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“Desiderio in Search of a Master”: Desire and the Quest for Recognition in Angela Carter’s *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*

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Introduction

This paper will address how the interpersonal relations depicted in Angela Carter’s novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* are represented as affecting the development of the self. Focusing upon the first-person narrator and his love-object, it will consider the manner in which the characters are portrayed as detecting elements of themselves within the people that they desire, and look at how sexual attraction and romantic love are shown to influence the dynamics of identity-forming encounters. During the course of the discussion, the paper will examine the manner in which the events of the narrative enact and interrogate philosophical ideas concerning the relations between the self and the other. More specifically, it will concentrate upon the ways in which Carter’s novel engages the work of Hegel in a detailed and productive conversation.

Beginning with a brief outline of Hegel’s famous account of the interaction between the lord and the bondsman, the article will go on to consider the novel’s treatment of the tension between a compulsion to identify with the other and a conflicting urge to dominate him or her. What constitutes an ideal other for Carter’s characters, and how does this intersect with feelings of desire? What obstacles are shown to hinder, in the theorist Jessica Benjamin’s words, the process of “recognizing the other as an equivalent centre of experience” (28)? This paper will consider how the novel’s treatment of Hegelian themes works to illuminate the German philosopher’s ideas, before concluding with an account of the unrealised possibility of recognition that haunts Carter’s text.

Master, Slave and the Self-Reflecting Gaze

First published in 1972, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* is a surreal, picaresque novel which takes the form of an autobiography. It focuses on the adventures

of a character named Desiderio, and depicts both his sexual obsession with the shape-shifting Albertina, and his journey through a world in which time and space have become mutable. In the text, the forces of reason and desire are at war, and Desiderio is instructed to assassinate “the diabolical Dr Hoffman” (Carter 11). Hoffman is the “great patriarchal Forbidder turned Permitter, the one who sets libido ‘free’” (Sage 34), and it is he who has unleashed desire upon the city. However, as he nears the end of his first-person narrative, Desiderio realises that the true purpose of his quest was never to kill the enemy leader. Instead, it was to find a person worthy of his respect, and he suggests that his journey should have been entitled “Desiderio in Search of a Master” (Carter 190). If to seek a master implies a longing to be controlled and dominated, then it is perhaps important to examine why the protagonist finds this so desirable.

That Desiderio uses the term ‘master’ is significant for the purposes of this study, because the word is imbued with Hegelian connotations. The theory of lordship and bondage outlined in *Phenomenology of Spirit* is, after all, popularly referred to as the Master/Slave dialectic. In his discussion of self-consciousness, Hegel argues that, when the self first becomes aware of the existence of another being, it experiences both affirmation and anxiety. Upon realising that this being has “an independent existence of its own” (Hegel 112), the self enjoys a moment of identification with the other. However, the self also becomes aware of itself as an inessential object before an autonomous individual’s gaze, and this provokes a desire to dominate and seek “the death of the other” in order to reassert the self (113). An intense struggle for supremacy ensues, after which the self and the other enter into a relationship of mutual dependence based upon asymmetrical power relations; the winner is henceforth the lord or master, whilst the loser exists as the bondsmen or slave.

However, the master is more than simply a domineering figure who “holds the other in subjection” (Hegel 115), for only the figure of the master within Hegel’s dialectic is capable of providing satisfactory recognition. The nature of the relationship between master and slave means that “the action of the bondsman is impure and unessential” (116), for he is condemned to perpetual “thinghood” (115). As such, “the object in which the lord has achieved his lordship has in reality turned out to be something quite different from an independent consciousness” (116 - 117). In other

words, because the bondsman is not perceived as being human to the same extent as the lord, any power that the lord might have over him or her is rendered meaningless. The master thus remains uncertain “of his [sic] *being-for-self* as the truth of himself [sic]” (117, original emphasis). Conversely, due to his or her essential status within the dialectic, the lord is potentially able to offer “recognition proper” (116). The master could, in principle, grant the slave an image of the self through the eyes of a creditable other, and therefore represents the possibility of achieving true self-consciousness and self-certainty.

