortal lot.  
The only boon she asks; – to die (23).

She feels torn, split inside between the Law that forces her to kill, and her kind heart that rejects the aggressiveness of destruction. But even more, she is torn by her inability to attain absolution for her deeds; she is torn by the impossibility to reach the nothingness of fullness that once was her existence. The Siren is in a desperate need for stillness, silence, the gift bestowed upon mortals – she is in a desperate need for death.

There is a Promised Land: beyond materiality, beyond sound and motion. It is in the “ocean's stilly deep, where motion, sound, and sight are not”; it is the safe place on the “mother's breast”; it is where mortals go when everything is over and done, and they are allowed a totality of existence – a darkness that soothes “all pains and wrongs and woes,” an emptiness that promises oblivion. She wants and she needs death. And she envies mortals for having it.

How did it come to this? How did the Siren become tormented by the specters of her murderous deeds?

Before the fateful events described in the summary took place, before she understood animals and came to the realization of her lack, the Siren was semiotically *whole*. There were no waves in her soul, no cracks in her selfhood. ‘She felt her life,’ the narrator says, “[w]ithout a want, without a pang” (80). She never knew what loving, hating or desiring meant. Incapable of any inner motion aside from a “reckless joy” (a phrase Carrington uses to describe the psychic unity of her desireless existence), the Siren was *the perfect object of desire* for others. She could not desire herself, thus everyone desired her.

Her beauty sank into the heart.  
And stole the heart away, it left.

*Once seen, instead, ne'er to depart.  
 A hunger, thirst, a longing void,  
 A craving never satisfied:  
 The captive soul, by love subdued,  
 Of all resistance was bereft;  
 And thus, the charms her singing wrought  
 Were by her loveliness renewed;  
 Which, though but for a moment viewed,  
 Was ever loved, and ever sought (15-16).<sup>8</sup>*

The Siren of the poem was a wholeness incarnate, the subject's fantasy of coherence prior to invocation into language, into culture. She was death personified, the creature of the Real: for her victims, she was what haunted their minds, souls and Beings – their own lack, their own *objet petit a*.

Then the word arrives: the enticing, shattering word of death that will crush her wholeness and introduce her as the subject to her lack. Taken over by curiosity, the Siren asks the highest power (Jove) to grant her the knowledge of the animal tongue. The summoning of the subject into culture begins: the moment she understands the language around her, the Siren hears the animals talk of something precious, bright and worthy; she learns that

*she lives for ever, dispossessed  
 Of all most joyous, brightest, best  
 Among the gifts that fortune deals (86).*

She lives without a heart, so she begins desiring it. The circle of wanting is open and the Siren can never be the same again.

*That much she longed to know, to feel,  
 What could that strange possession be,  
 Which all the forms of life reveal  
 As height of all felicity.  
 True, she herself no guilt could own,  
 Nor want, nor lack; yet, all the same,  
 Compassion like she not, not blame [...]  
 And long this thought possessed her mind,  
 And with desire strong and strange,  
 She more and more became inclined  
 To claim of Jove the promised change (87).<sup>9</sup>*

It is interesting to see how desire slowly creeps on the Siren. She is not consumed by it immediately in an inextinguishable fire that burns flesh and blazes bones into dust. She is introduced into the circle of desire by the power of language, of the animal tongue; the understanding of the world around her is revealed to her, a landscape that we call culture. A crack opens within her, and she cannot fathom this “desire

<sup>8</sup> Emphasis are mine.

<sup>9</sup> Emphases are mine.

strong and strange”. In the above passage, we see that previously she has not been able to understand neither want nor lack, wanting and lacking taken as two sides of the same coin, one leading to another in a game of desire. The moment the game began, however, an eternal displacement of the language took place, a substitution of one object of desire for another. “If I entreat thee to resume,” prays the Siren to Jove the Father,

That former gift, and one bestow,  
Which all thy creatures here below,  
Whose speech thou gavest me to know,  
Have made me long for – in its room (89).

The knowledge of animal language is not enough anymore, as nothing is ever enough where objects of desire are concerned. There is something better this time, a shiny thing everyone (animals) is talking about, an elevated substitution for the last gift given. It is almost distressing to read how the inner life of this modern Siren develops in a fashion familiar to commodity fetishism. The narrative of the poem revolves around the heart, death and desire – and the heart appears as just another commodity to be asked for, given, taken, or otherwise acquired.

