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Aubrey's Fragile Psyche and the Signal of the Real: A Lacanian Analysis of John William Polidori's "The Vampyre"

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"When men have suffered their imaginations to be long affected with any idea, it so wholly engrosses them as to shut out, by degrees, almost every other, and to break down. Any idea is sufficient for the purpose, as is evident from the infinite variety of causes which give rise to madness..."
—Edmund Burke

More often than not, the word "vampire" makes people think of Count Dracula; what most people do not realize, however, is that eighty-seven years before the world met Dracula there was another vampire stalking victims in fiction: Lord Ruthven in "The Vampyre" by Dr. John William Polidori.¹ Christopher Frayling remarks that "The Vampyre" is "the first story successfully to fuse the disparate elements of vampirism into a coherent literary genre" (108). Despite this fact, other authors famous for their vampire tales continue to overshadow Polidori, while "Polidori's style, an unusual combination (for the time) of clinical realism and weird events...has [also] been much neglected" (Frayling 108). Yet D. L. Macdonald contends that Polidori "merits more critical attention than he receive[s], which is almost none" (ix), to which I wholeheartedly agree. Despite the underwhelming attention given to "The Vampyre," it is my hope, and the aim of this essay, to bring the discussion of "The Vampyre" back to life by examining the protagonist, Aubrey, and providing a new answer to a very important question: Why does Aubrey keep his oath of silence to the vampire instead of saving the lives of those around him?

Allow me to provide a brief plot summary for this little-known narrative before venturing into my argument. Aubrey, being an orphan, treks across Europe with an

¹ Quotes from the text used throughout this essay are from Christopher Frayling's 1992 book *Vampires: Lord Byron to Count Dracula*.

unknown nobleman, Lord Ruthven. Initially seeing Lord Ruthven as the “hero of a romance,” Aubrey begins to realize the error of his judgment as whispers of a vampire begin to circulate. Aubrey begins to watch his traveling companion closely, soon uncovering the truth that Lord Ruthven is a vampire, and this revelation will ultimately lead to the demise of Aubrey and the women he loves—his sister, Miss Aubrey, and his love interest, Ianthe. Most read “The Vampyre” as a story about an aristocratic vampire who brings bad luck through apparent acts of charity and feeds on the blood of innocent young women to prolong his existence, all the while using a naïve young man as a pawn in a twisted hunt for prey; however, I read “The Vampyre” as a story that tells much more than one young man’s futile attempt to save his sister—the only other child surviving their deceased mother and father—from death. Examining the text through a lens provided by the work of Jacques Lacan, I will delve into Aubrey’s psyche in order to show how Polidori’s story is an allegory about the constant failure of language to truly express our innermost thoughts and desires. As I will argue, the story’s vampire, Lord Ruthven, is at once a signal² of the Lacanian Real and a mock paternal figure in Aubrey’s Oedipal triangle. Aubrey’s inability to replace his sister as a maternal figure in the triangle allows this uncanny being to block Aubrey from transitioning into the Symbolic order. Because Aubrey cannot cross into the Symbolic properly, he is unable to break his oath of silence, an inability that leads to Miss Aubrey’s death, the rupture of Aubrey’s psyche, and the victory of Lord Ruthven.

² A signal is simply a sign.

THE HISTORY OF “THE VAMPYRE”

The influences of Polidori’s story can be seen in almost every vampire tale that was published after its original publication in 1819, yet many people have never heard of Polidori or “The Vampyre” since succeeding vampire texts continue to eclipse it. During the iconic “Year without Summer” in 1816, Polidori was the traveling physician of Lord Byron, both of whom spent time with Claire Clairmont, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (née Godwin) at Lake Geneva in Switzerland. Polidori finished his medical degree at the young age of nineteen, making him too young to receive a medical license for practice in London, and was hired by Lord Byron the next year. Despite his medical training, Polidori had “literary ambitions,” and one would assume that a trip with “the famous poet of the age” would be a dream come true—it was anything but (Macdonald and Sherf 35-6). The summer Polidori spent with Lord Byron is called “The Year without Summer” due to its odd weather; it was exceptionally rainy and without much else to do the group passed the time reading *Fantasmagoriana*, a collection of German ghost stories. One night Byron suggested that “the members of the group write ghost stories of their own” (Macdonald and Sherf 11), which was when Byron began his incomplete story “Fragment of a Novel,” Polidori wrote “Ernestus Berchtold; or The Modern Œdipus”; and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* came to life, later being published in 1818.

Polidori’s nephew, William Michael Rossetti, elucidates the timeline of events leading up to the publication of “The Vampyre.” Rossetti clarifies that “Polidori’s own statement [in his diary] is that the tale which he first began was the one published under the title *Ernestus Berchtold*...Afterwards he took up the notion of a vampyre” (129). At

that point, Polidori wrote his first version of “The Vampyre,” leaving the original manuscript with the Countess of Breuss, who encouraged Polidori to create his vampire tale after a conversation where he recounted to her how he believed that the subject of Byron’s unfinished tale was to be about vampires, and she wondered if “anything could be made of such a theme” (Rossetti 12). Polidori forgot all about leaving it with the Countess, but soon his manuscript would drastically change his short life. A woman obtained the manuscript (Rossetti, believes that the woman was Madame Gatelier due to the ways Polidori mentioned her in his diary) and forwarded it to publisher Henry Colburn, telling him “that certain tales were ‘undertaken by Lord B[yron], the physician [Polidori], and Miss M.W. Godwin’” (Rossetti 12). Misinterpreting this information, Colburn printed “The Vampyre” in the April 1819 edition of *The New Monthly Magazine*, attributing the story to Byron (Rossetti 13). Polidori fought to be recognized as the author of “The Vampyre,” which finally happened once Byron published his “Fragment of a Novel.” Polidori seemed distraught at his “imperfect and unfinished” tale’s having been published prematurely (Rossetti 15-6), but the story was an instant success. Within the first year, “it went through seven English editions,” and by the next year “plays based on it were running in London and Paris” (Macdonald and Sherf 5-6). Even though “The Vampyre” is now finally printed with the correct author, other authors famous for their vampire tales continue to overshadow Polidori, and the fact remains that he has all but been forgotten despite his tale’s having much more to offer than simply being the shadow of a fragment of a story written by Lord Byron.

CRITICISM OF “THE VAMPYRE”

Polidori may not have received the attention he deserves, but that does not mean that criticism of the narrative does not exist. The most widely accepted criticism to date involves Polidori’s relationship with Lord Byron, a focus that overshadows Polidori’s creativity as an author. Patricia Skarda argues: “Polidori fashioned a version of a vampire tale more remarkable for its echoes than for its originality. His story of the vampire Lord Ruthven unquestionably draws on Byron’s characterization of Childe Harold...and on the tropes and imagery in Byron’s oriental tales, especially *The Giaour* (1813)” (250).

Likewise, Simon Bainbridge remarks that Polidori “transformed the image of the legendary bloodsucking predator by associating it with the glamorous, aristocratic and mysterious figure of Lord Byron,” presenting “Ruthven’s irresistibility as a product of his mastery of the rhetoric of Byronic poetics” (21). D.L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf echo these sentiments in their introduction to *The Vampyre and Ernestus Berchtold; or, The Modern Oedipus*, stating that “there are obvious parallels between Lord Strongmore’s [Ruthven’s] domination of Aubrey and Lord Byron’s domination of Polidori” (17).³ Unfortunately, Polidori’s relationship with Lord Byron rarely escapes mention regardless of the school of criticism. Mair Rigby observes that “academically speaking it [“The Vampyre”] has been largely ignored until, in recent years, the queerer aspects of its subtextual themes have attracted attention” (2), recent in this context still being almost a decade ago.⁴ Rigby argues that Polidori’s Lord Ruthven and Byron’s

³ Lord Strongmore is the name Polidori uses for Lord Ruthven in later editions of “The Vampyre.”

⁴ Queer theory applied to “The Vampyre” is based primarily on the queer studies of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the most popular book of reference being *Between Men*.

Augustus Darvell are both “figures who ‘pass,’ masquerading as normal men,” despite being closeted homosexuals (4). Rigby also claims:

Because critical responses to *The Vampyre* [sic] and the “Fragment” have been so rooted in biographical speculation concerning Polidori and Byron, there has been an assumption that these narratives also reflect, and by implication stand as codes for, that relationship. As a homosocial bond which developed into tense hostility, the homoerotic and homophobic possibilities of their relationship have often been implicitly dismissed, much like the doctor himself, from the poet’s presence. (12)

Even Anne Stiles, Stanley Finger, and John Bulevich, whose criticism examines the influence of Polidori’s medical dissertation on somnambulism in “The Vampyre,” remark how “the events following Polidori’s graduation [from medical school at the age of nineteen], including his travels with Lord Byron and the publication scandal surrounding *The Vampyre* [sic], have received more critical attention than any other aspect of the author’s career” (797). Sadly, both in life and in death, Polidori cannot rid himself of Byron.