We can, therefore, conceive of the object of Desiderio’s quest as more than just a leader; our protagonist is perhaps in search of a Hegelian lord capable of providing recognition. With this in mind, I would argue that the character of Albertina functions not only as the focus of Desiderio’s sexual desire, but also as the object of his quest for recognition. I now hope to demonstrate that despite, or rather because of, her close resemblance to the protagonist, Albertina is positioned as the ideal potential master. The novel repeatedly draws attention to the many similarities between Desiderio and his love-object as they change throughout the narrative. Both are shown to have ‘exotic’ parentage, for example, and Desiderio wonders whether Albertina might, like himself, have descended from “certain of the forgotten Indians” (Carter 32). The protagonist and his beloved are also depicted as being similar in appearance, and Desiderio’s narrative voice recalls that, in his youth, he was “Albertina in the male aspect” (199). He remarks that “That is why I know I was beautiful when I was a young man. Because I know I looked like Albertina” (199).

Albertina, so infinitely compelling and attractive to Desiderio, is seen by the narrator as an idealized, feminine version of himself.² It might be argued that, in so far as she embodies both the other and the self, Albertina could be considered the perfect master. Hegelian theory provides a basis for this argument. Having been confronted by another independent entity, self-consciousness finds that “it has lost itself, for it finds itself as an *other* being” (Hegel 111, original emphasis). However, it must be remembered that in understanding the self through the eyes of the other, the self has also “superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self” (111). In other words, the self supplants the other by projecting itself

onto this separate self-consciousness at the very moment of identification and acknowledgement.

Conversely, when the self receives recognition from the other in this manner, it is itself superseded. The very experience of being recognized might therefore be seen as a subtle form of subjugation which destabilizes identity because it involves the displacement of the self. However, in discovering a potential master who is also, fantastically, already the self, Desiderio manages to circumvent this issue. Should Albertina assume the role of the dominant and recognising partner in the Master/Slave dialectic, then Desiderio would be able to receive recognition without being truly superseded by the other, for this other is merely an alternative version of his self.

One recurring image in *The Infernal Desire Machines* seems to operate as a commentary upon this complex power dynamic - the reflecting eye. When Desiderio first comes across a magical peep-show, he views an exhibit entitled "THE ETERNAL VISTAS OF LOVE" (Carter 45). He recalls that "all I could see were two eyes looking back at me" (45), and goes on to add that "in the pupils I could see, reflected in two discs of mirror, my own eyes, very greatly magnified" (45). This exhibit is enacted by our hero and his beloved, and reprised throughout the text. For example, the narrator recalls of Albertina that "I would gaze at her for hours together, as though I were feeding on her eyes. And, as I remember, she, too, would gaze at me" (187). He even goes so far as to state that "we saw the events of the war in which we were enlisted on opposite sides only by the light of one another's faces" (136). The connection between this repeated image of a reciprocated, desiring gaze that reflects the self, and Hegel's notion of a type of consciousness achieved via viewing the self through the "middle term" of the other (Hegel 112), is obvious. This association highlights a certain privileging of the self which can occur in recognition.

Because it is the self's own gaze which becomes the focus of recognition here, the other is effaced and rendered merely a mirror in which the narcissistic self can view itself. In this situation, as Benjamin notes, "the pleasure of mutuality between two subjects is reduced to its function of stabilizing the self, not of enlarging our awareness of the outside or of recognizing others as animated by independent, though similar, feelings" (33). Because the importance of appreciating the freestanding identity of the other is

obscured by the desire to superimpose oneself upon this other, the perceived possibility of recognition diminishes. If one cannot suppress the desire to insist upon accentuating the essential nature of the self at the expense of the otherness of the other, and if one cannot conceive of the possibility that one's own self-consciousness is inessential for discrete and different beings, then one will find oneself unable to conceive of a reciprocal moment of recognition. The hope that one will be acknowledged reduces in response to the self's egotistical closed-mindedness, and as one asserts oneself with mounting self-importance, anxiety about the impossibility of recognition increases exponentially.