Thus, Siren asks for a gentle heart, she wants to feel and she wants to know. The object of desire moves away from speech to the heart, which

Is the best boon that from on high,  
Thy bounty to creation deals;  
A heart that pities, loves, and feels (90).

The heart is the shiny thing that lures desire; it is the commodity of the moment. It is better than the ability to understand animals. As much as Carrington would have liked it to be classical in theme and structure, *The Siren* consistently shows an essentially modern, consumerist nature of its narrative.

## 6. Warning of Death as *Jouissance* Expected

At this point in the narrative the poem structurally converges again with the modern siren narratology, as the moment of warning comes. This moment is crucial, because under the surface of praise-worthy sacrifice, lies a profound desire for an utter dissolution of selfhood, devastation of being, and transcendence of the limits of language. In a word, the moment carries in its womb a dream of escaping the semiotic incoherence, of exiting the maze of signification, of awakening and reaching out for the absolute – it holds on to the fantasy of *the beyond*. The Siren embodies a subject who, seemingly against all odds, decides to “sleep with the woman of [her] dreams but be hanged afterwards.”

But only apparently, I would argue.

The transgression the Siren is rushing to is a transgression of the boundaries of *life* itself, an abject desire to reach the desired object that stands behind all desired objects – death. Being of an impossible nature and essentially nonexistent, always found again only as an absence, every *objet a* is in its essence a death epitomized –

nothingness without a beginning and an end, the Real beyond every reality, *nihil* that gives birth to life itself. When I say death, I do not necessarily mean the physical death (as death of the body), but what Johnston calls “psychical death” as death of desire, as stillness of meaning and pure enjoyment beyond language. Death as a pure signifier – a signifier without a signified, without being.

Every death needs a prophet, though. Otherwise, there is no expectation; the subject does not know that there is a *jouissance* waiting for her on the other side. The Little Mermaid had the witch, a monstrous figure woven out of Victorian male misogynist fears. Ulysses had Circe, a witch-whore promising death to those who do not follow her advice. And so our Siren has Jove, and his warning, or better his “promise” is as follows:

‘Tis doomed by fate that you must sing,  
 And doomed by fate you must bring  
 Ruin, and death, on all that hear; [...]  
 But soon as by this heavenly guest,  
 This loving, melting human heart,  
 Your bosom’s threshold shall be crossed, [...]  
 Then shall those other guests depart,  
 That now within your bosom throng –  
 Laughter and mirth, and peace and joy,  
 The careless, jocund company [...]  
 But every note [of thy song] shall wound you ear,  
 And shall hate you late-loved song,  
 And feel its witching powers pierce,  
 The soft kind heart for which you long. [...]  
*Yourself shall writhe with every cry,*  
*With every death yourself shall die.* [...]  
 Anguish unheard of, and unknown,  
 Shall so consume your life with grief,  
 That you shall supplicate for death:  
 To sleep the earth or waves beneath,  
 As sole succor and relief,  
 From terrors that your soul appal.  
 Ask death with eager vehemence,  
 With longing, craving more intense  
 Than you can e’ver imagine now (94-99).<sup>10</sup>

The Siren has been warned and this warning comes as a long promise of pain, anguish and misery. It was necessary to quote this long passage, so that the reader becomes aware of how intensely disturbing is the warning/promise given to the Siren. I have quoted only the smallest piece of it, as this horrendous promise stretches over two whole chapters! Compared to this, the price the Little Mermaid pays seems ridiculously naïve – her loss of voice and bleeding feet (along with possible death in the end), appear benign compared to this promise of an abiding infernal agony. The Little Mermaid at least had a chance at winning the prince and the soul. But for the

<sup>10</sup> Emphases are mine.

Siren the price is not only death; there is no advice for her, no tools of salvation. Her destiny has been promised to her from the start: the price of a heart is eternal damnation, searing pain and an endless fall.