One critic, however, offers a different insight into Byron’s influence on Polidori; Ken Gelder contends that “although Polidori certainly did draw on Byron’s fragment as well as on an earlier vampire poem by Byron, ‘The Giaour’ [sic] (1813), he used this material creatively (even ironically) rather than slavishly” (26). Regardless of Gelder’s insight, the understanding of Polidori’s merit remains insufficient. The biggest problem with the existing criticism of “The Vampyre” is how most critics consult the various influences in Polidori’s life instead of examining the text itself. I cannot and will not refute that Byron was a major influence for Polidori, and my intent is not to undermine or

discredit existing scholarship on influence since all literature is born from the inspiration of other authors' writings. I do and will contend, however, that investigation of influences is limiting and speculative.

PSYCHOANALYTICAL APPROACH TO THE GOTHIC/VAMPIRES

"The Vampyre," while not being the first publication to include vampires, was the first publication of *prose* to include vampires, and whether or not it was a conscious decision for Polidori to turn the vampire into a Byronic hero, he definitely did not anticipate exactly to what extent his vampire would shape literary and pop culture history or he may not have committed suicide in August 1821. As the first piece of published fiction to include vampires, "The Vampyre" is often labeled as Gothic literature. The first Gothic novel was published in 1764⁵ and has since morphed into various subgenres of literature (e.g. horror, sci-fi, pulp, Southern). Vampires mainly belong to the Gothic horror subgenre, and their appearances have exploded in such areas as film and television, giving birth to pop-culture icons such as Nosferatu (1922), Barnabas Collins (1966-71; 2012), Blade (1998-2004), and the Cullens (2008-12). Before the Gothic, however, vampires existed for centuries in various myths and legends throughout many countries all over the world.⁶ Nick Groom observes how "the [nineteenth] century's obsession with vampires emerges from the Gothicization of Science," further stating that "despite its profound historical basis, the Gothic has always been a state-of-the-art movement" and Gothic writers, such as Polidori, drew inspiration from "the latest scientific developments in anatomy, the circulation of blood, and infection, as well as... psychology" (92; 122). As part of this movement, Polidori was innovative with his style of writing, using his

⁵ Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*.

⁶ For further inquiry into the history of vampire mythology, see Melton.

knowledge of science to transform the vampire from the mythological undead into an alluringly modern aristocrat.

It is unknown to what extent, if any, Polidori's knowledge included psychology, but he did know quite a bit about the mind. Part of his medical thesis on somnambulism and oneirodynia (nightmares), particularly the passage about somnambulistic memory, "evokes the image of two minds, one working during sleep and the other during wakefulness, each unaware of the other" (Stiles et al. 795). According to Stiles, "Polidori's thesis thus foreshadows the interest in dual personalities that would surface shortly thereafter in both medical and literary circles" (795). Interestingly, the subject of dual personalities is one example in a long list of that which is "uncanny." Given that the Gothic has a long history involving the psychoanalytical concept of the uncanny, it is unsurprising that Polidori's Gothic tale speaks to psychoanalytic theory through a host of themes. It is known that "Freud theorized the uncanny on the basis of actual Gothic literature (albeit German)" (Hogle 171).⁷ Additionally, Jerrold Hogle states that the Gothic

provides the best-known examples of those strange and ghostly figures that Freud saw as examples of "the Uncanny" (or *Unheimlich*) in his 1919 essay of that name. For him what is quintessentially "uncanny"...is the deeply and internally familiar (the most infantile of our desires or fears) as it reappears to us in seemingly external, repellant, and *unfamiliar* forms...The uncanny, he [Freud] suggests, "is that class of the terrifying which leads us back to something long

⁷ Freud's concept of the uncanny is based on German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch's 1906 essay, *On the Psychology of the Uncanny*. The text to which Hogle refers is E.T.A. Hoffman's German Romantic Gothic tale "Der Sandmann," or "The Sandman."

known to us, once very familiar”); it designates the peculiar quality of something “that ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light.” (6; 171)

Thus, a psychoanalytical concept born out of the Gothic easily applies to Gothic texts, specifically that of Polidori’s “The Vampyre” due to its use of the theme of the uncanny.⁸ After Freud, French psychoanalyst and philosopher Jacques Lacan links the uncanny with anxiety in his 1962-3 seminar *Anxiety*.⁹ In fact, the uncanny as described by Freud sounds similar to Lacan’s explanation of the Real, a concept I will address below. The idea of the uncanny connects to Lacan’s concept of the Real because a signal of the Real in a subject’s¹⁰ life causes a once stable psyche to become unstable due to the entrance of the “uncanny,” or something strangely and disturbingly familiar. The subject’s recognition that something is amiss—a terrifying type of déjà vu that the subject feels when encountering a weird familiarity that cannot be put into words—causes anxiety, all of which I will explore with “The Vampyre” in following sections.

LACAN’S ORDERS OF THE PSYCHE

“The Vampyre” contains multiple Lacanian themes, specifically the uncanny being of the vampire and the concept of the Real, as well as anxiety, trauma, fantasy, desire, and language.¹¹ Lacan is known for his reworking of Sigmund Freud’s theories on the unconscious,¹² theories which led to the American practice of ego-psychology.¹³ For

⁸ Interestingly, both of these texts were written in 1816, with Hoffman’s being published in 1817 and Polidori’s in 1819.

⁹ Ian Parker notes that, while many refer to Lacan as such, he “was not a psychologist,” stating that “Lacan’s hostility to psychology is often underplayed in critical writing” (38).

¹⁰ In psychology, the term “subject” always references a human being.

¹¹ While scholars do apply Lacan’s theories to other vampire stories, some argue that Lacanian theory, specifically the concept of the Real, does not apply to the entirety of “The Vampyre,” an argument with which I disagree below.

¹² For further inquiry into the id, the ego, and the superego, see Freud’s *The Ego and the Id*.

¹³ For more information on the development of American ego-psychology, see Wallerstein.

Freud, a subject's ego—the central part of the mind that mediates between the subject and his/her surroundings—struggles with repressed thoughts and desires. Marcus Pound asserts that when Lacan began to challenge Freud, France had “a sort of crucible avant-garde surrealist thinking; we had structuralism, we had various forms of Philosophy and phenomenology...and we have all these streams feeding in. We have this important emphasis on language, and what Lacan does is very simple. He basically says ‘everything Freud said was true, but really he was talking about language’” (qtd. in St. John's Nottingham).¹⁴ For Lacan, “the unconscious is neither the primordial nor the instinctual, and what it knows of the elemental is no more than the elements of the signifier” (Lacan, *Écrits* 434).¹⁵ In other words, Lacan argues that Freud's ideas of the unconscious are less about, say, the young boy's biological desires to replace his father and possess his mother than about how humans acquire language and how the acquisition of language affects our interior lives. Thus, according to Lacan, we can better understand what Freud calls the unconscious by interpreting the acquisition and usage of language in the subject.

Lacan dedicates the majority of his seminar work to establishing a relationship between the three orders (registers) of the human psyche—the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real—which came to fruition with his reworking of Freud's id (ideal ego), ego (Ego-Ideal), and superego. Freud's id becomes Lacan's Imaginary, “the ‘small other,’ the idealized mirror-image of my ego”; Freud's Ego-Ideal becomes Lacan's Symbolic, “the

¹⁴ With this statement Lacan challenges the practice of ego psychology, which believes “psychoanalysis should be, on the practice of the ego, using and building its defenses against all these kinds of licentious desires” (qtd. in St. John's Nottingham).

¹⁵ Whereas a signal is a sign, a sign is the whole representation of a signifier and the signified. A signifier is the form which the sign takes, the signified is the concept that the sign represents, and the relationship between the two is often referred to as signification. For further inquiry into the concept on signs and semiotics, see Saussure.

point of my identification [being] the point in the big Other from which I observe (and judge) myself”; Freud’s superego becomes Lacan’s Real, “the cruel and insatiable agency that bombards me with impossible demands and that mocks my botched attempts to meet them” (Žižek, *How* 80). The Real is the most complicated of Lacan’s three orders. It resides inside our psyche as that which is impossible; its presence is traumatic and threatens our understanding of reality; it is the infinite and the absolute; most important, it resides outside of language and resists symbolization. In other words, the Real can be likened to the black hole of our psyche, knowledge about ourselves that we give up in order to exist (St. John’s Nottingham), something that evades the symbolization of language yet is recognizable when it attempts to infiltrate a subject’s life due to its uncanny, or strangely familiar, quality. Note that while Lacan’s structure of the psyche develops over the years, the fundamental ideas remain constant and “the majority of Lacanian concepts are defined in connection with all three registers” (Johnston 2.1).