The projection of the self upon the other sometimes takes the form of physical violence in the novel, and combative power play is depicted as a central element of the relationship between Albertina and Desiderio. During the period of nebulous time,³ when the couple are prey to their own unconscious fantasies, Desiderio recalls being convinced that they would not escape with their lives: "if we were the victims of unleashed, unknown desires, then die we must, for as long as those desires existed, we would finish by killing one another" (Carter 191). Indeed, the decisive encounter of their relationship is a violent and extended brawl, in which they wrestle "for possession of the knife as passionately as if for the possession of each other" (216). This fight recalls Hegel's "life-and-death struggle" (Hegel 114), the results of which establish the positions of the two individuals within the Master/Slave dialectic. However, whilst Hegel's characters reach an agreement, Carter's ultimately take this struggle to its bloody conclusion.

By illogically insisting that the potential master be wholly the self, and in demanding an unreciprocated recognition that would efface the other, the lovers are gripped by stasis. Desiderio and Albertina remain, with varying degrees of literality, forever at the instant of attempting to destroy one another and re-establish the self-certainty which the first realisation of the existence of otherness disrupted. If one strips the metaphor of a fight to obtain recognition of its literal implications, however, and ignores the physical dangers endured by Desiderio and Albertina, then a conceptualisation of the quest for recognition as a manner of ongoing struggle loses many of its dystopic overtones. Indeed, a perpetually unfinished but endlessly affirmative practice of remaining receptive to the other, in the hope of initiating a process of becoming both the recognizer and the recognized, could be read as an ethical conception

of love. Carter could thus be perceived as pessimistically misrepresenting the possibilities within an encounter between self-consciousnesses in a field of social relations that is influenced by asymmetrical power positions. However, Carter's text introduces two major problems into a positive conceptualisation of this desire-fuelled Hegelian encounter – misrecognition and overly-narrow acknowledgement.

Misrecognition and the Eternal Vistas of Love

As discussed above, neither of the lovers is truly able to see the other because of the nature of the self-reflecting gaze of desire. This mesmerizing gaze is shown to obscure the person desired, by projecting, over him or her, a self incapable of acknowledging any self-consciousness but its own. In considering the other, Desiderio and Albertina are confronted only with mediated versions of themselves. As Albertina notes, this locates desire as “a perpetual journey that does not go through space, an endless oscillating motion that remains unmoved” (Carter 202). The stasis produced by misrecognition - that is, by a form of recognition that, compromised by the concerns of the self, does not truly allow for the otherness of a separate being - is shown to be all one can achieve in relation to the beloved.

Perhaps this misrecognition can be related to Desiderio's claim that “Love is the synthesis of dream and actuality” (Carter 202). As Slavoj Žižek suggests,

“Any contact with a real, flesh-and-blood other, any sexual pleasure that we find in touching another human being, is not something evident, but something inherently traumatic, and can be sustained only in so far as this other enters the subject's fantasy frame” (49).

A sexual relationship, then, “has to be screened through some fantasy” in order to function (49). We have no access to the ‘real’ of our beloveds and, because we must rely on our own fantasies to facilitate the creation of intimate bonds, the love-object is necessarily a synthesis of the other and the self. Albertina admits as much when she informs her lover that she has never fully been an entity in her own right: “all the time

you have known me, I've been maintained in my various appearances only by the power of your desire" (Carter 204). Albertina, as the reader experiences her, is partially "the emanation of Desiderio's desire, and depends for her existence on the story he tells" (Jordan 209).

Of course, in a post-Kantian and post-Lacanian world,⁴ it is widely accepted that no individual has access to any version of reality that is separate from the mediation of his or her own mind. In fact, an acceptance that one will always see the self reflected in one's own experiences of others is arguably a culturally dominant notion in the contemporary age. This fact need not pose an intractable challenge to the possibility of initiating the process of recognition. If one works to remind oneself that the other views the self through a similar filter of subjectivity, and remembers that one's own opinions are not universal, then a moment of identification with the other can occur at the very moment that one is forced to confront difference.

It is not impossible, then, to incorporate the supposed problem of misrecognition into theories of Hegelian acknowledgement. However, it is easy to understand why the novel includes no such act of incorporation. Opening up a space within one's cognitive landscape for the acceptance of epistemological and attitudinal difference may involve a self-aware intellectual effort that would be quite out of place in Carter's "kingdom of the instantaneous" (Carter 18), where the world and its cities are "no longer the conscious production of humanity" (18). After all, as Elaine Jordan has noted, the action of *The Infernal Desire Machines* is generated "from the fragmented and unrecognised elements of Desiderio's desire as much as from his deliberate – if sceptical – service of rationality" (206). I would argue that the ethical act of acknowledging that both self and other possess viewpoints that are similarly contingent would be wholly anomalous in a narrative that is persistently influenced by the violent and unconscious fantasies of the characters.