Faced with this choice, we would have thought that the Siren would side with the Kantian perspective, at least: no being would choose enjoyment if promised not death, but perennial horror afterwards. Thus, the answer that the Siren gives to Jove becomes important. “The words, the danger, you disclose,” she says,

*Increase, not lessen my desire:*  
An impulse that I strive in vain  
Myself to fathom, or explain,  
Such as I ne'er have felt before,  
Makes me all future chance disdain,  
This unknown region to explore:  
This craving fills and rules my soul,  
And brooks not reason or control (102).<sup>11</sup>

Desire works in roundabout ways; it does not strictly follow historically contingent rules of rationality though it follows culturally contingent objects of desire. What all Victorian “longing sirens” have in common is that they have all been warned, and that every single one of them decided to pay the price. They all follow their object of desire towards the promised *jouissance*, a pure enjoyment beyond the limits of materiality, body, language, life, existence. They all crave the *nihil* where it all began, and the *jouissance* of transgression just gets pushed to the extreme and explicitly framed in the poem we are analyzing.

Enjoyment does not have to be pleasant; *jouissance* can be pleasure in pain.

But it has to be promised – a line has to be drawn somewhere, so that the subject can be seduced by the fantasy of crossing it. This line – the promise made – signals an emotional overflow, a semiotic surplus; it lures with images of purgatorial ecstasy, transcendence worthy of life itself. The fiercer the price, the more the Siren wants it: “The words, the danger you disclose, increase, not lessen my desire,” she says, as her monstrosity fades away. The monster is seduced by the promise of death, which is absence itself.<sup>12</sup>

## 7. After Death, Death

The last episode of the Siren’s inner journey arrives with the libidinal fall. As the Siren begins to understand animals and the crack opens within her allowing desire to appear, the signifying chain moves on, in an everlasting substitution of desired objects. Never will an object be enough, though, because the fundamental dream that supports desire is one of pure wholeness delivered only in death. As long as there is a subject who desires, as long as there is a desire which, along its path, constitutes

<sup>11</sup> Emphases are mine.

<sup>12</sup> Taking this symbolic absence to its extreme, I would say that every desire is a cry for death, driven by the impulse of nothingness that can be acted upon, but it cannot be satisfied, it cannot be fulfilled. We could say that every desire, as a reaching out for this emptiness, is ecstasy in itself, a little death, *une petite mort*.

the subject, satisfaction is bound to be postponed, always introducing new objects to the game.

The poem presents us with this scenario, making explicit the mechanics of longing. Since it is unattainable, reaching out for the *objet a* inevitably leads to the libidinal fall of the subject, to the place where the subject falls short of *jouissance* expected, of the ecstasy mythically promised by the Prophet of Death. Instead, the subject experiences *jouissance* obtained, an extreme emotional overflow barely within the limits of the Law and excessive enough to allow the substitution of objects, but insufficient enough to bring a semiotic resolution of death to the split subject.

The subject always misses the appointment with the Real. An encounter not missed would be the end of the subject's psychic life; it would mean the Little Mermaid acquiring an immortal soul; it would mean Ulysses breaking the ropes and dying at the Sirens' shore or at the bottom of the sea; it would mean our Siren ceasing to exist.

Is that what happens to our wretched heroine? Does she succeed in reaching death? At the end of her libidinal existence the Siren would have to die, she would have to actually see and touch her *objet petit a*. Is that what happens in our story?

Almost.

In her search for wholeness, for silence, stillness and peace, the Siren approaches the limit of existence, of life itself. After the promise and her acceptance of the price, the transformation begins as an aggressive experience of the libidinal fall.

The Siren goes through an agonizing, excessive experience, worthy of an ecstatic fall of the subject. She is ready to receive her gift (a gentle heart) that embodies her *objet a* (death). She is put to sleep by Jove, so she could survive the aggression of the transformation into a full desiring subject, and first to visit her are the Furies, sinister creatures of Hades whose task is to suck out all the poison from her stony heart.

From Pluto's realms of ghastly gloom,  
From the black land of pain and death; [...]  
Bade the fell snake-haired sisters come  
Nor dare the Furies to delay (106).

The following scene, in which the Siren is transformed into a full desiring subject is a horrifying experience of bitterness and pain. The Furies approach the Siren with their "icy touch" and they press their "deadly lips" on the Siren's pale face. "Terror and anguish [are] such," the narrator says, that "her soul amazed [is] seek[ing] to fly" (107). The Furies lay their "cold hands," on the Siren's chest, and

[W]hile each shuddering fibre quakes,  
With threat'ning hiss and livid fold,  
Entwine and mix the Furies' snakes,  
Amid her locks of tangled gold (108).