In his seminar *R.S.I.*, Lacan presents a mathematical relationship between the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary using a Borromean Knot (e.g. see Fig. 1). Lacan uses this knot, which he takes from topology, as a way to explain the differences between a properly functioning psyche and an improperly functioning psyche—madness—which I will discuss more at the end of this section and later when discussing Aubrey’s mental state. The Borromean Knot illustrates the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary as heterogeneous orders that nonetheless tie together to create a continuous chain, or a properly functioning human psyche. Conversely, psychosis is the result of the Borromean Knot’s unraveling. As this knot suggests, despite the heterogeneous quality of these orders, describing each order is only possible in relation to description of the other orders.

After treating these orders in more detail, I will explain their relation to the Oedipal social triangle, which will be key to an understanding of Aubrey's psychic collapse.

The order of the Imaginary corresponds with Lacan's mirror stage,¹⁶ the second stage in Lacan's stages of psychosexual development,¹⁷ usually beginning from six to eighteen months old, that "marks the movement of the subject from primal need to what Lacan terms 'demand'" (Felluga, "Lacan II").¹⁸ This correspondence makes the Imaginary a fundamentally narcissistic stage, when the subject creates an ideal image of himself and his object of desire—a fantasy—once he breaks away from the mother. An important element of the Imaginary order is what Lacan calls *l'objet petit a*, with the 'a' serving as an abbreviation for *autre* (other) in Lacan's earlier presentations on the mirror stage. The 'a' refers "to the little-o-other as the Imaginary ego" or the "me" I see in the mirror that I fantasize as being the real me, but is not really me (Johnston 2.4.3). In his later seminars, Lacan presents the other 'a,' various alter-egos of how the subject views himself¹⁹ or objects of substitution for the subject's fundamental fantasy, a fantasy which remains unconscious to the subject (Johnston 2.4.3). This object 'a,' which sets desire in motion, "is in fact simply the presence of a hollow, a void, which can be occupied...by any object, and whose agency we know only in the form of the lost object, the *petit a*" (*The Four* 180). Lacan does not coincidentally label this order "imaginary" since it exists

¹⁶ Dino Felluga explains how this stage is central to our development because "the 'mirror stage' entails a 'libidinal dynamism' (*Écrits* 2) caused by the young child's identification with his own mirror image (what Lacan terms the 'Ideal-I' or 'ideal ego'). See "Modules on Lacan" for more information.

¹⁷ For further inquiry into Lacan's ideas on psychosexual development, see *Écrits*.

¹⁸ In this sense, "need" is an infant's biological need to survive. "Demand" serves a double function: first, it is the articulation of this need, or an infant screaming to be fed. Once language is acquired, demand becomes the demand for love.

¹⁹ I will be using masculine pronouns throughout this essay because Aubrey, a man, is the subject of "The Vampyre."

as necessary illusions, or fictional images, for the subject. The Imaginary does not cease once we transition away from the mirror stage.

Whereas the Imaginary is about images and identity, the Symbolic is about language and desire, but there is much more to the order of the Symbolic than the acquisition of language. The Symbolic is an experience of coexistence with other humans, also known as “the big Other.” Adrian Johnston explains the relation between the big Other and the Symbolic:

The capital-O Other refers to two additional types of otherness corresponding to the registers of the Symbolic and the Real. The first type of Other is Lacan's “big Other” qua [S]ymbolic order, namely, the overarching “objective spirit” of trans-individual socio-linguistic structures configuring the fields of inter-subjective interactions. Relatedly, the Symbolic big Other also can refer to (often fantasmatic/fictional) ideas of anonymous authoritative power and/or knowledge (whether that of God, Nature, History, Society, State, Party, Science...). (2.3)

A subject enters the Symbolic order once he is old enough to recognize the existence of others aside from himself. Johnston remarks how the Symbolic is what makes subjects what they are “in and through the mediation of the socio-linguistic arrangements” since “the unconscious is structured like language” (2.1.2). Furthermore, the Symbolic exists because subjects accept the laws and restrictions that control the rules of communication and desire; these laws and restrictions are what Lacan calls “the Name-of-the-Father,”²⁰

²⁰ Dino Felluga quotes Lacan's explanation of the Name-of-the-Father: “‘It is in the name of the father that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law’ (*Écrits* 67). Through recognition of the Name-of-the-Father, you are able to enter into a community of others. The symbolic, through language, is ‘the pact which links... subjects

or the fundamental signifier which allows proper signification throughout life.

Acceptance of the Name-of-the-Father by the subject causes the Symbolic to remain in constant tension with the Real because the Real always resists symbolization (Felluga, “Lacan II”).

Taken together, the Symbolic and the Imaginary interact throughout a subject’s life and, even after the acquisition of language, the Imaginary continues to influence the subject. Glyn Daly explains:

What we call “reality” is articulated through signification (the symbolic) and the characteristic patterning of images (the imaginary)... [B]oth the symbolic and the imaginary function within the order of signification... [W]hile the symbolic is in principle open-ended, the imaginary seeks to domesticate this open-endedness through the imposition of a fantasmatic landscape that is peculiar to each individual. In other words, the imaginary arrests the symbolic around certain fundamental fantasies.... (“Slavoj Žižek: A Primer”)

Once we acquire language, or transition into the Symbolic order, the Imaginary is what allows us to create images in our minds when words are spoken to us. Some people, however, tend to linger longer in the Imaginary than they should, the effects of which can be seen with the character of Aubrey in the next section.

The order of the Real is the most abstract concept of the psyche. Lacan explains that the Real is what gets expelled from meaning, and this aversion to meaning makes the Real “impossible” (Lacan, *R.S.I.* 107). This impossibility causes the Real to exist as that which is “foreign to Imaginary-Symbolic reality” (Johnston 2.1.3). Whereas the

together in one action. The human action par excellence is originally founded on the existence of the world of the symbol, namely on laws and contracts’ (*Freud’s Papers* 230)” (“Lacan II”).

Symbolic and Imaginary construct what we know as reality, Daly explains: “the Real, by contrast, does not belong to the...order of signification but is precisely that which negates the letter, that which cannot be incorporated within such an order. The Real persists as an eternal dimension of lack and every symbolic-imaginary construction exists as a certain historical answer to that basic lack.”²¹ The Real is an uncanny reality that remains unknown to the subject because it exists as “whatever is beyond, behind, or beneath phenomenal appearances accessible to the direct experiences of first-person awareness” (Johnston 2.1.3). It is a continuous truth of both the self and being that the subject gives up knowing in order to exist and survive in reality, exerting its influence over the subject’s entire life, much like the Imaginary. Theoretical analysis of the Real, for Lacan, serves as a way to pinpoint “the exact limits of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and their overlappings” (Johnston 2.1.3). Most people have heard the expression that words fail us since we so often find it impossible to express what we truly mean; the meaning that escapes signification is deposited in the order of the Real—hence, the impossibility of the Real. The Imaginary seeks to maintain the order of the Real, but the Real is beyond all phantasmic ordering, so fantasies created in the Imaginary will continually fail in the Real because they cannot be put into any kind of logical signified order. Furthermore, that which is deposited into the Real should never be withdrawn, so desire in the Symbolic allows the subject to avoid the Real, which is important because coming into contact with the Real is traumatic for the subject.

Lacan uses the Borromean Knot during his seminars as a visual aid with which he explains how the heterogeneous orders interact because the Real is such an abstract and

²¹ Lack (*manqué*) refers to both a lack in being and the lack of an object. The three types of lack, according to Lacan, are castration, frustration, and privation (Evans 98-9).

inarticulable concept. Lacan explains how the Borromean Knot is “a writing that supports a [R]eal” (*R.S.I.* 21). He adds, “This already, just by itself, designates that not only can the Real be supported by a writing but that there is no other tangible idea of the [R]eal” (21). Note here that writing does not constitute the Real, but it does support the Real, which shows why the Real “is tricky to encapsulate” because it “evades being pinned down through succinct definitions” (Johnston 2.1.3). As I said, if the subject’s psyche breaks one of the three chains of the Borromean Knot, the other two knots are freed, resulting in psychosis, which is what we see happen to Aubrey when his Symbolic order unravels, freeing the Imaginary and the Real.