The text also raises the issue of over-narrowness in relation to Desiderio and Albertina's attempt at recognition. Carter's exploration of the reflecting gaze produces a peculiar version of the Master/Slave dialectic. Not only do the huge pupils of the peep-show allow Desiderio to gaze at his own eyes, but, as he recollects, "my own pupils, in turn, reflected the false eyes before me while these reflections again reflected those reflections" (Carter 45). The exhibit, as a metaphor for the quest for recognition,

envisages the self as progressing from being an inessential object for the other, to becoming the self of the other through identification, and back again in a near-instantaneous manner. This perpetually circular process of realisation and identification is akin to a feedback loop, which produces only “the motionless tautology of: ‘I am I’” (Hegel 105). The peep-show, offering as it does “a model of eternal regression” (Carter 45), represents a perpetually oscillating gaze which is exchanged in a similarly ceaseless manner between the two lovers, and which, because of its very endlessness, works to prevent all other forms of seeing.

The exhibit is explicitly connected with the relationship between Desiderio and Albertina, for our narrator, recalling a moment of conversation with his love-object, remembers how “In the looking glasses of her eyes, I saw [...] my entire being whirl apart and reassemble itself innumerable times” (Carter 202). That this relationship should be so associated with an exhibit entitled “THE ETERNAL VISTAS OF LOVE” is telling (45), for such a phrase emphasises that Desiderio’s encounter with Albertina offers only the narrowest of views. Blinkered by the vista of the reverberating gaze of attempted recognition, Desiderio can look only at Albertina. The focused nature of his gaze limits his peripheral vision, and desire becomes necessarily exclusive.

This manner of gazing finds its ultimate expression in the “love pens” of Dr Hoffman’s laboratory (Carter 213), where numerous heterosexual pairs engage in continual sexual intercourse in order to fuel the desire machines responsible for disrupting time and space. These couples remain “so engrossed in their vital work they do not even notice” those around them (214). Desiderio recalls this disconcerting passivity, and notes that the bloody fracas resulting from his eventual rejection of Albertina barely disturbs “the willed oblivion of the love slaves” (216). In response to the noise of the brawl, he reports, they merely “bucked and thrust less violently, and one or two moved their eyes as far as they could without moving their heads to watch me” (216). Even after the gunshots, when the corpses of Albertina and her father lie upon the laboratory floor, “none of [the love slaves] seemed to observe this spectacle for they still seemed half-blinded” (217). Their intensely narrow gaze inflicts a single-minded stasis, which excludes the rest of the world in order to focus solely upon the sexual partner.

The ceaseless oscillation of the look of love, involved as it is in a problematic attempt to receive acknowledgement from the object of one's desires, risks destroying the possibility of recognition beyond a narrow vista. This is further illustrated by the protagonist's experiences with the figure of the Count. Desiderio notes that this extraordinary character "had a passionate conviction he was the only significant personage in the world" (Carter 123), and that "It was impossible to converse with him for he had no interest in anyone but himself and he offered his companion only a series of monologues" (124). The Count is interested only in creating a situation where he can secure recognition for himself without having to acknowledge the other; his self-regarding nature is to some extent an attempt to enact an impossibly narrow recognition which does not even move beyond the self.

This situation leads to the existence of the Chief – a fantastical self-other who physically embodies the Count's self-involved desires. However, even after the introduction of an ostensibly autonomous self-consciousness which the Count feels able to deem significant, his quest for recognition from this ideal other maintains an excessive narrowness which recalls the image of the vista. This is evidenced by one particular encounter between Desiderio and the Count, who, taken up with his own identity and that of the Chief, declares "I am alone. I and my shadow fill the universe" (148). In the textual world of actualised desires, this destructive self-absorption almost obliterates the novel's protagonist and his love-object. Desiderio remarks that "I felt myself instantly negated. To my horror, I discovered I immediately grew thinner and less solid" (148). In only acknowledging the existence of one other discrete self-consciousness, the Count almost condemns Desiderio and Albertina to "that cold night of non-being" (148).