The Siren's soul is attempting to flee, the experience of the transfer being too much even for her immortal body. She is covered in the Furies' snake hair, the drama rising in an agonizing crescendo. In the apogee of ecstasy, her beautiful body is tainted; her golden locks that covered her lower part like a fish tail are full of snakes, as

the Furies hiss and her body quakes. The Siren's being is literally dying away, "[f]rom her soft cheeks, in horror sped, [t]he blood, and all her colour fled" (108). Her body is losing its natural properties, turning into stone, into a monstrous nothingness of inanimate matter, reaching out for the other side of life. At the gates of Hades, the habitat reserved for human victims since time immemorial, the Siren is on the road to death, the *objeta* is upon her reach. Death is encroaching on her:

Her own [eyes], then shrinking 'neath the sway,  
 Appeared to die, to fade away,  
 Burnt out to darkness by dismay;  
 Then closed again, and all had said,  
 So white, so cold, the maid was dead. [...]  
 When these Tartarean forms had left  
 The Siren, as of life bereft,  
*She lay, pale, cold, and motionless;*  
*A marble statue, you had said,*  
 To represent some beauteous maid,  
 Who died of terror and distress (109-111).<sup>13</sup>

It may seem that the Siren finally arrived at the end of her path and that the search for the *objeta* is over; she has found wholeness again, her body turning into stone, into a "marble statue," the *jouissance* being pure, leaving only an empty shell behind, "pale, cold, and motionless," empty as death itself.

But this, of course, cannot be.

After the Furies had departed, love, pity and compassion were poured into her heart by the Graces, restoring the Siren back to life, turning her into a creature of desire again. What appeared to be an end, what appeared to be the *jouissance* promised to her, was only the Siren's libidinal fall in desire, an experience of *jouissance* obtained, an insufficient extreme emotional overflow at the limits of the Law, at the gates of the beyond. Before the fall – desire; after the fall – desire again; an indestructible circle of objects lining one after another, a never-ending chain of signification that is the alpha and omega of desire never ceasing to exist and to instill the *différance* into the heart of the subject's being.

The Siren came a long way on her inner odyssey, and at the end of her long journey there is only the beginning to be rediscovered – the infinite circle of horror of alluring nothingness. She wanted the ability of animal speech, and then she craved a gentle heart. The poem starts with the Siren desiring death, absolution and a way out, and it returns to the same place of sorrow and misery. After the split, after she has received a gentle heart, she moves to an island in the far West, in the land of death, where tormented souls find their final resting place of peaceful wholeness.

Even space betokens the Siren's desire for death: far in the West, in this Land of the Dead, we see the Siren sitting on a rock, mourning the decaying bodies of dead and dying men scattered across the landscape that seems to be her whole world. Her nature is fundamentally object, bound to her monstrous voice, unable to attain what she desires the most.

<sup>13</sup> Emphases are mine.

## 8. The Moral of the Story is not a Pleasant One

At the end of the poem and of the analysis, we gaze into the last scene that I intentionally kept hidden till now: *the self-sacrificing Siren jumps into the sea, but is saved by Hermes from her fall, and restored as a queen to her island.*

Does *The Siren* have a happy ending? Carrington would certainly like us to believe so; he would like us to think that suffering has to be rewarded. In the very last scene, after all the torment and horror, the Siren has left the pain of longing behind and continues her immortal life without pangs of desire. It seems that there is an exit out of language, out of yearning, after all.

However, I read the moral of the story as follows: only an *external power* can bestow absolution; the subject is mercilessly immersed in the culture that shapes her libidinal existence, and is incapable of making the transition alone. After the warning, after the promise of death, the only thing the subject is capable of is the *jouissance* obtained; a fall in desire does not allow her to awake from the libidinal circle. If not saved by gods – by the winged Hermes or the almighty Jove – without a *deus ex machina*, the subject drowns in desire again, morphing the *jouissance* obtained into just another turn of the deathless circle of longing. Without a power that comes from the beyond, the sleeping subject, the Victorian dreamer, be it a Ulysses or a Siren, dreams her dream of transcendence, unaware of the agonizing circles, time and again thinking she has been saved.

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