Given that the Symbolic order is the ultimate goal for a subject who wishes to achieve a properly functioning psyche, Lacan develops his own version of Freud’s Oedipus complex. Dylan Evans defines Freud’s Oedipus complex as “an unconscious set of loving and hostile desires which the subject experiences in relation to its parents; the subject desires one parent, and thus enters into rivalry with the other parent. In the ‘positive’ form of the Oedipus complex, the desired parent is the parent of the opposite sex to the subject, and the parent of the same sex is the rival” (130). We cannot apply Freud’s Oedipus complex directly to “The Vampyre” because Aubrey’s parents are dead and his appointed guardians remain uninterested in filling these gaps until it is too late. Lacan’s version of the Oedipal triangle, however, serves as a prime illustration of Aubrey’s messy ordeal. Being mindful to avoid the Freudian idea of familial issues, Lacan argues that this complex is really about the transition, often involving nonfamilial persons, from the Imaginary order into the Symbolic order (e.g. see Fig. 2). In other words, a subject’s ability to transfer from the Imaginary into the Symbolic typically

happens with influence from outside of the subject's family—recall how society works inside the Symbolic order. Lacan's Oedipal triangle "stages the drama of the child's laborious struggles to situate him/her-self *vis-à-vis* all three register-theoretic dimensions of Otherness" (Johnston 2.3). Adrian Johnston explains that "the maternal and paternal Oedipal personas are psychical-subjective positions, namely, socio-cultural (i.e., non-natural, non-biological) roles that potentially can be played by any number of possible personas of various sexes/genders" (2.3). The maternal figure exists as a Real Other for the subject, "an obscure omnipotent presence who is the source of all-important love" (Johnston 2.3). The Oedipal father, on the other hand, exists as an Other with both Symbolic and Real faces. Typically, the father persona offers a balance to this maternal love in the subject's psyche by way of the Name-of-the-Father in the Symbolic order. At the level of the Real, however, the father is "a fantasy-construct generated in and by the Oedipal complex, with the child imagining an obscene, dark...underbelly behind the Symbolic façade of paternal authority and its rules" (Johnston 2.3). Note that this "Real father" is a "fantasy-construct," or a product of the Imaginary since the Imaginary is responsible for arresting the Symbolic around fundamental fantasies. As we will see, Aubrey suffers from his inability to transition into the Symbolic order, specifically because, within his Oedipal triangle, he refuses to replace Miss Aubrey in the maternal role, while allowing the "Real father"—Lord Ruthven—to block him from accepting the "Symbolic father"—the Name-of-the-Father.

UNDERSTANDING AUBREY'S PSYCHE

"The Vampyre" revolves around Aubrey's internal failure to adequately position himself inside the big Other of the Symbolic order, but in order to fully understand this internal

failure we must dissect Aubrey's psyche. Aubrey's wealthy parents die when Aubrey is a young child, leaving him and his only sister, Miss Aubrey, under the guardianship of people who only care about the great wealth that comes with the children (109). We know that the guardians have very little concern for the children's well-being, and can safely assume that the siblings rely heavily on each other for emotional support as they get older. At this point, Aubrey is unaware of the inherent desire to save his sister from the same fate as their parents. This desire is never explicitly written in the text, but exists as a fantasy in the Real. While the Imaginary typically creates fantasies for the subject, there are fantasies that are deposited into the Real since the Real encapsulates certain parts of ourselves that escape our direct knowledge. Žižek explains how this "form of the fantasy [is] the Lacanian Real: a point that never took place 'in the (symbolic) reality.' That has never been inscribed in the symbolic texture, but that must nonetheless be presupposed as a kind of 'missing link' guaranteeing the consistency of our symbolic reality" (*Looking Awry* 120). In other words, Aubrey never explicitly states that he wants to save his sister from the hands of death, but this fantasy is implicit throughout the narration.

The narrator informs us that as a child Aubrey cultivates his imagination more than his judgment with a "high romantic feeling of honour and candour...[in which] the dreams of poets were the realities of life" (109). Upon Aubrey's first attempt at entering "into the gay circles" (109)—the big Other of the Symbolic order—he soon realizes that there is "no foundation in real life" for such imagination and romantic thoughts, until he meets Lord Ruthven. Aubrey does not yet know that Lord Ruthven is a vampire, but the vampire, in the words of Žižek, "inhabits the intersection of the imaginary and the Real"

(*How* 64).²² At the point where we first meet Aubrey, he straddles the line between the Symbolic and the Imaginary. Aubrey is able to move, however uncertainly, within society. Obviously he knows how to communicate with others with words, but the Imaginary order remains a strong influence on him, which we can attribute to the early and traumatic separation between him and his parents. Recalling how the Imaginary is particular to each individual, Aubrey's attachment to his solitary hours isolates him from others, thus excluding him from the Symbolic. The narrator informs us how Aubrey "was attached to the romance of his solitary hours." Just as Aubrey is "about to relinquish his dreams [or accept the Name-of-the-Father]...the extraordinary being [Lord Ruthven]...crossed him [Aubrey] in his career" (109-10). At first Aubrey watches Lord Ruthven, seeing "the character of a man entirely absorbed in himself, who gave few other signs of his observation of external objects" (110). Aubrey's imagination allows him to see a successful person who remains within the realm of his Imaginary order. This is when Aubrey allows "his imagination to picture every thing [sic] that flattered its propensity to extravagant ideas" (110). Instead of seeing Lord Ruthven for who he truly is, Aubrey "soon formed this object into the hero of a romance" (110). In other words, upon their initial meeting Lord Ruthven seemingly possesses the fantastical attributes that Aubrey was about to relinquish in himself despite secretly desiring to reside inside "the dreams of poets." Unfortunately for Aubrey, this chance meeting inhibits Aubrey from ever fully functioning adequately within the Symbolic order. His desire to know this "extraordinary being" will cost Aubrey everything.

²² Note that in this passage Žižek is describing the lamella, not the vampire. I will connect the vampire and the lamella in the next section.

Aubrey wants to keep a hold on “the dreams of poets” so badly that he allows himself to construct a fantasy around Lord Ruthven that is not the reality of the situation. One explanation for this desire of Lord Ruthven is briefly mentioned by Macdonald and Sherf when they state that “just as Frankenstein’s monster is his creator’s double—his own vampire—so Strongmore [Ruthven] may be Aubrey’s double; there may be a terrible appropriateness in his preying on the women Aubrey loves” (19). This observation makes sense of the fact that Aubrey meets Lord Ruthven while Aubrey still resides, in part, in the Imaginary order. Recalling how the Imaginary is a “narcissistic existence when the subject creates an ideal image of himself and his object of desire”:

The mirror stage [which] corresponds to [the Imaginary] demand in so far as the child misrecognizes in its mirror image a stable, coherent, whole self, which, however, does not correspond to the real child (and is, therefore, impossible to realize). The image is a fantasy, one that the child sets up in order to compensate for its sense of lack or loss, what Lacan terms an "Ideal-I" or "ideal ego." That fantasy image of oneself can be filled in by others who [sic] we may want to emulate in our adult lives (role models, et cetera), anyone that we set up as a mirror for ourselves in what is, ultimately, a narcissistic relationship. (Felluga, “Lacan II”)²³

In other words, once Aubrey enters the mirror stage as a child he creates a fantasy of the type of person he believes himself to be. We can assume by the description of the

²³According to Dino Felluga, “Lacan’s ‘ideal ego’ is the ideal of perfection that the ego strives to emulate; it first affected the subject when he saw himself in a mirror during the mirror stage... Seeing that image of oneself established a discord between the idealizing image in the mirror (bounded, whole, complete) and the chaotic reality of the one’s body...thus setting up the logic of the imaginary’s fantasy construction that would dominate the subject’s psychic life ever after” (“Terms”).

guardians that Aubrey lacks a proper role model while growing up after his parents die (109), which explains Aubrey's immediate attachment to a stranger—Lord Ruthven—who seems to embody all that Aubrey wishes himself to be. Note that while “The Vampyre” does not explicitly state how old Aubrey is when his parents die, we do know that “he was yet in childhood” (109). His sister, Miss Aubrey, is barely eighteen years old (121) when Aubrey returns from his trip with Lord Ruthven, meaning Aubrey is at least nineteen years old. Additionally, when Aubrey first meets Lord Ruthven he is “only just emerging from childhood (characterized by an interest in Gothic fantasy) into adulthood (characterized by an interest in marriage)” (Macdonald and Sherf 17-8). Aubrey's age is significant because Lacan places the mirror stage “from the age of six months on” and the “moment at which the mirror stage comes to an end inaugurates...the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* [subject] to socially elaborated situations [the big Other],” situations in which Aubrey never fully participates (Lacan, *Écrits* 75-79). As will soon be apparent, once Aubrey sees through the fantasy he has constructed and realizes the truth about Lord Ruthven, this being who initially seems to be Aubrey's perfect narcissistic counterpart but is actually a signal of the Real, Aubrey's psyche begins to unravel.