The bond between the self and the desired other is shown to be passionate and all-consuming, but if the perpetual becoming of the process of recognition occurs only within the eternal vistas of exclusive attachments, then recognition fails to achieve any significance beyond this bond. It becomes devoid of wider meaning, and the myriad of others that one encounters in social relations fail to initiate any such quest to acknowledge and be acknowledged. If such a process is brought into being only within a monogamous sexual or romantic relationship, then it exists merely as a form of politically ineffectual stasis.

Conclusion: Autobiography, Ambiguity and Carter's Positive Thesis

Benjamin argues that "recognition begins with the other's confirming response, which tells us that we have created meaning, had an impact, revealed an intention" (33). This notion of provoking a particular desired effect and producing readable signs seems to position the self as a manner of artist or author. Benjamin's statement therefore suggests that Desiderio's narrative, as a self-aware act of self-documentation, might be related to the character's quest for acknowledgement. Throughout *The Infernal Desire Machines*, the Desiderio of the textual present is, as it were, watching the Desiderio of the narrative past. There is therefore a marked split between the narrator and the journeying figure whose adventures are recounted. Desiderio himself admits this divide, declaring "I was a great hero in my time though now I am an old man and no longer the 'I' of my own story" (Carter 14).

Desiderio, as he narrates his tale, is very much aware of himself as an individual leaving a legacy. He sees himself already as "a commemorative statue" (Carter 14), and he repeatedly mentions that the authorized version of his story can be found "in the history books" (208). However, the narrative that constitutes the novel is, to some extent, an attempt to dispute the accepted narrative which renders Desiderio a hero. The narrating protagonist is at work throughout the text subverting his reputation, and revealing facts which have thus-far been concealed from his public. For example, he divulges the manner in which he "killed the Doctor - that is, unintentionally" (217), and notes that his attack upon the laboratory technician lacked any element of "heroic struggle" (218). Desiderio suggests that the ignoble truth regarding his victory over the enemy will indicate to his reader that he does "not deserve to be a hero" (217). He further emphasizes that his reputation is unearned by presenting himself as apathetic and opportunistic:

I became one of the founders of the new constitution - largely from the negative propulsion of my own inertia for, once I was placed and honoured on my plinth, I was not the man to climb down again, saying: 'But I am the wrong man!' for I felt that, if what I had done had turned

out for the common good, I might as well reap what benefits I could from it. (220 - 221)

In light of this insistence upon filling in the fissures of history and foregrounding his inadequacies, Desiderio's narrative could be interpreted as functioning as an attempt at self-disclosure before the eyes of a future reader. Without his account, history would continue to position him as an active and independent hero. However, Desiderio feels that this would be an act of misrecognition, for in attributing to him the status of an autonomous self-consciousness, history would be offering him recognition based upon a skewed and partial understanding of his actions. His narrative is an attempt to rectify this situation, for in attempting to disclose the reality of his actions and experiences, Desiderio is working to enable a more complete understanding and a more satisfactory recognition.

The quest to obtain recognition which takes place during Desiderio's journey fails, prompting him to question whether "all the potential masters the world held for me were to be revealed as nothing but monsters or charlatans" (Carter 213), and his community has recreated him according to a myth of his heroism which he believes to be false. However, his narrative, displayed as it is for the eyes of a multiplicity of future others, enables the quest to continue. As Paul de Man has noted, certain theories regarding life-writing suggest that "the identity of autobiography is not only representational and cognitive but contractual" (174), and that the reader becomes "the policing power in charge of verifying the authenticity of the signature" (174). Desiderio might be forgiven, then, for turning to a reading public for recognition, for such theories place the reader in a position of "transcendental authority" (174), from which he or she can judge the author. The reader thus represents a potential master, and the hope of a recognising other to come.

However, any notion of a recognition that is induced by the full disclosure of the self is an illusion, for any such disclosure will always be imperfect and incomplete. The nebulous and fluid nature of the self means that there will necessarily be an excess which escapes any attempt at narration, and this is indeed a problem that Desiderio encounters. It is suggested that, in attempting to "unravel my life as if it were so much knitting and pick out from that tangle the single, original thread of my self" (Carter 11), he betrays the

nature of his experience. After all, he states that when he recalls his journey, events “seem to happen all at once, in a kind of fugue of experience” (13), not in the linear manner in which he recounts his tale. Narrative thus functions in the novel not as an expository act of transparent representation, but as an act of violence invested with sense-giving properties. It does not allow for the full and absolute revelation of the self which Desiderio appears to consider necessary in order to circumvent the threat of misrecognition.