LORD RUTHVEN, VAMPIRES, AND THE REAL

As stated earlier, the entrance of the uncanny in a subject's life causes anxiety, anxiety being a common symptom of mental disorders in psychiatry. Vampires are uncanny beings and Lord Ruthven, specifically, causes Aubrey so much anxiety that Aubrey's psyche breaks down. In this sense, Lord Ruthven becomes a signal of the Real, a “terrifying anxiety-provoking image...the essential object which isn't an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail.” This

is what Lacan calls “the object of anxiety *par excellence*,” the effects of which I will discuss in the next section (Lacan, *The Ego* 164). Even so, the Real itself “should not be thought of as some kind of external entity...[but] is rather strictly an internal point of failure, an inherent limit” (Daly). With this in mind, I interpret Lord Ruthven as a signal of the Real for Aubrey.

Not all critics agree that Lacan can or should be applied to “The Vampyre.” One such critic is Ken Gelder, who argues that Lacanian schemes²⁴ are “more applicable to later Victorian vampire fiction than to Romantic vampire narratives such as Polidori’s ‘The Vampyre.’” Seeing as “Aubrey has no one to consult with about vampires..., [i]ndeed, Polidori’s story is about the *inability* to testify to the vampire,” Gelder claims that there is no available “bureaucracy of paternal figures” through which the vampire can be diagnosed and managed (50). Gelder’s assertion, however, falls flat, since Aubrey is presented with paternal figures while in Greece as “Ianthe cited to him the names of old men, who had at last detected one [vampire] living among themselves, after several of their near relatives and children had been found marked with the stamp of the fiend’s appetite” (114). With the vampire existing as a signal of the Real, Aubrey misses an opportunity to “erect a defense against the Real” when he does not diagnose and manage the vampire in response to the Greek paternal figures (Gelder 49). Ianthe attempts numerous times to warn Aubrey about the existence of the vampire, but Aubrey refuses to accept the myth as reality despite wondering “at the many coincidences which had all tended to excite a belief in the supernatural power of Lord Ruthven” (114-5). As we will see, Aubrey’s refusal to accept Ianthe’s Name-of-the Father excludes him from her

²⁴ Specifically the Lacanian schemes of Joan Copjec and Mladen Dolar.

community, leaving her vulnerable as innocent prey to the vampire. Moreover, Aubrey's later inability to testify against the vampire or defend against the Real is exactly what causes Aubrey's mental breakdown and ultimate death, especially since we know that once the Borromean Knot ruptures the other knots are freed, and this unraveling causes psychosis. In Aubrey's case, his refusal to discuss and manage the vampire, his inability to confront Lord Ruthven, and his oath never to speak of Lord Ruthven or his crimes for a year and a day after Lord Ruthven's death cause a rupture in the Symbolic of Aubrey's psyche, which allows the Real to infiltrate Aubrey's reality.

Despite Gelder's argument that Lacan is not applicable to Romantic vampire narratives, one man refutes both claims: Slavoj Žižek.²⁵ In *How to Read Lacan*, Žižek supports my assertion that Lord Ruthven is a signal of the Real. Žižek explains how the Real becomes apparent to the subject by way of three modes: the lamella, the scientific mode, and *l'objet petit a*. Lord Ruthven's existence and interactions with Aubrey embody each of these modes. The most obvious mode that can be attributed to Lord Ruthven is the lamella. Žižek explains:

A lamella is indivisible, indestructible, and immortal—more precisely, undead in the sense of horror fiction: not the sublime immortality of the spirit, but the obscene immortality of the 'living dead' which, after every annihilation, reconstitute themselves and shamble on. As Lacan puts it, the lamella does not exist, it *insists*: it is unreal, an entity of pure semblance, a multiplicity of appearances that seem to enfold into a central void – its status is purely phantasmatic. (62)

²⁵Gelder discusses Žižek's Lacanian schemes, but his argument predates *How to Read Lacan* by twelve years, and it is Žižek's later work on which I base my argument.

Being the grandfather vampire in fiction, Lord Ruthven is the indestructible and immortal undead, like many vampires who follow. The most notable example of Lord Ruthven's resemblance to the "living dead" is when he reconstitutes himself after being shot dead in front of Aubrey and reappears later, very much alive, at Miss Aubrey's party. Macdonald and Sherf might argue that because Lord Ruthven is a humanlike "conscious vampire" (13), he is more like the "sublime immortality of the spirit," but I disagree. The vampire in itself is only the semblance of a human: vampires look like humans, walk like humans, talk like humans, but they are not human. Lord Ruthven frequently disappears and reappears throughout the narrative in multiple appearances, insisting on existing in Aubrey's life. As Aubrey studies Lord Ruthven's interactions with others:

profuse in his liberality; the idle, the vagabond, and the beggar, received from [Lord Ruthven's] hand more than enough to relieve their immediate wants...all those upon whom it was bestowed, inevitably found that there was a curse upon it, for they were all either led to the scaffold, or sunk to the lowest and most abject misery...[Lord Ruthven] entered into all the spirit of the faro table...yet he took no money from the gambling table; but immediately lost, to the ruin of many. (111)

Although Lord Ruthven seems to be a charitable fellow, those who receive his "charity" are sucked into the central void of the Real as he leaves "formerly affluent youth, torn from the circle he adorned, cursing, in the solitude of a dungeon," and frantic fathers destitute and unable to feed their children (111). The more Aubrey witnesses Lord Ruthven's true character, the more he realizes that Lord Ruthven is not the "hero of a romance," but a fantasy created in his own mind. Therefore, this aspect of Lord Ruthven

embodies the lamella which “inhabits the intersection of the Imaginary and the Real: it stands for the Real in its most terrifying imaginary dimension, as the primordial abyss that swallows everything, dissolving all identities” (Žižek, *How* 64). This is apparent when Lord Ruthven drains his victims, dissolving their identities and turning them into corpses.

Lord Ruthven preying on innocent young women also embodies the scientific mode of the Real. What Lacan means by scientific is biological, also known as the “real Real,” which occupies its own domain. Žižek explains:

This Real is for Lacan the Real inscribed in the very core of human sexuality: ‘There is no sexual relationship.’ Human sexuality is marked by an irreducible failure, sexual difference is the antagonism of the two sexual positions between which there is no common denominator, enjoyment can be gained only against the background of a fundamental loss. (*How* 65)

In other words, men and women are biologically different at birth. The desire for (heterosexual) sex is simply a desire to obtain something from the opposite sex that they cannot have, a type of biological loss for which we can never be compensated. Therefore, when Lacan says “there is no sexual relationship” he means that the act of sex is merely a drive to fulfill desire, a desire which is impossible to achieve. Not only is Lord Ruthven a seducer of innocent women, but he sustains his existence through fusing with the opposite sex by incorporating their blood into his being, something Aubrey cannot do. Aubrey will always possess a fundamental loss in sexual difference, but the vampire successfully bypasses this loss of sexual difference by robbing women of their identities. The scientific mode of the Real is another way to understand the lamella, and while these

two modes oppose one another in some respects, their overlap occurs when “the lamella presents the phantasmatic entity that gives body to what a living being loses when it enters the (symbolically regulated) regime of sexual difference” (Žižek, *How* 65). As I have stated, Lord Ruthven is Aubrey’s phantasmatic entity, and if Lord Ruthven did not feed on innocent women, much like Aubrey’s innocent sister, Aubrey’s desire may have remained buried inside the Real of his psyche. Lord Ruthven’s feeding on various women, however, forces Aubrey to face his conscious desire to save his sister from the same fate as their parents, unable to accept that death is inevitable.

The mode of the Real that is not as obvious as the lamella is *l’objet petit a*. Žižek offers an analysis of the movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* to explain *l’objet petit a* simply: “although the aliens look and act exactly like humans, there is as a rule a tiny detail that betrays their true nature ... a tiny feature whose presence magically transubstantiates its bearer into alien. In contrast to Scott’s alien [the lamella], which is totally different from humans, the difference here is minimal, barely perceptible.” Žižek continues his explanation with a reference to everyday racism: “although we are ready to accept the Jewish, Arab, Oriental other, there is some detail that bothers us in the West: the way they accentuate a certain word, the way they count money, the way they laugh. This tiny feature renders them aliens, no matter how they try to behave like us” (*How* 66-7). Even though Aubrey notices the tiny features that make Lord Ruthven “alien”—his “dead grey eye”; “the deadly hue of his face”; his “winning tongue” (108-9)—his fantasy distorts reality. Just as Aubrey had the chance to accept the Name-of-the-Father with the Greek paternal figures, he might have acknowledged Lord Ruthven as *l’objet petit a* and spared himself from encountering the Real.

WEAKENING AUBREY'S PSYCHE

By viewing Aubrey's psyche in terms of the Borromean Knot, "The Vampyre" becomes a story about an inherent failure of language. The ultimate unraveling of Aubrey's Symbolic order illustrates the importance of Lacan's three orders functioning together. Each order influences the other, and as we see with Aubrey, "the imaginary is far from inconsequential; it has powerful effects in the [R]eal, and is not simply something that can be dispensed with or 'overcome'" (Evans 84). Aubrey's inherent failure is not obvious until he begins to truly study Lord Ruthven, but Aubrey's fragile mental state is obvious from the beginning. When we first meet the young man, he attempts to enter "gay circles," or the big Other in Lacanian terms. As he converses with many young women who show him attention, Aubrey leads himself into "false notions of his talents and his merit" (109), hinting at an inflated ego. After Lord Ruthven attracts Aubrey's attention by seeming like a "man entirely absorbed in himself" (110)—another inflated ego—Aubrey eagerly approaches the nobleman, asking to accompany him on his travels. Once in the presence of Lord Ruthven, however, Aubrey's words begin to fail him. After witnessing the ways in which Lord Ruthven harms those around him, Aubrey often wishes to "beg [Lord Ruthven] to resign that charity and pleasure which proved the ruin of all...but [Aubrey] delayed it—for each day he hoped his friend would give him some opportunity of speaking frankly and openly to him; however, this never occurred" (111). Instead of speaking, Aubrey simply watches Lord Ruthven as they travel, and even when given the opportunity to do so, Aubrey never directly confronts Lord Ruthven about his strange behavior. After receiving letters from home, one in which Aubrey's guardians beg him to leave Lord Ruthven, Aubrey finds Lord Ruthven alone with yet another

innocent girl. While Aubrey does ask Lord Ruthven his intentions with the girl, Aubrey does not directly sever ties with Lord Ruthven, instead “writing a note to say, that from that moment he must decline accompanying his Lordship in the remainder of their proposed tour” (112). Lord Ruthven agrees to this request. Aubrey then calls “the mother of the lady, inform[ing] her of all he knew” (113). Aubrey’s separation from Lord Ruthven leads Aubrey to meet Ianthe, the Greek girl who becomes Aubrey’s new desire in an attempt to fill his internal hollow void caused by the absence of *l’objet petit a*. Ianthe becomes a substitute mother in Aubrey’s Oedipal triangle as he remains unconscious of his desire to save his sister. That is, until Ianthe dies.

In *R.S.I.*, Lacan position *l’objet petit a* (the small o-object) in the center of the Borromean knot, at the point of overlap among the three orders (47-8). As an embodiment of *l’objet petit a*, Ianthe in effect exists at Aubrey’s psychic center. In this respect, even though Ianthe remains “unconscious of his love” (114), her love could have given Aubrey a good chance of acclimating himself to the Symbolic order while in Greece by securing, as it were, his Borromean knot and Oedipal triangle (e.g. see Fig. 3). Before he leaves for another excursion, Ianthe offers Aubrey one more chance to discuss and manage the existence of vampires when “she appealed to her parents on the subject of Vampyres, and they both, with several people present, affirmed their existence, pale with horror at the very name” (114-5). Everyone begs the young man not to venture toward his destination, but “Aubrey made light of their representations, and tried to laugh them out of the idea; but when he saw them shudder at his daring thus to mock a superior, infernal power, the very name of which apparently made their blood freeze, he was silent” (115). Unfortunately, Aubrey’s refusal to accept the Name-of-the-Father allows

Aubrey's attraction to the vampire to destroy any hope of fully participating in the big Other and saving the women he loves; his silence at their warnings weakens Aubrey's affiliation with the Symbolic, thus allowing the Real to strengthen, furthering the tension between the two orders.

ERUPTION OF THE REAL

Aubrey leaves Ianthe and her family, promising that he will return before dark. Not surprisingly, Aubrey becomes "so occupied with his research that he did not perceive that daylight would soon end" (115). Despite his best efforts, the sun sets before Aubrey makes it back, and this fatal mistake allows the Real to infiltrate Aubrey's reality when "suddenly his horse took fright, and he was carried with dreadful rapidity through the entangled forest" (115). The tangled forest signifies the tension in Aubrey's Borromean Knot, where the Symbolic is on the verge of unraveling and freeing the Real. Recalling how both the uncanny and the Real have common traits, Lacan remarks how the words "suddenly" or "all of a sudden" mark "the moment that the phenomenon of the unheimlich [uncanny] makes its entry" (*Anxiety* 66).²⁶ Since the Real resists signification it can only be signaled (not signified) by a word or image. Therefore, when the horse "suddenly" becomes frightened, the uncanny, the Real, is making its entrance.

Once the horse stops, Aubrey dismounts seeking shelter. The scream of a woman followed by laughter startles Aubrey and, following the sounds, he "with a sudden effort, forced open the door of the hut. He found himself in utter darkness: the sound, however, guided him" (115-6). Again, we see the word "sudden," this time marking Aubrey's psyche as it struggles with the Real. The hut can be seen as a symbol of Aubrey's

²⁶ In this particular passage, Lacan is speaking about the relationship between the stage and the world; however, the same concept can be applied to literature.

consciousness—it is dark and void of signs, filled with unfamiliar sounds, and hides Ianthe and Lord Ruthven within. The events that follow Aubrey's entrance into the hut symbolize the struggle happening inside Aubrey's psyche. In reality, the vampire attacks Aubrey in complete darkness; however, if we view this dark hut as Aubrey's psyche, the struggle signifies the imminent unraveling of the Symbolic chain. Aubrey is clearly losing the struggle as he is "grappled by one whose strength seemed superhuman" (116). In reality, the vampire possesses superhuman strength; in Aubrey's psyche, the Real is winning the resistance against the Imaginary and Symbolic. In the midst of the struggle men with torches appear, scaring away the vampire. Aubrey begs for the men to search for the woman whose screams caught his attention. Once Aubrey is able to see, he faces the worst horror:

the airy form of his fair conductress brought in a lifeless corpse. He shut his eyes, hoping that it was but a vision arising from his disturbed imagination; but he again saw the same form, when he unclosed them, stretched by his side. There was no colour upon her cheek, not even upon her lip...upon her neck and breast were blood, and upon her throat were the marks of teeth having opened the vein: to this the men pointed, crying simultaneously struck with horror, 'A Vampyre! a [sic] Vampyre!' (116)

Yet once again, paternal figures offer Aubrey the chance to accept the Name-of-the-Father by shining a light on the existence of vampires. Instead of this encounter's moving Aubrey into the big Other, however, Lord Ruthven's dissolution of Ianthe's identity forces Aubrey to move farther away. In turn, Ianthe's death at the hand of the vampire causes Aubrey's psyche to collapse as "his mind was benumbed and seemed to shun

reflection, and take refuge in vacancy” (116). Aubrey is bedridden with fever and delirium, in shock from the trauma of not only losing his love but encountering the Real.

At first Aubrey has no proof that Lord Ruthven was the cause of Ianthe’s death, and is in fact startled to see that he seems caring and attentive during Aubrey’s recovery. Aubrey, feeling bound to Lord Ruthven due to this care, proposes that the two travel through the parts of Greece they have yet to see. What Aubrey does not realize, however, is that Lord Ruthven’s “charity” during Aubrey’s recovery is an example of the lamella’s multiplicity of appearances that will soon enfold him into a central void.

During their travels, Lord Ruthven is mortally shot and begs Aubrey to “swear by all your soul reveres, by all your nature fears, swear that for a year and a day you will not impart your knowledge of my crimes or death to any living being in any way, whatever may happen, or whatever you may see” (119). Once Aubrey agrees Lord Ruthven dies, or so Aubrey believes. Vijay Mishra argues that Aubrey’s oath acts as a Faustian pact that “is ambiguously directed at ritual, an exchange, through silence, of a sister...whose desecration and rape by Lord Ruthven...is offered as a sacrifice and Aubrey becomes an accomplice in this act of barbarism” (100). Yet there is simply no evidence in the text to support the idea that Aubrey would ever agree, even implicitly, to such a pact, especially not with the sister he loves so dearly. Aubrey is not an accomplice to the vampire, but a victim of a signal of the Real. The Real exists as a “fissure within the symbolic network. The Real as the monstrous Thing behind the veil of appearances is the ultimate lure...not so much the inherent presence that curves symbolic space (introducing gaps and inconsistencies), but, rather, an effect of these gaps and inconsistencies” (Žižek, *How* 72-3), which explains why Lord Ruthven so easily lures Aubrey into his trap. Aubrey’s oath

is not a Faustian Pact but the subject's inability to properly situate himself within the Symbolic order due to his encounter with the Real.