Besides being unfeasible, such reliance upon an autobiographical text to disclose the ‘truth’ of one’s identity also disregards some of the possibilities inherent within the positioning of the self as a form of author. These possibilities in fact depend upon the failures of narrative and the problems surrounding sense-production which Desiderio’s attempt at self-revelation seeks to elide. Benjamin’s discussion of recognition views the other’s validating response to the self’s utterances as foundational to mutual acknowledgement. Recognition begins when meaningful communication with the other occurs, and the self enjoys the satisfaction of seeing its intentions understood. However, it is worth remembering that every utterance brings with it the risk of misunderstanding, for an excess of meaning and a multiplicity of possible interpretations is potentially present within any linguistic act. Indeed, the very fact that the process of acknowledgement is initiated by the palpable satisfaction of seeing the desired purpose of a linguistic act understood is testament to the perpetual danger that one will be misinterpreted.

The appearance of linguistic transparency which triggers affirmative mutual recognition for Benjamin is therefore precarious. The self may well operate as a manner of author, but because one can never fully contain the response of the reader, one’s texts might inadvertently signify in undesired ways, and this textual ambiguity perpetually disrupts intention. Just as Carter’s novel has been said to revel in “shamelessly exploiting sci-fi B-movie conventions for serious aesthetic and ideological purposes” and “brazenly appropriating literary images cherished by British culture” (Bonca 57), so too can identities be violated by a near-infinite range of unforeseen readings. I believe that it is in the failure to precisely limit the reading of a text/utterance/self that the possibility of satisfactory recognition might be detected. When one becomes aware of one’s inability to

control and exhaust signifying practices, when one realises the limits of authorship, difference is foregrounded.

The interpreting other, upon whom one depends for recognition, can thus no longer be positioned as a passive, inessential recipient of the self, or viewed merely as another version of the self. Nor can this other be held up as akin to the figure of the master, because, in this situation, he or she cannot reasonably seek to be the only essential party in the interaction. The other's role in interpreting and communicating within the act of reading or conversing relies upon an acceptance of, and receptivity to, the self who is the other. Both self and other are engaged in a reciprocal attempt at intersubjective interaction which acknowledges the volatility and risk inherent within this attempt. Once acknowledged, then, the uncertainty regarding the success of communication confronts the individual with the otherness of the other, and the conditions for recognition are in place.

That such acceptance of ambiguity is lacking from *The Infernal Desire Machines* is unsurprising for, as Linden Peach has noted, Carter's world of unconscious desires only "gives way, and free reign, to exploitation and domination" (110). It is enmeshed not in attempts to forge reciprocal connections away from the power dynamic of the Master/Slave dialectic, but in endeavours to achieve recognition from the object of desire without compromising self-certainty. The text is haunted by the unrealised possibility of mutual recognition as embodied by Albertina, the lost other, to whom the narrative is dedicated with "insatiable tears" (Carter 14). The novel shows us that a will to be recognized, combined with a disinterest in recognizing anything other than the self and an inability to look beyond one's love-object, leads to violence, frustration and dissatisfaction. Whether one seeks a master or seeks to be one, recognition is withheld. It is, I would argue, in the margins of the novel, in the unrepresented attempt to embrace ambiguity and accept one's inability to possess absolute knowledge and vision, that Carter's positive thesis can be found.

Notes

¹ I would like to thank Mark Currie for all his helpful suggestions, and Diarmuid Hester for his invaluable support and advice.

² The role of narcissism in the novel is closely related to the concerns of this essay, but I unfortunately do not have space to do justice to this issue here.

³ Cornel Bonca offers this definition of Carter's concept: "Nebulous Time means the chaos of time and space, where desire mingles with actuality and dreams swerve to nightmare in a flash; it's a sort of Lacanian Imaginary made flesh" (60).

⁴ It would be possible, and productive, to read Carter's novel alongside Lacanian ideas regarding the big Other and the mirror stage.

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