As Aubrey prepares to leave Greece, he begins to suspect Lord Ruthven is responsible for Ianthe's death (120), which is when Lord Ruthven begins to fail decisively as Aubrey's fantasy. Aubrey believes Lord Ruthven is now dead, that is, until Aubrey sees him again in London society: "he [Aubrey] felt himself suddenly seized by the arm, and a voice he recognized too well, sounded in his ear—'Remember your oath'.... [H]e could not believe it possible—the dead rise again" (121). Recalling Lacan's idea that "suddenly" marks the entrance of the uncanny, the moment Lord Ruthven grabs Aubrey's arm signifies the moment when Aubrey's Symbolic chain loosens and the Real confronts the ego. Note here that the Real becomes present in adulthood when our fantasies fail to meet our expectations. In turn, the Real begins to continuously erupt, and this eruption of the Real into the subject's reality happens "whenever we are made to acknowledge the materiality of our existence [physical beings with an expiration date], an acknowledgement that is usually perceived as traumatic" (Felluga, "Lacan II"). As I will show, Ianthe's death at the hands of Aubrey's misplaced fantasy—the vampire—forces him to acknowledge the materiality not only of his existence, but of his sister's as well, and this traumatic acknowledgment ruptures Aubrey's already fragile psyche.

AUBREY'S INHERENT FAILURE

Significant to Aubrey's breakdown in communication and consistent inability to transition into the Symbolic order is the death of Aubrey's parents. For Aubrey, the Symbolic (specifically language) fails him over and over. He unconsciously finds himself in situations that end in death, death that he could have prevented (e.g. Ianthe by

accepting the Name-of-the-Father), as a way for his psyche to deal with the trauma of losing his parents. Therefore, facing the materiality of his own existence triggers Aubrey's "repetition compulsion," or the psyche's tendency to repeat certain events in order to deal with trauma, in turn making him conscious of Miss Aubrey's materiality as well. In Aubrey's case, the repetition compulsion involves continual attempts to participate in the big Other despite his inherent failure to transition fully into that order. Aubrey's apparent psychosis towards the end of the story stems from his inherent failure to use language, language that potentially could have saved the lives of innocent young women. Note that a subject's "entrance into language [the Symbolic]" marks an "irrevocable separation from the [R]eal" (Felluga, "Lacan II"). Instead of entering the Symbolic order, however, Aubrey is unable to use his language to properly ally himself with the "law" of language that could protect him from the trauma of encountering the Real. Lord Ruthven's insistence on existing in and interrupting Aubrey's life—as a lamella does—prohibits this transition.

The subject remains unaware of his psyche's compulsion to repeat traumatic events as a way of dealing with aspects that remain hidden from the subject's consciousness; however, once the Borromean Knot unravels, the subject comes face to face with the Real and the subject experiences psychosis, where "the unconscious is present but not functioning" (Lacan, *The Psychoses* 143). Aubrey nonetheless attempts to participate in the big Other on three separate occasions, each time being thwarted by the vampire in the guise of the Real. Aubrey's first sighting of the reconstituted Lord Ruthven happens while Miss Aubrey is being "presented to the world" (121). Despite Aubrey's uninterest in "the frivolities of fashionable strangers" due to his recent trauma,

“he determined to sacrifice his own comfort to the protection of his sister” (121). This is where Lord Ruthven “suddenly” grasps Aubrey, reminding him of his oath. After seeing “the dead rise again...he thought his imagination had conjured up the image...[i]t was impossible that it could be real—he determined, therefore, to go again into society” (121). The word “impossible” is relevant since that is exactly what the Real is—impossible. During his second attempt to participate with the big Other, Aubrey finds his sister conversing with “him whose features he most abhorred”—the vampire (122). Aubrey snatches his sister by the arm, much as Lord Ruthven did in their previous encounter, and hurries her toward the door where he hears Lord Ruthven whisper, “Remember your oath” (122). Aubrey’s adherence to this oath may seem like a firm decision; however, when Aubrey does attempt to warn his sister:

He only uttered a few words, and those terrified her. The more he thought, the more he was bewildered. His oath startled him;—was he then to allow this monster to roam, bearing ruin upon his breath, amidst all he held dear, and not avert its progress? His very sister might have been touched by him [Lord Ruthven]...For days he [Aubrey] remained in this state; shut up in his room, he saw no one, and only ate when his sister came...(122)

We are never told what Aubrey says to terrify his sister, another indication of the inherent failure of Aubrey’s Symbolic language for both his sister and readers. Aubrey is stuck within his thoughts, anxious because he cannot speak to warn others, and afraid no one will believe him anyway.

In this passage we also see Miss Aubrey actively placed in the role of the mother, taking care of Aubrey’s biological needs by feeding him. Although nonfamilial personas

typically fill the roles in Lacan's Oedipal triangle, that does not mean it is impossible. Recall that Lacan's triangle is a social triangle that stages "the drama of the child's laborious struggles to situate him/her-self *vis-à-vis* all three register-theoretic dimensions of Otherness." Because Miss Aubrey is the only person who Aubrey will eat before or attempt to communicate with, his psyche is regressing further away from the Symbolic and deeper into the Imaginary order (Lacan, *The Psychoses* 166). Therefore, this regression coupled with the psyche's repetition compulsion begs us to view Aubrey's experiences in terms of Lacan's Oedipus complex. When Aubrey loses both of his parents in childhood, his appointed guardians do not adequately help Aubrey transition into the Symbolic order so he can participate in the big Other. Being the only constant influence in his life, Aubrey positions his sister in the role of the mother/Imaginary/small other. Remember that Aubrey had no one else close to him growing up, so the comfort he feels with his sister eases some of the anxiety that he experiences thanks to Lord Ruthven, an anxiety that he continually faces whenever Ianthe and her family discuss vampires. Remember that the small other is the imaginary ego, and saving his sister is his unconscious fundamental fantasy, so this unconscious desire and the recurring anxiety is why Aubrey continually avoids accepting the Name-of-the-Father while in Greece despite the many given opportunities. Aubrey believes he loves Ianthe, the "beautiful and delicate" girl who believes in vampires (113). This love, however, is simply a substitute and an attempt by Aubrey to fill the void of his 'a' (small o-other). Miss Aubrey, on the other hand, is the one who truly holds Aubrey's affection despite her not possessing "that winning grace which gains the gaze and applause of the drawing-room assemblies" (120)—a grace that was effortless for Ianthe. Although Aubrey is unconscious of his

desire to keep his sister in his Oedipal triangle, accepting the Name-of-the-Father in Greece would have automatically removed Miss Aubrey from the Imaginary point in the triangle, putting Ianthe in her place. As we will see, Lord Ruthven works his way into Aubrey and Miss Aubrey's lives, acting as a mock paternal figure who blocks Aubrey's entrance into the Symbolic order (e.g. see Fig. 4); once the uncanny vampire who signals the Real positions himself to block Aubrey's transition, Aubrey's Symbolic order ruptures under the tension.

Doing the only thing he knows how to do, Aubrey makes a final attempt at situating himself in the big Other when he realizes "the whole of his friends" are alone and unaware of the presence of a monster stalking them; therefore, Aubrey "determined to enter again into society, and watch him [Lord Ruthven] closely, anxious to forewarn, in spite of his oath, all whom Lord Ruthven approached with intimacy" (122). Note that acts of repetition happen within the subject "only to a certain limit," and beyond that limit is the Real (Lacan, *The Four* 49). Once Aubrey's psyche hits this limit after so many attempts, others begin to perceive him as mad. The trauma of encountering the Real over and over proves too much for Aubrey's psyche to handle. In fact, his guardians fear "that his mind was becoming alienated" and they hire a physician to watch over him. Aubrey waits anxiously for the year and day of his oath to expire, "count[ing] upon his fingers a definite number, and then smil[ing]" (123). During this time he suffers from psychosis. According to Lacan, psychosis results from the subject not integrating the Name-of-the-Father into his Symbolic universe, leaving a hole in the subject's Symbolic order.

As Aubrey remains under the close watch of his guardians and physician, Lord Ruthven furthers his plan of enveloping Aubrey into the central void of the Real by

furthering his multiplicity of appearances as the Earl of Marsden. When Aubrey hears that his sister is to be married to a young Earl, he is very pleased at his sister's being properly married and participating in the big Other with the promise of a long life. This happiness is cut short, however, when Aubrey "suddenly perceived a locket upon her breast; opening it, what was his surprise at beholding the features of the monster who had so long influenced his life" (124). It is worth noting how the phrase "so long influenced his life" is reminiscent of the Imaginary and the Real continually influencing the subject throughout his life. As we know, "suddenly" marks the entrance of the uncanny. Therefore, this moment in the text signifies Aubrey's loss to Lord Ruthven. The locket resting upon Miss Aubrey's breast is significant because she is now torn from the mother role in Aubrey's life—the breast being the part of the mother that an infant breaks free from when he begins to articulate his needs through language—which makes her lost to Aubrey as she waits to become prey for the vampire. Furthermore, Lord Ruthven wins Miss Aubrey's ear by faking "great affection for the brother and [an] interest in his fate" (124). This is where we witness Lord Ruthven becoming a mock paternal figure as "his tongue had dangers and toils to recount—could speak of himself as of an individual having no sympathy with any being on the crowded earth, save with her to whom he addressed...in fine, he knew so well how to use the serpent's art, or such was the will of fate, that he gained her affections" (124). Possessing a master of language with a title of nobility, Lord Ruthven seems to be the ideal Symbolic paternal who would enable Aubrey to move fully into the Symbolic while balancing the immense love between Aubrey and his sister. But, as fate would have it, he actually exists as the Real paternal, and uncanny father figure lurking behind a would-be Symbolic father, "an obscene,

dark...underbelly behind the Symbolic façade of paternal authority and its rules”

(Johnston 2.3). Consequently, Aubrey, who senses the presence of the Real, remains too frightened to move into the Symbolic.

Aubrey attempts to tell his sister the truth about her future husband: “gazing on her with a frantic expression of countenance, he bade her swear that she would never wed this monster, for he—But he could not advance—it seemed as if the voice again bade him remember his oath—he turned suddenly round, thinking Lord Ruthven was near him but saw no one” (124). This is the last time “suddenly” appears in the text, marking the ultimate entrance of the uncanny inside Aubrey’s head—the Real has overtaken Aubrey’s psyche. Despite numerous attempts by Aubrey to have the wedding delayed, his words—the ramblings of a mad man—fall on deaf ears. When Lord Ruthven hears that Aubrey has been deemed insane, he can hardly conceal “his exultation and pleasure...from those among whom he had gained the information” (124). The lamella has successfully, albeit elaborately, lured another victim into the central void of the Real. Being unable to speak, when Aubrey is left alone, he writes Miss Aubrey a letter begging her to delay her wedding, which is reminiscent of Aubrey’s being unable to confront Lord Ruthven before they go their separate ways, instead writing him a letter before Aubrey travels to Greece. The parallel of these letters is yet another sign that Aubrey has already lost his sister to the vampire, despite her still being alive. Now Aubrey faces two choices: to regress further away from the Symbolic or to accept the Name-of-the-Father and save his sister.

CONCLUSION

Lacan explains that “repetition is fundamentally the insistence of speech...[and] man is the subject captured and tortured by language” (*The Psychoses* 242-3). Aubrey’s final

words exist as the story of “The Vampyre.” As soon as “the midnight hour struck” Aubrey relates to his sister’s guardians “composedly what the reader has perused,” and he dies immediately thereafter (125). When the threat of the Real vanishes as Lord Ruthven takes Miss Aubrey away, Aubrey is finally able to enter the realm of the Symbolic by speaking about the existence of the vampire—alas, too late! And this attempt at signifying the Real in order to save his sister costs Aubrey his life. Despite their best efforts, the guardians do not reach Miss Aubrey in time: “Lord Ruthven had disappeared, and Aubrey’s sister had glutted the thirst of a VAMPYRE!” (125). Aubrey’s inability to transition into the Symbolic order before Lord Ruthven inserts himself into the mock paternal position causes Miss Aubrey to become yet another victim of the vampire. Lacan reminds us that “in the [S]ymbolic nothing explains creation. Nor does anything explain why some beings must die for others to be born...Just as life reproduces itself, so it’s forced to repeat the same cycle, rejoining the common aim of death” (*The Psychoses* 179).²⁷ What Aubrey never fully understands is that death is inevitable. Much like the Real, creation and death cannot be symbolized in meaning. So why does Aubrey keep his oath of silence to the vampire instead of saving the lives of those around him? Because words constantly fail him; because, despite numerous attempts, Aubrey’s inherent failure was stronger than his Borromean Knot; because Aubrey’s psyche could not find a way to deal with many traumatic experiences until it was too late; because no desire can ever be satisfied fully and his drive to quench the unobtainable satisfaction of saving his sister from death became Aubrey’s ultimate destruction. Aubrey’s inability to articulate his desire is inevitable because no amount of affection he has for Miss Aubrey, the only

²⁷ In this passage, Lacan is referencing Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

living remnant of his parents, will keep the Real, the thirst of the vampire, or death constrained.

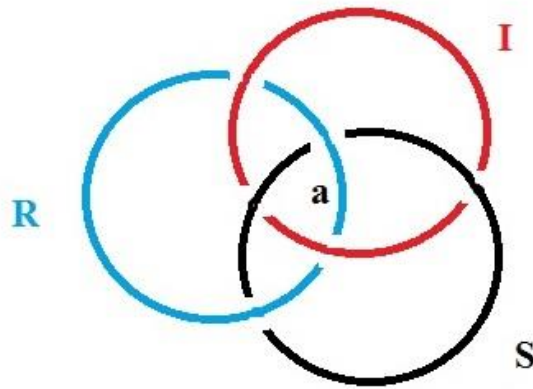


Fig. 1. Lacan's Borromean Knot

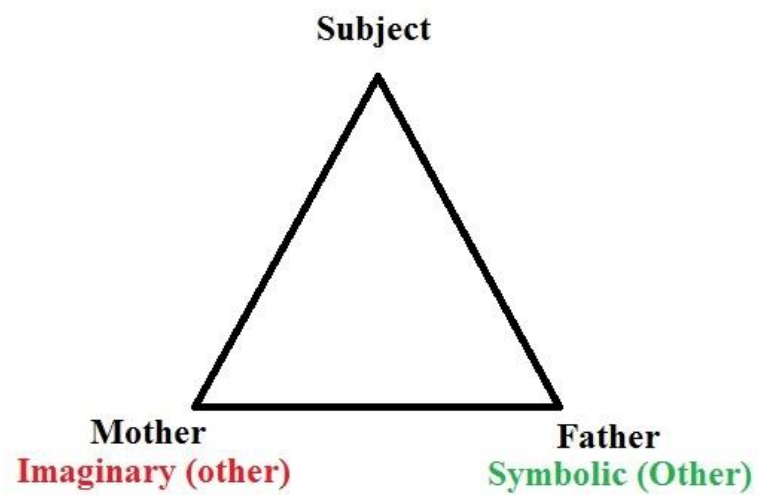


Fig. 2. Lacan's Oedipal Triangle

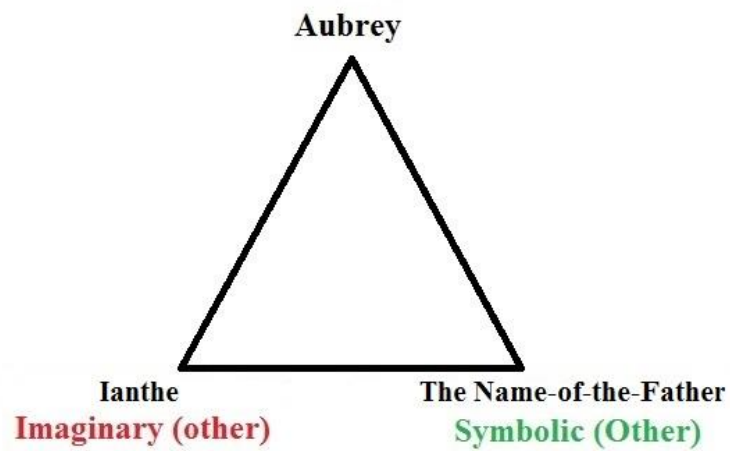


Fig. 3. Aubrey's Oedipal triangle had he accepted the Name-of-the-Father

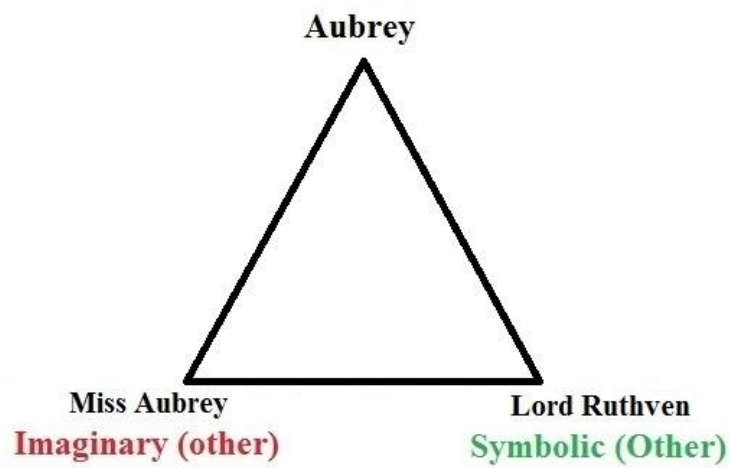


Fig. 4. Lord Ruthven blocking Aubrey's Oedipal triangle

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